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Merle Allshouse : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Lucy D. Jones

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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TRANSCRIPTION

J: Today is Tuesday, February 3, 2004. My name is Lucy Jones. I'm a graduate assistant for the Florida Studies Center, continuing a series of interviews here at the Special Collections reading room at the Nelson Poynter Library, University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus, with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni, to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today I am with Dr. Merle Allshouse. Thank you for being here.

A: Thank you, Lucy.

J: I first got to know you when I walked into a class, and you were there as an auditor. However, your academic career has certainly been a long and varied one. Just to give a little background.... If you could quickly, if possible, summarize.

A: You want me to do that?

J: Briefly.

A: Ok. I was born in Pittsburgh, went through Pittsburgh public schools, and went to DePauw University for an undergraduate degree in philosophy and history. Then [I] went to Yale University for my graduate work under a Rockefeller fellowship and a Kent fellowship. [I] started off in divinity school and decided I did not want

to finish up the divinity degree, and [I] switched over into graduate school of philosophy. [I] finished my Ph.D. in philosophy. I taught for about eight years at Dickenson College in a newly formed department of philosophy with two other wonderful colleagues, Frederick Ferre and George Allan. I had wonderful years there. A deciding point there was Kent State, a day that I will never forget, because it really changed American society, and certainly changed all of us who were part of an academic world then. Many of my colleagues moved a couple notches to the right, politically, and others moved to the left. All of us agreed that if you stayed where you were the day before Kent State you were probably brain dead and didn't appreciate the significance of what happened. My movement to the left then drove me into academic administration because I believed we really needed to change the structure of how we learn and make it more relevant to the twentieth century. I became an academic dean at Dickenson and was recruited from that job to be an academic dean at another school in New Jersey, which was more urban. I was convinced that, while Dickenson was a wonderful school.... I had tenure there, which is a very funny story in itself. I remember after the Kent State experience, going to the president of the college and telling him that I really didn't want tenure any more because I felt it was a great burden. I noticed that a lot of people who had tenure gave up on thinking and just taught from their old notes, and I didn't want to ever get caught in that kind of trap. He told me in a very deep, sonorous voice, young man, he said, please, please don't ever tell anyone that you wanted to give up tenure. It will destroy you. I gave up tenure emotionally and intellectually at that point, and I went into administration. I

always said that an administrator has his resignation in his hip pocket because you don't have tenure as an administrator, but you really work from day to day to try to better the situation you're in. I went from Dickenson College to Bloomfield College, New Jersey. When I went there, one could still see every day the flames and smoke rising from Newark, which was burning. Newark was in a state of revolution at the time, of civil unrest. I wanted very much to be part of a small college that was trying to address urban issues. About six months after I went to Bloomfield, the president came in one day and told me he was leaving for California. The board had an emergency meeting and appointed me as president. I stayed there the next sixteen years. I think at that time I was the youngest college president in America. I had a lot to learn, but [I] didn't know how much I had to learn. Sixteen years later, the school was meeting the needs of the community. When I went there, we had five percent minority students; when I left we had sixty-five percent. We started a lot of very interesting programs that really related the academic world to the world of an urban society that was in revolution. When I was fifty years old, I woke up one morning and decided that I could stay in this comfortable job now until I retired, but that would be a bad thing. That next day I actually got a call from a headhunter for a job in Colorado. On my first trip, I thought Colorado was ugly and nobody would want to live there because it's all brown. I was used to green mountains. Four trips later, I accepted the job and was president of a foundation that was set up by an eccentric gold miner. It was long before we had any social services in America, and he set up this foundation to take care of people. It was about that broadly defined in the charter. We were

working on programs to serve the needs, particularly of young and teenage people with learning disabilities [and] behavior problems, and also senior citizens that worked at both ends of the age spectrum. I did that job for about two years and really missed the academic world very much. One day I met Gordon Gee, who was the president of the University of Colorado, at a meeting in Denver. He asked me what I was doing in Colorado, and I asked him what he was doing in Colorado because both of us had known each other in previous incarnations on the East Coast. He said, you should be working for the University. The next day I took a job as vice president of the Foundation for the University of Colorado. I stayed there for eight years. I taught in the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the university while I was working with the foundation. We had a great time raising money for the university. Gordon left to become president of Ohio State University. [It was] a great opportunity for him [and] a disaster for the rest of us who were left behind. I got a call, not long after that, from an old, long-term friend, who was president of Eckerd College. [He] wanted me to take a look at the Academy of Senior Professionals at Eckerd College, which was then kind of in a state of doldrums and needed some revitalization. I came down and had the same experience saying, it's too hot; nobody should live in Florida. My wife came with me, and she loved Florida so this was the place to go. I took the job and held it for nine years. [I] had a wonderful experience. We did fundraising. We rebuilt the center, which is called Louis House. We developed many, many wonderful programs [We] interfaced the Academy with many good programs in the community in St. Petersburg. A new president came to Eckerd College two years

ago or three years ago now. One ex-president and one current president at the same institution didn't work very well. So I decided to retire from that job and [I] discovered the University of South Florida. [I] discovered you, and I discovered the Florida Studies program, and it's been wonderful.

J: What was the first class that you audited? You've been doing the courses at USF as an auditor, right?

A: Yeah. I think the first course I took was a course in geology, two courses in geology. I wanted to take areas that I didn't know anything about and where my education was woefully neglected. Geology was one of those. I'm so glad that I never took geology because in 1966 or 1967, the entire field changed in the discovery of how plate tectonics work. It revolutionized the field. I was glad I didn't learn it in the pre-1960 period. There was a wonderful course on the history of the earth. Another course I took in geology was the History and Development of Beaches. [It was about] how beaches are made, how they develop, how they move, and so forth. That was a wonderful experience. I've taken courses in political theory, which also I didn't have a lot of background in before, and I've taken courses in political geography here, which have been excellent. Every single course I've taken has been superb. Now Ray Arsenault, I knew a little bit before coming to USF because Ray is such an institution in St. Petersburg. I had in fact invited Ray to be a speaker at Aspect several times. When I saw the flagship program developing in Florida Studies, I thought I should take some courses there. Then [I] met Gary [Mormino], and it's been a wonderful experience.

J: When you say you discovered the University of South Florida – obviously from Eckerd you knew it was here – but how did you first become involved with it? Weren't you on some sort of advisory board at some point?

A: I'm on the advisory board for the College of Business at USF right now. I didn't have any official function or anything of that kind. I had thought, when I left Eckerd, that it might be appropriate for this university to have something like an Academy of Senior Professionals but really tailored to the culture of this institution. It's very different, really, than Eckerd College. With the development going on right now of condominiums and the economic and social growth of St. Petersburg, it seems to me this was a marvelous time to recruit persons in the community who were just moving here for the first time. [It was a good time] to recruit them as friends of the university and to develop a strong support system and also an adult learning component. I talked a little bit with Bill [Heller], the previous vice president, and he and I were having conversations about that when he learned that he wasn't going to be part of the future. That terminated, and I haven't really had any further discussions, other than working with the College of Business.

J: I know that you're involved with the College of Business. You're auditing courses; you're involved with Florida Studies. Aren't you also involved with other groups like Sailing Club?

A: Yes, yes. Sailing has always been a passion of mine. I love sailing. I did a lot of sailing when I was in graduate school in New Haven on Long Island. I didn't sail in Colorado or Pennsylvania. I took it up again when I came to Florida. There's a

wonderful group here, the Sailing Club, which is the oldest student organization on this campus. It really was very close to the founding of the Bayboro Campus. It's a wonderful group of students, primarily adult students, who sail for the joy of it. We also have the capability of teaching other persons how to sail. More students should really take advantage of this program because it's a winner. We go out every Friday from three 'o'clock to five thirty, and then [we] have some pizza or something in the snack bar when we get back. We also sail on Saturday mornings from Gulfport. One of our benefactors has a very large, wonderful boat that he built. He allows us to sail it from Gulfport.

J: Obviously you have interactions with the other students. How do you think that the university benefits from having adult learners, continuing education programs, [and] senior auditors on campus?

A: I really haven't done it long enough to know, but I think it all depends upon the maturity of the faculty person themselves. If they're mature and confident in their teaching, that's the key. Then they can use the resources that seniors bring to the classroom. If there's any sense in which they're threatened or any sense in which they feel that it's inappropriate, then it doesn't work at all. In fact it can be very negative. I think there ought to be a conversation between the senior who wants to audit and the faculty member first, in which they kind of have an agreement: do you want me to be still; do you want me to interact? It can be inappropriate or it can be very appropriate. It can be a tremendous resource. I noticed at Eckerd College, I developed and sponsored a lot of our interaction. There were many faculty members who were frankly not eager to take on senior members who had

enormous amounts of experience. In some cases [the senior] had more experience than the faculty member themselves. That can be tricky.

J: That's true. If you're a brand new teacher and all of a sudden you know that you have somebody who was a college president in your class....

A: Even worse than that, Jim Michener was a member of Aspect. To have Jim Michener sit in your literature course or your writing course.... You can do a little creative writing, and there's Jim Michener saying, well I don't know about that. It can be very tricky. In Michener's case it worked extremely well. He was very, very open, and he was not a threat. That was the kind of person he was, really. He wasn't pompous and didn't come on as though he knew it all. I think that's the key. My experience is I do what I do partly selfish. I do it to learn. I'm not here to teach anyone anything, but [I'm here] simply to learn. I think if a senior goes in with that attitude, it'll work.

J: Have you had a lot of contact with other senior auditors?

A: No, not a great deal, although I had a little bit. There's another organization here on campus that's kind of informal, but I've learned a lot from it. It has an interesting group of seniors in it. This is the program for ethics and community. Its called PEEC [Program for Ethics in Education and Community]. Jay Black has been the primary sponsor for some time with the Poynter Media Studies Program. We meet on Wednesdays at eleven o'clock over in the Florida Teacher Center, and [we] discuss issues of current politics and ethics. It's a group of about fifteen people, very diverse in their backgrounds. We also have been sponsoring monthly lectures. The first Wednesday of each month we have someone come in

and give a lecture for faculty, students, and seniors, and then we discuss that lecture.

J: You say that you do this somewhat for selfish reasons. What need does coming to USF fulfill for you on a personal level?

A: [There are] so many. First of all, it's just an enormous adrenaline shot when you walk on a campus that's alive, and this campus is very much alive. You have a spirit of expectation about the future. This campus is on the move. It's going to be growing; it's going to be expanding in undergraduates and graduates both. You feel you're part of a learning community here. People talk to you, they say hi. They're kind of upbeat; they don't look down. I've been on so many campuses, enough to know that you can be on a campus in fifteen minutes and sense a culture. You can sense the heartbeat. Many other people, in my experience, will say this about USF. It is a place that's interesting to be, and you feel you're part of something important that's going on in the community. I think I learn, most of all, from contact with other students. I think that there's a great group of graduate students here. This Florida Studies Program, it's a small core of extremely bright people who are working energetically, very hard, and extremely dedicated. It's a model of really what I think learning should be and education should be. This is a campus where education means something to the students who go here. They make sacrifices to go here in many cases. Most of them have families; they work at all ends of the candle. They're not here to grow up. They've grown up. I think that's a remarkable testimony to the leadership of the campus itself.

J: It could be hard to pull all those people together.

A: Yes, it would be a big job. I can't imagine the discussions that the administrators here must go through in terms of trying to plan for growth. The institution, as soon as you get dormitories here, will dramatically change its culture, for the good and for the bad both. It's going to be an interesting experience to have.

J: I know that you're involved in other organizations in St. Petersburg as well. How do you think people or leaders in St. Petersburg view the university?

A: That's an interesting question, Lucy, partly because of our geographical location. Many people in St. Petersburg have never been on this campus. It's the same situation that Eckerd College has. Eckerd College is way down in the southern tip of the peninsula. Many people who have lived here for thirty years have never been there. It used to be an old, swampy fishing village back in the 1950s. This campus is such a gem. It's sort of the best-kept secret of the community in many ways. It's one of the reasons I think a lot can be done in developing community relations. I think there's just an open agenda for bringing talented younger, early-retiring adults, or adults who are working in semi-retirement in their forties and fifties. Bringing them as a support system to this campus could do wonders for it. I think in large part, it is still unknown. The business community is enormously supportive of this campus. The fact that we now have our first dean of the Business School - not a director, a dean of the Business School - makes a statement. It's a statement that Tampa may have a hard time fully digesting. There's going to be an interesting political evolution of that reality. Much of the work done here is applied work. The business school is going to be doing applied business ethics. That means it's going to be working with business leaders and

owners of businesses, particularly in the central business area, translated as euphemism for the black business district and the minority business district. There's going to be an interfacing there with the university that could transform much of this community. They are not just ethereal academics. These are people who are really going to be getting their hands into the day-to-day work of the community. The same is true of the Florida Studies Program. Both Gary and Ray are very involved in issues that are dealing with civil rights, issues dealing with the history of the minority community here, and what we can do to make this a better place to live.

J: I know [civil rights issues, etc.] have been a topic of interest to you for years. Civil rights, and.... It probably warms your heart to see an interest in that.

A: I think it's true to say, Lucy, that in many ways my sensibilities and social conscience didn't grow up until the 1960s. I was educated in my undergraduate education in the 1950s and part of it in the 1960s. I don't know where I was. I was unconscious of a lot of these things. I must admit, in my fraternity as an undergraduate, I rebelled there to a certain extent. Sigma Chi fraternity, I discovered after I joined, was an organization that never had admitted a Jew and never had admitted a minority person. As pledge trainer way back in the 1950s, I rewrote the ritual at one period, making it possible to admit two Jewish students that we had. We were immediately censured by the national fraternity. It turns out that we won our case nationally and broke the barrier for the Sigma Chi fraternity. That was back in the 1950s. By and large, it was the 1960s, to me, that was the important period.

- J: Do you think that the St. Petersburg campus is doing enough, even with the efforts that they have, to encourage diversity awareness amongst students?
- A: I don't know, Lucy. I'm not that close enough to the big picture. I know you can always do more. You can always do more. I think in several of my classes, I have been shocked to a certain extent in the fact that there are not more minority students in those classes. On the other hand, that's true of almost every university in America. St. Petersburg has been a segregated community much more so than many other communities in the south and certainly in the rest of the country. In St. Petersburg, one would not expect that there would be a huge amount of social integration. If I were a minority person in St. Petersburg, depending on your age, I suppose I would be eager to get out of St. Petersburg for my education, not stay here. I imagine recruiting is a tough issue. Most of the minority students that I see are adult minority students here. [They are] getting their masters degrees or coming back into education after moving here from somewhere else. My guess is if you were born as a minority person in St. Petersburg, you would go somewhere else as an undergraduate. If you could afford to.
- J: I guess now that you've essentially retired, you plan to stay in St. Petersburg yourself.
- A: That's a good question. I have stayed places usually longer than I should stay. I have a feeling that there are still things to do; there are places to go. If my wife were in better health right now, I think I would very seriously consider the Peace Corps. That's one unfulfilled dream that I haven't done yet. I would like very much, while I'm still healthy and could contribute something, to do Peace Corps.

That's still a possibility, somewhere. I don't know where. There are other parts of the country that I would like to explore living in, but right now I'm very happy being here.

J: Who are some of the outstanding people in the St. Petersburg campus that you have encountered?

A: I think Bill Heller is one of my first encounters. Bill Heller was, in many ways, the right person at the right time for this campus. He developed networks within the community that were strong, that were enduring. He goes down as a saint among people who, particularly in the business community, saw him as an evangelist for the campus. I would see him out at Rotary Club [and other] various service clubs. There was a warmth and a genuineness about his affection for the institution that made people say, USF, that's a good place. That's the reason I talked to Bill about the possibility of doing an Aspect type program here. I think that Ray Arsenault is a remarkable tradition on this campus. I think his involvement with civil rights, the NAACP, and the issues of social justice have been absolutely fundamental in giving this campus a feeling of forward movement in relationship to the community. The library is an interesting institution. This is one of the most user-friendly libraries that I've ever worked in as an academic library. I remember my first experience at Yale was going into Sterling Library. It was like going into a cathedral. At the far end of the cathedral where you have the altar normally, there was this most imposing woman. You had a sense that you dare not take out any book, much less ask a reference question, without having to go into a confessional or something. It's very different here.

I'm sure Sterling Library has changed, too. It's wonderfully accessible. The staff is very knowledgeable and very integrated with the faculty. One of my courses I'm taking is called Road to the Whitehouse. The second class meeting, the faculty member brought the entire class over to the library for a lecture on how to use the library and how to do a research paper. It was absolutely marvelous. I think it was a shock for the students to find out that they were welcome; they could use the library, and [learn] how to use it all in an hour and a half lecture. It was really good. There are many people here I have yet to meet. I know a little bit about our new campus chief executive. I met her on several occasions. And again, I think she was a good choice for the kind of person who will be a transition person between where we are now and where we're going. We're basically what's called an urban university campus. There are more and more of these around the country. When I was at the University of Colorado, we had campuses in Denver, campuses in Colorado Springs, and campuses in Boulder. In many ways, it's the same situation that you have with the University of South Florida. The Lakeland campus, the Sarasota campus... I've been to all of those places geographically, and they're all in different stages of development. They're all going to have different kinds of missions. They're all going to have tension with the mother campus at some point over issues. That will never really go away entirely. It's a tremendous asset for this campus to have the Tampa campus. I think the talk about independence and independent accreditation, in my judgment, really doesn't make any sense. I think programs may be separately accredited, where you have good graduate programs. The College of Business needs to be separately

accredited by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business. [There is] no question about that. I think that institutional accreditation still always will belong with the main campus, with the mother campus. It's going to be a tough job to lead this campus. It's dynamic; it's going to be growing faster than the Tampa campus is. It's going to get notoriety. All of that will have to be generously understood by Tampa. In this case, what's good for the parts is going to be good for the whole. On the other hand, when you're St. Petersburg, you have to view the whole as greater than just the sum of its parts to be a great university. Those things are going to have to be developed. It's fun to be here.

J: Interesting times?

A: Yes.

J: Let's just wrap it up with a final thought if you have any sentiments or anything that would want to tell anybody about the University of South Florida.

A: Well, a couple things. This is partly a personal statement. I think a campus that really understands that life is a lifelong learning process, and that there are many different dimensions and ways to learn.... For example, one of the key interests I have right now is distance learning. I have my own website, and I do a lot of work in distance learning. I learn through my own website. It's kind of a strange thing to say, but my own website has become a way in which I learn myself. I think that this campus will be strong as long as it's willing to understand all the different modes of learning. We learn from different people in different ways. An instructor is one way of learning. Your fellow students are a way of learning. The library is a way of learning. The computer is a way of learning. We have so many different

modes of learning. I think this campus, as long as it is sensitive to putting all of those feelers out and making them available to students, is going to be extremely successful. We can learn from this community, and we need to do more bringing the community into the classroom. No question about that. Another piece is that having roughly sixty new faculty this year, I don't know if everybody appreciates it. Socially, to integrate that culture of the new faculty into the old culture, that's a huge issue, and it could be a huge problem. What I have seen of the new faculty is that they're doing a tremendous job in doing that integration. I have not had a bad teaching experience since I came here, which is really unusually. In undergraduate experience, if you have half a dozen good teachers, three or four really good friends from whom you learn, and a decent library, you're lucky. I think students here are extremely lucky. I think I'm lucky in being able to be part of that learning process. I'm not by any means a fawn of wisdom. I'm an eager learner. In some cases, [I'm] probably too eager because I want to learn from everybody, everything. I wake up in the morning, and I say, 'Wow. What can I learn new today?' That's the reason I think adults should come back to a campus like this. You can literally learn new things every day. If a day went by without learning something fundamentally new, I think you would be a very sad person. Sorry I'm going on like it's a lecture, but the other thing that's important about learning is that learning should be transformational. In every class you go into, you should be able to find some way of testing one of your paradigms, one of your metaphors from which you are organizing all the rest of your experiences, and shake up. I'll give you a good example. A course in political geography I

took this last semester.... There were paradigms I had about the Middle East, about the way in which our political structure is organized. Suddenly for the first time, [they] were put to the test. Last semester I read Kevin Phillips's book, *Wealth and Democracy*. It literally changed my view of American history, American economic history, and the relationship between economics and politics. That was a shocking experience for me. It made me suddenly realize that a lot of my life had been wasted because I had been invested in some of the wrong things or inadequate things. I think the older you get, the harder it is to take those risks, the harder it is to say, I'm going to learn something today that will literally so change my life that it's going to be different. That's hard. For some people, it's hard after they're ten years old. I think that's the ultimate kind of learning, to have a paradigm shift go on and to say, now I need to reorganize not only my reading list, but I need to reorganize my life priorities as a result of my learning. That's really when learning is exciting.

J: Well, thank you. Thank you for being here and talking with me.

A: Thank you, Lucy, and thank you for what you're teaching me, too. One thing about interviews that I just thought of off the top of my head: when you express yourself about something, you learn yourself. Expressing is learning. Speaking is a learning experience. So I've learned a little bit about myself in the course of your interview. I thank you for that. Teachers do that, by the way. One of the most amazing experiences I had when I started teaching was to discover that I was thinking while I was talking. Sometimes I wasn't always thinking about what I was talking about. You can work on different levels simultaneously. I had a

colleague who used to count the levels he was thinking on while he was teaching. He was writing an article, he was processing an interview that he was going to have with somebody else. He was doing all these things in the course of giving an excellent lecture. That also is a great part of learning. The levels of our own learning can be simultaneous. A good course is one that, while you're listening to someone as a lecturer, you're also thinking in many different dimensions. I've said enough.

J: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

End of Interview