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## **Sam M. Gibbons : USF 25th (1985) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Nancy A. Hewitt**

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Sam Melville Gibbons

Nancy A. Hewitt

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CONGRESSMAN SAM GIBBONS

Hewitt: We are speaking this afternoon with Congressman Sam Gibbons as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Let me ask you first of all, when did you first hear about the idea of a University of South Florida or when did you start talking to people about the idea of University of South Florida?

Gibbons: I had been elected to the legislature in 1953 and had a real good session. I came back after that and one day a group of us were eating lunch down at Maas Brother Tea Room. We had a big table there where we all sat and had been eating together for years. Jim Moody, who was a member of the same delegation from Hillsborough County and who lived over in Plant City, and I were there and the group around the table got to saying, "Well, you fellows didn't bring us home anything from the legislature, why didn't you do something?" Jim and I had been talking about state problems. Jim was a very influential member and an old timer of the Florida legislature and I was a new member. I don't know how the idea first came up, but after the luncheon Jim and I walked outside of the building, sat outside on a bench and started discussing the fact that we should have some kind of project for our district in the next year. We got to thinking about what the needs of the community were and what the needs of Florida were and how all this fit together. I think out of that we got to talking about an educational institution because Tampa U. was right behind us across the river and there was a bunch of old warehouses between us and the river. Tampa U. had just finished trying to have a fund drive to see if they could raise a part of its endowment fund and it had done very poorly. The post-World War II baby boom had gone and the student body at Tampa U. had dropped and I guess we

were thinking in that context, but yet we knew that there was a boom of students. In fact, he and I were both parents and we knew that our children were crowded in school and they would eventually be when they tried to go to college. I think that it was in that context that we started dreaming about a university here. That was in 1954. We had to get re-elected in 1954. Both of us did. In 1955 we started in earnest working on plans for a school. Jim was the chairman for the Appropriations Committee, and I was appointed to the Appropriations Committee by the speaker. Jim made me the chairman of the Subcommittee on Education in State Institutions. The speaker also made me the chairman of the committee dealing with higher education. So I had sort of a natural corner on the market there. I controlled, to some extent, the appropriations for state institutions and universities and then had the detailed assignment of substantive legislation on higher education in Florida. At that time there were only three state institutions. There was the University of Florida, which had just recently become coeducational, Florida State University or Florida State College for Women which had just become coeducational, and then Florida A & M which had always been coeducational but it was exclusively a black school.

Hewitt: Neither FSU or U of F were integrated at that point?

Gibbons: Neither of them were integrated, in fact, they had only recently integrated by sex. The black school had always been integrated by sex. That was really the substance of higher education that the state supported in Florida. Because Tampa U. was in such bad shape and appeared to be going under, I first hit upon the idea of using Tampa U. as sort of a cadre for a new state university. The faculty, staff, and location was and is excellent. There was lots of land there and I thought a great university in downtown

Tampa would be just the thing. So I set about to do that. I really spent the next two years doing nothing but trying to get the folks at the University of Tampa interested in it. For a long time they were very interested in becoming the nucleus for a state university. Later on in years there was a court case called the Girard decision. The Girard decision was one of those famous cases in the desegregation that came about. It in effect said that private institutions did not need to desegregate, but public institutions had to desegregate. The trustees of the University of Tampa thought that was going to mean that everybody would suddenly quit state institutions and go to private schools. So Tampa U. dropped out. In the meantime quite a bit of interest had been built amongst the leaders here in Tampa and in trying to get a state institution here. So in the '55 session legislature we drafted a unique piece of legislation. It was House Bill 1007. Copies of it are still available in the state archives. House Bill 1007 was a very short one-page bill that said that the State Board of Control, which is now the Board of Regents, is directed to make a study as to the feasibility and the desirability of establishing a four-year degree-granting institution of higher learning in Hillsborough County. The second paragraph said that the State Board of Education, that is really the governor and his cabinet, is authorized to establish such an institution. So we had a mandatory study and an authority to grant it. That passed the legislature in 1955. Some of the delegates from Pinellas County and some other places tried to amend the legislation and apply it to Pinellas County, but we were able to get it through the House and through the Senate and signed into law by Governor Collins to require a study. Well, the Board of Control undertook the study. They had employed a man by the name of Dr. Bromball who was a consultant in education. Bromball acquired a staff. One of the principal members on his

staff was a man by the name of Dr. Myron Blee. Dr. Blee still lives in Tallahassee. They started studying higher education and writing a future about it. Farris Bryant who had been the Speaker of the House had introduced the legislation requiring this study about the future of higher education in Florida. Farris was a Harvard graduate and was always worried about the quality of higher education in Florida. I was worried about the quality, but more about the quantity. That is how we got the bill through the legislature. John Germany, the lawyer in Tampa who was then head of Holland and Knight, was Governor Collins' legislative assistant at that time. He was very influential in persuading the governor to sign the bill. The governor had some concern about signing the bill because the governor was from Tallahassee and he was interested in quality too, particularly if it didn't cost too much. He was concerned that it would dilute the quality of education in Florida.

Hewitt: How much competition was there for places like Pinellas County?

Gibbons: There was alot from Pinellas. It was even more vigorous than the baseball stadium. There was alot from all of the surrounding areas. In fact it went as far over as Orlando. After I passed that bill through the Florida House, the bill was introduced by Gibbons, Moody, and Johnson. The Johnson was Tom Johnson who is a lawyer here in Tampa right now. Jim Moody, who is retired, was the circuit judge over in Plant City. We introduced the bill and got it passed. The journal of the Florida House would show you all of this in detail. You can get that out of the Florida archives. You can trace the whole history of that statute. Tampa U. dropped out of the picture and we were than concentrating on what you could do to do this. First of all we had to convince the Board of Control that it was necessary and desirable and

that is where I spent most of my time doing that. I helped them with the study. After the legislative session I came back down to Florida, we passed the bill, we had a piece of legislation that authorized all of this, but we didn't have anything going. The state Board of Control wasn't really interested in doing anything about it. They were just sitting there waiting to see whether it is desirable or maybe it's possible, but it is not that high of a priority. So the whole struggle of the two year time that I spent on the project was to convince the state Board of Control that we needed to do that. Being the chairman of the Education Committee and being the chairman of the Appropriations Committee on Education, and Jim Moody being the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, we were able to get their attention. I traveled to Tallahassee many times. Paul Smith, who was a contractor in town, would lend me his airplane to get around. Most of the travel was done at my expense. I ran up God knows how many telephone bills and used up how much secretarial time I don't know. I went over to see Scott Christopher, who is still here in town and just retired as the director of the Chamber of Commerce and lived out in Carrollwood, became interested in it. He had been a college professor prior to getting into the Chamber of Commerce. He said that he would get the Chamber interested in this and they would give us some organized backing. They had staff, they had a budget, and they had things of that sort. He said that Louis Benetto would help me put together some kind of booklet to help explain why there is a need. Louis Benetto is the head of Benetto Advertising. He just retired and his business is out on Kennedy Blvd. He had a one or two-man shop in those days over here in the Tampa Theater building. He said to go over and see Louis to work out some kind of pitch for this University. I did. Louis put together a little booklet that said "Florida needs another university,

Tampa is the logical site." We developed maps, statistics about the people here, about the need, and put it into a great big folder. Louis said that we should make it handsome so that nobody would throw it away and so big that nobody could put it in their desk drawer. Of all the keepsakes that I have ever lost in my life, that is the one that I hate to have lost the most. It was a nice leather bound booklet with gold letters and lots of fine drawings, statistics, and things of that sort showing that Tampa was the logical place. When we developed that book, everybody else started developing books around here. It was the battle of the books and pamphlets. The newspapers got involved in it. Jim Clendennon, who has just retired as the editor of the Tribune, was very active in all of it by writing great editorials in support of it. The St. Pete Times was just as active on the other side of the Bay trying to say that St. Pete was the logical place. A big battle developed there over that. There were people that wanted to put it down as far as Sarasota and over as far east as Orlando. It was really the battle over the site that overtook and eclipsed the battle as to whether there was a need. Everybody got to arguing over the site, so they just took for granted that there was a need. I hadn't planned it that way, but when I realized that was working I exploited that. Finally, after a series of meetings during which we lobbied all the members of the Board of Control and the Board of Education extensively through this chamber committee that we set up, in October of 1956 we got a favorable report from the Board of Control that it was desirable and feasible to establish a university and a recommendation to that effect to the Board of Education which was their overseer. Then we lobbied the Board of Education in December 1956. I met in Tallahassee with some members of the staff of the Board of Control. I remember going over to a man's house and I remember his wife's name. His



wife's name was Ruthie and she was about 8½ months pregnant. We drafted the resolution on her kitchen table that established the University of South Florida. We took it down to the Board of Education meeting the next day and got them to approve it. So we had a university. We didn't have any president, we didn't have any staff, we didn't have any budget, we didn't have a campus, we didn't have anything. We just had a piece of paper saying that we had a university.

Hewitt: Had the site actually been chosen by that time?

Gibbons: Yes, the site had been chosen by that time. There was great competition for sites. When St. Petersburg realized that it couldn't get the site in St. Petersburg, they wanted to use what is now the Bayboro campus. When they realized they couldn't get the site approved, which is a site at the end of Howard Franklin Bridge, they then said they wanted to take a site on the bay in north Tampa Bay, which would have been the other side of Town and Country. One of the most humorous things that happened was that the Board of Control members would come in town, and I would pick them up and take them around to the different sites and they would look at them. The night before we looked at the site out here on north Tampa Bay on the other side of Town and Country there had been a storm. The wind had blown up the bay and the water had risen up to about the height of the road. There was some newly dug ditches along there and you could see the water marks. They decided real quickly that they weren't going to build a campus there. There was a site down in Ruskin that they were interested in, but it was considered to be too far away. There was a site out here by the intersection of 301 and 60 where all that development is now going on, it was nothing but a cow pasture. That looked reasonably attractive. The one up here in those sandy

hills where you are now located was the most attractive. The legislators from Brooksville and the state senators from Brooksville, Pasco, and Polk County preferred that site over Bay sites or anything in St. Petersburg. So that is how we finally decided on that site. That site at that time belonged to the county. The county had acquired it as surplus property after World War II. There had been a Henderson Airfield there. Henderson Airfield is still visible from the air if you get up and look down on it. Some of the old parts that remain are the old runways. That is where the industrial park is now. Fowler Avenue was not paved. It was just a dirt road out there at that time. 30th Street was not paved, in fact there wasn't even a dirt road where 30th Street is. Fowler was paved up to about the southeast corner of the campus and then just turned into a dirt road all the way over to Nebraska. 50th Street came through, but it was just a narrow road. I went out there with my wife and two of my sons. We took a picnic lunch and toured all over that place. There was nothing out there but a bunch of old straggly cows that were mostly skin and bones. The pond on 30th Street didn't have any water in it. The University site itself had been an old orange grove. In the 1920s when Temple Terrace was being built, it was divided up into ten acre tracks and they were going to sell off the orange grove to northern investors that came down. Well, the orange grove hadn't been planted but about six months and the little seedlings were just coming out of the ground and there was sand heaped up around them to keep them moist and to keep them from freezing. So they dumped a lot of fertilizer on that grove. About January the whole thing froze. There were no trees. As far as you could see there was nothing but these dead orange trees. After the real estate boom collapsed around here, the trees had died, and everybody had gone bust and it fell into disuse, grew up again in

weeds, and finally the little oak trees came back. There were no pine trees. Those pine trees were planted by Dr. Allen.

Hewitt: Wasn't there some concern about building an entire university campus on sand?

Gibbons: Yes there was. All of the sites had to be explored as far as underground underpinnings are concerned. The county had to hire an engineering firm. They had to core bore all that out there to find out what was underneath all that sand. Of course, there are a number of natural sink holes in that area. It was found to be just about like the rest of Florida. You know that Florida is just a big sand bar on top of lime rock. Some places the lime rock is pretty close to the surface of the place or it sits pretty far under. There are core borings somewhere in the state archives that would show you exactly what is on about every thousand feet underneath there. They would bore all the way down and take samples. You would find sand, and then you would find muck. At one time it was a swamp and the muck had been compacted. It was probably real thick at one time eons ago. Then there was more sand and clay and then there was the lime rock underneath that. That is generally what it looks like if you could go right straight down in the earth. That is pretty typical of Florida. Some places the lime rock is closer to the surface. Lime rock is soluble in water. So you got this huge 50 - 60 inches of rain we have a year and goes through the ground and it stays in big pools underneath there and builds cavern-like things and it is all pretty stable as long as the water table is high. When the water table begins to drop real caverns develop and then those caverns collapse and that is when you see those sink holes. We have had alot of them over in Orlando. Occasionally we have them around here still. We always will have them. One

day Florida will all fall in. They were real worried about the old library building, which was the first building built on the campus, because it was a very heavy building. What they did was they moved alot of dirt. First they core bored it and found that there were no real caverns in there. They moved alot of dirt that was heavier than the weight of the building that was to be built. They let that settle for about a year. Then they moved the dirt off and built the library. The St. Pete Times would raise all kinds of fuss about it. First of all they . . . The breweries came about the same time. The St. Pete Times would run stories about "Bottle Cap U." and they would have comics in the Times about drunken football players out there at "Bottle Cap U." That got the Tampa Ministerial Association all upset. They came in and defended Tampa's good name, that this was not a town of drunken sods. There was a great public spirit around all of this. Lots of business people, the Chamber of Commerce, and lots of editors worked together on it. There was a great public outpouring to get this university and get it established. I just happened to be the lucky leader.

St. Julien: Once the site was chosen and everything was settled, did Pinellas delegates give any support and start supporting the idea of South Florida?

Gibbons: They weren't that important in the legislature at that time. First of all they were all Republicans and the Republicans were in such a terrible minority at that time that they were taken very lightly. So it really didn't make any difference. The great political weight was in what we called the "pork chop gang" and they were from Brooksville, Lakeland, and places like that. They were interested in it and so they gave their consent. We had some real skirmishers in the legislature having gotten through the legislature for the first time because the University of Florida had a

great alumni association and they were always very proud of the University of Florida's position in the higher education picture. I would take too much time to tell you all of that. My father was very influential in convincing Senator Shands, who was the senator from Gainesville, to the fact that he should allow this school to go forward.

Hewitt: Was the University of Florida more willing to let it go forward because it was initially envisioned as just a four-year undergraduate institution?

Gibbons: Yes. The professional educator at the University of Florida never had a lot of concern about it. Dr. Allen was the acting president at the University of Florida at that time. He had succeeded a man by the name of J. H. Miller who had a heart attack and died there. Dr. Allen was the vice president and he succeeded as president. I never got any flack from the University itself up there at Gainesville, but I got a lot of flack from the chamber of commerce types and the chamber of commerce types in Tallahassee too. They influenced a lot of people; their alumni mainly. They had to defend the great old University of Florida and they had to defend Florida State University. They constructed quite a legislative hurdle to get over. When Bill Shands came out for the University . . . He was the leader in the Florida Senate at that time and he . . . I hate to say he was the Dempsy Barron of his days because he didn't have the same connotation that Dempsy Barron had. Dempsy was a member of the legislature at that time, too. We overcame it. It was really quite a tribute to the broad-mindedness of those people that we deridingly called "pork choppers." They could have blocked it. They were not particularly in love with me. I had been a thorn in their sides trying to get the Florida Legislature reapportioned. But they cooperated in

a statesman like manner and let us get the University and provided the money for us to get it started.

Hewitt: Was there any thought then that it would have regional campuses?

Gibbons: No. In fact, if you go back and get the minutes of all these meetings and all my speeches you would find that we were talking about an institution that in ten years we would have perhaps ten thousand students. It would just really be available in order to take care of the baby boom that was created after World War II. So when it opened in 1960 it was just a little ahead of the crest of the baby boom. Everybody thought it would grow to about ten thousand and kind of stagnate. When it got into graduate education was after I went to Washington and the Veterans Administration came to see me about the establishment of a veteran's hospital. They said that they would like to build a hospital in my area except that they didn't build them unless there were medical schools. I said that we didn't have a medical school. They wanted to know what they could do to get a medical school together. I said that I would get on the phone to see what I could do. I called Terrel Sessums, who worked for me while I was in the state legislature, and I called Senator Whitaker and a few others. Out of all that we got a medical school chartered. That is when we first got into graduate education. The Engineering School was going into graduate education, but had not gotten there. There was a graduate education program in the College of Education that Dean Jean Battle was head of. But that was mainly to help teachers get their teaching certificates upgraded. The Business Administration was not into graduate education at that time. So the medical school was the first breakthrough into graduate education.



Hewitt: So the medical school is . . . I guess if John Allen thought it was a headache then it certainly has gotten to be either a much bigger and better medical school . . .

Gibbons: The medical school ate up on a per capita basis what is a huge part of the budget of the rest of the University. You will find that the academic staff, while they are proud to have a medical school because it is a sign of maturity and dignity of your school, when they are competing for dollars as they have to in the budget process, the medical school just eats up a disproportionate amount. It costs so much more to train someone in medicine than it does in engineering, the sciences, or the liberal arts. It is terribly expensive. Anyway, it was one of the most joyous experiences that I have ever had putting it all together. I can thank my family for allowing me to do it. I was just a lawyer here in town and my father, brother, uncle, and others all supported me in what I was doing. They paid all my bills and gave me enough to live on during those days and to raise a family. I spent two years just going between here and Tallahassee and all over the state where ever the Board of Control was meeting.

Hewitt: Were you still in Florida when the University actually opened?

Gibbons: Yes I was. I was in the Florida Senate when it actually opened. Scott Christopher and I drew up the first budget. Scott Christopher was the executive director of the greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. After we got the University established in 1956, we didn't have anything but a piece of paper which was an important piece of paper having been approved by the governor, the cabinet, and the state Board of Education. The next session of the legislature was coming up in 1957. So Scott and I met in January over in the Chamber of Commerce building and we drew up the first budget. I

took it up to show the governor and the governor said that it was too much money and that we would have to cut it back. He said that because we weren't in a metropolitan area that we wouldn't need dormitories. I said that we did need them and said that we couldn't afford them. So we started without any dormitories. We got the budget through the legislature without any dormitories. We came back right after the legislative session and I think we got something like \$750,000.00 which is really no money at all in these days, but which was a huge amount of money for a school that nobody attended.

Hewitt: Was John Allen the first person hired as an actual member of the University staff?

Gibbons: Yes. He was the first person hired. But let me finish the budget thing. We got the \$750,000.00 and we had no money for dormitories so we started the University of South Florida Foundation. John Germany, the lawyer I referred to who is right over here in the Exchange Bank right now, drew up the charter for the foundation and made me president. We started what we called the "dollars for dorms" drive. We were going to raise one hundred thousand bucks for the dormitories. And we did. We raised more than that in just a very short period of time. So we got the money from private subscriptions for the dormitories and those are the same dormitories you find out there, the ones with all the great names. I got to know John Allen very well during all this time because he was the acting president of the University of Florida. The University of Florida had by far the largest budget and I spent weeks working with John Allen just on the University of Florida budget for the Florida Legislature in 1955 and 1957. So I spent a lot of time in Gainesville because they have a very complex and a very expensive budget and



also in those times it was a very controversial budget. Then John Allen had taken himself out of the running for being the new president (of University of Florida). In his conservative sort of way he didn't think it was appropriate that he be the acting president and also be in the running for being considered president which was our good luck and the University of Florida's bad luck. The Board of Regents finally appointed Jay Wayne Wrights as president of the University of Florida. The Board of Regents also thought that John Allen would make a competent president for the University of South Florida. He came down here in March of 1957 to be the president. They gave him an office in the Court House and he had a lady that sat outside as his secretary. He started planning and putting the thing together hiring the faculty and the staff. He hired the librarian first for the first professional. He and Grace lived out in Beach Park. They bought a house out there. He had enough of living on the campus at the University of Florida. He didn't want to live on the campus anymore. And he didn't want a football team because he had so much trouble with the football team. He also didn't want a med school, but he finally gave into the med school. Anyway, he put it together. I have to say that alot of it is due to his character. He was a personally conservative person, but he was a very broad-minded person. He wasn't narrow-minded in his conservatism. He was a Quaker, not a pacifist, but not a person for violence. He was an astronomer by profession. He had got his doctorate in astronomy. He had been the vice president of the New York State University System. He had alot of background in higher education. He and Grace were just wonderful people.

Hewitt: I interviewed Grace Allen as part of the Anniversary Project. She was just delightful and had wonderful stories. Almost everyone I interviewed mentioned John Allen's vision of a very broad liberal arts program and a real

concentration on a core curriculum of Basic Studies. Certainly from the reports of the National Endowment for the Humanities for the last year or so and reports throughout the National Education System on the need for a broader, more humanistic approach to higher education, it seems in some ways as though within twenty-five years, although it is not very long for the life of a University, that we are kind of circling back to John Allen's first vision which somewhere along the way got dramatically transformed. Do you think that it is possible for USF, which has grown so far beyond its original expectations and has professional schools that seem to be multiplying rapidly, to ever get back to that kind of early vision of a liberal arts orientation?

Gibbons: I think so, but something else has come in since that time and that is that there has been a great growth of community colleges and junior colleges in the system and so you don't have as high a proportion of freshmen and sophomores on the campus as you did at one time. When I went to the University of Florida in 1930 there were very few seniors and juniors. Most people were freshmen and the next most prolific group were sophomores. By the time you got to the juniors, most of them had dropped out. In fact I can remember Dr. John Tiger, who was the president, spoke to us at our first assembly as freshmen and he said that only one out of three will ever graduate from this university. I think that has changed and that change came along shortly after the opening of the University of South Florida and I think that had some impact upon it. So now a lot of the people that you get in the state universities are juniors, at least that is my impression. After getting the University, getting it started, and getting it turned over to John Allen, I decided the best thing that I could do, as far as the University was concerned, is not to have too high a profile with it because

I am a controversial political figure and there is no sense of burdening down a university with a controversial political figure when I have always enjoyed a warm wonderful relationship with it and have known all of the people out there that I have worked with over the years.

Hewitt: Did you have any connection in those early years with the Johns Committee?

Gibbons: I knew Charlie Johns. He had been acting governor of Florida and he was the state senator. He was always controversial. He discovered homosexuality. I used to kid him. I called him the Christopher Columbus of homosexuality. I told him to let those poor people alone. It all had to do with communism and communes and all that other garbage. Charlie is not the typical backwoods reactionary person. When he was in the state legislature in 1953 he put through the bill that required all restaurants and lodging places to take down their discrimination acts. It was customary in those days to prohibit Jewish people from going to a lot of clubs and things of that sort. It wasn't just blacks, it was Jewish people too. Charlie got through the legislature legislation outlawing those kinds of signs of discrimination in Florida. But he just discovered homosexuals and he just went crazy. Some people couldn't stand that basic studies core curriculum and some of the parents got upset about it because they were talking about controversial things. Charlie then came down to investigate it. I knew Charlie and I'm sure he voted to establish the University. If he hadn't it probably wouldn't have been established. He was concerned about homosexuality. That was his big problem.

Hewitt: I guess the University of South Florida has become less controversial over the course of its twenty-five years.

Gibbons: USF was the first school in Florida that was desegregated. The first black went to school there. It would be interesting to find out whatever happened to him. He was in the band and he was from around here somewhere.

Hewitt: We have tried to track him down and we haven't had any luck so far.

Gibbons: I will tell you what you could do. If we could find out his name and his social security number, we might be able to track him down. Anyway, he was in the band. He was a tall fellow. Grace Allen may remember his name.

Hewitt: Well, thank you very much for all your information.

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