

4-5-2004

Fred Wright Jr. : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Lucy D. Jones

University of South Florida Libraries. Florida Studies Center. Oral History Program.

Fred Wright

Lucy D. Jones

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/university_history_campus_bios

Scholar Commons Citation

University of South Florida Libraries. Florida Studies Center. Oral History Program.; Wright, Fred; and Jones, Lucy D., "Fred Wright Jr. : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Lucy D. Jones" (2004). *Campus Biographies-All Items*. 38.

https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/university_history_campus_bios/38

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the USF St. Petersburg campus Campus Biographies at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Campus Biographies-All Items by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2008, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

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

Narrator: Fred Wright, Jr. (W)
Current Position: Professor and Writer
Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date Audit Edit Completed: August 5,
2004
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

Interviewer: Lucy Jones (J)
Date of Interview: April 5, 2004
Location of Interview: Eckerd College,
St. Petersburg
Transcriber: Lauren Dominguez
Transcription Completed: May 28, 2004

TRANSCRIPTION

J: Today is Monday, April 5, 2004. My name is Lucy Jones. I'm a graduate assistant for the Florida Studies Center. Today I'm continuing a series of interviews with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni, commemorating fifty years of university history. Today I'm with Fred Wright, Jr. on the campus of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg. Thank you for meeting with me this afternoon.

W: Thank you for asking me.

J: Let's start off by talking a little bit about who you are and what you do now.

W: I'm a full-time writer and editor, self-employed. I basically do non-fiction articles for magazines, newspapers, and websites. In addition, I teach as an adjunct both here at Eckerd College and at St. Petersburg College. I teach classes both on site as well as online at St. Petersburg College.

J: What sort of things do you write about?

W: I'm what's called a generalist. That means I write about anything that I can find a market for, with some emphasis on travel. Travel is about fifty percent of what I

do. Also I write about business, science, medicine, film, features, pool tables, and most anything I can find a story in a market.

J: To backtrack a little ways, you were a student at USF?

W: I was a student at USF; I got a master's degree at USF, attending both on the St. Petersburg campus and the Tampa campus.

J: How did you come to be a student at USF?

W: I was working for a daily newspaper that doesn't exist any more in St. Petersburg called *Evening Independent*. I graduated in 1964 from Eckerd College when it was still called Florida Presbyterian College. In about 1968 or 1969, I got bored. I was just not being stimulated. So I started taking graduate-level classes in English literature on the St. Petersburg campus. I took two or three classes to see if I was really interested in doing that and going further before I could really begin the master's degree. I really did it more than anything else just because I was bored. I didn't plan to teach. I wasn't doing any teaching at that time. I just wanted to be stimulated.

J: And were you?

W: Yes, I was. It was a great experience. I took four or five courses on the St. Petersburg campus, and then I had to do the rest of the program at the Tampa campus. The program was pretty new. One of the things that had always attracted me and had been very beneficial for me about Florida Presbyterian College was I was in the first class. I started here in 1960 with the first class, the freshman class, and we started with the freshman class. I was also fortunate to be in the first graduating class in 1964. That experience is a unique experience, of course, and it

also made me want more of that. When I entered the master's program in the English department at the University of South Florida, it was a very new department. I don't know if it started just then, but it was early in its life. It was still somewhat experimental. There were some things that we were required to do then that they later dropped, which was typical to my experience at Florida Presbyterian College. For example, as I recall, I had to do both the comprehensive exam as well as a thesis for my master's in English literature, and I don't believe that's a requirement right now. I think you have a choice. It's things like that. Maybe I worked harder, but being new with the program was a good experience. I wouldn't trade it. I got my master's degree in 1971.

J: When you were a student at Florida Presbyterian, weren't the classes being held over at the marine science...[interrupted]

W: The first two and a half years, it was over on the Bayboro Campus. That was our campus. The junior year they began to build buildings out here on what is now the Eckerd College campus. For most of that year, they bussed us out here for classes and then bussed us back for meals and sleeping at night. On the senior year, the dorms were built out here for us. So we had one year out here.

J: How many students were in your classes, typically?

W: At Florida Presbyterian I think there were 150 or so in the graduating class, maybe a little bit less.

J: So you got to know everybody pretty well.

- W: I got to know everybody. It was a very intimate group and a very intimate experience. It spoiled you. By the time we graduated there were maybe 500 or 600 students.
- J: When you went back for your master's, did you expect that same level of intimacy with students?
- W: No, not after I registered the first time on the Tampa campus. I had no illusions about being in a small school any more, even though I was in a smaller college. I didn't expect that. The class sizes weren't a whole lot different than I had experienced at Florida Presbyterian, but I didn't have any expectations that the whole experience would be that way. I had to learn to adjust to a much bigger campus, particularly when I went to Tampa. When I was attending classes on the St. Petersburg campus, not much had changed by then in terms of the physical campus, so I was still very familiar to the area.
- J: It must have been a little strange and difficult to get used to at first that you weren't an undergraduate at Florida Presbyterian; you were a graduate at USF.
- W: The shift wasn't that bad. I didn't have the same affinity or the same affection perhaps because there's something to start out with the faculty and to start out with everybody in the same kind of new experience. I didn't have the same emotional commitment, but it was still a good experience. I really enjoyed the professors I had. Some of them were brilliant. I was fortunate to have some that are still talked about in terms of the English department at USF. I didn't like the drive to Tampa, but once I committed to the program, there were just some

courses I had to take over there. That was probably the toughest part, the commute.

J: Who are some of the teachers that you remember?

W: I remember Joe [Joseph G.] Bentley who was really just brilliant, a great satirist, an expert in satire. I still hear people occasionally talk about his lectures. I was very fortunate to have him. My thesis professor was Leslie Ford Davis, a fine southern scholar, somebody who really knew his literature, was very challenging to work with. I'm probably going to forget other names of people. I can see their faces, but their names aren't coming up. It's been a while.

J: What was your thesis on?

W: It was Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. It was a novel based on fact, or a nonfiction novel. He had argued that he had created a new genre. He argued that he had written a nonfiction book because it was based on a true event, but in a novelistic style. He was trying to say that he actually created a new genre. That really was the crux of my thesis. Had he indeed created a new genre or had he just put a spin on a different kind of nonfiction book? I had to bring in lots of scholars who argued and wrote about what is a novel and how you define a novel. It was a learning experience. It was good foundation for somebody who's making a career out of journalism.

J: Were your advisors, faculty you worked with, supportive of you not wanting to go on into academia?

W: That's a really good question. To be honest with you, they were candid that they weren't sure whether I could do the master's program, as I recall. Two factors

first was that I was a journalist. When I started taking courses on the St. Petersburg campus, I was still a journalist. There was some very candid concern whether I could do the academic work. The fact that I had graduated from Florida Presbyterian and it was still called that then, that was still an unknown commodity. They didn't know what that meant, what kind of training I had had, how good were my academic skills. There had not been enough students to come out of Florida Presbyterian College for them to know whether that was a reliable education or not, a foundation. I think they were somewhat justifiably a little gunshy until I started getting A's in the program. They said, well, ok, I guess he can do the work.

J: Trial by fire.

W: Trial by fire, and the fact is that it was difficult sometimes for me to shift in my academic writing. I remember one of the problems I had with my thesis was that my first draft tended to be a little bit more journalistic in its writing style, and he really had to point that out to me, that no, you can't; you're writing something academic. Sometimes I had to shift my thinking.

J: Once you got the master's degree, you were no longer being stimulated by the academic environment. Did you continue on as a journalist or is that when you switched?

W: I made my career as a journalist. I've done the teaching as an adjunct. That means I'm not on the staff. As an adjunct I'm a gypsy. I have no guarantees. I have no benefits. I don't know from semester to semester whether I'll have work for sure or what classes I'll be teaching. Although, I certainly have a pattern with a certain

couple schools. It's still very nomadic, very gypsy-like. There's no guarantees. I even went back a couple times to take graduate-level courses after getting the master's degree because I got kind of bored. I found that I really didn't think I was wanting to get a Ph.D. I did take a graduate-level creative writing course on the St. Petersburg campus from, I can't remember his name. That's the only writing course I've ever taken. It was interesting to become a professional writer and in my academic career, I've never taken a writing course. I never took a journalism course; I never took a writing course until I took this course. The purpose I took it for was I knew that this instructor would make me write in genre that I might not write in, specific forms in poetry that I was asked to write in. He gave the students a choice of writing either poetry or short stories in that semester, and since I wasn't going for a degree, I said I'd like to do both. I actually wrote some poems in some structures that I never would have done on my own, same with the short stories. The problem with being a freelance writer is I'm always goal-oriented. Where am I going to sell this? Where am I going to place this? That was difficult for me to not think that way when I was doing creative writing, but it turned out that I did place all the works I wrote in that course.

J: That turned out well then.

W: Yes, it did.

J: Did that cause any sort of a shift in what markets you went after?

W: No. There are certainly different markets for poetry and fiction than there are for nonfiction. What it taught me about fiction writing is, in journalism your goal is to say something in as few words as possible and to get the story told in a hurry,

even if it's a longer feature story. What I had to learn in writing fiction was to take my time. That was a big shift. I hadn't had as much problem just with the poetry because really use variation poetry in my freelance writing. In terms of prose writing, I'm so geared towards getting the story told as quickly as possible. I had to take my time in writing a short story, letting it unfold. It's still something I have to be conscious of when I'm writing fiction.

J: Do you remember any of the students who took classes with you?

W: Not from the University of South Florida. Occasionally I will run into them. Most of them, if not all of them, were adults like myself. They went different paths. Some became teachers at St. Petersburg College where I've been an adjunct for a number of years. I would occasionally run across them, but I couldn't name one now.

J: They were mostly non-traditional [students]?

W: Yes, even though they were degree seeking, they were non-traditional for the most part. Elinor Deutschmann, for some reason I remember that name. Elinor Deutschmann became an adjunct instructor at St. Petersburg College so, in the years past, our paths have crossed, but she's since retired.

J: Are you from St. Petersburg originally?

W: No, I'm from Nashville, Tennessee originally. I came here in 1960 to go to Florida Presbyterian, and I've been here ever since.

J: What drew you to Florida Presbyterian from Nashville?

W: That's a longer story. I was going to Davidson College in North Carolina. I was a sophomore at Davidson and very unhappy, not doing well. [I was] really just

miserable. My advisor was a man named PedroTrakas, Spanish professor. Even though I had not taken Spanish, that's the one I had been assigned to. I was in his office waiting to talk to him about what ever my latest problem of the day was, and he was on the phone. While he was on the phone, I noticed on his desk was a brochure. I started looking at it, and it was a brochure from Florida Presbyterian College. When he got off the phone, at some point I asked him, what is this? He said, that's where I'm going next year. I said, what do you mean? He said, we're going to be starting a new college in Florida. The idea of being able to start over again, because I just had two bad years at the other school, was really attractive to me. It didn't appeal to my parents because they were paying for the college. You only start as a freshman. I couldn't transfer in as a junior. I had to start over again. So essentially I had to do six years of undergraduate school. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. I ended up finding out about the college, signing up, and the fact that my parents were paying just made me really acceptable down there. They didn't care about my Davidson record so much. They were about eight or ten of us that were in that first class who had been to college somewhere else before.

J: Did you come down here with the notion of studying writing or anything in particular? Just going to college?

W: Just going to college. I was actually a math major because my father was a general contractor, and I had some ambitions to think I might be a civil engineer or something like that. I did well in math so I started out majoring in math as I had done at Davidson, and it took me about another two and a half years down

here before I realized that math was not where I wanted to spend my life. It was not as attractive to me after getting some higher levels. I'm not sure what made me switch to English literature, but it was the right choice.

J: Did you stay in St. Petersburg after you graduation just because you had a job?

W: I had a job. I went to work for the *Evening Independent* paper, purely by chance. I had not, as I said, taken a writing course. I had a B.A. degree in English literature, which trains you for nothing specific, but a lot of things in general. What I learned at the college, which was invaluable was how to analyze, how to think. Those were the basic skills that I learned at Florida Presbyterian, and not specifics. I remember when we took the graduate records and tests. We would score very highly on the general and very poorly on the specific English literature because we were not taught facts. I was in a terrible percentile on the English specifics, but on the general I scored very high. I realized because we had learned how to think, how to analyze, but not how to memorize.

J: So it was a different type of curriculum?

W: Very much so.

J: Were they experimental purposely?

W: Yes, that was one of the things that attracted a lot of the founding faculty. These were faculty members, in some cases, that came from colleges where they already had tenure. They risked their entire academic careers to come to a brand new college, which was no guarantee that it was going to succeed. The covenant with the Presbyterian Church may or may not have been a factor. I'm sure it was in some cases, but these were very daring and innovative faculty members. They

wanted to try things that maybe they couldn't do where they were. One of the things that was innovative about Florida Presbyterian was a core program in all four years, so that regardless of your major, everybody took the same core courses, which were basically humanity courses. Then you did your electives and your special courses for your major. That was an invaluable process. I got a huge humanities foundation. That proved invaluable for me when I was later working for the newspaper and they wanted me to be a critic and review ballet, opera, symphonies, and art shows, none of which I had any formal training in. Because I had training in a college that taught me how to analyze and think, then I was able to do that. I was trained in a way I didn't know I was being trained.

J: Did that have anything to do with it being the 1960s, or is that a coincidence?

W: I think it's a coincidence. It was sort of like an oasis. We were not really the 1960s any other way. There were not a lot of protests. The biggest protest was we did a protest against Castro at some point during the Cuban crises. One Cuban student, I think, or two or three. We were very non-1960s in a lot of ways. It was not nearly as freethinking, among the students. The students were more conservatives. Once we moved to this campus, you are distanced from the town. There was not even the bus service that you have now. I don't think the 1960s had a lot to do with it. The curriculum was terribly original. A lot of things have since then dropped, but everybody, regardless of their major, was required to take three years of language.

J: Really? That's a lot.

W: That's a lot, and it doesn't happen now, but that meant the chemistry majors, the biology majors, and the math majors all had to take three years of language. The other thing, which was very innovative, was the four-one-four curriculum where you had a standard semester and then one month, in this case January, of independent study, and then another three and a half or four months. That was the first college in the country to do that. Now hundreds of colleges have that structure.

J: Did they come up with it on their own?

W: That was part of the innovative curriculum that attracted a lot of these professors. I would not have swapped anything for that experience, to have one month each year where I studied one subject in a very seminar, almost European-style structure. I was just given a reading list, and I would read, and I would come in and meet with the instructor maybe individually or in a small group once or twice a week. I just totally absorbed myself for a month in one subject. It was an incredible experience. I did Steinbeck one semester. I did Tennessee Williams one semester. I did Hemingway one semester. Senior year, I went to London for the month of January. [It was] the first time I had been overseas. As you may know, Eckerd College now has the largest overseas study program in the country, for this size college. They now have a residence over there for students to go for either the winter term or for a full semester. That was valuable. So I studied here for one solid month and did nothing but see plays and discuss plays. It was an incredible experience.

J: So it was valuable in the end?

- W: Absolutely. I was trained when I wasn't being trained.
- J: Being in the first class, did that help you any when you got out? You mentioned the people at USF were uncertain what to do with you. Were the people in St. Petersburg in general uncertain?
- W: I don't know. That's a good question. What happened was when I was about to graduate, I began to look for a job because I was engaged at that time to a woman who still had two more years here at the college. I wanted to stay in the area, and I really was not sure what I wanted to do, and I thought I'd try to find some management-training program at some corporation where you can become upper management. I went to Florida Power, General Telephone at that time, and a couple defense contractors, and nobody was hiring. Somebody said, why don't you go to the Times Publishing Company? I said, why? They said, because it's a huge company. They have 1,200 boys. They have all kinds of needs. At that time people could just walk into their personnel office and just sort of say, I want to sign up. That's what I did, and just by pure chance, the Times Publishing Company had just recently purchased the afternoon paper, the *Evening Independent*. It was an independent paper that was about to fold. The publisher at the time, Nelson Poynter, said I want two papers in town even if I have to own both of them. I think that's healthy competition. They were looking to hire a new staff for a small, daily paper, and I just happened to walk in the door. They gave me a battery test, and I scored well on verbal so they hired me with no journalism background. I had done a little writing for the college paper. I helped start the college paper, but I had no training.

J: You started the college paper?

W: Yes. That's the good part of being in on the ground floor. I helped start the college paper, the sailing club, the honor court, the student council, and all those kinds of things.

J: Somebody had to.

W: Somebody had to, and that was opportunity where there was no tradition before. None of things were established before so I got to be innovative.

J: You mentioned earlier that you were in the same buildings that USF used to start. What were those buildings like?

W: I better be careful. There may have been some changes between the time when I graduated in 1964 and when I started back there at 1969, but I don't think there were a whole lot of change. I'm just trying to look back and think. The main building is a huge concrete building that still exists on the Bayboro campus. It has concrete walls eighteen inches thick and can withstand hurricanes. In fact, it would be a great place to be in case of a hurricane. Most of the other buildings that were there then have now been torn down and replaced. Basically, they were two-story barracks buildings that had served as dorms. I'm just trying to remember whether they had been turned to classrooms when I had my master's program there. There were some other buildings that had been used as classrooms, or the state had taken them over for marine biology purposes. The only thing that was really different was that I was in the two-story buildings that had been dormitories when I was at Florida Presbyterian. They were now classrooms. I had

the interesting experience of going to class in some rooms that I had memories of being dorms, bull sessions, and smoking, et cetera. They were different times.

J: College life.

W: Yeah, right. College life. That's about the only thing really different. I wasn't haunted by anything, but it was a little bit different to think I was going to class where bunk-beds used to be.

J: Was having the campus on the water a positive for you?

W: Absolutely. I was much more of an avid fisherman at that time. I used to love to go there and fish. I did a lot of fishing when I was in undergraduate, less so in the graduate program. I still used to go down there, particularly because I knew some of the maintenance people so I could come over after hours. There was a dock, at least there used to be, on the power plant side. I used to go out on my birthday. I would always go out to the end of the dock and contemplate the past year and the year ahead. It was quite a tradition. I did that for eight or ten years, including into the years I was in the master's program. I've quit since. I think they have more security now.

J: You said you sailed as well?

W: I was a recreational sailor. I did a little bit of sailing. I wasn't as much a sailor as I could have been if given an opportunity. I took advantage of the water mainly just in terms of fishing. I really enjoyed fishing. I didn't catch anything.

J: I guess being from Tennessee you didn't have the water.

W: Well, I used to fish in rivers in Tennessee. It's fresh water fishing. In this case [it is] saltwater fishing. I'm just a terrible fisherman. I don't have a lot of luck. I have

caught a few good fish off of Bayboro so I still have nice memories. I caught a tarpon one time. I didn't land him but I caught it. I used to catch Snook occasionally.

J: Those are supposed to be hard to catch.

W: They are. They're great fighters. In fact the only Snook I've ever caught in my life I caught off the Bayboro campus. That's been a number of years since I caught a Snook.

J: When you all had the dorms over there, did they have a dorm mother or somebody...[interrupted]

W: We did sort of. You asked about the 1960s, and that's a good question. I really appreciated that. Where the 1960s did apply was that it was very conservative. It was also a Presbyterian college. For example, the students in the undergraduate program at Florida Presbyterian were the students that had curfew. Many did not, but the other students had curfew. They were in the concrete building on the second floor of the permanent building. We were in the first and second floor of the barracks building which later became classrooms. They did have a dean that I think lived on the premises. They had more monitoring. We had a dean, but he didn't live in the dorms. We had a basketball team so we had cheerleaders. Cheerleaders had to wear shorts I remember. They couldn't wear short skirts. That was kind of leaning towards conservatism. There was no such thing as a coed dorm. That was unheard of at the time.

J: No visiting each other either?

W: You could visit, but you couldn't go in each other's dorms, not legally. Yes, they did it, but not within rules. Women had to sign in and out. They had students that were monitoring when we came so they were protecting them.

J: Where did students go to congregate on campus?

W: That was difficult because a lot of people did not have cars. Even on the Bayboro campus, if you wanted to go into town to a movie or to eat, you had a long night. It was located on Eighth Avenue South and First Street so you had at least eight blocks. I can remember often going out on the pier. At that time there was a radio station out there. WSUN Radio had a radio station out there, and somebody that I hung out with had made friends with one of the DJs. So we would sometimes walk out there just to hang out at night at watch him to his DJ thing. That was a long hike. I can remember that. We used to hang out a lot at the Greyhound bus station, which was sort of in downtown around Second Street. I don't know if it's still there or not, but it was a bus station, and it had a restaurant. It was about the only restaurant in that area that was open twenty-four hours. If we wanted to do late-night studying, we would go down there, and the popular thing was to have a cheese omelet. So we would have cheese omelets and french-fries, and have books and study to the wee hours. They didn't have much other business so they really didn't mind it.

J: I was wondering what other people you would meet in the Greyhound station.

W: We were off to ourselves so we didn't take a minute to meet the people we might have met. We were there just to hang out and do some studying. I think if you wanted to go to a movie, you had to even further walk further up Central Avenue.

There wasn't much to do. If you wanted to get off by yourself with a girlfriend, in my case, you tried to find a dark corner of the campus. There were just not a lot of choices. There were some bushes in the park. This was before the Bayfront Center was built, so there was a ball field there, a stadium with wooden bleachers. There were other various places that people would just try to get out of sight. In fact, I remember being with a girl one night on the top row of the bleachers, and two cops on motorcycles spotted us. They came over there, and they were nice about it, but they clomped up the stairs. We were sitting up there hoping that nobody would see us. They kidded us. I think one of them asked us if we were waiting for a night game. It was really hard to find a place to be alone.

J: I guess the place had been built as a military base so they didn't really want to encourage that sort of activity.

W: That's true. We were somewhat isolated. It was not the same way the other campuses might have experienced the 1960s.

J: St. Petersburg was probably a little different.

W: It was. It was conservative, too, and we were not altogether accepted. I think we were still an unknown quantity for a lot of the people in the community. There's not people that were inviting you into their homes or having parties for those Florida Presbyterian students.

J: As an undergraduate at Florida Presbyterian, did you do a lot of community involvement? Even though it was isolated, was there contact?

W: There was very little, actually, at least from my experience. I can't say that's true for everybody, but I can't think of a lot of examples where the students were

interacting with the community as volunteers or with any other projects, although that may have happened. My senior year I did volunteer to do some community theatre in St. Petersburg and did an integrated play with some community leaders from the African-American community, which was a big deal at that time. One of the English professors at the college had made the contacts, and they wanted to put on the play. I forget where we even performed, but we performed some piece of comedy. It was not a heavy thing, but it was integrated cast of mostly adults from the African-American community and some students from college. Somehow I ended up having a good part.

J: Was the student body integrated?

W: No. We did not have an African-American student, at least not the first two or three years. We had Cuban students, and one or two other foreign students, but basically we were very Anglo Saxon.

J: Were there an equal number of men and women?

W: I think so. I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but I think there were. I don't think it was skewed too heavily.

J: Did you work for the *Evening Independent* until it went out of business?

W: I left it in 1975 to become a self-employed writer, and I think it closed in 1981 or something like that.

J: Is that why you left?

W: No. I'm not sure they even closed, but I left it before it closed.

J: I guess the whole idea of having competition between two papers that you own...[interrupted]

W: Well, it was a good idea, but afternoon papers throughout the United States have suffered. Most afternoon papers are closed except for one. It was just one of the early ones to go. The *Tampa Times* some years ago also went. We found that what happened in most communities wouldn't support two papers. Many people were still leaning towards the morning paper. The idea of an afternoon paper.... They'd get their news from the TV. So they didn't subscribe or advertise.

J: Did you find it a difficult transition into being a full time, freelance, self-employed writer?

W: Not a whole lot. It was certainly challenging. It's certainly challenging because I am responsible for my benefits, if any, and vacations, if any. That's the hardest part. I had had an opportunity to explore the freelancing a little bit when I was employed. I was with the newspaper for eleven years so I got to find out that I could do it a little bit. When I quit, I really flipped because I thought I was getting sort of stagnant where I was. By then I had married and unmarried, but I had no children so it was easier for me because I didn't have to support anybody else. I quit with enough savings that if I didn't sell anything, I could go for three months. If I sold a little bit, I could go six months. Now it's been twenty-nine years.

J: So it worked out.

W: Yeah. It's been lean sometimes, and I may be eating cat food in a few years, but otherwise it's been pretty good. I really like the freedom.

J: Where are some of the places that you go looking for stores? You must leave the St. Petersburg area.

W: For most of the non-travel stories I do, I do really get them from two local newspapers: the *St. Petersburg Times* and *The Tampa Tribune*. These are two very professional newspapers. They have very good writers. They're constantly finding stories. All I do is look at a story and say, is that a story I think I could sell somewhere else? Does that story have an element to it that I think somebody outside this market would be interested in? If I think so, then I go looking for a market, I start pitching the story, and I sell ten, twelve, or fifteen articles a month that way. I do have an ongoing arrangement with the *St. Petersburg Times* business section so I do two stories a week for them, so that includes that in the twelve to fifteen stories. The rest, I really often sell stories to magazines I've never seen before, never heard of. I simply got an idea from a story in *The Tampa Tribune* or the *St. Petersburg Times*, and then went and contacted that editor and said, would you like this story? The editor says yes and then I do the story. A large part of what I do is really by phone and maybe locally driving around and interviewing people. A large part of what I do is by telephone. For the travel, yes, then I do some of the travel for the travel stories. But a lot of the travel I do is also by phone and by Internet, updating travel guides and stuff like that, checking to see if all the phone numbers are current. That's just phone work.

J: Yeah.

W: I've traveled to Canada and Mexico, and several places in Europe and Australia.

J: Have you ever been tempted to leave St. Petersburg?

W: Yes and no. I love London. I've never been able to figure out how to support myself as a writer in London. So, if I win the lottery, I'm on the next plane. It's as

simple as that. If I win the lottery, I'm flying to London, and I'll get a place. Probably seriously I would live there in the spring and summer and still stay here in the winter and fall. I would live in London in an instant. I think it's a great city despite the noise and clutter. I'm attracted to Seattle, but I'd miss the sun too much. I really like Seattle otherwise. I have a very good friend in Seattle, and I would really like a whole lot of things about that area. The last time I was out there was in winter, and the weather forecast predicted there would be fifteen minutes of sun breaks. Well, that told me so much about that climate. I just don't think I could handle that, despite all the other positive things. San Francisco is the same way. I really like San Francisco, but I keep thinking they're going to have a definitive earthquake. I wish they would have it and get it over with. If it's still there, then I'll move out there because I love San Francisco. I love Denver, the Rockies. At one point I thought about trying to move there part of the year, but it just didn't work out. St. Petersburg is just quite convenient. So much of what I do is because I'm here. So many of the stories I write, I write because I'm here. I couldn't write them from another part of the country. It would be too difficult now to start over. The teaching...it would be very difficult for me to start an adjunct relationship with colleges somewhere else. Not to say it couldn't happen, but I'm kind of a known commodity here. That keeps me here.

J: When I contacted you and you first started thinking in your mind about USF, were there any stories in particular that came up in your mind?

W: I can't think that I have a lot of experiences or that I have a long association with USF. I regret that I don't get to the Tampa campus nearly as much as I used to. I

used to go over there for the foreign film program. For example, when I was a film critic for the *Evening Independent*, they had an excellent man over there whose name I forget who was in charge of the foreign film series. He would sometimes book three or four films for me to come over and review. I'd see three or four Japanese films in a row. It was quite an experience. When I was married, my wife and I subscribed to the foreign film series. So, I had lots of times to go over there and see plays as well. Since I'm not reviewing things any more I am less likely to go over there. I haven't been on the Tampa campus for three or four years. I know there are changes over there that I just haven't experienced. I used to do some adjunct teaching for the journalism department, but the current administration doesn't know me from Adam so they don't come knocking. I haven't had a job over there in a while. The only stories I can remember, this is not part of the master's program, but teaching an 8:00 class on the Tampa campus. Getting up at 5:00 a.m. so I could leave by 6:00 or 6:30 to teach that 8:00 class. It was three mornings a week. At that time I needed that teaching. In terms of being a commuter, at that time it was much more of a commuter college. When I was doing the master's program, I didn't have any kind of residential experiences. I was just over there. I might have something to eat before class, I attend the class, I do some research in the library, and I come back. It was just not an opportunity to have a lot of experiences of there. That's true here, too.

Although, I've hung around the Bayboro campus a lot, I know some of the staff over there. Over the years I've known some of the staff, as well as faculty. I've taught on that campus, although not recently. Mostly I think the college-type stuff

- would go back to the Florida Presbyterian experience. When I was a resident, I was there for all the shenanigans that go on.
- J: Shenanigans!
- W: Shenanigans, all the college type of stuff that goes on.
- J: Did you have anything that you wanted to mention that I haven't asked you about?
- W: In terms of the Bayboro campus?
- J: Sure.
- W: There's a lot of history there. It's a shame, in a way, that the new expansion had to take down the old buildings, although there are absolute practical reasons for that. There's no way around that. That's just progress. I have some fondness about those dorms I lived in and the buildings that are no longer there that I had classes in. There's no way around it. That will be true here as the transition happens here at this campus. I don't know what it means that I had two different colleges' experiences on the same grounds. If there's some bigger message about that, I don't know, but it's kind of odd to have that transition happen.
- J: And to be in at the beginning of two campuses.
- W: I talk about the fact that Florida Presbyterian taught me how to think and how to analyze. I really discovered, more, the love of literature through the master's program at USF. I credit the instructors for that. It was a tough program in some ways. There were some courses that were really just very difficult and not a lot of fun, which is typical of any kind of graduate-level experience, I imagine. At Florida Presbyterian I didn't segue into English literature until my junior year. I

had a year and a half or a year and three quarters of English literature. Certainly, it awakened that me. I write novels. I write screenplays. Those are the things I do in my spare time. It certainly was the master's program that really taught me to appreciate more so literature, the depth, and discovery process. I'm sure none of the instructors are still there any more that I had. They might still be there. Maybe they are. None of the ones that I think whose names and faces pop in right now I think are still there. They've either passed on, died, or retired.

J: Would you recommend an experience like that to others?

W: Yes. I think it's a wonderful training for any type of discipline. So much of the teaching I do.... I'm teaching journalism courses, and I've never taken a journalism course in my life. Because of my life experience and my work experience, that seems to be acceptable. The closest thing I have come in my teaching part is teaching some composition courses at St. Petersburg College. The second Composition II has a literature component, or it can. The instructor is allowed to bring in short stories, poetry, and plays. That's the only time I've really had a chance to explore the literature part of my training and my love for literature. I wish I could teach literature courses. I think that would be more fun for me. I think it's a great training. I think a liberal arts education is a great training, but particularly literature because most literature programs teach you to analyze and teach you to discover beyond the surface. If you're looking at fictional works or poetry and you're asked to look at metaphor, simile, symbolism, and allegory, meaning you have to go below the surface. I can think of lots of other disciplines in the business where that's also a needed skill. It's one

thing to say, here's how to do it, and it's another thing to do it. I'm not saying that this is the only discipline that will teach you the foundation of good analytical skills. Probably math and sciences do, too. Humanities education, liberal arts, English literature education has proved very beneficial to me in ways I could never foresee.

J: Any last thoughts?

W: I don't think so. Not that I want to go on the record with anyway.

J: Save that for a different interview? Well, thank you.

W: Thank you.

End of Interview