

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

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

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Place of Interview: Estates at Carpenters
Lakeland, Florida

Date of Interview: April 20, 2015

M = James M. Denham ("Mike")

C = C. B. Gambrell

M. Today is April 20th, 2015. I am here with C. B. Gambrell, and my name is James Denham. We are resuming our fourth day of conversations and once again, this is April 20, 2015. Dr. Gambrell we were talking about your last year or so at the university in Los Angeles and you were there concluding your fifth year. Can you pick up from there and tell us about your decision to leave UCF, and also your next educational opportunity, I believe it was at Mercer?

C. I'd be glad to. I qualified for administrative sabbatical leave when I left the Vice Presidency at UCF after about twelve years. I went to Stanford University and participated in their activities out there primarily on the academic side of things. I continued, I guess the great love of my life, doing accreditation work for the engineering council. One of the things that I had done, I guess over forty visits that I had made, I was the team chair of about half of them. One of the institutions that I took a team to was West Coast University in Los Angeles; the Wilshire District of Los Angeles. I went there knowing that they were in terrible financial difficulty and that if things didn't go right, they would probably have to close. So I went there with the challenge in front of me to assist in any way that I could to collapse the curriculum and save money on expenses on one kind or another. I learned that the Vice President for Finance

had a fair size research program underway, and they farmed out contracts and opportunities to various locations pretty much all around the country. The General, General Neutergen was a good friend of the university and he joined with some others of the Chamber of Commerce to encourage Mercer University to begin an engineering school. They did; the Board of Trustees enthusiastically approved that possibility. The next thing they needed to do was to begin recruiting students and achieve success with a meeting. Well, because of the accreditation work that I had done, the director of the accreditation board for engineering and technology knew about the development of a new school at Mercer, and when Mercer contacted his office for recommendations for candidates to become the Dean, he recommended me. That is about all it took. They invited me there for an interview and I'm proud to say that the President cancelled the interview process about half way through and offered me the job. A week later I accepted and we moved to Macon, Georgia, about the middle of the spring, I guess early April. I started working to develop the new school. We had to first of all, get a budget! Well, in the interview process somewhere, the figure of \$12,000,000 had been mentioned as a startup for the new school. Well, I had never heard of anything quite so lucrative as that! I was indeed ready to pounce on that. It turned out that that was more conversation than it was reality. In any event, General Neutergen continued to demonstrate his interest in the engineering school and he wanted us to open a teaching program on base for his personnel there. I had a monster of a program to

sufficient enrollment on the base, we brought those students interested in the courses to the campus which wasn't too far away. We took that into the scheduling problem.

M. How many students were there at the entire university?

C. There were about five thousand. They also had a campus in Atlanta. The campus in Atlanta was at one time known as, I believe it was Atlanta University, and it was a Baptist institution. It fell on bad times and Mercer absorbed it and managed to continue its operation. It is now a good size operation there. They moved the pharmacy school to the campus and that added to its prestige and its appeal to students and so forth. Anyway we began to advertise for potential faculty members and we discovered a faculty member at Old Dominion University who was finishing his master's degree and he was, I don't think he retired from the Navy, but he had been in the Navy for quite a while and was in the submarine fleet. I just thought that would be a good working relationship with the students. He had lots of war stories to appeal to them, and yet he would have a good background experience and performance particularly with respect to the nuclear age that was marching on us. We didn't have a building and one of our people had an association with the industrial authority in downtown Macon. They owned some buildings; some of them were war surplus buildings and so forth. In WWII I believe Camp Wheeler was near the outskirts of Macon. So the Navy had a processing center in south Macon that was essentially vacant, but the industrial authority had acquired ownership of the facility so I was invited come to . . . we showed an interest in it, and I had never seen the facility but I had depended upon oral descriptions of what was there and what could be done with it. The industrial authority invited me to come down and discuss the subject at one of their meetings. We left the meeting, and I had hoped that I could get that building for a dollar a year. It didn't work out that way, but we got it for \$10,000 a year. Even that was a bargain because it was quite a large building and quite well suited for our needs, although it was separated from the campus by a far distance

people to decide what curriculum we should offer. We had contacted high schools and advisement counsellors and so forth to tell them what we had to offer. Now we were a private school, and private school tuition is usually higher than state supported institutions. That was the case for us, we decided to have four curriculum. We had electrical, mechanical and industrial engineering, and I'm not sure of the other two areas. They didn't come on line quite as early as those three did. Those three supported each other with respect to curriculum needs. The medical school at Mercer was across the street and I thought we should [collaborate]. Industrial engineering is active in what is called human engineering, [and I thought] maybe we ought to cooperate with the medical school. So we began a bio-medical engineering program and when I left that institution several years later, that was the largest enrollment curriculum we had. While electrical was the largest on most every campus all across the country, it was second at our place. Bio-medical was first.

M. You mentioned an issue of private versus public, how different was it for you starting this program. You basically started the program at UCF, of course it was the general program, not just engineering. Talk about some of the differences in logistics in working through the private versus the public. What were the differences?

C. The big difference was primarily the tuition. Everything else was pretty much the same.

M. But at Mercer you didn't have to worry about the board of regents so much.

C. Well, we did have a board of trustees.

M. Board of trustees, okay. How much intervention did you have at UCF by the board of regents for example?

C. Well, we had a problem there in that the jealousy that developed from the University of Florida. They saw us taking away a good bit of their marketing success with the students and so forth. It turned out that that just didn't happen. The students who chose to come to us would not necessarily have gone to the University of Florida in Gainesville.

M. And Florida was growing so fast you got some

C. Yes, and it wasn't too long after that . . . we grew at the rate of a thousand a year, except there was a two year period of time there at UCF that the legislature froze the enrollment. We didn't grow at all. When that was released and we could again operate normally, we gained back those two thousand students. Now, they are one of the three largest institutions in enrollment in the whole country. The three are: Arizona State, UCF, and Ohio State. They change positions occasionally.

M. Now, going through, you were at Mercer how many years?

C. I think about twelve.

M.

some cruise ship business. I think the Prime Minister was very interested to hear that. Whether anything ever developed from it, I don't know. They had a problem we found out. The water close up to the shore line was deep. It wasn't shallow like a beach at Daytona or some place. That might be the reason they didn't have one at that point because it would take some considerable construction skills to put a dock in there to handle a cruise ship. We visited several other islands as a result of our visit down there. They all wanted to do better and do things and welcomed us with open arms. We were very contributory, I thought, in making suggestions to them. I had a problem with some of my diabetes, and I had a kit with me. The leader of our group that we met after we got there was a medical doctor. I told him I had that kit with me, and that was all I said. Well, the night before we were to leave the next day, I had gone to bed in the hotel, and there was one hotel on the island, and it was fairly new and quite impressive I thought. Well, the phone rang about midnight, and it was Dr. Campbell on the phone and he said, "If you can, get down here immediately and bring that kit with you." Well, I went down there in my pajamas, and he was in the bar and there were some strangers in the bar. They had come in from a boat out in the ocean, and one of them had had an attack with diabetes in such a way that he had lock jaw. His mouth was locked in the open position and they needed my kit to give him a

we didn't have a lot of funds to work with. I won't say we grew something out of nothing, but it came pretty close in some cases.

M. If you had anything to contribute to young people, or other people even adult people, listening to these words, what would say is a matter of why you were successful?

C. I guess, if you see something that shows potential, jump in and get involved because it