

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Professor Robert MacDonald

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Florida Southern College

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M= James M. Denham ("Mike")

R= Professor Robert MacDonald

M: Today is December 14th, and I'm once again here with Robert MacDonald. We're continuing our conversations regarding his oral history and his life. Mr. MacDonald, how are you today?

R: Fine. Thank you.

M: Before we get started with your memory of the fine arts series that you put together here at Florida Southern, I would like for you to talk a little bit about President Charles Thrift. What was he like as a president and also how was your relationship with him?

R: First of all, having met him as I described before in Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania where he was visiting and I was spending a summer, I just had a brief first impression, not enough time to decide what I would really think about him permanently. When I came for that concert, I did meet him and was impressed with the fact that he had been the assistant to Ludd Spivey. When I came here, I just missed Dr. Spivey. I think when I was here on that concert trip, he had just very recently passed away. I was sorry to have missed that.

I was glad to know somebody who had been an administrator to him during that time. He couldn't have been more different I guess. I remember thinking because I was from South Carolina, two miles over the state line from North Carolina, knowing that he was from North Carolina, I was fascinated by the fact that he had been to the University of Chicago. His manner was anything but a graduate of that place, a person familiar with Chicago. He had done some remarkable things he had brought with him from Chicago. He had met Dr. Snodgrass and he made him vice-president here. I should have known from that to expect the unexpected from Charles Thrift. I should be the last person to say that because after all, I came from a very similar background. If anything, even more rural than what his had been, 12 miles from the nearest town, growing up in the cotton fields of South Carolina.

M: Would you say that he was well liked by the faculty or feared by the faculty or beloved by the faculty? How would you describe him?

R: It was a long time before I had really learned what truthful relationships were. I had still to learn that it was fashionable always to bitch a little bit about your leader, especially an academe. I was not prepared for the fact that. I had just gotten out of the military, I had been drafted into the Air Force, and there where everything was rank.

M: No questions asked.

R: That should have been the unusual place to me, foreign to me. What was foreign to me here was that the president would be so – well, he was a link to a man who was known as a legend. I thought a person who would be an assistant or vice-president when such a man was the head of it, must be very unusual. He was unusual in his inconsistencies.

M: Okay. He was inconsistent. How so?

R: He approached things of whatever nature, intellectual or semi-intellectual or whatever, as a person who if you walked in the room and heard him speaking in a group around the table, you would have decided that he is Mr. Farm Boy Come to Town. It took me a while to learn that that was the kind of image that he wanted to have.

M: In other words, self-effacing?

R: Not so much so as being folkloristic in his approach and keeping that southern accent of his. Because of that, I got over learning the anachronism of the fact that he turned out to be quite an intellectual man. In fact, it was later that I learned that he was writing this history of Florida, which, I think you'll agree with me, is outstanding.

M: Yes. So do you have any other vivid memories of President Thrift?

R: Yes. To illustrate the kind of anachronism of the fact that his image was so false in nature and yet his mind so quick, it was interesting in general to see the reactions of people from another part of the country who were not aware it was an anachronism. I grew up in the South. I knew that slow, drawly, dragging in the conversation had nothing to do with his level of intelligence.

M: So the easy way to describe it would be slow talking, fast thinking.

R: Yes. Slow talking, fast thinking. Probably capable even to do parallels with formulating his thoughts about the person he was talking to. When I had a chance to go a year abroad, when they had the Association of Mid-Florida

Colleges--

M: Freiburg?

R: Freiburg, yes. Because we were having someone from his college, he decided to visit. There were other reasons for his European visit but he made sure to come by Freiburg. My reason for mentioning it is the following: The head of the college there was very anxious to keep the good relationship with Florida going. So he assembled his best professors from his school that were later to come over here on a tour and visit and observe all the five different colleges, they were to have a meeting with Charles Thrift.

We met in their president's conference room at a big table. It was so funny, I knew two or three of the professors quite well by then, having been there and with my little bunch of students that I was going to look after. I assumed he would want me to do a lot of the questions because I speak German, by then I was very fluent in German, so that I could help him understand. When I suggested that to him, he was almost insulted and he said: Oh, no, that won't be necessary. We're all so good in English. He had not experienced the North Carolina accent of that intensity. I will never forget the moment when it came time to ask Charles Thrift to tell us some impressions of his part of the whole thing, I will never forget the look on those faces, they all turned toward me in desperation because they couldn't understand him. It's hard to think back to that and realize that –

M: President Thrift was speaking in a manner that the German Herrs who understood English could not understand, correct?

R: I think that the combination of that kind of folksy leader who could be sharp as a tack was utterly beyond them to that point. I was awfully glad that some of the strategic ones were on the trip here. I had already in various ways personally relived it with them and explained that it was no surprise to me that they were having a bad time understanding him.

M: Thinking back to the late 1960s when you were here and President Thrift was president, were there any things that happened in the late '60s, for example, the assassination of Martin Luther King, that you recall vividly in a positive light or a negative light regarding race relations here in Lakeland, Florida?

R: As a matter of fact, that's a good bridge. I was talking about the wife, do you remember, of my next door neighbor?

M: Can you go ahead and tell us that story?

R: The college, like many other organizations in town, had planned sort of a memorial service for Dr. King. It was significant that Charles Thrift had not had

anything to do with organizing it as far as I know. There was the more liberal and progressive elements of the English department for instance back then.

M: Can you remember any of those people?

R: Yes. The one who taught in the English department and theater, I can't think of her name just now.

M: So the event that was planned, it was primarily planned by some faculty, a few faculty and also students as well?

R: Yes. There was an English department lady and it was campus wide insofar led by a very few people. The administration back then was much more prohibited than now, as the president was, so many of them were afraid to think differently in public. So very few showed up. So it was considered almost a daring thing to go to that meeting. We still have, as you know, lately some racial things that seem to throw us back in time a lot more than we'd like to admit. That was a super, super intense situation in those days. In fact, I don't think we had any black students on campus.

M: So did you actually attend that event?

R: Oh, yes.

M: And when you left that event and you went home, what happened?

R: When I went home, that was when I was resolved after all. We must get away, I just couldn't take that emotional dichotomy between what you felt about the death of Martin Luther King being one of the leading possibilities to make progress with racial discrimination, having him actually killed, that was absolutely --

M: So what was it about that day in Lakeland that gave you pause, what happened with your next door neighbor, was it?

R: Yes, it was. He had been a very leading minister of a Methodist church and we liked him very much and his wife as well. In fact, when Andy Griffith came, they gave a wonderful dinner for him because everybody in that zone had already worshipped Andy Griffith. That was basically the main thing about it.

M: So they were very negative about doing anything like that?

R: Very much so. You remember when I quoted the wife as saying: "Just imagine, Mr. MacDonald, they're carrying on over that negro." I'm not pronouncing it right I'm sure. They were very, very nice people. I was getting used to the anachronism, some of the nicest people I knew still are coming from

the south had that problem.

M: Okay. Mr. MacDonald, what were some of your duties by the end of the late '60s? You had ceased being just merely artist in residence, now you were taking over the music department and as the decade came to a close, what were some of your duties at that time?

R: First of all, it would be hard to take what I'm saying about what had not been up until then and what I initiated, this sounds terribly egotistical but think of it this way if you will, only to the fact that it was thrust upon me to be the head of the department, never expecting to, I learned so much more about what was not present in our music department. In fact, so little that there was not any thought of belonging to a national association would have been out of the question. There was no bona fide music history course. Can you envision a department of music and we had never had a senior recital or a junior recital?

As I began to look into it, I was embarrassed by the fact that I had even come here. If I had known then what, in those next weeks and months learned, I would have never accepted, I would have accepted to play another concert maybe but never changed my life. I think I told you that Ingrid and I were so skeptical about it, we kept the rental apartment arrangement in Manhattan as long as we could to be sure we wanted to stay.

M: Well, yes, talk about that a little bit and, of course, what we just mentioned with regard to the Martin Luther King event. Did you ever seriously consider leaving your first three or four years?

R: Really did. I expect that if I had not had that thrust upon me, I do some of my best work when I'm faced with something that is alien to me. Nothing could have been at that point in my life as alien as the thought of being an administrator in a college music department.

M: On the other hand, it might have been exciting, here you have a chance to create something from scratch, you don't have somebody that you have to change the system or you have to replace if that person was good. You had the chance to really build it on your own and see the product of it.

R: Actually, I was the product of what had not been. As I took over dividing between the teaching and administration was so new to me, I was talking to Ingrid about this fairly lately, it's probably wonderful that I knew as little as I knew about it. I never had to think from week to week or month to month to dread this, that or the other that was coming ahead. Every day I was just sort of fending for self and trying to work my way out of this unknown territory.

Where we began was putting me on the curriculum committee. I remember my first day on that committee, they could have been speaking lower Slovakian, I

have no idea about academic language at that point. So I began to learn out of necessity.

M: So what were some of your worst memories?

R: I think you already anticipated that, my best memories, basically the excitement after getting to the president how little there was to the music department or how much we were missing, it became a real ego trip because I felt like the Messiah that had been waited on. Anything I did was incredulous. We had never had a senior recital. There was one Steinway piano and if I carried on about this before, forgive me, but I just walked by this morning a couple of the practice rooms, and the fact that we came from one beat up Steinway piano, to a house full of them and having the largest collection, every one of which was reached by being as nice as I can to alumni or to wealthy residents of the community, I don't know how I learned to sweet talk, proof again that necessity is the mother of invention and I did.

I was also combining the fact that I had signed with an agency in Atlanta for continuing my concerts and they were booking me for a whole season at a time in concerts all over. The beauty of that was it turned out to be not such an anachronism after all. I was able to observe many other departments and to get an idea. Of course never having to admit how many things were totally unknown to me and new to me but I could travel back home and know because it would have been difficult just to go to curriculum committee meeting in a place where they had never been or at least not in the recognizable past tense before I had come.

So I learned from all these other visits besides playing concerts at them and going to Catholic schools, protestant schools, all over the country, I learned to get an idea. We had never had a weekly student recital. That met with protests to a certain number of the faculty. One of the persons who made it seem all right to be here was a lady named Anne Roselle. She was teaching voice here, having been brought here by that wonder of a president who I didn't ever get to meet. I was told much about him and I realize he spoke this anachronism of being a southern gentleman who was just a whippersnapper inside and would have done many of us well to have copied him.

M: And that's Ludd Spivey?

R: Ludd Spivey, yeah. It was just remarkable to have that to know what you could do in the desert. There was a way to do that. So I started up a history course and the first recitals of the students. I think I mentioned before to you there was no grand piano to be seen anywhere in Annie Pfeiffer Chapel, so I had to do without my piano in my studio a couple or three times a year, depending on how many junior or senior recitals we had. My closest colleague in those years was a fellow named Jack Houts. There was no such thing as a voice department

but if there had been one, he would have been the head of it. He could also repair and tune pianos just as a hobby. So those two things brought me to him. We seemed to think the very same way and he had come from a large university here. I forget just whatever tempted him because it was certainly kind of a desert in many ways, but Jack Houts really seemed to be responsible for us being encouraged enough to stay. As I said, he could tune pianos. I think we talked about my duties on campus.

M: Can you tell us about getting the curriculum together and how that all transpired?

R: Looking back and knowing how green I was, those visits to the committee meetings with people around me who had been in education for years and years, I just had to sort of jumpstart my knowledge and I did that rather fast. Very soon we were able to have senior recitals. We needed to have a complete music course, a music curriculum. I was able to get that. We had people who were certainly capable of doing it, if not ideally capable, they had not been called upon, and it's remarkable to me that if you are in a place that's out of step with the rest of academe, how you could be as bright as a button but still just sort of get comfortable living with that. I suppose maybe the most unusual thing about my achievement would be that I was so devastated by the lack of this, that or the other that I just felt for my own pride's sake if nothing else I had to work on it to where we could hold up our heads.

I remember our band director from Bartow caused me to be very depressed because we had one student, Darryl Parsons was his name, and you may have heard that name, it was a big name in Methodism, his father was a minister, Darryl was a marvelous tenor and he was taking what would be the best thing of a degree at that time. He was taking a conducting course where we didn't have a band. Can you imagine a department that envisions itself as any kind of music department that didn't have a band? As little as I love basic band, but always being in an orchestra band, I just would have never -- I was absolutely devastated by the fact that we didn't have one. I talked to this band director in Winter Haven and he agreed to take Darryl Parsons on.

Well, he called me up I think a week or two later and said: I need to talk to you, when can I come over and talk to you? He sat me down and I could have gone one of two ways, either I would have said to myself enamoredly, which I did, I've got to do something about this or I would just say it's hopeless if that's the image of this so-called music department, there's no hope for me. Instead of that, I was encouraged by his attitude. He caused me basically I suppose to stay and have hopes to build up a department.

R: I was still able to combine the booking of concerts, I had to have mentioned the Festival of Fine Arts by now, that had been given to me by the dean who hired me. He had run into an association of colleges, schools and colleges in

New York which had stupendous for schools who did not have orchestras and things like that. So I was able to get on that not only in that way for our sake here but I was booked then by this agency all over the country. I played concerts in recital halls and on campuses and never had a recital to places that were very legendary practically. Because they all would take a concert that was free to them. My entire fee and my travel were paid for by this association of colleges. That was probably simultaneously my best way of keeping up my artistic requirements for performing in my administrative requirements.

When I look back, I just can't believe the number of times that I would get home at 4:00 in the morning from being in my studio working and trying to establish a curriculum for that job. I wonder how I did it, I couldn't of course now. I was young enough I guess. Really I was blessed with knowing so little about how bad off I was. I kept being surprised all through the years. I wanted to tell you that one of the best things that ever happened to me was learning about an agency in Atlanta that for the southeastern United States was just a top-notch source for our concerts and so forth.

M: We are now concluding our interview on December 14th.