

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 20<sup>th</sup>, 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 was quite a capable person, and he and I locked arms and pretty well developed a plan to save the institution. The President was totally cooperative on that and contributed on his part, and we did it. It took about a little over two years to see the light again, but we did. I was the Chief Academic Officer and Provost and I took it upon myself to expand the locations that we had for offering our degree programs. Vandenberg Air Force Base is north up the coast from Los Angeles and they do rocket work up there and so forth. We opened up a masters degree program there in computer science and that brought in quite a number of students that we were basically the only upscale educational institution in that whole area. And then we also expanded the program in San Diego and added the masters degree in computer science there. Well, I got to know the institution reasonably well, and I was there for five years. When I left to start a new engineering program, engineering school at Mercer University, and it all came about because of the accreditation work that I had done. Robbins Air Force Base in Warner Robbins, Georgia,

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 develop, to get the budget going, to begin interviewing and even hiring potential faculty members as well as developing laboratories for the programs that we decided to offer. At that point in time, we had not chosen what majors to offer.

M. Can you tell us roughly what year that was?

C. I think it was 1985 – 1987.

M. And the General's name was . . .

C. General Neutergen.

M. Can you spell that?

C. Neutergen I think. I think it is Swedish. He was a major general, the ranking officer at the Warner Robbins Air Force Base and they did lots of activity there primarily with rebuilding, reconditioning, and overhauling airplanes. There were at least three kinds of those bases in the country and there is a huge base like Warner Robbins in Oklahoma; I'm not sure just where. It is quite a large base. Then there was a third one somewhere. I think it eventually closed. In any event, each year they dispensed a large amount of research dollars to research institutions of one kind or another. Not many of those were associated with an educational institution. They were contract research opportunities. So in our case, we would need to have a budget for that. It seemed like you had to have a budget for everything you did, and we did. We wanted to get going on that possibility as soon as possible because it brought in funds – immediate funds. Well, once I got the engineering school budget and we had established our educational program on the base primarily for graduate work, they had lots of engineers that were interested in master's degree work. We pursued that and eventually we expanded it downward and opened up a program for undergraduates. Some of the courses that program needed, if we didn't have

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 – too far to walk and too far to ride a bicycle. Then I got in the transportation business and I contacted the school board and they had a bus that was not being used that needed some minor repairs and attention. I volunteered to bring it up to operation status if we could borrow that bus to supply transportation for the students from the main campus to our location there in that former Navy facility. We were there for a year. The Navy had done some design work and had constructed a large room area that was just lighted beyond belief in terms of good lights. That suited our needs for the graphics work that the beginning engineers take. We brought in the graphic type tables and got that going. We taught all sorts of courses there; computer courses. Computers were as plentiful then as they are now, and one of our new faculty members was a young oriental man and he said well if we don't have money to buy computers, I can build some computers. Well, I wanted to get a computer for every one of our faculty members. This young man ordered the parts and components, and cases and all that and built a computer for every faculty member that we had. That got us going in the direction of computerized teaching and learning and so forth which was a great advantage as we moved along. One of the other things that we did that was beyond the usual approach was the equipment in the laboratories. What we decided to do was to do illustration type laboratory work as opposed to the actual real life experiment. That just worked beautifully. We got catalogs from every direction and ordered the desk model installations and so forth, and we were able to build the laboratories to fit our curriculum needs. By the way, by that time, our faculty would have acquired three or four faculty members plus our staff people. We had a good number of

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. Okay, twelve years. What do you consider, besides getting the whole program started which is obviously important, what do you consider your greatest successes there?

C. Well, thanks for asking, that is a good question. There were two things I feel like that I, as a person, contributed to that were successful. . . . I tried to be as dynamic as possible with good potential success in front of us. We achieved a better accreditation on the first visit for all programs. That was unheard of, and particularly with a new institution that was just starting engineering up. That was one thing. The other one was the origination of MERC – Mercer Engineering Research Center in cooperation with Robbins Air Force Base. Now, when I left there they had 117 full time technical employees and they had, I think, about sixty million dollars in research. They have now built two brand new buildings in the industrial center in Warner Robbins. They are one of the biggest contributors in the Warner Robbins area for technical employment, so that was a smart move on my part. However, it could have gone the other way too. Early on, things didn't look too good now and then. There was even a time that several of us discussed the possibility that we would form a purchasing group and buy the thing from Mercer. It never came to that. I've always wondered what things would be like today if . . .

M. Talk about that a little bit. What was going on that you considered that?

C. The government doesn't always pay the next day after they engage an obligation. Some of their . . . we spent our money to do their work, and then the repayment was awfully slow in the beginning. We didn't have a reserve built up to carry us over. We had a tough time there for about six to eight months there one time. The Dean of the med school saved the research institution. We had a meeting to discuss the possibility of continuation of MERC and the Dean of the med school was there along with some other major administrators, people in finance and so forth. We were going over the investment we made, when we could expect repayment and what obligations are out there that we could take advantage of and so forth. The Dean of the med school was Douglas Skelton. He said that was a potential that the university needs to pursue and he pointed to me, and said, "He should run it." Just like that! So the president was sitting at the end of the table and he looked down the table and said, "C. B., you are the new Director of MERC." Just like that! So I got administrative relief for the deanship of the school of engineering and I went down to the research center at Warner Robbins. I must have been down there six or eight months to "right the ship" so to speak; get things moving, recruit more input from the Air Force, and we began to explore the possibility of achieving research grants from other government agencies than just the local Warner Robbins Air Force. That helped out. We, in effect, saved the research institution, and now it is now just a major component.

M. Just so we understand, the Federal Government was not forthcoming in their procreations.

C. Their payment schedule is stretched out.

M. Right.

C. It is slow. Maybe that is the best way to describe it. We had to get things moving and show success of accomplishment. We had to spend our own money. For example, we didn't

have any money to start the research thing, so I just took \$25,000.00 out of the engineering budget and gave it to the acting director and said, "This is all I've got. Make it pay off." And he did. I'm sorry, it was \$50,000.00. Come to think of it, MERC never paid that back! Anyway, the civic people, the community people in Warner Robbins were just very supportive of having Mercer down there in its facility and so forth. I can tell you one thing that we did. You know most of those Air Force planes, and particularly the fighters, are painted, at least some paint on all of them. Some of them have a pretty inclusive set of paint. Well, we found out that paint dries out and cracks and curls. . . .

We hired young Jim [Stumpff] to come down and teach some of the beginning computer work in our curriculum. By the way, just so you will get an appreciation for how we developed the curriculum that all the students would have to achieve to get their degree, the engineering curriculum now days, turns out students who generally have more mathematics than a mathematics major. They have more computer science than a computer science major, and they then, of course, have an engineering degree, so when they graduate, they have a three-way opportunity to gain employment somewhere. It worked out pretty well that way. Jim Stumpff joined our faculty as an instructor and along the way he took course work part time to earn a masters degree. I guess that took two or three years, but then after that, he developed an interest in medicine and the medical field. He began taking part time work in pre-med. He finished the pre-med program, and the next thing we knew, he wanted to apply to med school and join our Mercer medical school. Well, he was accepted by the University of Georgia medical school in Augusta. He went there and specialized in emergency room attention. He now is a very successful emergency room doctor in Georgia. He started out by himself, pretty much as a doctor in an emergency room at one of the hospitals, I think in Anderson, South Carolina, and he now owns his own medical emergency room company. He supplies the services to several different hospitals. That is a success story that we didn't count on taking place.

M. Okay. Your decision to come to Lakeland.

C. I was promoted to Vice President for Research, and I initiated the research office. We had straggler type projects that faculty members had written proposals for and were rewarded and not much coordination or consolidation or whatever else. I was able to put those together and lend some structure to the process. One of the things that we did that was very interesting, the Vice President for Academic Affairs called me one day and said, "We have a trip to the Caribbean to visit some islands down there to see if there is any potential down there for doing work with us. Do you think you ought to go?" I told him, "Absolutely! If I'm in responsible charge of research, and we are going to look for research, let's go!" Four of us went down there and we went to the island of Granada. I learned that the Prime Minister of that particular island was an eighty some odd year old lady who was a lawyer and she had gotten her degree in England. She was single and had never been married. She turned to politics and she was the convincing force with President [Ronald] Reagan to get him to clean up those islands down there of communist infiltration. We were down there visiting various things in the islands that might have some potential for Mercer in terms of sponsored research. I don't know that anything developed from that except that as a curiosity point we noted that the waters – they didn't have a real good dock and therefore could not attract cruise ships to the island. Cruise ships in the Caribbean are a major economic boast. They didn't have a dock for that so we just off the cuff, recommended that they ought to do something about a dock or wharf or whatever and attract

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 shot to release that. I was able to make a contribution there. They had a good size clinic on the island and they called it to come get the young man. While the transportation was coming, the doctor gave him a shot from my kit. About the time the transportation arrived, he was able to close his mouth. You never know what you are going to encounter when you go to a foreign land. Is that what you had in mind?

M. Can you tell us about your decision to leave Mercer or retire and then come to Lakeland and bring it up to the present?

C. As I mentioned earlier, I went to West Coast University as Provost and participated very actively in saving the institution from bankruptcy. I had done just about all I could do for them there. I was sort of interested in coming back to the southeast where I'd spent most of my life. One day I got a call from Dr. Stephens who was the Provost at Mercer and said I'd been recommended for their Deanship to move from the Deanship in Engineering to Vice President of Research at Mercer. When I got that operation underway and pretty well organized, I was already old enough to retire. I told the administration that would probably be my last year. We had the research center going in Warner Robbins, we had the research office on campus going pretty well, the engineering school had achieved accreditation – there wasn't much more for me to do, and I was ready to move to Florida. I finished up 1997 and did in fact move to Winter Haven.

M. So, you have had a really long career. What are some of the things that, after thinking if over all these years, what are some of your fondest memories?

C. Well, just about every place I've ever been, there has been a positive outcome. I feel like I helped achieve success at most every time. Some of the things I was involved in that I didn't run all of them, I participated in all of them, of course, but I did direct a good many of them. That was a source of considerable appreciation that I did something worthwhile. In many cases,

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 takes enthusiasm and activity to succeed. At least that has been my experience and it seems to have worked out that way.

M. Things just don't happen by themselves.

C. That's right, they surely don't. An inquiring mind is very valuable to look in to things that might have potential. You have to have a convincing nature about yourself get others to help you and cooperate with you and maybe even finance you along the way.

M. Well, we've had an interesting four days! It is probably a good way to end it. This is the final day of our discussion; April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and it happens to be twelve Noon right on the dot.

C. Yes!

M. Stop, stop.