

MATHESON HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interviewee: George Leonard Emmel, M.D.

Interviewer: Bob Clayton

Transcriber: Ruth C. Marston

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C: This is Bob Clayton. I am at the lovely home of Dr. Leonard Emmel, in Gainesville, Florida, at the Gainesville Country Club. Good morning, Leonard.

E: Good morning, Bob.

C: Were you born in Gainesville?

E: No, I was born in Wilson, Arkansas.

C: Were your folks from Arkansas? Tell me about your folks.

E: My father was from Ohio originally and my mother was from Mississippi. My father practiced veterinary medicine in Arkansas and met my mother in Mississippi. The first place that we lived after I was born was Arkansas. My father was a veterinarian at a plantation.

We moved to Bushnell, Florida, for, I think, about a year. My dad had the idea that he would make his fortune growing cucumbers, so we grew cucumbers. He didn't make his fortune, and from there we moved to Auburn, Alabama, where he was on the faculty, then to Michigan where he was on the faculty at Michigan State.

C: When did you come to Gainesville?

E: I think it was 1934. We lived in Auburn in 1932, and Auburn had an unbeaten football team. They were unbeaten and untied until the last game, when they played South Carolina at Columbia. The whole Auburn team had had the flu, so they had a center playing quarterback and all this kind of foolishness. Auburn was ahead 20-0 at the end of the first half, and in the second half Auburn gave out completely and South Carolina scored 20 points. It was a 20-20 tie game – the end of Auburn's Rose Bowl hope.

C: A tie game, and they didn't have overtime back then.

E: No.

C: What grade were you in when you came to Gainesville?

E: I think I was in the 5th grade.

C: What school?

E: What's Kirby-Smith now. The Eastside school.

C: On East University Avenue?

E: Yes. Ms Metcalf was principal. I had Miss Bishop, who later became Mrs. Lazonby in the 5th grade, and I had Mrs. Bishop, who was Howard Bishop's wife, in the 6th grade. Both fine teachers.

C: Who were some of your classmates?

E: Jim Vidal, Perry Ramsey, Tuffy Davis, Earl Taylor, Johnny Blizoter.

C: Some of them are still around.

E: They are.

C: Some of them have departed this world for the better world.

E: When I was in the 6th grade, we had been playing tackle football at recess and apparently the powers that be decided that was too likely to resolve in some injury, so Ms Metcalf, the principal, said that no one could play tackle football. We could play touch football. All the boys got together and decided that this was a terrible blow, that we were going to play tackle football no matter what. We ran out at the next recess and started playing tackle football. We thought that any minute one of the teachers would stop us, but we played and nobody said anything. We played just like we always did. We went back to our rooms and had been back in our home room about fifteen or twenty minutes, thinking we had gotten away with everything scot free, congratulating ourselves no end, when we got a summons to come down to Ms Metcalf's office. We all trooped down to Ms Metcalf's office and we made up our minds on the way down there, discussing the matter among ourselves, that we were going to be tough and weren't going to give an inch.

C: So you were big tough guys.

E: Yes, we were going to be real men. We went to her office and she sat us down. She was behind her desk, and we were ringed around the desk. There were a lot of us. She said, "You know that I asked you not to play tackle football. Why did you do that?" Each one of us gave his version of why we did it. Then she began to talk to us in a very quiet voice, just as calm and peaceful and sweet as you could possibly be, and inside of about five minutes she had us all in tears. All in tears. We didn't play tackle football anymore.

C: Now, where did you live?

E: Cherokee Avenue, over on the east side of town.

C: Which is now?

- E: N.E. 4th Street, I believe. It's not far from the city park on the east side.
- C: Back then, other than getting in trouble with tackle football, you moved on to the 7th grade to what used to be G.H.S.
- E: I moved to G.H.S., right.
- C: Where they had both Junior High and High School, and your principal there was?
- E: Fritz Buchholz.
- C: He was principal of the High School. Was Miss Blackblock there?
- E: Miss Blacklock was there. She was the 7th grade English teacher.
- C: Oh, she was? Okay. She was the Junior High principal when I was in Junior High.
- E: She may have been Junior High principal. I just don't really remember about that.
- C: Everybody from the 7th through the 12th grades went to that one building on West University Avenue?
- E: Yes. Of course, P.K. Yonge came along sometime along in there. Some of them did go to P.K.
- C: What did you guys do way back then in the dark ages for fun?
- E: In the 7th grade you don't do too much!
- C: From the 7th, 8th, and 9th, and on up.
- E: We used to play football and baseball. We boys used to play either touch or tackle football beside the Sweetwater Branch. Just north of 8th Avenue there was a clearing there, and we would meet in the afternoon and play football. We would play baseball at one of the schools.

One of my worst experiences was at age 16 when my jaw was broken by Frank Spain at the old Country Club. I stood in the wrong place during one of Frank's wild swings with a golf club. The driver struck me squarely on the mandible and sent me to the ground, blood pouring from the hole in my face. They rushed me to the hospital where Dr. Donald Morrison, an orthodontist, wired my teeth together so the bone could knit. I couldn't open my mouth. My food had to be either liquid or pureed so that I could take it through a straw inserted in the tiny space between my teeth. Dr. Morrison advised me not to get nauseated. If I

- vomited, I would probably strangle. After a month the wires were cut and removed, and I gradually began to eat again.
- C: That was a bad experience! Your dad at this time was at the University?
- E: He was at the University. He was in the Animal Industry Department. He was primarily concerned with poultry diseases.
- C: He was a veterinarian.
- E: Yes.
- C: Did you ever aspire to be a vet?
- E: Yes, but I finally decided I would rather go into medicine rather than veterinary medicine.
- C: Some of the classmates you had at G.H.S. Were they the same guys that you grew up with?
- E: Pretty much. Of course, in high school you always look up to those that are older than you are. They're the real heroes. I remember G.M. Davis, Jack Perry, and some of those fellows. I remember one time we were playing high school football on the G.H.S. team, and we were moving the ball. Jack Perry was playing fullback. He said, "Just give me the ball." I don't know what it was, but he kept getting 5 yards each play. We couldn't block the opposition very well, but he just kept going right down the field. He really had a lot of determination.
- C: Jack Perry. Do you know what his dad did? What family of Perry's was that?
- E: Jack Perry subsequently worked for the Post Office. I don't know really what his father did.
- C: That was when G.H.S. was in the Northeast Conference or the Big Ten?
- E: I think the Big Ten. We used to play Miami, Lakeland, Tampa, and Robert E. Lee in Jacksonville – all those.
- C: What position were you?
- E: I was about third string tackle. That was my junior year in high school. I didn't play my senior year.
- C: Did you play basketball?
- E: No.

C: They didn't have a baseball team?

E: I think they did have a baseball team in my senior year.

C: When I was at G.H.S., we didn't have a baseball team.

E: I think G.M. Davis liked to play baseball. I think we may have had a team.

C: I wish we had, but we didn't. Now, when you got out of G.H.S., was it war time or did you go on to college?

E: No. I went to the University as a Freshman. The war broke out, I think, in my Sophomore year at the University.

C: And what happened to Leonard?

E: Well, I was not drafted because I was in pre-med. The government figured that they would need doctors, so they deferred me until I got to medical school. At that time, I went into the Army and was sent to medical school at the University of Pennsylvania. The war was over before I graduated, and I got out of the Army and graduated as a civilian.

C: When you graduated, you weren't married?

E: No.

C: When you graduated at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, where did you go then?

E: I stayed in Philadelphia and did an internship, then a year of residency, and then I did a year of pharmacology. We did research in hyper baric pressure. After that, I went to Nashville, where I had a residency with their combined V.A./Vanderbilt University Hospital. They had a V.A. there in an old Army establishment.

After that, I went into the Korean War and was obligated to do two years of service because of the medical training I had in the Army. I went to Fort Sam Houston, where I was in the Medical Field Service School for one month. Then I was stationed in Camp Chaffee, which is Fort Chaffee now. The only claim to fame that Camp Chaffee had was that was where Elvis Presley went into the Army.

C: A lot of people say that when they were in the service they ran into somebody that they grew up with or that they knew. Did that ever happen to you?

- E: Not particularly. I can't say that it did. I've run across people in New York City, just walking down the street, that happened to be from home, but they weren't assigned there.
- C: When you got out of the service, what did you do after you got out?
- E: When I got out of the service, I was interested in trying to find a place to practice. We came back to Gainesville. We had two small children then.
- C: Wait a minute! You had two small children, and you haven't even gotten married yet!
- E: I got married after I graduated from medical school.
- C: Tell me about it.
- E: I graduated on the 15th of March and I got married on the 29th of March in 1947.
- C: To whom?
- E: Rachel Rodenbach.
- C: A Gainesville girl?
- E: No. She was from Connecticut.
- C: Where in the world did you meet Rachel?
- E: I met Rachel in New York City. We had finished our exams at the end of the Junior Year, and Bill Shelley, a classmate of mine in medical school, and I decided to go up to New York. Mary Ann Harn, now Cofrin, was in New York City and she was at Katie Gibbs, so I went up there and saw her.
- C: What is Katie Gibbs?
- E: Katie Gibbs is a secretarial training school (Katharine Gibbs), a very good school. We went up there and saw Mary Ann, and I happened to meet her roommate. I had a date with Mary Ann and then discovered at that time that she was already dating Dave Cofrin. I met Rachel. I had a date with Rachel, and subsequently one thing led to another.
- C: And that got you into all that trouble!
- E: A lot of trouble.
- C: But it has been happy trouble. How long have you been married?

E: Fifty-five years.

C: Well, she certainly doesn't look like it. In your experience in Gainesville, what do you think has been the biggest change in Gainesville, the most dramatic change since you first came here?

E: I think the growth of the city. It is so much bigger and traffic is so much fiercer than it used to be. There are so many more stores. I remember when I was in high school and college that the *Gainesville Sun*, of course, was our newspaper in those days. People would advertise in the *Gainesville Sun* when they had a sale.

C: It was delivered when?

E: It was delivered in the afternoon. In today's climate, their advertisements are not so much that they are having a sale but just to let you know what the prices are. They just advertise that in general.

C: That's true. Now, many of the stores back then don't even exist now, but what were some of the major stores in Gainesville when you were growing up?

E: I guess the two main ones were Wilson's and Baird Hardware. Baird Hardware was a wonderful store.

C: It had everything.

E: You could get anything you wanted there – from guns to nuts and bolts. They used to have a place that opened up off the main floor of the store and you walked into this long hallway. On either side were drawers filled with nuts and bolts and screws of all sorts. You could ask them for a certain screw and they would go in there and get it.

C: You could spend a day there.

E: Yes. You could spend a day there. They used to have wonderful collections of firearms, too. Tremendous!

C: And they had outboard motors. It was quite a store. That was on the corner across from where the old courthouse used to be. What else was in that block?

E: Phifer State Bank was there. There was a grocery store in there – I think A&P Grocery Store was there for a while. On to the north was where the Margaret Ann used to be.

C: Yes. The Margaret Ann Grocery store. I had forgotten about that.

E: It subsequently became Winn Dixie. It was a very nice grocery store. On the square, not on that same street, was a store called Geiger's Dress Shop. Burnett, the Clothier, McCollum's Drug Store.

C: Yes, and the theaters. How many?

E: We had the Lyric Theater, the Florida Theater.

C: The Lyric is no longer.

E: No longer, and the Florida has been taken over as a sort of auditorium/bar type of place.

C: Hip hop, or whatever.

E: Yes.

C: I think we've covered everything from even before you were born when your folks didn't even know where Gainesville was, until today. What do you do now?

E: I am retired now. I've been retired since '89.

C: And how do you fill your time?

E: I don't have any trouble filling it. I can see yard work that needs to be done, right now as I sit here and look out the window. I do a lot of things around the house. I do some woodworking. I have a little pine tree farm and I do some pine tree farming. There's always plenty to do.

C: I had a friend that told me one time after he retired that he wakes up in the morning and doesn't have anything to do and when he goes to bed at night, he doesn't have it all done. That's about the size of it.

E: Let me tell you a couple things. I didn't get through with the story about coming to Gainesville with the two small children.

C: Okay.

E: We came with two small children, and Dr. W.C. Thomas was practicing at that time. He was the dean of physicians in Gainesville. To open an office in Gainesville, you had to have his sanction or his blessing. I don't think anyone would have opened an office in Gainesville unless they had his tacit approval. I talked with him some, and he gave me the go-ahead sign, so I came back home to practice.

C: With two children and one wife.

E: Another thing that I think is worthwhile mentioning is that we had a very, very pleasant medical community. All the doctors knew each other. It was a small group. The staff of Alachua General Hospital could meet in a small room that adjoined the old blood bank. There were probably ten or fifteen of us at most. We knew each other well and we knew the wives, and it was a very rewarding association.

The Alachua County Medical Society had monthly meetings at the Country Club, which is now the University Golf Course. We would have a dinner meeting with our wives, and then the Alachua County Medical Society would meet in the room where we ate and the wives would leave and sit in the front part of the Country Club, where there was a room for them to have the Alachua County Medical Auxiliary meeting.

All the doctors used to take off on Wednesday afternoons. It was very difficult to find a doctor on those afternoons. Somebody would always be on call, but the doctors' offices were all closed. As I remember, a lot of the businesses closed on Wednesday afternoons. Also, I think, all of the drug stores closed except one of them usually remained opened to take care of emergencies.

C: I remember the barber shops even closed on Wednesday afternoons.

E: Wednesday afternoon was a great time. I think as time passed they gradually got away from that.

C: Well, back then, were most of the doctors general practitioners or did you have specialists?

E: We had general practitioners and specialists. A lot of the specialists were Gainesville boys that came back to Gainesville, like Henry Babers, Charlie Pinkoson, myself, and John Crago.

C: All Gainesville boys.

E: Yes. It was sort of strange. They all came back. Usually I don't think it works that way.

C: Now that has certainly been a change in Gainesville. I don't know that you could get all the doctors in the O'Connell Center now.

E: That's probably true. It's amazing. There are more doctors in just one department out at the medical school than there used to be in the whole town. But as the town grew, more doctors came.

C: Yes. Of course, the med center brought even more.

E: It did.

C: Well, Leonard, is there anything else that you need to regale us with? We need to know everything that you know.

E: At the time I started private practice in 1953, all the doctors made house calls. Life seemed to move at a more languid pace in those days. During one of the flu epidemics I saw more patients at home than in the office. An office visit was \$3.00 and a house visit was \$5.00. If a patient was too ill to travel by car, the funeral homes would provide an ambulance and transport the individual to the hospital.

If a patient sick at home needed an EKG (electrocardiogram), I often took it at their residence, or my office nurse, Harriet Phillips, came out to take it. In the early 1950's the hospital had no EKG machine. The doctors who had this equipment came to the hospital and ran the test.

During the flu epidemics, the beds and rooms at the hospital filled up. Patients had to be placed in the hallways. This made for near chaos, for it disrupted and stretched the nursing staff to the breaking point. No patient liked to be in the hall, especially when it was time for the bed pan. There was no privacy.

Alachua General Hospital faced 10th Street when I started practice. It was not air-conditioned. The boiler in the basement that heated the water was situated under one wing of the hospital. In hot weather that wing had to be ten degrees hotter than the remainder of the building and was terrible for anyone unfortunate enough to be there.

After making rounds of patients in the morning, I stopped by the surgical dressing room, where the surgeons would be robing for an operation or dressing back into their street clothes. For a few minutes we congregated and discussed the interesting problem patients with severe or unusual diseases.

I remember when the medical school was opened. I am not certain of the date, but I think it was sometime about 1960. They had been planning it for some years. They finally opened, and Dr. McLaughlin, who used to be out at the University in the Anthropology Department and the Social Science Department, was one of the advisors. He did the study that convinced the legislators to locate the medical school in Gainesville. As I remember, if you put a compass point on Gainesville and spread your radius out around the city, say 80 miles, you would have a fairly sizable population because that took in Jacksonville and also Ocala. If you went to Miami or anyplace on the coast, a lot of the area in the circle would be water. Miami University also had a medical school, so there didn't seem to be any point in putting another one there, so they established it here in Gainesville. I remember when Dr. Harrell, who was the Dean of the Medical School, came and

- spoke to the County Medical Society. Everybody was very impressed with Dr. Harrell and also Dr. Sam Martin, who came in as Head of Medicine.
- C: They were the first ones?
- E: They were about the first ones. I think Bill Wheat was Head of Surgery and he came in about the same time. The heads of departments all came in fairly soon.
- C: Who was in charge of getting that team up, getting the heads of the departments and hiring them? Would that be Martin?
- E: That was Dr. George Harrell. He was Dean of Medical School. I think the President of the University, of course, appointed Dr. Harrell, and then Dr. Harrell assembled his faculty. He got a lot of the faculty from Duke, some from Hopkins, and various places. He had been at Duke.
- C: You never aspired to be at the University?
- E: I had a minor appointment out there. I still am a Clinical Associate, which is about the lowest possible rung you can be on out at the medical school faculty.
- C: Now, they want you for your expertise just in case.
- E: I think it's just another name to put in their catalog so it looks like they have a lengthy faculty.
- C: Well, this has certainly been interesting. I've learned a lot and I'm sure that the Matheson Historical Museum really appreciates you taking the time this morning to tell us about old Gainesville as you knew it. I thank you very kindly, Leonard.
- E: Thank you, Bob.