

MATHESON HISTORICAL CENTER
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. John Crago
INTERVIEWER: Robert Clayton
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Q: This is Bob Clayton, and I am in the residence of Dr. John Crago, in Gainesville, Florida. Dr. Crago is the epitome of -- nothing personal, John -- but real old Gainesville.

A: Well, I think that's a compliment. I like that.

Q: Now, where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1919 -- a long time ago.

Q: Cornhusker State.

A: Yes, and as you know, a mid-western state.

Q: What brought you to Gainesville, Florida?

A: My father was a professor and he took a job at the University of Florida, so I came along with him.

Q: You talk about your family. How many in your family?

A: There were four children, my mother and my father. My two sisters aren't living. My brother is living and is down at Vero Beach.

Q: And his name is?

A: Dick.

Q: I remember that. He used to be WRUF for a while?

A: He was at WRUF off and on for some years and actually started out there as a 11 or 12 year old boy. The Depression was on, and they had a lot of programs put on by the government for people doing various things, so he got to go out to WRUF, and he never got away from the radio game. He just loved it.

Q: How old were you when you came to Gainesville?

A: Ten years old.

Q: You went to the public school system here?

A: I went to the 7th grade in the G.H.S. building, and I went through the 11th grade at G H.S. but then P.K. Yonge came along, and my father being in the College of Education and closely

connected with P.K., I sort of voted with my father and went out P.K. for that final year, which had its good points and its bad points but it didn't work out badly.

Q: When you moved to Gainesville, where did you live?

A: The first year we lived on what was called Mechanic Street, which is N.W. 1st Avenue very close to the University. We lived there only one year and then moved over to what was then called Palm Avenue, which was right close to the Duck Pond, and we lived there for one year. Then we moved to a place which is now called the Sword's House, which is of some historic significance. That's right close to the Thomas Hotel and it was not a grand house, but it was a very pleasant, comfortable place for us to live. It's still there and has been refurbished some and looks quite nice inside. My brother and I visited there and got a chance to walk around inside the house last month and it looked quite nice.

Q: When you were in school, who were some of your classmates, who might still be around? I mean they might have left Gainesville, not still be around!

A: How many here in Gainesville? Well, you may not know Winnie Dugan. Do you know Winnie Dugan?

Q: I knew Bill Dugan, who was at the theater.

A: It wasn't he. I think her husband is not living. Bill Graham, the lawyer, was a contemporary. Alma Warren -- do you know Alma?

Q: Yes.

A: I think she's still around. She was a classmate. Phillip Bradshaw. Do you know Phil?

Q: Yes.

A: He was a classmate.

Q: Well, those names bring back memories. Alma, of course, you'll remember was sister to Fuller Warren, who was Governor at one time. A rather prominent family, obviously. Back then, of course, there was no TV and what theaters did they have here?

A: We had the Florida Theater and the Lyric Theater. The Lyric was a little tiny place and I don't think they showed movies all of the time, maybe only part of the time. The Florida Theater was the primary place we used to go to movies.

Q: The Lyric was down by the post office.

A: That's right. It was not a great place, just small and not very fancy.

Q: The swimming holes around here then were Glen Springs . . .

A: Glen Springs and Magnesia Springs. We used to go out to Magnesia Springs quite often although it was a longer drive, but Magnesia Springs was really a very pleasant place and many Gainesville people drove up there to go swimming. We didn't have air conditioning

Q: I remember the water was so cold.

A: It was cold, but it was hot and we kind of liked to cool off.

Q: Other than just go to the movies and go swimming, what did you guys do for fun back then? Not like it was the dark ages or anything!

A: Kind of hard to say. I liked to play tennis, and I played tennis quite a bit with a friend, Ernest Adkin, who became a Marine Colonel and finally retired from the Marines and lives up in the Washington, D.C. area. He and I played tennis a lot.

Q: Where were the tennis courts?

A: Well, we had very few tennis courts but there were two clay tennis courts which were in the area just east of where the President's house is now. Do you remember those?

Q: No, I remember some on Masonic Street.

A: These were nice courts to play on, but they only had two and we had to kind of scratch around to find a time when we could play there, but we did quite a bit. Things were pretty free and easy then, not a lot of rules and regulations, and people kind of tolerated other people and so here we were high school kids and we could play out there on the college tennis courts if they weren't in use for meets or something.

Q: Times have really changed.

A: They sure have.

Q: When you graduated from P.K., where did you go to college?

A: Where else but the University of Florida?

Q: I wondered about that. When did you decide you wanted to be a doctor and where did you go to med school?

A: Well, I had an idea that I wanted to be a doctor when I went to the University because I started off in pre-med, but then I didn't quite know where the money was coming from to go to medical school and my family didn't have enough to send me, so I kind of pushed off into just kind of a general education and a few education courses, so I was authorized to be a teacher although by nature I was not made to be a teacher. I didn't know where the money was coming from for medical school, so I didn't push it as much as I should have. I think I could have gotten money if I had really just gone ahead and knocked on a lot of doors and so forth.

Q: When you graduated from college, where did you go to med school?

A: I went to medical school after World War II. That was on the G.I. Bill, which was just great. I got money and board and had a few bucks to spend. I had also figured I might want to do this and I had saved most of the money I got during World War II. There wasn't much of a way to spend it, so I saved that and between that and the G.I. Bill I had enough to get through medical school quite nicely. No problem really.

Q: Which med school?

A: I went to Cornell in New York, which is the place that Henry Babers went and Henry Graham went and Billy Thomas went, so I sort of heard of Cornell because they went up there. Then I thought I would kind of like to spend a little time in New York City, went up and applied at Cornell and they were good enough to let me in and I was very pleased. It was a very good experience for me.

Q: You mentioned being in the service. Did that happen right after you graduated from college?

A: Well, I graduated from college too young to get a commission -- you have to be 21 years old -- so I got out of college when I was just almost twenty years old and had to wait a year before I got an Army commission and then went into the Army and stayed until after the War ended. You know about the Army. You were there!

Q: Yes, I was in the Army, but when I got out they did not have the G.I. Bill.

A: Really?

Q: No. When you came back, you came back and started your practice in Gainesville?

A: Yes. We had been in upstate New York for three years and then spent a year living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and I spent that year over at the Duke Hospital studying and then in 1954 we moved back here to Gainesville.

Q: In 1954?

A: Yes.

Q: How many doctors approximately were in practice then?

A: Probably twenty at the most. It was a pretty small community, as you know.

Q: Approximately how many are in practice today? Are there now two hundred doctors?

A: Or more, if you count the University, it's probably 400 or 500. A lot of them are surgeons.

Q: But in private practice?

A: There are probably a couple hundred, I imagine.

Q: You're the last of the Mohicans. From that class of 1954 is anybody else in practice?

A: I can't think of any. Let's see now. You know Cullen Banks?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, Cullen was in practice here. He's not practicing here, but he does some surgical assisting so he has not totally stopped his medical work.

Q: When he's not on the golf tour.

A: That's right. He likes to play golf.

Q: Where was your first office location?

A: It was located at 819 S.W. 4th Avenue, which is very close to where Alachua General is now.

Q: But then that street was not Masonic. What was it?

A: It was 4th Avenue then? They had adopted the quadrant system by then. I don't think I was living here when the quadrant system went in, so I don't remember the exact year.

Q: Well, that was the biggest trick they played on me. I came back after it was in and I had to get acclimated to all the streets.

A: Yes, they didn't have street names any more, except University Avenue, and of course when you were here before they had East Main Street and West Main Street, and they ended up with nothing but Main Street.

Q: And the railroad train and the tracks and so forth. Well, in looking back now, Gainesville as it is today, when you think of Archer Road and you think of the University itself, what has been the biggest change in Gainesville from the time you first came here as a young lad?

A: Well, the population explosion, of course, is extremely dramatic and the people who have made up that population explosion have come from all parts of the country. They've come from California, New York, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Ohio, and years ago people who moved here came from Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina. Now the people who come in are a mix from everywhere, and very few from the immediate surrounding southern states, so we have become a very metropolitan type community with a little bit of the old Southern flavor, but it's very ---

Q: It's hard to find now.

A: People are from everywhere. "Where'd you come from?" "Well." "Okay, that's fine.. I came from maybe West Coast." So everybody's from everywhere.

Q: I knew you have always been interested in sports. Did you follow the Gators when you were at the University?

A: Everybody did! We all did. It was the item of conversation in the fraternity houses. We didn't win many games, as you know. We got beaten most of the time but we still paid a lot of attention to it and the football players were our big shots and we looked up to them. Our football team here then would have two or three really good players and maybe six or eight medium-good players and the rest were not very good at all. The other teams all had much better personnel than we did. Florida was a poor state in those days. There was very little money here and a lot more money in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina and North Carolina, even though we don't think of those places now as being more prosperous than Florida, but boy they were then. Any real good football players in Florida went to Georgia or Georgia Tech or Alabama or Auburn, but we didn't get too many of them.

Q: I think you can consider yourself lucky to have part of Gainesville history.

A: Yes, I have. I had a very good time growing up here and I've spoken to many, many people who were living here at that time and have asked them, "Did you have a good time when you were growing up?" They universally say that they did. We had a very pleasant time -- very little money but we had things that we could do and enjoyed it.

Q: I can attest to the fact that Gainesville was a good place in which to grow up. John, I do appreciate you taking this time to tell us something about not only the history of John Crago but the history of Gainesville, and I thank you very, very much for that time.

A: Now have you really looked into the square at the social center of Gainesville? It used to be, you know.

Q: Oh yes.

A: Have you had somebody talk about that? I think that's kind of interesting.

Q: Yes, I remember when the political campaigns were on: Joe Jenkins and Sigsby Scruggs always would have a debate of some kind, and everybody would come.

A: The Square was the place where you could go anytime and walk around and you would run into four or five people that you knew and just stop and talk and visit a little bit. Maybe you would have a nickel and you'd go get a Coca Cola or a Limeade.

Q: Where would you go to get it?

A: The drug store was there in those days, and there was a drug store on University Avenue right across from the court house that we used to go to.

Q: Canova's?

A: Well, it later became Canova's.

Q: Bennett's.

A: Bennett's was the last drug store years ago, and then there was the Vidal Drug Store on the corner but they didn't serve any drinks or anything. They just sold drugs and books and things. But anyway, the Square was unique.

Q: You would see people whom you knew when you went down there.

A: Yes, and this is part of what you did for fun -- stop and talk to your friends.

Q: Saturday afternoon the place to be was downtown around the Florida Theater.

A: Yes. I should remember more of what we did for fun. Swimming in the summertime, playing tennis, and I can't remember too many other things.

Q: Well, your wife is in the next room. I wouldn't go into that any further if I were you, John!!

A: No hanky-panky.

Q: Again, thanks a lot. We will be getting a copy of this to edit, and you may add anything you want to.