

FAL 2

Interviewee: Samuel Proctor

Interviewer: Mark Ward

Date: February 7, 2003

W: This is Mark Ward. It is February 7, 2003. This is for the *Alligator* Oral History Project, with Dr. Samuel Proctor. Dr. Proctor, you wanted to give some background information?

P: Give a little background on myself?

W: Yes, sir.

P: Okay. I was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, in March, 1919. So, I've been around a long time. I came to the University [of Florida] in September of 1937. I had graduated the previous summer in Jacksonville at Robert E. Lee High School. My uncle was here in school, he was a senior majoring in chemistry, and so we lived together. At that time, you had dormitories but not very many, and a few fraternity houses, but other than that, there was no such thing as apartments for students. You had rooming houses around the campus, and we lived in a rooming house on what is now NW 15th Street. It was then called Washington Street. We paid all of, I think, \$7 or \$8 a month. We had to furnish our own linens. There was no maid service, of course. There were four or five rooms that this lady, a widow, was renting out. [There was only] one bathroom, but everything worked out fine. I was a new freshman on campus, and I took the courses that were then available only to freshman and sophomores. We had what was then called the General College; it became the University College later on. There were compulsory courses that you had to take, and that's what I did. Obviously, I was looking for some chance to meet other students socially. There were only a handful of women on campus. We began having a few women here in 1925 [who were here] to take courses that were not available at FSU [Florida State University], or then they called it Florida State College for Women. [The University of Florida] was an all-male school for all practical purposes. There were about 3,000 students on campus, which doesn't sound like very much today, but it was a large school, one of the largest in the South by comparison with Georgia, Tennessee, and all. So, you didn't feel like you were isolated or living out at the end of world or something. But I was looking for an opportunity to meet other students. I did not belong to a fraternity because I couldn't afford to belong to a fraternity.

One of the ways that I found [to earn money] very early on, within the first two or three weeks that I was here, was indeed the *Alligator*. They had an office, as I remember, in what was then called the Florida Union. It is now no longer the [Florida] Union because the Reitz Union has taken its place, but all of the student activities pretty much were in that building, no classrooms at all. Everything that

dealt with student government, all of the organizations like the *Alligator*, Blue Key, all had their offices in the student union. They called it the Florida Union. When I came here, it was about half the size that it is now. After the war, with the great growth of the student body, they added on to it.

I had no trouble getting a “position” on the *Alligator* because they were looking for people like me, freshman coming in. There were a number of clubs on campus in those years. Almost every county had a club, and they met sometimes once a week, sometimes once a month. It was mainly for social gatherings. They didn’t try to do anything, there were no goals that they were setting for themselves, but they talked about current events, they talked about things that were going on in the campus, things that were happening in the rest of the world. Although, we were pretty well isolated from the rest of the world, even though already there was this growth, this menace, growing in Europe. Gainesville, Florida was a long way from Berlin, Germany.

What the *Alligator* wanted were people like me to go to these club meetings on a regular basis and then write a short report, news report, of what happened. I had about six or seven of these county clubs. I remember Duval County, which is where I came from, was one of them. I think Dade County was another one with a club. What I would do, I knew ahead of time when they were meeting because that information was public. I would appear with a little notebook, sit in the back row, listen to what they were saying, and then right a paragraph or two and turn it in to the editorial office of the *Alligator*. I don’t remember being assigned any big feature events or anything like that, and I was not really active in the *Alligator* after about the first year, year and a half.

W: Why did you discontinue your activity with the *Alligator*?

P: It wasn’t because I wasn’t interested. It was because I had gotten what I wanted. I had built up a cadre of friends. I was involved, of course, in my student activities, and I had a job on campus. They had a New Deal agency called the NYA, the National Youth Administration, which was one of the ones that Franklin Roosevelt initiated during the 1930s. His effort was to help students in high school to graduate high school and to help students on the campus. Most of the students that year going to the University of Florida came out of poor backgrounds, poor homes, and poor counties, and I would say about 50 percent, maybe more than that, of the students were what we called NYA-ers, and I was one of them. The employment office was in the basement of what is now Anderson Hall, and you got a job there. It paid you \$15 a month, which sounds like a ridiculous amount, but \$15 a month went a long way there when you only paid \$7 a month for rent and you could easily eat and eat decently for 75, 80 cents a day here on campus.

My first job was to work for a professor in the College of Business, an economics professor by the name of John [Berry] McFerrin. He had just come to the university, a new Ph. D., and his book, his dissertation I should say, had been accepted by the University of Tennessee Press. My job was to type that manuscript. We didn't have, obviously, computers then. His office was in what is now Flint Hall, on the second floor. I might just say in passing, Flint didn't look nearly as magnificent as it does today. That's what I did. As I said, about 50 percent of the students on this campus, they mowed the lawns, they worked in the cafeteria, they worked in the library, they were assistants to professors, grading papers, typing manuscripts, and doing things like that. By the middle of my sophomore year, I began to draw away from the *Alligator*, although I continued until the end of that year. There was no abrupt change or anything like that. It was just that other things began to loom greater for me.

W: Did you still retain friendships with people you had met while working at the *Alligator*?

P: Yes, because there were other student freshman and then sophomores just like me who had become involved in those activities, once again looking for social comradery. And I think it was very helpful because you had to be careful of how you wrote. One of the obligatory courses that you took as a freshman was what they called C3, Comprehensive Three: reading, speaking, and writing. That's exactly what you did. You went to class once a week, you met and you wrote an essay, an assigned essay; and then about once every month you had to give a little talk, an impromptu talk, in your class; and there were large reading assignments. I would think that the work that I did at the *Alligator* carried over into the work that I did as far as that course was concerned. I found it to be very helpful.

W: Did you get any feedback on the stories you had written?

P: No. Nobody said, Proctor, that was wonderful. If so, I don't remember it.

W: How did the students perceive the paper in that era?

P: Well, it was much smaller than it is, obviously, today, and in many ways much more provincial than it is today. It carried no national or state news. It was entirely a University of Florida publication. It was not a daily, as you know; it was a weekly. Then it became a semi-weekly. The main interest, I think, of students in there was to find out what was happening in the world of sports. Even there, you didn't get much beyond just football, basketball, and baseball. We had not become a very sports-minded university in those early years. So, the students picked up the paper. It was not as widely distributed around. You didn't have the boxes and all for them to get it, but it was available as a free item. Wait a minute.

Let me make sure I remember this. We didn't have any tuition to start with. It seems to me that in our fees, this fee distribution, something went to the infirmary, something went to the athletic department so that you got into all the athletic events without any charge. They had an artist series, so a little money went to them, and I think a little money went to the *Alligator* from the student fees. I think a little bit of it, maybe \$2 or \$3 or something like that, but when you add that up to 3,000 students, it was a good amount.

W: Did you feel that the newspaper was informative in that era?

P: I found it to be very informative. You didn't have the distribution of local papers. We didn't get the *Gainesville Sun* or the *Florida Times Union* available to us, so you read the *Alligator* for the weekly news for what was happening on campus. In Library East on the first floor, along that long corridor, you had chairs and you had local newspapers, and that was always crowded. Many of these papers were just weeklies, but they came in. The university subscribed to maybe forty, fifty newspapers. So, you read those to find out what was happening at home, and you read the *Alligator* to find out what was happening on campus, but you didn't get any Gainesville or Alachua County news.

W: When you were writing your stories, did you write them in the *Alligator* offices?

P: No, I wrote them at home. I did not have a typewriter, and I think I wrote everything in long hand and came to the *Alligator* office and typed them.

W: Could you describe what the office looked like?

P: The offices were small. They were on the first floor. As you came in to the union, there was a desk there, and a student manned that desk. To the left, you walked down two steps [and] there was a lounge. They called it Bryan Lounge. To the right were the offices. They were larger than this office but not that much larger at all, and they were pretty well jammed. There were about two of them that were turned over to the *Alligator*. I remember we had a yearbook that was being published at the time, *The Seminole*, and they had an office also on that floor. It was pretty jammed up. If you were going to use the typewriter – there were only two or three typewriters, as I remember, in the office – you had to wait your turn.

W: Did you have any contact with the editors of the *Alligator* at that time?

P: There were two of them, but _____. I think we dealt with somebody they called the feature editor. You know, you're asking me about things that happened sixty, seventy years ago.

W: Do you remember during your time as a student here at UF, either as *Alligator*

staff or not, any controversies the paper might have gone through?

P: No, there were no controversies to speak of. The most exciting times of the year was of course during football season, and your enemies in that case were off campus. Student elections were an exciting time. The *Alligator*, while it did not pick sides, reported what was going on. Student elections were much more active then than they are now. Everybody participated. The candidates went around to the dormitories and to the rooming houses at night to solicit votes. They had all kinds of funny and non-funny advertisements on the campus. I remember, for instance, they had one student whose name I think was Blitch, and he was running for student body president, which he did not get. I remember his slogan was "Vote for Blitch, you son of a bitch" [laughing]. But they didn't have too much of that.

W: So, you said the paper was pretty much unbiased in its news reporting in student government?

P: By comparison today, it was a pretty blah newspaper. If it reported things like the Duval County Club, it wasn't very exciting.

W: When you returned to UF in 1946 as a staff member, a professor, what changes did you see in the *Alligator* with the influx of veterans from World War II.

P: Of course, it was a dramatic change. In 1945, the year before you were asking me, we had about 500 to 600 students on campus. The war was just over. Then, of course, the G. I. Bill exploded everything, and the following fall, we had about 6,000 plus students, maybe more than that. I came to teach here in June of 1946 quite by accident. I had not planned to do that at all. I was planning to go to law school. But I did, and I never have regretted it. By that time, of course, it was a completely different campus, much more cosmopolitan. The students were older. Many of them had families, and they were anxious to get out, get a degree, get out of here, get a job, and get rich. Those were their goals. They were some of the best students we've ever had at the university. Of course, publications like the *Alligator* began to reflect their interests and activities. You didn't find reports on the Duval County Club after 1946. That's when you began to get national news, even international news, being reported in the *Alligator*. I don't think it was as much as you get today, and certainly the *Alligator* wasn't as large as it is today. As I remember, even in 1946, 1947, it was still pretty much a four-page publication, and there were no color photographs in there. Everything was black and white. It was a much different paper as the campus was a much different campus. I mean, it was part of the world.

W: Did the *Alligator* report on or cater to any stories specifically for veterans in this period?

- P: Well, you know, almost everybody was a veteran, almost everybody, and there was a big VA office down in the Seagle Building. So, yes, the *Alligator* reported on when the office was open, it reported on information about delayed G. I. checks, it reported on housing conditions. FlaVets, there were three major housing units on campus. The news in the *Alligator* was really focused on the majority of the student body which were G. I.s.
- W: How much interaction did you have as a faculty member with the paper?
- P: I wouldn't say a very lot because, once again, I'm busy with my own activities, [with my] teaching responsibilities on campus. Classes were huge. It was not unusual to have eighty or ninety people in a class, because not only did you have the students, the G. I.s, but the state had passed a law saying that teachers had to have a college degree. Up until that time, [teachers needed] something short of a degree. Even their years of experience did not count. So, in addition to the G. I.s, particularly in the summer – of course, teachers didn't come until summer – classes were huge, so I would not say I had much interaction with the *Alligator* at that time. Obviously, I read it and I knew students and editors who worked on it because they appeared in my class, but I don't remember much of the discussion about issues that were happening that then appeared [and were] reported in the *Alligator*.
- W: The period of the 1950s and 1960s, how involved was the *Alligator* in, say, civil rights and things of that nature?
- P: The *Alligator* was always considered to be a liberal paper, and so it was on the side of the civil rights. Beginning in 1949, when Virgil Hawkins and his four compatriots tried to get into the University of Florida, without success, the *Alligator* reported on their efforts, their court efforts. It was on the side of integration, on the side of letting students in, pointing out how unfair it was. On the other hand, not everybody on campus was an integrationist. Perhaps in 1950, 1951, if you did a poll of the students, those reading the *Alligator* [and] writing for the *Alligator*, you would find that they were mainly segregationists, not civil righters. So, this business of the *Alligator* supporting civil rights, which it did, came not overnight; it was a gradual transition kind of thing. The *Alligator* did play a role, it did stimulate public opinion, its editorial page was on the right side, and as it got closer and closer to 1957, when the circuit court ruled that the university had to accept someone on the graduate level, and it didn't ordain it for everybody, the *Alligator* was on the right side of that and endorsed what was happening.
- W: How do you feel students perceived the stance, in general?
- P: I think the students began [to come around]. Once again, a lot of changes had

taken place from 1950 to 1957, and people like Virgil Hawkins were being more kindly evaluated than they had been in earlier years. I think by 1957, I don't know whether you would call it a majority, but a large segment of the student population and the faculty population supported civil rights. In fact, some of them were very actively involved in demonstrations. I was not one of them, but there were many who were.

W: How did the *Alligator's* coverage change in the 1960s and 1970s from earlier periods?

P: The *Alligator* changed dramatically from being a semi-conservative, I started to stay very conservative but it was not very conservative, but a conservative, limited newspaper. By the time you get up into the 1960s with the number of black students coming to the campus and their demanding for more recognition and more support and more of everything, and then, of course, the Vietnam situation is taking over, and in addition to all of those things, the *Alligator* became involved in the abortion issue. So, yes, the *Alligator* changed dramatically from a limited newspaper to one that was much more liberal and much more involved in what was happening off the campus. But also on the campus, too, because the black issue, the Vietnam protests, all of those things involved their own students. But you know that integration came to the university through the courts. We never had any big demonstrations or any violence on campus. In fact, the protests against integration came from off the campus. The theaters, the Florida Theater downtown [and] what was then the College Inn, which they've just changed the name again from the Purple Porpoise [to Gator City], but the owners of that, the Hymens, would not accept blacks coming in. But by that time, the students and the faculty overwhelmingly supported civil rights.

W: How did administration or faculty view the *Alligator* during this period?

P: Once again, you can't say every single person on the faculty, but I would say generally the faculty supported the editorial policies of the *Alligator*. Everybody read the *Alligator*. It didn't cost anything, and you could throw it away once you got finished with it, which they did. Everybody read the *Alligator*, and to that degree, they were influenced by the *Alligator*. You're never going to get a situation, even today, where everything is 100 percent. In the abortion issue, for instance, while the majority of the faculty supported the stand that the *Alligator* took, if you go back and read letters, you find that there were a lot of people who did not support the *Alligator's* willingness to publish the list of abortion areas, not abortion clinics necessarily.

W: This all leads into the *Alligator's* independence from the university. What were the overtones like in that period?

- P: The transition took place without interrupting the flow of the newspapers at all. The *Alligator* continued to be published. There were some people who were unhappy with Stephen [C.] O'Connell's [UF president, 1967-1973] decision to withdraw support from the *Alligator*, but even there, it was not totally withdrawn because the University took a couple or three pages and paid for those. And they helped the *Alligator* get space over behind what was the Purple Porpoise, in those offices, to operate before they then moved to the building they are in now, which is the old TEP [Tau Epsilon Phi fraternity] house. Generally speaking, the majority of the faculty supported the *Alligator*, but it was not total at all.
- W: You mentioned support from *University Digest*, the advertising the university gave to the *Alligator*. What role has that played throughout the years?
- P: It has provided an income for the *Alligator*, which I'm sure they have appreciated very much. The *Alligator* has done magnificently well with its advertising program, the fact that it has never had to charge for the newspapers and yet it's still a thriving operation.
- W: How has advertising changed since the 1940s onward?
- P: Well, when you look at the newspaper in the 1940s and early 1950s, you don't find very much in the way of advertising. A few local people are advertising here, restaurants are advertising, but you didn't have much to advertise with or for. Of course, it has changed dramatically now. You get advertisements where they are trying to sell national products, which you didn't have at that particular time.
- W: How about classified ads? Were they prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s?
- P: Not very much, and nothing very erotic was advertised at all, looking for roommates or anything. I mean, you didn't have that kind of thing because there was no need for it.
- W: Why was there no need?
- P: Because there weren't that many places for people to live or rent.
- W: When do you believe that some of these changes took place?
- P: Right after the war. That's when the really dramatic [change occurred]. I mean, when you think about what the university was like up until 1941 and then what the university was like after 1946, they are two different worlds that you are describing.
- W: What is your opinion of the paper today?

- P: I like it. I like it very much. Perhaps part of it is because I like Ed Barber, but I like the editorial philosophy of the paper, even though they came out for Colin Powell yesterday to be president of the United States. I realize that some of this is tongue in cheek, but I like the way they write. I don't necessarily agree with everything that they write, but that is the way a newspaper should be. It shouldn't be there so that everybody says, yes, I believe that. But I like the *Alligator*, and I read it everyday.
- W: Do you think most faculty members and students do, also?
- P: I think that most faculty members and students do. I don't hear any negative reaction to the *Alligator*, and I can tell. [I hear people say] did you read that, did you see that?
- W: What role do you feel it provides today, in this era?
- P: It is an outlet for what is happening on campus, because people outside of Gainesville even are interested in the *Alligator* and what it has to say about student activities, and it is fulfilling a role. There is no other publication that is reporting as extensively on University of Florida student activities.
- W: Coverage of you in the *Alligator*, stories about you, how well do you think you have been treated in the past?
- P: Me? Oh, I've been treated very well. I mean, I've been harassed by *Alligator* reporters, particularly around homecoming time because it is easier to call up and ask Dr. Proctor than it is to get your butt over to the library and do your own research. I have said, is that another one of those God-damned *Alligator* reporters calling me up? [laughs] What was it that happened about a month ago? I've forgotten, some sort of story was coming out. A girl from the *Alligator* called me up at ten minutes to eleven at night. I said, I'm not going to talk to you now. I said, can't this wait? She said, no, I've got to write my story tonight. I said, but you're going to write it without me. I don't even know what I could have done for her. But, yes, that's how I've been treated, good and bad. Nobody said anything nasty about Proctor, though.
- W: That's good. How did the *Alligator*, in your opinion, operate in the 1980s and leading up until today? How has it changed?
- P: It hasn't changed. It's just normal growth of the newspaper as a result of the growth of the university. I don't see any dramatic changes taking place in its editorial policy, in its news coverage, in its advertisements. It is just more of the same, only better.

- W: As a teacher, are there any specific students you've had who worked for the *Alligator* who stand out, or anyone in the *Alligator* Hall of Fame you might remember on campus?
- P: No, and I know all of them. Perhaps some of them know me better than I know them. I've been here so long, I've obviously touched thousands of students, and their lives have touched mine too. I don't know how many to estimate, 15,000, 18,000. If you teach fifty years and you have large classes, you accumulate a lot of students. I was always happy doing what I was doing so that the *Alligator* didn't change me at all.
- W: Speaking a bit of Homecoming, how do you feel the *Alligator* covers historic events on the campus?
- P: Very good. It covers historic events excellently well. It has a lot of mistakes in the stories that appear, but so does the *New York Times*. I, of course, can see the historical errors, but they've disappeared by tomorrow.
- W: Any specific issues you've ever heard of with the UF presidents and the *Alligator*?
- P: I've known all of the presidents, starting with [UF President John J.] Tigert [1928-1947] really, and I don't think any of them have ever been anti-*Alligator*. They haven't agreed over the years with everything that the *Alligator* had to say about what was happening in the president's office and on the campus, but that's what a newspaper is supposed to do. It doesn't have to agree with what [UF President J. Wayne] Reitz [1955-1967], or Tigert, or [UF President Robert Q.] Marston [1975-1984] said. But I think that they all felt that the *Alligator* was doing a very good job as an interpreter of student activities. I heard over the years positive statements made along those lines. Even with all the controversy with O'Connell, O'Connell thought it was a great newspaper.
- W: Why, specifically?
- P: Because he thought, once again, it reflected the points of view of the students, it was an outlet for their activities, and it was not available anywhere else.
- W: Do you think that a university president would use the *Alligator* to gauge student opinions?
- P: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I think the *Alligator* is one of the first things that the president reads everyday, and I think that goes a long way toward determining what his philosophy and attitudes and activities are going to be. Oh, yes, I think the *Alligator* plays a big role there. Not only that, I think that is true of the deans'

offices, and I think it is true of the administrative offices generally, all over the campus.

W: What role does the *Alligator* serve today for the average student body member?

P: We've said several times, it is the source for a lot of things the students want to know or are interested in. Students are not great readers. They read what they are assigned. I think that most of them depend upon the *Alligator* because it is available and it does not cost them anything for "news of the day," news of the campus.

W: Do you feel that the *Alligator's* trend is toward more international stories...

P: I support that. I would like them to take more of a positive stand on issues on the campus and issues in the state, but I have no objection to them reporting on Bush's desire to go to war.

W: Do you think there is a need like there was in the 1940s to cover a diverse amount of campus groups, specific coverage just toward the university and student groups and that?

P: No, I don't think there is that need of it anymore. We have outgrown that a long time.

W: Are there any other topics that we have not covered that you would like to talk about?

P: Can you think of anything else? It seems to me we have talked about a lot. Have you been satisfied with the interview so far?

W: I have so far. Just any specific insights you can give me on large controversial events that the *Alligator* has been involved in.

P: I really do not think that there is anything that the *Alligator* has been involved in, any controversial events. I think it has definitely taken an anti-war stance, which I agree with completely. I think that the things that the *Alligator* has supported and things that the *Alligator* has opposed agrees with me, as though they are getting advice from Proctor.

W: How was the *Alligator's* coverage of the murders that happened here?

P: Oh, wonderful. As terrible as the murders went, you got details that you didn't get elsewhere because they were talking to the people on the campus who were handling the investigations.

W: Their insight as students.

P: Everybody was avidly reading everything. I mean, the terror that gripped the campus is kind of hard to believe today because we are away from it.

W: Do you think they provided a voice of calming or reason in that period?

P: Absolutely. I think that is really what the *Alligator* has done over the years, not only on the murder events but other things that have happened. I think particularly the Vietnam protests, the *Alligator* was a voice of reasoning, trying to calm people down. I think that is one of the reasons that we did not have any violence on campus and no buildings were burned. Nothing like that happened here as they happened on other campuses, the University of Georgia, the University of Alabama.

W: Do you think the *Alligator* has always been fair and unbiased in its reporting?

P: Yes, to the degree that human beings are in charge of the *Alligator*. As a result, you may not agree with everything, but I would say, yes, they have lived up to what good journalists are supposed to do, to write the news as it happened and not to bring their own negative personalities into the situation.

W: I have an interest on your time as a reporter, just to finish up. What were your impressions of going into that office for the first time?

P: You mean way back in 1937?

W: Yes, sir.

P: Boy, that was a long time ago.

W: Or can you remember your first story being published and what you felt at that moment?

P: No. I've got a pretty good memory but not that good.

W: Do you feel it helped you?

P: Of course it helped me. It helped me a great deal. I have already said that we were taking a course, an obligatory course, in reading, speaking, and writing, and of course it helped me. I had come out of a good high school and I had always been interested in history and English, so I was in pretty good shape, but I had a long way to go to be in perfect shape. I think my experience on the *Alligator* helped me a great deal. I value that.

W: Did it help you as an historian in any way?

P: No. The happenings of the Duval County Club did not help much in history.

W: Those are all the questions I have for you today, sir.

P: Well, I enjoyed this.