

Oral Memoirs
of
Dr. Storm Leslie Richards

An Interview Conducted by

Ian McLaughlin

October 24, 2012

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Ian McLaughlin

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

RICHES of Central Florida is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Dr. Storm Leslie Richards is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 24, 2012.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Dr. Storm Leslie Richards, an archaeologist and environmental consultant for Storm L. Richards & Associates, Inc. Dr. Richards was born in Patuxent River, Maryland, on August 20, 1950, but his family migrated to Sanford, Florida, in 1953. He graduated from Seminole High School in 1969 and received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Florida in Tallahassee in 1973, 1978, and 1987, respectively. Dr. Richards also wrote the grant for the Sanford Grammar School, located at 301 West Seventh Street. This interview was conducted by Ian McLaughlin at Dr. Richards' home in Geneva on October 24, 2012.

Dr. Storm Leslie Richards

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Ian McLaughlin
October 24, 2012
Geneva, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

McLaughlin Alright, today is Wednesday, the 24th of October, 2012. It is 3:05 PM. I am with Dr. Storm [Leslie] Richards at his home in Geneva, Florida, and we're going to discuss his experiences as related to historic preservation in Sanford, specifically concerning the Sanford Student Museum [and Center for the Social Studies].

Richards We moved to Sanford in 1953. My dad was in, uh, the Navy at the time, and, um, we came here, uh, when Sanford was a very small community. It was very agriculturally-oriented. Um, there were many, many schools in Sanford. Uh, I went to, uh, about four of them, uh, from about elementary school through high school—all in Sanford, and then I went to Seminole Community College,¹ which was what it was called at the time in the 1970s, uh, and got my Associate of Arts degree, and went on to the University of Florida and finished my Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate at, uh, the University of Florida in Gainesville. Um, did some graduate work at Tulane University, but, uh, for the most part, I was always at the University of Florida, and I had a very strong interest in historic preservation and archaeology and, uh, urban—urban development, and I think, uh, first time that I really became—became directly, um, associated with the school [inaudible] was I was asked to help write a grant. Um, he grant was originally through the Division of Historical Resources, which is part of Florida Department of State for doing architectural reconstruction and rehabilitation. Um, one of the things that came to me from the very, very beginning was that the school—the [Sanford] Grammar School was such a tremendous resource in terms of historically where[?] Sanford had been. It was constructed in 1907, I think—'02-'07, and, um, it had always been a real focal point for—for education for—for young kids, and I think, uh—I didn't go to school there and—and I always remember the school having, uh, teeter-totters and having, um, jungle gyms and the having the maypole, uh, swing that the kids would swing around and stuff like that. It's—it's the kind of thing where you still remember the kids yelling and screaming, and just, uh, it was a very fun place. Um, academically, I can't really speak for it, but, uh, I can remember that—that there was always a lot of activity there, and the school, uh, that I identified with the grant that I worked on was a very important hub for Sanford and for Seminole County to—to look at something historic and say that so many people had gone there and so many

¹ Present-day Seminole State College.

people's lives had been involved. I just thought it was a wonderful focal point, um, to try to keep, and, uh, at that time, they were really the first time that they were getting into the notion of it being an historic properties, and being important for a museum, and – and I was just really, uh, excited about that for the kids to be able to go back and look at things the way they were a hundred years ago.

0:03:25

Grant writing and rehabilitation for the Student Museum and Center for the Social Studies

McLaughlin All right. Um, in what capacity were you involved, specifically with the grant-writing process?

Richards Um, because I was – I am a certified archaeologist, and I have a really strong background in historic preservation with the University of Florida and the Urban Re-Use and Planning Department, I was asked to – to come in and take a critical look at if the site was really historic. Now, it had already been designated on the [U.S.] National Register of Historic Places, which one would assume would make it very important, uh, but because it's part of a district, um, that's not necessarily the case, and you really want a building like that to stand on its own, be – because the importance not of just the neighborhood, but the importance of it being, uh, the structure that was there, uh, and so I put together, uh, all of the documentation on, uh, why it was historically important, and what it meant to the community, and why the state should look at it as being not just some local landmark, but as something that was important to the county and the State of Florida.

So I wrote that up, and what really ended up happening was that the state looked at that and felt that there was enough merit there that it was designated on a, uh, state list of very important, uh, uh, schools for the State of Florida and it was designated as such with that important notice. I think that the other thing that I did was, uh, I contacted a number of commissioners and a number of people that had on a say on, uh – on how money was being spent, whether it was the school board of, uh, Seminole County, because it was certainly a focus of not just the City of Sanford, but the county also, uh, and told them the importance of preserving that, because at a certain point, older buildings have a way of just deteriorating to the point that they can no longer be used, and it takes an investment, and sometimes, that investment can actually cost more than – than new construction, you know? Rehabilitation's a very expensive proposition, but what it does for a community, in terms of identifying the importance of a city, and importance of schools, and importance of looking at the people who got an education there and what they went on to do, and is – and it is far more important than any single dollar value.

McLaughlin Right, I see. About how long did that process take from start to finish? From the beginning to the end[?]? [*laughs*].

- Richards** It took probably – the grants program probably took six months.
- McLaughlin** Hm.
- Richards** I think though the writing that I did, because I had a familiarity with it, was probably in days.
- McLaughlin** [laughs].
- Richards** I'm very quick at what I do, and so I think I wrote the, uh, four- or five-page report of why it was important in – in a day or two days.
- McLaughlin** Excellent, and what year was this again?
- Richards** You know, I think it was probably about, uh, 10 or 15 years ago. I mean, it was probably in the [19]90s – [inaudible] or something like that.
- McLaughlin** So like 90s?
- Richards** Yeah.
- McLaughlin** Right, and who all – do you remember which people from the museum you worked with?
- Richards** Se – Serena [Rankin Parks] Fisher...
- McLaughlin** Serena Fisher.
- Richards** Uh, she was, you know – and I've known her for years and years before that, because she's a geographer and an educator, and – and I'm a geographer also, and so I knew her from the Florida Alliance, um, which was a group of educators who try to – to convey the importance of educating children, and she was working the museum, and, uh, it was the kind of thing that I felt real honored to help her with, because of the possibility of helping people, and, uh, when you drive by the school even today, which I did,
- McLaughlin** [laughs].
- Richards** Um, it's one of those things that you can go look at and be proud that it's still there, because it could be somebody's patio brick, you know?
- McLaughlin** Yeah.
- Richards** And – and so it's a real good place for kids to go and look at the way that things used to be.

0:07:21 **Other historic preservation projects**

McLaughlin Excellent, and were there any other instances in Sanford, in which you helped with local preservation efforts?

Richards Um, yes. Uh, the Hopper Academy, which was the African-American school, h, over near the stadium. Uh, I put together the environmental assessment and some of the feasibility studies for – for looking at the rehabbing of that and making that, uh, another focal point, and because it was a wooden building and it had a lot of decay, it was really difficult, and the neighborhood, uh, didn't lend itself to, you know – there were a lot of transients in the area, and people were sleeping near – in the school, and people were doing a lot of things that were just destructive. I'm not sure that worked out as well as I would have liked, but it was a real, eh, effort for someone to go over there and say, "We'd like to see, you know this – this kept for the community," and so I worked on that, and, um, also, when I was the senior planner with Seminole County and worked, um, on comprehensive planning, I – I worked very hard to try to get a conservation element that reflected the importance of archaeological and historic sites, um, in – in Central Florida and Seminole County.

In – in the profession that I have now, we do an awful lot of work in Seminole County. Uh, we worked for the airport in Seminole – the Orlando-Sanford [International] Airport. We've identified historic sites and identified preservation, uh, concepts for them. [inaudible]. We've worked for the Division of Historic Resources on the railroad sites[?] that existed here that came from the 1900s, when they were shipping an awful lot of, uh, produce out throughout – throughout the state and throughout different parts of the country, and so I've, you know, worked a lot on different aspects on Seminole County on – on cultural[?] resource assessments and evaluations, uh, both historic and archaeological resources for the county, and provided information for the of State of Florida.

0:09:18 **How Seminole County has changed over time**

McLaughlin Excellent, and here's a little bit of a different question. In your experience working in Seminole County and living here and growing up, how has it changed environmentally? You – what do you think are probably the biggest ways that it's changed?

Richards You know, I think – the – the interesting part of that story – and it just hits me immediately – is how recently – this year, someone burnt down the big.² They got inside the tree and they lit it on fire, and you have a tree that is older than the for – the 1400s. Before [Christopher] Columbus and...

McLaughlin Wow.

² The Senator.

Richards This country.

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards And the tree was there, and they burnt it up and destroyed it, and it was considered an “accident,” and it was considered of no great significance, and I can remember riding my bike out to the tree when I was a child from Sanford. It’s – it’s probably halfway between Sanford and Longwood on [U.S. Route] 17-92. Uh, I can remember there was a wonderful book written by [Elvira] Gardner, it was called *Ezekiel’s Travels*.

McLaughlin Mmhmm.

Richards And – and Ezekiel, a little black boy, rode his bicycle out to the big tree and they documented that in the 1930s.

McLaughlin Wow.

Richards You know, and – and – and they burnt this tree up and it was considered just kind of a...

McLaughlin An accident.

Richards An accident. So, uh – and I think that – it really has an impact, you know?

McLaughlin Yeah.

Richards The – the other thing that I can remember that’s changed so much is, when I was, uh, very young, I used to ride my bike down to the – the band shell, and to the, uh – to Lake Monroe, and used to fish there, and there used to be just the band shell, and just the sea wall, and in the last 25 years, you know, they’ve built, uh – they built hotels there, and, uh, they built, uh, mixed used development there. They have had varying degrees of non-success.

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards Uh, but it’s taken away much of the character, you know? I can remember when the zoo was in Downtown Sanford, and, you know, it was a very small zoo. Sorta not like the really nice complex that they have now, but – but Sanford was [inaudible], you know – libraries were there, and it was a place that – that kids went, and young people went, and it was just very different. The [Sanford] Civic Center was a big, big deal, and they had dances every week, and it was just, you know – it was just a place that people went all the time, and, uh, I don’t see that in Sanford anymore. I don’t see that.

McLaughlin You think some of the character is gone?

Richards I think—I think the character—and I think that, you know, its—its, um—its environment, and its, um—the neighborhood, and it’s, um—it’s just the changes that have taken place, you know? I can remember the parades in Downtown Park Avenue, and just, um, very large parades that everybody in the community got involved in, and we have something like that now, but [inaudible]—it’s just a, uh—an agglomeration of people with big bands, and—and crazy things happen from early afternoon to way late

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards [inaudible], and it’s just not something that I’m interested in participating in, you know? Probably there are a lot of people that do, but it’s—it’s just very different from when I was raised in Sanford.

McLaughlin Yeah.

0:12:45 **Impact of Walt Disney World Resort**

McLaughlin As far as developmentally, what effect do you think that the arrival of like Disney Corporation³ and things like that had on the change, if any?

Richards Yeah, eh, Disney is a very large beast.

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards And it has a lot of beasts that, uh, have attracted to it—whether it’s the whale beast or the, you know, uh, any number of other international destinations that I think that it’s affected probably not just all of Florida, but the Southeast. It’s the number one tourist destination, you know, in the world, u, and I think it makes Interstate [Highway] 4, which used to be a wonderful opportunity to go to Orlando and you just got on the interstate and ten minutes later, you were in Orlando, and today, it’s, um—it’s questionable if it even functions at all.

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards You know, we have a—we have a toll road system, in which, uh, I was assigned to that. I was Deputy Director of the toll way [inaudible] before they actually started developing it, and it was supposed to relieve the traffic and make traffic a lot different in Central Florida, but Central Florida is so densely populated that it was probably nothing can significantly change that. You know, whether it’s a rail system that they won’t put in, it will cost billions of dollars, whether it’s increasing lanes on I-4, or whether the [Central Florida] GreeneWay builds out. It’s—it’s not going to make the quality of life significantly different, in my opinion, you know, but that’s just part of the price you pay.

McLaughlin Yeah. Just out of curiosity, how many lanes did I-4 use to be? [laughs].

³ Correction: The Walt Disney Company.

Richards You know, I think it was always six – divided six.

McLaughlin Divided six?

Richards Yeah, um, eh, it – it had fewer ramps.

McLaughlin Mmhmm.

Richards And so they put in more ramps and more access, and it's – it's – the speed is much quicker today than it's ever been. Uh, the Fairbanks [Avenue] curb is a problem that people have been having for years, and everybody's looking at the engineering and saying, "It's got to be engineering." They say, "It's got to be, you know, your problems," you know? People are traveling between their ears if they don't pay attention to traffic, and that's why we gotta have people at such a quick pace today, you know? It used to be if you made it to work at 8- 8:30, you know, or if you, you know, were just there. Now, everybody fills the building up at 10-to-8, and, you know, so consequently, everybody gets on the interstate and it's as fast as they can go, and it reminds me a little bit of Atlanta[, Georgia].

McLaughlin Yeah.

Richards You know, if you're not doing 80 [miles per hour], you're not getting there.

McLaughlin [laughs].

Richards I think that the – I think that I-4 is quickly approaching that. If you're not doing 70, you're probably not going to make it.

McLaughlin Yeah.

Richards You know, that's just part of reality, part of the [inaudible], and the – the – it's the quickness of what happens today. It wasn't like that in the, you know, 1960s.

0:15:42 **Father's experience in the Navy**

McLaughlin Okay, before we go, if you could – would you like to share the story about your father

Richards Uh...

McLaughlin And what he did at the Navy base?

Richards We moved to Sanford in – in '53. My dad was stationed in Jacksonville, um, before that in the, um – in the Navy, and – and when we moved here, my dad was a navigator bombardier and a mechanic, and when the first jets, which were the [Douglas] A-3D[Skywarrior]s came from California, my dad was part of the crew that flew the jets from California to Florida. That was before the [North American A-5] Vigilantes, before the larger aircraft. These were, you know twin-

engine jets, but their total design and their total purpose was, uh, to launch a, uh, nuclear strike, and – and art of what Sanford, you know – Orlando-Sanford Airport today has the bunkers that they kept the nuclear weapons in, and they were going to load onboard the A-3Ds and – and go to Cuba, and my dad was the slim pickins' of the aircraft, because it was his job to arm the nuclear weapons – To go back in the bomb bays and arm the nuclear weapons with, uh, I guess a detonation device that you screwed in the – in the nose of the bomb, and that was his job. It – and it was very, very stressful, and you know, at the time, I can just barely remember – I guess I was probably about seven – six or seven years old that all these young kids from the Navy would come over to the house, and they would have parties and stuff, and – and what they were doing was, h, the vanguard of changing the world, if – if they had to, and they all agreed to that – that that's what they were going to do, and my dad was a really big part of that, and I guess there's – there's some pride in that, but there's also some looking back and saying, "Is this really where we were?"

You know, and [inaudible], and I know today – you know, 2012 – we're still talking about the Cuban Missile Crisis and trying to figure out what really happened, and when you think about the people that were going to do whatever they were told to do, you know, there's a lot of frighteningness[sic] there, and there is a lot of, *Have we gone that far? Or, Are we still in the same place?* I kinda think about that occasionally.

0:17:57

Closing remarks

McLaughlin Do you have any other thoughts about Sanford or Seminole County or the Student Museum that you would like to share with us before we...

Richards I think that the Student Museum is, you know – it – it – it – it's probably a lot bigger than most people really think. It's – it's not a matter of postcards and maps and little things that you can touch or handle, but it's the notion of where we come from and where we're going, and will people identify those things in 10 years, in 20 years, in 30 years, and say that, uh – that there was something that was very valuable here? It was something that was very important to a lot of people, and I hope we can still see that, and I hope that that's, uh, a multicultural thing that – that, uh, everybody can look at and say, "This is – this is where we were, and this is where we are, and lot of good things have taken place."

McLaughlin Excellent, and once again, my name is Ian McLaughlin, and I'm interviewing Dr. Storm Richards at his home in Geneva, Florida. Today is Wednesday, the 24th of October, 2012.

End of Interview