

Oral Memoirs
of
Florence Patchell O'Connor

An Interview Conducted by

Mary "Katie" Kelley

October 11, 2012

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

Copyright 2012

This material is protected by US copyright. Permission to print, reproduce or distribute copyrighted material is subject to the terms and conditions of fair use as prescribed in the US copyright law. Transmission or reproduction of protected items beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the copyright owners.

Interview Histories

Interviewer: Mary “Katie” Kelley

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 Florence Patchell O’Connor is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 11, 2012.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Florence Patchell O'Connor, a docent for the Student Museum and Center for Social Studies, located at 301 West Seventh Street in Sanford, Florida. O'Connor was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1931. While living in Pennsylvania, she taught elementary school for nine years. After marrying, she moved to Marlton, New Jersey, and continued teaching and then substitute teaching until 1991. That same year, she moved to Florida. O'Connor worked as a substitute teacher, and began volunteering as a docent in 1996. This interview was conducted by Mary “Katie” Kelley at the UCF Public History Center on October 11, 2012.

Florence Patchell O'Connor

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Mary "Katie" Kelley
October 11, 2012
Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Kelley Okay, I'm with Florence [Patchell] O'Connor. Florence was born November 10th, 1931. Florence has been a volunteer at the [UCF] Public History Center since 1996. She started in the 1996-1997 school year, when it was still called the Student Museum [and Center for the Social Studies]. We are conducting this interview for the Public History Center's History Harvest event and we'll be hearing about Florence's experiences as a teacher and volunteer at the Student Museum. Today is October 11th, 2012, we are at the Public History Center in Sanford, Florida, and my name is [Mary] "Katie" Kelley. Okay, Florence. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, um—about you childhood and your experiences prior to, um, coming to the museum?

O'Connor About my childhood? I—I can't remember that far back.

Kelley [laughs].

O'Connor But [clears throat] I am a school teacher. I don't want to say former, 'cause school teachers never die, I guess. Uh, I was in Pennsylvania teaching, and then when I was 29, I married my husband and moved to New Jersey. I was able to acquire two children through the marriage, so I did not keep teaching, but I stayed home to raise them and to raise the other three children that came along. However, I did do some substitute work at that time in New Jersey. Uh, we moved to Florida in 2000—no, we didn't—in 19—uh, boo boo, right? 1991 and again we—our children were all gone by then, but we were co-parenting three grandchildren. So I was not able to go back to teaching right away, but by 1996, I was able to think about coming back, and you might be interested—I have, uh, notes here.

0:01:55

Student Museum and Center for the Social Studies

O'Connor You might be interested to know that the way I got to the museum was—there was an article in the newspaper and they were asking for docents, uh—people who would like to teach in the museum. My husband and I drove over. There was no one outside. He said, "My, this is a very busy place," but I did go in, and, uh Serena [Rankin Parks] Fisher, who was the

director at that time – [clears throat] pardon me [clears throat] – took me around the building and told me about the different rooms. We had no Geography [Lab: Where in the World Are We?] room at that time, or the [American] Ingenuity room. They were not open as far – as I recall. I like to joke that I always wanted to work in Williamsburg[, Pennsylvania], and to be one of those people there in one of the buildings. However, this, to me, was a poor man’s Williamsburg. I was able to dress up and, um, be, um, an active teacher in the different rooms.

Kelley Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like when you first started volunteering at the museum?

O’Connor Okay, when I first started, I truly did more in the Native American [Exhibit: Life in an Ancient Timucuan Village] room. For some reason, I leaned toward that room. I would do the others every once and a while, but, uh, that was my one I really liked the best, and then, I tried the [Turn of the Century] Classroom[: Lessons from 1902], and again, in the classroom you were wearing the costume of the day – of 1990 – of 1902, where you would have a black skirt and a white blouse and you carried your hanky, ‘cause that’s what they did in those days, and you were very strict. Uh, [clears throat] Pardon me. Uh, I had fun. I wasn’t as strict as I am now, when I first started, it – it sort of eroded that I became more strict, and one of the things that I do make them do is to sit outside of the room and we discuss the fact that in 1902, children had to sit straight, had to sit with their hands folded, their feet flat on the floor, and put their hand up if they want to participate and talk to me [laughs].

Kelley Um, why did you decide to become involved, um – uh, you talked a little bit about this, but what – what was it about the fact – it was the poor man’s Williamsburg that made you want to volunteer?

O’Connor Well, the thing is, as I say, “School teachers never die. They just sort of fade away,” and, uh, I wanted something extra to do. My grandchildren had moved on – back to with their mom – well, their mom was with us, but she remarried and they moved on, and I had really nothing to do. I was subbing – at that time, I was subbing at Wilson School, and I would keep Thursday open to come to the museum. That was my day. I did not take any substituting jobs on that day, because I was depended on here at the museum.

0:05:00 **Typical day at museum**

Kelley Can you describe what your typical day, uh, at the Student Museum has been like, or at the Public History Center has been like?

O'Connor I sure can. Okay, at the museum, what I would do when the children came in—again, it would depend if I was substituting or if I was just a docent. — when I substituted, I would do the, uh, verbal reading outside, and then we go upstairs and we talk a little more, and then we would go into a 45-minute class each time, and, uh, as I said before, they would start out in the hallway, and then I would take them in and they were not allowed to speak, and it was really cute to see that they really took on the character of the children in, uh, 1902, and then while I'm in the room—I think that's part of this question you, uh—I would have them look around the room to see what was different from their classroom and what was different here at the museum.

Kelley Um...

O'Connor [*laughs*].

Kelley Do—do you have any—I mean, what else did you do when you, um—did you just teach or did you assist with lunch and that kind of thing? Or...

O'Connor Oh, with the children? Well, they would have two classes in the morning and then they would break for lunch, and again, it would depend on whether I was just a docent or a volunteer or in charge, because at lunch time, when we went upstairs, the director of the museum or the person in charge would talk about 1902 lunches and how they would not eat up there, because that was the auditorium, and then we also would show them, um, a box of animal crackers, which was first started—made in 1903, and why did it look the way it did, and the reason was the string was put on it to use to hang on the tree. It was a Christmas ornament. So they ate the cookies, they hung 'em on the tree—the box—and then the box itself became a toy for them, and we shared all that and again, about their lunches with their bottles of soda and their water, you know? We would go out to the well and we would try to just show them, even at lunch time, the difference between 1902 and now, when they were eating.

0:07:22 **Teaching techniques**

Kelley Um, why was it so—why was it such an important teaching technique for you to show them the differences?

O'Connor Well, I don't think children realize how well-off they have things sometimes, and, uh, eh, it was one of those things where, um, they didn't think about the differences, you know, when they—the flag in the 1902 classroom is a[sic] artifact from 1902, and big and dirty and they never—they would try to guess why it was different, and usually a child would put their hand up, stand up to talk to me, and realize there were fewer stars in the blue field than now, and that was what—and just comparing what they have now and what we had then.

Kelley What do you think, um – what do you think was the value then for them in – in coming here? When they left, what do you think that the students walked away with?

O'Connor I meant to look up the sign and I didn't come in time for it, but we have a sign that says, "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I might remember. Involve me and I will – it will become part of me." Something like that, and I think that's the whole thing, by them having hands-on. When we did – when I do the classroom, after they look around and decide different things, um, we would read from a McGuffey reader, again, trying to compare the difference from what their books are to our books now – or, uh, then rather – and, uh, we wrote on slates with the chalk, and I do have a – a funny situation, I guess, that could come in here.

Um, when I do teach the classroom, I always have my hanky, and [inaudible] right before that, I do walk through the classroom with a ruler, and the children would say, "Are you going to hit me?" And I'd look at them and say, "Well, it is 1902, so if you don't behave..." And, you know, I had the ruler, and then when their hands were folded, I – if a girl had nail polish on, I would hit the desk, and then I'd laugh and say, "I didn't hit you now, but would you please stand up?" And they would and they'd be scared really, and, um, then I would point out to them – or I would ask them, "Why am I so upset?" Well, they had different answers, but the main answer is nail polish was not invented in 1902, and they would say, "Well, you're not allowed to wear it in school," "Children aren't allowed to wear it." No, it wasn't invented, and then I would ask them if they brought their hanky to school, and, uh, of course, they didn't. So I would blow my nose and put my hanky back in my pocket, and you should have seen the faces like...

Kelley [laughs].

O'Connor You know, and I would say, "Well, what do you do?" And their answer was "Well, we use tissues." So then I would ask them to explain a tissue to me, and basically they'd say it – "It's paper," and then I would be shocked and say, "You want me to blow my nose on paper when I have such a nice soft hanky?" And, uh, then I would explain to them that tissues – or Kleenex, whatever – were not made until 1929, and then we'd have a little laugh, because that's when my husband was invented.

Kelley [laughs].

O'Connor And they think that's funny, but that was the kind of thing – I do have an example and it's sort of a funny one. I had them sitting like this and I saw nail polish, and it was a little boy that had nail polish on, and I had to continue, 'cause I'd already told Katie or Mary to stand up, and I said, "Oh

my goodness," and he goes, "I have it on, 'cause I made a bet with my sister and she said I wouldn't do it and I'm getting five dollars." So there again we just had a good laugh, and the children, uh—I asked if it was worth five dollars and some of them said, "No," and some said it would have been, so that's—that was that.

0:11:32 **How the museum has changed over time**

Kelley Do you think you—you've been here for quite a long time teaching at the Student Museum. Um, have your experiences changed from the early days until now with either how the students react, or with how you teach, or—what has been the difference?

O'Connor Okay, there's[sic] two things—I did make a list last night—you sort of—we sort of fell right into my next thing.

Kelley [laughs].

O'Connor I was teaching one day in this classroom, and after the—we were ready to go home, a little girl came up to me and she said, "Well, I liked your classroom, but I didn't like you," and I said, "Well, that's okay, Katie, because I didn't like you too much either," and she looked at me and she said, "You can't say that to me," and I said, "Well, I just did," 'cause she was a little—little—you know, little 2011-type child who was just trying to rule the room, and another thing that I thought was so neat, um—I was the substitute at this time, and, uh, I did welcome the bus that came, and the group comes off with their chaperones and we take them upstairs, and at that time, we were not ringing the bell. The bell has been fixed and it's wonderful. We can hear the school bell ring, but anyway, we went upstairs and I continued and the mother looked at—called me over, I guess, and she said, uh, "Are you from New Jersey?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am, I am." Uh, "From Marlton, New Jersey?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am." Well, here the mother was a child that I had taught—or when she was a child, I had taught here in New Jersey, and her comment was, "When I got off that bus and I saw you—I get the chills—saw you standing there, I couldn't believe that I saw you again," and that was a neat experience. I really—it's a shame to think I didn't change in those last 10 years, but, uh, she did remember me, and she lived right up the street from me. In fact, I believe she played with my older girls, but I'm not—not that sure about that.

Kelley It's a small world. My goodness.

O'Connor Isn't that something?

0:13:46 Teaching in a museum versus teaching in a classroom

Kelley Uh, how does—speaking of your previous teaching experiences, how does teaching at the museum compare to the more formal classroom setting from when you were, um, teaching at a...

O'Connor Well, again, this is more hands-on. uh, as I do explain to the children going into the classroom, that I know that their teachers—and I will look at the teachers—allows[sic] you to talk a little bit, but eh, not in my room [*laughs*], you know, but each room is so different that it's hard to compare, and again we only have them for 45 minutes, and you can almost put up with anything for even the—I al—I always will tell them that, you know, "If you don't like sitting this way, realize in 45 minutes, you'll be in the Native American room. You'll be in Grandmom's[sic] Attic. You will be able to walk around, but in my room, that's the way we do it."

Kelley Are most of the children pretty willing to play along? Do they...

O'Connor Yes.

Kelley Do they take on the role?

O'Connor Yes, they really are, except sometimes, I'd ask a question and they wouldn't put their hands up and I'd laugh. I'd say, "I think that's because I make 'em stand up." You know, they just went [*inaudible*], but they—they really did behave. I mean, the—I, uh—I ran a tight ship. I really did, but it was fun, and that's why I say I started out in the Native American room and it was more casual, and then for some reason, I was in the classroom and I liked it [*laughs*]. I liked being mean. The only think I didn't like was one of our uh, form—uh, former—she's former now. Uh, she would announce to the children that I was the mean teacher and I just wish she'd let them not know that till they got in my room, but that's alright.

0:15:30 Native American Exhibit: Life in an Ancient Timucuan Village

Kelley So you taught in the Native American room? What were your experiences like in there?

O'Connor Okay, I've done that. I've done basically all of them. I'll start with Native American. Uh, y experience there was, uh—again, my way of teaching it—I had them come in and sit on the floor, and then we would discuss the room, and then I would send them on a scavenger hunt, and I would tell them the different things that, uh, are in the room, and one of them was a six-legged deer, and if they found it—you know, not tell the others—and I'd give them time to walk around and go in the buildings and—because we do have two buildings and one, uh, hut—and, um, they were not allowed to sit in the boat—in the dugout, because it's so old—but they were allowed to pick up and

look at and find – and then they’d come back to the circle and we would discuss what they found, and, uh, we have three bears in there, and we have – and the six-legged deer was just the idea that a Native American had the deerskin on him and that way he could come closer to, you know – to, uh, hunt, and then, uh, I would pick a child to be the fish and he had swim – and some of them are crazy, you know, and I would talk about the costume that they wore, and of course, there’s no costume we can wear, because the Native Americans went topless, and when I would tell that to some of the chi – some of the groups, some of the children – boys and girls – would sort of snicker, not often, and I would say, “Have you been to the beach recently? They don’t wear too much either,” and so we got over that hump, but, uh, it was fun. It was a fun room and they, uh – they liked it.

We used to paint – long ago, when I first started, we used to put, uh, the paint on their faces, and that was to show them – it wasn’t war paint. it was the, uh, chief – I couldn’t think for a minute – chief and their family wore the – the painting on their body to show that they were the – and then it has slowly dwindled down, and we don’t do that anymore, and in a way it’s better, I think, really. They’re not walking around with their faces all painted up.

0:17:47

Pioneer Exhibit: Before the Settlement of Sanford

O’Connor

Oh, and then if you want the other room – I’ve been in the Native – the, uh – oh, I can’t think for a minute – the Pioneer [Exhibit: Before the Settlement of Sanford] room, and there – in there, again, it’s a different format, because they do have clipboards and they go on a hunt there, but write things down, and again, the circle to introduce the fact about pioneers and anyone, even now, could be a pioneer, and they figure out by going to the Moon or going under the sea, and, um, we talk little bit about that, and then I break them into groups. Some go in the cabin with me, which is a three quarter cabin, and we again talk about that, and the others stay outside.

You can always learn something, because I’ve been here since 1906 – 1906? [laughs] 1996, and Warren, one of our newer docents, taught me that in the cabin there’s a quilt that has no backing to it. Not at all. It’s just fabric, and I just never – I just used to tell the children, “There’s a quilt,” you know, and he’s pointed out to a group of children that that was used for privacy – that at night, they would drape that across the cabin so Mom and Dad would have privacy and the children – so you can always learn something.

The Grandmom’s[sic] Attic was definitely set up as an attic. Really cluttered, and again we had the fun there. We dipped candles – we don’t do that anymore – and we churned butter, and again, there you’d talk a little bit, and then you divide them to go explore and do those things, and then the, uh, Geography Lab[: Where in the World Are We?] is, again, another exploring situation. Did I cover them all?

Kelley I think so [*laughs*].

0:19:50 **Memorable moments**

Kelley Um, do you have any, um, really memorable experiences that stand out in your mind?

O'Connor Well, as I say, the – one with the boy with the nail polish.

Kelley Mmhmm.

O'Connor I almost like – *What do I do now? There's a boy with nail polish*, and then the little girl who didn't like me very – oh, and there is another one – and then the lady who I taught years ago and it just was thrilling to see her, and then the other experience I had, basically, was there was a group of mothers – maybe three mothers in the back of the line while we were waiting to come in, and children were being a little noisy and I corrected them, but I corrected them not nicely. I corrected them as a 1902 teacher, because I was dressed for that, and you could see the mothers, like, *What is this woman doing talking to my child?* And I didn't – I wasn't nasty. I was – I just said, "Katie, stop talking." You know? And, um – I'm using your name – and anyway, you could almost see the wheels turning, that I was so sure they were going to call the superintendent of schools and tell them this woman at the museum, you know – and all that. So anyway, I told the director, who was, uh, a different one now – than we have now, and they did come into my classroom, and again, I was strict, and she did speak with them and they said, "That teacher – we didn't understand. she was so mean," and so, uh – I can't think of her first name, but the director said, "Well, once Mrs. O'Connor puts on the costume, she becomes that 1902 teacher," and, uh, after the whole day was over, one of the women came up to me and told me what had happened and I said, "Yes, I noticed you were really upset," and she said, "Well, I want to tell you that I understand and you did a very nice job." So, what – whatever, right?

Kelley [*laughs*].

O'Connor You have to be careful though. You do have to be careful.

0:21:50 **UCF Public History Center**

Kelley Um, since UCF [University of Central Florida] took over with the Public History Center,¹ do you, um, [*laughs*] do[sic] want us to talk anything about that? I mean, is it...

O'Connor I will. I – I think it's wonderful.

¹ Correction: Student Museum.

Kelley Mmhmm.

O'Connor I do think you might want—after we get this done, you might want to take this part out. I am just very upset over Grandmom's[sic] Attic. They have chosen to not have it be an attic. It's set up as a class—not a classroom—as a room back in the 1900s, and, uh, we had such interesting things in there. It was a clutter. It really was cluttered, and if you don't want that, I understand Dr. [Rosalind "Rose" J.] Beiler's, uh, under—thinking, but the children that used to come were just so amazed at what they saw, you know, and they even had, in the room, my skate key, which might sound funny, but the museum had the skates that they used back in the 1930s, when I was a little girl, and I had the skate key. You had it on a ri—string around your neck and you had the key, so you could fix your skates—tightening them and all that. They didn't have the key, so I donated my key to the museum and to go with the skates. I think they're still in there in the room.

Kelley Mmhmm.

O'Connor And then another thing that happened was, uh, my one daughter, who's now mother of two and, uh, in her early forties—she, uh, had a big brown bear and I had it. Don't ask me why I brought it to Florida with me. I have no idea, but I had it and she didn't want it, and so I donated that to the museum. I donated Cootie game to the museum and I don't—I haven't really been back in the attic too much, but I don't know, you know, where they are, and it was just the toys were in one area and the children could touch them, play with them, see the difference in how that monkey was not like soft and cuddly like they are now, and, so I'd, uh—I—I miss that. We had a wedding dress in there from Serena's mother, I believe. We had a 1900-bathing suit and I'd ask the children, "Well, what—what—where would you wear this?" "Oh, you'd go to a party." "Really?" You know? And then we'd talk about that and how everything would be covered in 1902. The hat the glo—they even had socks, not gloves, and, uh—and then we also had a chamber pot, and I don't think it's back there now.

So these are the changes and I have to roll with it. I mean, I have to understand it goes on, but the chamber pot was so funny, 'cause they had two different sized potties and then a big glass one—or ceramic one—and I'd hold up the one and I'd ask, "What would this be for?" They didn't have to stand up in Grandmom's Attic, see? That was gone. They didn't have—and it'd be, "Oh, we could cook our soup in that." "No, I don't think you'd want to do that," and they'd ask, you know, and I'd say, "Well, that's what they put under the bed because you didn't want to go out to the outhouse in the middle of the night," and then, "Who's the oldest one here in your family?" Well, hands would go up and I said, "Because you would be the one to empty the chamber pot." Well, then the hands would go down.

Kelley [laughs].

O'Connor But that's my – my hang up. There's[sic] things that I miss in Grandmom's[sic] Attic and, uh – but I know progress moves on, and I know they're planning something different, so...

0:25:23 **Lemonade Lectures at DeBary Hall**

Kelley Well, that's all of my questions. Um, I – I would like for you to share what you shared with me before the interview about the number of kids that you've, that you...

O'Connor Oh, okay.

Kelley How you figured it out

O'Connor Well, last night I was doing my list of paper with – oh, I do have something else to tell you...

Kelley Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Yeah, go ahead.

O'Connor Before I do that. There's a, eh – I don't know what to call it, but they're doing Lemonade Lectures over in DeBary at DeBary Hall. Every – this is a plug for them – every other Saturday, and it's experts, and I don't consider myself an expert really – come in and they talk about lighthouses, or they talk about, this, that and the other thing, and they asked me if I would go and talk about the museum, and I said, "Yes, I would," and, um, I did bring – I took some artifacts over and some things over. The girls let me borrow them, and I went over there with my charts and my – my costume on, and I talked about that with them, and I guess it might sound conceited, but up until then, there weren't that many people coming to the Lemonade Lectures. They were just starting. Well, they had to get extra chairs. People from John Knox [Village] came over, 'cause it was in the paper...

Kelley Mmhmm.

O'Connor About this lady who was gonna talk about a museum from 1902, and some of the people even went to school there, and that was fun, and then the other thing I pointed out there was that, in 1902 – and I do it in the classroom too – that boys and girls did not play on the same playground. So I would ask that question, and of course, if they did [*claps hands*], they got a smack on the bottom from the principal and, uh – but that was something that I really felt honored that I did it. At first, I was a little scared, but that wore off, and the Lemonade Lecture was really fun.

0:27:19

Closing remarks

O'Connor Now, Katie has asked me—I got thinking last night. Uh, I worked here at the museum for 15 years, and if I taught 30 children a day, and let's say, uh, I worked 30 days out of the year, okay? That would be 900 children I'd see in a year, and then I multiplied it by the, um— [inaudible] did I do? Oh, yeah, that was 15—yeah. I added that, rather, what all did I do here? Oh, yeah, okay. I'm with it, I'm with it. The total of that would have been in 15 years—okay, I would have been working with 13,500 children in my career here at the museum. I have chosen to no longer teach here for health reasons, but I do want to still be a part. So they've asked me to be a greeter, and maybe a little later, I'll become a substitute in the, uh—in the classroom. I don't know.

Kelley Well, that's excellent. Well, thank you, Florence. Um, I don't have anything else, unless do you have anything else you'd like to add?

O'Connor I don't think so, no.

Kelley Alright, well, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me, and, um, you know, now your interview will become part of the history of this building as well.

O'Connor Well, thank you for asking me.

Kelley Thank you.

End of Interview