

**Oral Memoirs**  
**of**  
**Serena Rankin Fisher Parks**

An Interview Conducted by

MacKenzie See

October 8, 2012

HIS 5067 Oral History Project

*University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida*

*University of Central Florida Public History Center*

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## **Interview Histories**

Interviewers: MacKenzie See

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the Public History Center, University of Central Florida, Sanford, 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 Serena Rankin Fisher Parks is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 8, 2012.

## **Abstract**

Oral history of Serena Rankin Fisher Parks, a resident of Seminole County, Florida. Parks was born in Concord, North Carolina, on March 3, 1941. She has worked as a social studies teacher, a media center specialist, and a social studies resource teacher for Seminole County Public Schools, as well as a Museum Specialist/Teacher Curator from 1992-2000. She then as a Volunteer/Docent at the Student Museum, located at 301 West Seventh Street in Sanford, Florida. This interview was conducted by MacKenzie See at UCF Public History Center on October 8, 2012.

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## **Serena Rankin Fisher Parks**

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by MacKenzie See

October 8, 2012

Sanford, Florida

**0:00:00**

### **Introduction**

**See** This is an oral history interview of Serena Fisher. The interview was conducted by MacKenzie See at the Public History Center [PHC] on August, on October 8<sup>th</sup> of 2012. Interview topics include experience with the Sanford Student Museum [and Center for the Social Studies] and Public History Center. Okay. Um, what is your name?

**Fisher** My name is Serena Parks Fisher.

**See** Um, and what is your occupation?

**Parks** My occupation is dilettante. In other words, I'm a retired teacher and I now do things that I enjoy doing. a little of this and a little of that.

**See** Um, and how long have you lived in the Sanford area?

**Parks** I don't live – well, it depends on what you consider the Sanford area. I do not live in Sanford[, Florida], but I have lived in Seminole County since 1978.

**0:01:01**

### **Involvement with the Student Museum**

**See** Okay. Um, how did you become involved with the [UCF] Public History Center and what is your role here?

**Parks** Okay. Uh, um, I'm a little confused about you asking me about the Public History Center, because, uh, my involvement with the Public History Center came as a result of my involvement with the Seminole County Public School[s'] Student Museum. And I was involved with the Student Museum. First, as a social studies teacher in the school district. At the time the museum was created, I was hearing about it, etc. And at that point, every school was asked to submit a display that gave information about their school. Now, that would have been during the time period of [19]85-'86 and so forth.

Um, then as time went on, I left the social studies classroom, and went into a media center at a middle school. And again, I would hear about groups going to the Student Museum. And then later, I became, uh, the social studies resource teacher for the district. And then from that position, had the opportunity to

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become the museum specialist, which was the teaching position at the Student Museum. And as such, I was the teacher, curator, what – whatever.

And so, uh, I retired in 2000 and went about my merry way just being a volunteer at the Student Museum, until there was a crisis regarding the restoration of the building. And there was some, um, controversy regarding that. And so I was involved as a member of the restoration committee. And then that morphed into, uh, UCF [University of Central Florida] having the agreement with the school district and the Public History Center. And I must say that I could not be more delighted about this relationship between the University of Central Florida Public History Center and what, uh, has taken place with the school district, Because I feel now that the Student Museum – Public History Center – will be achieving the goal that it originally was intended to achieve.

0:03:52

**The Museum's importance to the community**

**See** um, in what ways do you feel that the Student Museum is important to the community?

**Parks** Well, I feel that the Public History Center and the Student Museum is important to the community – just the building itself. One of the few remaining examples of Romanesque revival architecture – educational architecture – that is, uh, in the state of Florida. So just from an architectural standpoint, I think the building has a special purpose. But I think more importantly, the reason for me that it is so important is that it is a hands-on museum for students coming through, So that they learn by being involved and actually doing work here at the center.

I think that for adults in the community, um, in many ways it's a reminder of what their school days might have been like and also a reminder of things they have heard their family, um, talk about. And I feel something that the Public History Center will be working on now is using the archives here at the Public History Center, so that those who are doing research can find out more about the past in this area. Um, uh, so I think that is more speaking to the building and the interpretive exhibits, uh, here in the building.

Uh, I also feel that this is a very unique setting, because of the teaching gardens here. And there are other hands-on museums in National Register [of Historic Places] buildings, but I don't know of any other that is a hands-on museum in a National Register building and also has the teaching gardens. And I think this is an added dimension here.

**See** Um, you were telling me earlier about the three things that you thought were really important about, um...

**Parks** During me my time here?

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**See** During your time here [*laughs*]. Yes. Can you tell me more about those?

0:06:02

**Accomplishments**

**Parks**

Okay. I interpreted my job here, as a museum specialist, that I was a teacher. That my job was to work with students every day and to also work with the teachers. Uh, and this gave me many opportunities, not only for, uh, elaborating on curriculum, but also in providing for in-services and so forth.

But looking back over my time here at the museum, the three things that I am most proud of – that I can say, “Well, this is something tangible that I did,” uh, was seeing that, um, the gardens were established. This was something I wanted to do. and I realized when I was talking to the students in the Native American room<sup>1</sup> about the three sisters and, um, about the plants – the crops – that were grown by the Native Americans, or in the Pioneer Room<sup>2</sup> talking about the three G’s – grits, greens, and gravy – I realized that many students did not quite understand about – what I was talking about. What are these vegetable for? For them, these things just came from the store in frozen packages or in cans. And so I thought if they could actually see the plants growing, that that would be important. And fortunately there was, in the neighborhood, a master gardener, Walt Paget, who needed to have a project. And therefore, he was the one who actually came. And we worked together in establishing the very first garden, which was more of a pioneer-oriented garden. But I felt that the establishment of the teaching gardens – showing plants, herbs, and also the historic rose garden – that this was a significant, uh, development during my time here.

And the other two things may seem trivial, but to me, they made a difference. and one was having the animal sounds in the Native American room. I thought that with the subdued lighting, that created more of an atmosphere of traveling back in time to a Native American village.

And then here in the Turn of the Century Classroom[: Lessons from 1902] – the ticking of the clock. Because I realized that many students could – are just accustomed to digital clocks and had never heard a clock ticking. And so we not only have a clock that ticks, but the face of the clock has Roman numerals, which again, served as a teaching tool. So I guess the three things, when I look back on my tenure here as a museum specialist, were the gardens, the animal sounds, and the ticking clock.

0:09:23

**Favorite stories**

**See** What’s your favorite story about the Public History Center or the Student Museum?

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<sup>1</sup> The Native America Exhibit: Life in an Ancient Timucuan Village.

<sup>2</sup> Pioneer Exhibit: Before the Settlement of Sanford.

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**Parks**

I have many, many [laughs] that I guess would be favorites that are quite different. Um, two immediately come to mind. One involves students. I had the privilege of working with the tea – uh, a teacher of the autistic, uh, students at Eastbrook Elementary [School]. And we worked on a curriculum that we would have the students visited once a month throughout the entire school year. I found that most of the students who were coming were not able to communicate with us verbally. But they seemed to have a real appreciation. They could identify items and so on and so forth. So we felt that we were accomplishing something.

And then one day, we were in the Pioneer Room, and I had brought down the items from the *American Girls* book that corresponded to the pioneer period or to a pioneer period. And one of the students in the class was examining the items, and he picked up the item and called it by the name in the book – the, uh, *American Girls* book. And the teacher had told me earlier that he had read all of the books, but they weren't sure if he were – was really understanding what he had read. He picked up the lunch pail – and the pail was called a “tenet” – and he picked it up and said that word. And the teacher was astounded and she said, “Did you tell him this?” And I said, “No.” And she said, “I did not.” His mother could not believe it. And that's when the teacher and the mother realized that this student was reading these books and truly was understanding. That was a memorable day.

Another memorable day was a very early morning knock on the door, uh, at the Student Museum. and an older man was there with his wife and asked if he could come in. And he explained that he had just come in on the auto train – uh, was here in Sanford, because of the auto train, and they were headed on into South Florida. But as a child he had lived here in Sanford, and this was his elementary school. And he wanted to show it to his wife. He asked if he might go upstairs to the auditorium. And he began telling his wife about the plays that the students put on here, and that one of the most proud moments in his life was being in a school play. And that his parents had come to the performance, and how proud he felt, and that he was just bursting with pride when he greeted his parents after the play. And they told him – this was in the depths of the [Great] Depression – that this would be his last time at the school – that they had lost their house. And they moved from the area, and he said that they had to move in with relatives in another state. and he went from this high point, where he was feeling so good to – about himself to a point where he felt that he was – he – he didn't have anything anymore. And he wanted to come back and show his wife this location, where he had once felt so good about himself.

0:13:51

**Field trips and student behavior**

See

Um, did you ever have any students who misbehaved during a field trip [laughs]?

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**Parks** Um, it depends on what you call “misbehave.” Um, I dressed in the role of a turn-of-the-century teacher. and I—I—I did not have any real problems. I had some I had to speak to. And, uh, I tend to use a lower voice when I am really serious and really stern, and it worked out.

I think one of my interesting experiences, though, uh, took place when I student came in at lunchtime. and I just—he was joining his class—and I just assumed the student had been to a doctor’s appointment or something like that. And I noticed that the other students were very much interested in talking to him and I thought *Well, you know, maybe it was an unusual appointment* or something. but it was at lunch and they were chatting, you know. So that was it. And after lunch, I took the group to Grandma’s Attic, where they had the opportunity to try on clothing and so forth. And, uh, that’s when I realized that the student had been given—at the appointment in the morning—an ankle monitor. And that’s why [laughs] his classmates were very much interested in how his appointment had gone. but it—it was no problem with the child. He cooperated beautifully.

0:15:43

**PHC’s changing role in the community**

**See** Um, how do you see the Public History Center’s role in the community changing, now that it’s open to the public, instead of just for fourth grade field trips?

**Parks** Okay. The key thing there is “open to the public.” Because of very limited staff—it was very difficult to have it open for extended hours. and working under the school district, we could not have the public in when students were here. And so that meant there were just limited opportunities for the public to come. I now see this for—as an opportunity for, uh, people from all over whether they’re coming in by auto train or the airport or, uh, wherever—having the opportunity to visit here, because of the extended hours and the fact that the, um, Public History Center will be open on the weekend.

I also envision that there will be learning opportunities—special programs for adults here. And I had mentioned one that I hope—I would love to see it develop—um, where there was to be a workshop here for adults, where they would be given the opportunity to start writing down their own personal history—their own life story. [air conditioner turns on]. And I think that this would be an ideal setting for that, because there are so many visual props that would remind them of episodes in their own life—that they might want to jot down these stories and pass on.

Now, we’re probably being distracted by the sound of the air conditioner, but that points out [laughs] a challenge now. But it also points out something special about this building—that the building itself can be used as a teaching tool, with the wonderful windows, and how they were used for light, as well as ventilation.

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And how the design of the building was also used to take advantage of cross-ventilation. but we obviously have a very loud air conditioner.

0:18:03

**Favorite room**

**See** [laughs] Um, do you have a favorite room in the museum?

**Parks** I guess, being a teacher, this Turn of the Century Classroom is my absolute favorite room. Uh, I feel very much at home here. And, um, I have very happy memories of teaching in this room. I have very happy memories of teaching in other areas. But I'm the daughter of a teacher, and in many ways this reminds me of things my mother would tell me about.

**See** Um, Do students seem to get more out of some rooms in the museum than others, or does it just depend on the student, or all the rooms equally valuable?

**Parks** It depends on the students, and it depends on the preparation they have had before they had come here. I think, for me, the beauty of the hands-on experience is that students, who might not excel at the written word or reading in the traditional classroom, all can do very well here because of hands-on and verbal participation. But, um, I think—I think it depends on the student's own interests. And, uh, again, it probably has a lot to do with the enthusiasm of the guide who is showing them the particular area. That might be a factor, as well.

0:19:43

**Advice for volunteers**

**See** Um, What advice would you give people who want to volunteer at the museum?

**Parks** Do it. Uh, the beauty of the Public History Center is that there are so many volunteer opportunities, not just for working with the students. Now, the main[?] one that I found most rewarding was working with the students and the exchange—the interaction. But there are jobs that are needed to be done behind the scenes. Whether it is inventorying the suitcases or books, or whether it is working with the archives, or whether it is working as a gardener in the teaching gardens. I think that there is—or a greeter. Oh, that is a wonderful job for someone who enjoys people, but really does not want to, uh, work with the students in the instructional program. That is a wonderful opportunity. so I really that there is something here for everyone. And so, if someone is a little tentative about volunteering, I would suggest that they come and tour. and say, "Alright. This is what I like to do. what can I do to help you?"

0:21:03

**Ideal future for the museum**

**See** Um, if you could describe your ideal future for the Public History Center and the Student Museum, what would it be?

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**Parks** [laughs] For the instructional program to continue for fourth graders. But also for that program to be expanded. And again, during the time, I was here, I had the opportunity – we had year-round school. We had multi-age classes – that was a phase that the district was going through. I especially enjoyed working with the multi-age classes, because that meant that students came here one year and then they would come the following year, and so we could do different things.

I also liked working with teachers on special programs. and I think this is where the Public History Center, working with UCF students, could do a great deal – is working with teachers collaborating – using the resources here at the Public History Center – to develop special programs. I would like to see more in-service staff development done with, um, teachers here. So that teachers, who are required to do certificate renewal, could take a course here at the Public History Center. Again, going back to what I had mentioned about community programs – and I hope that someday there is an elevator, so that we aren't limited in the use of the auditorium and use of the, um, second level. But I just see this more as a very active center in the community and – where all of us can learn about changes in education and innovation in the education.

0:23:19

**Benefits of a hands-on museum**

**See** Um, what do you feel like the benefits are of taking students on a field trip to a hands-on museum, like this, versus traditional – a more traditional museum that's less interactive?

**Parks** Um, sign that I put up – and I think many people are tired of seeing it around here – is a saying that, to me, describes the benefit of a hands-on museum. "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." And again, I feel that it is a sense of involvement, where a student is asked questions – is required to think. "What is this item? What was used to create it? Why was it created? How is it used? What do you we have similar? Why are certain items put in an attic? Why do we no longer use them? What has replaced them?" So that when they are required to think – now, I spoke before about – I mentioned the Native American Room, and the Pioneer Room, and the Turn of the Century, uh, Classroom, and I think alluded to Grandma's Attic. What I haven't mentioned is the Geography Lab[: Where in the World Are We?]. and I feel that that is one area that is definitely underutilized. And I hope that it will be utilized more, and be used more in connection with the teaching parts.

0:24:57

**Ideal age for students to visit**

**See** Um, what do you think is the ideal age for students to come to the Student Museum? I mean, we've heard about the fourth grade field trip. Is – is that about the ideal age or...

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**Parks** Oh, I think it depends on what you are offering. I think that, uh, the fourth grade fit in with the Florida curriculum. But again, depending on what the teacher might be doing – or special programs that could be developed. You see, uh, at one time there was an eighth grade program here, as well. And, um, due to budget cuts and so forth, that program had to be eliminated. And also, there were problems scheduling with the middle school schedule. But, um, I – and I have had the opportunity again, with year round education, to work with senior high students. So this is the beauty of this facility. It can be taught at so many different levels, depending on where you’re putting your focus.

**See** Um...

**Parks** I think everyone should come here and, as I said, I am delighted at the potential that I am seeing, the enthusiasm with those from UCF, uh, in transforming this into a Public History Center. And I’m delighted that the public will now have greater access to this facility.

0:26:40

**Other purposes for the museum**

**See** Um, I’ve heard that the Public History Center serves, or has served, a lot of other purposes in the community, other than just as a museum and a teaching facility. I even heard a story about someone getting married here. Um, do you have any experiences with it in other capacities, other than as just the, uh, museum?

**Parks** Well, I was not involved with someone getting married here. but I know that it has been open, thanks to the Sanford Historic Trust, several years ago inviting the museum to be part of the annual tour. It was opened for that. So for – that would be more of a social, um, learning experience too. But I – I really do not know beyond that. I know students always want to know about ghosts. “Are there ghosts here at the Student Museum?” But I, um, don’t know about that.

**See** Well, speaking of ghosts, um, do you have a favorite aspect of the history of this place? I mean, as a school, as Sanford Grammar, or, um...

**Parks** Uh, no. I do not. Uh, I think that could definitely be addressed by students who came here. And something that I found very rewarding was when reunion groups from what had been Sanford High School and now is Seminole High School, when they would have their reunions and request that the museum be open on the weekend, so that they could come back and visit. I enjoyed hearing the stories of that and since I had no grown up in the Sanford community. Um, I learned a lot from that. But, um, no. nothing else I don’t think.

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0:28:38

**Seasonal celebrations**

**See** Um, so I've heard that there are a lot, um, of seasonal celebrations that take place here, um, especially around fall and things like that. Do you – do you go to those? Or...

**Parks** Well, in the past, I have volunteered with those. And, um, one of the favorite celebrations – it depends on how the, uh, calendar goes – is the Spring Fest around May Day. Because when this was Sanford Grammar School, the May Day celebration was a major celebration for students here. And so – for several years, the Spring Fest has included that dancing of the May Pole. And that was of appeal to those who had gone here remembering their days as students.

0:29:23

**Age limitations**

**See** Um, we've talked a lot about school-age children coming to the Student Museum and Public History Center. Um, is there a minimum age where it's appropriate to bring children?

**Parks** Uh, I think it depends on the parents, who would be bringing them. Um, uh, I would think that a child from, I would say, maybe three on – although we have had them in strollers and so forth coming through. But, um, I – I think it depends on – are you talking about them coming just to visit the building, just to see the building or to participate in a program? I – I would think that three would be about the youngest. But it depends on the parents, and, um, what the children have been exposed to before.

**See** Um, What about adults coming here? I mean, I know Student Museum sort of implies that it's only for children, but do you think there's something for adults also?

**Parks** Oh, absolutely. And, um, again, uh – going back to things that I remember – um, I remember, um, an adult friend of mine bringing her mother here. And the mother, uh, was quite elderly and had limited vision. But coming into this classroom and hearing the sound of the footsteps on the hardwood pine floor and so forth, and the ticking of the clock, and just feeling the chalkboards and so forth, brought back memories of her school days. And the mother just began sharing these stories that the daughter had never heard.

So I think that this is a multi-generational location. Student Museum – remember that its origins are with the Seminole County Public Schools, so I think that that is larger. but there was another part to that name. It was the School Board of Seminole County's Student Museum and Center for the Social Studies. and this goes back to the point that I was – wanted to make earlier – was that I think with, um, UCF now and with the emphasis on public history, that this is going to be more of a center for social studies and for adults to be involved.

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**See**            Alright. Thank you so much for talking to me.

**Parks**        Okay. Thank you.

*End of Interview*