

Oral Memoirs
of
Gene Kruckemyer

An Interview Conducted by

Megan Kaczmarek

October 31, 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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*A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences,
and Stories of Central Florida*

University of Central Florida

Interview Histories

Interviewers: Megan Kaczmarek

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 Gene Kruckemyer is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 31, 2012.

Abstract

Oral history of Gene Kruckemyer, editor for *UCF News* at the University of Central Florida's News and Information Office. Kruckemyer moved from Orlando to Sanford in 2004, following a series of hurricanes. He worked as a publisher for *The Sanford Herald* for three years and as an editor for *The Orlando Sentinel* for 33 years. This interview was conducted by Megan Kaczmarek at Kruckemyer's office at the University of Central Florida on October 31, 2012. Within the oral history, Kruckemyer discusses his involvement with the UCF Public History Center, located at 301 West Seventh Street in Sanford, Florida.

Gene Kruckemyer

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Megan Kaczmarek

October 31, 2012

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Kaczmarek Alright. Uh, today's date is Wednesday, October 31st, 2012. I'm interviews—interviewing Mr. Gene Kruckemyer in his office at University of Central Florida [UCF] about his involvement with the [UCF] Public History Center and the Student Museum [and Center for Social Studies. When did you first move to Sanford[, Florida]?

Kruckemyer I moved to Sanford in 2004. So I've lived within view of the museum for the past eight years. I can see it from my front porch.

Kaczmarek Nice. And where are you originally from?

Kruckemyer From Orlando.

Kaczmarek Oh, Orlando. okay. And what brought you specifically to Sanford?

Kruckemyer Uh, back in 2004, when with a succession of three hurricanes coming through Central Florida. Uh, the first hurricane came—we had purchased a house in Sanford as an investment actually. And we weren't going to move there, but, uh, the first hurricane came and knocked our power out in Orlando. Uh, we had the house in Sanford. It had power. We decided to just move up there until everything was okay back in Orlando. And then two more hurricanes came, and did the same thing. And we just finally decided to stay in Stan—in Sanford, uh, because we enjoyed living there. We enjoyed the town. We enjoyed the people.

0:01:20

Employment history

Kaczmarek Nice[?]. And, um, you worked at *The Sanford Herald* for a while?

Kruckemyer Currently, uh, I'm at the University's News and Information office. I'm the news editor. Previous—previous three years, I was the publisher of *The Sanford Herald*. and for the 33 years before that, I worked at *The Orlando Sentinel*.

Kaczmarek Oh, okay. Um, and what did you do at *The Sanford Herald*?

Kruckemyer I was a publisher.

Kaczmarek Publisher. Okay.

Kruckemyer Which is – which is basically the, you know, CEO of the newspaper. Making sure all the different departments worked together and...

Kaczmarek And how did you first learn about the Student Museum?

Kruckemyer Well, it was – in my time as publisher at *The Herald*, uh, while living right across the park from it. I, uh – I couldn't avoid it. but – but the issues that were coming to the museum were that, uh – it was during a critical time, while I was the publisher, that – that the school – the Seminole [County] School Board was considering closing the building down, because of economic reasons. And, uh, people in town and the [Seminole] County – the whole county – got involved and started creating committees to preserve the building. And that's how *The Herald* got involved.

0:02:30

Restoration of the school bell

Kruckemyer And, uh, one of the things that we did was to, um, uh, re-do the school bell that had not been used for decades. The building was built in 1902. And, uh, it was first used as a – as a, uh, senior high school.¹ Uh, I think, in 1911, it became a, uh – a grammar school.² And it was that, until 1984, when it was put on the National Register for Historic Places. And it was turned to the Seminole County, uh, Student Museum – or actually they called it – it had a longer name like – you probably know what it is. It had like – it was the, um – uh, the Student Museum and Center for the Social Studies, but most people just called it the Student Museum. And it was a place where fourth-graders go to learn Florida history. And it was a hands-on, uh, interpretive museum for other people come in during the week and learn different things about local history, and Florida history and, the native, uh, Floridians, uh, pioneers – a demonstration garden in the back show what people used to grow in the 20th, uh – at the turn of the 20th century. So it's an interesting place.

Kaczmarek And how did you get specifically involved with the bell?

Kruckemyer Um, I did a column one time. Uh, it was a Q&A with the building. I asked building questions and answered questions. And, uh, I talked to a friend of mine in Sanford – her name is Bette Skates – and she was student at the, uh – uh, I think she was there when it was a grammar school. And, uh, she said she wished that bell would be, you know – able to be rung again. It hadn't been rung in decades. Nobody knows why it stopped being used.

But, uh, in 1916, the building got electricity, so they put in an electric bell. Sometime after that, they stopped using the bell, which had a, uh – a pull cord

¹ Sanford High School.

² Westside Grammar Elementary School.

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and Stories of Central Florida*

University of Central Florida

that went from the bell tower to the principal's office, but the – but the hole was blocked off, so it wasn't used. And I was talking to Bette, and she said she sure wished that bell would be able to be used again.

So, uh, I thought that'd be a good project for *The Sanford Herald*. We, uh – we decided to make it work. So I talked with the then superintendent, whose name is Bill Vogel, and, uh, we – we figured out how much it was going to cost. And, uh, I had, uh – I contacted a friend of mine in Sanford – his name is Steve Meyers[sp]. He's a[sic] historic preservationist and he does construction work. And – and, uh, he and I went up one day and he did all the work, and I was the gopher[?], and I ran his errands. And he made a new channel for the rope and put a marine-grade rope up there. And, uh, now it goes to the principal's office. And every year they use the bell on the first day of school to signal the start of school for each year.

Kaczmarek Wow. Um, and what was – you talked a little bit about the process of restoration. Um, what was the community, um, reaction to you this project?

Kruckemyer Well, you can imagine, a lot of people that, uh, went to school there over the years had a – had a soft spot for the building. So, uh, they were objecting to the plans to either close the school on purpose, or just let it fade away, you know. Uh, so a lot of people formed committees to, uh, preserve the building. Um, uh, they raised money different ways. They had sales – I think – I think they still have periodic garage sale, at least until I think UCF took over. They used to have periodic garage sales to help, you know offset the costs. 'Cause the school board was in some dire financial problems, because of the economy. so they didn't have the money for it. But, Uh, at least the community groups kept it going long enough, until UCF thankfully came in and, uh – and leased the building to use it for the Public History Center.

0:06:21

Other projects with the Public History Center

Kaczmarek And, um – let's see. Are you – what – what other projects were you involved with the museum, if any?

Kruckemyer Um, that was – that's pretty much, uh – as far as *The Sanford Herald* – I mean, uh, that's pretty much right there in my neighborhood.

Kaczmarek [laughs].

Kruckemyer so, uh, I'm sorta a – a watchdog to see if there's anything that needs to be reported. That's been going on so the only thing.

Kaczmarek And, how – are involved with the Public History Center now?

Kruckemyer Um, I've been to several of the events that have been there.

*A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences,
and Stories of Central Florida*

University of Central Florida

Kaczmarek [laughs]

Kruckemyer They just had the, uh, Pumpkin Fest. And I was there on the opening day of school. And, uh, there was another event recently I went to, um...

Kaczmarek The open house?

Kruckemyer The open house.

0:07:10 **Living in Sanford**

Kaczmarek And, you've lived in Sanford for – since 2004. Um, have you seen a lot of changes within the community of Sanford, since the time you've lived there?

Kruckemyer Um, I – I live in the historic district. And the museum, er – the Public History Center was in the museum – in the – in the, uh, historic district. So we live in an area that doesn't see as much change as a lot of places, uh, because there are[sic] a lot of restrictions of what you can and can't do. But I don't mind. I moved into the neighborhood not even knowing that was the case. and I think that history's – or the, uh, historic district is one of the things that's really saved Sanford, because people got interest in preserving the neighborhood, preserving the houses, preserving the way things used to be. and that's something I enjoy.

0:07:56 **Working for *The Sanford Herald* and *The Orlando Sentinel***

Kaczmarek Nice. Um, and when you said you worked at *The Herald*, what would – what would you say would be one of your more memorable experiences with *The Herald*? I know *The Herald* goes back and it's a part of Sanford and that it's been around for a long time. Um, what would you say would be one of your most memorable experiences as working at the smaller paper, as compared to *The [Orlando] Sentinel*, is?

Kruckemyer Well, um, in my time there, I – I always maintained that the community papers were going to be the ones to survive. Because, um, bigger papers – they carry a lot of things that you can get online at a hundred different sources. The things that are in a community paper are only in the community paper. And one of my goals was to – to make sure that we could provide to the community with what – what, uh – what they needed to know, and people seemed to respond. We did all kinds of, uh, reader interactive things and, uh, contests.

And – and, uh, I started something called the "Centennial Forum," which was uh, like, uh, every edition. We'd have an, uh, opinion piece written by somebody from our, uh, town. We had all kinds of people running for supervisor of elections to, um, handymen, to teachers, to Just everybody. So that was something that got a lot of positive response. And, uh, it worked so well that once I came here, I sorta, uh, hijacked that idea. Brought it to the University, and we started a similar thing called "UCF Forum." And, uh, every Wednesday, we

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and Stories of Central Florida*

University of Central Florida

have an opinion piece by somebody that's on our panel. We had nine people on the panel and they'd rotate. And, uh, so the, uh, opinion piece runs on the UCF website every Wednesday.

Kaczmarek Very nice. And now, you said you had a column about – with the museum. What – can you tell me a little bit about that?

Kruckemyer uh, the original one was a column I wrote when I was at *The Sentinel*. And, uh, that was the one where I had the Q&A, where I talked about the building.

Kaczmarek Yes.

Kruckemyer And they asked how old it was, you know. And its interest and its favorite movies – that sort of thing [*laughs*].

Kaczmarek [*laughs*] And what were its answers? [*laughs*]

Kruckemyer [*sighs*] Oh, um, I don't remember offhand. I know I asked about relatives, and it said it had relatives all over the world, like the Louvre, the Smithsonian, and...

Kaczmarek [*laughs*]

0:10:12 **Sanford community**

Kaczmarek And how would you describe the community of Sanford to someone that doesn't, like, know Sanford?

Kruckemyer Uh, as I said, I moved 8 years ago. And, uh, it's not as congested as Orlando is. Uh, it's – it's a community that I enjoy. In fact, they're undergoing, uh, a program right now called Imagine Sanford [Community Vision and Strategic Planning]. It's a, uh, group that's been called together, and I'm on the committee to do that. Um, so we're just looking to see what's Sanford wants to be like within the next 10-20-30 years. What are the things we value? What are the things we want to improve? What are the things we want to change? Uh, so this something that we're undergoing right now. And, uh, hopefully by next May, we'll have a report to, uh, give to the [Sanford] City Commission to – to tell what we think should be done.

Kaczmarek Wow. That's really interesting.

0:11:02 **Closing remarks**

Kaczmarek Well, thank you very much for your time. I really much appreciate you doing this interview with me.

Kruckemyer You're welcome.

*A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences,
and Stories of Central Florida*
University of Central Florida

Kaczmarek Uh...

Kruckemyer [inaudible]

End of Interview