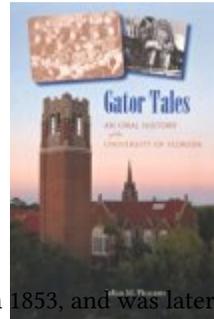


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Julian Pleasants.** *Gator Tales: An Oral History of the University of Florida.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. 408 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3054-8.

Reviewed by Fredric M. Hitt (Independent Scholar)  
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As darkness fell on the city they began to drift into the book store one or two at a time. Some came from the high-rise office buildings; others drove in from the suburbs. As 7 p.m. drew near, their numbers increased and store management hustled into the back room for additional folding chairs for what was destined to be standing room only.

The tall, gray-haired professor looked out on the gathering. These were not the fresh-scrubbed faces of undergrads, not the wizened self-assured graduate students who had paid him heed throughout his thirty-seven-year teaching career. No, these people were older and more conservatively dressed than his usual audience. A few appeared to be in their eighties. Still others were middle-aged, and some might even have been last year's graduates. As he waited for them to settle down and give him their complete attention, he might have noticed that many wore orange and blue.

Julian Pleasants, author of *Gator Tales: An Oral History of the University of Florida*, addressed the crowd in a comfortable and folksy manner. As in the book, his message was lively and anecdotal, informative and, for those who consider themselves members of the "Gator Nation," intriguing. One hundred years of Gator-dom compressed into an hour, or in the case of the book, 360 pages.

Pleasant has served as Director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program since 1996, and he draws upon a compilation of more than three hundred interviews of professors, politicians, university presidents, coaches, athletes, students, alumni and aging campus rabble-rousers.

*Gator Tales* begins with a synopsis of the lineage of the modern University of Florida: The East Florida Semi-

nary opened for business in Ocala in 1853, and was later relocated at Gainesville; and the Florida Agricultural College was established in Lake City after abortive attempts to place it in Gainesville and Eau Gallie. In 1905 the Buckman Act abolished all existing state-supported institutions of higher learning and created the University of the State of Florida along with the Florida Female College and the Florida State Normal and Industrial College for African American students in Tallahassee.

After utilizing the existing facilities at Lake City for the first year, the University of Florida was moved to Gainesville under the leadership of its first president, Andrew Sledd, in 1906. Sledd's first challenge was the move itself, accomplished in the face of an angry and hostile Lake City citizenry that felt robbed of the institution. Sledd's twelve predecessors in office over the next hundred years were equally challenged, albeit in different and unpredictable ways.

*Gator Tales* begins with the administrative history of the institution. Citing liberally from *Gator History* by Samuel Proctor and Wright Langley (1986) and other sources, Pleasants weaves an interesting and entertaining tapestry of personalities and events that reflected the times and shaped the institution that was to be. The highs and lows, the humorous and the frighteningly tragic, are treated with perception and unblinking clarity.

The 1918 influenza pandemic that killed more than twenty-one million people world wide came to Gainesville and struck down 140 students, one-third of the school's population. Floyd Hall was converted to a makeshift hospital and highly poisonous strychnine was the treatment of choice, at least until it gave way to the medicinal properties of a confiscated cache of moonshine liquor. Only one student died of the illness. Pleasants

does not report the number of students who may have suffered hangovers.

More frightening and certainly more threatening were the machinations of the infamous Johns Committee which, post-McCarthy, conducted investigations and hearings to link the Florida civil rights movement and the Communist Party. The legislative committee proscribed certain “dangerous” books that could not be available to students by such “subversives” as Sigmund Freud, George Bernard Shaw, and Bertrand Russell. Loyalty oaths were required, interrogations were carried out of students and professors, and many were purged or simply chose to leave. Unchecked for nine years, and despairing of finding Communists, the committee turned its wrath on homosexuals to “protect Florida’s children.” Sadly, in fear of threats that legislative funding for the university would be cut, some administrators acquiesced, or at least turned a blind eye.

During a three-day period beginning August 26, 1990, at the very beginning of the fall semester, the world was shocked by news of the brutal deaths of five students. The first three had been decapitated and posed by the murderer, making it clear that there was a psychopathic serial killer at work. As day by day more bodies were discovered, students panicked. Some fled the campus and some armed themselves for self-protection. Parents were frantic to contact their children. University President John Lombardi assumed responsibility as sole spokesman, dealing with the media and quashing rampant rumors. He communicated with parents and allowed students to leave campus without penalty, to return when the danger was over. At the same time the university continued to function and classes remained in session. Later, police arrested Danny Rolling for the crimes. He admitted guilt in 1994 and has recently been put to death for his crimes.

Pleasants balances the negative with the positive as he traces the University of Florida’s rise from humble beginnings of 140 students in two buildings, to the status of a major university of almost fifty thousand students who matriculate from all fifty states and more than one hundred foreign countries. Appropriate notice and credit are given to the university athletic programs which have accumulated numerous Southeastern Conference championships in a variety of sports for men and women, national championships in NCAA football and basketball, and two Heismann Awards. Gator football fans will be pleased to note that Steve Spurrier is given his due.

Beyond the administrative history, *Gator Tales* fea-

tures oral history interviews with nine individuals who have touched, or been touched by, the university in some profound way. Selecting from the archives of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Pleasants uses transcripts of presidents and staff, sports figures, and outstanding graduates. Reflecting the university’s diversity, the list includes two women, one African American and one Hispanic. It would be easy to question Pleasants on his interview choices. Some would suggest former Governor and U. S. Senator Bob Graham. Others might nominate Steve Spurrier or even “Mr. Two-Bits,” the perennial sideline cheerleader at Gator football games. I might suggest an average student or two as appropriate, perhaps a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher, or even a professor, not unlike Pleasants. But he is the author, and I will not quibble with his choices.

Stephen C. O’Connell, former Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court, served as the sixth president of the university during the 1960s, a tumultuous period. A University of Florida graduate, O’Connell was a collegiate boxer but it is doubtful that he caught as many punches as a student as he did as president of the institution. Vietnam War protests and street marches, combined with the reaction to the killings at Kent State, threatened to close down the university. In 1971 several black students, upset with the pace of minority enrollment, organized a sit-in at the president’s office, resulting in the arrest of some. As a result, one-third of the black students and several black faculty members withdrew from UF. To be fair, minority enrollment during O’Connell’s term increased more than ten-fold, from 61 to 641.

John Lombardi, who occupied the president’s chair during the 1990s, was also interviewed, as was Marna V. Brady, a red-haired ex-marine who served as the first Dean of Women when the University of Florida became co-ed in 1948. During her tenure, female enrollment rose to more than 5,000.

Ray Graves, the first winning Florida football coach, worked the sidelines during the 1960s and brought his team to five bowl games, produced fourteen All-Americans and one Heisman winner, Steve Spurrier. Coach Graves stepped down in 1969 but continued to serve as Athletic Director for ten years, ushering the school into Title IX compliance with the requirement for women’s athletics at the university.

It is estimated that in forty years Otis Boggs broadcast more than 400 Florida Football games. Known as the “Voice of the Florida Gators,” his interview is as much

a primer on early radio broadcasting as a history of the team's wins and losses.

Tracy Caulkins (now Caulkins-Stockwell) is arguably the greatest athlete ever produced by the University of Florida. She has been called the most versatile swimmer in American history, having held a record in every stroke. Caulkins held sixty American records and five World Records. In her second trip to the Olympics she entered three events and won three gold medals and set an Olympic record.

Two business entrepreneurs, John Dasburg and Manny Fernandez, were interviewed and included in *Gator Tales*. Both had Horatio Alger life experiences, benefited greatly from their college education, and shared their time and treasure with their alma mater. Both have served on the University Board of Trustees.

I accepted the request to review *Gator Tales* for H-Net and read it with great interest. When we learned that Pleasants would be appearing locally, speaking and signing the new book, I decided to attend anonymously and perhaps learn more about the author, his book, and the effect it might have on others.

After he had spoken and read excerpts, Pleasants in-

vited questions and recollections from the people present who had experienced life at the University of Florida. I was struck by the relevance of the questions asked to the subjects treated in *Gator Tales*. Even more interesting were the memories that these people, for the most part strangers, were willing to share.

An older man recalled what it was like to live in the Fla-Vet Village housing fifty years ago, and the lifelong friendships that were established living only a paper-thin wall away from your neighbor. A young woman raised her hand tentatively, and when Dr. Pleasants acknowledged her she said that she was there during the killings and that she still remembered the fear. Students would only leave their dorms in groups, and pizza delivery men had to respond with the proper code word before a door would be unlocked. A thirty-something man said at the time he could not believe what was happening, that his mind just couldn't comprehend. He admitted that he was in denial then and perhaps still is. Danny Rolling just a month ago paid for his crimes. No one present opined that capital punishment was not warranted.

Obviously, no one has personally experienced the full one-hundred-year sweep of *Gator Tales*, but anyone who ever attended the University of Florida will find much of interest in this book.

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