Breaking New Ground in Tampa

Jacque Bishop
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JOHN GERMANY HAS TWO bulging scrapbooks that contain the story of his life and times. But they are also a snapshot history of the Tampa Bay Area and its university. Germany, a prominent Tampa attorney and activist for over 46 years, was president of the USF Foundation from 1960-1961. He was also part of a determined group of legislators and educators who turned the idea of an “urban university” into a reality.

“It was Sam Gibbons’ idea,” says Germany, “to create this ‘urban university’. We saw there was a great need in this community for a commuter university, one that was accessible.” The “we” Germany refers to included Senator Sam Gibbons, State Representative (and later Circuit Judge) James Moody, former Governor Farris Bryant, and Germany himself, then a legislative assistant to Governor LeRoy Collins. It was this group which did much of the legal and political legwork required to get USF established.

In 1955, Germany says, it was “Moody and Gibbons who got the funding bill through the House Appropriations Committee. Then, of course, the opposition to the project began...” The older universities in Gainesville and Tallahassee, fearful that their own funding would be diminished, began lobbying against the creation of a third institution. But thanks to an energetic defense by the Tampa team—and vigorous editorializing by the Tampa Tribune—efforts to squash the project were defeated.

A whole new round of disputes, however, would arise when it came time to select a site for the university. “The Board of County Commissioners,” Germany says, “donated 1,000 acres of what had been the Henderson Airfield during the war. Then a developer by the name of Sanson donated an adjoining 700 acres, in return for permission to build a road on some of his other holdings. So, you see, there was a splendid opportunity for growth into a very large university.”

Not everyone was as happy with this vast parcel of potential. One group of developers favored a waterfront site further north in Tampa, but the bitterest disappointment was to the St. Petersburg contingent. Led by stalwart education-supporter St. Pete booster Nelson Poynter, editor of the St. Petersburg Times, they desperately wanted the new campus to be located on the water at Bayboro Harbor. The Times editorialized vigorously against the Fowler Avenue site — “A Decision... and a Mistake,” Germany chuckles as he remembers the tug of war that ensued:

“There was an industrial park on Fowler that housed a Schlitz brewery. So the St. Pete contingent started calling the place ‘Bottlecap U’.”

—John Germany

“The 1956 ground-breaking ceremony, autographed by Governor Collins. It depicts five buildings, including the first dorm built by the new USF Foundation’s “Dollars for Dorms” contribution drive—and the theater that President Allen insisted must be part of any great university. Today, on the Tampa campus alone, there are 225 buildings.

“Now that we’re the second largest university in the state,” Germany says, “I want to see us go to the next level of quality. I am anxious to see just how great a product we can ultimately produce.”

By Jacque Bishop