

The Best Years of Their Lives

By Gary R. Mormino

The modern university was born 60 years ago as several million veterans exchanged G.I. fatigues for beanies and T-shirts. College campuses may have been crammed, classes may have been crowded, and married housing may have been cramped, but to young couples in love and eager to make up for lost time, it was the best years of their lives.

From a pre-war peak of 3456 students, the University of Florida swelled to 7500 by the fall of 1946, with enough applications to reach 10,000 by the spring semester. It was an academic world devoid of SAT exams or essay questions asking applicants to write what they thought about Wednesdays.

From its origins as East Florida Seminary and Florida Agricultural College in the 19th century to its emergence as the University of Florida in 1905, the school had functioned as a bastion of masculinity.

Legions of Gator alumni in the state legislature--and their wives-- preferred that males and females be segregated: the former at Lake City and Gainesville, and the latter at the Florida State College for Women (FSCW) in Tallahassee.

But new pressures began to erode old ways. In 1945, state legislators passed a bill permitting student wives of discharged servicemen to attend the University of Florida.

Angry that the state could not accommodate all male veterans seeking space in Florida classrooms, politicians petitioned Florida State College for Women's president, Doak Campbell, asking that males be admitted to the all-female institution.

Governor Millard Caldwell and President Campbell agreed to allow a few hundred veterans to enroll, but Attorney General Tom Watson, a fiery, red-headed lawyer from Tampa who desperately wanted to become governor, blocked the move. Politicians and educators out-maneuvered Watson by establishing a "branch campus" of the University of Florida in Tallahassee.

Over 500 veterans enrolled at TBUF (Tallahassee Branch of the University of Florida). Barracks of the former Dale Mabry Air Field, the site of today's Tallahassee Community College, served as dormitories for married students and single veterans. Married couples lived in barracks-turned-apartments called "Whispering Pines," the so-called "Fertile Crescent." The Baby Boom had begun.

The experiment marked a fascinating chapter in Florida co-educational history. A 1946 headline, "GI's at Miami University Not Interested in Co-Eds" was not

universally shared. Nor was the 1943 observation of the Apalachicola Times, "Show a soldier a ping pong table and he will forget all about love."

When a reporter asked a Tallahassee coed what she thought of the prospect of young men on campus, she replied with the voice of experience: "What's the difference? There'll be plenty coming over from Gainesville on weekends, anyway."

James S. Pavy and Jessie Liles met in Seattle during the war, married, and then enrolled at TBUF. "They lived in converted barracks," writes their daughter Sandra Howsare. "The men's bathroom was at one end of the hall and the women's was at the other end. There was one pay telephone in the hall. And, of course, they did not have a car."

Jessie Liles Pavy, a Georgia native and a WAC during the war, also took advantage of the G.I. Bill. Enrolling at FSCW, she took classes for five years, arranging her schedule around family demands.

Like many veterans, the Pavys also held part-time jobs. Their daughter remembered, "My mother got a job typing at night for the legislature. She would ride the bus home at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m."

Mary Frances Tonello was a sophomore in 1946 when FSCW welcomed the first male students. "Some who were majoring in hotel and restaurant management even enrolled in our food preparation and nutrition classes," she fondly remembers, adding, "I appreciated the guy who often helped us beat our cake batters, etc. by hand. No electric mixers in class!"

Veterans certainly brought new attitudes to institutions that clung to tradition. Historically, upper-classmen enforced a code of behavior that included hazing hapless freshmen. First-year students at the University of Florida wore an orange "rat" hat/beanie.

With good reason, 21-year-old seniors wisely allowed 25-year-old freshmen who had fought at Saipan or Salerno, a beanie pass. One veteran explained to the Gainesville Sun's society editor, "Listen sister, I've had enough military training to last me the rest of my life. "Do I look stupid?"

The Tampa Tribune dispatched state editor James Clendinen to Gainesville to cover his Alma Mater's 1946 Homecoming. The campus still exuded a special charm, but the student body had changed.

Prior to the war, married students were as rare as football championships and housing for couples was nonexistent. "Now," he wrote, two thousand students were married and diapers "flap in the breeze." The young married veterans provide "on this tree-studded campus a day-by-day demonstration of how to be

happy when you're broke."

College administrators applauded the new breed of married students. "Out of the whole bunch," insisted Dean R.C. Beatty, "we haven't had more than one or two couples that have separated."

The Boys of Old Florida also encountered new fashion trends. Clendinen described "a new type of student costume consisting largely of one T-shirt (a short-sleeved white athletic slipover) and one pair of tan twill pants." Officers' uniforms fashionably adorned with red suspenders were also the rage.

Students also scrambled to find a place to sleep. Flavel Village became the campus's first home for married students. Other students scurried to find space in the trailer village located near the Gainesville airport. "Gainesville is jammed from attic to basement," reported Clendinen.

So many applications flooded the University of Florida that state legislators intervened. In 1947, Florida State College for Women became Florida State University.

Altogether, over 2 million veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill. Before Pearl Harbor, only one adult in 16 had attended college. World War II ushered in revolutions in higher education and greater expectations.

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