

Historical Account by Bob Lynch, founding Gainesville Chapter member and past president – Written April 2008

While members of the Florida Public Relations Association Chapter in Gainesville prepared to celebrate a 40th year of their status in April, I asked President Sheila Zachow for permission to provide personalized views of the historic past, focused on charter president Rae O. Weimer, who died in 1997.

As a 1952-56 student in the University of Florida's School of Journalism and Communications that Weimer led, then working closely with him between 1964 and 1973, I was...and am...able to respect and admire Rae with a different and more intense perception than many others. The school became a college in 1967, changing Weimer's title from director to dean. He was succeeded by John Paul Jones, who taught me magazine writing and another who assisted FPRA and the Florida Press Association for several decades.

I recall 1967 because (a) Richard Nixon spoke to a Florida campus audience 24 months before he was inaugurated president; (b) Stephen C. O'Connell was concurrently president of the University of Florida Alumni Association and a Florida Supreme Court justice prior to receiving a narrow 5-4 approval vote from the Board of Regents to accept the UF presidency and (c) U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts gave the headline speech during Florida Blue Key's annual pre-Gator Growl banquet. Vice President Hubert Humphrey had delivered Homecoming weekend remarks in 1966. Weimer came across campus to UF's Tigert Hall in 1968 as special assistant to newly appointed President O'Connell. As director of information services, I reported to the dean of university relations. After three years with two bosses, my responsibility link came under Weimer in July, 1971, yielding more important day-to-day access to the president.

In that era it was "Bob, have the local folks in Tigert by four o'clock. The president will have a news conference statement." Rae loved those attention-claiming phone call orders that triggered O'Connell commenting on timely issues affecting UF. When I complained meekly once about short notice to notify press, radio and TV, he smirked at me, "You asked for work when you came here, didn't you?" Rae Weimer had no doctorate, no master's and not even bachelor's degree documentation. His education claim may have had "SHK" after his name. "School of Hard Knocks" reflected years of New York newspaper duties preceding launch of the UF journalism thrust on a steady move toward prominence.

Before the Osceola Chapter was born in 1968, joined by the UF chapter of the

Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), practitioners in Alachua and Marion counties depended on Gator Chapter meetings in Jacksonville or the state FPRA convention to stay current with new industry trends. After my 1964 arrival in Gainesville to begin a nine-year stay at UF, Weimer and I were encouraged frequently by FPRA officers to charter the Osceola Chapter.

With my competing duties as 1967-68 president of the UF Alumni Association's Alachua County Club, Weimer agreed to the initial Osceola presidency if I would be vice president and follow him in 1969. We both had day jobs competing with the challenging task of growing the FPRA unit in Year One.

Rae headed the committee planning the October inauguration of President O'Connell. He and I sat on the Executive Committee, attended Administrative Council and Faculty Senate meetings and talked constantly with vice presidents, deans, department chairmen, faculty, students, community leaders, media and information personnel in the Health Center, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and Athletic Association. Our key objective was always offering accurate news and providing public relations services at the local, state and national levels.

In February, 1968, Weimer chaired and the college coordinated the Southern Science Seminar for University Information Officers, a four-day Reitz Union program following a similar venture hosted by UF in 1961. Forty registrants from 12 states heard speakers addressing the theme, "Human Implications of Science at the University." The National Science Foundation (NSF) and Southern Regional Education Board were additional sponsors.

Dr. Jack Detweiler, who was on Weimer's faculty, provided input along with other seminar presenters from NASA's Division of Scientific and Technical Information, NSF's Sea Grant Program, Bell Telephone Laboratories, CBS-TV's "The 21st Century," Gulf Universities Research Corp., the Chicago Daily News and the Boston Herald. The successful Florida dialogue prompted by Weimer's direction pushed the American College Public Relations Association (ACPRA) and NSF to schedule a 1970 national conference in Washington, D.C. for emphasis on "Communicating Science in the '70s" topics. That guest speaker roster drew from the President's Council on Environmental Quality, National Academy of Sciences, American Institute of Physics, Science News, Washington Star, National Accelerator Laboratory, Northwestern University, Baylor College of Medicine, Pennsylvania State University and Johns Hopkins University.

As chairman for the three-day event simultaneously conducted a few blocks from the first "Earth Day," I had the privilege of introducing our faculty, including keynoter

U.S. Rep. Emilio Daddario (D-Conn.), chair of the House Subcommittee on Science, Research and Development, and Dr. Robert Q. Marston, director of the National Institutes of Health. Little did I realize then that Dr. Marston would be a future University of Florida president.

UF finalized hiring its first director of publications, Jim Patterson, in 1968. O'Connell named Dr. Robert Bryan, a 1989-90 interim president of the university, to head a special Publications Committee. I visited Michigan State, Illinois, Purdue, Indiana and Maryland in a whirlwind five-day flying and rental car tour to analyze how other institutions handled production of various printed works. The committee approach was a team effort, using wise counsel by former English professor Bryan and Weimer.

Patterson's initial assignment resulted in a new look and name for the Florida Alumnus magazine, led to acceptance of advertising, increased the use of color and improved design with each quarterly issue. Weimer was a tough Osceola Chapter act to follow in my 1969 term as president, but members did enjoy eight meetings, including four inter-chapter functions with Orange Blossom (Orlando), Gator (Jacksonville) and Hush Puppy (Tallahassee), traveling to Six-Gun Territory at Ocala, Daytona Beach Speedway, Stephen Foster Memorial in White Springs and St. Augustine mixed with home outings. President O'Connell spoke to Osceola and state FPRA board members in February. The treasury balance when I bowed out was \$152.69 and we had 29 members after two years.

Alvin Alsobrook, who succeeded me in 1970, still lives in Gainesville. He was acting executive director of the Alumni Association in 1966 when we teamed to produce a 28-minute film narrated by UF broadcasting alumnus Red Barber, highlighting the Gators and Steve Spurrier at New Orleans for a Sugar Bowl bout with Missouri in the school's inaugural major football bowl appearance.

The volunteer hours Weimer devoted to FPRA and the Osceola Chapter leading into 1968 were essential ingredients in growth and progress over the next 40 years. From 1970 until 1973 as he and I shared and handled a mixed bag of news/PR assignments--everything from Gatorade and anti-war protests to calls for takeover of the university and shifting of the student newspaper to independence--there were no cell phones, no e-mail, no fax machines and no text messaging available as aids to better communication.

The Division of Information Services depended on IBM Mag Card typewriters, a mimeograph, "snail mail," telephones and onsite transmitter links to the Associated Press (news releases) and United Press International (photos). The "University of Florida Days" speaking program spanned the state with 80-120 engagements annually. We

even experimented with computerized information retrieval about 1972, thanks to guidance from College of Engineering graduate student assistant Clark Pewitt. I often have wondered whatever happened to Clark because he certainly had great foresight back then.

It was my lifetime highlight to earn a journalism degree under Weimer's supervision, starting classes in rickety Building K across from Florida Gym and then being instructed in space within the northwest corner of the football stadium, now The Swamp.

Working with and for Rae was a five-year bonus that the vast majority of his college's alumni never experienced unless they were on his payroll. He created valid logic for UF to name Weimer Hall as a salute to one individual's dedicated leadership.

My involvement with FPRA, ACPRA, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the University of Florida gave me a jump start for 1978-79 when I contracted with boards of directors to manage five state, region and national associations spanning a combined 46 years. Constantly monitoring income and expenses via four to six checking accounts in those times was just one hurdle among many.

I am thankful to share these flashbacks with the Gainesville FPRA Chapter and wish individual members well as they embark on a 41st year of advancing themselves and their association.

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