

Interviewee: Pope, Melvin
Interviewer: Kristen Norton
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Norton: We're with Mr. Melvin Pope at his office in Tallahassee, Florida for Florida State University. The date is October 7th, 2008. Mr. Pope, are you aware that we are recording this conversation and do we have your permission to do so?

Pope: Yes ma'am.

Norton: I'd first like to ask you where and when you were born.

Pope: I'm a native of Tallahassee, Florida. I was born on February 7, 1933.

Norton: How long have you lived in Tallahassee? Since then?

Pope: All my life. I was only gone four years, two years to Gainesville and two years to Uncle Sam.

Norton: You've been here awhile, have you had a longstanding relationship with Florida State University?

Pope: Sure.

Norton: What was your relationship with the University like before you attended?

Pope: I was at Leon High School, my buddy had a car and we used to go out when we got old enough to know the difference between boys and girls. We would go to FSU and take young ladies out for a coffee – and tea. And, uh, we really had just a lot of fun. We went to the first football game, 1947, and followed the Seminoles, literally, ever since.

Norton: Do you remember who played in that first game?

Pope: I do. Most of the players – a lot of them were from Tallahassee. Leonard Gilberg, Wes Carter, Chris Kalfas, good, good friends.

Norton: Did you go to any of the events, or activities, functions, maybe the circus, things like that, before you enrolled in Florida State?

Pope: Went to the circus. That was actually just beginning back then. But it was not

near as popular as it is today. Jack Haskins brought that program online and did an unbelievable job with it.

Norton: When you graduated from Leon High School what was the first university that you attended?

Pope: I went to the University of Florida. If you remember 1951 there were no scholarships available for Florida State. My mother was a first grade teacher, my dad was a hair stylist, a beautician, and I needed some help. So I went to the University of Florida on a grant and aid scholarship.

Norton: Was that to play football, or was that just based on –

Pope: To play football.

Norton: So that's why you decided to go to the University of Florida?

Pope: Sure, sure.

Norton: If Florida State had offered scholarships would you have preferred to go there?

Pope: Probably would not have then, because I was ready to get away from home and Tallahassee. But, you know, I was eighteen years old and I think most eighteen year olds want to get away from home. At that point in time, it was probably immature, but I was mighty glad after I came back from Korea that Florida State was here and Coach Bob Woodruff, U of F Head Coach, called me and said "hey, Pope, you coming back down here to Florida?" and I said, "Coach, if I don't have to leave the city limits of Tallahassee I'm not goin' anywhere."

Norton: So what years did you attend UF?

Pope: It was 1951 and 52. And I was drafted in 1953.

Norton: And when did you start going to Florida State?

Pope: In 1955.

Norton: So what was it that made you decide to go to Florida State when you came back? Anything in particular?

Pope: Well, you spend sixteen months in Korea and you're ready – you're maturity has changed, my value systems had changed, and your priorities change. I was ready to be home.

Norton: I'd like to ask you how Florida State was different than the University of Florida.

Pope: In all candor I had not been academically inclined until I came back from Korea. I never paid much attention to my grades. I didn't have a real idea what I wanted to do. I always thought I'd be a coach or have some athletic endeavor of some sort. But, I remember very vividly talkin' to my high school coach about going into athletics. And he said to me, "why don't you check out what the head coach of the football teams at Florida and Florida State, and A & M make," which I did. And I was pretty horrified. Of course, times have changed, but back then twenty-thousand dollars was a big salary for a head coach. Amazing, when I think back. Stunning, how that has changed.

Norton: So what degree did you ultimately graduate with, and what made you interested?

Pope: Well my father's health had caused him to change professions, so he now had a property casualty business, a real estate business, and originally I started into the – I was thinking property casualty but then the business changed and as I learned more and more about what the property casualty business was, and all of the paperwork, and endorsements, and changes, and rate changes, and filings that went with it I shied away from that. And then, of course, I was introduced to the Northwestern Mutual – and the right person at the right time gave me the opportunity to broaden that scope. We had some wonderful professors, Jim Dillinger in Risk Management, Head of Risk Management, Dr. Dickinson was a really outstanding person, and these guys really laid the groundwork for the Risk Management Department at Florida State, which has grown and grown and grown, and is one of the best in the country today. I recommended a lot of people, friends of mine, send their kids here to – just to major in Risk Management. My middle son, Bruce, is a graduate of Florida State in Risk Management.

Norton: So you got your degree in business?

Pope: In business.

Norton: Okay, and just since you mentioned some professors. What were some of your favorite courses and professors?

Pope: I loved the marketing in sales because I had no background in any of that, even though I had worked and always sold papers, and mowed lawns, and did all of the other things to make money. But my father had a great philosophy. Every time I would put twenty-five dollars in the savings account at Tallahassee Federal Savings and Loan, he would match it. But only on the condition I couldn't touch the money until I was either married or used it for school. And the day I got married I withdrew the first money from that account, four-hundred dollars to buy a Plymouth from Fred Drake Motors, who was a good friend, and who owned the dealership near Florida State.

Norton: I want to talk a little bit about your relationship with fellow students in Florida State and how this was affected by being on the football team.

Pope: Well, when I went with Northwestern Mutual in 1958, and remember – I had an advantage of staying out of athletics for a year. And eligibility required when you transferred schools you could not immediately play so I had stayed out a year. In fact, I had no intention of playing any further football, but I was lucky enough that two of my colleagues from University of Florida, Charlie LaPradd who was an all American at Florida and Bubba McGowan, who was a halfback, both were coaching for Coach Nugent at Florida State. And our line coach was Hugh Adams, who was little All American at Florida State, he was my high school coach. So those three guys said “you know, we need a long snapper and a center and a linebacker and why don’t you come out here and see if you can earn a scholarship.” Well, that was a challenge, number one, but I’d already bloomed up to about 240 lbs. and I wasn’t sure I could hack it. But in any event, I went on out and of course was lucky enough to earn a scholarship. Coach Nugent was a good guy and a good coach and somebody I enjoyed. But remember, on that team you had Buddy Burt Reynolds, you had Paul Smith, you had Carmen Battaglia, and you had Lee Corso, and Vic Prinzi, and Ted Rodrigue. You had some outstanding people – Ron Schomburger, who has just been an outstanding person in Tallahassee here, Bill Childers, you know, the names go on and on of people who made an impact here. Bill Collum who later became head of the Chamber of Commerce in Miami, and just some wonderful long term friends that were made in that relationship and I cherish that.

Norton: So you keep in contact with a lot of football –

Pope: I do.

Norton: Well, speaking about football, what were some of things you remember from your football times spent here? Any particular games?

Pope: Well, the funniest thing is when we were playing NC State at NC State. One of my good friends, Bob Camp, of central heating consultants here, and his wife and a group of them were up there for the game and I had not been playing in the game, and so they [laughs] just got this drunk to go down on the field and get in front of Coach Nugent and tell him to “put Melvin Pope in the game!” And much to my shock, he did [laughs]. And, you could imagine these guys up here, just this little crowd hollerin’ my name. It was embarrassing is what it was, but the reality was, I look back on it, it was a pretty funny incident, can you imagine it? You’d never even imagine something like that happenin’ today. So that was pretty funny. But, I think the final game may have been the most significant. The University of Florida had recruited five people, five men from Plant City High School and primarily because they wanted this one 235 pound fullback by the name of Fred Cason. He was a big six foot three, run like a deer, and powerful. I actually saw him throw a football about 75, 80 yards – in the air. So he was really a big, big guy. And – but he had stayed at Florida only a year, transferred, and in my final game in Tampa, I knew he was playing fullback for Tampa then, and here I was playin’ for Florida State. And I tackled him behind the line of scrimmage and I look at up and says “how you doin’ Buddy Cason?” and he looks at me and says “is that you, Pope?” I says, “that’s me.” So imagine after the number of years, we’re talkin’ 1951 and this is 1957. So, it was a pretty neat thing. And he

and I have maintained a relationship. He ended up as a coach in St. Petersburg, and no telling how many people he affected over the years. But, kind of interesting, he just passed away two months ago, but I had been in touch with him. E-mails make that pretty easy today.

Norton: Just to clarify really quickly, what was your position on the football team?

Pope: Actually, I was a center, long snapper, linebacker, and played some tackle too on defense.

Norton: Did you play in almost all the games? Or, how did that work?

Pope: Well, I lettered, so you had to play so much, so many quarters in order to letter. I wouldn't consider myself a starter, but I played enough that I was not unhappy. All players want to play more than whatever they played, doesn't matter whether they're starters or not, but at this point in time I was happy with what was happening. After all, I had a family now.

Norton: Did you get married while you were still at Florida State?

Pope: I got married while I was in Florida State.

Norton: How did you meet your wife?

Pope: We went to a wedding and Kathie's roommate had a wedding in Panama City, and she was an attendant and I was one of the ushers. And we had our first date.

Norton: And what year was this?

Pope: This was 1956. We married in 1957.

Norton: Did she attend Florida State as well?

Pope: She was an A D Pi [ΑΔΠ].

Norton: What was your courtship like?

Pope: Once I had met her it was a pretty interesting time because, by that time, I was no twenty-one year old. So we dated and goin' into the fall I knew if we were gonna get married we needed to get married before football season. So, at the end of summer school we got married, July 28, 1956.

Norton: How was being a single college student different than being a married college student?

Pope: The academic side took care of the time – I had never been, as I said earlier, much of a student, but the necessity and fact of the matter is, to be honest with you, I actually came back and was so uncultured in my studies I actually flunked out of Florida State. And Dr. Martin, who was Vice President, I went to see him and I said “Dr. Martin, you know, I just flunked out of school, I got GI Bill, I’m living at home, and I’ve never been very serious about school, but if you give me a chance to come back to school I promise you I won’t let you down.” Well, I never failed to make the Honor Roll from then on. But it did take that maturing effort of losing and yet being given a chance. So, I learned a lot about doing extra work. I don’t think I ever had another course that I had to do extra work to make sure that my grades stayed at maximum, so, that’s a learning curve, took a little while for me to learn it, but.

Norton: So what year was that, when you went and spoke with Dr. Martin?

Pope: Well, this would have been, well, 1955. I would have flunked out in the Fall of ’55 when I came back and then he gave me, what you call, a Presidential, I don’t know what you call it – pardon, whatever it was, he let me back for a semester on condition. And the conditions were that I make my grade better. But I didn’t just make my grades, I made honor roll grades. My family was very proud, they were not very happy with me when I flunked out [laughs]. So, but that’s what growing up is all about is overcoming adversities. And that was a really big adversity. I was fixin’ out to go to work. Wouldn’t that have been horrible?

Norton: Well, I would like to ask you about your daily life campus life.

Pope: Mhm.

Norton: You mentioned that you were married, while you were still in school. Did you and your wife live on campus? Or did either one of you live in a dorm?

Pope: We lived in El Roacho Villa [laughter]. It was right off the campus. El Rancho is what they called it. It was really interesting because I lived right next to Billy Moncrief, a filling station there, a city service filling station. I never had much money but we had a charging account – a charge account there. But what was really the biggest issue for me, my buddies on the football team would come over and, uh, at that time you could buy a six pack of beer for like a dollar and a half and all I remember is one particular month I went over to get the bill and the bill was like \$75. Well, that’s a lot of beer. And a lot of what these guys have been doin’ is they’re just buyin’ beer and charging it to me [laughs] and I had no idea. Billy told me, he said “well your buddies came by and got, you know, several six packs and signed your name on it.” I said, “oh my goodness, well let’s stop that” [laughs]. So, it was again, the learnin’ curve. But Billy Moncrief let me pay that off over time, you know, and the GI Bill that I had. But I’ll tell you somebody else, Nick Toggery Clothes. Nick would allow players to buy clothes, coats, pants, shoes, and pay for it on installment basis, just a little bit a month. For that reason there are a lot of us around today that still buy clothes from Nick Toggery because he was the kind of guy that gave us a break back then.

Norton: Was that fairly common?

Pope: No, it wasn't. Most of these guys that – if you were a friend of his Nick would always take care of you. And, you know, Nick's still around. He's just a really nice man, and his boys are still in the business. Do you know the company I'm talkin' about?

Norton: No.

Pope: Yeah.

Norton: I'd like to speak a little bit about the Florida State and the University of Florida rivalry, unless there's anything you'd like to add.

Pope: Well, if you looked at my resume you'd know that once I graduated from Florida State I became very active in the Alumni Organization. I was local and national President of the Alumni Association, twice. I have been on the booster board, I suppose for about, probably 12 years on the booster board. I spent some nine or ten years on the foundation board. And then of course, as a chip last year the alumni you're always an ex-officio member. So I'm still involved with that, so. The reunions that I go to at the University of Florida are pretty challenging because they know my relationship with Florida State. So I get quite a few digs. My roommate, I had two roommates at the University of Florida, one of those roommates just died last week, Dan Scarborough, who was a Senator over in Jacksonville. And, the other was Bob Kennedy who ended up bein' a Senior Vice President of Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. So that group of '51, '52 gators, I get together with them once a year. And you know Art Nesmith's a cardiovascular heart surgeon in Gainesville, was a member of that team. Perry Johnson was a guy that raises race horses in Kentucky and Ocala. I mentioned Fred Cason, Fred Robinson, so he spent his years coaching in St. Pete High. And Dick Watson is a District Judge in St. Augustine, just had a building named for him. Dave Hirsch has a stadium named for him over, outside of Jacksonville, there in Starke, Florida. It's amazing the relationships that you continue. Last Wednesday night I had dinner with Mike Karaphillis and Jackie Pappas in Tarpon Springs, two guys that were on that earlier team. It's really amazing because J. Pappas Hall, who is a Tallahassee boy, he's a world record holder in the high jump, and of course played football, he's a K A [KA], but he set the world record. I saw him set the world record and also tie the world record in the hundred yard dash at the relays at Florida. He's an amazing guy. But his son passed away just four weeks ago, at age 50 from cancer. And when I called up Karaphillis and Pappas to tell them about, Mike had just lost his son from a heart attack just a week – just two months earlier. Now, I didn't know that. So I went over to have dinner with him, and you can imagine the, uh – those guys are great friends that I made, uh, Tommy Assimack, Nina Pereras, Nick Billins, these are all pretty special people.

Norton: Well –

Pope: And, I've maintained contact with them, so it's pretty cool.

Norton: Well you've mentioned a few times, fraternities –

Pope: I was an SAE [ΣAE]

Norton: What is that?

Pope: Sigma. Alpha. Epsilon.

Norton: Okay.

Pope: And all three of my sons went KA [KA] of course. But I'd have to tell you that they probably, the thing that I was proudest of, each of them came to me before they said, "Dad, you know, we like the SAE [ΣAE], but all our buddies are going KA [KA]," and I said, "you know, you gotta – you go with your friends, you be with your friends, that's what it's all about." In my case, when I pledged SAE [ΣAE], my friends were SAEs [ΣAE], so I went to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon. I actually pledged at Florida, and then when I came to Florida State, since I didn't have my grades to make initiation at Florida I was initiated here. So, part of the few activities was that when I was dating Kathie, we went to the SAE [ΣAE] house for our fraternity events, the things we did were a lot related around the fraternity.

Norton: Were there any other social groups that –

Pope: Well she was an A D Pi [ΑΔΠ], so obviously we had – to make benefit of both those institutions there.

Norton: Well I'd like to talk briefly about some of the changes going on at Florida State while you attended. Did you notice a lot of growth and expansion in terms of campus and the number of students going there at all?

Pope: Well I think the thing that I have said many times from many platforms, one criteria that Florida State has had going for it more than anything else – I say criteria, but one of the issues that I think has been instrumental in its growth has been the leadership that it's had. Not just from the administration but from the faculty and from the deans. Because I've sat on so many boards, I've sat on Presidential Committees, and I – the academic community is a different ballgame. And I always say that the Dean who doesn't think that their department and their division within the University is the most important needs to go somewhere else. Because the challenge becomes one of trying to exceed expectations. And the vision that our deans have had, and the leadership we've had on campus has been extraordinary. I've known most of the Presidents going back and without exception they have brought to the table unbelievable leadership. And as a result of it Florida State's fostered in a way that they never would have done so without that kind of leadership.

Norton: In relation to leadership, were the students upset that Doak Campbell, President

Doak Campbell had decided to retire the year that you graduated?

Pope: No, I think it was time at his age. They – you have to remember that at that point in time you young ladies did not walk across campus without a cover. You – shorts were not allowed to be worn on campus. You checked in and you checked out. But they knew where their students were at all times. And of course the resistance to that overtime, as the parents became more liberal and the University had no alternative but to become more liberal with the, with their students. But I think that at the same time, while I'm saying that, one of the joys that parents had in bringing their young ladies to Florida State because of that kind of culture. I mean, it was definitely – the difference was night and day between Florida State and University of Florida. I can tell you that, I mean there is no doubt. I remember being accused at being at the Pantie Raid where they blew the charge [makes charge noise] and the guys went all through the girls' dorms and they actually threw the little firecracker bombs into some of the toilets and blew them up. I mean, it was just awful, and some of the campus police were so convinced my roommate and I were involved they came and searched our rooms. Of course, they did almost everyone. But this is 1953.

Norton: And that was the campus raid at Florida State? Or –

Pope: That was the University of Florida. You didn't have anything like that here.

Norton: Well being someone who went to Florida State as a high school student did you notice when you were taking young ladies out places that there were chaperones, or anything –

Pope: What they did was they checked out. They would sign out and then there were certain deadlines that they had to be back in and signed back in. So there was accountability.

Norton: And that carried on –

Pope: That was campus wide.

Norton: And that continued when you went there?

Pope: That continued when I went there, that's right. You didn't have any living off campus, I mean, that was just not a part of it. If your residence was here that was a whole different thing. You didn't have girls living in apartments or anything like that.

Norton: Did your wife, or did you live in the fraternity or sorority house?

Pope: My wife lived in a sorority house. First in the dorm and then later in the sorority house.

Norton: Also, speaking about changes on campus, when you attended Florida State it was

kind of the middle of the integration, segregation debate. Was any of this evident to you as a student? Or what was your position?

Pope: I never really – you know coming back out of the army, the armed forces had already integrated. So we didn't have any problems. I took a R and R to Japan with a boy named Browns, he actually had graduated from Rutgers and I had pictures of that. And it was really kind of funny because I sent these pictures home and my dad said "who is this black guy in the picture?" I said, "he's a buddy of mine from Rutgers," and my dad said "really, you went to Japan with him?" I said "yeah." He didn't say anything more about it and I never really thought anything about it. But the reality was at the point most of us had a pretty clear mind about where we were and what we were doing and the integration issue was not an issue. It never has been with me anyway. But it was even more focused as I began my business career because I always felt that I've probably given more African Americans opportunities in business than I should because some of them as taken advantage of it. But then I'm proudest of guys like Al Lawson who is our state Senator now and has been with Northwestern now 31 years. Pretty cool.

Norton: Going along with the changes again, you've mentioned a few times going to Korea, this was the middle of what would become the Cold War. Did you notice discussion about this on campus, especially coming from the viewpoint of a soldier?

Pope: Yes, because you were surrounded by guys, when I mentioned Ron Schomburger and I mentioned Bill Collum and several others, these guys had already been in the military, so you know, you got Rodri – Ted Rodrick, we were all in our 23, 24, 25 years old. In fact, I think Ted was maybe 26. So, in relation to, we were a much mature and older group of guys. So it was a whole different atmosphere.

Norton: How did that affect your relationship with fellow students? Were you mostly friends with more mature, older –

Pope: Yeah, you tended to identify more with an older crowd. I think that the maturity level just automatically motivates you to be with people that think more like you do. And, but yeah, you had relationships – most of us got married while we were in school. I was in Ted and Sarah's wedding and many of the others. In fact one of the Korean – Lieutenant Park came here to get his Masters degree in Economics and I was in his wedding. So it was really remarkable. I met him in Korea and he – Larry Block, a friend of mine, had helped him come to Florida State. And he got married. I was there for it.

Norton: Well I jotted down a few things that popped into my head while you were speaking. You mentioned now that you're an alumni that sometimes you get some glances from Gators about your role at FSU. When you were a student coming to FSU did you get any sort of, I don't want to say backlash, but glances for being a Gator, or was that just not present?

Pope: A lot of gestures, and fun, but nobody's ever been serious. I was one of the

original Golden Chiefs. I bought my seats in the skybox and you know I've been active with the varsity club, past chairman of the board of the varsity club of formal letterman. So, you know, I don't know how much more involved you could be. I take a lot of pride in that, and now I'm on the Emeritus Board so I get to look at that – those 50 and older folks. And they have a different view, frankly, on the institution and what it should be doing. And what they should be doing. So I'm enjoying that and I'm workin' with Tommy Waits right now tryin' to redo the bylaws of the Emeritus group and trying to get the purpose set again. I remember when we used to recruit bright students and we haven't been doin' that. And so one of the things we want to do is go back out and have our alumni start having some coffees and teas and bring in some of these young, bright, academically-oriented students so that we continue the flow of bright kids coming here, 'cause you know – the motivation is always going to be based on the sales of the institution, and what it's all about, the purpose of it. And we've got some of the most outstanding programs in the nation; we just have to let people know it. And that's communication.

Norton: Well, you spoke briefly about your children. Did all of your children attend Florida State?

Pope: All of my children attended Florida State.

Norton: And how has your involvement with the University influenced your family's attendance at Florida State?

Pope: Well I've never thought about it – I think they're kinda like, you know like father like son. My sons are involved and, they've been involved. My middle son lives in Columbia, South Carolina, has a very active alumni group there that he meets with. They watch football games together and that sort of thing. My other two sons of here they're involved in – obviously just by being here. But, uh, that's – I've got one of my oldest grandsons is now 19 and he's at TCC [Tallahassee Community College] so the transition when he graduates from that will be interesting whether he goes to Florida State or decides some other institution. Well that will depend on what he wants to do. So, but we'll support him whatever it is.

Norton: Well, that's pretty much all that I wanted to cover. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Pope: Not really, I think you've asked all the good questions. I may have missed a few things here and there but I think – people who come to Florida State – I had to lunch with the chairman of the board of Northwestern one day and I took him out to Red and Sam's Fish Camp, and he's that kind of guy that you can do that with, and we sat there and he says, "why is there all of this interest in this school?" I said, "well, people who come here, because it's sort of like Avis, they've always had to come from behind." The University of Florida's always had the legislature, they've always the blue noses of the state and so Florida State's always had to come from behind. And so people become more passionate about it. And the more passionate they become, the more involved they become, and the more involved they become, the more they are

willing to give and to do for the institution and that's really what sets it apart. And as a result of that I think that's why Florida State's been able to gain the inroads it's had. I've been to Board of Regents meeting, I know how Florida State Presidents were treated by the other presidents of other institutions. It was shocking. So shocking it made me angry and more committed to make sure that our people got a fair shake.

Norton: Well, Mr. Pope, let me just remind that we were recording this conversation and we had your permission to do so. Is that correct?

Pope: Sure.

Norton: Thank you so much for your time.

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