HAPPY 50TH ANNIVERSARY UWF!

At 12:01 a.m., just after midnight, on Tuesday, June 4, 1963, the University of West Florida became a reality – fifty years ago! A bill authorizing the acquisition, purchase, and funding of land for an actual campus became law.

Universities have lots of anniversaries – the first building, the first graduating class, the first basketball game – the list goes on and on. We might consider the University’s 50th anniversary to have been 2005 for the Florida Legislature authorized the creation of a university in the panhandle in 1955. But you can’t create a University with no funding, budgets, staff, campus or buildings. Today, there is a magic “1963” in Roman Numerals on the campus flag, and that becomes the basis for our “UWF at 50” history.

In 1962, the State Board of Control (governing board for all state universities in Florida) created a special site selection committee. As it began looking at land, the Panhandle legislators began looking at including funding in state appropriations in the Spring 1963 legislative session.

The Senate Appropriations Committee put funds for an administration-classroom building for the “West Florida University” on its list, but couldn’t specify an exact location because none existed. Senator Clayton Ma poles noted that the 1955 bill specified only Escambia County as the location, while the Board of Control’s committee had considered sites in eight counties, but predominantly in Santa Rosa and Escambia counties.

As a result, Representative John Broxson of Milton introduced a bill permitting the proposed senior university to be built in either Santa Rosa or Escambia County. This passed the House Committee on Higher Education on April 30th.

The Senate Appropriations committee passed five appropriations bills on May 1 which included $2,250,000 for...
the establishment of a degree-granting institution in Escambia County or West Florida, as provided by law. The new institution was empowered to begin junior level college classes in September 1967 and junior and senior level college classes in September 1968. Clearly the language was just ambiguous enough in location to satisfy everyone.

The total appropriations in the budget was $1,250,000,000, a first-ever billion dollar budget in Florida, an outrage to Governor Ferris Bryant and a number of conservative lawmakers. This was at least $300 million higher than the previous year, without any indication of where to find new revenue or taxes to cover it. The House concurred with the Senate, though its budget came in at $1,043,000,000.

While the Governor and Legislature moved into the “wrangling” stage, the State Board of Control held a special called meeting in Pensacola at the San Carlos Hotel on May 16, 1963 to make a final site selection for the proposed senior university. Prior to their meeting they did a fly-over of two of the sites—north of Scenic Hills, and the Live Oak Reservation on Santa Rosa Peninsula. To sweeten the deal, the Escambia County Commission called a special meeting on the morning of May 16th to formally approve their offer of an additional 100 acres of Pensacola Beach if Escambia County was picked for the college site. The Board chose what they called the “Scenic Hills site.”

[Our story on how the campus site was selected, will be featured in our next “UWF at 50″ newsletter].

By the end of May, the Legislature had approved and sent to the Governor two measures to initiate the new university – an appropriations bill with the first capital funding for ‘West Florida University’ and a local bill that granted authority to the Escambia County Commission to acquire 1,000 acres of land for a campus and authorizing them to issue bonds and other county revenues at their discretion to pay off the bonds.

As the Governor stalled on the appropriations bills, he hinted his intent to call a special session to handle taxes and revenue when the Legislature ended on May 31st. This would provide him the opportunity to veto the massive budget (which he objected to and for which no legislation had emerged on how to fund the increases).

In a strategic move, the Legislature on May 30th, extended their session by thirty days, forcing Bryant to act on the appropriations bills by Tuesday, June 4th. He chose to let the bills become law without his signature. Thus at 12:01 a.m. on June 4, 1963, the ‘West Florida University’ came into being.

Over the next thirty days, the Legislature adopted an enabling plan for the appropriations and they and the Governor asked voters to approve a new Constitutional amendment in the Fall of 1963, one that would grant the State the authority to issue bonds for construction. Much of the expanded state budget was due to construction needs of junior colleges and universities and so the state proposed a new fee on utilities (telephones) that would provide a revenue stream to pay off the construction bonds. Known now as PECO, this process has funded university capital improvements for fifty years.

In the enabling plan (and PECO proposal), the new senior university funding was pared to $1.6 million ($1.2 million administration-classroom building and $200,000 for planning funds). Radio announcer Paul Harvey used to say “now, you know the rest of the story” and truly, now you know why “1963″ is on the University flag and logo. —Dean Debolt

Happy 50th Anniversary, University of West Florida! With many more celebrations to come!
UWF History in Photos


First student to receive a diploma at UWF’s inaugural commencement held in the Commons in June 1968. 58 degrees were granted. (Note the diploma box!)