Florida Alligator impressions through the years.
INTRO

TRACING BACK ALLIGATOR TRACKS

When University of Florida graduate and longtime Gainesville resident Ron Perry heard the announcement that UF's student newspaper, The Alligator, had been digitized and made available online by the George A. Smathers Libraries, the first thing he did was search for Halloween 1971. This was the year a Masquerade Ball was held on the Plaza of the Americas, where more than 2,000 people danced in costume to the music of Mudcrutch—a band led by an up-and-coming artist named Tom Petty. According to The Alligator article covering the event, there were fireworks, tambourines, and balloons flying over the plaza.

“I was 16 when I went to this with my older brother,” said Perry. “It was sort of like a mini-Woodstock where I discovered a new world of music.” This was an event he always thought of fondly, and the ability to revisit his past with a few keystrokes was something he never expected. He also found mentions of his father, a well-known professor with the University’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), and even located articles written by his brother, a 1970’s Alligator reporter who went on to become a journalism professor at the University of Alabama. For Perry, searching this new digital collection was similar to opening a time capsule with countless connections to his life.
For decades, the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida have preserved print and microfilm copies of *The Independent Florida Alligator*, the largest student-run newspaper in the United States. The paper began printing in 1906 as *The University News* shortly after the University of Florida opened its campus in Gainesville. During this time, the paper was published semi-monthly.

It changed its name to *The Florida Alligator* in 1912, and by 1915 was being printed by University College of Journalism students on campus in a press room located in the basement of Peabody Hall. It became an official University publication, initially governed by the Faculty Committee on Student Publications and later by the Board of Student Publications.

In 1973, the newspaper became independent and began printing under the new title of *The Independent Florida Alligator*. The Libraries house over 160 microfilm reels at Library West and thousands of print issues in Special Collections for the years 1912 through 2004.

Each year the Libraries receive several requests for access to historic issues of *The Alligator*, expressing interests in researching topics related to development of campus, student government, campus events, student activism, growth of minority groups on campus, and more.
For several years, the Libraries have digitized historic issues of *The Alligator* upon request and as funds have been available. Through a partnership with *Alligator* editors, the Libraries have also provided access to issues published from 2005 to present in the University of Florida Digital Collections (UFDC) *Alligator* collection (ufdc.ufl.edu/alligator).

However, there were large gaps in the digitized content. Many issues were only available on microfilm or in bound volumes housed in Smathers Library or the *Alligator* Offices. Without an exact date or citation, one would have to flip through innumerable pages or rolls of film hoping to stumble across related material. The inability to search the full text across issues meant that a great deal of information was largely hidden from journalists, researchers, students, and members of the general public.

Previous *Alligator* staff members attempted to take matters into their own hands without realizing just how much goes into a digitization project of this size. Said one *Alligator* alumna who shared the announcement on Twitter, “When I was at *The Alligator*, I bought a flatbed scanner & started a project to deliver a searchable database for 90+ years of publications. It chugged along for years, rightfully second to delivering the news. I am SO thrilled to see this finally happening with expert support!!”

With funding from an endowment, Patrick Reakes, the Project Director and Senior Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources and Services in the Libraries, was able to start *The Alligator* Digitization Project, with the goal of providing free, online access to all issues of *The Independent Florida Alligator*. These newly digitized issues complement the digitized material already available in UFDC, providing access to the complete *Alligator* archive housed by the Libraries and over 100 years of content.

**ALLIGATOR DIGITIZATION PROJECT**

From September 2017 through August 2019, the endowment enabled the digitization of 163 microfilm reels, equating to more than 147,000 pages of issues published from 1912 through 2004.
The Alligator is a chronicle of the student perspective of the University of Florida and life in Gainesville. Digitization of this archive has unearthed articles about the development of campus, including the construction of many still-standing campus buildings, such as the Florida Gym, the Florida Museum, and Century Tower.

Student journalists of The Alligator covered campus life during the World Wars, the shift to a co-ed campus, and the debates leading up to racial integration. The Alligator included reports on activities of student organizations like the Florida Players, Glee Club, and minority groups such as the Hispanic Student Association and the Black Student Union. Stories related to various on-campus fraternities and sororities are also featured.

The University’s scholarly output and educational advancements were also covered extensively in The Alligator, including the development of the tutoring center on campus, the Whitney Laboratory’s groundbreaking research on horseshoe crabs, and the influential work of Samuel Proctor, a former UF historian and social sciences professor after whom the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program is named. And of course, one can track the entire evolution of the invention of Gatorade by UF’s Dr. Robert Cade and the controversies that ensued over who should hold the rights to the revolutionary sports drink.

The paper has published stories about the origins of many campus traditions, such as the “F” book, Homecoming, and Gator Growl. Coverage of sports such as men’s football, basketball, tennis, and women’s tennis, volleyball, and soccer demonstrates The Alligator’s unwavering interest and support for Gator sports.

It also includes student-drawn political and sports-related cartoons. Several ads for Gainesville businesses like Leonardo’s Pizza can be found along with local news coverage of Santa Fe, Silver Springs, and the origins of the Hippodrome State Theatre.

One of the most exciting types of coverage that can be found in The Alligator is reporting on nationally known musicians who performed on campus such as the Rolling Stones and Red Hot Chili Peppers as well as famous comedians like Robin Williams and Jerry Seinfeld. Several artists performed at UF before reaching the height of their fame.
**WHY IS ACCESS IMPORTANT?**

Providing a digital archive of more than 100 years of news not only greatly extends access to valuable UF and Gainesville material, but also helps fill a gap in state and national coverage due to what some refer to as the “black hole of newspaper digitization.” While newspapers from the last thirty years or so can often be found in commercial news databases such as Lexis-Nexis, and anything before 1924 is usually the first to be digitized because it is considered part of the public domain, a large amount of news in between is still only available on microfilm. This “black hole” greatly reduces access to news coverage of significant periods in our history such as World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, thanks to The Alligator-Digitization Project, such information is now just a keyword search away, and told from a unique, local, and student perspective.

Such access will be greatly appreciated by researchers and authors like Marty Jourard, author of the book *Music Everywhere: The Rock and Roll Roots of a Southern Town*, which discusses the influential Gainesville Music Scene of the 60’s and 70’s. Said Jourard in response to a Facebook post about the digitization project, “I came from Seattle to Gainesville twice for research on my book and turned every page of every edition from 1963 through 1976 (large bound volumes) and took digital photos of articles of interest. I could not have written the book without those back issues of *The Florida Independent Alligator*.”
Having a searchable database that reaches beyond the paper’s physical copies is also incredibly valuable for today’s newspaper staff. Alligator reporters have often turned to their print archives to track down information such as the name of the first female senator in student government and the origins of the university’s African American Studies program. When Richard Spencer came to speak at the University of Florida in 2017, many wondered if there had been similar controversial speakers on campus in the past, and how those situations were handled by UF administration. The answer lay within the pages of The Alligator, with 52 results appearing after a search for “controversial speaker” in the digital collection.

Said prior Alligator editor-in-chief Melissa Gomez, who met with library staff when The Alligator digitization project was first being planned, “When we publish stories, we do it not only to inform the public but to remind them of history. The digitization of our archives means future members of the Gainesville community will be able to look back and know how the community felt about past events.”

Gomez is now a reporter for the Los Angeles Times. This speaks volumes about The Alligator’s impressive legacy, which has started the careers of numerous reporters, editors, photographers, etc. who have worked for some of the world’s largest news publications and media outlets. Now many are turning to the newly digitized Alligator archive to re-discover their very first bylines.

**OUTREACH**

Remember, the entire archive is text-searchable and freely accessible online! Visit the UFDC Alligator collection to view the content. [www.ufdc.ufl.edu/alligator](http://www.ufdc.ufl.edu/alligator)

Content from these historic issues is also regularly featured on the Libraries’ social media accounts.

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