CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with: **Al Bellotto**
Interviewer: **James M. Denham**
Location: **Lakeland, Florida Southern College**
Date: **August 11, 2005**

A=Al Bellotto
M=James M. Denham (Mike)
B=Betty

M: I am here at the residence of Mr. Al Bellotto and his wife Betty. We are here on August 11, 2005 and we are going to begin this oral history with Mr. Bellotto. Good morning, Mr. Bellotto.

A: Good morning, Mike. Glad to have you here.

M: I gave you some questions that I asked you to look over, but we are not necessarily going to be tied to those questions, and I would like for you to be as free as you would like as far as your own reflections. Can we just begin with where you were born and where you lived when you were a child?

A: Yes, I was born really on the west side of the little town of Dundee here in Polk County in a log house in 19 and 25.

M: And where were your mother and your father from and how did they get to Dundee?

A: Well, my dad really came in through Ellis Island at 14 years old, he and his two brothers. One of the brothers [was] about 17 and the other one was 20. They came through Ellis Island from Italy and his first job, of course, was there in New York laying brick for the roads at 14 years old. He couldn't speak a word of English at that time. Then his brothers went back.

They only stayed here a short time. Dad decided this was such a great country so he stayed and then later, shortly after he was working laying brick on the streets of New York, he found out about the coal mines down in Pennsylvania which he could make more money. He went down there and a shaft fell on him, which the doctors advised him to go south, as far south as he could, so he ended up moving from there into Lake City, a little area outside of Lake City. Actually his farm was where the airport in Lake City is right now. So there he had cows and he had his farm.

M: So that would have been about 1910 roughly?

A: He came over here in 19 and 04. I don't know exactly, Mike, what year he got to Lake City, but I do know that my brother was born in 19 and 17 there, so he came there

sometime, you know, 1910, 1912. The way he met my mother was I thought an interesting story that he loved to tell.

He was farming and he was plowing corn and of course, I don't know whether you know a whole lot about Indians, but when they go from one area to another, they never go in a group as we do. We go and talk and have fun. They go single file and they'll be one come by and maybe it'll be five or six minutes before another one will come by. But anyway, as they were going to town, they had to come right by his farm. So he said the sun hit this young girl's black hair and it shined real good and it got his attention. He was plowing so he stopped to watch her go by. So a Saturday or two later he was over there working and he noticed her again. He got to where every Saturday he made a reason to be over there on that side of the farm. So after about the fourth or fifth time, he decided to follow them to town and that's how he met my mother, who was a full-blooded Indian and of course they got married and then my brother was born there, as I said in 1917.

Then from there [Dad] heard about the citrus industry, the fact that they just started planting groves here in Florida, and you probably know the largest packing house we had back in 1892 when you had the freeze was in the Gainesville area. So all that citrus was moving south and Dad came to Haines City and what he did to get there [was] put his cattle and his horses in one boxcar and put all of his furniture and his family in another boxcar, and they came to Haines City, and that's where he unloaded. He bought this property to start with, 80 acres, on the south end of Lake Crystal, which is west of Dundee and between there and Lake Hamilton.

Of course, there is where he built a log house and started farming there and then had his cattle right there. Of course his cattle operation grew as he made money planting trees and then he got in the grove business, and that's where I was born, in that house, in 1925. While he had that location, he also started building a house up, then downtown Dundee, and he ended up building a lot of houses and owning a lot of houses in Dundee and Haines City, rental houses.

M: Did you know very much about your mother's family? Did you ever have any interaction with them? And how did they come to be up in the Lake City area? That's an interesting story.

A: Well, that was a tribe that was there and of course the Indians came [and] continued to move south as they were pushed further south. How they got there, I don't know. Now I do know –

M: But by that time, it would have been fairly unusual that late in the story though for a lot of Indians to be up in that, they would have been most likely by that time down even below us.

A: Yep. But what I was going to tell you was interesting was, my granddad, who was one of the people I admired, was out of the Creek, the ones out of Alabama, and he was

tall. He was about 6'3", 6'4", straight as a board, even back, Betty remembers him after we got married.

M: Talk some about that, your memories of him if you don't mind. That would be very interesting. How you got to know him, and where he lived, and everything.

A: I guess probably the two reasons that I just loved my granddad was, one, he was a great fisherman. He used to say, "If Uncle William goes and doesn't catch 'em, there's no use for the rest of us to go". That was the big thing around the community. He could actually, when he'd take me fishing, and I've seen him do this many times, we'd go speckled perch fishing and it would be so cold, what he'd do is take a big bucket or a big drum and put it in the boat and put wood in it for me to stay warm as a kid, and he'd be up in the front of the boat and of course, you know, I remember –

M: You mean have a fire in the boat?

A: He would actually build a fire in that bucket for me and he'd be up in the front of the boat, and of course, the Indian way, he never raised that paddle out of the water. He'd reach down and taste the water and when he got to an area where the fish were bedding, evidently he'd taste it. He'd say, "Well they're right here".

M: Well I know you can smell them. But he would taste it?

A: Yeah, he would actually taste the water. That's the way he would do it.

M: Would you go fishing with him here in Polk County or would it be up in Columbia County?

A: Oh yeah, this was in Polk County.

M: Did he move in with you all or did he come to live –

A: He came down after Daddy moved. He came down. But that was one of the reasons [I loved him]. He was such a great hunter, fisherman. Of course that inspired me you know. But I can remember he had big hands. He'd hold three speck poles in one hand and paddle with the other one, you know. Those were big things.

But then the other love was animals. He was, back in those days there wasn't many vets and he really worked for the Glen St. Mary's Nursery, which was one of the biggest citrus nurseries in the state, and they had about 40 to 50 mules, and he was like the caretaker of those animals healthwise. Granddaddy had a great knack for animals and their health. I can give you two cases really that I can well remember.

One was, I had a horse that one time got leeches. We had three different vets come and try to treat this horse over about six or seven weeks and wasn't getting anything done. I happened to mention it to Granddad one day and he said, "Well son take me

over there". He just had this knack. He said, "Take me over there and let me see the horse". And he took the wraps off. Anyway he said, "Well take me to the drugstore" and he made up some stuff and put [it] on the horse and cured the horse. Another time, my brother's horse came down with sand colic and she was laying flat there in the little lot that we had by the barn, really groaning and taking on, and we had the vet with her and didn't get anything done. So I went over and got Grandpa and he came over and he ran a hose down her nose into her stomach and he made up a concoction of linseed oil and I don't know what else.

In about 1-1/2 to two hours, she was up and running around the lot, so that's the kind of thing that really, as a kid, enticed me. I learned so much from him. Even in hunting, and turkey hunting, and different things I learned from him. But he was a great person.

M: Did you ever have any contact or knowledge of his other family? Where they lived, anything like that?

A: No, I did not.

M: Did he live in the Lake City area?

A: Well he was there just evidently a short time because what I remember about him was down here.

M: Did he live perhaps in Alabama? Did he have background in Alabama?

A: I don't know that background. I really don't. I just knew he was out of the Creek. I do know this one thing, that his daddy, I do remember him telling this story, his daddy was a scout for the South in the Civil War and got killed, somewhere up in Tennessee.

M: Your grandmother?

A: She was a Seminole Cherokee. My memories of her were that she went blind at an early age, but she was a typical Indian. I just remember seeing her sitting in a chair and he tended to her. He took care of her like, [it was] unreal the way he would [take care of her].

And something else I remember about him was that you'd go to visit him and if we talked as long as we had this morning, he wouldn't be in that chair. He'd be laying on the floor, propped up. That was just the way he always did, you know, in front of the fireplace. That's just the way he was. But Grandmother always sat in a little chair, you know, a rocker.

M: If you think back to those days when you were a little boy, you probably wouldn't have thought about it then, but did people recognize him as an Indian? Would they say, "Well he's an Indian"? For example, in Dundee when you were growing up, did people know that he was Indian?

A: Well if you were around him, you would know from his way of doing things, but no, they did not say that.

M: Physically did he look like an Indian?

A: Oh yeah. Now he didn't dress like an Indian, you know what I mean? He didn't do any of that. But if you were around him, his actions –

M: His actions would have said, "Well this is a different kind of fellow".

A: Yeah. Very quiet. He'd never say a whole lot. [He'd] kind of stay off by himself. But more a Mother Nature thing. You could just see it in action.

M: Right. He never really talked about his family background?

A: No.

M: So your father was in the citrus business but he also did cattle as well?

A: Well, cattle was a bigger thing for him. He actually owned some groves with Snively, Tom Snively. He planted a lot of groves for other people. That was his deal. He'd taken his horses and cleared land back in those days.

M: I would imagine your grandfather and your father were people that you really looked up to. Were there any other people that you really admired growing up as a kid in your community that you remember?

A: No. Those really were the people that I spent most of my time with. So much of our free time was spent in the woods with cattle and around animals, and of course those were the two people that were there.

I had two uncles on my mother's side that I did work a little bit with. My mother had three brothers and two sisters but two of those uncles I did spend a little bit of time with. One of them was from Nehigh, back in those days he was the salesman from Nehigh, and I would go and help him load the trucks in early high school. The other one had the contract with Dundee Citrus Packing Company and he did all the loading in the boxcars, the nailing back when we had actual boxes that you put fruit in. He nailed the lids on and then his contract was to take them in and then, at night after I cleaned the packing house, I would then help him load out the cars.

M: I want to try to stay in the chronological period that we're in, kind of break it down into various periods, childhood, early adulthood, that kind of thing. So, I want to keep on the childhood now. When you were growing up, do you remember any political things, like presidential elections or governors or state elections as a kid, say before you got out of high school.

A: Mike, I would honestly tell you, I remember names, but I didn't get as interested in politics really. I guess a statement that I've made many times, I had to really learn that you can be a cowboy but you've got to come to town.

M: You've got to come to town.

A: Yeah, and the reason for that is, I learned after I got probably in the late '50's early '60's, I began to realize who was making the regulations, who was making the rules that we had to go by. We had to put our part in this.

M: Otherwise you're going to get eclipsed.

A: That's right, exactly. And that's when I started getting more involved.

M: Well that makes perfect sense.

A: Up until then, I remember a lot of the people. I remember their names and all that, but was not really interested in –

M: Your family was not either really?

A: No. No. In fact, Dad was not involved in politics at all. It was me that had to start seeing that we've got to go to town to be able to [have] them hear our side and be able to be involved in the things that we've got to do to get along, to operate.

M: Well, that's one of the things I want to pick up on a little bit later, okay? Where did you go to high school?

A: Haines City High School.

M: As you went through your time about to graduate, what were the things going through your mind as far as what you would do for your profession, or did you think about college? What were some of the things you were thinking about as far as your future?

A: Yeah. If I could tell you this before we get there. You know, some schools you went through the eighth grade and then into high school. Our school, Dundee, went through the eighth [grade] and then you went to Haines City High School in the ninth grade as a freshman. We went through the ninth grade in Davenport and then went on to three years in Haines City High School.

I also want to tell you, we had the option in Dundee that we could go to either Winter Haven or Haines City. I was a fairly strong big kid after I started growing; of course I'm ahead of my story. One of the memories, you asked a question about the things, I've forgotten [how] you worded it, that I didn't like?

M: Oh, what were some of your worst memories, some of your best memories and your worst memories? I forgot to ask you that. Go ahead and tell us.

A: Yeah, that I thought was something that probably most people didn't have to get through and that was because my dad was an immigrant. Immigrants were not really accepted in those days. So back in the Depression days, my mother made all my clothes, sewed the little buttonholes and all.

But what I'm trying to tell you is, nearly every day I got into a fight at school. I'd come home. My mother'd see I'd been in a fight 'cause a lot of times the buttonholes were torn out and she'd say, "Yeah you've been fighting today", and I'd say, "Yes ma'am". Dad was somebody who never believed in flowers. If you plant anything and fertilized it, it ought to give you a return, so he planted peach trees, pear trees, fig trees, those kinds of things, grapes, all in the yard. So there were plenty of peach switches in the house.

So I'd get a whippin' with a peach switch and then she'd say, "When your daddy comes in, he's goin' to give you another one". So sure enough, the time he hit the floor, she'd tell him, "Well he's been fightin' again today". "Okay come on in the back room". So he'd take me back in the back bedroom and he'd close the door. Well the minute he'd close the door, he'd say, "Did you win?" And I'd say, "No Daddy there was two of 'em". He'd say, "Well until you learn to win, you're goin' to have to get a whippin'". So he'd whip me again.

That's how that story went, so when you talk about bad days, that was a bad situation. But when I got to be [in] about the seventh grade, I took a spurt of growing in that summer and of course being real active and working with cows and different things, I was pretty strong, so I whipped up on some heads after [that].

M: You touch on something that's important and that is, how did people look at you, or address you, or whatever in Polk County, Florida, in the 1920's and '30's? It must not have been very easy.

A: It wasn't easy. The thing that really turned the tide, I thought, was when we had Joe DiMaggio [and] Rocky Marciano. When they got to be heroes, that all went away. It really did.

And then I played football, that's what I was going to tell you. I went to the eighth grade and the coach, Crockett Farnell, out at Haines City High School; he came down to the house to be sure to try to talk me into coming to Haines City to play football instead of going to Winter Haven. And we just had a reunion Saturday for the first time since 1943. And she'll tell you, the quarterback, which was David Wright walks up and he said, "Al, what I remember about you, you played in the first ballgame you ever saw", and that's the truth.

I didn't know anything about football 'cause Daddy always had us work. We never went to a ballgame. We played a little volleyball at night in Dundee and I played softball. But he said, "This is what I remember about you, you played and there wasn't many people could make it as a freshman on the team, but you made it and played in the first game". But they forgot all that when I started playing ball and like I say, the pattern was set by DiMaggio and Marciano.

M: You graduated from high school in what year?

A: '43.

M: Wow. 1943. That was a really important year for our country. That was right in the middle of World War II.

A: Exactly. And there were some times there, Mike, that people today, you know we had the Depression years, those were tough. We used to come in from school; we only had two changes of clothes. We'd change out of our school clothes into work clothes, and we'd go in the fields. And back in those days, they planted peas in the rows of the groves, so we'd go out and pick peas –

M: For the nitrogen right?

A: Yeah. And we'd pick peas for a cover crop. We'd pick those peas and then mother would can 'em at home. But it was a tough time, dipping. You asked the question in there about what was the correlation of the state and government in helping the industry I believe, and there was some direction; compulsory dipping. We were on a 21-day compulsory dipping in '31/'32. I just started school during those days but every third Friday and Monday, they kept me out of school to help them gather cows. It was open range in those days.

So we had to gather cows, my brother and I had to ride bareback, we couldn't afford saddles in those days, but we helped gather those cows and we'd dip. Then the second thing that I felt that was super strong was when the government came up with this, when we had screwworms, every calf that was born, and she (Betty) knows this because that was one of the first things she helped me with, we had to rope every calf, I'd rope 35-40 a day. I'd rope 'em, throw 'em down, and she didn't know anything, she was a city girl. She'd dig the screwworms out. While I'm holding [the calf], she'd dig the screwworms out and put all the doctors on it.

M: I've gone through some of that with Doyle actually, Doyle Carlton, who was instrumental in getting some of that passed.

A: Anyway, I give J.O. Pearce out of Okeechobee credit for this. He was a real staunch, strong person to help get [this] done. We set up a lab down in Sebring right after World War II and sterilized those flies, and that was the thing that helped us get rid

of them. But those were the two things that I thought in my time that the government was such a big help with.

M: Normally, when American people think of Italians, they think, "Well they're probably going to be Catholics". What kind of religious background did you have when you were growing up? I can't imaging there would have been a whole lot of Catholic churches in Polk County.

A: There wasn't. And my dad wasn't Catholic or very religious but my mother was and [I don't know] if you know this denomination, but there was a Hard Shell Baptist, what they called a Hard Shell Baptist.

M: Oh sure. That's quite a mix.

A: Oh yeah. You're right! But anyway, my mother, big strong Hard Shell Baptist 'cause all the family was, even her mother and granddaddy, all of them were Hard Shell Baptist. But it was every third Sunday they'd go to church. They didn't go every Sunday, you know, it was once a month they'd go to church.

M: Where did they have to go?

A: We went north of Davenport, up there to a little church called Little Zion Church. And I have heard as many as 10 preachers in one Sunday. They'd start at 10:00 in the morning and go 'til 3:00 in the afternoon and then have dinner on the grounds.

M: That's my background. I know all about that.

A: Yeah, one of the fine memories, this old wooden church out there in the woods, no houses around it at all. But the pattern that my mother would set, she always, when we'd go to church, she'd let us play for about an hour to start with to get the edge off, then we'd have to come into the church.

Well, there's a little story I've told, we had one deacon of that church, we called him Handlebars Gil and the reason why [was] he had those little twists on the end of his mustache. He would sit in church and he'd sit just a little ways from the window, but pretty close to the window, and they'd push the window up and put a stick in it, you know how that was all the way around. Well us kids playing, we learned right quick that when we went by that window, we'd always duck down and go, 'cause he'd set here and spit from where he was out that window, so if you didn't duck, you were liable to get hit!

But then one of the other stories that happened to me was, there wasn't anything to play with, so we carried marbles, and in the sand we were shooting marbles. I don't know whether you know what a big log cart [is], that's what they called that biggest marble that you could break up the group with you know, I put that thing in my back pocket one time, and went in church. My mother was sitting on the next to the last row. Well this

church was elevated just enough, I got to squirming around and that big log cart fell out of my pocket and not only did it hit the floor, but you could hear it roll.

M: The wooden floor probably.

A: The wooden floor. And, I thought well maybe somebody's feet would stop it but for some reason unclear, it went all the way down to the front. Of course, I got a good whippin' when I got home.

M: Did the preacher make reference to it?

A: Oh yeah!

M: Yeah, "we're rolling along today"!

A: Yeah! Yeah, he did.

M: What about Catholic? Did you ever attend Catholic services?

A: Very few times. Dad didn't push that because she was so strong on Hard Shell Baptist, and she was strong. I mean, we didn't mess with her.

M: Was there any tension in the house about that?

A: No, none whatsoever.

M: What about when they got married? Do you have any sense at all that that might have been a concern of her family when they were married?

A: The only tension that I could remember as a kid growing up was probably some arguments. Mother would not let us speak or learn any Italian, simply because of what I told you earlier [about] the American people resenting it. So she wouldn't let us, and Dad tried to get us, I wish a thousand times that I had [learned Italian]. Now I can understand a little bit of it when I hear it but I can't speak it. But the reason was, she just thought that was one more that –

M: One more strike against you in the world. So your father pretty much deferred to her on things like that.

A: Right. He did. He did.

M: And I guess you never would have ever met his father or mother.

A: We did never meet any of –

M: Did they ever come to the U.S.?

A: After they went back, those two brothers, one of them came back.

M: But not parents, never the parents?

A: No. Well the daddy did. The daddy actually died in Sandusky, Ohio. They came back over here, the brother and the daddy came back, and one of the brothers was in Lake City when he was there and while he was cleaning a shotgun, this is the thing I remember about him, it [blew] off one arm. But he didn't stay here very long. But then the daddy got sick and died. He didn't get back to Italy.

M: So he came to visit one of your uncles then?

A: Yeah, he came to visit Daddy and they were touring, I think.

M: In Ohio?

A: Yeah, in Ohio. The relationship on the Italian side, no family, but Daddy would take us [and] we would visit a few Italian families. One of 'em was in Kissimmee 'cause he was a cow person too.

M: They were not related but just Italian folks?

A: No, they were not, but we'd go up there sometime on Sunday evenings and of course he had a wine cellar down in the ground and he had a vineyard and he made his own wine, and of course that's what the men would do, they'd go down in the wine cellar and drink wine.

You know, and another thing, Mike that I'd like to pass on is the fact that my daddy raised us. Every morning, we had to get up at 4:30, seven days a week. He says the cows doesn't know it's Sunday, so you went to the barn to feed the cows, milk the cows, feed the horses, cut the wood, you did all those things seven days a week. As you went through the kitchen, Daddy would always pour a little bit of wine for each one of us boys. You drank that wine before you went to the barn.

M: First thing in the morning?

A: First thing. By the time you finished feeding up to eat breakfast, you could eat nine biscuits, and then the last thing at night, even when we got up dating age, he still poured that wine and left it on the sink for you to drink just before you went to bed. Neither one of us boys drank.

M: Except for that.

A: We drank that wine and I think that had a lot to do with the fact that we didn't [drink]. But he used it as a health thing.

M: Did he make his own wine or did he just get it in town or something like that?

A: No, he never did make wine for us. He had friends that he got wine from.

M: If we go back to your late high school years, did you ever think about the outbreak of World War II? Where were you for, example, when Pearl Harbor was hit? And was that the first time you really got a sense of the outer world and the discombobulated state of the world?

A: Well, my brother was drafted in '39. He was in the first draft. And of course that's the first thing we thought about, the danger of him –

M: Could we stop it there just one second? It just occurred to me, what about Benito Mussolini? Did Mussolini's name ever come up in your house, or Mussolini's aggressive Italy, or any of that kind of stuff?

A: No.

M: Had you ever even heard of Mussolini before?

A: No.

M: Okay, well let's go back to your brother then.

A: My brother was in the first draft. Of course that was the thing that upset my mother and the family was the fact that now he's in danger.

M: Right out of high school?

A: He didn't finish high school.

M: He was drafted out of high school? Before he finished high school?

A: No, he had already quit high school and was working when he was drafted. And because of that, my mother, and I didn't know it, Mike, and I've always told Betty that probably the worst thing I ever did was, my mother was dying with cancer. Kid-wise, you know, you think they're going to live for a long time. My dad was on crutches, so I was exempt.

But when I got out of high school and all the rest of my buddies [who] played football with me, and that was my buddies in school, when they started leaving, signing up to leave, I couldn't stand it. I slipped over to Winter Haven and told the Draft Board that I wanted to go. I was actually exempt. I had an exempt card. So, in two weeks I was gone.

M: So, you were the only son left at home then.

A: I was the only son left at home. And sure enough, when I got there and I was training –

M: What did your parents think of that?

A: Well they didn't really like it of course. I didn't realize my mother was that sick. I really did not realize. And kid-like, I guess, but like I say, that's the worst thing I ever did. I should not have done that. 'Cause she didn't last very long. The reason I signed for the Navy was I always had a thing about wanting to fly and be able to land a plane on one of those carriers. That was something just as a kid I wanted to do.

Well they didn't do that. They put me right into demolition to train as a seal. And I was just before finishing that when the Red Cross came and got me and brought me home, and I was just home one day when my mother passed away. They gave me 30 days, and when I went back, the group had already finished so they put me into gunnery school and put me on the battleship.

M: Did you ride a train somewhere when you were first drafted? Where did you go?

A: I got on the train in Lake Alfred and ended up in Norfolk, Virginia. Then they took me up the river [which] is where we did all the demolition training, someplace up there.

M: How long did that training last?

A: I don't remember exactly but it was more like two months.

M: And then that's when they called you to go back? The Red Cross contacted you and you went back?

A: Yeah, they came and got me.

M: So there's your father on crutches, so you're still in the Navy and he's by himself. Was your grandfather still alive at that point?

A: Yeah, he was alive.

M: You would have been thrown in with all kinds of people I'm sure, in your training. What was it like to leave Dundee, Florida, for the first time and go to Virginia? Had you ever been out of the state before? Had you ever been among people from all over the country before? What was that like?

A: No, we had not been. You know, that didn't shock me as much, believe it or not. Of course we were always country people, stayed in the country. But I guess the biggest thing that shocked me when I first went into the Navy is the day that I finished gunnery

school and they had just come up with taking single 20 mm guns off this battleship and had put quad 40's, and when they drove up with the bus and I saw that battleship, that was the biggest sucker that I had ever [seen]. You can imagine a country kid in a little old rowboat fishing, never seen anything like that. That thing looked like it was as big as the state of Florida.

M: And that was in Norfolk?

A: That was in Norfolk.

M: So did you get on?

A: Oh yeah. I learned a lesson there too.

M: What was the name of the ship?

A*: U.S.S. New York*. BB34.

M: And that was a destroyer or a battleship?

A: That's it right up there. Yeah. That's a picture of it.

M: And you're up there somewhere in there.

A: Yeah, I'm in there.

M: What date was it that you shipped out of there? And where were you headed?

A: We went straight to the Pacific. I don't remember the date, Mike, but I wanted to tell you one other little story there.

M: Was that picture taken before you left?

A: No, that picture was taken after -

M: After you came back. Okay.

A: Yeah. When we all got off the bus, we had our sea bag. You've got all of your clothes in your sea bag, which is pretty heavy. We had to climb a ladder on the side of that ship, and there was this one kid who was pretty small, and I realized he wasn't strong enough. I took my sea bag up, went back down the ladder and got his to take up to the topside.

Well, when I got to the top, the First Class Seaman wanted to know my name and what my idea was for carrying his sea bag up there, and I told him it was because he's not strong enough and he said, "You can forget that day and for that we'll give you some

extra duty". And I did. I got extra duty for two weeks because I helped that kid. He's got to stand on his own feet is what he was trying to tell me. But it was a good lesson.

M: So you weren't being a smart aleck or anything, you were just thinking you were doing a good deed for somebody.

A: That's right, yeah. But he's got to stand on his own feet.

M: So did you go through the Panama Canal when you came through?

A: We went through the Panama Canal.

M: Was that pretty exciting?

A: Oh yeah, it was exciting. Again, I couldn't get over; you could actually nearly touch the ground when that ship was so wide going through that canal.

M: You mean almost reach the other side?

A: Yeah! Yeah.

M: Barely get through?

A: Oh yeah, barely get through. Of course another thing that I still remember were the locks.

M: They raise you up?

A: When you go through the locks, you know how they raise you up? And when we got into Gotoon Lake, the fact that that ship sank three foot deeper in the water, in freshwater, I never will forget that. It shows you what saltwater can do.

M: How did you adjust to being at sea? Did you have any seasickness at all?

A: Believe it or not, I was one that never got sick a time.

M: And other people were –

A: Oh yeah.

M: You never know who's going to be it and who isn't. It's the luck of the draw.

A: And let's see, I'm trying to remember another thing, that water flow that changes out there in the ocean, in the Atlantic, going down –

M: The Gulfstream?

A: The Gulfstream! I was just amazed at that Gulfstream. You could be going along [with] all these swells, and all of a sudden it's just as slick.

M: Yeah, like a river in the ocean.

A: Yeah, just right out in the ocean.

M: And you all stayed kind of on that?

A: Yeah. And of course the other thing was we had to stay out about 300-400 miles offshore going down because of German submarines. We had a lot of 'em on the coastline at the time.

M: And they were primarily in the coastline area.

A: Right.

M: Did you have any encounters with any of those on the way to the Panama Canal?

A: Did not have. We had some alerts but we did not have [any encounters]. Had a kid fall overboard.

M: Did you go in a convoy or just by yourself?

A: We were in a convoy. That was another lesson I had to learn. We had a kid fall overboard and I thought they'd turn around and go back and get him, mm-mh.

M: They didn't?

A: No.

M: Wow.

A: We were running a zigzag course.

M: So he's gone.

A: Well another ship picked him up three days later. The only thing that saved him was he had on a Mae West lifejacket. Believe it or not, he went down under the ship and went through the screw! Yeah.

M: Oh my goodness. He fell off in the front?

A: Yeah, right off the front. It wasn't in our division; I was in the first division. He was in the second division. But he fell off and went right under the ship and went out the

back. They said they saw him when he popped up back there 'cause that Mae West jacket brought him up. But he had a cut on the side of his head. And he was unconscious when they picked him up. But they picked him up three days later and they ended up bringing him to our ship before it was over with because, you know, we had –

M: You needed him.

A: Yeah, well we had a hospital. I'm trying to remember the name of what they called it. But anyway, we had doctors on our ship. Boys would get appendicitis on those smaller ships and they'd have to pass 'em over, you know, -

M: Yeah.

A: Sick bay, that's what I was trying to think of. We had a sick bay on our battlewagon.

M: When you came through the Panama Canal, did you stop off in any of the Pacific ports before you went out to the Pacific, or did you go straight on?

A: Yeah, we stopped at, I'm trying to remember the name of the one on the Atlantic coast, Balboa was one of 'em, and I'm trying to remember the name of the other one. We stopped on the Atlantic side 'cause you have to go through that, you have to have a whole day to get through. It takes you eight hours to get through the lock.

M: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that. Boy, that's a long time.

A: Oh yes. So you have to stop and you start first thing in the morning to be able to get to the other side.

M: So it's real slow and tedious, you see everything on shore.

A: Oh yes.

M: I didn't realize that. I guess they have to fill up each lock with water, don't they?

A: Each one to raise you up.

M: And that takes a lot of time.

A: And then you move up and they raise you up again. It's the same way when you get on the other side. They just have to let you down.

M: Well, go through some of your experiences then in the Pacific. That must have been pretty exciting, pretty scary. What were some of the campaigns that you would have been involved in? That would have been, let's see, late '44, correct?

A: Yeah. Well it was actually early '44. One of the first real scares was we had a submarine attack, three submarines attacked us right after we left from the Panama Canal while we were going up to Long Beach, and they reported us sunk, but we never got hit. They tried to hit us.

M: These weren't Germans were they? They would've almost had to have been Japanese.

A: They were Japanese. And we know that –

M: And you're I guess along the Mexican coast by that time, right?

A: Yeah, yeah. That's right. And we had two submarines that we know our DD's got, that blew 'em up. We don't know about the third one. We never did get a report on it.

But then when we get up to Long Beach, [the fact that] the fog was so bad and the fact that they had reported us sunk and they couldn't see us, they wouldn't let us into the port. We had to circle out there until everything cleared, although they were sending messages and all this. But you know it was kind of scary because –

M: So U.S. people had reported you sunk?

A: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, we went in and we stayed there a couple of days. That was all big to me.

M: A lot of fun probably.

A: Yeah. We went on liberty there. It was the change of weather. It was a big thing. But then we left there. We went to Pearl Harbor and then from Pearl Harbor, we went down and helped finish up Leyte and Luzon. That campaign was, you might say, over. We did very little firing down there. But they thought that there was a Japanese fleet down there, and that was part of the reason why we were sent down there. But then we ran to Iwo Jima and we fired the first shot that a ship fired on Iwo Jima.

We went through that whole campaign of 76 days and nights of fighting; got damaged there by torpedoes. We had to go down to where we were half afloat when we left there. Out of the 32 bilges on that ship, 16 of them were full of water, so we were just groggy in the water. We went down to Marianas and the Admiralty Islands which was just below the equator and went into dry dock. It was the closest dry dock that we could get serviced in.

Of course I was amazed that all the welders you might see were women. I mean this country never gave enough credit to the women that really, I tell you if it hadn't been for them, we wouldn't have made it.

M: So the "Rosie the Riveter" stories are really true then?

A: Oh you betcha! You betcha! I'd be willing to tell you right up front!

M: And these were all American women who had volunteered and had gone out there.

A: Yeah. It was unreal. And then it was so hot.

M: Where was this?

A: This was Marianas and the Admiralty Islands down there, just below the equator line. It rained eight and nine times a day. It was so hot until we wouldn't go down and get in our bunk, we'd sleep on the top deck. When it'd rain, you'd just roll over so it didn't rain in your face. That's how hot it was down there. It was unreal. But anyway, we got repaired there and that's -

M: And you're a Florida boy, knowing what hot's like! That must have been really tough on the other fellows, even worse than you probably.

A: So then we went from there to Okinawa. We set a record there, the [ship in battle longest] without being relieved or knocked out of commission, 80 straight days and nights we were firing there.

M: What did the noise do to your ears when those big guns were going? Did you all have to wear earplugs?

A: Well we did wear earplugs. And I was on the 40 mm and when we were bombarding, I was the first loader in the #1 turret from that ship, which is a 14-inch gun on that battleship.

And the other thing you never think about is they have to keep a certain amount of air pressure inside of that thing or when you fire that big gun, that fire'll come right back down in the gun and into the turret with you. So all of those are things that you remember.

M: I'm sure a lot of people got really hurt.

A: Well we, yeah, we lost a lot of people. Some of the memories are not very good. When you have buddies who start telling you to move over at the breakfast table for you for his wife to sit down or he's calling his dog, you know, that's kind of how it got 'cause –

M: It got to 'em.

A: After a while it really gets to you.

M: Were there a lot of fellows that had to be relieved?

A: No, we didn't, but when the war was over, we were just outside of Tokyo Bay going after that last battleship that the Japanese had. It was supposed to have been in Tokyo Bay. In fact, the Old Man, I call him the Old Man, the skipper of the ship, that's what we call him, the Old Man; he didn't believe that the war was over. He circled around out there for two days. He still wanted to go get that ship but finally he gave up and we came on back.

M: You mean your commander. Who was that?

A: Yeah, Kemp. He was the oldest Captain in the Navy and I can tell you some stories about him. One of 'em I'd like to tell you about before I go on. When we were firing in Iwo Jima, it had a lot of mountains. They kept calling over there that, on any of the ships when you fire, you're in rotation in shifts, and what you do you make a circle like this and all the ships from the circle are firing as they go along on beachside, they're firing. We couldn't get to the marines that the Japs had hemmed in behind the mountain. Nobody had the elevation to get to them.

M: To get over them and then –

A: To get over the mountain and get to them. We were hittin' about 18 or 19 miles from the shoot, the Missouri, all of us were doing the same thing, you know, the Texas, all of us. The Old Man, Skipper, asked permission to pull off the firing line. Nobody knew what he was going to do. Mike, he goes out and floods one side of the ship. Nobody had thought of that. He comes back in and just tears 'em up.

M: So that meant the tilt of the guns was up higher, oh my goodness! That's ingenuity isn't it?!

A: Well see they tried –

M: And they never thought about, nobody else thought about that?

A: Nobody had ever thought about it. As I understood later, they tried to make him an Admiral in Pearl Harbor at the beginning of the war, and he told them no 'cause he'd been a sailor since he was 14 years old. He told 'em if he knew anything to help his country, he wanted to stay on that ship. And he was the oldest ranking Captain in the Navy.

Well things like, when we pulled into Long Beach, there was an ammunition ship too close to what he thought they ought to be, the berth they gave us. They'd been there a week. He made 'em pull up and get out of there. He just had that ranking, see. But that's how he knew so much about –

M: So he flooded the ballast on one side –

A: Yeah, on one side and raised the elevation and the marines were calling him back just raving about how we were tearing those Japs up.

M: That was Okinawa?

A: That was Iwo Jima.

M: What kind of fire were you all getting at that point? Were you getting attacked as well with airplanes and everything coming after you?

A: Yeah, the air defense was the biggest thing. I never could figure out why they couldn't figure out the zigzag course that we ran. They'd shoot and the water would actually sometimes splash up on the ship, but they could never figure out where we were going to be.

But now the airplanes were a different story. We took two suicide planes at Okinawa and cut my guns off, that's how close it came to me. We had nine people that had run that gun and I was one of them that lived. There was only two of us that lived on that one suicide plane that came in. And the guy was only 17 years old according to his tag.

M: So you found the tag?

A: Yeah, they did. They had the tag. Air defense was the worst thing that we had to fight off.

M: So they really didn't have the ability to shoot you from the water.

A: No, they tried. They hit some, but I could never figure out why, as hot as a pursuit we'd be in, and we'd have to get up so close, why they didn't hit us. And they wouldn't. Now how they got us on the submarine deal was, we went in to load ammunition at Comarada Bay, and those little two-man submarines came in there and laid right on the bottom so you didn't pick 'em up on the radar and when we'd come out, they'd crank up and motor out with us, and then they'd drop back and fire. See, this is how they got us.

But the planes, they were coming at you so fast and they'd come out of the clouds. I always said when he'd drop out of the clouds at 400 or 500 miles an hour and hit on the level and he'd be just off the water, he'd look about like the size of that coming at you. He was the hardest one to hit, for me to hit.

M: So how many of them were you able to knock out of the air? Were you able to knock any of them out of the air? Probably a lot of them?

A: Oh yeah, we were able to knock 'em out. I knocked out several out of the air. But when they get right down there on the water running that fast, it's hard to hit 'em.

M: This is almost a ridiculous question, but do you think your experiences in World War II probably changed your life?

A: Yes I would. I started to tell you, when we came in to Honolulu, they pulled us off the ship, put us over in some islands they had in those days –

M: This was after Iwo?

A: No, this was after Okinawa and the war was over.

M: Okay. So when the war was over. So you were in the Okinawa campaign too then?

A: That was 80 days, 76 in Iwo Jima, 80 days in that one. Oh yeah, we set a record there. At Iwo Jima, we set a record of firing more ammunition than any ship had ever fired. At Okinawa, 80 straight days and nights of fighting was the longest any ship had ever been. You know, we were supposed to be relieved twice. The cruiser, St. Louis, got hit and another ship, I forget which one it was, got hit before it relieved us. You have to be on the firing four hours before you can pull out. Well they got hit before so we just had to stay, so we stayed the full 80 days and nights at Okinawa.

But anyway, when the war was over and we headed back, they stopped us at Honolulu and took us off of the ship because so many boys were cracking up. They put us on an island that wasn't populated at that time, no Hawaiians, and every other day they'd run you through this test to see whether you were getting better, and all we did was play ball and fool around out there, and then they started giving out, oh what do you call it when you pay 'em to go home and you pay 'em a dividend, what do you call that?

Anyway, they started passing that out and I told them, I said, "You let me go home. I don't want your money. I just want to go home. I'll cure myself". So she (Betty) knows, when I first came home, I'd go in the woods and stay two or three weeks by myself in Johnson Island, nobody there, just me, two horses, and three dogs, just being close to Mother Nature and that kind of a thing. That's actually how I recuperated rather than go through their treatment.

After three weeks in that recuperation camp, I just didn't think it'd do anything for me. So that's how you try to – but there again, even when we got married, which was in '49, I was supposed to have got out in '45 and they lost my papers, so it took a few weeks to get out. But anyway, after we were married, a fire whistle could go off in Dundee, and that's where we lived for the first couple of months, I'd be out in the yard, you know, just, it takes a while to get rid of all that.

M: How many folks were on the ship?

A: 2100.

M: And it stayed about like that the whole time?

A: That's what it started out to be. We didn't have near that when we got back to Hawaii. I think it was 1100 and something, maybe 1200 of us that were left on that ship.

M: Were they deaths or casualties of various kinds?

A: Some of them were alright. Some of them were moved to other ships to help them. We had a lot of burials at sea.

M: Well, you've already gone through some of the things about when you got back. The whole world had changed probably in your mind by that time. You'd only been gone about 1-1/2 years, right?

A: Well, see I went in in '43 and was supposed to have got out in November of '45. I got off of the ship in New York and we went in there for Navy Day. But when I got home, I didn't notice at that time a lot of difference in anything. The American people were so good to us when we got home. I used to comment on the fact, waiting for my papers they shipped me to Miami for a few weeks that I could hitchhike home faster than I could ride the Greyhound bus.

M: As long as you had your uniform on, yeah.

A: Oh yeah, they'd pick you up. It was unreal, it really was, how fast you could get home.

M: Was your father still alive when you got home?

A: He was still alive, yes. In fact, he lived quite a while. We ended up taking care of him.

M: Did you know Betty before you left to go in the service?

A: That first Christmas in '45 I had come home for a 30-day deal because they couldn't find my papers and I'd gone into the woods and we'd been in the woods about two weeks and then came into town to get supplies. Back in those days, you know, you'd park on the street and then get out and walk the sidewalk to get whatever supplies you wanted.

So [my brother and I] were walking down the sidewalk. They didn't have air-condition, so these stores [had their] doors open. Anyway, we were walking along the sidewalk and I looked in this dime store and its big double doors were wide open and this beautiful girl was behind the counter looking out toward, you know, and I saw this beautiful hair and you know, when you see, I grabbed my brother's arm and I said, "Whoa! I got to go back and look at this girl!" Well I did, but I didn't go on in the store. So believe it or not, a buddy of mine came in and our favorite place to meet during those days was at the drugstore in Dundee, so we met down on a Friday night and he

had a date. He said, “Come on, go with us to the movie” or someplace and I said, “No I don’t have a date”. Well his girlfriend said, “Well I know somebody we’d probably get as a blind date”, so she gets the phone and calls and lo and behold, it was [Betty]. But anyway, when we met, what was odd about it was the shirt I was wearing was the same material that her whole dress was. But anyway, that was how we met.

M: Now, your brother was in World War II also obviously.

A: Yeah, but he didn’t go overseas.

M: Where did he serve?

A: He was in Georgia and then they sent him to California and he was just fixing to leave when the war ended in Europe, so he didn’t have to go.

M: Okay. Did you make friends in your service in the war that you still keep in touch with at all? Or did you participate in any of those ship reunions?

A: I have not. In fact, we just got a letter last week. I have not gone to any of them.

M: So you really don’t keep in contact with any of those fellows?

A: I have not ever. Every year I get a letter where they are moving around the country and we should have, but we haven’t.

M: So that was 1945. I guess you kind of hit it off after that first date, I guess?

B: We did call one of your buddies while you were on the board –[New York]

A: Yeah, that’s right. When I was serving on the bank board up there, I called one of them ‘cause he was one of my favorite people when we were up there. We did do that.

M: Well, when did you decide to get married?

A: ’49. 1949. June 3, 1949.

M: Did you settle right there with your family?

A: Yeah. My whole time that I was in the service, you might say I was in the Pacific and couldn’t spend money so every two weeks, I’d draw $3.00. The rest of it I left on the books and then I’d send it home. So I saved quite a bit of money while I was in the service and we remodeled the old house that we had there and about the time we got finished remodeling it, of course I was looking for a bigger piece of land.

I had already been looking at this place over here in Lakeland and I had been looking at a place in St. Cloud on Alligator Lake. I could have got four times the amount of

property on Alligator Lake than I got over here for the same money that I had for a down payment, but we made a decision. It was made on the fact that we knew we'd probably create a family and we felt that the school system in Polk County was much better than it was over there. The second thing was Watson Clinic was the biggest and one of the finest clinics in the South for care. And the third thing was the livestock market was just being built, they hadn't even finished it, in Lakeland, and it was only four miles from where this property was. So that's why we settled in Lakeland instead of going to Alligator Lake in Osceola County and buying that property.

M: So you built your house there? Or did you stay in Dundee?

A: We stayed in Dundee to start with and there was a little 2-room log house on this property. We actually came to look at a piece of property that was on the lake and this man had owned all of this property –

M: On Lake Hancock?

A: He'd owned all the property but he had sold a piece on the lower end because it was lower and he kept the higher part. So when we went to look at that property, and we went to look at it several times, one of the times we were looking at it, when we came out, and there was no road out there, we saw this old man up there around the barn so I told her, I said, "We'll pull in here and let's ask him about this property". Well, when we got there and started talking to him and were asking about the property he said to me, "Are you interested in buying that property?" and I said, "Very much". He said, "Well I'll sell you this if you're interested". So we got to looking at that part of it, it was the higher end and the better piece of property to get into, so we ended up making a deal with him to buy him completely out.

Well, in that deal was the cows. It took us a long time to get it closed because back then you bought cows by the head not by the pound mostly. So we were trying to count the cows and we kept trying to count them and we never could count as many as he said he had. Well what the deal was, during World War II, and I found this all over, they didn't have the help in those days because there was no help around. Everybody was gone fighting the war. He didn't have the cows he thought he had so finally one day he said, "While I'll just take your count". Well I knew right then he couldn't pen 'em. He was trapping what he could get trapped.

But anyway, we bought the west side of the property, the piece right down on the lake. While we were signing the papers, the day we closed our deal, another man came in and signed a paper to buy the piece down on the lake. So he operated for a few years and then gave his cattle operation to his son because he was having trouble controlling it. It was thick down there then and they were having trouble trying to control those cattle.

M: No fences?

A: Well, we had fences but penning them and handling them, and they were registered brown cattle. He ended up giving it to his son and giving the property to his four kids and one of the sons operated it for just a few years, three or four years, and then he came to me one day and said, "Would you want to buy me out and lease the property?" and I said, "Yeah". So we did. And then we leased the property for a while then they turned around and sold the property to a developer. And the developer, it was not only him but there were three or four more involved, but the guy with the most money was out of Orlando.

They had all the streets drawn out, got all ready to start auctioning off and the guy dropped over with a heart attack. Well, those people that were left in it came to me to see if I would pick up where he was and go on with the developing. But what they didn't know, I was interested in the property but I didn't want it to be developed, but I did meet with them several times and never told them. Finally I said, "What would it take to buy you all out?" We had to pay about four or five times as much money. Property at that time, all ranch land property, was selling for $350 to $400 an acre. I ended up paying them another $2200 an acre, which was just completely out of sync with what was going on. But that's what we did to keep it from being developed.

M: What year was that, roughly?

A: That was in the '70's.

M: Yeah, we may be getting way too far ahead. We'll want to pick up on that a lot later. We're back to that log house, really. What ever became of that log house? You all never lived there did you?

B: Oh yes.

M: Oh you did? Okay. Well let's go back there. That was your early marriage years?

A: Yeah.

B: Yeah. We had our first three daughters there. Of course they were born in a hospital but we didn't build the house on the hill until Al, Jr., was born, right?

A: No Al, Jr., was born while we were still down there.

B: Then right after that maybe.

A: Yeah. What we actually did, Mike, was we had army cots that we slept on. We lived in Dundee for just a short time, just like months, three months or something.

M: At your parents?

A: No at the house we were remodeling after the –

B: It belonged to his parents.

A: Yeah, it belonged to my parents. Of course I had bought it from my Daddy, and we had done all the floors, you know that wooden floors, we'd gone and buffed them and waxed them, varnished them, whatever you call it.

M: That was kind of your project after you got out of the service?

A: Yeah. And we painted all the inside of the house. We did it ourselves.

M: Now, Betty, I don't want to interrupt here, but are you from Dundee or Davenport?

B: Davenport. Elementary and then I have an aunt in Haines City, my mother's sister -

M: You grew up there all your life then?

B: Didn't have children, so I went every weekend down there because I had my own bedroom and lake in the back to swim in. So I spent most of my time with her. And then when I went to high school, I lived there.

M: In Davenport?

B: In Haines City. Only in my early years was I in Davenport.

M: And you went to Haines City High School?

B: Mmhmm.

M: And you met, one more time, in what town was that?

A: Haines City. Yeah, we met in Haines City.

M: Now what did your parents think about this guy that was trying to get you married?

B: My aunt was very opposed, and I don't understand why because her husband was Swedish. But I guess because –

M: Do you think it was an Italian, that kind of thing?

B: She was very opposed to it. And I told him –

M: Your aunt?

B: My aunt.

M: Not your parents?

B: No, my aunt. My dad had died when I was in school at Tallahassee.

M: So you went to FSCW?

B: Yes, but I never got to know my dad. I was born in Fort Myers and then we moved in my early years to my mother's parents in Davenport. But, I guess that's why I loved him, he was my father, my brother, my friend. We had a great marriage, very great. And I -

M: What was your maiden name?

B: Johnson. And when I spelled B, as in Boy, E-L-L-O-T-T-O, I'd tell them I gave up Johnson for that. I only have one sister and when I told her who I was dating, she said, "No!"

M: She knew him?

B: Yeah, she knew him. They were in the same grade together. She said, "No! He's mean!" He's mean. And he had that reputation because he was rough and rugged and played football and you know worked cows and all this kind of stuff. But a sweet nature underneath.

I can remember sitting on the cow pens about three weeks after we were married watching him throw down cows and then over, you know catch the calves – Then so they had to throw 'em down every time and I can remember him doing that and thinking, "How can he be so rough and then be so gentle with me?" But he could.

M: Now when you got back from service, you were a great football player in high school, did you get any offers to go up to UF and play football and maybe a scholarship? Did you consider maybe going to college when you got back, like a lot of other folks did, GI Bill and all that?

A: I can tell you an unusual situation. When we were there in Norfolk, Virginia, just above that in training there was a football team created by the Navy. We had a boy named Bulldog Turner they called him out of Alabama, made All-American. We had a boy by the name of Poppler made All-American. We had a great team. In fact, we only played eight ballgames but we won 'em all. I played on that team.

M: Is this after your service or before?

A: This was right before, while I'm there in that demolition training, we played. We beat the University of Richmond. We beat Maryland. We beat the Second Air Force. We beat all of 'em. We had it going. So anyway, like I scored three touchdowns against the University of Richmond on a Sunday afternoon. So what I was going to say to you, the

Navy came after me and Poppler, that boy I told you about out of Ohio, to go to the Naval Academy. I had 24 hours. We were at Iwo Jima. I had 24 hours to decide. Well most boys would've said, "Let's get out of here" and go, but I didn't. He did and I didn't.

M: You mean to tell me in the middle of the battle –

A: In the middle of the battle, to pull me –

M: You had such notoriety at Norfolk as a football player and they'd seen you, in the middle of the battle, they come up to you and said, "Okay, boy you want to be in the Naval Academy because we want you to play football"?

A: Yeah. I could go to the Naval Academy.

M: That's unbelievable!

A: Yeah. The other kid did. He went home. But I stayed.

M: Well, but what's even more unbelievable is why you didn't do it! Why didn't you do it?

B: Cows.

A: Well you had to sign up for six years, and I wanted to go back to my cows.

M: So you knew that right when you went into the Navy, and none of that changed your mind.

A: None of that changed my mind. So when you asked me when I got home, no I was not interested –

M: You could've been like Jimmy Carter, you could've gone in the Naval Academy and then gone back after your time and go back to the cows, but things would've been a little different maybe.

B: You did have offers from Miami to play.

A: Yeah, when I got home, yeah. In fact, the coach came up to see me at Dundee to go to Miami, University of Miami, but I just didn't want to go. But I could've gone if I'd have wanted to go.

M: That's interesting.

A: And I had a good time playing up there. We did well, you know, it was a fun time.

M: Okay, well let's go back to that log house then. You just lived there I guess right after you were married and then you just started working the cows, is that correct?

A: Yeah, but our philosophy, Mike, was always that we always tried to make enough money working for somebody else in whatever we had to do rather than when we sold a cow to have to live off of the cow income so we could put that back into the cows.

M: Oh, I see.

A: And that's how we grew. For instance, when we first got there, we had two army cots and we would come over here and see about the cows, but we'd do it when they had sale days. We'd go up and work for the livestock market on sale days. She'd work in the office and I'd work scales. And we would work during that time and then from there, I also had a truck and I started contracted hauling. And then, before I knew it, I was buying cows for Armor & Company out of Tifton, Georgia, and then got their contract to move all the cattle to Tifton.

What I'm relating to is we always tried to make money from some other source and keep putting it back into the cows. That's how we grew. That's how we spread in those days.

M: So you did that. You started out with how many cows?

A: I had 75 head when I got home. I had started off, bought my first cow at 11 years old. I paid $20 for that cow. I was making 50 cents a day and had to work 40 days on my hands and knees unwrapping buds at the Glen St. Mary's Nursery on Saturdays to pay for that cow. That's how I started out. But by the time I left to go into war, I had a sizeable herd. I don't remember, like 45 or 50 cows, but when I came home, my daddy had kept them and took care of them, and I had 75 head. So that's what I started out with when I first came home.

I went to State Bank in Haines City. The banker's name, we called him Jay Poppa Smith and, believe it or not, this was big money back in those days, but I had my plan, I'd worked on my plans for months before I got out of the service, and I went to him and borrowed $35,000 on those cows. And they didn't loan money on cows back in those days. He let me have it on my football reputation --

M: Now what year was that?

A: That was in '49.

M: Well, World War II also had something to do with it I bet.

A: Not in '49. In '46.

M: Yeah, World War II had something to do with that I think.

A: Yeah, it could be. Yes, I imagine. But anyway, that's how I got started.

M: How did the children begin to come in? When was your first child born?

A: Well we planned that too. Believe it or not, before we were married, we says #1 we wasn't going to have or try not to have any children before three years to be sure we had a solid marriage. And we planned and she wanted to have 'em kinda together, so we planned and we had one every two years, three girls in a row, and then the third girl, when she was born, she tried to do too much. That's one thing she didn't let happen, although we lived in the country and you know we were isolated.

Mike, it's hard for people to realize, there was no road out there. Let me tell you how isolated we were, when we first went there, and we didn't know it for awhile, but our big thing then was we'd come to town once a week……One Saturday night we were goin' back and we'd made a little dirt road down to this log house and I saw tracks in the road where somebody had walked. Well, they was only goin' one way and that was toward us. About halfway down to the house the tracks left the road. So I told her, I said, "Somebody's walked down here." But anyway we didn't think a whole lot about it and then about three weeks later, we saw 'em again. Each time there was no return. Well, that got my concern. Come to find out on our property, right in front of where the ranch house is now was a little spring and this man had a nine barrel moonshine still.

B: But he had 11 kids.

A: He had 11 kids. Well, when I caught him, you know, he said, "You gonna turn me in?" and of course, I talked to him a little bit and found out he had 11 kids and found out that what he was doin' was just a side income. I said, "No, I'll give you two months to get it out. I don't want you to get caught, but get it out." And so that's what he did.

M: So you were living right on the property at that time. So that was pretty amazing that he was doing that at the same—

A: Well, that's how thick and isolated it was.

M: Would it have been as much as a mile from where you lived?

A: Half a mile. But he was slippin' in there, see, at night and he had had the still in there and evidently Mr. Rhodes, the man we bought the property from, his home was in Auburndale so he really didn't know what was going on on his property.

M: So how long do you think he'd been doing that?

A: Quite a while.

M: How long was it after you bought the property and started living there that you noticed all that?

A: It probably was six, eight months.

M: Did you have any idea that the other fellow knew about it? The person you bought it from?

A: No sir, I don't think he knew.

M: How long did you live in the log house?

A: We lived in the log house until [we] moved up there to the new house in '70 or '71.

B: Kelly was born in '54. She was in junior high or high school. That log house was really a little weekend getaway for the man who owned it in Auburndale who was in the building business.