

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: AL BELLOTTO
INTERVIEWER: JAMES M. DENHAM
LOCATION: LAKELAND, FLORIDA
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M=James M. Denham (Mike)

A= Al Bellotto

B=Betty Bellotto

M: Today is August 16 and I am once again at the home of Al Bellotto and Betty Bellotto on Fairmont Avenue here in Lakeland, and we're here to resume our discussions of Mr. Bellotto's oral history. Mr. Bellotto, good morning.

A: Good morning, sir.

M: Last time we were talking about your early childhood years and this time we'd like to kind of resume with that as well and pick up some of the topics we didn't cover the other day. What were some of the first jobs you did as a kid growing up, of course when you had some time off from your father's chores?

A: Well probably what would be interesting is how I got started out in the world of trying to be in business or raise money or which way I was headed and it would be interesting to know that my first investment, I borrowed five dollars from my uncle because my dad didn't believe in chickens, and I borrowed five dollars and bought 10 banty, colored banty chickens. You could sell them for fifty cents a piece, those bright colored ones, so that was really my first venture in business. And I had those for a while and then from there I started raising rabbits, you could sell those for seventy-five cents a piece, and I sold those for a while.

That was along about the time I was nine, 10 years old, and when I got to be 11, that's when I bought my first cow. I paid twenty dollars for that cow and I was making fifty cents a day on Saturdays working for the Glen St. Mary Nursery, unwrapping buds, so it took me 40 days to pay for that one cow. But that's how I got started out.

But the first outside job that I had was peddling Grit papers in Dundee. Of course to deliver the Grit paper, I didn't have a bicycle, but my granddaddy had given me a big billy goat and my daddy made a little two-wheeled cart to go behind that goat and he made the harness, and I would put my Grit papers in that cart and I would make my delivery. I always came on Friday, and if I remember right it was a once-a-month paper, but I would deliver those papers and wherever I ended up, I had the papers in [the cart] and when I finished delivering the papers, I'd get in the cart and ride back home. And if I didn't get 'em all delivered on Friday, I'd

finish delivering them on Saturday. But that was my really first outside job that I had.

M: So you had a list of people who were subscribers –

A: Right.

M: Did you pick up the money as you gave them out?

A: No, I'd have to go back around and pick up the money later. But that was my first outside job.

M: As you were growing up into the 1930's, the dipping issue came into being in the early '30's. Can you explain your memories of that?

A: '31, '32. Yeah, we were on compulsory dipping, which we had to dip every 21 days. That's quite a memory for me because I got out of school every third Friday and Monday to be able to help gather the cows. Back in those days there was not a fence law so our cattle, like everybody else's roamed on a lot of wide area and we had to gather these cattle.

First, one of the things, back in those days, Dad didn't have enough money to buy a saddle so my brother and I rode our horses bareback. But we gathered the cattle and then if you missed some of the cattle, of course they'd change color sometimes, like if you painted maybe this week a green color and then in three weeks you'd paint with a yellow or red. So then they had Range Riders, what they'd call range riders would come through the territory and if you missed a cow, those Range Riders would pick her up, bring her to the vat, and dip her themselves and paint her, but they'd charge you a dollar a head to do that.

M: So were these State employees?

A: Yeah, these were State employees. That's what they called 'em, Range Riders. But that compulsory dipping went on for two or three years, I can't remember now, 'cause I was just really young.

M: Of course this would have probably almost finished out by that time, but did you ever experience any of the drives or hear about the drives from, say, the Osceola, Orange, Polk County areas down to Punta Rassa or was that pretty much before your time and your father's time?

A: Probably the nearest that I got to that was, back in those days there was not a lot of cash money so they'd trade labor and we used to help the Keens, which were down towards Lake Rosalee and Kissimmee River, and we helped other people, the Stewarts, Bill Stewart and Cup Stewart, Mark and Brand. Arthur Bissett was the guy that was more or less the foreman and we would help 'em

work and brand but probably the closest we got to those drives is, some things I do remember, one of the Keens bought Ray Snell's cattle over at Winter Haven and we helped him gather those cattle and drive 'em right down the Winter Haven, Dundee Road, and you'd just get in the middle of the road and you might drive 'em 45 minutes. Cars had to wait on you and then you'd push the cows off the road and then they'd go on by, but we drove those cows back over next to the Kissimmee River.

Then there was a couple of times that we'd gather cattle over in Kissimmee River and brought 'em down Hwy. 60 to Hesperides there at Lake Wales to load 'em on the train to go to Tampa to Lykes Brothers. Then later, after Betty and I got married, I had bought some cattle and had pasture up around Davenport and we'd drive from there, which was 25 miles, down to a pasture that we had leased at Lake Hatchnehaw, so we had some long drives during those times also. Our biggest drive was around 1946 when we drove 4500+ cows from North Hillsborough to Joshua Island in Osceola County.

M: Did you ever employ cow hunters?

A: Oh yes. Yeah, a lot of times, like when we'd make these drives, we would have to employ four or five of 'em.

M: Of course we're talking about your dad, really, I guess now.

A: Yeah.

B: But he didn't run them.

A: But there was a lot of exchange in labor. For instance, I never could understand it. I hit on this the other day, but I never could understand why, like some of the cattlemen were bigger and we'd have to spend maybe two weeks helping them, or three weeks, and they'd only come to our place three or four days, you know, and I'd always say to Dad, "This doesn't seem right!" But that wasn't a problem back in those days. You just didn't look at it that way. It was the fact of the availability of having those people when you needed 'em and they were cow people and knew what to do.

M: To go back to the dipping, how often would you dip 'em?

A: Every 21 days. Compulsory. It was a State law. We had to dip everything every 21 days, and you had a certain date that you were issued [and] you had to dip on those days.

M: What was the process like for mixing up the potions and the solutions and all that? How did that work? It was probably pretty toxic stuff wasn't it? That wouldn't go over today really. As far as all the environmental stuff.

A: Oh no. You couldn't do that. But fillin' that vat with that ol' pitcher pump and then every so often you had to pump that sucker out. You pumped it on the ground, you know, but it took us about two days to part of a third day sometimes to pump that vat out, the same with fillin' it back up, with a pitcher pump, 'cause you didn't get that much water on a shallow well.

M: So what kind of solution did you have, a mix, a powder, barrels of stuff?

A: Yeah, as I remember, they had 5-gallon cans of dip already real strong, oh it would smell.

M: Wasn't it arsenic based?

A: Yeah, I think it was. Of course it's not legal today.

M: Did you have to buy the stuff or did they supply it to you free of charge?

A: No, the State furnished it.

M: Did it make the cows sick?

A: No. It didn't seem to make 'em sick.

M: Of course you didn't let 'em drink it, and they wouldn't drink it, I guess.

A: No, but we had to jump 'em through the vat.

M: With the dipping came the necessity of fences, I would imagine, because you had to segregate the cows and pen 'em up and that kind of thing. How did that work?

A: That, and they wanted to get 'em off the roads. That was one of the things in some of the areas, you know. Even the cattle in some of your lower areas are naturally goin' to go to the high ground and they'd go up on the shoulder of the road to sleep at night. It was dangerous and the people wanted to get 'em off. And if I remember right, it was in 1936 that they passed the fence law. We might have to look 'at up but if I remember right, that's when it was passed.

M: Well, actually, there could've been some laws appropriate to that, but the documented things I've read are the statewide law, which was a big, big to-do in 1949 with Gov. Fuller Warren. But I would imagine that there would've had to have been specific sections of the State that would have certain laws appropriate to them perhaps. But I know the statewide law, the universal statewide law, was '49.

A: Well I know that '36, the reason I go back to that, [is that] we started fencing all of our property –

M: Was that something that you were happy about? Do you remember your father talking about the fact that it's compulsory but we need to do it anyway? It's a good idea? Of course I'm sure people did it before they had to.

A: Yes. But our property that [Dad] had bought earlier up there, that part of it [that] was in Johnson Island and came out toward Loughman to where now Hwy. 17-92 is, we fenced all that. We started in '36 fencin' all that. In fact, the other memory that I have is we had spent most of the summer on fencing a lot that property and then in one night we had some people come and cut between every post because they only owned 160 acres and 700 and something cattle, so those cattle were grazing on our land at that time. Of course, when we started fencing our land in, that cut their grass out. So this is what happened. There was some of that went on in those days.

M: Without going into a whole lot of detail, if you would like to talk about it, what did you know about the fence war down in Polk County with the Allbritton family? You would have been a really little boy at that time, I think.

A: Yes I was, but I remember that there were some people killed south of Mulberry.

M: And it had to do with phosphate land too, didn't it? The phosphate company started fencing.

A: Yeah. Right. They started fencing and the way I understood it was, these people owned a lot of cattle and they had gone and cut fence a couple of times before this happened, but anyway, there was two or three of 'em got killed one night down there over this fence law.

George Mann, Buck Mann's daddy, started dipping some of his cattle. That vat believe it or not would be right in the middle of Hwy. 27 where Dundee, Winter Haven Road crosses Hwy. 27, if you went about 50 feet straight north where Hwy. 27 crosses, that's where the vat was. So George Mann had Buffalo Ford and some of that down towards Waverly. They'd bring their cattle up there and dip 'em at that time in that vat. Claude Paige, another big cow man out of Bartow, he was another one. He didn't have cattle up there but the story I wanted to tell you was, he bought some cattle from the Keens.

The Keens had Baahma Island that's in Kissimmee Lake and they had gotten my brother and I to go help them on driving those cattle and there was probably nine or ten of us that's down there and we gathered the cattle off the island, and back in those days, you swam those cattle, which was about a mile and a quarter. You didn't have a barge to haul 'em out with that they got today. So Claude

Paige had bought 'em by the head. In those days that's the way most of 'em were sold.

But anyway, I believe it was Paul Keen that owned the cattle and on the third day we had driven 'em over, swam 'em, and gotten 'em over on the land side, and they had a fence that was a small crevasse to hold the cattle 'til we let the cattle go through the gate to count 'em. So there's like 300 and something, around 300 head of these cattle. So the idea was, we had to have somebody to count 'em. Well, the Keen boys, and there were four or five of the Keen boys at that time, I think Allison had already moved up around Apopka but the other four was there, Barney and Roy and Paul and Sam, but anyway, "Who's goin' to count the cows through the gate?" They didn't want to lose a horse, in other words a rider, so the Keens were always having black boys with them in the back of the truck for openin' the gates and this, that and the other. So anyway they started talkin' about it and this one –

M: I think Barney called 'em "Smokies".

A: Yeah, that was the other thing. They never knew their names, but they'd call 'em all "Smokies". They'd say, "Hey Smoky! How 'bout openin' that gate!" or so-and-so. Well anyway, they were talkin' about it and this one said, "Well we got to have somebody countin'" and this one little Smoky held up his hands and he was probably 10 or 11 years old and held up his hands and said, "I can count!" And he said, "You sure?" and he said, "Oh yeah, I can count", and he said, "Alright Smoky". So just two posts down, there was one of those big lighterd stumps right in the fence, so he told him, "You get up on this stump now and we're goin' to bring four or five head through each time and you count 'em". So we would.

They held the cattle up and we'd go in there and we'd cut out four or five and we'd bring 'em up. Well I happened to be on the left side next to where this little black boy was settin' on top of the stump countin', and I rode by him two or three times and after about the third or fourth time I rode by him, it sounded like he was singin' a song, and I couldn't figure out and I started listenin' to him. So I rode back up to Mr. Keen and I said, "Mr. Keen", I said, "are you sure that boy can count?" And he said, "Well I guess he can, he said he could", and I said, "Well you take my side. When you get up there, you need to listen to him". So we did and when we put the cattle through the gate, I had ridden up to where Barney was and he said, "Smoky!", he said, "how are we doin' on our numbers?", he said, "How many have you counted?" He said, "Mr. Keen" he said, "I got 10 fingers and I got 10 toes and I don't know how many nuddin's I got but it's anuddin and anuddin and anuddin and anuddin and anuddin and anuddin".

We turned all these cattle back. We must have had nearly 100 head by then turned out. And they was out into the wide open area by then. We didn't have

any fence law so I mean you're talkin' about miles where these cattle were, so we had to spend days to gather all these cattle up.

B: I bet he could paddle one little Smoky.

A: Anuddin and anuddin and anuddin and anuddin.

M: Well maybe he should've started counting them over, you know, started all over again, kind of, well you've got three all overs or whatever. The last time we were together, you talked a little bit about the Keen family. What kind of fellows were they?

A: At that time, I don't think there was one of those big guys, the smallest one I think weighed about 235, a big rugged kind of guy, country as cornbread, you know, good as gold. I mean, they really were just as fine a people, but they were rugged individuals, real good cow people, had all that country down towards Kissimmee River and Lake Rosalee and Kissimmee Lake. But they were fine people.

M: Well, Mr. Bellotto, we're about to get into your early marriage years, but before you went off to World War II, were there any teachers that you can remember that particularly inspired you and helped build your character?

A: My high school football coach, Farnette Crockett, had a lot to do I think with inspiring me to take some of the strongest positions if I hadn't done that. He was such a great coach. Case in point, back in those days, and a lot of people don't understand this, but you had the gas shortage and of course I'd ride the bus to high school, which was seven miles from Dundee and we practiced 'til it was about dark, in fact one time we took a shower and came out and the moon [was] out.

I'd walk up to the road to hitchhike home and of course with the gas shortage bein' on, I'd start walkin' toward home and a lot of times I'd walk all the way home. We played on Friday night, and that was not a day I had to do that, but on the practice days, probably one time out of the four, I might catch a ride. A lot of time, when he thought we had done something wrong in practice, he'd have us run extra laps around the field after practice, and of course that'd take us later, but he would act like he was upset with us, but yet when I'd come out of the shower, a lot of times he'd hand me the key to his car just to drive home at night. So, you know, he was just a great guy. He was a great inspiration to me and the things that I had to deal with in those younger years and also my living through in World War II. I thought he had a lot to do with me bein' here I guess.

M: Last time, we covered your World War II experiences and I'm sure you remember some of the things that you mentioned there. Are there any World

War II experiences that you'd like to talk about that you may not have remembered to talk about last time?

A: I don't think.

M: The commander of your ship, the New York, his name one more time was?

A: Christian Kemp.

M: Of course, we've just commemorated this weekend V-J Day and there's been a lot of material on television. Would you say that World War II really shaped you or shaped your character, made a lasting impact on your life?

A: Yes I would, in a lot of ways. One of the things that I think it helped me to understand [was] the feelings of other people and living at such close quarters and defending each other and those type things, learning to get along. It had a lot to do. I think also it had a lot to do with probably making me a lot closer to my Maker, the blessings, the things that I was taught, you know.

I think about so many times and I never talked this much and I don't think I've even talked this to my wife, but the approach that my granddaddy had when we were hunting, certainly they shared a lot of consideration defending our ship and me doing what I did with my gun.

A case in point, a lot of people don't know this, but when you're hunting, if you get into a flock of wild turkeys, what [Granddaddy] taught me was, [if] you start to shoot one out of them more than one, try to shoot the one in the back. A lot of people'd say, "Well I'd shoot the one in the front", but that's not the way he taught me and there's a reason behind that. If you shoot the one in the back, the other turkeys, I don't care how far they are out front, they'll come back to it. I used some of that same philosophy when I was in World War II. That's not good to say.

M: When you were a gunner.

A: See the Japs at Iwo Jima and Okinawa in caves, they'd come out and try to move from one place to the other and that's where I'd use some of that strategy with that 40-mm gun. Also, we were told and taught two things we didn't do, we respected the Red Cross and graveyards. We didn't fire at any of the cemeteries.

Well when we got to Iwo Jima, we found out that was not a true story because Japs, and [in] Okinawa, in fact they were worse in Okinawa, they would actually look like it was a graveyard and it was, but they were firing from behind those tombstones and they were using a lot of those as buffers. So we had to change our philosophy on what to do.

M: Were you ever able to go on shore after some of those battles or did you just stay on the ship the whole time?

A: On the ship.

M: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about as far as World War II goes? Any other thoughts before we move on?

A: No. I was watching [the programs] on the TV and it was very timely that they were talking about initiation of Leyte, Luzan on the news and the tail end of that. They were talking about the Japanese trying to run a decoy toward Alaska and we were one of the ships that ended up chasing them in that deal. Didn't ever get up with 'em in that particular case, you know. But we were watchin' that the other night.

M: When you return home, it takes you a little time to kind of find your wits about you again and you make your adjustments to civilian life and then you meet the future Mrs. Bellotto, and then you decide to have a family, or at least decide to get married. I guess we left off last time in that log house. Can you reflect a little bit on what it was like to live in that house, maybe the first 10 years after you were married? That would have been through the 1950's, correct?

A: That's correct. Probably a lot of people couldn't understand this, but [in] talkin' about that log house, you could watch the moon out through the cracks in logs, but we started out with a two-room house here and she and I slept on an army cot. Then when the first baby was born, we just added another little room to the house and that's kind of the way it went for several years there as the babies were born. We would just try to add a little bit more space until we finally, in '69, we built the ranch house up on the hill where each one of 'em had their own bedroom.

But yeah, of course she didn't have a washing machine. She had to hang out [everything] on the clothesline. [I don't know] how she did all of what she did to help me and do the things she did, but anyway, we'd always had to ride a bus to school and that was one of the things that she wanted to be sure our children didn't have to do, so at one time she had three girls in three different schools, so she was runnin' a taxi service more or less. But anyway we got through those years.

M: During the whole 1950's, can you summarize I guess your operations in the cattle, and also the other things you were involved in during your first decade there at the ranch?

A: Well our philosophy that early was, if we could, we wanted to try to make outside money some way to keep from having to draw out of the income from the

cattle. We wanted to put that money back in to try to grow the size of our operation. So in the early years, we worked for the livestock market on sale days-Betty worked in the office and I worked the scales. And then I started buying cattle and selling cattle and started hauling cattle for other people. And we ended up with an office with five people working and at one time had 35 trucks running all the way to the west coast, all the way to Canada. We were haulin' for other people in that same time we were haulin' cattle that we'd bought.

M: What were some of the contacts and market contacts in those early years?

A: Well we had contacts. One of the best one was, I can't even remember his name, he was in Oklahoma. It doesn't come up right now. And Dwight Crum was one of 'em that we hauled a lot of cattle for. Mainly the Hootens from out of Texas.

M: Would these be breed cattle or would they be for slaughter for beef?

A: They were stock for cattle, they were really heavy calves mainly and then we got to movin' light calves.

M: And you were supplementing their herds then? That's why they were buying them?

A: They would buy 'em and take 'em out there and put 'em on rye grass and then by the time they got 'em up to feed lot size, in other words they'd take cattle 400 or 500 pounds out there and grow 'em 'til they were 750 and then go into the feed lots with 'em. Of course what that's doin' is takin' 'em to where the grain is, Florida bein' a grain deficit state. That was what's always been the challenge is movin' our cattle from here out there. That's where our market is even today is tryin' to move to where the grain is to finish the cattle off.

M: As time went on and your family got larger and you got settled into your place there, I would imagine opportunities came along that presented themselves for you to purchase more land adjacent to your place. Can you go into that aspect of things?

A: Yes. Of course as I've talked about earlier, that whole piece of property, part of it down on Lake Hancock, that we'd really came to look at the first time, was sold to the Griffin family while we were closing out this deal. And they started with registered cattle down there but it was rough country at that time and they had quite a time. Anyway, they ended up selling it to a developer.

M: How many acres would there have been there at that time?

A: There were 835 acres at that time, and we had 500 acres at that time. So we were very interested but they sold it to a developer at a higher price and then the

man that had the most money, there was like three or four of 'em invested in the development and they had already laid out the roads and started layin' it out and blockin' it off to be sold, and the man out of Orlando dropped over with a heart attack. So the other people financially could not do what they wanted to do so they came to me to see if I'd pick up his part of the interest in the investment and in time, we started negotiating for us to try to buy it and I realized, you know, that we were going to have to pay way above the normal land prices for ranch land.

So we ended up buying it to keep it from being developed and also to use it in our operation. In the '50's, we spent a lot of those days trying to improve the land that we had in ditching and canaling and trying to control the water situation to harness it in the canal, and we ended up havin' to buy a dragline and do that.

M: At the time you bought that extra piece, did they have cattle that they sold you as well?

A: Yeah, we bought the cattle that were on there and equipment that they had that was on there, a tractor, some choppers, and that kind of stuff. We did buy the equipment that was there and the cattle.

M: When was your first child born?

A: '52.

M: And then the next one came?

A: '54. Then '56 and then '64 was it?

B: Eight years after Chris was born.

A: That would be '64 Al, Jr.

M: So obviously that took a lot of your time. Were they involved in the process, in the cattle, did they have a role to play in all of that even though they were girls? I shouldn't say that, but, primarily girls anyway.

A: Yeah, but let me say this. They had to get up 4:30 every morning when we worked cows. They had to help us pin cows and of course there again, this is what most cow people do, I mean, they use their family labor 'cause they can't afford to pay for 'em. During all those days, there wasn't a world of money to be made in the cow business. You made a livin', you had other possibilities of what you could do, but mainly, if you were a good operator, you tried to improve your land so one day you might sell a little piece of it.

For instance, when we saw the family building, we tried to figure out a way to have some security when they got to college, and that's how we started in the

citrus business. Along about '59 or '60, we planted our first 10 acres of citrus grove to have some other return besides the cattle business. And that's the way we got started in the citrus business.

B: And we planted the trees.

A: Yeah, and we planted the trees.

M: When was it that you began to get involved in both state organizations, cattle associations, but also in the banking side of things?

A: In the cattle operation, it really started in 19 and 57. I believe, well I know, I think it was '57 or '58, I think it was '57, Donald McClain from Bartow was president of the Polk County Cattleman's Association and he's the one who got me interested. And then from there, Charlie Lykes is the one that got me involved in the State Cattleman's Association. And as I got involved in both of 'em, I began to realize if you were gonna be a good cow man, you had to come to town, and [if] you had problems that needed to be solved, you had to start lookin' at politics and government. And that's how I began to get more involved.

And then as we grew, more and more I realized, and back in those days, bankers didn't want to lend you money on just cows, so that's how I got involved in Farm Credit because with a little bit of dirt put up for collateral so to speak, you could borrow quite a bit of money on cows, and commercial banks didn't want to do that. And then commercial banks were bad about gettin' in and gettin' out about the time when you thought you were rockin' along real good, whether you made your payments or didn't make your payments sometime they'd call you in and ask you if you could refinance with somebody else.

And I realized and found that Farm Credit was formed in 1916, just for this purpose, that they needed a financing unit for agriculture to be sure to keep the farmers and ranchers in business, and this is what's been the strength of farm credit. And actually, I think a lot of the strength of the agriculture system that's been so great for the United States all these years has been Farm Credit.

M: Now is Farm Credit nationally sanctioned by the United States Congress?

A: Yes it was.

M: I guess they would have State divisions. Okay, we were talking about your flying up to Columbia, South Carolina.

A: Right. That was short-lived. Mr. Darr said to me one day, he said, "Al, I think you're the person that can help us put the land bank and production credit together. You could be a cross-over director to get this done". So anyway, with some strategy that he had and had passed on to me, and me being involved in

other associations, Farm Bureau, the Cattleman's Association, and Water Soil Conservation, he thought I would be the one that might pull this together. So we did. We finally got the two associations to merge. We put five bank boards together here in Central Florida. One of 'em was out of Tampa, it was a Land Bank. In Lakeland and the Lakeland area we had the Land Bank and Production Credit, two boards. In Orlando, they had the Land Bank and the Production Credit, two different boards. But we were able to unite all of those five together into one association.

M: That would've been quite an undertaking.

A: Oh it was.

M: And a lot of phone calls and a lot meetings and a lot of –

A: A lot of understanding. A lot of leadership.

M: How did you manage to do that? Was that a salary position?

A: Well you get a per diem that they pay you on the meetings for each meeting you go to or have. That's the way you get compensated.

M: It sounds like a fulltime job though with all of the phone calls and hours and meetings.

A: Well, it was a lot of time but when it got to more than one time we did that and then I ended up gettin' elected then, the bank really got in some trouble on some Land Bank loans that they had made and we ended up having to take part of our revenues to Columbia, South Carolina to salvage. Because of that, I took a pretty strong stand on some issues and got elected to the Bank Board in Columbia, South Carolina, so now I'm serving here on this bank, the local bank, which was Central Florida Farm Credit, and ended up to be chairman of the old Columbia Bank Board, which covered the four states. Then, while there, we ended up merging with some other bank associations, the production credit side out of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. We merged with part of Louisville, who went under on a financial situation, and we merged with part of those states, and then we ended up merging with Baltimore, so now we're talkin' about 13 states and Puerto Rico. So then I was elected chairman of the Ag First Board, the Ag First, and from there got elected to the funding board in New York, which sells all the paper for Farm Credit for all the United States. So when I got to be in those positions, I'm spending about a third of my time in Farm Credit. I was making a little bit more at that time.

M: So all that was unsalaried? There was no salary?

A: Oh there was salary.

M: So you actually had an employment with them?

A: Yeah, this was part of that side deal that our strategy was that we don't take money out of the cattle industry.

M: So you really kind of worked that out and sought that actually as an employment.

A: Yeah, right, that's the way it was.

M: When did that begin as far as a salary?

A: Well the salary actually started when I started down here on the local level. Each time we met we got paid per diem. And then, when I got elected to Columbia, of course, for a while we had our own plane and they'd pick me up down here and then they'd pay the hotel room and the food bill and so much a day, and that grew. And [it was] the same way with New York. And we got to fly, and I got to fly into New York, [and] of course they'd pay it all. And I'm getting insurance and that kind of thing. So that was the side income that came in.

M: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was your opinion of things. When we think about cattle and cattlemen, we think about independence, you know, "we're on our own" and all that kind of stuff. Was it hard to get people to break that idea saying, "Well we need this organization because we need to be organized and we need to work together"? Was that hard to sell to some of the cattlemen? Did they want to not participate? Was that something you just had to explain? Or was it difficult to get them to understand how important this was?

A: Some of the cattlemen probably wouldn't like this but I've said it many times. I've said it several times in meetings and when I was standing up at the microphone. Cow people are being so independent or probably people don't understand 'em because they're independent because they've got to fight the weather, the rain, they have no assurance of what their crop's going to return them, what their returns are going to be, and as I said, if they didn't go to town, they're gonna' be taxed out. You know when you go through the whole arena, you realize, and I've said this to 'em, you've got to be the most aggravating son of a gun in the world to be able to survive and it's the truth, Mike.

M: And you can't do it alone.

A: No. And you've got to be, I mean you've got to be strong. You've really got to be strong, and you've got to have a little bit of aggravation in ya' or you're not goin' survive. You can't stand up under the pressure. So when you go to talk to 'em, and this is the reason it's always hard to bend them because they goin' do it

their way, I mean that's what it gets down to. So just like in the check off. It had failed twice.

Well, Charlie Lykes and Bud Adams, Gilbert Tucker, and some of them came to me and said, "Al, if there's anybody can pull this off, you can be it", and I say that not puttin' roses on myself but, I evidently did some things and I always worked on the grassroots level. I always felt like when you went into a project, most projects are not any good if you don't have unity and support from your people, so I started off in my little bit of thing when I started off trying to lead, that's the way I always tried to do. I've got to get all these people in my court.

Well I was pretty successful in pulling off some things that I pulled off over the years, so they came to me and said, "Al, you need to pick this up and see if you can get it turned. We have failed". So that's how I went back in as chairman of the Beef Council the second time in '86, I believe it was. I'd been chairman in the '70's, early '72, is when I first went in when it was falling apart on a volunteer basis of 10 cents a head on the market. Two or three of 'em had pulled out and this, that and the other, and gotten into it, so the man who was chairman at that time said, "I'm not doin' anything. We need to get another one". Well that's when the cattlemen wanted me to come in and I did, and I got that turned around.

M: Can you summarize the check-off, what it did, and why people might have opposed it.

A: Well at the time it was created it was a 10-cents-a-head volunteer contribution. When you sold an animal, you donated 10 cents to go in and that was supposed to be for promotion.

M: For the industry as a whole.

A: For the industry as a whole. Well the cow people who stay in the country most of the time and don't come to town too often, they were more prone to not understand that there was anything being done, so I had to get out and start tellin' 'em some of the things and promoting the ideas. So I did that in the '70's and kind of got it back on track. Then we did the compulsory thing, mandatory by going through Congress, where everybody gives a dollar. In other words they take a dollar when you sell an animal at the market; they take a dollar a head.

M: Was this a state law or a federal law?

A: It was a federal law. But we had trouble trying to get there. People in Florida and a lot of other states were against it. And that's when Charlie Lykes and Bud Adams and them came to me and said, "Al, you've had such a grassroots relationship, we feel like if there's anybody can pull it off, you can". Well I knew right up front writing letters and printing in a magazine wasn't gonna get it done.

So what I did, I traveled all over the state, went to some of the biggest strongest leaders in the state and I took 'em county by county, and I'd go to 'em and if there was say 10 in Polk County, I'd find out who was the strongest leaders, that was the first thing. I'd go right to their ranches, to their houses, and talk to 'em and explain to 'em and show 'em. Well we ended up; we were the second in the United States. We had 95.8% support.

M: Where did the money go directly into?

A: Half of it stays here at our local Florida Beef Council in Kissimmee and the other 50 cents goes into the National [Beef Council]. And I contribute, I really do, Mike, I think that what has [sustained] pricing in the last year and a half or two years when we're getting better prices than we've ever gotten has been because of the check-off system.

A lot of the people still don't know today why it's happening. And here's what's happened. In fact, I was the initiator for the "Know Your Beef" check-off that's still runnin' at Gainesville at the University of Florida and I can get into that later, but the cattlemen didn't know enough to know what was being done. What's brought this about today in a better market is that fact that some of the things that we found out through experimental things that now they're selling some of these cuts of meat that was going into the hamburger at a low price, now are different cuts of, I've forgotten what the names of 'em are to tell you the truth, I hadn't been in it lately.

But anyway, there's some low grades of steak cuts that are being sold at a much higher price. What it's done, it's added about 50 or 60 dollars to every calf that's sold in Florida because these cuts of meat are being sold at a higher level in the store and it's nothing in the world but the check-off money has done that through research.

M: So the check-off money goes into research at University of Florida and other places?

A: Yeah, they have a board that oversees that to guide where to spend it, for promotion, and whatever, TV, you know, "Beef, It's What's for Dinner?" That's out of check-off. That's all check-off. But anyway, we voted it back in.

Now, there's always people who never, and I tell 'em they never come to town often enough, they really don't, because they don't understand. We had a couple guys that was elected to our board here lately. This was in the last two years, and boy they were hell-bent against the check-off system. I finally got 'em to go listen in Kissimmee about five or six months ago and they heard this guy come in and explain to 'em.

Boy I mean they're true supporters now, but they were just staunch against it, hard against it, 'cause they didn't understand. But now they're a different story.

M: Who would you say, in your activities in the '50's and '60's and '70's, and even '80's, were some of the most supportive political leaders that you interacted with in terms of helping you do some of the things that you've been able to accomplish? State level or national level.

A: Well, I think state level you'd certainly have to give a nod to Fred Jones. Fred Jones was probably, in my book, one of the most common horse-sense guys that we ever had. I remember, I invited Beverly Burnsed the first time she ever sat on a bale of hay, we had a political meeting at the ranch and I put on a barbecue. Beverly was strong. Of course I had a good rapport with Lawton Chiles. He was very strong.

This goes a way back; I had a good one with Harry King. Mr. King, an attorney and state senator was a good guy. And the things that I went to him with of concern in agriculture, he always seemed to be able to analyze and see through that and represent at the right place where he could. I'm sure I'm missing some people. Mr. Peterson, Jay Peterson's dad. Mr. Peterson was one of the idols that I always felt like, and I did, I went to him with different things that I thought I could see.

M: So he was your congressman? Until the '70's right?

A: Yeah. I'm not talking about Curtis now.

M: Right. Jay's father?

A: No, it wasn't his father.

M: Okay.

A: You remember Jay Peterson?

M: No I didn't know him.

A: Jay was Lawton's attorney.

M: Right, of course. I know about him but I never was able to meet him.

A: Jay was the first attorney that I had in '49 here in Lakeland. But anyway, it was his daddy and the reason I knew his daddy was because his daddy was one of 'em that helped my daddy finish off his last immigrant papers.

M: Yeah, I was right. He was congressman. Elected in '32 I think and served until into the '70's, is that right?

A: Yeah. He was a great guy. I had a lot of respect for him as a kid growing up. Then I got to know Jay and I still know Mr. Peterson, even during those days I respected him. I'm trying to remember – of course, Spessard Holland was another one that I felt like was very true-blue toward agriculture. I think those are mainly, I'm sure I've left out somebody.

M: What was the way by which you used some of the check-off to more publicize the industry?

A: One of the things, Mike, was the video that we built and of course there again trying to bring people in unity together of what we were trying to represent our industry and what it means to not only our county and state but our country and the environmental people in trying to be sure that they understand where we are. And of course we worked on that and did create this video, but then came the name and they asked me, "Well what are we gonna call it?"

I go back and I had to think a little bit, but I go back and the most favorite question from people from other states that I can remember being asked when I was president of the Cattleman's Association and as chairman of the Beef Council is "Where's all the cattle?" And you know, people would see all this advertisement for a cow calf state. They don't see 'em when they come down here 'cause they go to Disney World and the beaches and they don't see 'em. So that's where I came up with the idea of Florida's Hidden Industry as the name because this really was the number one question that was asked to me, is "Where are they kept?" And I don't know whether you know it or not, but at one time we ran some numbers a few years ago, 80% of the cattle operation in the state of Florida is south of I-4.

M: That doesn't surprise me at all. There are some counties, like DeSoto County and Hendry County where that's all you see is cows, everywhere you go, on every road.

A: Because Polk County, you know, one time for years we were the largest cow county east of the Mississippi, and we're not too bad right now, even with all the development, all the citrus groves that's been planted, you know we're sittin' here as really, we're #3 in cow but we're #1 in cattle membership and we're actually #1 in contributions to the state association to run their budget. Polk County puts in more money than any other county. So I mean, as much as we've developed Polk County, it still has held on to the industry pretty strong.