

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: AL BELLOTTO
INTERVIEWER: JAMES M. DENHAM
LOCATION: LAKELAND, FLORIDA
DATE: AUGUST 18, 2005

M=James M. Denham (Mike)

A=Al Bellotto

B=Betty Bellotto

M: Today is August 18th, and I'm here again with Al Bellotto and Mrs. Betty Bellotto, and we're here to resume our taping from Tuesday and then last week. Mr. Bellotto, good morning.

A: Good morning, sir.

M: You were mentioning that you would like to talk a little bit about your early years in your relationship and meeting Mrs. Bellotto's grandmother and actually a tragedy that occurred in 1947. Would you to begin [by] talking about that?

A: Yeah, I would be bringing up something that I thought was kind of unusual, Mike, and that is, when I first got home from the Navy during early '46, at a time when improved grass had not gotten down here in Florida, I contacted the experiment station in Gainesville and they would only let you have a pickup truck load of grass seed to make your seedbed with, so there was no one around doing that, and I just thought that was the way that we had to go in the industry, so I went up and got a pickup load and planted it and created a pretty good-sized seedbed and started planting on our ranch. Then from that, and a contact at the livestock market in Kissimmee, Betty's uncle had heard about it and then asked me. Of course no one was planting grass at that time. So he wanted to do a seedbed himself and would I help him, so I said, "Yeah, we'll get enough to get you started". Anyway the tragedy was the day we started planting the size of the acreage that he had, we thought we had enough grass but at the last part of the day after lunch, about 1:30, 2:00, we realized that we didn't have enough, so I took my pickup and went back to our ranch up near Loughman, because I had just plowed up some fresh grass up there, and got enough seed grass to finish out the little piece of ground that he had disked on the way back, after I left the ranch there and came down the dirt road to get on to Hwy.92, I had to stop right there before entering Hwy. 92, and right there on the road when I started off, I broke an axle, the only one I ever broke in my life. But the thing about it is, while I was gone, there was a little thunderstorm came up where we were planting and two uncles and two cousins of Betty's who I was helping to plant this grass, they all ran in the horse barn. Lightning hit the barn and killed all four of 'em. The

axle being broke kept me from bein' there 'cause I would have been there. I got back there about 45 minutes after this happened.

M: So you found them then. You were the first to find 'em?

A: Well no there was one other guy that was there ahead of me. He was driving a tractor in a grove right there close and he thought he saw smoke when the lightning hit, so that's why he thought maybe the barn might be on fire and he came down there, and he had been there just a few minutes before I got there. I was not the first one there, but all four of 'em were dead.

B: Fred Jones was about the second one there.

A: Yeah, Fred Jones was one of them that got there early too. But anyway, where I'm goin' with that was, you know, it was such a tragedy and then her grandmother lived about a half a mile from there at what we called the "old place" so I ended up buying the cattle from Aunt May and leasing the pasture and of course that bein' surrounding where Betty's grandmother lived and the acquaintance, it created something that was pretty unusual. She always had the old wood stove and the old pitcher pump with the gourd where you walk out and pump the water and everybody drinks out of the gourd, you know. But through the acquaintance when we'd go up there to work those cattle, she'd always say, "Why don't you come by and have lunch with me?" and we did, so it grew into a deal, which was unusual, where she'd say, "If you'd let me know if you pop your whip and let me know", so when I got within say a mile or so of the house, I had a certain way I'd pop that whip and about five or 10 minutes you'd see that old black smoke through the trees, rollin' out of the chimney; by the time we got there, she'd have the dinner set on the table, you know. And this got to be a regular deal that anytime we were up there in that area, I just shut down on that old whip and here we'd have lunch on the table there and we'd noon there, you know, what we called noonin'. And that grew to be on a regular basis. June 13 of '49, when Betty and I left to go on our honeymoon, I told my brother to take care of my horse while I was gone and feed him and see that he was alright, and he did. But, when I called in about six or seven days later to my brother to see how everything was, he said, "Well everything's fine 'cept your horse is gone". I said, "What do you mean my horse is gone?" He said, "Well he unlatched the gate himself", which he'd never done before, but that horse pulled that latch back and got out and was gone. We had planned to stay at Daytona Beach another three or four days but we came on in because I was gonna try to find 'im. I called him back a couple times, he still hadn't found him, and I even got a plane and I looked and couldn't find him. So after about the second day when we were back home, grandmother called, we called her? Granbaw called and she said, "How 'bout y'all comin' up to have supper with me?" and I said, "Granbaw, I can't, I'm huntin' my horse. He's gone. We've lost 'im". She said, "Son, all you got to do is bring your horse trailer with ya and come up here", and said, "every evenin' about dark he comes up to the old pitcher pump for water". So, we drove up

there. I didn't believe her, you know. But anyway I drove up there and opened the back gate on the horse trailer. We went in and we was sittin' down at the table eating and all of a sudden I heard something go {bump, bump}. The old horse had stepped up and he just loaded himself right up in the trailer.

M: Was it the same horse?

A: Yeah. Same horse. You saw that picture.

B: That's the one that I showed you.

A: But he knew we'd been noonin' there all those times. And from where he was, this is about 15, 16 miles. That horse left from where it was hunting us and went to her, and he'd go off and graze and then every night she said right about dark he'd come up there for water and she'd pump him water. So she said, "If you'll bring your horse trailer", so I did. I got there and I just opened up the gate for him like we always did when we loaded him. We're settin' in there eating and sure enough, he loaded himself up. Very unusual situation.

M: I'll be darned. Can you tell us a little bit about what treating the screwworms was all about and that whole problem and how that came about?

A: Well you know of course a lot of people did not realize the screwworm situation and how bad it was back along in the '50's, '50, '51, '52, '53, along in there. Every calf that was born, or even blood, if you were working cattle and they got a cut on 'em or for some reason there was blood on the cow, those flies would blow that blood or blow the navel cord when a calf was born, and every one would have screwworms. And of course that screwworm would eat on into the belly and kill the calf. So what happened during that period of time, it was every day, we were riding. I'd rope 35 or 50 a day and of course Betty would help me. I had some good dogs, I'd roped a calf, of course the cow would try to fight, the dogs would keep the cow off of you, and I'd hold the calf down and Betty would doctor, dig the screwworms out and then put the medicine on. We did it for ourself and I also contracted with a couple other people to doctor their calves the same way during that period of time.

M: So the calves were the ones that were most vulnerable?

A: Oh yeah. They were the ones. Well every calf was born; you just had to figure –

M: You just had to figure that they had it.

A: Yeah, you just had to catch 'em and doctor 'em. How we got rid of 'em and I give J. O. Pierce out of Okeechobee most of the credit 'cause he was the one that came up with the idea. We actually got the government involved and they

funded the thing and of course during World War II Sebring Air Base was a big thing, but after that, in the '50's, they put in a fly station down there where they'd sterilize the flies and then they would drop them out in these hot areas and that's the way we got rid of 'em 'cause we were not able to do anything up until then to really make any headway of gettin' rid of the things.

M: Isn't it also true that Doyle Carlton was very much in the forefront of that fight?

A: He was in it, but I give J. O. most of the credit because he's the one that I remember was so strong in leading this thing.

M: Now was he a scientist or was he a rancher?

A: No, he was just a rancher. He just was one of those strong guys that, you know, he got on something and stayed on it. We actually got rid of 'em here I think before they did in Texas. They still had 'em down in the southern part of Texas longer, two or three years after we got rid of 'em.

M: When did you first see them? Or is it hard to remember?

A: You know, Mike, I would tell you that I could not identify when I first saw 'em, but I think it was somewhere in the time of '48, '49, somewhere along there.

M: Now, do people know where they came from, how they got in Florida? I guess they were imported somehow or another.

A: There was all kind of stories told.

M: Yeah, nobody really knows for sure.

A: No, they thought they came in with some cattle from down in South America. This is what I was told. I really can't identify to know exactly, but I tell you, them and the tick deal, I think we talked about that, the compulsory tick deal and of course that was such a nuisance and such a –

M: Well that had pretty much run its course by that time hadn't it?

A: Oh yeah.

M: By that time the ticks were taken care of.

A: We got rid of the ticks by the mid '30's. We had 'em gone before then. And of course I told you about the Range Riders and they'd charge you a dollar a head to come and dip 'em if you didn't dip 'em all. But those were big times in our lives spending a world of time working with your cows, same way with the

screwworm fly. We just rode every day. Those are two things that, thank goodness, the more recent cow people have not had to contend with.

M: You haven't been out that long, what would you say today would be the biggest problem along that line? Any pests? Natural kinds of pests like that? Would there be any recent concerns? Now it's probably just the markets. Of course that's always been a problem, or concern.

A: Well when you talk about problems and runnin' your operation, I would probably address one of the most recent problems you turn to, soda apple weeds in the grass. This is such a nuisance that was brought in here.

B: Weeds.

A: And they'll just take over your place. This is something that we're steady, continuously fighting right now that was brought in here from South America. We didn't have any of that until, we bought 311 head of heifers from Cup Stewart down below Lake Placid at his ranch down there in '89, and when we brought those cattle in, not knowing it, they had been on an area that had soda apple. And of course, when we brought 'em in here, we didn't hold 'em in the pen, we turned 'em right out. And of course they just spread that soda apple.

M: Because their chewing would –

A: Well they'd eat it and get it in their stomach and of course when they –

M: Okay, and the seeds would. Now what would that be? Can you spell that for me?

A: Soda apple.

M: Soda apple, like soda, like the drink. Apple.

A: Apple just like the word apple.

M: Okay, is it kind of a weed?

A: It's more like a little bush that grows rapidly and really can take over land. Sticky, oh man!

B: There's a botanical name but I can't think of it.

M: Another thing I wanted to ask you about is fire ants. When did the fire ants really start getting really bad?

A: Fire ants. We're talking about probably in late '70's, '80's.

M: Not 'til then?

A: Yeah, when it really began to be a real nuisance. And they was a bigger nuisance back then than they really are now. Yes, there's fire ants today, but for some reason or another, they're not as bad now as we had back in those days.

M: Would they harm the cattle? Would there be enough of 'em to harm the cattle?

A: Well not that bad.

M: I know they destroyed the quail, that's for sure.

A: Oh yeah, yeah. And you just had to be real careful where you parked your tractor, what you picked up, where you got out. If you threw a board down, boy I'll tell you what, they'd be under that thing and all over it, and when you'd go to pick it up and they're all over ya'. They were bad. But they're not as bad, I don't think today, as they were.

M: One other thing I wanted to ask you about is, of course you were a boy and then a young man in the '20's and '30's, do you remember any panthers? Do you remember any Florida panthers? Ever seeing 'em?

A: Oh yeah. In our cow camp at Johnson Island, we had driven a well and an artesian well out there that really had enough pressure out of that well that we piped it into the house to run all the spigots in the house and the bathroom and the whole thing, but anyway, what I was goin' to tell you, we had a little trough that we had there by the well and we had a panther that would come by about every third night and water there. We'd find his tracks, and we could hear him. Now I've seen panthers from time to time in the woods back in those earlier years, didn't see any of 'em because we got away from the real rough country when we came over here to the Lakeland area, until back in somewhere along in the '70's. They built road S. R. 540 from Hwy. 98 toward Winter Haven in '63 and '64, and I had seen tracks but I had not seen the panther, but I had an accountant that worked for us there in the office that came back and forth, he lived over on Lake Winterset out of Winter Haven, and he saw this panther several times cross the road in front of him. It was going from up Saddle Creek coming down Saddle Creek and coming onto our property there on what we called Alligator Point. Later I saw the panther, but because we've developed so much, you know, we've kind of pushed those back in to where they feel more comfortable.

M: Do you ever remember as a little boy hearing about going on panther hunts?

A: Yes. There was and it was a big thing. You don't hear about those kinds of things anymore. We had little hog bears even that came there on Lake Hancock in the early '50's and '60's and there again, because of the developments; we'd kind of pushed them back. I'm sure there's still a few in the Green Swamp.

M: You say hog bears?

B: They're smaller.

A: They're a smaller, black, brownish-black bear. They're a smaller bear. They're more like 250 to 300 pounds. Talkin' about that, we had another unusual thing happen. We was cow huntin' one time, when I was about 21 years old and the dogs were ahead of us and had run up into what we call Hamburger Bend. What it was was a little ol' area that was a little bit higher than normal flat country up there at a neighbor's ranch, and I was working his cattle for him. These dogs had run up ahead of us and they was three or four of us riding horses and we were picking up the cattle, bunchin' 'em, and all of a sudden the dogs came flyin' back toward us and one of the guys, Ed Campbell was his name, and he said to me, "What in the world's wrong with your dogs?" and I said, "Well the way they came back", I said, "looks like something very unusual, like a little hog bear or something", and he said, "Aww there's no hog bears probably in this country" and I said, "Well I would bet you it's something very unusual", so we made a little bet. I said, "If it is a hog bear", I said, "you gotta rope 'im when we get up there", and I said, "if it's not, I'll rope whatever it is". So believe it or not, we get up there and it's a big ol' bobcat. So I did take off and I did rope 'im. But when I roped 'im, he came down the rope to the horse and got up under the stomach and the horse started buckin', you know. But anyway, what I was trying to tell you was, so then he put a rope on 'im and we tied him up and I had buckskin crackers from my whip in my pocket. It was in the wintertime, and I took those and took a forked stick. He had a rope one way and I had a rope the other way so I could get to that bobcat, and I hogtied him and put him in the trailer and took him home and showed him to some people. But that was a very unusual thing [to] happen. He was turned loose later.

M: The other day we were talking about your work in the Farm Credit and how that began to mushroom and to take various steps in your career, and you moved more and more into banking and Farm Credit. I think last time, we discussed the fact that the Farm Credit, the company that you were working with, expanded to include was it seven states?

A: Yeah, we went from four states to 13 states.

M: And what was the name of that again?

A: Well it was really the Columbia, South Carolina Farm Credit Bank when it was four states and then when we merged, we ended up merging with part of

Louisville and part of the old Texas association, which included Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Then the last merger we had was with Baltimore and when we merged with them, that's when we changed the name to Ag First, and then it ended up to be, I said 13, it was 17 states, even including Puerto Rico. We was so much larger we changed the name to Ag First and increased the amount of directors on the board, but that was a pretty big undertaking at that time. That caused me to serve a lot on national committees for the Farm Credit system. I was big in involving some moves there in leading into some of the things we had to get done that created evidently some support that they thought I ought to be one that would serve on the Funding board in New York, which is the one that sells all the paper for the Farm Credit system. They have seven directors elected in the nation to serve on that board and they wanted me to serve, and I did on that board and served from '91, until 2000. And while I was serving up there, got interested in, 'cause our people would come in the office and talk about the transportation problems in New York, and of course if you ever go there, you understand why. A lot of 'em don't even own a car, they go strictly on busses and subway and to travel back and forth. Those girls, which amaze me, would leave home most of 'em at 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning to go to work at 8:00 or 8:30 and it took 'em that long to get there, then they would talk about the fact that they didn't get home 'til 7:30 or 8:00 at night. So naturally I got interested in this and am saying, you know, "If you do that five days a week, what do you do on the weekend with your family?" Well their biggest thing was they went to Central Park, take a football or a softball and pack a lunch and go over there and that's all they knew. But out of that created the idea that the county had been wanting to try to buy our ranch and that's how we got interested in this [being] certainly something similar to Central Park for the people of Polk County for education, 'cause the college is right there next to the ranch, and the fact that it could be utilized in that direction and also most of these properties that the county has bought has been way off where it takes you 45 minutes to an hour and a half to get to, and our idea was that we think that Auburndale and Winter Haven and Bartow and Lakeland [are] growing so fast that they [are] going to be darn near together within the next eight or 10 years, so our thinking was, this would be a central park in the center of the population, only take you six or eight minutes to go there. It's right here, it's not some place that you gotta drive an hour or an hour and a half to get to, and it's something that's very unusual because we've got as much or more habitat, you know, we've been told by the bird watchers that there's more eagles on that property than about any place they've seen in Florida. Betty and I counted 69 Bald Eagles one afternoon that came to roost in pine trees when it was drizzling rain. We counted as high as 70 something alligators down there on Alligator Point at one time. You know, you've got all the fox and squirrels and armadillos, and you've got all the habitat that you normally would have to go far away to see. Like I say, it'd be very far and few between that you could find alligators and this kind of a thing, fox, and different things, that's on this property. So that's how it came about. So we thought if we did decide to sell, that's what we would like to see and in talking to Marlene Duffy Young, who was a county commissioner and some of the county people, they

were all excited about it and this is kind of how that property got sold to them for that purpose. I'm a little disappointed in what I'm startin' to see though where they're now talkin' about floodin' 500 acres of it, and when I say that, the back side has got quite a bit of higher elevation but down on what is the most beautiful part, and that's down around Alligator Point, the level of that land is not high enough if they start flooding a lot of that. It's gonna be so wet it's gonna kill a bunch of those oak trees and it takes away from what we felt like ought to be established as a great park. They're talkin' about duck hunting, well, you know if you flood a place, who goes and looks and enjoys lookin' in the middle of a lake? You're takin' away what the purpose of the whole thing was for. I realize that Swiftmud, because they bought in on half of it and now I wish that had never happened, you know, if we'd have known that they was goin' to flood it, we'd have never sold it. Because it's too small an area in my opinion for them to be firing shotguns or guns and also talk about a park within just a few hundred yards of people just walking, looking for different habitat. And that makes a threat to the people that want to bring their kids and children and picnic and that kind of a thing. I don't think that should'a ever happened either.

M: Can you go through a little bit the arrangements by which you sold the land? Who were the people that were instrumental in negotiating things for you?

A: You mean the county commissioners?

M: County commissioners and –

A: Well Marlene was the ringleader really. And then Jack Myers ended up here at the last meeting involved in it. But really Marlene was probably the strongest leader in wanting to buy the property.

M: Were there any discussions about the things that you hoped would happen with the land, or were there any statements about what they intended to do? Was that just kind of not an issue at the time or they were not willing to share with you their plans?

A: No. Mike, Marlene, and it's unfortunate that she got voted out simply because she was the one that had the vision to see what the idea our family thought would be good for the environment of our people here in Polk County, to give them something very unusual right here in their front yard so to speak or backyard, where they hadn't gotta go a long ways and go through a lot of things. She realized and could see the vision and she was really the one that, I really think if she hadn't got voted out, it would have been different. I don't think that Swiftmud, because we had talked about maybe I think they've got an organization called Florida Trust or something, she was going to try to get them interested. In other words, they were goin' to find somebody else to help 'em partner in purchasing this land and it wouldn't have been Swiftmud. I know Swiftmud's got a purpose and it's a good purpose. We've gotta have water, but

just like this deal, they got two phosphate reservoirs that the phosphate companies had right here on Peace River just south of Hwy. 60, that all this water could be stored in instead of utilizing good land. You know, it's kind of crazy when you really think about it. All those years in the '50's, '60's, and '70's, your water soil conservation, all these people were promoting trying to improve land, take it out of swamp conditions and put it in a higher level of valuation so they could increase the tax to do the roads and do the things for the people. They came out when we started on this ranch. That's the reason why I served on the Water Soil Conservation Board, they would actually send an engineer out there and shoot levels, do the topography for where the ditches need to be, the control structures, and all those things, because they wanted it developed. Now, all of a sudden, here all this money, all this time, all this good land was made into improved land at a higher tax rate, you know, you look at it and it's very foolish. It's kind of like the Kissimmee River. You know they made a stupid mistake over there. We're doin' the same thing here on this piece of property. A beautiful piece of property that could be kept for years and years and years for a world of people to get on and now they're startin' to do things that's gonna ruin a lot of it. It's really disgusting. On our side, we had Jack Brannen, who was our attorney. He knows the plan. David Bunch was big and with the idea, and David knew that we had talked about this kind of thing and he was all excited about what we could do. David Bunch has a great vision down the road of development, and he could see the towns growing together, the people population and what would be such an asset to all of these people, yet now they're trying to make it into something worrying about people in Charlotte Harbor. What I worry about the people in Charlotte Harbor to the degree put the water in those reservoirs down there that's not doin' anything right now. The locks are there, the dikes are there, we can hold the water, and still give them the same service but not ruin this property that we spent all this time, our lifetime, in developing, and the state and the county and all these programs, now they're just throwing those out the window as they were bad programs. So this is why, you know, we'd have never sold it had we known that they were gonna turn around and do what they're doin' to it now.

M: So the full tract is how many acres again?

A: The full tract was 1275 acres.

M: 1275. And do you know how much of this land is being flooded of the 1200?

A: Well, Mike, in the paper here a week or two ago, they talked about taking 500 acres of it and flooding it. And I realize that they're talkin' about the lowest part of the ranch, and I know all that property like the back of my hand because I've been on it about all of our lifetime, you know, since '49. So I know what they're talkin' about. But the other thing that I do know, the elevation of the land is not that much different except on the back side. On the back side, it really goes up in elevation. Now that'll never be harmed by this water. But the main part of the habitat is a lot of where they're goin' to flood.

B: And the beauty.

A: And the beauty. I mean those big old oak trees, and Cabbage Palms. You know, people ask us all the time they used to ask us, well the bird people, one of the first times we let 'em on there to do what they call their Christmas bird count, the first time that, do you remember what that guy's name, those people that lived in Haines City or Winter Haven that traveled on the – anyway, the bird people said, "Why have you got so much of this habitat? Why are so many birds here? We've not seen this." You know, just like we had some bluebirds which they had not seen and they did see. Well, the reason, #1 we never let anybody hunt. The only time we used a gun was to kill a rattlesnake, and we killed a few of those on there. But we never let anybody hunt. And the other thing was Betty's mowing with the big diesel tractor and the 20-foot batwing mower. She kept it mowed like a golf course. Well when you mow it, then it turns around and creates seeds. Well that's where the birds come in 'cause you're creating feed for them, see? Well, when you create that, the eagles can catch the rats and the rabbits. This is why we created that type of thing and that's the reason it was so successful in having all that habitat in there and those birds, and they said that this was the highest count they'd had in this area and just raved about it. Well, what you're doin', you're takin' all that away. First they're goin' to be shootin' in there. They're not goin' to come back in there when you're doin' all this shootin'. Then they're talkin' about flooding 500 acres of it, part of the most important part of their feedin' ground, you know. They're doin' away with what the sole purpose of what it was set out to be, and that's a shame. For what? For some place that, that water could be put in those reservoirs. 'Cause you can't find another place, and they said that, you couldn't find another place that has this many eagles, this many alligators, all the different things that they described, you couldn't find another place. Right here! You're talkin' about from this office right here, you're only talkin' about six or eight minutes and I can be on it.

M: Mr. Bellotto, I think it's probably a good idea to change the subject now a little bit, and you know that I have this Lawton Chiles Legacy Project and you'll be probably #21 or 22 of the people I've interviewed with regard to Lawton Chiles. In fact, I've got a report here. We were talking about it on the way out the other day. I've got a report here that I wrote and maybe, if you need something to read between the next couple of weeks, you can take a look at it just for interest. Can you tell me a little bit about your first meeting with Lawton Chiles, or maybe even his family? Did you know his family before you met him perhaps?

A: Yeah we did, Mike. Of course I think about Lawton, of course Jay Peterson, Mr. Peterson's son was an attorney that we hired in '49 to be our attorney when we moved to Lakeland.

B: Did you know him?

M: Unfortunately I didn't. He just passed away about three or four years ago?

A: Yeah.

M: I have spoken to his wife, Nancy, and we just haven't gotten together. We pledged to kind of make contact. She lives in Tallahassee now.

B: He was a great guy.

A: Oh he was a great guy.

M: And a real practical joker I understand.

B & A: Oh yeah!! Oh yeah!

M: That's what everybody always says. In fact, I would really like it if you could talk about him a little bit too because he is so connected to Lawton.

A: Well, Jay did drink a little bit. I didn't, and he knew what a staunch, strong, person I was about alcohol and didn't like to see people hit the bottle too much, but anyway, he had been involved with us. In fact, we went to Washington on a trip and he heard how strong I felt about it so anyway, to tell you what he did to me one time. I had gone uptown, and this was back when of course the City of Lakeland was a little smaller but, what was it Myricks? Myricks Men's Store was up there and I had to stop there to pick up something. And Jay is on the other end of the block down there, you might say. He sees me getting out of the car. This is like about 4:00 in the afternoon and he hollers all the way down the street, "Hey Al!" I said, "Yeah" back to him. He said, "You come to town", he said, "are you ready to go out to the County Line liquor store and let's get that drink?" Of course everybody –

M: And he says this all the way so everybody can hear.

A: Everybody on the sidewalk turned around lookin' at this crazy idiot, you know. That's the kind of jokester he was. He knew I didn't drink, but you know, he said, "We didn't get the right bottle the other night". He was always doing something.

B: What was it when we went to Washington? Back then you didn't see blacks and whites together as much as you do today. And what was it he, I think you almost got run over in the road?

A: What it was, when we flew in there in the airplane and we landed, we got our bags and walked out of the airport, he was representing me on some rights that I had filed for on transportation to bring back when I shipped cattle and other commodities out west, I wanted to bring stuff back, so Jay was there representing me. But anyway, we walked out of the airport. We were standing

there on the sidewalk waiting to get a taxicab and it was just a very light misty rain, like when it does when its freezing and everybody's freezin' to death you know? And here comes this taxicab and it was a black driver. And when he drove up there, Jay said, "You want to get that?" and I said, "No let's wait and get another one". That happened about three times in a row. And Jay said, "Damn!"

B: Well we're not prejudiced.

A: Yeah, and he said, "Damn, All!" he said, "I'm gonna freeze to death out here while you're readin' colors!"

M: Readin' colors.

A: Yeah.

B: He was just crazy.

A: He was just crazy.

B: He got a lot out of life.

M: Now did you know his father?

A: Yeah.

M: And his father was a congressman, correct?

A: He was a great man.

B: Tell him about your trip to Tampa in the back of the pickup truck.

A: Yeah. There was something happened to dad's immigration papers and in later years, and I was just a little thing, Daddy had to get Mr. Peterson to go with him to Tampa to straighten out something on those papers. Well we were in the back of the truck. We rode all the way over to Tampa in the back of the truck for Daddy to get those papers and Mr. Peterson was in the front of the pickup truck with Daddy.

M: So he actually rode in the truck with your dad and you rode in the back.

A: Yeah, me and my brother was in the back, in the back of the pickup truck, rode over to Tampa to get –

M: That's great.

A: He was a great guy, Mr. Peterson was.

M: So did you have any other memories of his father?

A: No except just, you know, a lot of respect. I remember a lot of people's respect for him, for Mr. Peterson, and the praise of what he was getting done for the people.

M: And he left office, what in '50 something?

A: I'm not sure about that.

M: Okay, well I know all that, I can fill that in. Did you know Congressman Haley?

A: I knew of him.

M: Not really like Mr. Peterson?

A: No, no.

M: What about Andy Ireland?

A: Oh yeah, Andy Ireland. I knew Andy Ireland before he ever got into politics. I knew him as a banker. In fact I borrowed money from his bank. Yeah, I knew Andy well.

M: You know I have his congressional papers? I have Mr. Ireland's [papers] and he and I have discussed aspects of things at the Center for Florida History and I'm hopeful he can be a supporter of mine on the board and so forth.

A: He is a great guy. I had a great relationship with him.

M: Now when was the first time you met Jay?

A: '49. In '49.

M: And you were about the same age, would you say?

A: Jay was two or three years younger than I. Then in later years, and I don't remember what years this was, but Lawton came on the scene as a young attorney right out of school. In fact, what I was told by Jay, Lawton's first assignment as an attorney was on a lawsuit that we were involved in where somebody'd run up on –

B: You told him that.

M: Well I didn't get that on tape though and I'd actually like to get that whole story, if you don't mind.

A: What had happened, I had bought some calves for Armour & Company and we were to load 'em down there between Okeechobee and Pahokee on that road, and I forgot what that number is but it's over on the east side of Lake Okeechobee, and it was right in a curve where these pens were but the pens are of course off the road and the truck backs in off the road. The truck is completely clear of the highway by about eight or 10 feet from the front bumper, but it's in a curve, so if you're coming from the south heading north – And what happened, he had backed in there just before daylight for them to load these calves right at daylight to take off and evidently this guy had been up all night. He had loaded vegetables down at Pahokee at one of those vegetable markets down there and he was headed out going out of state, going up the east coast. He's comin' around the curve and the driver of our truck is settin' there in the cab with the parking lights still on. Of course the lights are not turned down, they're not on and they're headed in a different direction but when you came from the south coming north, at a distance, you could see the lights and it looked like the lights was in the road because you had the orange light on the front of the trailer on the corner and then you had red lights right on the tail end. So this guy came around this long sweeping curve heading north with his semi loaded with vegetables, and evidently was half asleep, and he went off the road. And that's the only thing we can figure out, that he thought that was the road –

M: And hit your man.

A: And went up underneath that trailer and killed him. So they sued us. But anyway, Lawton represented us in Miami and I drove Lawton down there –

M: They sued you!?

A: Yeah, they sued us.

M: Because their driver had run off the road!?

A: He'd run off the road. Of course we had to prove all that. We were cleared. It wasn't much of a case.

M: Man that seems to me you should've sued them! Was it your truck that was destroyed? And hit by the other person?

A: It was our truck. Of course our insurance company, you know, took care of that. I was afraid because I didn't know how deep this'd go. I don't remember back in that time I think we had like a \$300,000 limit, you know, and if had went to a million dollars, that's the reason I hired my own – Jay couldn't go for some reason or another and he sent Lawton down there.

M: And [Lawton] worked for Jay's father, didn't he?

A: Yes. That's where he first started.

M: And that would've been about '59?

A: I'd say somewhere there about. And I can't remember exactly but it's somewhere close to that. But I took him down there in our car.

M: Was that the first time you had met Lawton?

A: Well, I might have met him at the office, but yeah, that's when I really got to talk to him.

M: Did you know his parents?

A: No, I did not. Now, you talk about his family. Our oldest daughter, Cheré, and his, is that his oldest?

B: Tandy.

A: Tandy? That was his oldest girl, though, wasn't it? Anyway our oldest girl was great friends. In fact she stayed with us, wasn't it in the summertime?

B: No. She stayed when he went to Washington and she wanted to graduate and it was just a few months.

A: But she lived with us.

B: Lakeland High School?

A: Yeah. She wanted to finish at Lakeland High School.

M: Now was she hearing impaired?

B: Her mother had measles when she was –

M: German measles, correct.

B: And her eyesight was affected, she could hear. She was as sweet as could be.

A: But she and our oldest girl, Cheré, were great friends and she stayed with us during that period of time to finish school here.

M: So that first law case, I guess you really got to know [Lawton]. What were your impressions of him when you first met him?

A: Lawton was very, very astute in knowing the law for a young person. I know I was impressed with the fact that at that age and just starting out he was so knowledgeable.

M: Well prepared.

A: He was well prepared, got everything, wasn't haphazard. Everything was right to the tee. He had written out everything and he was right on target. And from the get-go, we were good friends. Good friends enough that when he ran the first time –

M: For the State House.

A: Was it the State House or was it Washington?

M: Yeah, State House.

A: Okay. Anyway, what I did [was] I put on a big barbecue at the ranch for him and I got all my buddies in the Cattleman's Association and we dug a big pit out there under the oak trees, started a fire in the hole, and put one of the old landing mats over it, I did a big barbecue and I had people come from the east coast, cattlemen and different ones that I knew, I invited. And we raised \$70,000 that afternoon.

M: Well, that probably would've been the Senate race. That would've been 1970. He actually just to kind of remind you, he was in the State Legislature in the late '50's and then about '60 until about '70, he was in the State Legislature and I think was in the Florida Senate by 1970, when he decide to run when Spessard Holland retired. And that would've been a very instrumental event.

A: So we did that one and then what I wanted to tell you –

M: That would've been about 1970, I'll bet, correct?

A: Yeah, that's what I would think. So then, when he started to run again, Dean Saunders, the Dean Saunders that is here now, you know him?

M: Oh yeah.

A: Okay. Dean Saunders was working under him. He was quite active in trying to promote summer campaigns. He calls me and said, "Al, Lawton wants you if you will to put on another barbecue for a fundraiser for him for Polk County". I said, "Fine, we'll do it". So we talked a little bit and then in a few weeks he called

me back and he said, "Well, you need any help?" and I said, "No". I said "We didn't charge him anything before. We're goin' to put it on for him. I've already talked to my cow people and we're goin' to do it again". This goes along until about three weeks before the time and I –

M: Was this the second race? '76 I guess it would have been?

A: Yeah. So he calls me back and he said, "Lawton wanted you to know that we have already done one in Hillsborough County and he said we did hot dogs over there and he said we're doin' one in Manatee County and we're goin' to do fish down there, so he said he wants to be sure that you serve chicken at yours". I said, "Whoa". I said, "There will not be any chicken served on this ranch. It's not costin' him a dime".

B: He wanted that poor boy image thing.

A: So Lawton gets on the phone two or three days afterward and he calls me and he tells me, he said, "Al, what I want to do is to pursue that poor boy image". He didn't say it exactly like that but that's what he was sayin'. I forgot how he said it. I said, "Lawton, we're good friends, but", I said, "there won't be any chicken served on this ranch. It won't cost you a dime, but there won't be any chicken served". He said, "You really mean that?!" I said, "I mean it just as sure as I'm talkin' to you". And he said, "Well I'll have to think about that", and I said, "Well you can think about it". He said, "Can I call you back?" and I said, "That's fine, but just remember, I'm not goin' to change my mind 'cause I don't do that". Chicken people don't create anything for us in Polk County. This is a cattle ranch. And for me to invite cowboys in here to help me put this on –

M: Yeah, it'd be embarrassing. I can see where you –

A: I said, "I'm not about to do that".

B: Yeah, 'cause we had swamp cabbage and –

A: Oh yeah, I mean we did it up right.

M: That was kind of overboard probably on his part, you know, because nobody would've noticed that.

A: So he called me back and he said, "Well I appreciate it", but he said, "I've got another place" and I said, "That's fine". So anyway he got the auctioneer, Marty Higginbotham. He got Marty to put it on at his little place over here somewhere on the other side of town over at his little place. So anyway, I thought, well that may sever the relationship all these years and the kids are buddies and we've been buddies and of course in a few days Jay calls me and he'd heard about it, and he called me razzing me, you know. Then Jay goes to Tallahassee to

represent him, right at the last, then Jay calls me after he was up there about two years and he said, "Al", he said, "I thought I'd give you a chance to get back in with the Governor". I said, "How's that?" He said, "He's got some lumber down there in Joe Ruthven's, under his building, that he needs up here to build his little cook shack". He said, "Can you get it up here for me?" And I did.

M: So you just loaded it up on your trucks, you had trucks.

A: Yeah, I had semi trucks. We parked a trailer over there and gave Ruthven's a day to load it, and then we took it to Tallahassee. Of course we didn't charge him anything.

M: So that was in Jefferson County; his place in Jefferson County?

A: Wherever that place is he's got. They buried him there now.

M: Yeah, I think it's in Jefferson County, just east of Tallahassee.

A: Yeah, it's just outside because Jay was talking about this is where he liked to go and he wanted to build a building there and they had the lumber here that he wanted to use because of history. So I said that I'd get it there for him, and I did. So Lawton called me back you know and was thanking me and all that.

M: What did you think when you found out he was going to run for Governor? Were you surprised?

A: No not really because he was strong. If he believed something, he believed it, and you know, and then the dedication of walking the state of Florida. You know that was quite a chore and it was different.

M: What did you think when you heard he was going to walk around the state like that the first time you ever heard it?

A: The first thing I thought about was the distance. I mean, mercy! You start up there around Pensacola to go to Miami, you know, you've gone a fur piece! And to do that, I really thought he [wouldn't] get it done. Something'll come up that he'll go part of the way and then, but he didn't. He went all the way. Lawton was very strong and when he got on something, and I think that's what I liked about him as much as anything. And Jay was that way.

M: Did you feel like you could call [Lawton] up?

A: Oh yeah. I never called him at any time, even when he was up in Tallahassee. Man, I'd return his call right that minute, but he'd call you back, just like he called me to thank me for the lumber deal. He called me back, wanted to jaw, you know, he was fine.

M: Who do you think were the closest friends of his here in Lakeland? Who do you think were the closest people that he interacted with on a daily basis, besides Jay I guess?

A: Well the Ruthvens, of course that's a marriage deal, wasn't that?

M: Yeah, Joe married his sister.

A: Joe was always in the picture, especially in the later years when he got into politics. Mike I'm trying to remember. Of course, just remember politics kind of grew on me when I started getting involved. I realized, as I said, that we had to come to town and we had to get involved.

M: You had to get good people in.

A: You had to get good people and you had to show leadership in these different organizations. It's like the Cattleman's Association when the first meeting that I had on the Polk County Cattleman's Association and Donald McClain was president and we only had 87 members, and yet we were the largest cow county east of the Mississippi. And there's 1100 and something cattlemen in Polk County. You know, I knew that we needed, and we got, we're the largest membership county in the state right now. We have been for years and years and years. But it took promotion of gettin' 'em involved. As I said before, they're awful independent and they have a right to be independent. I respect 'em for it because they fight all the problems of weather and, and then when they grow a product, they don't have a market for it, a set market, you know. They don't know what they're goin' to get for their product. So you've gotta have a lot of independence. But Lawton, when he first came out of school, you know, he was somebody that immediately you started respecting.