

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: Monroe Brannen
INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham
LOCATION: Florida Southern College, Lakeland, Florida
DATE: March 9, 2000

J=James M. Denham
M=Monroe Brannen

J: I am here today at Florida Southern College with former Sheriff Brannen of Polk County and today is March 9, 2000. Mr. Brannen, can you say a few words for us to make sure this tape is going to pick us up?

M: Yes. Good morning. I'm happy to be here with you.

J: We last spoke in 1997. That's been a lot longer [ago] than I thought it had [been], but I had to transcribe that, so I wrote down 1997, and we talked about all kinds of things during those three hours, we had three hours together. We talked about your growing up in Lake Butler, and your uncle, your uncle –

M: Wiley Brannen.

J: Wiley Brannen, and I tracked down some things since I listened to that again, and I found some information that I'd forgotten about as far as your uncle goes, and that was quite an interesting coincidence. We also talked about your days as a Lakeland policeman?

M: Yes, Lakeland.

J: And then as a constable?

M: Yes.

J: We talked about your injury to your eye, which seems ironically to have pushed you into the Sheriff's Office in a way, I guess in kind of a way. We talked about your politics and going around to various places. Now there are three things that I'd like to talk to you about today. One is, when we left off we were in the 1960's and we also talked about the Civil Rights Movement, and I think we covered that pretty well.

M: Yes.

J: In the 1960's, the issue that really came to a head in law enforcement and also in Florida was drugs, and I want to ask if you have any comments on that. Also, there was an event that happened down in Mulberry that I'd run across that had to do with some holdups. I actually read an account recently of you sorting all of that out and finally exonerating a man that had been wrongly accused of those crimes, and there was some difficulty in the Mulberry Police Department, is that correct?

M: That's correct.

J: And you worked with a reporter from *The Tampa Tribune* a little bit?

M: Yeah.

J: Anyway, I read an account of that and I'd like to talk to you about that a little bit, and then finally, and this is up to you as far as whether you'd like to mention anything about this or not, but I'd like to see if you have anything to say at all about your final days in office, as far as the bogus indictment goes and so forth, but that's entirely up to you.

M: I don't mind.

J: So, why don't we begin with the drug issue, do you have any memories or reflections on how that changed law enforcement? The drug question?

M: The drug question, you know, started back, I would say, maybe when I was in the Sheriff's office, about 19 and 64, I believe when it was kind of coming around about the drug situation, into the families and the children who were fooling with it, and I had two people or three people assigned, or four people out here, I guess there were maybe five, and they kind of stayed in a standstill along there. Our problem was then that you know you never have enough people to do the things you'd like to do sometimes, but you just do with what you have, and it was just in the stage then of people's children messing with this stuff. You didn't have too many big ones doing it at that time but I kept it under control, I thought, very good with my help or what we had . . . but then later in life as the county grew, about the time I was leaving, neglected things got out of hand.

J: Right. You left office in 1977, by 1970 had it gotten progressively worse as the years went on?

M: I would say yes it did, it got a little worse every day because as you well know, every year we inherited a bunch of people here -

J: Sure.

M: And it just gets more people, like when Polk County had a hundred and, oh I forget just at the moment but 150-200,000 people here in Polk County, and we don't have that anymore. We've got half a million people here. But back when I started, even then, in fact we didn't have the people living here that we've got today.

J: When do you remember, during your tenure as Sheriff, that first the State of Florida and then the Federal Government became involved in drug interdiction? What were some of the first experiences you had with the State authorities and also the Federal Government coming in, and having to work with them? Do you remember what that was like?

M: We always had a good relation working their people. I'm trying to think of the first men in, oh what was the name of the people, but it was over in Tampa, in Hillsborough County, and we had a good relation with those people over there. And the Florida Law Enforcement people started getting larger every year. But we had no problem with them and to help us and we'd come in to work together. I think we did a pretty good job.

J: Do you remember any remarkable or outstanding or unusual drug busts or crackdowns or anything like that? What was the most dramatic one that you can remember?

M: Well, I don't remember, I remember one time that we got \$11,000 but I don't just remember –

J: In cash.

M: In cash. I remember that. I don't remember just what year it was in. Then you know, back in those days, this county was a dry county, whiskey-wise, I was pretty good on that one day or the next, but I don't remember. Of course I've been away from there for 18 years and my memory is not like it once was. But we had no problem with our people.

J: Now Polk County during those years was still pretty rural, were there a lot of people growing marijuana out in the woods and things like that?

M: No, not here.

J: Do you remember nearby counties where that would have been a problem? Say Pasco County? Or Hernando County?

M: Well, Pasco County –

J: Or Osceola County?

M: Osceola County had a little problem with it but we was much larger than them, you know, mileage-wise because Polk County's the largest county in Florida, the second largest. Palm Beach is the largest county mileage-wise. But we had no problem with the people like that. But it just kept gradually getting worse. I don't remember just, I know one time and I don't remember who it was that, in a murder case and the person had \$25,000 cash dollars on him, and that come through our county. And it was his money, and there was others that I don't remember any more much about.

J: Okay. Well tell me about the Mulberry holdups. How did all that happen?

M: Well, the way it happened is two police officers working in the department--and down there, one who was a chief and the other one was, I don't know what to say officer, and one night on a Saturday evening at eight or nine o'clock in the afternoon, we had a holdup that deputy went out there, deputy was with the policeman and they went to the store, I don't remember which one it was, there on 92 or 17, and to talk to this girl in the ___ and carried her to the bank, but it was made up. He started to get out but robbed him and he threwed the money back to the people that stole it, it was one of the policemen from Mulberry, so really it wasn't we went out and tried to talk to her -

J: To the policeman?

M: Yeah, two of the policeman, and he didn't want to talk to us, said it was nothing happened. So it went on back and to a little bit and they just never could get it together. We had it together.

J: How long was it before you got a feeling that there was something wrong?

M: The night we was working on it.

J: That very night.

M: Yeah, that very night we knew there was something wrong. Because everything he did was different, like the bank was setting here, near the sidewalk instead of helping us, if the policeman was doing his job, he'd have drove around and put the passenger side to step off of it, but he didn't do this. He totally opened the wrong side of the street. And he threwed the money to the other one. And then he ran from there back to the Police Station hollering and screaming that somebody, he'd been robbed, this woman had been robbed.

J: Now this was the police officer.

M: The police officer. The police officer went to the store, got the lady, if I remember correctly, and he'd been doing it every week or two, you know, he might have been doing it every night. They'd put the money in the bank. Well that Saturday night, he didn't drive her up there and let her step out of the car. But when he did, this man comes from around the corner and pulled a gun on him and then he pitched him the money to the policeman and he run back to the station down there.

J: So this was kind of a habit, the lady would get a ride to the bank to make a deposit with the officer and when that happened one night, there was a phony stickup.

M: And the man working with him, he's dead now, but when they were leaving, the investigators, we'd even talked about the search. And then one of the city commissioners down there about a week later was not afraid to go down there, but he said that he could do something or get off the job, you know, that he was got sick of us picking at his deputies, I mean his policemen. But we knew there was something wrong.

J: Yeah.

M: Then the papers come on and give me a bad story or two, you know.

J: *The Ledger*?

M: *The Ledger*, I think it was. But not too bad. And the man works with *The Tribune*, he come over and talked to me at times, confidential and off the record.

J: His name was – Freshca?

M: Well, no he came in after this fella.

J: Later on?

M: Later on, and I told him the whole story, so that's the way it is. It was broken and in the end there was, if my memory is correct, the girl said that John Smith, or whatever his name was was looking right straight at him. And he got sentenced to five years or three years in the penitentiary. And this come on about after we finally got together and they was wrong and this one that had taken the money in his hand and run back to the bank or something he broke down and said 'yes' that he did do the job. And then we, he was tried and I think they

put him on probation, I don't remember right now, and the other one was tried and he, they acquitted him.

J: Acquitted him?!

M: Yeah. he didn't serve it, if I understand it, you look at the record, how they acquitted him.

J: That's unbelievable.

M: Yeah, that's right.

J: So was the trial in Bartow?

M: Yeah, n Bartow.

J: How do you explain the acquittal?

M: Well, I don't know, but the jury turned him loose. You know.

J: Well at least they turned the other guy loose that was wrongly accused, correct?

M: This I don't remember. I know that he told the truth about it.

J: Now I read this account in a new book that has come out on the history of *The Tampa Tribune*, a big thick book. I forgot to bring it. I was going to show it to you, and you're in there, featured very well in there. So, were there other robberies that happened at the same time?

M: No, that was the only one.

J: That was the only –

M: Of those two.

J: There were actually two robberies.

M: Yeah, two of them.

J: And one man was actually accused of the crime, was sentenced. . .

M: Yeah, after they was taking another two or three months before. . .

J: Right. But he was later released.

M: Yeah. The one that, the oldest one, he was a chief. They tried him. The other one pled guilty if I remember correctly. A lawyer got her off with me and talked to him and he said he's guilty rather than her but then the other one, he went to court and –

J: He got off.

M: He got acquitted.

J: Do you remember what the one that pled guilty got?

M: No, I don't remember. It's been so long ago.

J: Okay. Well, being in the Sheriff's office, let's see by 1976, that would be about 16 years, in that time it's hard not to make enemies, I bet.

M: Oh yeah you get the best of them.

J: But being in the Sheriff's office for that long, did you have enemies, people that wanted to get rid of you?

M: Not too bad, no. I would have never lost the election the last time if the, when they indicted me, you know the State's Attorney then was Glenn Darty. And if he had a person working with him in the Circuit Court system high enough You know, he said he didn't have the time but it was, you know, he could've got it, just six months back was when they indicted me but they waited til the election was about over with and, so when they went to trial, I believe it was in October, they had a jury and they had about four witnesses that testified, one that was in the Lakeland Police Department I knew at that time, he said he'd seen me at the park. I told him I had an office right around the corner there. If I didn't have to use the phone, I didn't use it so it went to court and I didn't take the witness stand and they turned me loose in 16 minutes. Sixteen minutes and it cost me \$23,000. That's what the lawyer charged me.

J: Yeah, now who were your lawyers, do you remember?

M: He's living now down there around Sarasota. I can't think of his name. If I get it.

J: Now, since we talked the first time, I spoke to a lot of people in town and they told me various things, not in town but others. One is Judge Kelly and he said that he was very disturbed about all that. And my friend, Walter Manley, his father, who is deceased now.

M: A real friend.

J: Who's deceased now.

M: Yeah, he's. . . .

J: But Walter Manley thinks the world of you, I'll tell ya', he really does. So it was pretty much a trump up, then?

M: Oh yeah.

J: Now what was the motivation of that? Were you doing things that they did not like, or enforcing the law in a way that they didn't like? There was obviously a group of people that were against you.

M: Well, we had two deputies working for us and they went to Miami and I talked to somebody down there, and the Chief of Police of Bartow at one time was going to be Sheriff

and he was one of the ones that was named in this thing and had a few words to say, I think. He was the one, and they didn't even put him on the witness stand.

J: He testified before the Grand Jury but he wouldn't testify –

M: No, the lawyers didn't call him in, you know, when you get down with the State's Attorney 'who are we going to put on the witness stand'. He's got more power than the judge. Most powerful person in Law Enforcement or anything is Glenn Darty, he was the one, and Glenn Darty got a little mad at me about something. If you cut that off, I'll tell you.

J: Okay. Well, let's see, we've covered a lot, and what I wanted to mainly talk about today was the drugs and the holdups in Mulberry and then the indictment. It doesn't look like we got a whole lot. Do you have any remarks about what you consider to be your greatest contributions as a Polk County Sheriff?

M: Well, I think one of my contributions was that when I was elected Sheriff, the Boys Ranch was just getting off the ground. They started in 19 and 57 or 58, 58 I believe it was and they opened the doors in 19 and 59 or right at 60. And we had -

J: Who would you say, along with yourself, were the other people that were instrumental in getting that started?

M: Well, there were four people in this county ahead of my time, A.B. Davis in Jacksonville you know greater than me but he's dead now. And John Snively in Winter Haven. There are some people in Live Oak, who had some land over there and made the American Legion give the Sheriffs this piece of land, like \$100 for 40 acres and then it went, they bought 160 acres at about the time I went into service down here, it was in '61, and in the 16 years that I was Sheriff, I raised more money population-wise than anybody out of the

J: 67 counties?

M: Yeah. And I raised more money than any of them. Yeah, you know, you'd be surprised. It wasn't no trouble to raise money.

J: Yeah, I'll bet. What a great cause.

M: Yeah. There was a million-- a million eight hundred thousand dollars coming in and I was the one that was never named.

J: Now they've built a lot of different ones too, haven't they? They've built not only, the first one was on Suwannee there, and then they built, don't they have one down here in Polk County too?

M: Well, what happened down there, there was a bunch of ladies through the Chamber of Commerce or something of that order and this is when I was trying to raise money for the girls, well a man not Sheriff could raise money if he wants to, if he wants to, he can raise the money. And they had \$60,000 and they come down to me and they finally let us have that \$60,000. We had 124 acres of land made one of the phosphate companies and they agreed to let us have that piece of land for 99 years for one dollar a year, and there's always a few that disagreed with it but we had taken the \$60,000. And I was the Chairman and the Board then and then they. I was the Chairman and the Board of County Commissioners and then

we had to get a release from them and the City of Lakeland. So one day a man from Bartow, not from Bartow, a man come over here, called me over the phone and he said 'Monroe, 'how much money you got in that thing?' and I said 'about \$60,000 in that come on by my office and he'd give me \$50,000. -- Scratch the hand, just about the time I was at the Sheriff's office we got a million eight hundred thousand dollars.

J: From one person?

M: One person. He died and he gave a million eight hundred thousand dollars, including what had come from before. And every year on the date that I was Sheriff. I really don't think that anybody else got the property, do you believe that?

J: I believe it.

J: Now, did you have any kids you remember from Polk County that went up there that you sent up there?

M: The first student that went up there come from Polk County up around Loughman, but I wasn't the Sheriff back then, Hagan Parrish was. And one come from here and –

J: What were the requirements or what were the –

M: They were like his mother and his father if something happened to him that you could control. If we couldn't control him, we'd turn him back to them.

J: How old were they?

M: We did it from eight to 14, 13 years old.

J: Eight to 14.

M: 13 or 14.

J: Now, were they kids that would have been in trouble?

M: Well, that's what we thought, but we, I hired a boy, Wally Edwards, right down there in Bartow right now, Wally Edwards. He was there and I gave him a job. He was one of the first ones.

J: He came back and you gave him a job?

M: The boy's family had to sign a bunch of papers and he worked for me as long as I was down there. He's still in Bartow. Got his own business. Wally Edwards is his name.

J: So he was a kid that you had go up there –

M: I wasn't the Sheriff then, but Hagan Parrish was. They had about a dozen boys before I got to be Sheriff, but he was one of the ones.

J: And he was there how many years?

M: Oh, I don't know, seven or eight.

J: And then he came back to work for you?

M: No, he went up there as a boy, we'd see him up there and that was his home. And then when he got 16, 18, we sent him to college up there.

J: Yeah, is that right?

M: And he came back here, his mother lived over there, and I gave him a job in the Sheriff's office.

J: Now when they would go up there, did they have a school there, or did they have a school nearby?

M: They'd take them to school.

J: How did it work?

M: Well, the children went to the Public Schools.

J: Right in that area.

M: Yeah, out there, we had cars and busses.

J: They had a bus and everything.

M: Yeah. And we had about 10 children who lived with a family, you know and took care of these kids. Another house down here in the same thing. You ought to go up there.

J: How many kids –

M: When I left?

J: Yeah, when you left.

M: Around 102 or 103.

J: 102 or 103.

M: Depending where I did go.

J: So they're set up with families up there –

M: Yeah.

J: As well as living on the ranch.

M: Yeah. They lived there, drove right over here in Bartow. Supervisors lived in a nice house.

J: So the families live on the ranch, too.

M: Yeah. And the families lived on the ranch. Just like every man and woman did and take care of the children. It was a good thing. The State didn't pay anything but for 16 years I was there, they didn't even pay a dime.

J: Do you know if they do that now? If they supplement it now?

M: They do everything in the world there now. Welfare and everything else.

J: Who were some of the other sheriffs that you remember who were instrumental in –

M: Ed Blackburn in Hillsborough County and Donald Genung of Pinellas County.

J: Dave Starr maybe?

M: It could have been Dave Starr. He was on the Board right after it started. But hell it could have been the sheriff in Suwannee County. Of course he was ill. But we was great friends.

J: Now, would you go up there every year or so to have like –

M: Yeah

J: Like parties and things for the kids?

M: I'd go up there.

J: Yeah. So over the years, how many kids from Polk County would you say ended up there?

M: Well, at that time, see I've been –

J: Like Mr. Edwards.

M: I wouldn't know really because, see, I've been out of the Sheriff's office for 17 years or so, and people have come and gone. But Wally is. . . . His wife, I believe, works at the college right here at the girls' dorm, not the college. I'm sure she does. But it was a good thing. But I went to be with the sheriffs, I went up there and we were having a meeting, oh five or six, seven years ago. There was one sheriff, one. That's how much got done.

J: So they've kind of lost interest in it then.

M: Well, we livin' in a different world than when I come along. You know, people come along done for each other but they don't do this no more.

M: You're a young person. I wouldn't mind getting beat for sheriff's office. I'm making a living, and I'm making it alright. I've got nine thousand acres of land. I hitchhiked in this county when I was 16 years old and asked for a meal right down there in the ladies auxiliary. Would you believe that?

J: So what do you consider to be your greatest contribution to Polk County?

M: Well most, when I left from down there it was about 16 or 17 hundred dollars. And today it's over 100. . . . So where's the time gone . . .

J: Yeah.

M: Now, we didn't have enough money, but we got by with what we had, you know. We had some good people down there and I never, and another thing that I'm afraid of now is, every time you see a policeman anymore, they're shooting like 14 times or 41. Now believe it or not, when I was in the Lakeland Police Department down there, you learned to shoot with that hand just like that, one hand. And you learned to shoot with the other. But I got my arm messed up in the South Pacific. You can see a little difference in my hand, see it shake? I never could control the hand anymore. I had it in a cast for 13 weeks. I didn't complain. But anyway, that's history. I'm glad I served. But getting back to your question. The biggest contribution was to the Sheriff's Boys' Ranch from out of this county.

J: That's something you're proud of then.

M: Yeah.

J: Well, one of these days, I'm going to get you and we're going to talk about World War II, how about that?

M: Alright.

J: I don't know when or whatever, but I want to get this finished first, 'cause I know that you've got some very interesting things to tell us about that. Well, I know you're busy and you want to get back to work. I just wanted to leave you with May 25th. We're going to have our program down in Bartow, that I talked to you about, and one of the people that I was listening to on the tape yesterday that you mentioned was Bob Saunders from Tampa, NAACP. And he's going to be there too.

M: Is he?

J: Yeah. So that will be May 25th.

M: May the 25th.

J: And I'll call you and we'll talk a little bit more about it. It's over a month from now.

M: But anyway, getting back to our problems, now I'd like to read that again . . . I never went back in from of the Board of County Commissioners as long as I served to ask for more money.

J: Did you ever have to ask for more money?

M: No. I got by without it.

J: Yeah. So, since the county commissioners appropriated money every year through the taxes, I guess –

M: Every year in July.

J: For the sheriffs, that must have given them a tremendous amount of power, a lot more power than they had before.

M: Well, [you see by the old system] you go out and get a drunk and make 20, 15 dollars or 12 carrying them to Bartow, and that eliminated that and it should have been. But the other constables stayed on the fee system until around just before they abolished it in 1972, I believe they went under, they did away with the fee system and appropriated their money.

J: Now we mentioned in your last interviews that you were a constable before you were elected.

M: You had to be elected for that.

J: Oh. That's true. You were elected Constable before you were elected Sheriff.

M: Yes.

J: So that job obviously had a lot of things in it that allowed you to really meet a lot of people –

M: Yeah, well –

J: And go around, you know, and seeing people.

M: You'd think me being Sheriff here now – is this on? Then when I was elected Sheriff, I left the City of Lakeland in good standing and there wasn't no phones, direct telephone lines, you know in Polk County until, I believe it was around the third of, in 19 and 61, of September or something or other. There wasn't no direct telephone lines from here to Bartow, no direct line nowhere. And I wouldn't trust the Board of County Commissioners when I was elected sheriff and told them that I was going to put in a telephone line from Lakeland to Bartow and from Winter Haven to Bartow and they said 'we don't have the money' and I told them 'well we're going to have to get it -- about \$12,000. I got the telephone line then the next few years I got one to Haines City and got another one to Lake Wales and then naturally to Lakeland.

So the constables here, I mean I was, I went and hunted the city of Legalbrook, you ever know him Brooklyn? Well he was the Chief of Police, you know, a good person, good man, and I went to see him about the second month I was elected Constable, could have been the third, and he said 'I'm going to buy a radio to put in my car' and I did one of those would pass it he said he was going to get the thing and put it in and he says don't talk to nobody but me. And I was smarter enough to tell him that I would never show them those call if I were to have my car in Drew field where it might be in the court. I'd tell them where I was at and when I'd come over here. If I was going to Jacksonville to pick up a prisoner, I'd tell them I was going to Jacksonville and wouldn't be back 'til tomorrow evening or something, and they was nice enough.

And then this was the hardest job I ever had. There were people who'd go up to the Lakeland Police Department. I don't want to pay for a telephone call to get a Deputy over here -- they ordered me to death. That was the hardest job I ever had. And they'd call me at two o'clock in the morning, and seven o'clock in the morning. That was the hardest job I ever had.

J: And you're working alone and everything.

M: And I never had any trouble. The only trouble I ever had was one person and he beat me and I beat him up. I hit him with a flashlight. But I never had to fight with nobody. I've been all over the country and got people right by myself. I went to North Carolina one time and come back with four. That's the truth. And it was kind of funny. It was a teenage girl and teenager boy about 16, 17, 18 or 19. . . . [On one of those trips taking prisoners back to Polk County] I stopped in Lake Butler and Aunt Creasy, we always called her that . . . she was out in the yard and she had the same amount of children that my mother had. There was 11 in our family and 11 in theirs. And she seen all them dirty boys and hanging girls and how it would affect them. [She had a] nice-looking daughter, and she just broke down and went to crying. And I said 'Aunt Creasy, you don't need to worry about me. Ain't nobody going to hurt me'.