

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:           JOE P. RUTHVEN  
INTERVIEWED BY:         JAMES M. DENHAM  
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M= JAMES M. DENHAM (Mike)  
J= JOE RUTHVEN

M: Mr. Ruthven, thank you for allowing me to visit you today. We're here, of course, to talk about your memories of Lawton Chiles. But what I'd like to do first is to get a little information on your background. Where were you born and where did you grow up as a child?

J: I was born in Chesterfield, South Carolina, on a farm about six miles south of Chesterfield, and I went to grammar school there at White Oak in Clanton Plains and to high school at Chesterfield High School. I was born on July 9, 1927.

M: So your first memories as a child were growing up on a farm, I guess?

J: Yes. We raised cotton and tobacco. My mother and father both were farmers, so this was something that they thoroughly enjoy. But I think I realized early on that I didn't want to be a farmer. Dad had us out at sunrise and we were in the fields 'til sunset. I plowed the mule many a day and just decided there must be some other way to make a living. And they encouraged us to do that, too. I have two brothers and two sisters, and I'm the middle child. We were really in a very rural area. We got electricity when I was a senior in high school. As a child growing up, we went everywhere [with my family] in the mule and wagon. Mother and Dad helped build a Baptist church in our rural community; I mean, actually cut the logs, take them to the sawmill, and build the church. And Mother taught Sunday School there for 50 years. As a child growing up, I only remember missing church and Sunday School two Sundays; one Sunday we were snowed in and couldn't get out. The other Sunday, we were iced in.

M: Now what church was that?

J: It was Clanton Plains Baptist Church and this was about three miles from our house in Chesterfield County. We lived six miles south of Chesterfield.

M: Was the farm in your family a long time?

J: My mother's parents died when she was 11 years old. It seems like pneumonia was the thing that killed everybody back in those days. She was the oldest child in the family at 11 years old and had two brothers. They auctioned off the estate and the auctioneer, or the judge, or somebody decided that whoever bought the farm had to take the

children. People bidding on it wanted the two boys, even though they were much younger, but really weren't interested in the girl. They were looking for people to work on the farm. At age 11, my mother made the statement that whoever takes the boys or buys the farm takes all three of us. An uncle of theirs did buy the farm and he took the three children and raised them. Then when Mother and Dad decided to get married, Mother had the same condition, the two boys had to come with the marriage. So my mother and dad raised her two brothers. She was really the outspoken one in the family and the one that kind of set the stage for what happened in our lives, and she was very active in the Baptist church. We were raised up in a very rural Baptist church, but it was a great lifestyle. My children always ask me, "What did you do on Saturday night?" On Saturday night, we were so tired; we really weren't excited about doing anything. However, we did kind of have a routine of going to town on Saturday. We didn't have any of the excitements that you have today. My kids all wonder what you did to get in trouble. There really was nothing to get into. When you work on the farm all week, you're really not interested in getting into trouble on Saturday night.

M: I would imagine the social activity also revolved around the church, didn't it?

J: Very definitely. We had cakewalks out there, and that was your social life. The church was not only your spiritual life, but it was your social life because there was not much else to do.

M: Your mother's maiden name was?

J: Agnes Pender. The farm is still there. I still own my part of it. I've got it planted in pine trees, and have so many fond memories I go there once or twice a year just to see how things are going. In my youth growing up, as a child, I guess our Baptist minister was probably one that you looked up to because, not only was he pastor of the church, but he had a little grocery store like you find out in the country, and I worked there for 25 cents a day for a while. I think I finally got up to 75 cents, but I worked there for four or five years, probably starting at about 10 years old. So I kind of got in to retailing. At least he taught me how to meet the public and do whatever had to be done to run the store. It was good training. We had uncles and aunts close by. Of course, my uncles were my mother's two brothers and they always lived close by for many years, and they had families and children my age, too, so we had a good time growing up together. We all worked on the farm. I think my parents kindly insisted that we go to school and try to get a better education. My dad had a third grade education and Mother had a seventh grade education. I guess in looking back on my childhood, I marvel now at the things they did. I'd have to say that my dad accomplished what he accomplished by just good ol' common sense. I think of the many things he did, not having an education, he had to find other ways to solve the problems. When you think about five children, you've got to, in the summer months, have plenty of food for the winter months, not only for us but also for the cattle and the livestock and everything else. And we always had something to eat. I look back now and wonder how he knew just exactly how much we should have. We never ran short on food and we never ran short on food for the livestock, either.

M: Was your father a native of Chesterfield County?

J: No. Mother and Dad both were from Darlington County. I really don't know how they met, but I think it was at a family picnic and Dad happened to be over there. They lived

eight or nine miles apart, which doesn't sound like very far today, but if you've got to ride a mule to get over there, it's an overnight trip, really. He met her at a picnic. They dated for some time and got married and worked as just day laborers for quite some time. A distant relative who was an old maid and never been married had this farm in Chesterfield that had been left to her by her family. She was looking for somebody to come move in and live with her to take care of her in her old age. In return, they would get the house and about 40 or 50 acres of land to go with it. So that's how Mother and Dad got started in the farming business. Dad always wanted to own that farm next to us, so all of his life and ours too, we kept trying to buy the next few acres next to us. He finally expanded the farm until we had probably four or five hundred acres of land.

M: Did you have any tenants?

J: Oh, yeah. We had some sharecroppers. We had two, three, maybe four sharecroppers.

M: Were they white or black?

J: Some of both. Growing up, I'd say about 50/50. But the family that owned the farm next to us was black, and they had boys my age, so I really grew up with them. Even though we were very segregated at the time in South Carolina, my relationship with them was equal. We played together. We worked in the fields together. And we got along wonderfully well.

M: Have you read Jimmy Carter's memoir?

J: Yes, "*Hour Before Daylight*". I can certainly relate to a lot of things he said in that book. When daylight came, we were in the fields.

M: That was one of the themes in the book, his interaction with the black families.

J: I can distinctly remember how I got off the farm. I had graduated from high school. I started to school at five years old, and we only had 11 grades so I graduated at 16 and I was wondering, "Well, what am I going to do?" I knew I was going in the service.

M: What year did you graduate?

J: '41.

M: That was an important year.

J: Yeah. I was plowing cotton in front of the house and wondering, "What am I going to do." I thought, "Well, I'll work here during the summer [on] the farm and maybe in the fall I'll do something else." My sister came by the house. Her husband was stationed at Fort Jackson. We didn't have a telephone or anything. Dad came out to the field about 11 o'clock and said, "Your sister's at the house and she thinks you ought to get a couple semesters of college before you go into the service. What do you think of it?" I said, "I think it's a great idea." I could remember this very clearly because I had my pants leg rolled up about halfway to my knees and it was hot as blue blazes. I had been plowing that mule for weeks. And he said, "Well, take the mule to the barn", so I took the mule to

the barn and I've never been behind a mule since then. I did it with some emotions because I knew that Dad had planned on me working that summer, so suddenly I leave and he's got to pick up the slack, which I kind of regretted, but I thought it was my opportunity to get off the farm. I did go on over to the university and went to school for two semesters. We were on a tri-semester system because of the war. We got the same physical training and everything that the military did. Then I took a semester off and went up to Connecticut and worked.

M: What did you do up there?

J: My sister's husband was stationed at a submarine base in New England, Connecticut, and she was working at a plant on the assembly line, and I thought I'd probably go up and get a job in the warehouse, whatever they had. I'd had two years of engineer drawing at the university, so when they were so short of engineers, and I was not an engineer by any means but I did have two semesters of engineer drawing, so when they found that out, they put me in engineering lab. I learned more there than I did when I was in school. I was in charge of chassis #5, is all I knew about it. They would make parts in a machine shop, bring it up to us, and then we'd make plans on it. It turned out later that each chassis was such a secretive thing, we did chassis five, somebody else did one, two, three, four – I don't know how many other chassis they had and had no idea what they were for. I found out later it was the beginning of radar. So we would do these things here and it was taken somewhere else and assembled. It was such a secretive thing that all we, or I knew was chassis #5. Somebody else in the Engineering Department probably knew a lot more about it than I did. It was a great experience. The building is still there. We lived in Mystic, Connecticut, in the Mystic Seaport. The historic area is there now. There's a big building down there and I was up there this summer and that building now is used to warehouse parts and stuff for the seaport. It was a great experience and then I came back to the university.

M: I read yesterday that you went to the University of South Carolina. What were your first impressions when you were there?

J: Well, having never been off the farm before moving to start at the University of South Carolina, it was quite a jump. In Columbia, I lived on campus, but my sister was living there also. She worked at the university, so I did have a little "in" there.

M: Did you live on the horseshoe?

J: Yes, I lived in the horseshoe in tenement #7. The library is the end of the horseshoe and there was a music hall at the time – they taught music there – and I lived in the unit next door. I worked in the library part-time my first year to have some extra money.

M: What was your major field?

J: Business. I was trying to get in the Air Corps, as it was called at that time. It was getting near the end of the war and they just weren't taking any more pilots so I waited 'til the day before I was 18 years old and went down and volunteered for the Navy. At that time, they would give you two months, sometimes three months, before they called you to active duty, so I went back and signed up for another semester at the university. For some reason, they called me immediately. I was an enlisted man and went to

Bainbridge, Maryland, for training. Just as we finished our training, they came through the barracks one day and said, "Anybody in here that knows how to type and has been to college, raise your hand." Off I went to an outgoing unit and I hauled garbage for a couple of weeks and then, just to keep us busy, they gave us picks and shovels to go out and pick up some asphalt, just to work us. I ended up down at the tug office in Norfolk, Virginia, and stayed there the rest of the time. My only sea duty was coming across the Chesapeake Bay.

M: So you didn't get shipped over?

J: I didn't get shipped over, no.

M: So did you enter in '43, or '44?

J: '44, I guess. I was in boot camp when the Japanese surrendered. It might have been later than that. I was in about 18 months.

M: That would have been '45. When you got out of the military, where did you move, and what did you do?

J: I knew I didn't want to go back to the farm very long because if you did, Daddy hooked you up to a mule. So, at that time, where I was stationed, they were running short of people because everybody was leaving. They were trying to get people to stay as long as they could because we were in charge of all the tugs, ocean-going tugs and sea-going tugs, and assigning personnel to keep them on schedule. I did stay a little longer than I had to, but I called the university to find out when school was going to start and then I told them when I wanted to get discharged. I got my discharge, went by the farm and dropped off my sea bag, got my civilian clothes, and caught the bus to Columbia the next day. I only stayed there overnight and [then I was] gone and I went back to the university. We were on the tri-semester system, so I went full-time 'til I graduated from school.

M: It must have been an exciting time with all the GIs coming back and the GI Bill.

J: They had 5,000 students at the university. Most of them were coming back and we had a lot of GIs there. The way I met my wife (Lawton's sister) was that so many GIs were trained in Florida, a lot of them came to Florida to the school, and they had priority on admission. Ladies in particular had a difficult time getting into the Florida schools, so she came up to South Carolina. When I got out of the service, as I say I caught the bus from Chesterfield over to Columbia and I was walking from the bus station to campus and walked by the YMCA. I saw two young ladies in there playing pool, so I walked in and introduced myself, and one of them happened to be Lawton's sister.

M: Did you know either one of them?

J: Didn't know either one of them. I went in and introduced myself, told them who I was and that I was just getting back out of the service and coming back over to school. I had my suitcase with me and we talked for a while then I went on to my dorm. I guess after that I started calling. In fact, I dated both the ladies for a while. The other girl was from Charleston, South Carolina. Jeanette and I dated all through school. She was a year

behind me, so we had planned to get married when she graduated from school. After I graduated from college, my GI Bill was out – I had 10 days left on the GI Bill – so I knew I had to have a job or go back to the farm. So during my last year and a half at the university, I worked for J.C. Penney Company part-time to have some extra cash and they offered me a job at \$200 a month when I graduated from college. And B.F. Goodrich was recruiting on campus, so they offered me \$250 a month. I didn't know who Goodrich was, but I found out and I went to work for them on a college training program. It lasted about a year and they sent you around to various stores and to Akron, Ohio, their home office, for about six weeks or eight weeks training. Then I came back to Charlotte, North Carolina, and worked in the Budget Department or Time Payment Department, Credit Department, for about a year and a half, and then I was made store manager at Shelby, North Carolina. But, as soon as my wife graduated, we got married. The ceremony was here in Lakeland, because they lived on Lake Morton. Of course, I came down here a couple of times while we were in school to meet her family, and that's where I met Lawton. He was in high school, playing football, and we went to a football game. He was the center and I guess he was either a junior or senior at that time.

M: Is the house that they were living in still standing?

J: No, it isn't. It was on the lot where Herndon Insurance Company is now, 91 Lake Morton. The old home that Mr. and Mrs. Chiles lived in, which was there when I came down here and it had been there for a long, long time, they moved it back behind that big old oak tree that's in the back of that lot.

M: Where would that be in relation to the library?

J: The library is on the other side of the street.

M: So it's not on that Chiles Street?

J: It is on Chiles Street, yes. It's on the east side. That house was moved to the back [91 Lake Morton, Herndon Insurance is in the house now] because Mr. and Mrs. Chiles had planned to build the house that's there now. They had plans to build that home, and he had a cardiovascular problem - had it since he was 40 years old, [and] he passed away unexpectedly. They were up at the river fishing and he died up there. She decided to go ahead and build that house that exists now, and she lived there by herself until she passed away. [91 Lake Morton, Herndon Insurance is located in this house now] It's got the vent at the top of it, a glass top like that that runs the length of it. It looks like a Frank Lloyd Wright house, but Frank Lloyd Wright didn't design it, somebody else did. And they moved the old house back behind there under that oak tree just to preserve it and rent it out, and she rented it out to somebody and they literally destroyed it, so she tore it down. She lived there until she passed away and, in the meantime, my wife had passed away. I was living in a condo, so I moved in her house to kind of keep an eye on it 'til we got the estate settled and I ended up buying Lawton's part out and lived there for a while.

M: What were your favorite subjects, or did you have any favorite subjects or were you just trying to get it over with?

J: Not really, I mean, growing up like I was, everybody expected us to be farmers, so even in high school, I took agriculture courses, which was a terrible mistake because it didn't prepare you for college. During the courses I should have been taking, we were out there pruning trees and fertilizing cotton and corn and stuff like that and we all had to have our own acre or two of farm of some kind to raise something as a project for the FAA. So that was a mistake, but it was kind of the era that I was in and the lifestyle that everybody was leading just coming out of the recession. Nobody thought anybody would ever leave Chesterfield County; we were all going to stay and be farmers. So it doesn't exactly prepare you for college, but it was still a great life.

M: When you moved to Lakeland, did you live right down there on Chiles Street or where did you live first?

J: After Jeanette and I got married we lived in the Carolinas for 10 years. We lived in Charlotte for about a year and a half, then in Shelby, North Carolina for three years. I was store manager in the B.F. Goodrich store there. Then down to Charleston, South Carolina, was a store manager there. I had always wanted to get in business for myself and just hadn't quite figured out how to do it. While we were there, she always wanted to move back to Florida so I had been thinking seriously about trying to get in business for myself. Well, I'll back up a little bit and say, when I went to Shelby, North Carolina as store manager, this was certainly a new experience for me and I thought it was a great opportunity and a great responsibility, so the first Sunday we were there, we got up and went to the Baptist Church. I was sitting in Sunday School and introduced myself to the guy sitting next to me and I said, "I'm the new manager of the B.F. Goodrich store here", and I said, "I'm looking for somebody to help me at the store, I need to hire someone", and he said, "Well, I'm your man." I'd never seen him before. I said, "Well, come on down and fill out an application", so he came down on Monday and filled out an application and I hired him. When I left Shelby to be transferred - I was promoted to Charleston - he took my place as store manager. We were sitting in a sales meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina - when we went to these meetings, we always sat next to each other - and in a lull in the meeting, I touched him and I said, "I think I'm going into business for myself, and I'm going to move to Lakeland." He said, "I'm going with you." And that was the extent of our conversation. About 60 days later, he called and said, "I sold my house. I'm ready to go". Well, I was just thinking about it. So, he really kind of pushed me into making a decision.

M: And what was his name?

J: Eugene Black. He had been in the grocery business and sold out, and had a little bit of money. I had been saving what I could for the 10 years I had been with Goodrich, so I sold my boat, sold my house, sold my wife's car, took my money out of the pension plan, and I had five thousand dollars. And he had five thousand dollars. So we came to Florida with ten thousand dollars and opened a tire store, O.K. Tires on Memorial Boulevard. That was the extent of our agreement until we got down here and got going and finally had a partnership agreement drawn up. But the understanding was that he wanted to work the store and I was to run the business. We got along wonderfully well and we were there for 17 years. In the meantime, I had started developing real estate so it became obvious that something had to happen. Somebody had to run the tire business and somebody had to run the real estate end. Unfortunately, he had always been a heavy drinker and it finally started taking its toll on him. So, a good way to solve

a long-time personal relationship with a good friend was to sell the business and we'd split the money and go on our merry ways. That's what we did and he and his wife moved back to Shelby, North Carolina after that.

M: Do you remember what year that was?

J: I moved down here in '57 and we sold out in the '60s.

M: And then you went into the commercial real estate?

J: I was already developing commercial real estate. I was going to retire for about year and realized I couldn't do that. After about two weeks I was going bananas. I'd go down and play tennis with a fella' in the morning and everybody was going to the office and I didn't have anywhere to go. I really got depressed. So I decided to open an office and get more active in developing real estate, and I've been doing that ever since.

M: When you first came to Lakeland, and even before that, do you have any memories of Mr. and Mrs. Chiles?

J: I had never been to Florida until I came down here with Jeanette. I had never seen Florida before, so it was quite an experience just coming down here. Of course, they were living on Lake Morton, which was absolutely gorgeous and at that time, Lakeland and Lake Morton were a lot different than they [are] today. Clear water, [you could] swim the lake, perfectly safe, nobody ever locked the doors. It was just a very relaxed, laid back attitude. Of course, it was that way in the Carolinas too. But coming to Florida in those days, we came down 301, and you lived in bed and breakfasts. I don't remember the first hotel I stayed in coming down here. The office building I have now was a hotel at the time and when we came down to get married, my mother and father stayed in that hotel. That was in '46. We had our first child nine months after we were married. I wouldn't say it was a planned event, but it was certainly a blessing. We were going through a lot of experiences any married couple would, trying to get adjusted to things.

M: Now, that was Joe Lawton?

J: Yes, he was our first child.

M: Named after Lawton, I guess.

J: Well, we had a discussion. I thought he should be named after me and my wife thought he should be named after her father, so we settled with Joe and Lawton and called him double names there. He's trying to correct that a little bit but I still call him Joe Lawton.

M: Can you remember Mr. Chiles' place in the community?

J: Mr. Chiles worked for the railroad as a conductor. In his forties, he had a heart attack so he retired and they had some property here. They owned the parking lot at what used to be People's Bank. They rented that parking lot to People's. They had some other income producing property too. They had built the A&P store that was on Florida

Avenue, so they had income from that plus some other rental property. And Mrs. Chiles' family owned quite a bit of property too that was divided up and she had, I guess really, she probably owned or inherited most of the real estate that they had, but Mr. Chiles managed it. So he had a parking lot in what used to be the People's Bank. He ran a parking lot there for a while. When I first came down here, he was running that parking lot himself. After his heart attack, he wasn't able to do much, but he was very sociable.

M: And he was only in his forties when he had that. Mrs. Chiles' family was pretty prominent in the community, what was her maiden name and what were they involved in, and did you ever meet them?

J: [Her maiden name was] Patterson. I met her sisters and brothers. [Her parents] were dead when I came down here. You might be interested in this. Her great grandfather was in the Civil War. He was a captain and a medical officer. That bottom certificate there is his homestead certificate where he homesteaded property in Auburndale. Then he built that house that you see there, this is obviously a later picture of it. It was a beautiful little home and they lived there. This was kind of a vacation spot or something. The family met even when I came down here. The first thing they wanted me to do was to see the Patterson house on Lake Ariana. It was a gorgeous old home. The kitchen was separate from the house. It was out back of it. That's the bottom floor there, where you see that compression ring. The second floor was supported by these logs coming out to this compression ring. And this is the study of the home and it had leaves of the trees made out of wood and decorated. When we first came down here, and I could shoot myself for not doing that, he had these medicine cabinets in there that ran clear to the ceiling and had some old bottles in there, clear back to the Civil War.

M: Was he a physician?

J: Yes. And this mule post that you see right here, this came from the house. I think that family kind of had a split, and Mrs. Chiles' sister, Aunt Pat, lived with them. Her husband died at a very young age and she moved in with Mr. and Mrs. Chiles and lived there until after he died. And she owned this home with her sister, this old Patterson place in Auburndale. I was interested in developing real estate, so I approached her sister's husband, Otto Bentz, about buying it. Incidentally, his daughter lives at Sea Island, Georgia and she would be a very good one to interview, too. Her name is Marsha Turk. She would be a good one for you to visit with. Her mother and Mrs. Chiles' sister owned this home. Together, they inherited that, and there was a grove there. Mr. Bentz knew I was developing a little bit of property so he came one day and wanted to know if I was interested in buying the property. I told him I was, and I had no experience in developing residential property, so he made a deal where I could buy it and finance part of it with him. It probably had to come from an outsider like me. I don't think that either one of them, the friction was pretty great in the family, would have sold it within the family, but they both agreed to sell it to me, and I bought it and made a subdivision out of it. It's called Ariana Estates, had 75 lots in there, and [I] sold the lots on Lake Ariana for \$7500, which is unbelievable today.

M: That would have been back in what year?

J: In about the '70s; maybe even earlier than that.

M: Is the old house still standing?

J: No, I moved it twice on the property trying to save it. Mr. Carl Allen used to have the fish camp place over there, he kept trying to get the house. He wanted it to be his restaurant out there and that didn't sound like a good idea. I moved the house on the property twice trying to save it, and tried to give it to the Historical Association. They came down and looked at it and wanted it but the house was so big that we couldn't move it on the highways. The only way you could move it was to cut it in two. You couldn't cut it in two 'cause the whole second story would collapse because of the compression ring. That supported the whole second story of the house.

M: That would have been built by just a crack architect.

J: Oh yeah. Well, look at that. When you think, back in those days, how did they do that?

M: Do you have any idea when the house was built?

J: No I don't. We've got a scrapbook on it if I can find it. We got a lot of newspaper articles. The Auburndale paper and the Lakeland paper ran several stories on it when we were trying to save it. The Historical Society in Tallahassee did come down and look at it, and accepted it, but there was nowhere to put it and no way to move it.

M: So the house was built by the Confederate veteran, who was a physician. It looks like U.S. Army rather than Confederate Army. Now, we're continuing here, back to the family. Can you remember not only Lawton, of course, but also the other siblings?

J: There were just two children. She was the oldest in the family and Lawton was younger.

M: How would you describe their relationship, was it close?

J: Oh yeah, the two of them were very close.

M: How many years older was she?

J: She was probably six or seven years older than Lawton.

M: So she was a real big sister then. Can you describe her friends here in Lakeland? Did she have a lot of friends that she kept in touch with?

J: Yes, she did. She graduated from Lakeland High School. There's one still here, Patsy King still lives here and they were in school together. Sarah McKay was probably in school with her, too. Most of her other close friends have passed away. Patsy King is the only one I can think of. They had some class reunions, but I don't remember anybody still here, other than Patsy King, that were close friends and are still living.

M: Can you remember your first impressions of Lawton? Did you watch him play football?

J: Oh yeah. My first trip down here we went to football games and watched him play. He always had a group of friends. There was always somebody at the house visiting with him. Jimmy Miller is one that stands out. Jimmy lives in Tallahassee now. He and Jimmy were very close friends, and I guess played football together. Of course, Bill Skipper was in the same era. He's not with us anymore. When Lawton became Governor, y'know, Jimmy and his wife moved to Tallahassee. Jimmy's wife worked in the Governor's Mansion there as a receptionist and hostess the whole time Lawton was there. I think Jimmy went to work for the lottery or one of the agencies up there. I'm sure they're both retired now. But, Lawton always had a group of people around him.

M: Would you say he was a leader in high school? Was he class president, that kind of thing?

J: Oh, definitely. Oh, yeah. Yes, definitely.

M: What were some of the accolades that you remember that he was involved in?

J: I don't remember that much about his high school, because we'd only come down for a day or two, or I would. Other than the football team, and he was in several other activities, I don't remember that.

M: When you came down here in 1957, Lawton was just about to get into a political career at that point.

J: Yes. Well, he was in law practice.

M: Right, when you came here, he would have been in the law practice.

J: Well, he started out working with Mr. Peterson, Jay Peterson's father. Then they left and went into business for themselves, and it was Carr, Chiles, and Ellsworth and they were opening their law office in the basement of The Thelma Hotel, at the same time I was building my tire store.

M: Did you have them do business for you? Law business?

J: Oh, yes, yes. Yes.

M: They were your lawyers, I suppose.

J: Yes. George Carr continued to be my lawyer, long after Lawton left. George was my lawyer until he passed away.

M: What was the first political office he ran for?

J: State House of Representatives against Roy Searles.

M: He didn't run for any local offices, county commission - city commission?

J: No.

M: What did you think when you heard he was going to run against Searles?

J: Well, we were at a football game and he sat behind us. He told us he was getting ready to throw his hat in the ring, and I didn't really know what he was talking about. Then he started telling us about his plans to run for the House, and Roy Searles was such a prominent figure and had such a successful career, it looked like a pretty good giant to tackle. That's when he realized that he had to do something more than just a normal campaign, and that's when he and Rhea decided to do the door-to-door campaign. There were a lot of concerns about his age, too young, somebody that had been serving and had all the seniority.

M: Wasn't he slated to be a leader?

J: Roy? Yes. But there were two different personalities. Roy was very well liked so far as I know, but he was not a people person. He wasn't out shaking hands with people. I noticed that in some of the campaign debates. He didn't circulate in the crowd like Lawton did. Of course, Lawton and Rhea had been going house to house and it became a very popular thing and when he went to these debates, he knew so many people there and they knew him, because of the personal contacts.

M: What was Searles' profession?

J: He was an attorney, also a pilot. He had his own airplane.

M: Was he a native of Lakeland?

J: I don't know. I knew him personally to say hello to him, and we knew who each other was, but we didn't socialize with him or anything like that. As you know, Roy was killed in an airplane crash. I was flying at the same time. He was coming back from Tallahassee. I don't know the year. I think he was still active up there. After you fly for a while, you get a lot of confidence you shouldn't have.

M: You've flown, haven't you?

J: Yes.

M: Do you still do that?

J: No, still have my private pilot's license.

M: When did you begin doing that?

J: Oh, in the '60s. I had always wanted to fly and, of course, the airport was right downtown then at Tiger Town. That's where I learned how to fly. Roberts Flying Service was a big space operator out there and I had always wanted to do that, so I just picked up the phone one day and called and said, "I want to learn how to fly", and they said, "Well, come on out". So I went out there and started taking lessons in a Piper Tri-Pacer, which was a great experience, and then later bought a Cessna 172 and kept that for

about a year then traded that and got a Comanche 250, which was real high performance, for that time anyway. I got about 500 hours in the air.

M: Were you ever interested in politics before you married Jeanette Chiles?

J: Well, in college, I was President of the Literary Society, president of our fraternity, and two or three other things in college.

M: So when you came down to Florida in '57, you couldn't have cared less about politics really, you were just trying to make a living so you would not have seen who was governor or what the issues were too much. You didn't really pay much attention to that. During the campaign, did you work for him?

J: Oh, yes.

M: Did you go around knocking on doors?

J: Not so much knocking on doors.

M: Was Mrs. Ruthven involved too?

J: Yes, to some degree, but remember we had three kids by then. The day of the election, Lawton had people throughout Polk County taking leaflets out with his picture on them and "Today is the day to give Polk good government. Vote for Lawton Chiles" with a big 8x10 picture. We had part of Auburndale. We got up at four o'clock that morning and went over there putting leaflets, if the newspaper was in the yard, we picked it up out of the yard and put in on the porch with that leaflet underneath it. We worked from four o'clock going door-to-door and, with the dogs and everything else, it's not the best time to be walking up and down the street. Today you wouldn't think of doing that. But we did, she and I both. She'd get one side of the street and I'd take the other. We did that 'til probably about eight o'clock.

M: How many folks like that were out there doing that kind of thing, besides you?

J: I don't know. When I got through, I had to go back to the tire store and put in a full day. Scott Linder was another one. I don't know what area he worked, but he's always talked about going door-to-door putting these leaflets out. But, the door-to-door and certainly Polk's Lawton Chiles was something so different. I asked Lawton where he came up with this idea, and he was running for some office in college and did the same thing, so he just took his college experience and put it into practice down here.

M: Was it a shock to you when you heard he was going to challenge Roy Searles? Or were you surprised?

J: Yes. I was surprised.

M: What did you think his chances were?

J: Well, if you talked to anybody, anybody you talked to didn't give him a chance, because there was just no way he was going to beat Roy Searles. I remember we did a

lot of business with automobile dealers back in those days with the tire business and I don't know of any automobile dealer that I went to calling on to sell tires that thought he'd win. But as the campaign developed, about midway through it, it was very obvious he was the most popular person there. And I think, I distinctly remember Roy Searles being there one day with Red Holcomb, and I think Roy realized at that time that all the attention was on Lawton, not on him, but by then it was too late to do anything. That was certainly a great idea Lawton had to win. Of course he continued those great ideas all during his campaign and from that walk, as you well know, is when he decided to do the other walk.

M: He had you all as the foot soldiers, of course. Were there any business leaders that came onboard in the beginning?

J: Not in that campaign, not until later on.

M: Back then, the legislature was certainly a real part-time job, and he had to make a living and his law practice was essential to that. How many hours a week...

J: I have no idea. He had some very forgiving law partners, because like any other public office, you start out and it's 'gonna be part-time but it ends up just dominating your time, and you feel like, you ran for the office and you asked the people to vote for you, so you just feel like, you have the strong obligation to do it, even though it's really a financial burden.

M: And even though the session only lasts 60 days, you're working all year, working steady.

J: There are committees and everything else.

M: Do you remember if he had any people that he worked with closely that early on as a staff?

J: No. I do not remember any of the staff in the House.

M: Do you remember any specific legislation that he was really interested in pushing up there in Tallahassee?

J: Once the election was over, I was back to the tire business.

M: During those years in the late '50s and early '60s, what kind of social activities did you do with Rhea and Lawton?

J: We always had Christmas together, the whole Chiles family. Their family, our family, we always celebrated Christmas together.

M: Vacations?

J: Some vacations. Well, not with his parents because as I say Mr. Chiles died at a very early age. Mrs. Chiles went with us on vacations. We took her on vacations and we went with Lawton and Rhea to a tennis tournament in Vermont and things like that, but

Lawton was leading a very busy life and he was not here a lot of the time, and I was pretty much confined to Lakeland, Florida.

M: During the late '50s and early '60s, besides his law practice, did he have any other major business activities?

J: Yes. He obviously got involved with the very first Red Lobster to be built here, along with Bill Ellsworth and some others, and they were doing some real estate development, along with Skipper and Ellsworth. I really don't know all their real estate dealings, but he was involved in that.

M: Was most of his work civil work, or did he do any criminal work?

J: I don't think so, no.

M: Can you go through the family, the children as they were born? Do you remember the chronology there?

J: Well, Tandy...you talking about Lawton's family? Tandy was obviously the first child, and you know she has a little problem but is doing fine. Lawton was stationed in Columbia, South Carolina, for a while at Fort Jackson, and I was living in Shelby at the time. We saw them a couple of times then, and when he went overseas, Rhea came back and lived with Mr. and Mrs. Chiles. Then when Lawton got out of the service, he came back and lived with the family for a while 'til he could get started in his law practice and his politics again. But they lived with them for a number of years while his children were being born and growing up. Well, Lawton always was a survivor. Certainly, his run for the U.S. Senate had to be his greatest challenge, 'cause he literally ran out of money with five people in the race and he was rated number five. When you go out and try to raise money like that, there's just nothing out there; very little interest in contributing to his campaign. I made some calls with Rhea, and my wife and I made calls, and we were just, everybody was committed to somebody else. And the walk got to be something that had to happen because there was just no other way to keep the doors open. They were paying the light bill on a daily basis. When he mentioned the walk, I thought it was the greatest idea he'd ever had because I could see that as a way for him to stay in the campaign. Other people thought it was crazy.

M: Were you taken aback when he decided to run for the Senate?

J: No. No, I wasn't surprised. I didn't realize that he'd have as much competition as he did, or that he would be that far down in the ratings. Of the five running, he was last when they first started. So the walk was the turnaround for him.

M: Do you remember any involvement that Spessard Holland would have had in the campaign, other than saying he's not running?

J: To my knowledge...

M: Was he pretty closed mouth about the whole thing?

J: Yes, he was.

M: In 1970, during the campaign, were there any specific people that stand out in the management of the campaign that you can remember?

J: Well, Jack Pridgen had to be the number one standout. Jack was the one that came up with so many ideas for Lawton's campaign, what to do and how to respond to questions and problems. He was a great contributor to Lawton's success.

M: Would you put him above Canady in terms of those early years?

J: Without any question.

M: His background was?

J: Public Relations. He was in the public relations business and handled Lawton's campaigns. I don't know on what basis 'cause there wasn't any money in the till, so I don't know how he got paid. But of course, then he went full-time with Lawton after Lawton got elected to the Senate.

M: So he would have known Lawton through probably his business with Red Lobster and that kind of stuff?

J: Oh yes. Yes.

M: Chesterfield Smith. Was he supportive of Lawton running, or do you remember what his stand was on the campaign?

J: I remember when Lawton was in, I guess, the State Senate, he was always visiting with Chesterfield Smith, so I think he had a great admiration for him. Chesterfield had other commitments, I'm sure, so I really don't know when he came aboard with Lawton. I know that he thought the walk was a crazy idea, but certainly later on in years, they became very close friends.

M: I was going to interview Chesterfield right before he died, and I've been through a lot of that with Burt Kibler obviously too, you know that relationship. Obviously Lawton's personal appeal was strong, but what were his major areas of support, constituencies, I guess, in the beginning, in say 1970?

J: I think the workingman from the very beginning, the workingman.

M: What about teachers?

J: Teachers, yes. I'm talking about the middle income; the blue-collar worker was Lawton's base. Of course, later on I'm sure that changed, but I think that was still his base. I mean, everybody recognized him for his walk and he kind of established his image. And then too, his ten-dollar campaigns where everybody could contribute. But that was his base and I think that's what made him so successful because the person that gives you ten dollars, for some of 'em, it was a sacrifice, but they're committed when they do that.

M: When did that ten-dollar pledge begin, right in 1970?

J: I don't remember. That happened when he was in the Senate, the U.S. Senate.

M: Do you remember any of the issues that he addressed straight forward, or was it just...

J: I sure don't remember any major issues.

M: Teacher's strike in '68? Civil Rights?

J: I don't remember Lawton really taking a position on the teacher's strike but that's because I don't remember it. But that's when Charles Canady came to work for him, because Charles was on strike so he came in and I think started out volunteering and then continued to stay. To my knowledge, he never did go back to teaching.

M: Did he have a position on the Viet Nam War that you remember?

J: No, I don't.

M: That was the election that Reubin Askew was running for governor in 1970. Was there any interaction with those two at all that you can remember?

J: Not that I'm aware of, no. I think they were close friends, but I don't know when that friendship developed.

M: At the national level, historians look at the 1970 campaign in Florida as a pivotal campaign – two young, very progressive, products of the New South and new ideas – Reubin and Lawton.

J: I think Lawton...Reubin Askew almost looks like a minister and presented himself that way, and I think that appealed an awful lot, because I heard him make comments, I don't know the exact comment, but similar to that that Reubin was ministerial and had that image, and therefore wasn't questioned on a lot of other things like other people might be.

M: Regarding The Walk, do you remember doing any walking?

J: Oh yes. We met in several places where Lawton walked.

M: Can you go through some of that?

J: I don't remember where we were, I think he had already been down through this area now, but I know he wanted a wristwatch with a Mickey Mouse on it from Disney World, so I went and got one for him, brought it to him on the campaign trail. And we walked with him on several different occasions, just go up for a day and walk, and then walked into Lakeland with him. It was just an exciting time.

M: At the very beginning of the walk over in Century, Florida, Escambia County, there was hardly anybody walking at all, but by the time he got to Tallahassee, he gained momentum. Were you and the boys involved in the walk at all?

J: After Tallahassee. We did not start with him at Century, up in that area.

M: Were his kids involved in that at all? And Rhea?

J: Very much involved. Oh, yes. It was a family affair.

M: Of course, the big hurdle was the primary and he defeated, as I recall, Farris Bryant in the primary. What did you think his chances were in the primary?

J: Once the walk started, by the time he got to Tallahassee, I didn't have any reservations about him winning, because everywhere you went it was just the talk of the town. And how do you combat that? It was just the khakis and the blue shirt was an image.

M: Where is Lawton today? What's he doing today? Who's he meeting today?

J: Always on the news. It was in the paper. Some dignitary would come out and meet with him, or the mayor and the commissioners of the town would come out and walk him. This made headlines, not only locally but also throughout Florida.

M: They say with these kinds of things you better be careful what you hope for, and of course, he did win the race, and he beat Cramer. I'm sure you were watching the news returns like a hawk; can you go back to that night? Where were you that night?

J: We were at the various campaign headquarters. That night, I don't remember. I know we were in Orlando one time, we were in Tampa one time, but I don't remember which ones. But, there was just obviously great excitement, almost unbelievable. I don't remember whether it was the first campaign or the second one, but during the day, Lawton called me and thanked me for the help, and I could tell from the tone of his voice. I didn't know how he knew at that time that he knew he had won, but he was getting the exit polls, which I didn't have access to, and he knew what the percentages were, so he knew early in the day that he was going to win. So he called. He didn't tell me he was going to win but, like I say, I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was very confident. Also, when he decided not to run for the Senate, Judy and I were in California, and he called me to tell me he wasn't going to run and I said, "Lawton, that's a big adjustment". I said, "When you come out of office having been in the Senate as long as you have, you've got a big adjustment to make, to driving your own car, to find a parking place, not having all the attention that you enjoy now". And I think he did. Just leaving the mayor's office in Lakeland. You soon get where you expect some attention. And it is a big adjustment for somebody that's been in 18 years to come out, I think he was lost not being in the public office, so I was glad when he decided to run for governor.

M: That's what I'd like to talk about right now actually, is your mayorship in Lakeland in 1970. Why did you decide to run for mayor?

J: Well, I ran for the City Commission and then you were elected as mayor from the City Commission. But I had been involved in the chamber and had been President to the Lions' Club and I'd been very active in the community. George Trask was in the Commission at that time.

M: Had you sold the tire business by that time?

J: No. I was still in the tire business. And I guess having worked in Lawton's campaign so much, you kind of get the political bug and you'd like to try it, so I decided to run. I had two opponents.

M: What was the makeup of the Commission before you ran? Or at the time you ran? Were you dissatisfied with some of the things going on?

J: No. No, this was just a vacancy and it was in the district that I lived in, so I thought it was a good time to run.

M: Did people approach you to run?

J: George Trask and I had been talking about it and George, I guess, encouraged me to run. Then when I started making a few comments about it, I did get a lot of support, and thank goodness, I won. I didn't have a runoff so that was nice. And Dr. Jackson was running at the same time. He was our first black City Commissioner.