

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

**INTERVIEW WITH:**            **JOE RUTHVEN**  
**INTERVIEW:**               **JAMES M. DENHAM**  
**PLACE:**                    **LAKELAND, FLORIDA**  
**DATE:**                     **FEBRUARY 9, 2004**

**M= James M. Denham (Mike)**

**J= Joe Ruthven**

M: I'm at the house of Joe Ruthven on February 9, 2004, and we're resuming our oral history interviews with Mr. Ruthven. Mr. Ruthven, good morning. The last time we were together, we were finishing up our interview with your term as mayor and you had gone through some important aspects of your mayoral tenure. A couple of the prominent things we talked about were your role in getting the Civic Center project underway, and the desegregation issues. Also, before that, we got Lawton Chiles elected to the Senate. So I guess what I'd like to do today to begin with is to see if you would take us through the end of your term as mayor.

J: Integration of the schools was a big part of my term as mayor. I think I had a good relationship with the Afro-American community. I visited over there a lot. They supported me during the election. Dr. Larry Jackson was the first black person to be elected to the City Commission and also the first to serve as mayor of our city. He and I developed a friendship and a mutual respect, so I was invited to the black community quite often. One of the highlights were the meetings with the school children, because there were a lot of walkouts, a lot of confrontations, a lot of fights in the schools, and we tried to impress on the kids that education was what it was all about. If they wanted to improve their lifestyle, they needed to be in school and they needed to get an education. In meeting with the kids, there was one kid that always seemed to stand out, and we developed, I think, a friendship. His name was Jesse McNeil. I met in the black community with Jesse and his organization many, many times. He was President of the Future Black Leaders of America. There were a lot of organizations that sprung up out there; somebody would be president of it and maybe it would last a short period of time then it would go away and something else would spring up. But the Future Black Leaders of America seemed to continue. Jesse was quite an individual. If a fight started at school, he either started it or got involved in it before it was over. But he would always come up and chat with me, so we kind of kept an eye on each other. After I went out of office, I didn't see Jesse for a long time and I always wondered what happened to him because after those meetings, we'd go back to the Chamber of Commerce and kind of review what had happened and try to figure out ways we could improve it the next time we had a meeting. We always commented that Jesse would either be a community leader, or he'd end up in prison. About 20 years later, I ran into Jesse at the bank. He had long curly hair and a three-piece suit on. I didn't even recognize him. He came over and asked me if I knew who he was and I said 'no', and he said 'I'm Jesse McNeil' and I said 'Jesse what on earth are you doing now' and he said 'I'm a preacher' and I said 'well you ought to be a good one because you've been on both sides of the fence and you've played with the devil a lot, so it had to a good experience for you'. He went on the share his life with me. He did get into drugs and his headquarters or the bar he sold

drugs out of was on the corner of Fifth and Kettles and he was picked up and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He kindly brought me up to date on his life and said while he was in prison, he realized that he had been wrong and that he missed his wife and children. He committed himself to going into the ministry when he got out of prison, and he was going to go back to the neighborhood where he used to sell drugs and build a church. Well, Jesse fulfilled his dream and fulfilled his commitment. He came back and worked for Publix and also had another job and he also went to Southeastern College, which at that time was known as Southeastern Bible College. He did graduate, so he is an ordained minister now. After our experience, needless to say, he came back wanting me to help him get a church started at the corner of Fifth and Kettles. He had taken over the old bar where he used to sell drugs. He had converted that into a church, and he had about 100 people in his membership. We went down and visited that, and Buddy Fletcher and I thought we would help him out. We agreed to head up a fund drive. Victory Assembly was also involved in helping Jesse in his ministry down there. We needed to raise \$300,000 dollars and figured they could borrow the rest of it and pay that from the congregation. We got the project started, and had a grand opening down there, right on the corner of Fifth and Kettles. Within 100 feet of where we were standing, 20 people had been murdered over the past few years. So, it was a rough neighborhood. We all went down there in police vans for the groundbreaking. We had adequate security down there. Carol Barnett came down. Sarah McKay and several other people came down for the groundbreaking; we must have had 100 or so people there. We were able to get pledges that were adequate for Victory Assembly to go ahead and kind of sponsor this ministry with Jesse. As always, Publix charities stepped to the forefront and made a \$50,000 matching pledge. We were able to raise the rest of the money or get pledges for the rest of the money.

We really didn't call it a church for several reasons, but it was called the "Freedom Center" and it was going to be a mentoring place for children, where they could come in and be tutored. They'd have a sports forum to participate in. There would be somebody always there for those kids that didn't have a place to go, and there were a lot of them in that community who were really abandoned. They were just out on the streets. It was unfortunate, and some of them were out there with submachine guns. But Jesse, having been raised in that neighborhood, could talk the language and he could talk to the kids as well as the parents. We got the Freedom Center started and it kind of ran into some problems and sat there for about a year or so, really for lack of funds. We had hoped that we would have enough volunteers and donations of materials and supplies, but after a while, the volunteer workers just ran out of time and the project slowed down. I'm happy to say that now we've got it back underway and moving again, and it will probably be open by the end of this year.

Victory Assembly was kind enough to go hire a minister to assist Jesse in tutoring the children, and this is going to be a great help. This area is known as "The Bottom" in Lakeland and it is the bottom of everything. It is one of the highest crime areas in our city and I think this project when we finally get it underway will improve conditions down there and give those children some hope for the future. So Jesse didn't disappoint us in what we had said about him, that he would either be a great community leader or he'd go to prison; he fulfilled both of our thoughts. Thank goodness he's got his prison time behind him and now he can work toward doing more constructive things. He presently serves as Chaplain of the Police Department and the Sheriff's Department, and he's got a very active group going there. We're really very optimistic about what's going to happen. Those are probably the highlights of my term on the commission and as mayor.

Certainly the civic center is something we're all proud of and that was a project that literally divided our city. Looking back on it now, you'd wonder why people would object to it, but at the time it was a big controversy. Two of us that ran for higher office after the civic center was voted on were not elected. George Trask ran for Senate and so did I and both of us were defeated, and we think the civic center was really the reason for it because it was still a topic of controversy for several years to come.

M: Was that in 1971?

J: Yes.

M: After that period you left politics entirely?

J: I decided to go back to work and make a living.

M: Can you summarize some of your work at that point? How much did being mayor and [being on the] city commission keep you from that?

J: Oh, public service is a very demanding job.

M: You must have had a good staff.

J: I think of, if I had worked as hard in my own business as I did in public office, what I could have accomplished. I did have a good staff but [being in public office] hurts your business. There's no question about it. People that are serving in public office and have to make a living are doing double duty and my hat is off to anybody who's willing to do it. But getting defeated for the Florida state senate was the best thing that happened to me. There were five in the race and Curtis Peterson won and he did a lot better job in the Senate than I would have ever done, and I made a lot more money by not being there. So I'm thankful that he won. It turned out very well for me and for the public, too, because Curtis did an outstanding job. Of course, you never like to lose, but in retrospect it was one of the best things that happened to me. I was in the tire business at the time and I was also developing real estate and it had finally gotten to the point where it was obvious that I had to get somebody to run one or the other, and just out of the clear, this gentleman walked in one day and wanted to know if I wanted to sell the tire business. After about a year of negotiations, I sold it. And I'd been in the tire business for 27 years, 10 years with B.F. Goodrich and 17 years in my own business. I thought it would be the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I thought I'd retire for a year and do nothing, but after about two weeks I was so depressed. I not only missed the employees, but I missed the people and I just missed being out front, having people to talk to every day.

M: And that was in 1970?

J: 1971. So I got an office on South Florida Avenue in a building I owned and stayed there for a little while then had an opportunity to buy the building at 41 Lake Morton Drive, so I bought that and moved over there and got actively involved in developing real estate and building warehouses, which I had been doing some of before. So I just went back fulltime, working as hard as ever. But really, I never had a desire to run for public

office again. People in public office need to be independently wealthy because it's very difficult to make a living and meet a payroll and try to fulfill your public obligations, too.

M: Well, perhaps now we can go back to Lawton. Do you remember the process of Lawton moving up to Washington and how that all transpired? Did he get any help? Did you and Mrs. Ruthven have any involvement in that at all?

J: Not in actually helping him move. We went up to visit him several times.

M: What was the first time you went to visit?

J: Shortly after they went to Washington. We went up and spent a long weekend with them, and we went back on several other occasions. Lawton would always take us to lunch in the senate dining room and we got to meet John Glenn and Strom Thurmond, [whom] I had met [in] South Carolina, and several other senators because most of them would come in there for lunch. The temptation to get up and go around and shake hands with everybody was awfully great, but you tried to restrain yourself. I think we did go over and personally speak to John Glenn and shake his hand. It was quite an experience. We went several times to visit Lawton when he was in office, and he took us on tours on how he got from his office to the senate chambers, and always to lunch at the senate dining room which was a real treat.

M: Who were the people closest to him at that time in Washington as far as the staff goes?

J: Well, on his staff certainly Charles Canady and Jack Pridgen. They were there during that time. So far as his senate companions, Sam Nunn was always a close friend. And, at this moment I'm drawing a blank on others that he might have been working with. We would usually go down there and we'd do something else over the weekend.

M: How do you think Rhea liked Washington?

J: I think she liked some aspects of it when she first got there. I think she, like anybody else, [felt that] it was a very exciting place to be. Of course, she got Florida House started as a result of going up there, which was a great accomplishment. But I don't think she really enjoyed the Washington lifestyle. She, as you know, moved back to Florida and Lawton kind of commuted back and forth on the weekends.

M: Did that happen as early as the first term?

J: I think so. She started spending most of her time down here and she had good friends.

M: Here in Lakeland?

J: No, at Anna Maria Island.

M: Okay, so from the very beginning of his senatorial years, she lived in Anna Maria.

J: Longboat Key. Around the Holmes Beach, Anna Maria Island.

M: Did they sell their house here in Lakeland?

J: Yes.

M: Right off the bat in 1970, 1971?

J: Yes. Early on, I don't remember when they sold it, but they did sell their house, yes.

M: Even so, Charles Canady stayed here in Lakeland, is that correct?

J: Charles went to Washington for quite some time, maybe through the first or part of the second term. I don't remember exactly when he moved back but he moved back to Lakeland to run his office.

M: So the office in Lakeland continued right after the election. The office was established here in Lakeland, I guess, right after the election.

J: Not with Charles here. It was established later on. Charles was in Washington, I'd say, for the full first term.

M: But somebody else was here.

J: Yes. He had a Lakeland office, yes.

M: Did you ever talk to Lawton about his Senate activities, what he liked the best?

J: Not really.

M: He didn't want to talk about that kind of stuff when you were together?

J: No. And I think a lot of the stuff he was working on, they hadn't voted on, and it would be kind of premature. I think you have to be very careful what you say.

M: Did he ever ask you about any issues that he was wrestling with, what you thought about this or that?

J: Not really, we were more involved in his campaign when he was running for office than we were on his issues and his senate activities.

M: Did Lawton ever express to you any of the things he did for fun up in Washington? Did he go hunting up there?

J: I'm sure he went on hunting trips, yes. He always enjoyed the outdoors and camping out and being in the woods.

M: So he made some connections up there probably right off the bat with that kind of thing.

J: Yeah, either up there or back in Florida, one or the other. But when Lawton got into real difficult decision-making, like when he was trying to decide whether to run for governor or not, he went out and spent the weekend or longer in the woods, hunting and just enjoying nature.

M: Do you remember going hunting with him?

J: No, I'm not a hunter. I don't hunt.

M: Who do you think would have been his favorite hunting buddies if he had to assemble a group of about a dozen?

J: Well, he and Aldine Combee, who is no longer with us, were good friends. Of course, Aldine had a big ranch here.

M: Is he kin to Neil? Father?

J: Yes [he is kin]. No, I think maybe Aldine is his uncle I'm not sure. But it's the same family. And [Lawton] spent a lot of time at Ben Hill Griffin's ranch and also at Burke Kibler's. So in this area, I would say that's where he spent most of his time. But he did a lot of hunting up in Tallahassee with some friends, and I'm not familiar with those.

M: Does Whit Palmer ring a bell?

J: Yes.

M: Do you remember in those early years in the senate if he had any kind of substantial relationship with Buddy MacKay other than maybe they had served in the State House [together]?

J: In the early years, I don't think so. I think this developed while they were in the State Senate.

M: Can you remember [Lawton's] first re-election campaign to the U.S. Senate in 1976?

J: Oh yeah. I remember a whole lot.

M: Okay, can we go into that? It sounds like you were a lot more involved in the campaigns than a lot of the other stuff.

J: Well, we did a lot of the grunt work. I had some carpenter's on the payroll at that time and they made up thousands of signs, assembled them together and we'd haul them in our trucks and Greg would go out every night putting up signs. We spent a lot of time doing that type of work for Lawton, a lot of time.

M: By 1976, obviously he was the incumbent, which meant his campaigning was obviously a lot more sophisticated than 1970. What were the major changes that you remember?

J: All of [Lawton's] campaigns were kind of loose. You might think of it as being a well-oiled organized campaign. Lawton's campaigns were looser than that. I guess all campaigns are just mass confusion because things change, people change, events change, so it's really high pressure. You've got to be flexible and ready to change directions and move and go onto different issues. Most of our support of the campaign, as I say, was from actually constructing signs and putting them up. I can't tell you how many employees I had out hanging signs and sticking signs up along the road anywhere we could get them.

M: In 1976, your kids, Greg and Joe Lawton, would have been how old?

J: Well, Joe Lawton wasn't here. He went from Vanderbilt to the service and came back with Shell Oil Company, and he was in the oil business so he was never very much involved in the campaign.

M: Even in 1970?

J: Yes. Greg spent an awful lot of time on the campaign. I mean, an awful lot. And Kay was involved in some of them, but Greg was good at campaigning and I think he learned a lot about campaigning, meeting people and working with the public. But he spent an inordinate amount of time. He took a lot of my employees that I thought were out on a job and instead he had them out making signs.

M: What about Kay? Was she involved too? She's younger?

J: She was involved some. She's in the middle. Greg did the majority of the work in Lawton's campaigns, along with my employees.

M: Would you consider that Kay got a lot of enthusiasm to get into politics from Lawton?

J: Definitely. No question about it. She would come down for the election nights and things like that, even when she was out of town. If there was a campaign speech or something here, or a debate, we all went to that. Even when she was in college, she'd come down.

M: And where did she attend?

J: She went to Florida State Undergraduate School then Wake Forest Law School.

M: Do you remember anything about the campaign that sticks out in 1976?

J: I don't remember anything that stands out right now, no. In the first election, of course, it was Cramer and Farris Bryant and several others. That was during the walk.

M: Did you ever have a sense of Lawton's relationship with Bob Graham?

J: No I [didn't]. They knew each other but whether they were close personal friends or not, I cannot respond to that.

M: Can you remember anything about the campaign in 1982?

J: Refresh my memory. Who was running against him at that time? [Lawton Chiles ran against Van B. Poole]

M: I can't really remember myself.

J: That makes me feel better then. You know, in his campaigns for the senate, I always felt like he had a very comfortable edge over everybody else because his walk related to the average working man. As I've said earlier, you don't meet those people in the Kiwanis Club or whatever club, but you know they're there, and they were on Lawton's team and they got out and voted. So in my mind, he had that vote locked up just from his walk and his dress and his relationship with the working people.

M: In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected. In 1976, four years earlier, Jimmy Carter was elected. What do you think [Lawton's] opinion of Carter was, first?

J: It was very good. In fact, Jimmy Carter came down here to speak in Lakeland.

M: I remember you telling me that. What year was that? That was after [Carter] was elected President, obviously.

J: Yes, in fact it was just before the election when he lost. I think when he was here he had gotten some exit polls which pretty well let him know he wasn't going to win.

M: [It] was pretty close to the election then.

J: Yes. And we had the event at the civic center and I think he and Lawton were very good friends. Lawton was certainly supporting him. I'm not sure [Lawton] was that close to Reagan. I think he always thought that Reagan was spending too much money, but I guess we were racing with the Russians in the Arms Race and we outspent them, and without having a war, we came out ahead. But at the time, I think [Lawton] was concerned about the money that the Reagan administration was spending. But Jimmy Carter, I never heard anything but compliments about him, and [Lawton's] relationship was obviously very good.

M: That brings up really another important point around 1980. Carter lost and everything was going in the other direction. The Republicans were winning everything, and that even really highlights the fact that in 1982, it was quite an accomplishment for [Lawton] to win again. It was going pretty far but it wasn't as far as it is now, of course, with the Republicans taking over everything. Did [Lawton] ever express any frustration with the national party or concern that he just couldn't stay in the Democratic Party any longer, or anything like that to you?

J: No. I think Lawton was more frustrated with people that changed parties from Democratic to Republican, saying they were doing it for philosophical reasons and various and sundry other things. I think Lawton felt like they were abandoning their roots and didn't see the need for them to change. Then, when they changed, they suddenly became outspoken about their position and I think he and I shared the same views on that.

M: Which are?

J: I don't think many of them changed for philosophical reasons. I guess I've been a Democrat so long and plan to continue being one. I guess during the times when I was growing up if it hadn't been for Franklin Roosevelt, I'd probably still be plowing, so I'm very grateful for a party that will look out for the working people and those who are really in need. And I think Lawton felt the same way. But a lot of people changed parties for political reasons. I guess if they wanted to get re-elected, they felt like they had to change. I have much stronger ties to the party. If they don't like the way the party is going, I think they should try to work within the party to change it rather than abandoning it. I think [for] a lot of people who changed to the Republican Party; it kind of got to be a social thing, a prestige thing. It was the thing to do. Whether their hearts were in it or not, I don't believe so.

M: In other words, they kind of forgot where they came from?

J: They got too far into the dance. I really think if they were truly interested in the welfare of their country and they didn't like the way the party was going, they should have been working within the party to change it rather than to jump ship. I think loyalty is important.

M: This gets also to the heart of that a little bit. Do you think that race has anything to do with the switch? Do you think there's a feeling that the Democrats are just being taken over by the blacks?

J: Well, Lyndon Johnson kind of made that statement, but I don't know. It certainly doesn't for me. I certainly lived in a segregated area, but the farmer that lived next door to us was black and he had kids my age. We grew up together so some of my best friends growing up were black, so maybe I don't have as strong a feeling as some other people do, although Chesterfield was highly segregated, there's no question about that. So were the schools when I was growing up. But I guess having worked in the fields with them and living side by side, I don't have as strong a feeling as some other people have.

M: 1982. Lawton was gaining significant leadership positions in the Senate. I think by that time he was slated to be Chair of the Budget Committee, in fact he might have even been Chair of the Budget Committee by that time. That was the time of ballooning deficits and spending without cutting, without keeping the tax revenues coming in. Did [Lawton] ever confide in you the frustrations that he had? Did you see the strain when you would see him from time to time?

J: Yes, he was frustrated. There's no question about that. I don't remember any in-depth discussions. He felt like it was a very difficult job trying to get the spending under control and I guess a little disappointed that a lot of people didn't feel the same way he did about it. But that's politics. That's public life. You have to respect the other person's view, even if you don't agree with them.

M: When did you first learn that he was going to not run again in 1988 for the Senate? And what did you think about it?

J: Judy and I were in Sun Valley, Idaho, at a meeting, and he called me at the hotel to tell me he wasn't going to run for the Senate, and we discussed it on the telephone. And I appreciated his call. This was before he had made the announcement. And I said 'Lawton, you're going to find that it's a big adjustment from being in the senate to going back out doing whatever you want to do. You know, you're accustomed to this lifestyle', and there is a certain lifestyle being in the Senate. Somebody is always picking you up at the airport and driving you here and there, and suddenly you walk out of office and a lot of those people you thought were your closest friends are political friends. They're official friends. When you get out of that office, they stay with the office. And it is a big jump. It's a big jump for anybody in public office. All you've got to do is look around at some people who've been in public office for a long time who lose an election. They have a hard time making that adjustment. And I'm sure he did too. He never admitted it or talked about it. But all the public attention you get when you're in public office, 90% of it is for the office. And anybody in public office, and I keep reminding my daughter of this, remember, 90-95% of all the accolade you're getting is for the office, it's not for you. If you can remember that and take it in stride, I don't think the adjustment is as bad, but it is a big adjustment to go out of office. And it was a big adjustment for him too. He didn't dwell on it a lot but if you read a newspaper article, he hadn't driven a car in a long time and was trying to find a parking place to go make a telephone call to somebody. We didn't have cell phones then like we've got now. But you get accustomed to people doing those things for you and suddenly you don't have it. It is a big adjustment and I think it was a big adjustment for him. It had to be.

M: Do you think Rhea had any involvement in that decision, or do you think he just made it on his own?

J: I'm sure they discussed it. It's a demand on your time and I'm sure it gets tiring after a while, but I think it was his decision. I think he thought it was just time to move on.

M: Did he mention anything about what he was planning on doing in lieu of this?

J: No. At one time Lawton talked about going into the ministry. Have you heard that before?

M: No, I have not.

J: He called me one day to talk about that. I said, "Lawton, I think you can serve the good Lord better right where you are in the Senate". He got very much involved in his church and was giving that serious thought for a while. I thought he might decide to do that.

M: How old was he at that time?

J: He was probably in the middle of his senate term.

M: No kidding, all the way into the senate?

J: Oh yes. I don't know that my recommendation [had anything to do with it] but I told him I thought he could serve the Lord better in the senate. He would have more contact

with people and would see more people. He certainly set a good example in his own life for people to follow, and I felt like he was a lot better off in the Senate.

M: While we're on that subject, can you reflect on the religious side of his character? I know he went to the Presbyterian Church here in Lakeland on Lake Hollingsworth.

J: In fact his mother went to church there and he was raised there, but he didn't necessarily stay in the Presbyterian Church. He and Rhea were involved in several other churches during their marriage.

M: Can you go into some of that?

J: I really don't know enough about it to do that. There were some in Lakeland and other places, too.

M: Do you know if he attended a church regularly in Washington?

J: I'm sure he did, but I don't know what [church].

M: It's common knowledge that he suffered from depression.

J: He did, but he did not share. I was surprised when I read about it in the papers. I did not know it.

M: You actually read about it in the papers.

J: Yeah. I did not know it. He never discussed it. Of course, he had his bypass operation here in Lakeland. But so far as his depression, I think I was as shocked as everybody else because I did not know about it.

M: Walk me through what you were doing in 1988. How had your business changed, how had your daily life changed from 1970 through 1988?

J: Well, I sold my tire business in the mid 70s, I guess. I didn't do anything for a while, a short while because I really got depressed. When I first sold it, I thought it was just a great idea. I wasn't going to do anything for a year and it just didn't work out. I'd go down and play tennis with the fellas and they were all going to their offices and I didn't have anywhere to go. I'm not very domestic; I don't enjoy sitting around the house doing nothing, so I got very involved in real estate and got my team back together. I guess in the 80s, Greg came into the business with me. I'd already had a substantial business going at the time and he wanted to go into business with me when he got out of college; he majored in real estate. I didn't think that was a good idea. I thought it would be good for him to get experience someplace else. So I took his credit cards and everything and sent him on his way. I think it was good training for him to do that. So he went down to the beach and worked for Wilbur Boyd selling condominiums. He did extremely well down there because they were in a boom period. He couldn't understand why I hadn't been making big money all my life, all you had to do was sell something and you'd get these commissions, you buy a Mercedes and you keep going. Of course, when the boom busted the next year, he didn't have enough money to buy fuel for his car, so then he really wanted to come into business with me. Again I said, 'Well I think you need a

little more exposure to the business world', so he went to work for Frank Foster selling computer programs, traveling from Canada to California. He did that for a year or so then I thought maybe he'd had enough outside training. It was good training for him. That's when he came in with me and he's been very instrumental in helping expand the business. He's good at working with people. Certainly I think his background, working with Lawton in politics, and his other work in sales prepared him to do a good job for us. We started expanding the business and just continued doing that and we found a little niche in the marketplace that's worked out quite well for us. Not having any money has kindly kept us from getting into a lot of trouble, because we had to watch everything very carefully. You never think about it, but you can have too much money sometimes. You don't spend it as wisely as you do when you have to borrow every nickel and have to sit down and think about it a little more.

M: Who were the other folks doing the same kind of thing that you interacted with, Mr. McKay, perhaps?

J: Kirk was doing a lot of land speculation. In the warehouse business, the only other person building around here at the time was Bob Stanley. The little niche in the marketplace that we're in, and I don't know whether you want to get into this or you want to stay on Lawton, is where I think we need to stay because we're not out here trying to compete with the bigwigs living in 400,000 square feet. Our niche in the marketplace is a 100,000 square foot building and trying to divide it three or four times. I guess the largest tenant we've got is probably 150,000 square feet, and that is a single-tenant building. That type of development is something we shouldn't have too much of. The buildings we build are very flexible and we build them with the idea that 'this guy's gonna move out or expand and go larger and somebody else is gonna move in there', so we have to keep our buildings very flexible so we can convert them and change them and accommodate the next person. The bigger companies that are beginning to move in here now are looking for the big boxes; the big guys that are going to come in build and stay. We're not in that business. We're trying to stay a niche below them. We're spreading our wings a little bit but our basic business is somebody that wants 10-50,000 square feet. We're not out pounding the blocks for somebody wanting 200,000 square feet. That doesn't mean that we wouldn't rent to them if we had the building but if we had many of those and something happened to them, it could get us in trouble fast. I think we're going to continue in our little niche in the marketplace.

M: Okay. Let's walk through Lawton's immediate post-Senator years. Where did he come back to from Washington to live?

J: Down at the beach. Holmes Beach. I think part of the reason for that was his friend, Wilbur Boyd. Then he decided to run for governor, which I thought was a great idea because I thought he certainly had some more good years in him, it was a great experience and a challenge, and I was delighted to see him do it. Obviously it was another political challenge, but again I think his original walk in the senate propelled him into the governor's office.

M: That was 1989-90. Can you remember the first time you heard he was going to run? Did you suspect that he might run?

J: I don't remember where I was when he called, but he called to tell us he was going to run for the Governor's office. I told him I thought it was a great idea and to count us in.

M: Did he express any thoughts on Bob Martinez, about how he was screwing up, doing this or that, any real open anger or frustration with him necessarily?

J: Oh, no.

M: Just that he could do a better job?

J: Well, I think he was probably battling his conscience a little bit because I think he and Bill Nelson had been friends. I can't tell you many details about it; I know that it was something of a concern to him, but I guess the overall desire to get into the governor's office obviously overrode his feelings there and, as you know, it was a bitter campaign. I can understand the frustration of Nelson, too. But I guess other people persuaded [Lawton] that it was the thing he should do.

M: Was there actually a primary that he ran against Nelson, or did Nelson withdraw?

J: Oh, there was a primary. It was a mudslinging primary.

M: That's not good. So, [Lawton] won the primary. I guess you had to get your old fundraising shoes back on.

J: Everybody did.

M: Can you reflect a little about the process of bringing that all back together and your part in it?

J: We did a lot of fundraising campaigns, calling people. And certainly the fundraising, which is always challenging, wasn't as challenging as his first run for the senate. I mean they were paying light bills by the day and through the generosity of I think Lakeland Electric; they kept the lights on. It was not that kind of campaign [this time]. I think he had enough contacts around the state that money was a little easier to come by.

M: Would you say the fundraising was probably even harder maybe in the primary?

J: I don't remember. You're always under pressure to raise money.

M: Because Nelson might have already had some commitments, perhaps?

J: He did, and I think people had a hard time changing over. But that happened when he ran for the senate because I know a lot of people here had committed to Farris Bryant and a lot of people had committed to others. Some of the people we'd call on for money would say 'Well I'm committed to somebody else' and 'We're not on Lawton's team', and then as Lawton [would start] to get stronger, we started getting some telephone calls saying 'I've changed over', and I guess that's normal.

M: Who would you say would be the closest, including yourself, of course, here in Lakeland in the 1990 campaign working very closely in fundraising?

J: J. Peterson was obviously very much involved. I cannot say that there was an organized group that would get together every day. It wasn't like that. It was kind of loose. I know J. was very much involved in the campaign, and I don't think J. at that time even suspected that Lawton might be considering him to go to Tallahassee with him.

M: Where was J. at that time, here in Lakeland?

J: You know that Polk County at that time was beginning to turn Republican.

M: That's another theme that I'd kind of like to pick up on.

J: Well, I think a lot of them that were Republicans were still on Lawton's team even if they didn't openly admit it as much as they did the first time he ran for public office. The first time he ran for public office, and I'm talking about the state house of representatives, Polk County was very much Democrat. I don't know what the percentage was, but Republicans were looked down upon. By the time he ran for governor, it was a totally different situation here and as you know, the "Politics in the Park" here which the Chamber had which is not a good indicator of anything except who puts the most money in it. Lawton did not do well in those polls. I know he had a stronger base than the polls had indicated, but Polk County was definitely going in another direction and he had kind of lost his base here. I think part of the reason for that was that he didn't live here. I don't know if that was a mistake. I personally wish he had kept his roots in Polk County. It would've made life much easier through this era, but obviously he didn't and had other reasons for not staying here. I've always wished he had kept his home here because this is Central Florida. These were his roots, it's where he was born and raised.

M: So that made things a little more difficult.

J: Very definitely. I think some people resented the fact that he did not continue to keep his home here. They felt like we weren't getting the benefits, maybe, that we should have if he had continued to live here.

M: Do you get a sense that people supported him just because he was Lawton, even though they had turned Republican by that point? I know that's a hard thing to answer, nobody really knows for sure, but did you have a sense that that was going on?

J: We had a lot of people who were Republicans who would come up and tell me they were going to vote for Lawton, 'I'm a Republican and I'm gonna vote for Lawton'. Now when you get into the younger generation, I don't know whether they did or not. I'm talking about people my age or his age. I think that the large majority of those continued to support Lawton. But you had another generation of people here at that time, two or three generations of people. They didn't remember him living here. And it's amazing how quick you can lose name recognition. I don't remember the timeframe from when he got out of the Senate until he ran for Governor.

M: Okay. Can you remember the election night?

J: We were there. I can't tell you any details. It's always hectic. All the family was there. My kids came down for it.

M: Did you get a sense from the campaign that everything was going the right way, in the right direction?

J: Yes. And he knew from the exit polls where he was, which is kind of amazing. I mean he pretty much knew when he came in that he had won.

M: Do you remember any of the people in the forefront of that campaign for governor? Who were the people mainly involved in pulling that together for him?

J: Right now I'm drawing a blank on it.

M: Was Canady still involved?

J: I don't think so. Canady dropped out and I think Canady had changed parties by then?

M: Even Senior?

J: Oh yeah, he was out. I don't think I'm letting out any family secrets, but as you know, Charles and Rhea did not get along very well and this had been kind of a thorn in Lawton's side for a long time. So I guess things were kind of tense in that area.

M: Even so, did Canady continue on until he left the senate?

J: I cannot remember when he left, but I think it was before he left the senate.

M: So you don't really remember who was behind him in that campaign or working very closely with him?

J: Well, Wilbur Boyd was obviously very much involved, but a lot of people in the house and senate down here were very much involved in his campaign too. He had a good base by then and he had good financial support from some business people. I don't know that any of them gave him large quantities of money, but they had people they could call and if it wasn't a small amount, they had a base of people they could call and get money. So it was a much easier campaign.

M: You mentioned J. Peterson. Was he involved in the campaign?

J: Yes.

M: Dexter Douglas?

J: I don't know to what extent Dexter was involved.

M: So when [Lawton] was elected and he moved to Tallahassee, were there any people in Lakeland you remember that left and went up there with him?

J: Jimmy Miller and his wife. You know she worked in the Governor's mansion. Jimmy had another job; I think he ended up working for the lottery. The Millers and the Petersons were the only ones I remember right now that left Lakeland and moved up there with him. There might have been others.

M: I guess you went to the inauguration?

J: Sure.

M: When was the first time you went back? Can you remember anything special that happened in the inauguration?

J: Yeah. Lawton appointed me to a couple of committees, Citizens for Good Government, or something, and we were meeting on a regular basis. Of course, we would always see him up there and spent several nights in the mansion, which was a treat. And all my kids came down at various and sundry times and overnighted there.

M: Can you reflect on the role of the kids [Bud and Ed] and what they were doing at that time?

J: All of [Lawton's] kids were very much involved in the campaign. Of course, Ed had his own business to run down there, and with three restaurants he's got a pretty good table. And Bud, as you know, sold out his business and moved to New York to work with a company. But they were all very much involved in every campaign.

M: Do you remember anything special that happened in the first [major legislative] term?

J: No, I don't. He was very much involved in I guess you'd say the "neonatal program" for children that were born with difficulties. That was always a big project for him.

M: One of the things that I think Lawton should be remembered for, in the first and second terms, is his common sense approach to adequate revenues to run the state government and provide the services necessary. Did you ever have any sense, as he did, that the tax base was inadequate and how he would try to wrestle with that?

J: We had this at many family discussions. The kids probably asked him more prying questions than I did. But that was a concern. Another basic concern, I think, was the lottery. He didn't feel it was necessary and [that it was] a poor way to raise taxes, which is what it's doing. And I guess maybe his religious background and beliefs had some impact on that. As you know he was not a big supporter of the lottery.

M: But he inherited it?

J: He inherited it. And you know he changed the director as soon as he got into office.

M: The race for re-election was very close and he was facing a really well oiled young vigorous guy with a lot of out-of-state money. Of course, the state was already turning

Republican, even more now. What were your thoughts as you went into the 1994 campaign?

J: I thought it was going to be very, very close. I felt some resentment about this, with this being Lawton's hometown, that so many people here were not supporting him, and some of them were longtime friends. They had just gotten on the Bush wagon and it was really embarrassing. I know Lawton was very depressed about it when he had the meeting here.

M: Was that the Politics in the Park?

J: Yes. We went back across the street and sat down, and he was really distressed. I think he felt some of his longtime friends had not supported him the way he expected them to. And I can understand that, coming back to your hometown and having some people that you grew up with kindly abandon you for no real reason. I think some of the excuses were they thought he was 'too liberal', but I really don't think that he was. I think it was just the times. I think Lawton's legacy is going to be enhanced as we go down the road simply because some of them, looking back on some of the things he did, and I think nobody ever questioned his sincerity or his dedication to what he was trying to do and that it was always above board, that some of those people that didn't support him then probably feel a little differently now.

M: I remember that Politics in the Park, and it was not a very pleasant situation. And, of course, I was on the outside. I had no real knowledge of what was going on. But I was there and to me it was sad because I remember Jeb Bush had bussed up all of these maniac Cubans and they were shouting and yelling and screaming and basically taking over the whole thing, and it was just a fiasco.

J: Well, as you know, the way the voting was carried out, two or three people here in Lakeland bought \$1-2,000 worth of tickets and handed them out because you were going to get free food, but you had to vote for Jeb Bush. And that's not a good poll. I really think the Chamber should change the direction of that. I don't have problems with straw polls, I think they're good, but I think they should be done on a more equitable basis. Just because somebody goes ahead and buys a couple thousand dollars worth of tickets, [he] can swing the vote one way or the other. And they were out to embarrass Lawton, and they did, and that's unfortunate because I think he was dedicated to Polk County. I think Lawton did a lot to get the Polk Parkway here that he's never been recognized for. In fact, one of the subcontractors on it said that 'if it hadn't been for Lawton Chiles, we wouldn't have the Polk Parkway'. It should've been named after him. Maybe I'm a little biased.

M: I think it was proposed wasn't it, and voted down?

J: Yeah, it was. In fact, Homer Hooks and Burke [Kibler] went to the county commission and tried to get it passed and got turned down. I think that was a terrible mistake. Maybe in retrospect, the community should have done a little more homework in trying to get that named for Lawton, and I still think it should be.

M: The most memorable event in that campaign in 1994 obviously was the debate. You were in the audience, I think, probably when that debate happened. Was that in Orlando, or do you remember where that was?

J: No, I don't. That might have been in St. Petersburg, either St. Petersburg or Orlando, but I'm not sure. You mean the "He-Coon Debate"? Oh yes, I was there.

M: Yes. First of all, how was the debate going in your mind before all that happened?

J: I thought Lawton was doing well. Lawton did well in debates and I think bringing it to the He-Coon was a great strategy because a lot of people in the audience didn't know what he was talking about. But again, the workingman out there knew what he was talking about and having been raised on the farm, I knew what he was talking about. But obviously, there were a lot of people there who didn't, and some of them thought it might have been carrying things too far. But it was the thing to do. It certainly threw Jeb Bush off base. He had no idea what [Lawton] was talking about.

M: And as the journalists and pollsters always say, 'it had legs'. In other words, that was what people saw on the news the next day and were talking about the next day.

J: He recaptured the newsprint. And I don't know where that came from, whether that was something he originated in his own mind or how that happened, I don't know.

M: Whether he planned it or it was just spontaneous?

J: I don't know. But it certainly came from his hunting experiences and living in the outdoors, and the love of nature and animals.

M: The 1994 campaign was obviously a referendum on his first term, plus a referendum really on his career. And it was after that that he really began pursuing with all of his energy the tobacco companies. What was your attitude on that? Did you think that was kind of crazy or a cockamamie idea?

J: No, I didn't. Having been a tobacco farmer, of course, I never smoked, still I think it's one of the great tragedies of our country that people know it's a health hazard and they still go around smoking. Some of my friends who smoked all their lives are not with us anymore and died horrible deaths. I feel like it was a move in the right direction and something that should have been done. I wish we could improve on it because it really concerns me to see these teenagers smoking, particularly young girls, and I think we need to put more effort into that.

M: Even before all this happened, did you ever sense that [Lawton] was angry with the tobacco companies or that this was something that needed to be attacked?

J: I don't know that he had any animosity toward the tobacco companies other than he just saw it as a health hazard for our youth and our people. I never did hear him express any animosity toward them.

M: It was just a matter of 'we've got all these incredible health costs', 'the State of Florida is practically bankrupt paying for smoke-related problems'.

J: It was kind of a bold venture, and I think he felt like it was something he should do.

M: Can you comment on what Lawton's legacy would be for future generations?

J: Well, I guess concern for our youth and honesty in government. I think those would be the two highlights.