CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with: Al Bellotto
Interviewer: James M. Denham
Location: Lakeland, Florida Southern College , 2005

and we are going to begin this oral history with Mr. Bellotto. Good morning, Mr. Bellotto.

A: Good morning, Mike. Glad to have you here.

M: I gave you some questions that I asked you to look over, but we are not necessarily going to be tied to those questions, and I would like for you to be as free as you would like as far as your own reflections. Can we just begin with where you were born and where you lived when you were a child?

A: Yes, I was born really on the west side of the little town of Dundee here in Polk County in a log house in 19 and 25.

M: And where were your mother and your father from and how did they get to Dundee?

A: Well, my dad really came in through Ellis Island at 14 years old, he and his two brothers. One of the brothers [was] about 17 and the other one was 20. They came through Ellis Island from Italy and his first job, of course, was there in New York laying brick for the roads at 14 years o O G + H F R X O G Q ¶ W V S H D N D Z R U G R I (Q J Then his brothers went back.

They only stayed here a short time. Dad decided this was such a great country so he stayed and then later, shortly after he was working laying brick on the streets of New York, he found out about the coal mines down in Pennsylvania which he could make more money. He went down there and a shaft fell on him, which the doctors advised him to go south, as far south as he could, so he ended up moving from there into Lake City, a little area outside of Lake City. Actually his farm was where the airport in Lake City is right now. So there he had cows and he had his farm.

M: So that would have been about 1910 roughly?

A: He came over here in 19 and 04 , G R Q ¶ W ctly, Mike, what year he got to Lake City, but I do know that my brother was born in 19 and 17 there, so he came there

sometime, you know, 1910, 1912. The way he met my mother was I thought an interesting story that he loved to tell.

He was farming and KH ZDV SORZLQJ FRUQ DQG RI FRXUVH , GRQ¶V a whole lot about Indians, but when they go from one area to another, they never go in D JURXS DV ZH GR :H JR DQG WDON DQG KDYH IXQ 7KH\ come by and may EH LW¶OO EH ILYH RU VL[PLQXWHV EHIRUH DQRV anyway, as they were going to town, they had to come right by his farm. So he said the VXQ KLW WKLV \RXQJ JLUO¶V EODFN KDLU DQG LW VKLQHG was plowing so he stopped to watch her go by. So a Saturday or two later he was over there working and he noticed her again. He got to where every Saturday he made a reason to be over there on that side of the farm. So after about the fourth or fifth time, he GHFLGHG WR IROORZ WKHP WR WRZQ DQG WKD-W¶V KRZ KI blooded Indian and of course they got married and then my brother was born there, as I said in 1917.

Then from there [Dad] heard about the citrus industry, the fact that they just started planting groves here in Florida, and you probably know the largest packing house we had back in 1892 when you had the freeze was in the Gainesville area. So all that citrus was moving south and Dad came to Haines City and what he did to get there [was] put his cattle and his horses in one boxcar and put all of his furniture and his IDPLO\ LQ DQRWKHU ER[FDU DQG WKH\ FDPH WR +DLQHV &I He bought this property to start with, 80 acres, on the south end of Lake Crystal, which is west of Dundee and between there and Lake Hamilton.

Of course, there is where he built a log house and started farming there and then had his cattle right there. Of course his cattle operation grew as he made money planting trees and tKHQ KH JRW LQ WKH JURYH EXVLQHVV DQG WKDW¶V in 1925. While he had that location, he also started building a house up, then downtown Dundee, and he ended up building a lot of houses and owning a lot of houses in Dundee and Haines City, rental houses.

M: 'LG \RX NQRZ YHU\ PXFK DERXW \RXU PRWKHU¶V IDPLO\" LQWHUDFWLRQ ZLWK WKHP" $QG KRZ GLG WKH\ FRPH WR E an interesting story.

A: Well, that was a tribe that was

WDOO +H ZDV DERXW ¶´ ¶´ VWUDLJKW DV D ERDUG HY
we got married.

M: 7DON VRPH DERXW WKDW \RXU PHPRULHV RI KLP LI \RX C
interesting. How you got to know him, and where he lived, and everything.

A: I guess probably the two reasons that I just loved my granddad was, one, he was a
JUHDW ILVKHUPDQ +H XVHG WR VD\ ³,I 8QFOH :LOOLDP JR
QR XVH IRU WKH UHVW RI XV WR JR´ 7KDW ZDV WKH ELJ W
DFWXDOO\ ZKHQ KH¶G WDNH PH ILVKLQJ DQG ,¶YH VHHQ K
VSHFNOHG SHUFK ILVKLQJ DQG LW ZRXOG EH VR FROG ZKD
big drum and put it in the boat and put wood in it IRU PH WR VWD\ ZDUP DV D NL
be up in the front of the boat and of course, you know, I remember ±

M: You mean have a fire in the boat?

A: +H ZRXOG DFWXDOO\ EXLOG D ILUH LQ WKDW EXFNHW IRU
boat, and of c RXUVH WKH ,QGLDQ ZD\ KH QHYHU UDLVHG WKDW
reach down and taste the water and when he got to an area where the fish were
EHGGLQJ HYLGHQWO\ KH¶G WDVWH LW +H¶G VD\ ³:HOO W

M: Well I know you can smell them. But he would taste it?

A: <HDK KH ZRXOG DFWXDOO\ WDVWH WKH ZDWHU 7KDW¶V

M: Would you go fishing with him here in Polk County or would it be up in Columbia
County?

A: Oh yeah, this was in Polk County.

M: Did he move in with you all or did he come to live ±

A: He came down after Daddy moved. He came down. But that was one of the
reasons [I loved him]. He was such a great hunter, fisherman. Of course that inspired
me you know. But I can remember he had bi J KDQGV +H¶G KROG WKUHH VSH
one hand and paddle with the other one, you know. Those were big things. e to live 323 294.89thdyo

RYHU WKHUH´ +H MXVW KDG WKLV NQDFN +H VDLG ³7DN
KRUVH´ $QG KH WRRN WKH ZUDSV RII $Q\ZD\ KH VDLG ³:
and he made up some stuff and put [it] on the horse and cured the horse. Another time,
P\ EURWKHU¶V KRUVH FDPH GRZQ ZLWK VDQG FRLF DQG V
in the little lot that we had by the barn, really groaning and taking on, and we had the vet with her
DQG GLGQ¶W JHW DQ\WKLQJ GRQH 6R , ZHQW RYHU DQG J
Grandpa and he came over and he ran a hose down her nose into her stomach and he made up a concoction of linseed
RLO DQG , GRQ¶W NQRZ ZKDW HOVH

In about 1- WR WZR KRXUV VKH ZDV XS DQG UXQQLQJ DURXQ
thing that really, as a kid, enticed me. I learned so much from him. Even in hunting, and turkey hunting, and different things I learned from him. But he was a great person.

M: Did you ever have any contact or knowledge of his other family? Where they lived, anything like that?

A: No, I did not.

M: Did he live in the Lake City area?

A: Well he was there just evidently a short time because what I remember about him was down here.

M: Did he live perhaps in Alabama? Did he have background in Alabama?

A: , GRQ¶W NQRZ WKDW EDFNJURXQG , UHDOOr\ GRQ¶W , M
Creek. do know this one thing, that his daddy, I do remember him telling this story, his daddy was a scout for the South in the Civil War and got killed, somewhere up in Tennessee.

M: Your grandmother?

A: She was a Seminole Cherokee. My memories of her were that she went blind at an early age, but she was a typical Indian. I just remember seeing her sitting in a chair and he tended to her. He took care of her like, [it was] unreal the way he would [take care of her].

$QG VRPHWKLQJ HOVH , UHPHPEHU DERXW KLP ZDV WKDW \
WDONHG DV ORQJ DV ZH KDG WKLV PRUQLQJ KH ZRXOGQ¶W

A: Well if you were around him, you would know from his way of doing things, but no, they did not say that.

M: Physically did he look like an Indian?

A: 2K \HDK 1RZ KH GLGQ¶W GUHVV OLNH DQ ,QGLDQ \RX N
any of that. But if you were around him, his actions ±

M: His actions woul G KDYH VDLG ³:HOO WKLV LV D GLIIHUHQW NLQ

A: <HDK 9HU\ TXLHW +H¶G QHYHU VD\ D ZKROH ORW >+H
But more a Mother Nature thing. You could just see it in action.

M: Right. He never really talked about his family background?

A: No.

M: So your father was in the citrus business but he also did cattle as well?

A: Well, cattle was a bigger thing for him. He actually owned some groves with Snively, Tom Snively. He planted a lot of groves for other people. That was his deal.
+H¶G WDNHQ KLV KRUVHV DQG FOHDUHG ODQG EDFN LQ WK

M: I would imagine your grandfather and your father were people that you really looked up to. Were there any other people that you really admired growing up as a kid in your community that you remember?

M:

, GLGQ¶W NQRZ DQ\WKLQJ DERXW IRRWEDOO µFDXVH 'DGG\
to a ballgame. We played a little volleyball at night in Dundee and I played softball. But
KH VDLG ³7KLV LV ZKDW , [illegible] ZDVQ¶W
FRXOG PDNH LW DV D IUHVKPDQ RQ WKH WHDP EXW \RX PD
But they forgot all that when I started playing ball and like I say, the pattern was set by
DiMaggio and Marciano.

M: You graduated from high school in what year?

A: ¶

M:

of them. But those were the two things that I thought in my time that the government was such a big help with.

M:

A: After they went back, those two brothers, one of them came back.

M: But not parents, never the parents?

A: No. Well the daddy did. The daddy actually died in Sandusky, Ohio. They came back over here, the brother and the daddy came back, and one of the brothers was in Lake City when he was there and while he was cleaning a shotgun, this is the thing I U H P H P E H U D E R X W K L P L W > E O H Z @ R I I R Q H D U P % X W K H G W K H G D G G \ J R W V L F N D Q G G L H G . + H G L G Q ¶ W J H W E D F N W R

M: So he came to visit one of your uncles then?

A: Yeah, he came to visit Daddy and they were touring, I think.

M: In Ohio?

A: Yeah, in Ohio. The relationship on the Italian side, no family, but Daddy would take us [and] we would visit a I H Z , W D O L D Q I D P L O L H V 2 Q H R I µ H P Z D V L Q was a cow person too.

M: They were not related but just Italian folks?

A: No, W K H \ Z H U H Q R W E X W Z H ¶ G J R X S W K H U H V R P H W L P H R course he had a wine cellar down in the ground and he had a vineyard and he made his R Z Q Z L Q H D Q G R I F R X U V H W K D W ¶ V Z K D W W K H P H Q Z R X O G cellar and drink wine.

You know, and another thing, Mike that , ¶ G O L N H W R S D V V R Q L V W K H I D F W raised us. Every morning, we had to get up at 4:30, seven days a week. He says the F R Z V G R H V Q ¶ W N Q R Z L W ¶ V 6 X Q G D \ V R \ R X Z H Q W W R W K H E feed the horses, cut the wood, you did all those things seven days a week. As you went through the kitchen, Daddy would always pour a little bit of wine for each one of us boys. You drank that wine before you went to the barn.

M: First thing in the morning?

A: First thing. By the time you finished feeding up to eat breakfast, you could eat nine biscuits, and then the last thing at night, even when we got up dating age, he still poured that wine and left it on the sink for you to drink just before you went to bed. Neither one of us boys drank.

M: Except for that.

A: We drank that wine and I W K L Q N W K D W K D G D O R W W R G R Z L W K W K But he used it as a health thing.

school and they had just come up with taking single 20 mm guns off this battleship and K D G S X W T X D G ¶ V D Q G Z K H Q W K H \ G U R Y H X S Z L W K W K H E was the biggest sucker that I had ever [seen]. You can imagine a country kid in a little old rowboat fishing, never seen anything like that. That thing looked like it was as big as the state of Florida.

M: And that was in Norfolk?

A: That was in Norfolk.

M: So did you get on?

A: Oh yeah. I learned a lesson there too.

M: What was the name of the ship?

A*:*

H[WUD $XW\´ GLG , JRW H[WUD GXW\ IRU WZR ZHHNV EHFD
got to stand on his own feet is what he was trying to tell me. But it was a good lesson.

M: 6R \RX ZHUHQ¶W EHLQJ D VPDUW DOHFN RU DQ\WKLQJ \R
doing a good deed for somebody.

A: 7KDW¶V ULJKW \HDK %XW KH¶V JRW WR VWDQG RQ KLV

M:

M:

E D F N 7 K H \ V D L G W K H \ V D Z K L P Z K H Q K H S R S S H G X S E D F N jacket brought him up. But he had a cut on the side of his head. And he was

A: <HDK :HOO LW ZDV DFWXDOO\ HDUO\ ¶ 2QH RI WKH IL
submarine attack, three submarines attacked us right after we left from the Panama
Canal while we were going up to Long Beach, and they reported us sunk, but we never

A: 2K \RX EHWFKD <RX EHWFKD ,¶G EH ZLOOLQJ WR WHOO

M: And these were all American women who had volunteered and had gone out there.

A:

A: Yeah, on one side and raised the elevation and the marines were calling him back just raving about how we were tearing those Japs up.

M: That was Okinawa?

A: That was Iwo Jima.

M: What kind of fire were you all getting at that point? Were you getting attacked as well with airplanes and everything coming after you?

A: Yeah, the air defense was the biggest thing. I never could figure out why they
F R X O G Q ¶ W I L J X U H R X W W K H] L J] D J F R X U V H W K D W Z H U D Q
actually sometimes splash up on the ship, but they could never figure out where we were going to be.

But now the airplanes were a different story. We took two suicide planes at Okinawa
D Q G F X W P \ J X Q V R I I W K D W ¶ V K R Z F O R V H L W F D P H W R P H
that gun and I was one of them that lived. There was only two of us that lived on that one suicide plane that came in. And the guy was only 17 years old according to his tag.

M: So you found the tag?

A: Yeah, they did. They had the tag. Air defense was the worst thing that we had to fight off.

M: 6 R W K H \ U H D O O \ G L G Q ¶ W K D Y H W K H D E L
Lity to shoot you from the water.

A: No, they tried. They hit some, but I could never figure out why, as hot as a pursuit
Z H ¶ G E H L Q D Q G Z H ¶ G K D Y H W R J H W X S V R F O R V H Z K \ W K
Now how they got us on the submarine deal was, we went in to load ammunition at Comarada Bay, and those little two-man submarines came in there and laid right on the
E R W W R P V R \ R X G L G Q ¶ W S L F N µ H P X S R Q W K H U D G D U D Q G
D Q G P R W R U R X W Z L W K X V D Q G W K H Q W K H \ ¶ G G U R
p back and fire. See, this is how they got us.

% X W W K H S O D Q H V W K H \ Z H U H F R P L Q J D W \ R X V R I D V W D Q G
D O Z D \ V V D L G Z K H Q K H ¶ G G U R S R X W R I W K H F O R X G V D W
O H Y H O D Q G K H ¶ G Z E H M U V K H ¶ G O R H N D E R X W O L N H W K H V L] H
He was the hardest one to hit, for me to hit.

M: So how many of them were you able to knock out of the air? Were you able to knock any of them out of the air? Probably a lot of them?

A: O K \ H D K Z H Z H U H D E O H W R N Q R F N µ H P R X W , N Q R F N H G
Z K H Q W K H \ J H W U L J K W G R Z Q W K H U H R Q W K H Z D W H U U X Q Q L

A: 7 K D W ¶ V Z K W D H W G L R W X V W W D R U E H : H G L G Q ¶ W K D Y H Q H D U W K D W
Hawaii. I think it was 1100 and something, maybe 1200 of us that were left on that ship.

M:

KDG D GDWH +H VDLG ³&RPH RQ JR ZLWK XV WR WKH PRY
GRQ¶W KDYH D GDWH´ :HOO KLV JLUOIULHQG VDLG ³:HOO
abl LQG GDWH´ VR VKH JHWV WKH SKRQH DQG FDOOV DQG O
anyway, when we met, what was odd about it was the shirt I was wearing was the same material that her whole dress was. But anyway, that was how we met.

M: Now, your brother was in World War II also obviously.

A:

A: Well, we had fences but penning them and handling them, and they were registered brown cattle. He ended up giving it to his son and giving the property to his four kids and one of the sons operated it for just a few years, three or four years, and then he F D P H W R P H R Q H G D \ D Q G V D L G ³ : R X O G \ R X Z D Q W W R E X \ D Q G , V D L G ³ < H D K ´ 6 R Z H G L G $ Q G W K H Q Z H Q H D V H G W turned around and sold the property to a developer. And the developer, it was not only him but there were three or four more involved, but the guy with the most money was out of Orlando.

They had all the streets drawn out, got all ready to start auctioning off and the guy dropped over with a heart attack. Well, those people that were left in it came to me to V H H L I , Z R X O G S L F N X S Z K H U H K H Z D V D Q G J R R Q Z L W K W K N Q R Z , Z D V L Q W H U H V W H G L Q W K H S U R S H U W \ E X W , G L G Q ¶ Z L W K W K H P V H Y H U D O W L P H V D Q G Q H Y H U W R O G W K H P) L Q D \ R X D O O R X W " ´ : H K D G W R S D \ D E R X W I R X U R U I L Y H W L P H V time, all ranch land property, was selling f0ng f0f0f ´) L Q 5 H K r E ‘ $Uq@ ¦„$UvUqJ Ã C K Q 5æC

B: It belonged to his parents.

A: Yeah, it belonged to my parents. Of course I had bought it from my Daddy, and we
K D G G R Q H D O O W K H I O R R U V \ R X N Q R Z W K D W Z R R G H Q I O R R
fed them and waxed them, varnished them, whatever you call it.

M: That was kind of your project after you got out of the service?

A: Yeah. And we painted all the inside of the house. We did it ourselves.

M: 1 R Z % H W W \ , G R Q ¶ W Z D Q W W R L Q W H U U X S W
Where, but are you from Dundee or Davenport?

B:

M: Not your parents?

B: No, my aunt. My dad had died when I was in school at Tallahassee.

M:

Navy came after me and Poppler, that boy I told you about out of Ohio, to go to the Naval Academy. I had 24 hours. We were at Iwo Jima. I had 24 hours to decide. Well
P R V W E R \ V Z R X O G ¶ Y H V D L G ³ / H W ¶ V J H W R X W R I K H U H ´ D Q G

M: You mean to tell me in the middle of the battle ±

A: In the middle of the battle, to pull me ±

M: < R X K D G V X F K Q R W R U L H W \ D W 1 R U I R O N D V D I R R W E D O O
P L G G O H R I W K H E D W W O H W K H \ F R P H X S W R \ R X D Q G V D L G
Na Y D O $ F D G H P \ E H F D X V H Z H Z D Q W \ R X W R S O D \ I R R W E D O O ´ '

A: Yeah. I could go to the Naval Academy.

M: 7 K D W ¶ V X Q E H O L H Y D E O H

A: Yeah. The other kid did. He went home. But I stayed.

M: : H O O E X W Z K D W ¶ V H Y H Q P R U H X Q E H O : L K H Y D L G O H ¶ V \ R X \ G \ R
it?

B: Cows.

A: Well you had to sign up for six years, and I wanted to go back to my cows.

M: So you knew that right when you went into the Navy, and none of that changed your mind.

A: None of that changed my mind. So when you asked me when I got home, no I was not interested ±

M: < R X F R X O G ¶ Y H E H H Q O L N H - L P P \ & D U W H U \ R X F R X O G ¶ Y H
W K H Q J R Q H E D F N D I W H U \ R X U W L P H D Q G J R E D F N W R W K H
little different maybe.

B: You did have offers from Miami to play.

A:

M: 2ND\ ZHOO OHW¶V JR EDFN WR WKDW ORJ KRXVH WKHQ

M: H63.024d( )e Tct( ) tha 6ct ( )th e( )r fello 6cwskne( )wsab( )24 Tcu( )t ( )it?0 6p Tce( )rson