CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with: **Sheriff Monroe Brannen**
Interviewer: **James M. Denham**
Date: **June 2, 1997**
Location: **Lakeland, FL**

J: I'm James M. Denham here with Monroe Brannen at Florida Southern College on June 2, 1997 and this is our second interview. Previously we spoke for one hour. Mr. Brannen, how are you doing today?

M: Very good, thank you.

J: Did you have a chance to look at any of those questions?

M: I read most of them, yes.

J: When we left last time, we were just about to pick up with your career. We just had actually picked up with your career in the Lakeland Police Force. You began that tenure before World War II and then left to go to serve in World War II, is that correct?

M: Yeah, that's correct.

J: And when you returned, it was 1946 and you resumed your duties pretty much as before.

M: Yes, I took the same job back, you know, patrolling the streets or either walking a beat.

J: So you had, I guess, two careers with the Lakeland Police Department, before and after the War, right?

M: Well, yes. I started on the first of April 19 and 39. And I went into the service,…in '43, but I didn't go back to go to the service til '44 because I got a six-month deferment and then I was in the service about 92fs in

J: How had Lakeland changed?

M: It had changed because they had put in the parking meters in the first of ’46. That was one change. And that if you got a red ticket for over parking, they’d charge you 25 cents for over parking, then they went on for about a year, maybe a year and a half, something like that, it went to 50 cents if you over parked. That was one change that they had to Lakeland at that time. And another change that they had there, when I started to be a policeman in ’39, the first of March or April anyway, that we worked seven days a week, but they changed over right, the first of ’46. When I went back to work, we worked six days a week. And when I left the department, we was working six days a week. And over the years, they changed it to five days a week.

J: Eight hour days?

M: Eight hour days, yes.

J: Would you mind telling us how much you were making at that time?

M: When I went to work for the City of Lakeland, we was making $80 a month and they furnished our clothes and our gun.

J: You had to buy your own gun?

M: Buy your own gun. And I never owned a pair of handcuffs as long as I was a policeman.

J: Did you have a Billy Club or a nightstick, or anything like that?

M: No, I just had me a little blackjack.

J: At that time, did the Lakeland Police Force have patrol cars?

M: Yeah, sure. We had patrol cars –

J: What kind of cars did they have?

M: Well they put ‘em up for bid and they had an old airplane one time down there and they had two or three Plymouth cars down there. I mean they had a Chevrolet and Fords. And my theory is that the Ford Motor Company made the best police car.

J:

M: Roy Hutchison.

M: No, no, it came in before I left. The radio was there when I went to being a policeman, in the City of Lakeland. They was put in about 19 and I would say about '35, '36, the radio, because I wasn't an officer then, cause I didn't go to work til '39, but I knew some of the policemen back then and they had to have a call box they'd call in. You know, like the one on the corner of Florida Avenue and North Street.

J: Like a telephone booth or something?

M: Yep.

J: Yeah, yeah.

M: You'd go by there and you'd go by there about every 15 minutes and call in. You had one over here off of Southern College, and you had like two patrol cars, one on the north side of Lakeland and one on the south side, you know. That's where the patrol cars went. They had three beats downtown when I was there. They had one walking Pine Street and they had walking around Tennessee and Kentucky, and then one over on Massachusetts and Tennessee. But they three police officers walking a beat. And it was kept pretty good.

J: Okay, after you came back from the service and you resumed your operations at the Police Department, did you ever have the occasion to fire your gun?

M: Yes.

J: In that time, before that time when you left?

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face is coming out faster than we can put it in'. You can just feel that knife going right in there and spitting it out, and I couldn't stand it no more. I never said another word.

J: So the Novocain was coming out the holes and other places.

M:

some, and the police would come and ride me around a little. But I couldn't get my nerves kind of settled down, you know what I mean? That was such a shock. People thought well if you ever live through it, it's pretty rough.

J: Of course.

M: So they was good to me and everything, so I went back to work. We had these same little red tickets you were talking about, the parking tickets and an officer by the name of J.D. Morris was a Sergeant there and he had some problems, it happens some time. He was a good man, but well I don't want to just say the word, but it was, you know, girls or something and he had to leave there. But he was handling the disposition of the tickets, you know what I mean? He'd try to get 'em in, people to pay 'em.

And he had gotten behind with 'em and everything, so the Chief asked me would I be willing to take the work of these parking tickets, and the disposition of 'em. And he was real good, too. He told me, he said that, when I went back to work, he said 'now what time do you want to come in and go to work? You set the time and then if you get tired of staying here, you just tell the Sergeant on the desk that you're goin' home', you know, 'don't come down and stay. If you get tired, go home'.

But I didn't do it. But what it was, nobody's bringing these tickets in so I kind of enjoyed it. And one other thing he said 'if anybody comes here and complains and says I'm not goin' to pay a parking ticket, I won't send no money, if you excuse every one of 'em, I don't care!' He said 'I'm not agoin' to be bothered with it, I don't care what you do'. So if I had to look at the ones that ngin

M: And nobody, one time speaking of that, there was a lady who come to the station and went in. We had a little scooter go around and check 'em and now they got people walking around, you know. Economy was a good thing. You could go everywhere with that little scooter you know.

Anyway, this lady come down and she was just as mad, and the guys that was, the officer that did it, his name was Irvine Smith, and he'd make 10 people mad every day, you know what I mean? So I just take the other side of the thing. So she said 'I know there's something wrong with that meter!' and I said 'well come on and let's go around', so I got in the car with her and went around there. I wished I could think of her name. But anyway, I said, I put the nickel in

building? You know? What if you kicked it down? You don't have a right to not see the public. That's what's wrong with the department.

I can tell you little things that happened to me this year. I got a little lot out there on Pinewood and Walnut. So people throws trash on it, and one day, three or four months ago, [I went] to clean it up and there was a motorcycle settin' there. And I walked around it and there was no tag on it, so I mowed the lot pretty well. And there was a police car sitting on the corner over there with a man with a dog in it. So he turned on around and come in front of me and I waved him down. And I asked him, I said 'sir, this motorcycle is just settin' on my property, I own this lot here. Would you be kind enough to run it through the computers and see if it's stolen?' and he said 'if you want it moved, you call up a wrecker and do it' and I said 'hell, you didn't have to tell me that to start with. I knew that 40 years ago'. This is what I'm saying. They've lost touch with the people.

J: But it's easier for you to do it than it is for him to inquire about it.

M: But it could be stolen andngButaid '-2(ow)2(e)4(dr)3(e)do ihet. ng8.00.771 0.,.004 0.004 Tw [(an)-4(d)]TJ

they got that through the legislature and the bill was passed. So I got to lookin' at the thing and went and got it and read it, and I was makin' then about 240 dollars a month. And I'd think 'well how much can I get out of this retirement fund now? I can't live on 240 dollars a month'.

And they passed the bill so I'm in front of the Civil Service board and the guy by the name of Emery Walker, director of goods down there, and he said 'Monroe, I hate to say you ought to go into retirement'. I said 'no, I just can't live'. So they sent me to the doctor and told me I had to go get a medical clearance and went to a doctor who said 'I know what's wrong with you, you lost your eye, didn't even charge me anything'. So I went in front of the Board and told 'em I wanted to go into disability retirement so they figured it all out and it come to 99 dollars and 96 cents. Well you know I couldn't live on that money either.

So I run for Constable. And they was four of us, there was myself and a man named Ogden and one named Purvis and one worked at the hospital, and I didn't beat 'em very bad, I beat 'em nine to one. I got 9,000 votes and all of the others got 1200, so I was a pretty popular boy.

J: That was in 1953?

M: '52.

J: Okay, what were your duties there?

M: Well, the duties as a constable then, back in the horse and buggy days, back you know when they had constables, they actually had constables before they had sheriffs, did you know that?

J: Mm-hmm.

M: And they called 'em the keeper of the stable. You ever told that? Or you knew that?

J: Mm-hmm.

M: And everybody'd go to you in a crisis, you know, to make noise. Well there was no direct telephone lines in Polk County then. If you called Auburndale, you had to pay for it. If you called Bartow, you had to pay that. If you called Plant City, you had . . . .

See the Sheriff's office was in Bartow and they had say two or three deputies living around in this area, maybe four or 10 or something, but not very many because, I think they had four. And then Pat Gordon had been Constable. He's deceased now. So then you see you run in May and April . . . . that's when you run for office, as you well know, then but they set it up so that, and I didn't have anything to do.

I couldn't go back to the Police Department, so I got me a job, two or three little jobs around, paying me a little something, a dollar there, dollar an hour. So a man by the name of Woodale was a Roadmaster for the Coastline Railroad Right of Way Department, you might call it. And I went up and asked him, did he have something I could do, and he said 'yeah, you can go to work

down in the shop' and I said 'how much you gonna pay me?' and he said 'a dollar and 52 cents an hour' and I went to Penney's and bought me five pair of dungaree pants.

So I worked there a few days. I went to work there about July 1st or June, and he called me and he said 'bought a brand new truck and the guy that was gonna use it', they had a bucket on the front end of it just like all the tractors have where it was built with an arm and you could go out and scoop it into the dirt and pick it up and come it over and dump it into the back, on the body on back was a dumpster. . . . . Then there was the fee system then.

J: The Fee System as Constable.

M: Yeah. And the Sheriff's office was under the Fee System. So anyway, I went to work there and, well I rented the office that Mr. Thornton had, that was elected Sheriff. And I had one girl. So the first month, I was there, I went to work. I had worked about like 26 days and I had served 29 warrants arresting people, you know like arrested them for bad check or a fight or something disorderly, and then I –

J: Was that for the County Court?

M: Yeah, the County, see I was working for the County then.

J: Right.

M: And the most that you could make with the statutes, for instance, you'd taken in 15,000 dollars. You paid for the girl to work for you, you paid her like 50 dollars a week, you paid for your gasoline, you furnished your car and your rent. You'd do good but if you made over 7500 dollars at the end of the year –

J: In fees.

M: On fees, it was just like you'd taken in 15 and it cost you 7-1/2 to make it. But if you'd taken in a little bit more, then you had to give back to the General Funds of the County the difference.

But anyway, the Justice of the Peace was named Rudon, oh I can't think of his name, he's a crippled man right now. And he called me in and said 'I want to show you something' he said 'in 26 days, you served more warrants than Pat Gordon did in the whole last year together.

So then, like the civil process, the people that, for instance, anywhere within a mile of your office, for instance, if your wife was suing and the attorney brought a paper in there or the secretary and asked you to serve this paper on a man, and you got 15 cents a mile to go there and 15 cents a mile to come back, and you got two dollars and 67 cents, maybe two dollars and 90 cents or so to process those papers. But at that time, if we served a warrant on you, whether it was murder or either traffic violation or something and carried you to Bartow, booked you into the County Jail, the county would have to pay you 16 dollars and 45 cents.

J: Now did you have a firearm at that time, as Constable?

M: Yeah, I carried a pistol.

J: Yeah, cause you're serving warrants on people that aren't good people.

M: I was a Constitution Officer.

J: Okay, right.

M: Cause it's just like the Sheriff was. I had the same power in this district as the Sheriff did, but the statutes also say that I couldn't go out and have a sale, like an automobile, you know what I mean? The Sheriff has to do that. Then people would just wake me up at nights, you know what I mean? It went on for about six months.

J: So your main duty then was serving warrants and orders to the court.

M: Yeah, from the court, and warrants and bad checks, people give 'em all the time, and taking furniture or a car away from –

J: So did you work with the Judge's Chambers mainly?

M: No I had me an office right side of his.

J: But you got your walking papers and your orders from the court, didn't you?

M: Not so much as that. The biggest thing he did was he practiced law and did this on the side, you know what I mean? So the biggest thing he did was serve warrants. And then if you didn't pay for your car. And they come out and say they want me to get a Repossession Warrant.

Well if they owed 1700 dollars on it and it was worth four dollars and 95 cents, or whatever it is, that you could say for instance say that the man owed you that much, and you'd have to put up a warrant to take the car away from him, you know what I mean? And then you had to give him three days and then he had 17 days to come in and put the car in storage, or furniture, or whatever it may be.

But they had to put up, now if you owed 10,000 dollars and you didn't want to put up but five, you know what I mean, because the fact that's all you'd have to put up cause that's all that man

time and your own pocketbook. There wasn't no way to charge anybody. But I kept that then for eight years. But then I didn't quite finish up.

I went down to see Leo Brooker, was the Chief of Police then, and Leo went to work in 19 and 34, and that's the only job I think he ever had, except he was United States Marshall for about

Monroe, and if he gets up and comes down here and does the work for you, what you say that you'd like him to do, he'll charge you five dollars or seven dollars or something for his mileage out and back'.

So she got me on the phone, so I dressed and come down there. And when I got down there, she had a child, a boy or a girl, I think it was a girl, like four years old, and her husband was having some problems and he went and got the baby and carried it to his mother. A little ahead of that, they'd called the deputy and he came down there and he told her there wasn't nothing he could

M: So this woman walked out there, had on levi pants, like I got on you might say, and she walked up to me and said 'aren't you Monroe Brannen?' and I said 'yes ma'am' I said 'aren't you the lady that come and I went over and got your baby one night?' and she said 'yes sir'. She said 'I want to tell you something, I didn't live in Polk here, I lived in Highlands County' but she said 'I worked in this packing house'. She said 'I told every person in the packing house, everyone that's come in and I know most everybody that's here, what you did for me and that you should vote for this man'.

And I made up my mind right then that I could beat Hagan Parrish. That's the God's truth. Polk County, there was more people in this section, and I knew people that, like the Tyres down we'll say in Frostproof, and the Latt Maxcy and John Maxcy and Ben Hill Griffin, Earl Davis, Ken Davis, Everett Diason, Hunter Diason, Agnes Diason . So then I went running –

J: Now was that in 1960?

M: It was in 19 and 60. See I didn't go out of office then. And money was hard to raise. The incumbent can raise the money.

J: So you were runi evhe 5 Td [(e)4(ve)4(r)-17(y)20(r)-7(a)4(i)-2(s),'arvhe .

money that me and the wife had saved up and put together, I think it was 5000 dollars, and I had a hard time staying in there for money. When the run-off came, there was Pat Gordon.

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Interview with: **Sheriff Monroe Brannen**
Interviewer: **James M. Denham**
Date: **t goin' to stop it'.**

J: You mean the speech?

M: Yes, we're going to go through with it. And I stood right close to him as I am to you, one or two people around us As soon as we [found out], we told him though. We went to a room and came back and told him what they told us and he looked kind of funny.

J: Was that before he spoke or after he –

M: Before he spoke.

J:

J: Here in Lakeland?

M: No in Washington.

J: Oh, okay.

M: We had went to Washington. When we left here, I went up there the following weekend to be with this convention.

J: Oh, okay.

M: I was just a little out of step there, what I was doin'. But anyway, that was the reason I went up there, and there was a lot of people, like Goldwater, and different ones coming from each state making a speech running for the President, so they had people there, like 10,000. And the Governor of Florida then was Kirk, I believe it was. Claude Kirk.

And he came in with Goldwater. But they knew who was out there. And I was there and one of the County Commissioners, Alan Trask, was there. There was a lot people there. Ray Clemmons and a lot of people. So they asked me and said 'go out there and bring the Governor in', you know. So I went out there, they had Secret Service runnin' over each other, and brought him on up there, so he got on the platform with Rockefeller, he was a Republican.

J: Right, he had just changed parties -

M: That's right.

J: And then got elected.

M: And got elected. So I told his Secret Service men who I was, so Kirk always called me 'Sharif' –

J: Sharif?

M: Yeah. He was a comical man, but anyway he said 'Sharif' he says 'I'm sure glad you have been taking care of me'. So when he got through, he called Rockefeller over there and he said 'I want to show you a real Sheriff from Polk County' and he introduced him to me. But he said in his speech, what I've been getting up to, I never seen him no more.

So the next day that George Wallace is supposed to speak I got to thinking about it and well, so I picked up the phone and called the airport and asked them 'could I amend my ticket to come a day home earlier?' because I just got through with this, you know, I didn't want to be up there when somebody a'might got killed.

And you know, he was so, I don't know -- determined not to go by some rule that we should have in this country long time--this people should have equal rights regardless of the color of his

skin, you know, no matter what they come from, but I liked him. But anyway, I came on back home and I never did see him no more. I saw him the one time after he'd got shot.

J: That was four years later wasn't it?

M: Yeah, four years later. But he was up there. He could talk. He was a good speaker.

J: He could get you stirred up, couldn't he?

M: He doggone sure could, and he had guts, let me tell you. He wasn't scared of anybody. But I was up there when they was all speaking and I came back after this here, I took the plane the next day and flew to Boston, and he was to come in about the fourth day before or after that. But what can you do though, you know? There you got, you're ordered to so-and-so, you don't want nobody to get killed, you know. Are you goin' to let him speak or not?

J: The tip that they got, was it just an anonymous tip?

M: Yeah, just an anonymous call. We kind of thought it was a crank ce kind oe]TJ 28.53 0 T9 ( )Tj EMC ThWoCtoll (-)Tj0 Tw 1.27 -3(r6MC EMC 6.955( )Tj EMC /P <</MCID 11 >>B9C -15.44 0 495

M: He was the State Attorney from Lake Wales. And his daddy killed Judge Bob, used to be Bobby Stokes, he used to be a Judge . . . Glenn was the State Attorney and his daddy killed Mr. Stokes' daddy over there. I'm not going into what it was about or anything but I could tell you a few things.

So, when we was trying Mr. Daughtery over there in the courthouse, I went over there and there was just a little, it was right after this . . . . desegregation thing. And the night before that, we got

J: Real big guy?

M: Big. Pretty nice. But he wasn't a bad man to talk with.

J: Big man, though.

M: But he did the talking. And he says 'Sheriff, do you believe a man has the right to live where he wants to?' and I said 'yes sir, under the Constitution of the United States he has the right to and live in any society he wants to live in'. He asked me another question and I said 'well I answered your questions, what else have you got?' Now I asked them and I had done had my words figured out so, but you have to change, you don't know what you're goin' to say.

I turned and said 'who built this house for that man down here?' He said 'this man right here'. And I said 'Did you build that house?' and he said 'yes sir'. I was only gonna ask a question and I said 'how much did he pay you down?' and he said '$100'. See that's what I wanted to get at, you know. It looked like it was kind of a deal that would give you $100, you could pick up $100 pretty easy to get a house started, and I figured it was on account of the people, maybe it was f a

I most of the time didn't even have one around. But a lot of things could be settled if the number one man would come to the front. You know what I mean? So he moved away, everybody's happy and neve

on the other side!' And finally he got 'em over there and, you know, you can pick that thing and hit it just like, and it snatches it'll catch around here. I had one on him. So I snatched him and got the other one and just got up off of him. And I told him, 'now if you draw back to hit me again, I'm gonna stomp you into this ground' and he just kept looking at me. So I asked them to call and ask them to send a deputy down there, so in a few minutes –

J: Very few. Were there more in '77?

M: Well yeah 'cause I'd increase it, everybody did. And everybody had a black deputy but then it was better. I know one time when I was Constable I carried a person, his name was Dynamite Jones, was the black man's name, and he thought a lot of me, so I had a black prisoner and asked him if he would ride up there with us and he said 'yes sir'. And we came back –

J: Chattahoochee?

M: Chattahoochee. And that was a hard trip to make.

J: Gosh! Chattahoochee's 300 miles!

M: I'd drive up in five hours driving 90 miles an hour.

J: Five hours?

M: Five hours, driving 90 miles an hour. Would you believe that?

J: That was before I-10 was finished.

M: Yeah, you went all through these little, I drove from Lakeland, many times in five hours, but that car would make it to 75 miles an hour. When I was Constable, that was the worst job I ever, I'd drive up make a mile a minute. You have to drive a darn car to make a mile a minute on them crooked roads, would you believe that?

So we came back to Don Quixote's restaurant up there, right in Tallahassee, and I said to him 'Dynamite'. But we went to the door and they fed him at the back door, set up a table back there for him. And I got tired driving, you know, coming back, and I let him drive, and he was a good driver. Dynamite Jones. And it was a funny thing about him.

One day I drove out there and he had a little house over there, and he had a nice looking wife, and he was a clean, big husky man, but they were just having kind of confusion. I was standing over there at the hotel and I went and heard 'bam, bam!' and I just walked on across there, then a man run out of there, and she had shot him!

J: Dynamite?

M: Had shot Dynamite! His wife shot him. She claimed that he beat on her the morning before and bloodied her up. But the little guy working for him took that pistol and run out around and hid it. So I walked on over there and I said to him, I said 'I seen you run out of the door, go ahead and get me that pistol' and I arrested her. And she wasn't ugly. I said 'get in the car' and she got right in. So I forgot the pistol. I don't remember what happened to it. I think it kind of got her on probation or something. And I was standing right on the corner when the gun was fired across the street.

J: Now was he alright?

M: Yeah, you couldn't kill one of 'em. She shot him in the shoulder, I think it was. It scared him pretty bad.

J: Now he had a –

M: A little beer joint.

J: A little beer joint too, while he was on the force?

M: No, he was, I was Constable when that happened.

J: Oh, Constable, I'm sorry.

M: But it was just kind of funny. But when I was Sheriff, then he died. He was a good man. Pearson was the guy's name [and one time he walked up from a cellar] in front of me and just walked right over to the car and said 'if you touch him you won't touch nobody else'. So he says 'Mr. Brannen, just leave, I'll take care of it'. But this here is when I was in the Sheriff's office –

J: Okay, these are pictures from –

M: Ecuador.

J: From Ecuador and this is obviously an old yellow envelope that I've got here and it's addressed to Sheriff Monroe Brannen, Bartow, Florida. And we see pictures of, what are these 10 x 12 pictures?

M: Yes, yes.

J: And I see pictures of you. Now is this you here? That's not you, is it?

M: No, here's my picture, right there. There's me, right there, the one with the –

J: Okay, yeah. Now what year would this be?

M: This was back in the '60s. I think it's right on top of that envelope there somewhere.

J: Okay.

M: Is there some writing or a date on it right there somewhere?

J: No date on it. No date.

M: See this guy right here? He worked for the Federal Government. He was an Ambassador kind of thing over in Ecuador. He's the man that got me to go down there that time.

J: Now what was the reason you were down there?

M: Okay, one morning, about 10 o'clock, some people in Miami called me and we had bloodhounds, and he had been working with us down there by the name of Vernon Meadows. He's the one running our dogs, and there wasn't any dogs in the Police Station or anything like that. The Sheriff's office had some. And he worked for me down there and this call from Miami, from some person down there, I don't remember what he was now, wanted to know if we had any dogs so they referred him to me. The essence of the story down there in Ecuador, you know, the air is so thin or something that you can like walk from here to your car and get out of wind.

J: Right, it's really elevated.

M: Yeah. So what had happened there on those mountains one Sunday, or we'll say Sunday, you could go around and around and around and around and go up on one of those mountains there so far, and then you'd have to walk way on up there. And four or five students, children, went up there and had a party and before they knew it, the fog had come in on 'em. And they

and backtracked it and found the other two. It then was late in the afternoon so they was just

got kind of acquainted with the guy and he was the neatest guy, and they was talking, and somebody run in there and said that there had just been a robbery right down there in one of those quick loan places, and he run out there and the druggist did too.

The druggist jumped in the back seat of the car and he's taken out after him in his personal car. And over there around Alturas, the man that had robbed it, he and his wife sat in the car, and he stole about $250

M:

J: The Sheriff's Association was certainly in existence then.

M: Yeah, the Sheriff's Association was put in effect about 1926.

J: Okay. What kind of help and support, and also activities did you have with them while you were Sheriff?

M: Well I had a good relation with all of 'em. We always got along real good.

J: Did you have yearly conventions or –

M: Yeah, you have 'em twice a year.

J: Twice a year.

M: And I was Chairman of the Board of the Sheriff's Association for three years.

J: When was that?

M: In about '73, along in those years for three years, four years, something like that. And I was on the board a lot of times and I often visited the legislature.

J:

They was a guy who was a drunk here in Lakeland, and he worked at the Post Office. He'd invariably get drunk, and he would call me and say he wanted me to get a will made for him. So finally I got tired of it and we had a lawyer over there in Bartow and I told him that he wanted everything he had made to the Florida Sheriff's Boys' Ranch so he said 'well bring the drunk down here and I'll fix it for you'. And he fixed it and one day I went in Mike's Men's Store right after Christmas to buy a suit of clothes, they marked 'em down. Well I walked in and they said a man had just come D.O.A. at the hospital just a few minutes from out on the Boulevard out there and I figured 'I betcha that's him' so I went to the hospital and it was him.

J: