

CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: JOHN LAND

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

PLACE: APOPKA, FLORIDA

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D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

L= JOHN LAND

D: I am here with John Land and today is September 26, 2008. We are here to resume our conversations about his time as mayor. We have covered up to about 1945. You were elected mayor in 1949, is that correct?

L: That's correct; our election at that time was on the first Monday of December every three years. There were only three of us on the city council; a mayor and two commissioners. Of course that changed later on. All three of us were sworn in to take office on the last few days of December of that year. January first of 1950 was when our term started.

D: Can you try to remember what Apopka was like, what kind of place it was, how many people lived here, what were the major economic pursuits, and what was the ratio between whites and Blacks in 1949?

L: In '49, Apopka was still a farming community. Apopka is about the same age as Orlando. Both cities were settled about the same time prior to the Civil War and after.

Ukrainian people that live in Apopka, American Indians, and many different ethnic groups. I think that the Black population has stayed around seventeen or eighteen percent. At the time I was elected mayor, Apopka was still dependent upon citrus and the muck farms, which became popular during the Second World War for food for America, and then the indoor foliage for which Apopka was named the Indoor Foliage Capital of the World. At one time Apopka was the fern city with the Boston fern; that started about 1912 when the [blight] came to Apopka and started the industry until it changed in the 30s to many different kinds of indoor foliage. That is where we were when I took office in 1950.

D: When you were considering running for mayor, your brother was already in the state legislature, is that correct?

L: No, Henry did not get in until a couple of years after I was elected mayor. Henry had been in politics, though, in 1940, before World War Two, when I was still not even twenty-one yet and in college. I would come home on the weekend and campaign for him and knock on doors when Henry ran for District Two county commissioner. He was elected and served until his army reserve unit was called into action after Pearl Harbor, which he joined in 1933 when he graduated from college, so he did not run in 1942. At that time they had the primaries in May and winning the primaries, at that time, was tantamount to winning the election. He was called into service about June 1, 1942 and he had to resign. When Governor Spessard Holland asked him who he wanted to replace him, Governor Holland offered to let Henry's wife, my sister-in-law, Abbey Joe, fill out the last six months. Henry stated that he wanted the guy who won the primary, Guillen McClure, to replace him. So Governor Holland appointed Guillen McClure to replace Henry. Henry returned from World War Two before I did and ran again for county commissioner and lost in a three or four way run. So he was not in office in '49 when I ran, but he ran for the state legislature in '52 and won. We sort of leap-frogged each other in politics.

D: When you took office as mayor what were the immediate issues, once the dust settled, that you had to confront?

L: Well, there wasn't anything that I didn't predict. I guess anything was fair game back in those days. Local government, pretty much, was handled at the local level. In 1882, Apopka didn't go to the legislature to get our charter; we chartered under the general laws of the state of Florida and just organized here in Apopka. Some of the cities at that time could get under an oak tree and have a vote and they would have a charter. In 1950, we were still in that mode where the state and federal government let you run things at the local levels. So we could have a hands-on deal and move forward or we could stay stagnant and not change any. I saw the opportunity for the city to change. Our family was in the manufacturing business and we had a payroll of about three hundred at various times and sometimes, when we had big orders during the war, up to six-hundred people. We had the privilege of making the payroll every Friday and paying people off and making things work in a business-

had a millage rate of about 10 mil for the operation of that \$30,000.00 and then we had about another \$9,000.00 for paying off the street bonds. So, about 15 mil was the millage rate. Of course you apply that to whatever the property is appraised at, which is your tax base, and that was very low. Most houses were under \$5,000.00 and you had the \$5,000.00 homestead. It was not a burden for the city dwellers, although, they paid county tax too, but that was our budget. We had a city clerk and, I think, about five or six people on the payroll: two police officers, and a police chief when you could keep one for about \$180 a month; it was a long time between pay raises in those days. We paid them on the first and fifteenth of each month. When people would get better jobs, the second police officer was quite often looking for another police officer and would operate with just the police chief. Crime was not as bad then. People respected police officers and when they saw them on the street they weren't trying to give them problems. There was enough crime that you needed police officers, but usually you handled the small things and only every now and then a big thing would happen.

So we had two police officers when we could keep them and a street crew that would pick up the garbage and work a mower, and they had a flatbed truck to pick up the garbage with. They took the garbage maybe a mile out i

we could annex the county road, actually it was the state secondary road at that time, Rock Springs Road and 435, can we go past the house in our way and branch out to the six houses outside of that to get much needed housing in the community. He stated that he thought we could because there was no law against it, so we did it. So we kept going to about 15

kids with their first offense can go before this committee if the offender and offender agree to go to that committee they can let people in the community mentor them and give them community action and not make a criminal out of them. The old city courts did a lot of that and handled in right quick on Monday mornings; if a kid acted up over the weekend at a football game or something he had to come before the judge on Monday morning and the parents would be there and things like that. But the state, during that era, started taking it all away, although we spent all that money modernizing. They had a slogan that, if you wanted to change something call it reform. They said the cities were doing cash-register justice, so we had \$10 fines or if it was bad it might have been \$25, now you get \$173 for running a red light and, with some of those, the city only gets about 21 to 22 percent of those; so, I say, that's reverse cash-register justice because the state's taking all the money even though we do all the work. We had our grand

that? How were race relations from the time you were mayor throughout desegregation and what was the thinking in the community about all that?

L: A lot of the Black area was south of town

registered to vote between '64 and '67 by that time and I still had a strong following. One of the fellas that supported me through many elections ended up being the head of the N.A.A.C.P. We were asked to purchase some property on that end of town and work on some housing projects which probably did not help me on the other end of town.

D: Would you say your opponents used that against you in the next election?

L:

D: As I have been told, and I've read, there was a major fault-line that developed between Burns and his opponents who were convinced that Burns's road board was not exactly that straight. As I recall, Scott Kelly, as a state senator, did various investigations and showed that there was a lot of funny business in Burns's road crew.

L: Well, they checked back to Jacksonville with all the improvements up there, and thought all his cronies were getting it or whatever.

D: Anyway, as I recall, there was group in the legislature and I would really love to talk to your brother about this actually, because he would have been quite knowledgeable about all that.

L: Yeah, I think he was, and I'm not too sure he was that sold on Burns. Of course, then they had the group up there, well, the big thing now is the Florida Crackers. Bill Clinton is coming down to get the Cracker vote, what Lawton Chiles used to call get the Cracker vote. But really, what the whole thing was in the Democratic Party at that time, was what they called the "pork choppers" and they grew up in West Florida and they controlled the state until . . .

D: Right, Charlie Johns . . .

L: All those old guys up there, they were entrenched up there from the early days of Florida.

D: Now, was Burns on that side?

L: Well, I suspect he worked them and probably did, but . . .

D: And I would imagine they got a lot of that road money?

L: Yeah, around Jacksonville and west Florida because they were the big controllers and they were going against that "one person, one vote" and all that instead of allowing the control up there; and they redistricted and broke up that "pork chop" gang. They were really conservative. I remember . . .

D: Would you call the delegation that represented Apopka, your brother and that delegation, were they a "pork chop" or were they "one man, one vote" reformers?

L: Well, they were far enough south they wanted to break it away but they still had a lot of contracts.

D: But it is a lot more complicated than that based upon what I've learned, and that is that it's not just the panhandle, there are counties like Collier county or De Soto county or some of those south Florida counties that are really, really rural. Obviously, they are in south Florida but, yet, they vote with the "pork chop" gang because the "pork chop" gang is the rural county's set.

L: So we are right in the middle. We can go each way and Henry had a lot of friends up there. I remember when some of them started dying off he go to the funerals. You're right, that "pork chop" went down to the southern counties, but they're changing now. But some of those are still

up there and they're registered Democrat. And can't figure out, during the last election, they couldn't understand why Florida, up in that area, were voting for Bush, but they're old conservative Democrats from the old "pork chop" gang. I remember Raymond McGuire telling me one time, and he was conservative, and he said the smaller the government is the more conservative they are; he was talking about and defending the old "pork choppers" because they were more conservative and remained that way. I realized he was right because a little old city like Apopka is more conservative with money and everything.

D: Well, you just have to break it down to fiscal conservative versus social conservative and you have to recognize that there are two different conservatives. Even the Democratic Party now have officially recognized "blue dog" Democrats, which have a caucus and everything in Washington, D.C. They are real Democrats but, yet, they are real fiscal conservatives.

L: Yeah, around here we call them "yellow dog" Democrats.

D: "Yellow dogs" and "blue dogs" are different in that "yellow dogs" vote for any Democrat no matter what- but "blue dogs" hang together because they believe in strong fiscal responsibility, like Lawton Chiles, he is a really good example. There are still, particularly in the House of Representatives, twenty-five or thirty of them that really are Democrats but they really believe in balanced budgets, fiscal responsibility, tax and spend, and not no-tax and spend; in other words, pay for what you spend.

L: Lawton, he came back when the state was in bad shape, if you remember, under Governor Bob Martinez and all that right-sizing and down-sizing, and somebody said they were going to capsize. But he came back and got them in good shape within a few years. Then they went to a Republican legislature and they took a lot of the credit, but Lawton brought it back and returned the state to a sound fiscal basis.

D: Walk us through your devastating election loss and decision to run again.

L: I lost the election in '67, right after the city council voted down my idea for a museum, and I left office kind of down. I think it was about three days before I could sleep. I finally went to the woods, where I like to hunt, and dozed off in the hunting vehicle there. I was kind of out of sorts for the first few months or first year and a half or so. But I was watching the operation of the city and when I left, we'd left it really good shape and set aside about a \$27,000 c.d. which we didn't tell too many people about, but the money was going out really fast in the utilities and the general fund. Along with that, one of the commissioners got into a scandal trying to contact people for a new sewer plant, or an improvement, so he was removed from office and that got a new person into the city council. So there was a lot of turmoil going on with things like that in the administration during those three years. About a year and a half out people started to ask

people recognized that but people could twist it. So I realized that in campaigns they can take a good thing and turn it into something that sounds bad. Like, we did this big paving program which was really big for our community in the early 60s, but we still had some clay roads so they would take a picture of a clay road and say "this one hasn't been fixed," like that was the end of the world, and just things like that. So I realized that when I ran again for re-election in 1970 that I'd better get out and do a little politicking and take some credit for some things. By that time the people realized it, so I think I beat them, maybe I could go back and check it, but I think it was about three to one.

When we took the city back and the funds were all spent. We would write checks at the end of the month and hold them. We wouldn't send them out for our bills and wait to see who hollered the first; we might get by three for four weeks, maybe even a month, before they came in and then we'd go through the stack and pull their check out and pay them. We had to do a lot of things like that. We did have that one CD that they didn't know about, so we were able to cash it in and do some things there. We sold some of the former city property for about \$50,000. It took about a year or so to really get back to a good operation fiscally. That is when we started taking Walt Disney at his word and started getting ready for the growth that was going to come. Walt Disney opened in October of '71 and from then on there was growth in Central Florida 0..4 bamn T2 (t)0

payroll when he sold the juice and everything, was making payroll. So, even though they were bad years for the farmer, the product made jobs for so many people and circulated in the community, as well as the muck farms, circulated close to \$110 million dollars a year in product in the community. This changed fast in the 80s and at the same time, population wise, we were growing fast; the fastest growth in Orange County and a lot of it was due to the property being available. The canning plants and the Plymouth Citrus Grower Association and all their big payrolls and everything are all gone. Of course, we still have some industry taking place up there and we are now trying to get good, clean industry in that same area and keep it as an industrial site. But, back in the 80s, the freezes of that era really changed the whole situation. We are more in central Florida, Orlando metropolitan area; the beltway is on the west side of us so we are included in the general downtown area rather than a more distant farming community now. When the '73 oil embargo and everything stopped tourism and hurt Orlando, it didn't affect our economy that much. In fact, about 60% of the building permits in Orange County were in this area. A lot of it was for the indoor foliage business, but our economy wasn't dependent on tourism like Orlando's. I think that now they want to diversify and go into more things, but we already had that little diversification away from tourism. We still like to maintain our own identity though and keep a separate economy from Orlando. We want to do that somewhat with the indoor foliage industry, but also with some other light industry up around where we used to have Plymouth Citrus Growers and Minute Maid. That area is where they developed the concentrate.

D: From '68 and into the 70s, revenue sharing with federal dollars began to come in, federal grants, and federal support for infrastructure; how did you tie into that and how did it affect you? Can you reflect a little bit on a project or two in which you may have taken advantage of that?

L: Well, any of that funding helps a lot, but, actually, we wanted to have our own operation and it's hard for us to get any grants or anything because you have to have matching funds, it was hard to get any help. We had to wait and wait and wait. One example was there was a matching fund for fallout shelters when we did our city hall here. We were building ours for about \$40,000 and the engineers were waiting and waiting and waiting; it took so long we just quit trying to get it and just spent \$40,000 to build our own shelter. It's still there; in fact, that is

fees you felt sorry for but you had to just go on. They used that to say you had 17% in the minority area, or let's say 20%, and only half of them have water and sewer. Over here, you got the other 80%, but 95% of them have water and sewer; so they were able to show a lack of parity. If they had given us just a little more time we would have had all the stuff in because we were moving fast to try to get it all in. We settled it by saying we would do all these things and showed that we could do all of them in a certain length of time. They even looked if you didn't have curbs or if you didn't have sidewalks. So, if we got extra money, we'd make sure they got all the sidewalks even if some of them . . . I didn't get sidewalks in f

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