

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: AL BELLOTTO
INTERVIEWER: JAMES M. DENHAM
LOCATION: LAKELAND, FLORIDA
DATE: AUGUST 18, 2005

M=James M. Denham (Mike)

A=Al Bellotto

B=Betty Bellotto

M: Today is August 18th, and I'm here again with Al Bellotto and Mrs. Betty Bellotto, and we're here to resu weh

you started". Anyway the tragedy was the day we started planting the size of the acreage that he had, we thought we had enough grass but at the last part of the day after lunch, about 1:30, 2:00, we realized that we didn't have enough, so I took my pickup and went back to our ranch up near Loughman, because I had just plowed up some fresh grass up there, and got enough seed grass to finish out the little piece of ground that he had disked on the way back, after I left the ranch there and came down the dirt road to get on to Hwy.92, I had to stop right there before entering Hwy. 92, and right there on the road when I started off, I

there. I didn't believe her, you know. But anyway I drove up there and opened the back gate on the horse trailer. We went in and we was sittin' down at the table eating and all of a sudden I heard something go {bump, bump}. The old horse had stepped up and he just loaded himself right up in the trailer.

M: Was it the same horse?

A: Yeah. Same horse. You saw that picture.

B: That's the one that I showed you.

A: But he knew we'd been noonin' there all those times. And from where he was, this is about 15, 16 miles. That horse left from where it was hunting us and went to her, and he'd go off and graze and then every night she said right about dark he'd come up there for water and she'd pump him water. So she said, "If you'll bring your horse trailer", so I did. I got there and I just opened up the gate for him like we always did when we loaded him. We're settin' in there eating and sure enough, he loaded himself up. Very unusual situation.

M: I'll be darned. Can you tell us a little bit about what treating the screwworms was all about and that whole problem and how that came about?

A: Well you know of course a lot of people did not realize the screwworm situation and how bad it was back along in the '50's, '50, '51, '52, '53, along in there. Every calf that was born, or even blood, if you were working cattle and they got a cut on 'em or for some reason there was blood on the cow, those flies would blow that blood or blow the navel cord when a calf was born, and every one would have screwworms. And of course that screwworm would eat on into the belly and kill the calf. So what happened during that period of time, it was every day, we were riding. I'd rope 35 or 50 a day and of course Betty would help me. I had some good dogs, I'd roped a calf, of course the cow would try to fight, the dogs would keep the cow off of you, and I'd hold the calf down and Betty would doctor, dig the screwworms out and then put the medicine on. We did it for ourself and I also contracted with a couple other people to doctor their calves the same way during that period of time.

M: So the calves were the ones that were most vulnerable?

A: Oh yeah. They were the ones. Well every calf was born; you just had to figure –

M: You just had to figure that they had it.

A: Yeah, you just had to catch 'em and doctor 'em. How we got rid of 'em and I give J. O. Pierce out of Okeechobee most of the credit 'cause he was the one that came up with the idea. We actually m(A)20048003>3(h)3(e)

funded the thing and of course during World War II Sebring Air Base was a big thing, but after that, in the '50's, they put in a fly station down there where they'd sterilize the flies and then they would drop them out in these hot areas and that's the way we got rid of 'em 'cause we were not able to do anything up until then to really make any headway of gettin' rid of the things.

M: Isn't it also true that Doyle Carlton was very much in the forefront of that fight?

A: He was in it, but I give J. O. most of the credit because he's the one that I remember was so strong in leading this thing.

screwworm fly. We just rode every day. Those are two things that, thank goodness, the more recent cow people have not had to contend with.

M: You haven't been out that long, what would you say today would be the biggest problem along that line? Any pests? Natural kinds of pests like that? Would there be any recent concerns? Now it's probably just the markets. Of course that's always been a problem, or concern.

A: Well when you talk about problems and runnin' your operation, I would probably address one of the most recent problems you turn to, soda apple weeds in the grass. This is such a nuisance that was brought in here.

B: Weeds.

A: And they'll just take over your place. This is something that we're steady, continuously fighting right now that was brought in here from South America. We didn't have any of that until, we bought 311 head of heifers from Cup Stewart down below Lake Placid at his ranch down there in '89, and when we brought those cattle in, not knowing it, they had been on an area that had soda apple. And of course, when we brought 'em in here, we didn't hold 'em in the pen, we turned 'em right out. And of course they just spread that soda apple.

M: Because their chewing would –

M: Not 'til then?

A: Yeah, when it really began to be a real nuisance. And they was a bigger

A: Yes. There was and it was a big thing. You don't hear about those kinds of things anymore. We had little hog bears even that came there on Lake Hancock in the early '50's and '60's and there again, because of the developments; we'd kind of pushed them back. I'm sure there's still a few in the Green Swamp.

M: You say hog bears?

B: They're smaller.

A: They're a smaller, black, brownish-black bear. They're a smaller bear. They're more like 250 to 300 pounds. Talkin' about that, we had another unusual thing happen. We was cow huntin' one time, when I was about 21 years old and the dogs were ahead of us and had run up into what we call Hamburger Bend. What it was was a little ol' area that was a little bit higher than normal flat country up there at a neighbor's ranch, and I was working his cat!

were all excited about it and this is kind of how that property got sold to them for that purpose. I'm a little disappointed in what I'm startin' to see though where they're now talkin' about floodin' 500 acres of it, and when I say that, the back side has got quite a bit of higher elevation but down on what is the most beautiful part, and that's down around Alligator Point, the level of that land is not high enough if they start flooding a lot of that. It's gonna be so wet it's gonna kill a bunch of those oak trees and it takes away from what we felt like ought to be established as a great park. They're talkin' about duck hunting, well, you know if you flood a place, who goes and looks and enjoys lookin' in the middle of a lake? You're takin' away what the purpose of the whole thing was for. I realize that Swiftmud, because they bought in on half of it and now I wish that had never happened, you know, if we'd have known that they was goin' to flood it, we'd have never sold it. Because it's too small an area in my opinion for them to be firing shotguns or guns and also talk about a park within just a few hundred yards of people just walking, looking for different habitat. And that makes a threat to the people that want to bring their kids and children and picnic and that kind of a thing. I don't think that should'a ever happened either.

M: Can you go through a little bit the arrangements by which you sold the land? Who were the people that were instrumental in negotiating things for you?

A: You mean the county commissioners?

M: County commissioners and –

A: Well Marlene was the ringleader really. And then Jack Myers ended up here at the last meeting involved in it. But really Marlene was probably the strongest leader in wanting to buy the property.

M: Were there any discussions about the things that you hoped would happen with the land, or were there any statements about what they intended to do? Was that just kind of not an issue at the time or they were not willing to share with you their plans?

A: No. Mike, Marlene, and it's unfortunate that she got voted out simply because she was the one that had the vision to see what the idea our family thought would be good for the environment of our people here in Polk County, to give them some

just like this deal, they got two phosphate reservoirs that the phosphate companies had right here on Peace River just south of Hwy. 60, that all this water could be stored in instead of utilizing good land. You know, it's kind of crazy when you really think about it. All those years in the '50's, '60's, and '70's, your water soil conservation, all these people were promoting trying to improve land, take it out of swamp conditions and put it in a higher level of valuation so they could increase the tax to do the roads and do the things for the people. They came out when we started on this ranch. That's the reason why I served on the Water Soil Conservation Board, they would actually send an engineer out there and shoot levels, do the topography for where the ditches need to be, the control structures, and all those things, because they wanted it developed. Now, all of a sudden, here all this money, all this time, all this good land was made into

B: And the beauty.

A: And the beauty. I mean those big old oak trees, and Cabbage Palms. You know, people ask us all the time they used to ask us, well the bird people, one of the first times we let 'em on there to do what they call their Christmas bird count, the first time that, do you remember what that guy's name, those people that lived in Haines City or Winter Haven that traveled on the – anyway, the bird people said, "Why have you got so much of this habitat? Why are so many birds here? We've not seen this." You know, just like we had some bluebirds which they had not seen and they did see. Well, the reason, #1 we never let anybody hunt. The only time we used a gun was to kill a rattlesnake, and we killed a few of those on there. But we never let anybody hunt. And the other thing was Betty's mowing with the big diesel tractor and the 20-foot batwing mower. She kept it mowed like a golf course. Well when you mow it, then it turns around and creates seeds. Well that's where the birds come in 'cause you're creating feed for them, see? Well, when you create that, the eagles can c3(n)3(y8s(t6h5(90.024 4-3(u)3(8)m)8(m

M: Unfortunately I didg

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there on the sidewalk waiting to get a taxicab and it was just a very light misty rain, like when it does when its freezing and everybody's freezin' to death you know? And here comes this taxicab and it was a black driver. And when he drove up there, Jay said, "You want to get that?" and I said, "No let's wait and get another one". That happened about three times in a row. And Jay said, "Damn!"

B: Well we're not prejudiced.

A: Yeah, and he said, "Damn, Al!" he said, "I'm gonna freeze to death out here while you're readin' colors!"

M: Readin' colors.

A: Yeah.

B: He was just crazy.

A: He was just crazy.

B: He got a lot out of life.

M: Now did yo 90.021 0 0 1 90.s5D10004C004B2 y

M: So did you have any other memories of his father?

A: No except just, you know, a lot of respect. I remember a lot of people's respect for him, for Mr. Peterson, and the praise of what he was getting done for the people.

M: And he left office, what in '50 something?

A: I'm not sure about that.

M: Okay, well I know all that, I can fill that in. Did you know Congressman Haley?

A: I knew of him.

M: Not really like Mr. Peterson?

A: No, no.

M: What about Andy Ireland?

A: Oh yeah, Andy Ireland. I knew Andy Ireland before he ever got into politics. I knew him as a banker. In fact I borrowed money from his bank. Yeah, I knew Andy well.

M: You know I have his congressional papers? I have Mr. Ireland's [papers] and he and 7i-10003-3802C00550048004F0044-4005160e als f6(a)5(n)10(e)5(iscusse-3(u)3(b)4(a)116

M: And [Lawton] worked for Jay's father, didn't he?

A: Yes. That's where he first started.

M: And that would've been about '59?

A: I'd say somewhere there about. And I can't remember exactly but it's somewhere close to that. But I took him down there in our car.

M: Was that the first time you had met Lawton?

A: Well, I might have met him at the office, but yeah, that's when I really got to talk to him.

M: Did you know his parents?

A: No, I did not. Now, you talk about his family. Our oldest daughter, Cheré, and his, is that his oldest?

B: Tandy.

A: Tandy? That was his oldest girl, though, wasn't it? Anyway our oldest girl was great friends. In fact she stayed with us, wasn't it in the summertime?

B: No. She stayed when he went to Washington and she wanted to graduate and it was just a few months.

A: But she lived with us.

B: Lakeland High School?

A: Yeah. She wanted to finish at Lakeland High School.

M: Now was she hearing impaired?

B: Her mother had measles when she was –

M: German measles, correct.

B: And her eyesight was affected, she could hear. She was as sweet as could be.

A: But she and our oldest girl, Cheré, were great friends and she stayed with us during that period of time to finish school here.

M: So that first law case, I guess you really got to know [Lawton]. What were your impressions of him when you first met him?

A: Lawton was very, very astute in knowing the law for a young person. I know I was impressed with the fact that at that age and just starting out he was so knowledgeable.

M: Well prepared.

A: He was well prepared, got everything, wasn't haphazard. Everything was right to the tee. He had written out everything and he was right on target. And from the get-go, we were good friends. Good friends enough that when he ran the first time –

M: For the State House.

A: Was it the State House or was it Washington?

M: Yeah, State House.

A: Okay. Anyway, what I did [was] I put on a big barbecue at the ranch for him and I got all my buddies in the Cattleman's Association and we dug a big pit out there under the oak trees, started a fire in the hole, and put one of the old landing mats over it, I did a big barbecue and I had people come from the east coast, cattlemen and different ones that I knew, I invited. And we raised \$70,000 that afternoon.

M: Well, that probably would've been the Senate race. That would've been 1970. He actually just to kind of remind you, he was in the State Legislature in the late '50's and then about '60 until about '70, he was in the State Legislature and I think was in the Florida Senate by 1970, when he decide to run when Spessard Holland retired. And that would've been a very instrumental event.

A: So we did that one and then what I wanted to tell you –

M: That would've been about 1970, I'll bet, correct?

A: Yeah, that's what I would think. So then, when he started to run again, Dean Saunders, the Dean Saunders that is here now, you know him?

M: Oh yeah.

A: Okay. Dean Saunders was working under him. He was quite active in trying to promote summer campaigns. He calls me and said, "Al, Lawton wants you if you will to put on another barbecue for a fundraiser for him for Polk County". I said, "Fine, we'll do it". So we talked a little bit and then in a few weeks he called

me back and he said, "Well, you need any help?" and I said, "No". I said "We didn't charge him anything before. We're goin' to put it on for him. I've already talked to my cow people and we're goin' to do it again". This goes along until about three weeks before the time and I –

M: Was this the second race? '76 I guess it would have been?

A: Yeah. So he calls me back and he said, "Lawton wanted you to know that we have already done one in Hillsborough County and he said we did hot dogs over there and he said we're doin' one in Manatee County and we're goin' to do fish down there, so he said he wants to be sure that you serve chicken at yours". I said, "Whoa". I said, "There will not be any chicken served on this ranch. It's not costin' him a dime".

B: He wanted that poor boy image thing.

A: So Lawton gets on the phone two or three days afterward and he calls me and he tells me, he said, "Al, what I want to do is to pursue that poor boy image". He didn't say it exactly like that but that's what he was sayin'. I forgot how he said it. I said, "Lawton, we're good friends, but", I said, "there won't be any chicken served on this ranch. It won't cost you a dime, but there won't be any chicken served". He said, "You really mean that?!" I said, "I mean it just as sure as I'm talkin' to you". And he said, "Well I'll have to think about that", and I said, "Well you can think about it". He said, "Can I call you back?" and I said, "That's fine, but just remember, I'm not goin' to change my mind 'cause I don't do that". Chicken people don't create anything for us in Polk County. This is a cattle ranch. And for me to invite cowboys in here to help me put this on –

M: Yeah, it'd be embarrassing. I can see where you –

A: I said, "I'm not about to do that".

B: Yeah, 'cause we had swamp cabbage and –

A: Oh yeah, I mean we did it up right.

M: That was kind of overboard probably on his part, you know, because nobody would've noticed that.

A: So he called me back and he said, "Well I appreciate it", but he said, "I've got another place" and I said, "That's fine". So anyway he got the auctioneer, Marty Higginbotham. He got Marty to put it on at his little place over here somewhere on the other side of town over at his little place. So anyway, I thought, well that may sever the relationship all these years and the kids are buddies and we've been buddies and of course in a few days Jay calls me and he'd heard about it, and he called me razzing me, you know. Then Jay goes to Tallahassee to

represent him, right at the last, then Jay calls me after he was up there about two years and he said, "Al", he said, "I thought I'd give you a chance to get back in with the Governor". I said, "How's that?" He said, "He's got some lumber down there in Joe Ruthven's, under his building, that he needs up here to build his little cook shack". He said, "Can you get it up here for me?" And I did.

M: So you just loaded it up on your trucks, you had trucks.

A: Yeah, I had semi trucks. We parked a trailer over there and gave Ruthven's a day to load it, and then we took it to Tallahassee. Of course we didn't charge him anything.

M: So that was in Jefferson County; his place in Jefferson County?

A: Wherever that place is he's got. They buried him there now.

M: Yeah, I think it's in Jefferson County, just east of Tallahassee.

A: Yeah, it's just outside because Jay was talking about this is where he liked to go and he wanted to build a building there and they had the lumber here that he wanted to use because of history. So I said that I'd get it there for him, and I did. So Lawton called me back you know and was thanking me and all that.

M: What did you think when you found out he was going to run for Governor? Were you surprised?

A: No not really because he was strong. If he believed something, he believed it, and you know, and then the dedication of walking the state of Florida. You know that was quite a chore and it was different.

M: What did you think when you heard he was going to walk around the state like that the first time you ever heard it?

A: The first thing I thought about was the distance. I mean, mercy! You start up there around Pensacola to go to Miami, you know, you've gone a fur piece! And to do that, I really thought he [wouldn't] get it done. Something'll come up that he'll go part of the way and then, but he didn't. He went all the way. Lawton was very strong and when he got on something, and I think that's what I liked about him as much as anything. And Jay was that way.

M: Did you feel like you could call [Lawton] up?

A: Oh yeah. I never called him at any time, even when he was up in Tallahassee. Man, I'd return his call right that minute, but he'd call you back, just like he called me to thank me for the lumber deal. He called me back, wanted to jaw, you know, he was fine.

M: Who do you think were the closest friends of his here in Lakeland? Who do you think were the closest people that he interacted with on a daily basis, besides Jay I guess?

A: Well the Ruthvens, of course that's a marriage deal, wasn't that?

M: Yeah, Joe married his sister.

A: Joe was always in the picture, especially in the later years when he got into politics. Mike I'm trying to remember. Of course, just remember politics kind of grew on me when I started getting involved. I realized, as I said, that we had to come to town and we had to get involved.

M: You had to get good people in.

A: You had to get good people and you had to show leadership in these different organizations. It's like the Cattleman's Association when the first meeting that I had on the Polk County Cattleman's Association and Donald McClain was president and we only had 87 members, and yet we were the largest cow county east of the Mississippi. And there's 1100 and something cattlemen in Polk County. You know, title ou e lel