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Interviewee: Joe Hilliard

Interviewer: Vernon Peeples

Date: June 26, 2000

P: This is an interview with Joe Marlin Hilliard in his cabin near Labelle in Hendry County, Florida, June 26th, 2000. Joe Marlin, that's a very interesting name and there must be a story as to how you were named Joe Marlin.

H: It's not quite as interesting as you think. It was actually my father was named Joe and my uncle was name Marlin, and uncle Marlin never had any boys, so they just decided to give me half to him.

P: What was the date of your birth and the place of your birth?

H: Born January 18th, 1943 in Ft. Myers, Florida.

P: The names of your parents starting with your father and then your mother.

H: Well, my father of course, were the Hilliards and my mother were, I think **Travis** was the grandfather and then she became a **Yarborough**. She was a Yarborough before she married dad.

P: When did your father's family come to Florida?

H: I would say they started in here right around 1900 when they started... they were from Georgia, lived in Georgia, sawmill people. They started cutting cross ties for Henry Flagler when he was building the old railroad going to West Palm Beach. They built... they had a sawmill in a little town called Hilliard, one at Dinsmore, one at Callahan, and right on down.

P: Hilliard is in Nassau county next to the Georgia border, is that where they were from?

H: No, they were from Whitecross, Georgia.

P: That's just on the other side of the Okeefenokee.

H: Right, that's where they're... in fact, there's a big whole street up there, a whole block called the Hilliard house and it's on a big block and dad used to... we'd give money to it and all that and there was a lot of history about the Hilliards, and Morgans and different people up there.

P: Well there's a town called Hilliard in Nassau county.

- H: The story goes that it was named after my great-grandfather cause he had a sawmill camp there.
- P: When did the family move down into southwest Florida?
- H: I guess 1905, when granddaddy finally ended up down at the murky grove. Where the old murky grove is between Labelle and Ft. Myers, he used to own that thing. In fact, that's where my father was born, right out there.
- P: Now your mother's family.
- H: They were part of the **Heitmans**. **Gilmer Heitman** and **Aunt Nina** and all of that... **Gilmer** I guess was my mother's cousin. Aunt Nina, Nina Hietman, she was my grandmother's sister. But they were the... my mother's side of the family was the poor side, and the **Heitmans** were the wealthy side. I don't know if you remember **Dorothy Turner** in Ft. Myers that used to...she was another cousin.
- P: Where was your mother's family from?
- H: You know, I don't know. Ft. Myers is all I... as far as I knew they were there... you know, I really don't know where they did come from. I probably should find that out. It's funny how the women's side of the family sometimes gets lost in the motion.
- P: The Hilliard family originally came to this country about when? You have any idea and where were they from?
- H: Actually, there's an article that was written in the Ft. Myers News Press years ago and said they followed a guy named Oglethorpe from England to Georgia and started there in the Whitecross, Georgia area. And that was back in the early 1700s.
- P: When your father's family came to southwest Florida, what business were they involved in?
- H: Actually, if I can digress a little bit and tell you the tale of the migrant trail that they started instead of...
- P: That's better.

H: That's probably better. And this is what we've all been told now. We don't know if this is true or not, but like I said, my grandfather on the Hilliard side apparently started in the Whitecross, Georgia area. That was my great-grandfather. Started in the sawmill business. Around the turn of the century, Mr. Flagler apparently was hiring carpenters and people to build a railroad from Jacksonville to Palm Beach. Someway or other, my great-grandfather got involved in that. The story goes that they would come along ahead of the railroad, and they would set up sawmills, like in Hilliard, and Dinsmore, and **Callihan**, and actually Bassinger, and right on down. And they would set up these big sawmills and cut these crossties, and then they would move on. And then other crews would come in and lay the ties and lay the rail. This all went on, and I would say probably about 1902 or '03, they ended up at Bassinger, Florida which is over on the east coast, and at that time my grandfather apparently got sick and tired of cutting those crossties. He met a young girl named **Carry Morgan**. Let me take a moment to tell you about her side of the family. The Morgans was an old gentleman and the story was told that he was a Confederate officer and at the end of the Civil War, he hauled tail from Georgia and came off down here in the central Florida, and had a heck of a cow herd. In fact, there's quite a few of the cattle today. He had seven girls, and those seven girls married out and his whole cow herd got dispersed all over the country. And so probably, some of the old time, the **Partins, Likes**, the little people might have even had something to do with some of the cattle. But anyway, granddaddy married her at Bassinger and grandpa Morgan told him that he had a herd of cattle over north of the river around Punta Gorda, that if he wanted those cattle--they're being stolen and thieved and everything--that if he wanted, him and my grandmother could move over there. But they apparently had stayed there in Bassinger long enough to have Uncle Marlin and Aunt Lisee which were two of the oldest children. They then moved to **Murphey's Grove**, or what we knew as Murphey's Grove, and build a little old one room schoolhouse out there at Murphey's Grove between Ft. Myers and Labelle. I don't know how granddaddy either bought this little old grove or it just was there and he just started taking care of it, but they had those cattle. The ranch actually, the part we know about the Hilliard part, started in about 1905. That's when granddaddy got to Ft. Myers. They stayed out there and the river would flood during the hurricanes and things just... So they finally moved to Ft. Myers in, I'd say around 1910. He built, bought a big old home down there right behind where **Piper's Animal Veterinarian Hospital** used to be, right there in east Ft. Myers. He owned three dry goods stores, two he held in Punta Gorda and one in Ft. Myers, and one at **Safety Hill** which was a black segment of Ft. Myers. Uncle Marlin was a young man, and back in those days, Uncle Marlin would go to the woods and they didn't care about a cow because you couldn't do nothing with him, but the hogs, they'd salt them and all that. So they would haul these hogs... Uncle Marlin kept those three dry goods stores going. Now Uncle Marlin

was born in about 1885, so that would have put him about a fifteen or sixteen year old boy then. There were six Hilliard children, Uncle Marlin, Aunt Lisee, **Aunt Moore, Uncle Eli**, Dad, and **Aunt Heddy** would have been the six kids. The three girls all married people around in the Ft. Myers area. The three boys, Uncle Marlin being the oldest, he kind of helped his father run the ranching business and supplying those dry goods stores. Uncle Eli was five years younger than Uncle Marlin, him and Uncle Marlin as they got a little older, it was kind of a pecking order, and Uncle Eli and Uncle Marlin fought all the time. So Uncle Eli finally decided when he was about eighteen years old, he'd join the service and went in the Navy. Ended up, actually, in the state of Washington. After World War II was over, and he stayed in the service until about 1950, I guess, he owned a pretty good size ranch out at Republic, Washington. In 1970, he sold that ranch and moved back down with dad and Uncle Marlin on the ranch down here. He became our Vice President in charge of hogs. He was just an older gentleman and he trapped hogs and all that... it was kind of a comical story. Back about dad and Uncle Marlin, and I'm kind of going through this a little fast, and if we want to, we'll back up, but I've told this part of the story a jillion times. So, then, if I'm looking a little glassy eyed, I'm trying to think of all these dates... so we're in about 1915 now. Well, dad was born in 1911, so he was a four year old child then. Time just kind of come along. Uncle Marlin went off to World War I. Apparently had a heck of a time in World War I. The stories went... and Uncle Marlin, as close as him and I was, all he'd ever tell me about World War I, he said it was just a hell of a place to be. The way they fought over there was almost like medieval times. Soldiers marched against soldiers. There wasn't any strategy to the way they fought that war. So, Uncle Marlin, when he got discharged out of the service, in fact we have his discharge papers and everything. He got a medal of valor. When he came back, he went to those woods and never came out. He'd had all the people he needed to see for awhile. But time went along. The night that dad graduated, which was in 1930, or 1929, my grandfather got killed going to his graduation. A boy on a motorcycle ran into the side of his car and killed him that night. Of course, that was right in the heart of the Depression too, and I don't imagine...in that little box, I'm going to show it to you, it's absolutely full of people owning granddaddy money. You know in the Depression, they'd bring in flour, he'd give them this. That kind of changed the whole perspective. Dad actually had been accepted to Emory and was going off to college. When granddaddy got killed, that kind of wound that up. Dad and Uncle Marlin...our dad went to the woods and start helping Uncle Marlin with the cattle. Actually, I guess in 1930, that the real true Hilliard brothers were born. Even though, we've kind of claimed that we've been in the cow business since 1905. The two boys...everything from there on has just been hard work, rough as heck. At that time, they owned no land, not a drop of land. I remember dad telling the story about Uncle Marlin had accumulated a pretty good herd of cattle. And the first cattle they sold, they drove him to Punta Rassa and put him on the ferry, on the barge, and sent him

up to Tampa to the **Likes** brothers. They got \$9 a head for those steers and came back and bought nine acres of land. With each steer. Today, one of those steers is worth about \$700 and you can't buy but a third of an acre. In today's time. So anyway, in 1932 when they started buying their first land. If you want me to, I'll kind of go on as you want to and then we can regress back.

P: That's fine, excellent.

H: We probably should just get a little floor plan laid out and then we can go back.

P: Where was the land that they first purchased?

H: The first land that they bought was out on the **Key Rile Road**, what we call **Tollin's Slough**.

P: In Hendry county.

H: In Hendry county was the first land. In fact, **Collin English** which was the old land, eventually became superintendent of all the schools in the state of Florida, he was the land agent in Tallahassee and took a real liking to dad. **Mr. English** would let dad by one section here, and then he'd reserve four sections around it until dad could get back and pay for those. I don't think there was a whole lot of competition for land back in those days. From 1932 until... well, I guess to this day, we're still buying land. But from 1932 to probably 1960, dad and Uncle Marlin bought over 75,000 acres of land in Hendry and Collier and Palm Beach and Glades county... are the four counties. So we stayed in the cow business up until 1961. In 1961, I got out of high school and theoretically joined the company, although I'd been working on the ranch ever since I was big enough to go with them. In 1961, that was when Cuba, in 1960 actually, Cuba and the United States broke off ties with all relationship. That's when Castro took over. We had an opportunity to plant a little sugarcane. We planted 300 acres of sugarcane. That was the first time we diverted from pure cattle to something else. We went into the sugarcane planting business and stayed with that 300 acres until 1970. In 1970, there was another opportunity to expand sugar, and then we went pretty heavily then, up to 12,000 acres of sugarcane, as we have today. So we started in 1970 planting that real hard. In 1984, jumping ahead a little bit more, was the 1981, 1982, and 1983 freezes. Just wiped out the citrus industry. So, in 1984, the ranch went into the citrus business and we planted upwards of about 300,000 acres of citrus. I jumped way ahead though, cause a real devastating thing happened in 1978. Uncle Marlin was in car wreck. He got run over by a fruit truck, he and an Indian boy. Uncle Marlin had gotten to where he could not pass his driver's license test, so we hired a driver for him. And they were just coming down **833**, or the **Devil's Garden Road** and a semi

hauling fruit ran over the back of them. Uncle Marlin became a quadriplegic and ended up dying in 1981. Well, when he died, though, there was no relief on inheritance taxes, dad and I woke up that morning owing the federal government \$17,000,000. Just on Uncle Marlin's estate. That was in 1981. Nevertheless, we buckled down and went to work. Ended up having to sell about 12,000 acres of our land, to pay for the debt and all that. It took us from 1981 to 1990 to clean up that \$17,000,000. We probably ended up paying Uncle Sam close to \$25-\$26,000,000 with interest and all that because we had to borrow the money to do it. It was really a rough time for the company but it made us darn good businessmen. By 1990, we had it paid off. At that year, my oldest son, Joe Marlin the second came to work for us. He got out of Mississippi State University and came down here. Of course, Joe had been like I was, going on the ranch here since he was big enough to know about things. So anyway, Joe started full time with us in 1990. His younger brother, Brian, came in 1995 with us. Joe runs over all the cattle, and Brian runs one of our sugarcane divisions. We've got a daughter, **Maribeth**, and she graduated from Auburn University with master's degree and now she sells real estate for Century 21 in Charleston, South Carolina and doing real well. I guess that was all the important times of the ranch. As today, we now have about 60,000 acres of land, so we've gained some of that back, and then that is about still the same 10,000 acres of sugarcane, and about 3,000 acres of oranges. And then we've got pretty large holdings up in Georgia now, we've got close to 7,000 acres of timber and cattle up there.

P: Where is that?

H: Right out of Columbus, Georgia. Right up against Ft. Benning. We're east of Columbus, Georgia about thirty miles in a little county called Marion County, Georgia, Buena Vista, Georgia. So, we kind of went back where our roots are. So that's where we are today. Dad died January 13th, 1999. He was 88 years old. Just died a normal death. So now we're looking at another state battle, but we've hired some of the best lawyers in the country. We've, over the years, myself and the three children has bought dad out of the ranch, so we're in a lot better shape than we used to be. Although we still paid inheritance taxes, it was more gift taxes. So that's kind of the fast moving of the ranch.

P: Hilliard Brothers, I think that's the entity.

H: Hilliard Brothers of Florida is the name of it.

P: Who are the people who are the principles in Hilliard Brothers today?

H: Myself and my three children. It was just dad and Uncle Marlin for years, and then I... The way we actually did things, it was kind of a neat thing. We each

one of us, all on our own, even though it Hilliard Brothers, we all owned our own cattle until 1987. In 1987, that's when we started doing some better tax planning. That's was after Uncle Marlin died and we went through all this stuff and got through paying off Marlin's estate. Dad and I consolidated everything then, and put everything that I owned into it, and he put everything he owned.

P: Sending Vernon some messages. Now did you have any siblings? Any brothers or sisters?

H: No, none at all. Just the three children. And Uncle Marlin had no children. They had a tug of war on me.

P: Let's go back to the time you were born and where was your family living at that time?

H: They were living at a place out here on Devil's Garden Road called **Gunshy**. It was an old hunting camp years and years ago, and dad actually purchased the land in 1938. This is kind of comical, it's talking about one of our neighbors. There was a gentleman named **Cecil Jackman**, that lived over here on this side of the country and Cecil... no one knew he stole but dad just thought it would be a good idea to move over close to Cecil. Him and mother moved over here in 1940, over here, what we call Gunshy. It's one of the ranch divisions today. I was born, like I said, in 1943, and came back out there when I was two days old. A lady named Mrs. **Willingham** came with mother and stayed out here in these woods with us until I was big enough, I guess, for her to go. But mother and dad, they enjoyed life and had some great things, but they sure didn't have much \_\_\_\_\_. They worked hard, oh it was unreal. Mother cooked for the cow crews and all that stuff. But you know, I don't think they knew any different back in those days, so it wasn't all that big of a hardship. To me, right now, or to one of us, to have to revert back to that, it would be staggering.

P: Where did you start to school?

H: That's a humorous thing too. I started at Clewiston High School, and whenever I was six and a half or seven. This old Devil's Garden Road wasn't even paved back then. It ran in the center of Hendry county up to State Road 80. It comes across from Clewiston to the road you all came out here today on. Well, it was just an old dirt road. Well dad, now here I was a six or seven year old kid, and there was about four or five more little kids that lived out there in that part of the world, and dad had an old Jeep willy station wagon. Seven years old now, all those kids would come to our house, and I myself would drive those children all the way out to the school bus which was about twelve miles in that old Jeep, in case the school bus. And go to Clewiston and go to school. The school bus dropped us off, we'd fire up that old Jeep and come back down that road, and the parents would all pick us up. That went on until... we lived out there, I guess,

until... we might have moved to Clewiston in about 1953-1954. The reason was, dad needed to be around a telephone. Back in those days, there were no phones or anything out there. No power, no light plants, we had to crank to run lights and everything. So in about 1955, we moved to Clewiston.

P: Do you remember what conditions were like in Clewiston in the time you started in school and what the school was like?

H: If I'm not mistaken, all the kids went to one school which was the little bitty school down in the middle of Clewiston. All twelve grades went to this one school. Great big old three story white building. Don't know... I guess it was built for a school originally, I don't know what its original purpose was. Later on, they built the high school out on the east end of town, or the west end of town and that's where I went to high school there. Except for the mulchery school. Clewiston was just a sugar town back then, still is today. I bet there wasn't a thousand people living in Clewiston then. In fact the home that we still owned, we just sold it here this year. The home that I was raised in here in Clewiston, was kind of a factory town, you were a sugarcane man in 1929 or 1926 and built a bunch of \_\_\_\_ homes, and of course people took them and made them a little better but that was the house that mother and dad moved into.

P: What was growing up like during that era in your life?

H: My buddies were turkeys and chickens, dogs, and hogs because when I get off that school bus and get back home it was just cow crews, and I think I probably learned how to cuss before I learned how to talk. It was just out there in the middle of nowhere by myself, just a young kid. I remember I really was frightened to death the first time I went to school because that was one of the first times I [ever was] around a lot of children my own age. I was a little bit of a kingpin, I was around all of these cowboys and they were \_\_\_\_ and when I got to school I had to realize there were some more that were getting spoiled. I had to go through the pecking order there.

P: What did you do during the day, when you were outside?

H: It's been so long, probably chase chickens, or rode a horse, played with the dogs, we had a lot of hogs and [I'd] mess around with them, I mean just a kid beating around in the woods out there. I remember when it would get real wet the snakes would come up in the yard, the yard was pretty well built up. That was the only time my mother was real worried, but I was out there beating on Moccasins, and everything because it was wet and the snakes would come to the higher ground. The houses back in [those] days were about that high off the ground, and they would crawl up under the house and that's where I'd be playing, and lord I'd come face to face with a Water Moccasin.

P: Did you have many wild animals come up to your house?

H: I don't remember so much of that, but I'm sure the yard except maybe the dogs would chase them out or something like that. I remember we had chickens, in fact that was what I was a little surprised in that book *Land Remembered* those people just loved chickens and they never raised them. The old gentlemen that wrote the book said you build chicken pens where predators don't get in them. We always had chickens and dairy cows, we'd have to milk the old cows and that was one of my projects. We had a bunch of turkeys, I don't know what made them so mean but when I was about three or four years old I'd head across the yard and if those turkeys saw me, they'd take to me and run me like a dog with a hog.

P: What family or cultural celebrations, or traditions were important to you growing up?

H: Christmas, and Thanksgiving as far as I can remember back there, my father, mother and mother's sister and her husband we'd always eat Thanksgiving dinner out in the woods, and each Christmas dinner. Once I [was] big enough to hunt myself and one of my first cousins used to be the \_\_\_\_\_ teacher here in Clewiston, **Richard Poppy** it was our job to kill the turkeys for the Thanksgiving. That was a big deal to us to make sure we got it, you know you right there to Publix or one of the stores and buy them but they weren't \_\_\_\_\_ like killing them out of the woods. I remember Christmas trees, for years we would just cut those little green pine sapwood and that would be our Christmas tree.

P: What [did] you have for Christmas dinner?

H: I suppose turkey, ham. There wasn't many children in our family, so it wasn't a big family. There was a lot of adults, without myself and like I said my first cousin [were] the only kids that I remember much around. It was really mostly him and I and being with the adults during the Christmas times and that stuff. In 1948 or 1949 storm, I've got a picture of myself out in front of gunshot and the water was about that deep, I was standing in the water, right on the chin, and that was sticking out was my head right in the front yard of this high yard. That would of meant those whole woods over that whole world out there was that full of water.

P: When did you start to hunt?

H: [When I was] big enough to go with dad I guess or uncle Marlin.

P: What did you usually hunt for other than turkeys?

- H: Turkeys and deer, and that was about all we ever hunted for. Although in 1960, 1961 it was against the law back [then] a guy named **Jack Sprat**, Dad, **Barney Baron**, **Charlie Lykes**, and **Frank Cole** used to go to Huron, South Dakota every year in the fall and hunt pheasants. That was a big deal, they had some friends out there, so that year dad told me if you could save up enough money and pay your plane tickets, you can go to South Dakota with us. I was about eighteen years old and I remember another guy named **Todd McDaniels** and I killed enough alligators and sold enough hides to pay for our plane tickets. Of course you had to sell it to a bootlegger or black market hides, but we made enough money off those gator hides to go to South Dakota pheasant hunting.
- P: Let's talk a little bit about when you were in high school, athletics did you participate?
- H: Yes, all of them. In fact I had a football scholarship to the University of Florida, and had a collapsed lung. Back [then] if you got hurt, that was all she wrote. But real [athletic] in baseball, football, and basketball.
- P: Sports were real important to you then?
- H: Yes, they were I guess. Of course I loved the rodeo, the rope, and all this on cattle so it just kind of came along with it. Sports [were] probably more important than grades were back in them days.
- P: Sports were important to Clewiston High school I know.
- H: To this day, it's a great tradition, the winning is over here.
- P: How about your religious development or church participation?
- H: Been a Methodist, I guess I became a member of the church probably when I was about ten years old. [A] little Methodist church, in fact I still go into it now. I'm not a every Sunday goer, but enough the lord and I stay pretty well in touch with one another.
- P: You went to a little rural church?
- H: No, not really didn't go to a rural church. When I was a young man we'd have to go to Labelle once a week to buy groceries and we would always go by the church there. That was a Baptist church if I'm not mistaken.
- P: When did you start to actually work on the ranch?

H: Probably big enough to go with dad, and uncle Marlin and I.

P: When you were big enough to walk?

H: Yes, they'd haul me with them and back in those days they didn't come back and forth home every night. They would stay at these cow camps all over the country, you know the old names **Prairie Pens**, **Limes Lew**, and **Barton Place** just ring bells in my head but they would stay out there, there would be some type of little old lento thing but we'd take our mosquito bars and just camp out there. I don't know if your familiar with mosquito bars but that's a piece of cheese cloth that hangs over and hangs down, and you tuck it into the bottom and crawl in that thing and hope, I'm sure one mosquito would always make it in there with you. Went with them all my life really.

P: You mentioned about when you first learned to drive, but when did you get your first automobile?

H: Well, that was the funniest thing, the first drive I ever did in my life there was a set of cow pens called **Prairie Pens**, and I was probably about five years old or four years old, and dad put the old Jeep in double low and had a spray machine hooked and I drove that thing about 30 miles through those woods. Just following an old truck, when you get the gunney shot, just turn the switch key off, and that's what I did. Like I said, when I was seven years old, I was hauling those kids out to the school bus everyday. There'd been about six or eight of us doing that. I do remember though, when I went to high school and all the kids had fairly nice cars, and Dad and Uncle Marlin give me an old Jeep. That was my mode of transportation.

P: How about your first horse?

H: Gosh, that came along when I really little. Had a lot of good horses. First horse I ever had was little bitty kind of little Florida cracker horse named Jigs and he was kind of speckled and white. He was quite a character.

P: When you graduated from Clewiston High School, did you go anywhere else to further education?

H: I was going to the University of Florida, but I had a collapsed lung. Didn't get there. But then went on to Palm Beach Junior College [now Palm Beach Community College], then went two or three semester at Louisiana State University, but never finished school. I had more mind on socializing than I did... you know what, I think a child back in those days, I pretty well knew what I was going to do. Being off to school, I was wasting Uncle Marlin and dad's money and my time. It was a good three or four years.

P: Do you have any military service?

H: No, none at all. Although, I was in a military school from the sixth, seventh, eighth grade and tenth and eleventh grade, I went to Admiral Farragut Academy in St. Petersburg.

P: When did you marry?

H: The first time I married was in 1966, I guess, and then had the three great children and then got a divorce in about 1982 or 1983. And then married Barbara in 1985.

P: What was your first wife's name?

H: Kathy. Her father was **Father Comfort**, used to be an Episcopal priest at Ft. Myers Beach. In fact, he a dear friend to this day. **Reverend C. A. Comfort**.

P: Then you said you were divorced, and then you later remarried Barbara. And her name was?

H: Barbara Ireland.

P: When you first got married, where did you live?

H: Actually, I lived up on Highway 27, where my oldest son lives now. In fact, I built a home up there in 1966. A little small house and enlarged it over the years, but that was the first house. The only other place I've lived is right here. Although, I take that back, Barbara and I lived in a double wide trailer from 1985-1988, until we built this home.

P: You've observed politics in Hendry County, I guess, all your life. It's a small county and politics is all local and personal in a county this size. Who are some of the political leaders that you remember from earlier times?

H: I guess one of the first leaders I remember. There was three men, that I was real young... politics was on of those kind of things I got interested not to be one, but I felt like we needed to know the politicians to get things. I guess, **Jack Sprat, Charlie Minor, Herlo Bronson, and Elmer Friday**, and **Jerry Thomas** was a senator out of Palm Beach County, was probably the first most influential politicians that I had... and I was about twenty, twenty-one years old. **Skip McFallis** became an awful good family friend and we supported him on the way, all the way to the House of Representatives. In fact, I even supported him

against Bob Graham for the governorship. I remember the last night, or two before the election. Skip called up and said, I need a little more money. And I said, Skip, I might as well giving it to a drunk, you haven't got a chance to meet Graham. But anyway, we stuck with him.

P: You've mentioned U.S. Sugar, and certainly that's been the dominant force in Hendry County, economically, for a long time. Have you had an opportunity to work with them throughout the years?

H: Extremely close. We became a grower... other than just be good friends with them, we became an actual grower of them in 1970. At that time, **John Boy** was president of United States Sugar. Of course, I knew **Mr. Vaughn** real well. Then **Nelson Fairbanks**, I guess, is probably one of my best friends. Nelson came from Louisiana to Clewiston in about 1966. He worked for the **Florida Sugarcane League** then. Off the bat, Nelson and I hit it off real well and hunted and plundered together all our lives. To this day, U.S. Sugar is a very integral part of Hilliard Brothers.

P: How have they been as a corporate citizen of Hendry County?

H: Excellent. Hendry County has been real lucky to have them. They've brought some stability here that a lot of counties wish they had.

P: Lake Okeechobee. What's the health of it these days?

H: From what you hear out there, if you listen to the environmentalists, it's dying. If you listen to the commercial fisherman, it's got as good of a fish population as there is. If you listen to us farmers, it's our lifeblood, that water is. For our crops and stuff. It's a very integral part of agriculture in Hendry County. Without the lake, there wouldn't be any agriculture. Not in the northern part of Hendry County. Now the southern part of Hendry County, where our biggest ranch is, it's mostly all on ground wells, so the lake has nothing to do with that. Still, for a hundred miles around the lake up here, it's very important.

P: The Everglades. What's the condition of it?

H: Well, it looks just like it has since I was a kid. Once again, if you listen to the environmentalists, it's dying. If you listen to any... They're going to spend how many billions of dollars? Eight to twelve billion dollars to try to save the Everglades. It's gone all the way to Washington and everything else. I'm not even going to get into that. Whether it's broken or not right now. It's a political football.

P: Based on what you know and what the plans are, do you think that the proposed plan is a good one? To rehabilitate the Everglades?

H: Vernon, I think there's some real loopholes. I don't know all that much about what they're going to do on the eastern coast of Florida. But they're talking about coming around Lake Okeechobee and putting in 110 deep well injections, and they haven't ever made one work yet. There's going to be 24" holes in the ground, and they are supposed to pump all that water down in there, and bring it back up and not mix with the aquifer and all that. That's almost like science fiction to me, how they're going to make that work. These big retention ponds they're talking about... I don't know... the worst thing that happens to this lake I hear, is evaporation. If you don't have these big reservoirs deep, if you just put shallow water, it's not going to hold water very long. About the time we need it in the spring, the water is going to be gone. You talk to all these experts like **Tom MacVicar and Tony Frederico** and the different folks that we hire. **Phil Parsons** the ones that we think we know what they're doing. And even the Corps [Army Corps of Engineers] colonels like this Joe Miller that just retired and Terry Rice, which is the Corps colonel before. They're all back on our side now, saying this is all bogus and it's not going to work. I'm just wondering... of course, you take Jeb up there running around saying, I'm going to give you so much money. Luckily, he said I'm not going to give it to you until the fed's match us. How much of this is a political football. Jeb Bush is pretty much as good of friends as I've got, but I'll sure be glad when November comes whether his brother is either the president or not and he can go back to being a governor. All they're doing in Tallahassee right now, is not trying to upset the crews. It probably won't work in mine and your lifetime, let's put it that way. Maybe Patty, might, when she's old and gray, see a little something.

P: Water Management Districts. I know you know a lot about them. You and I both served on the Water Management District study commission and tried to put together a piece of legislation that would have done some good and been fair. It didn't get too far. How do the Water Management Districts seem to be functioning right now?

H: I've got a lot of faith in **Frank Fitch** who is running the district now. Frank doesn't personally know anything about this area, but I think he's a bright guy. If he can have half a chance. The supervisor from Lee County, **Trudi Williams**, I think a whole lot of her, she seems to be a hard working... she's gotten into a whirl of trouble over letting all this water out of the lake up here from all of her environmental friends in Lee County, because she apparently flooded her estuaries and killed all of her animals over there. She got in trouble because she made the motion. If she'd never made that motion, no one would have said a word to her. I think she got snuckered a little bit. Now the lake's down right

now and we're all concerned if it will have enough water by spring of next year to supply all of us. The other day, Florida Power and Light, the Seminole Indians, Dade County, Broward County, and Palm Beach County, and **George Wedgeworth** of the sugar growers on the eastern side of the state, **Bernie Lester**, and I, and **Rick Dansler**. Rick works for Ben Hill and I. **Bill Parsons** met with **Frank Finch** on this little thing. They assured us they were going to try to do everything they could to bring this water back up. They thought they were going to get a lot more rain than what they got. So, they let all the water out of the lake. As you remember in '81 and in '89, no water came. They assured agriculture and all the big cities and utilities that they're going to do all they can. One of the biggest allies right now is agriculture and the big cities because we both need that water and there's no hype in there and so we're trying to all work together.

P: Consumptive use permits.

H: They've kind of had them on hold for about two years. They haven't even been bothered. I think this permitting thing is about to get fired back up. I know they're trying to write rules for different basins and all this.

P: What are you principally producing now?

H: Cows. Sugarcane, sugar. Oranges, orange juice. And timber.

P: You're not in the truck farming business at all?

H: No sir. And we're growing rice... we'd like it to be a money making thing, but we're actually putting it on our fallow sugarcane lands to build the soil back. We're actually selling the rice and it goes to Winn-Dixie. There's a plant over in West Palm Beach and we sell the rice to them. It's great to put new nutrients back in your soil.

P: You have any trouble with muck fires?

H: No, luckily we've had enough moisture during the winter and all this, that we haven't had any muck fire. In fact, I don't think this year there was hardly any muck fires.

[End side A1]

P: For your markets, what you produce geographically, where do you market what you produced?

H: The cattle, the last two years have been the best prices in the cattle business that we've had in a number of years. When prices weren't so good though back in the early 1990's, in Florida most Florida cowmen are cow calf operators. They just raise the calf and sell it to stockers that come down here and buy these calves and take them off and put them in feed yards. We kind of got away from that and we've started learning more about the feed yard business, in fact we bought 25% of a feed yard in Dighton, Kansas. We bought into it when it was time when we could get great money here for the calves on the ranch, but what it's done it taught us a lot of stuff. There's two ways we market our cattle, \_\_\_\_\_ right now with the price high, we go back to the old historical times and sell it to stocker buyers that come in here, or feeder buyers that come in here and buy our calves and then they take them and do what they want to with them. The years prior to this when the price was really sorry, we actually took our own calves [and] went up into Georgia, that's where we got the Georgia operation started. We would precondition our calves, meaning take them off their [mothers] and teach them how to eat and get them through the winter on **rye grass** and then we'd go onto grasslands in Kansas and then in the feed yards. Each step cost a little money, but each step put a lot more weight on the calf, so in feed yards there was a good chance of making good money. Now being that they're worth so much money we just soon sell them on the ranch and let someone else worry with that whole step. We have about 6,500 head of calves that we sell, we've actually got on the whole ranch when you count everything like today is about 9,500 head of [mother] cows, 7,000 calves is 16,000 plus 5,000 bulls and replacement heifers so it's almost 18,000 head of cattle trotting around out here right now. That all takes a world of work and a world of looking after. Then the sugar thing, all of our sugarcane is sold to the United States Sugar Corporation. Just this year they've started refining it themselves, and all of us being sold under Pillsbury in the stores. It used to be all sold under Dixie Crystal, but now Pillsbury has started marketing the US Sugar, sugar which is also ours. We've been selling cane to US Sugar since the 1970's. The oranges all go to Tropicana, we are one of Tropicana's pure premium growers, and they are just a wonderful company to deal with. US Sugar [has] a fantastic processing plant right next to us but they don't offer you the kind of money Tropicana does. Then of course the timber, most of that goes to **Meade Coaster Board**, which is a big timber company they're on the National Stock Exchange, that's who we sell our timber to in Georgia. All of our fat cattle in Kansas go to **Excell, IBP**, and farmland. We've started a new thing that might be interesting, a group of cattlemen us being one of them, raise fifty million dollars and went in with the Safeway Food Stores. Safeway actually came to them, and I was asked to join them. They want a piece of meat that they can control from start to finish, almost like **Cargil** does with their chickens, or Tyson does. They want a type of animal that's going to sell good to the public and that they [have] some control over. It's called now **Future Beef Organization** and what it is, it's a joint

venture with Safeway foods and it looks like it's starting in about two years. All of our calves are going to be under this program where they may even tell us what kind of bulls to use, which we don't care. The pretty thing they're guaranteeing us a decent profit on all of these calves no matter what the market is that's going to be the prettiest deal, so that's brand new. Just out there we've got our fingers crossed, we had to put a pretty good chunk of money in it to get started in it, but I think it would be great for the future.

P: Sounds like it stabilized the market.

H: The most independent guy in the world is a cowman. There is not two of them that do the same thing together, and that's been part of our problems too. In the sugar industry there wasn't but 140 cane growers in Florida, but we all got together and we were a very strong voice as you remember in Tallahassee. The cattlemen, they've been just like a bunch of sprayed roaches running around, scattered. This deal with the Safeway Food Stores is now the first time that we can almost control our destiny all the way to the consumer, the housewife, which we are very excited about.

P: How about the labor situation in Hendry County?

H: Excellent, except like today it's hot and we're still trying to pick our oranges. The workers have got other crops coming up in the cooler parts of the Virginia's, and Carolina's. We [have] to some way or other get this orange harvest, over with by I think the fifteenth of June and not drag it out like it is now because the last four weeks is just painful on us and painful on the labor, they're ready to go. It's hard to keep the crews held, but all in all the labor in Hendry County is excellent. There seems to be knock on wood plenty of it, and good dependable help.

P: Do you rely much on migrant labor?

H: Not so much migrant, but we do on seasonal with our sugar operation. We have a huge harvesting company, we harvest cane for the United States Sugar Corporation, Lykes, **A. Dud & Son**, the Indians, **Aleco**; we harvest probably almost three million tons of cane and so we have about 180 employees that we hire the first of October till the end of May. We harvest an awful lot of cane, so we don't call those so much migrants like the pickers in the field, but I suppose they are because a lot of them do go on drive trucks or tractors and goes up the country. A lot of them just draws unemployment for the summer, but we do have a certain amount. All of our pickers that pick our oranges are migrant.

P: Let me read you a quote of **Ernie Powell**, you remember Ernie Powell is a war correspondent from WWII. He visited Clewiston in 1940 and he said, "I'm glad I'm not a sociologist for what I wouldn't know what to make of the Everglades.

Company business makes for a better living, but a rich company is doing it so it is wrong. Individual freedom results in slums and that is wrong too. The government is building migrant camps and that is wrong too.”

H: I agree with everything he said.

P: I'll just leave your reaction to that.

H: I don't have to agree with him. This **Rudy McKay** Field out here, this air strip was built in 1939 I think to train WWII piolets. That's probably when he came here when all of that was happening, because this was a big army air base at one time. In fact, it used to channel world British soldiers over here at Rudy McKay. The federal government came into this country and drained all of the Everglades, put in all of these canals, and then the farmers came in, and the people did on the coast and everything. My wife she's probably a fairly bright lady, all of this in Ft. Myers about the land planning, and the zoning the only way your going to win the war is stopping [them] up near Georgia and stop them from coming down here. Until you do that, your going to have to find homes, cities, streets, and water for all of these people. This water thing, you know Vernon better than I do from St. Petersburg down, those poor people don't ever have any water. If they don't start using some salt water they're going to run out of drinking water period. You were in the legislature, you can probably write two books on how to do right, getting them to do it is something else though.

P: That's the meat in the coconut, and that's pretty difficult to do. Throughout the years the agriculture industry always has problems, they never solve them all. Generally speaking the people in agriculture don't like government at any level. What would be your opinion right now as to what the federal government is doing affects agriculture?

H: When you say that agriculture doesn't like government of any kind.

P: I'm generalizing about the regulatory effects.

H: I think your right, but if it wasn't for the regulatory thing a lot of farmers would have destroyed some stuff they shouldn't have destroyed. You take a family like this that has been here since 1905, in fact I've made this speech fifty times to the **Charles Lees** and **David Gluckmans**, it's a damn good thing I was around or our family was around to save t his piece of land that you've got here, or you can take care of it now. And there is some truth to that, this thing about setting aside wetlands didn't hurt a thing in the world. A good farmer would have never used that wetland to start with because you don't want \_\_\_\_ bogging your tractors down. What gets me burning now is the regulatory people, in the water bank district over there. They mean well, but they are thirty year old people and some

of them not even that old, they have never done a damn thing in their life but went to college and went to work for the government, they have no idea about business, common sense or anything, and they think that they can just turn a valve off and agriculture stops or people quit coming to Florida. Agriculture has some of the best friends in the world like yourself and the legislature to this day. This term limit thing, it's not totally out there yet but we lost a world of friends this year in the legislature, in the Senate and the House. I think in the House alone we're going to get sixty new members, in the Senate thirteen or twenty-five new members. We've got to relearn these people, the **W.D. Childress**, and the **Vernon Peeples** they are not there anymore. They may say oh god here comes them farmers, but you knew we weren't up there just talking [and] that we had a real complaint. This is what worries me as much as anything else, the governors's elections, the Senatorial elections, and all of this stuff cost so much money and these people need so. They promised almost anything to get that money, and when they get there they are almost diluted. It's just like this Bill Nelson, **Bill McCall** race, both guys are super guys but they're not even acting like themselves and I know them both very well. They're both trying to win this thing and it's just a mess. The governor right now, he can't do anything that he's not worried about hurting his brother in his political thing, so he's sitting on his hands to a degree. The folks that are really running Florida are the regulatory people, wether it's in the water management district, the DEP, DNR you name it, it's being run by the regulatory folks. I don't know if I'm beating around the bush answering your question.

P: I think I understand you and you agree, what it's doing is it's destroying the institutional memory of the legislature.

H: Absolutely.

P: And you have to start almost from ground zero, with all the new people. There's a learning curve that takes two or three sessions until you get those people to where they understand what the nature of the problem is.

H: It's going to be like another world up there next year, it really is. Right now, just trying to get someone to become the president of the Senate or the Speaker of the House you remember when you were in there, he would have to serve four or five terms to work his way up there and now we're going to have to get those people up to speed in two terms. What's going to happen? I think our education department is going to suffer, better government for the citizens is going to suffer, and I know agriculture is going to suffer, and the environment may be the only thing that wins out because there is going to be so many crazy laws out there that it worries me.

P: How about foreign competition in the agriculture business?

- H: Sugar, yes bigtime. It's not so much competition, the Europeans, the EQC which is the European blocks. Ten years ago I asked a french man in Washington, why in the hell does your country, you can buy this sugar on the market for next to nothing and why does your country subsidizing you at thirty cents a pound? He said back in WWII we starved so bad that our governments will never allow to starve. They'd rather keep us farmers alive than anything. What he really did say too was there's so many farmers that's in local governments in Europe that has a better leverage on their politicians than what the farmers in America does. Sugar is not really competition, other than it's just these big countries subsidizing their farmers and making where we don't have a good export on sugar. Beef, it looks like China is about to open up and we're exporting beef like crazy. Orange juice is doing pretty good. The GATT [General Agreement on Tariff and Trades] thing, the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] thing I think backfired on us to a degree, especially on the farming part. Although if you talk to someone like Ford Motor Company, it did well because Ford got to send their cars down there, build cheap cars, and supply the folks. The cars don't necessarily come back in, they stay down there. Where sugar and citrus to a degree pours back into the United States against us. I'm real surprised how well cattle are doing right now, but more people are eating beef than they have in years. It's funny how one dietician can make you wealthy, and right now beef is not bad to eat.
- P: Tired of chicken.
- H: Yes, everybody is tired of chicken. The Atkins diets and things like that, have certainly helped the cattle industry.
- P: We've talked about politics to some extent already, but your one of the more involved people in the agriculture business in politics. Not as a participant, but been involved like in the water management district study commission and activities of that kind. As well as actively supporting political candidates in your field, friendly to your goals. How do you feel that, that's going right now?
- H: I thought it was going real good until this term limit hit us this time. Until all of a sudden we hired **Rick Daster** when he failed to become the governor of the state of Florida. **Ben Hill** and I hired him to do [some] lobbying for us, and right now Rick's out there. I've never spent a penny on someone that has done us so much good as Rick has. I don't care what we've sent Rick to do, wether it's been to tackle DOT on a highway problem, or get me a wine licence, or bring **Patrick Smith** in here for a book signing. He's really been a star at the end of the rainbow as far as our company is concerned, I'm sure Ben Hill too. Rick's been spending the last three weeks just trying to go around and meet these new

candidates that [are] running. There was the **Agriculture Coalition** which is all the Agriculture lobbyists, has started I guess ten years ago going around meeting the new candidates that are running. This year they've got their hands full because there are so many, but really trying to pick out the ones that give agriculture a fair shaking at it. We're waiting on that report to come back, the medical associations [are] doing the same thing. They are going around and meeting these young men and women, but you know all in all I think the politician gives agriculture a pretty fair shake. Once you explain things to them, and sit down with them. There [are] a few environmentalists like **David Gluckman** and **Charles Lee** that your never going to change, but other people know them just as well as we do and don't pay a lot of attention to them either.

P: How familiar are you with what's going on in public education in Florida?

H: Other than what I read about, what Jeb's doing with this voucher thing, that our superintendent of public schools just fell over dead in Hendry County. \_\_\_\_ went on a turkey hunting trip here three weeks ago, fifty two years old died of a heart attack. So we just appointed a new man that was his assistant here. I notice there's more private schools coming along. Apparently right now I don't have any children involved in schools but I know it's an expensive proposition, and expensive to businessmen like ourselves just keeping these schools. Hendry County has ten schools over here now. Something else the migrants hurt—rural counties like this because they flood in here during the winter time and you have to put up teachers, and all of them take off. I think education is an armload for anybody.

P: I do want to ask you about anybody that is still active in politics, but Lawton Chiles were you in a situation where you worked with him?

H: Lawton Chiles was probably as good a friend as dad ever had. He would come down every year turkey hunting, and I just thought the world of Lawton. The only thing Lawton ever did wrong and I told him to his face several times, but when he put Buddy McKay over his environmental sector when he was governor was the worst thing he did for the state for awhile. Other than that Lawton was a wonderful guy, he was a great friend of the family, we turkey hunted and deer hunted together and all that.

P: Your political philosophy certainly doesn't follow any partisan political lines. You've been friendly too, and supportive of Democrats and Republicans.

H: You [have] to, two of my best friends [are] Tom Daschle [U.S. Senator from South Dakota] and Tom Harkin [U.S. Senator from Iowa] [who] are Democrats, and actually a little bit liberal Democrats. Also some of the best friends I [have]

are the Republicans like **Tom Delany** and those that are just really good friends to us. We had the Speaker of the House here the other night, and what a genuine guy. There was **Nelson Fairbanks** and myself and \_\_\_\_ and **Ted Davis** [who] is a lobbyist from Washington. He comes down here to the lake fishing, so we had him out here, served him a steak. Actually Democrats help farmers in Washington better than Republicans [do]. Republicans talk about this free trade, well there's no such thing as free trade, it's just whatever government.

You [have] to watch your Republicans pretty well, although Republicans are a little more conservative. The Democrats as far as the farmers concerned on programs are much more helpful, so I think we have to have them both. I've had just as many Democratic friends, it's the man I vote for, I've never voted party.

P: You've certainly been an involved citizen in government and in public affairs to a far greater extent than most people who are involved in agriculture.

H: I was very lucky, I had a father that knew how bad we needed our friends in Washington, and Tallahassee. Probably at the age of twenty-one, twenty-two years old, that's what I was saying about Nelson Fairbanks. Nelson came in and he probably pushed me at first off to Tallahassee and to Washington to lobby and politicking. It was just a way of life that he felt like he just couldn't get up to speed because all the politicians at that time [were] about my age anyway. He couldn't up to speed as fast as I could so I think I have to owe most of [the] early years of getting involvement was from dad. Back in the days when we could bring politicians hunting and fishing we used the ranch for a lot of turkey hunting but some of our best friends that we [have] today were ex-politicians. There were some genuine good folks up there as you know yourself.

P: Those are all the questions that I have for this session, but we want to cover primarily next time about your father and your uncle in the early years.

[End of the interview]