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Interviewee: Joe Hilliard

Interviewer: Vernon Peoples

Date: October 25, 2000

[An unnamed female participant is designated W.]

P: This is an interview with Joe Marlin Hilliard, October 25, 2000, at his ranch home near Clewiston, Florida. Joe Marlin, we did an earlier interview and covered a lot about your early family background and some of the operations in the area that you and your family have been involved in. Today we wanted to expand on that and give you an opportunity to talk about Hilliard Brothers and the various activities that it's involved with and also to give you an opportunity to include anything that we don't ask you about because, certainly, we want to be sure that we have a representative amount of information about the entire operation. First of all, about when was Hilliard Brothers started, and what businesses is it engaged in?

H: The actual Hilliard Brothers, I suppose, started in 1932, and the reason I say that [is] that's actually about when they bought the first land. My grandfather actually, though, started with cattle over in this area in around 1905, but it was kind of a smaller herd of cattle and it wasn't just mainly focused on it. He had some dry good stores and this kind of stuff. But the actual Hilliard Brothers started with my father, Joe A. Hilliard and his brother Marlin Hilliard. Do you want me to back up a little bit and start with how they kind of got together?

P: Sure.

H: They were sixteen years different in age. Uncle Marlin was born in 1895, and Dad was born in 1911. Uncle Marlin worked with his father up until about 1918, from the 1905 time until 1918. I guess Uncle Marlin was ten years old, twelve years old. You know, back in those days, kids started early to work, and that could carry on a pretty responsible deal. Then Uncle Marlin went off to World War I and, according to all accounts, had a pretty rough go at that over there – I guess all soldiers did back in those days fighting that kind of a war – and came back in about 1920 and really just went into the woods to a degree. Granddaddy at that time had three dry good stores that he was trying to keep running, and then cattle, I don't know if there was refrigeration then or ice houses or just what, but a whole steer was hard to deal with, where hogs and smaller animals were easier to deal with. So, Uncle Marlin literally started hauling hogs out of those woods, basically out around Lehigh Acres. They hadn't even got to where the ranch is today, but back in those days around Lehigh Acres and Buckingham. Buckingham, I don't guess they built that airport until 1935, 1936, so this was twenty years almost before then, [or] fifteen years. But Uncle Marlin got there in old S_____ Prairie, out there in the Corkscrew area, and he would trap hogs and

bring them back, and then Granddaddy and him would smoke them and put them in them houses and then sell them in those three stores. The Depression hit in 1928 or 1929, whenever it did, but in June of 1930, Dad was graduating high school, and Granddaddy and all the family was going to see him, and a boy on a motorcycle runs on Granddaddy and killed him. Well, then they had those three stores during that Depression. I don't know just how they dissolved the stores, but we've still got quite a bit of IOUs from them that they owed Granddaddy. I remember back in them days they were taking in animals and giving out flour and things of this nature. When that happened, Dad, as he told me, had been accepted to Emory and wanted to go off. In fact, Dr. Grace, the old doctor in Fort Myers way back, was a good [doctor], and he was saying, Joe, you are a bright young man, you should go to medical school. So, Dad was wanting to do that. Nevertheless, Granddaddy getting killed, no money, well, Emory all of the sudden became the furthestest thing from their minds. Dad headed out in them woods with Uncle Marlin, and they figured, well, the best way to keep the family going, Uncle Marlin had a pretty good herd of cattle built up then. I guess Dad realized at that time that there was no advantage in just running cattle on home. They were just homesteading land out there and no ownership. Apparently, the state of Florida about that time said they would start selling land. **Mr. Colin English** used to be superintendent, was a school commissioner years ago, and he was somehow related to the Englishes now that live over there in Alba. But Colin English was the land agent for the state, and he would let Dad buy 640 acres and he would reserve 640 around that thing. Between 1932 and I would say 1960, they put together 75,000 acres of land. They did this by Uncle Marlin and Dad would drive some steers over to Punta Rassa, load them on the barges or sell them to Lykes Brothers there, and load them on the barges and they'd get about \$1. They'd get actually \$9 a head for those steers, \$6 to \$9, and they could take that money and buy six to nine acres of land with it. It was a pretty profitable thing. Do you want me to continue on to the cow businesses today, or do you want to ask a question?

P: I want to ask you a couple of questions, and then you can continue, of course. They were primarily buying land from the state? Were they buying any from private individuals?

H: Yes, I want to tell you that. Collier. They bought some land from, I guess, **Baron Collier**, Sr. at that time, too. Apparently, he had bought a world of land from the state. They didn't start buying the land until the 1940s from Collier, but the early land was bought off what we call the **Key Rye Road**. It's a highway that lays between Highway 29 and 833 on the north side. That was where the first land that we call **Colin Slough**, and that was the first land we bought. But about twelve years later they bought quite a bit of land from the Collier family.

P: Does some of the land extend out into Hendry County?

H: All of it is in Hendry County and Glades and a little sliver in Palm Beach. But everything is in Hendry County, none in Lee.

P: When you speak of their business activities in the early 1930s during the Depression, which is when they were starting to really accumulate land, they were producing cattle primarily?

H: Only.

P: Cattle only. What were their markets?

H: Their market at that time was Punta Rassa. That was the market for all the cattlemen down here, and what they'd do, they'd literally get on these old cattle drives. Sometimes, Dad would say, they'd start off with 150 head of cattle, and then as they went along, people that trusted them would put their cattle in the herds and finally get to have 300. Dad's and Uncle Marlin's would be marked and this one. It was a deal that they may start off just with their cow crew, being they were a little further out there, [but] by the time they got to Fort Myers or to Punta Rassa, there'd be thirty cowboys.

P: The cattle that were shipped from Punta Rassa, then, were shipped where?

H: Cuba and Tampa. A lot of cattle were going to Cuba then. I don't know why it was, but Cuba was really needing meat, and this was it. In fact, they used to barge these cattle, a herd, down to Key West, reload them on barges and go to Cuba with them. But the market and the money was in Tampa. I think at these places, when they'd get these cattle to over there to Punta Rassa, it was apparently a huge facility at that time. Dad said there were probably over 100 acres worth of pens, so if you remember what 100 acres looks like, and there'd be cow buyers there, working for Lykes or working for the Spanish or the Cubans and all that, and they would sell to them. These were all grass-fed steers.

P: What were the breeds that they were producing?

H: Just a Spanish, kind of a cracker breed of cattle. It kind of had the Spanish influence. I think they had probably some Shorthorn and **Red Devon**. They hadn't been exposed to the **Brahmers** as they are today, the Brahmer breed. I bet a big steer wouldn't weigh over 600 pounds.

P: The pasture that they used would have been unimproved?

H: Native range. But remember back in those days it looked a lot different than

today. Today we got the forestry service that won't let wildfires go. Well, back in those days those old timers kept this country burnt off every spring, and that just kept lush grass, and there wasn't hardly any oak trees or any pine trees. We got pictures of back in the 1940s out where I was born at **Gun Shy**, which is on the ranch, and you can look for miles across that country. Today, with the way we've managed our timber and everything and took the fires out, we got oak trees as big as this cabin. Hell, back in those days you could not find an oak tree. It was a whole different world. Even around Lehigh Acres they used to burn that stuff off, and it'd come running into Fort Myers and the whole city would have to turn out to try to put the fire out sometimes. But all that country, you know how that thing get them little sorry scrubs out there and myrtles? It was nothing like that. Apparently, Vernon, they generated a pretty good wild grass.

P: About how many cows per acre?

H: Don't have a clue. Also, there was no drainage back in those days, so they grew a lot of marsh grasses and a lot of **maiden cane** and **pira grass** and things that were native to this area. But I would bet in that time of year, probably in the summertime you could've run one cow to ten acres, and the wintertime you'd have to drop that back to one to maybe twenty or thirty. Today, though, to give you an idea, we run a mama cow and her calf to three acres today on the ranch. That is our loading [or] stocking capacity today. That's highly fertilized, all improved, today.

P: Did they shift them from pasture to pasture back then?

H: No. In fact, I think until the 1930s it was all open range, and you would just mark and brand your cattle. That's what I'm saying. There would probably be six or eight ranches would gather cattle together, and they'd all go in there and mammy their calves up, meaning they'd pick out the mother and the calf together because they would stay together, and then this guy would part his out over here and that kind of stuff.

W: How long would it take to get the cattle down to Punta Rassa?

H: I would imagine it would be, what, a ten-day trip probably, an eight-day trip, from out here in the middle of this country. It would be about eighty miles, so ten, twelve miles, fifteen miles a day.

P: During the Civil War from the Fort Myers area to Savannah was thirty days to drive a herd of cattle.

H: Yes. In fact, back in those days my great-grandfather used to deliver cattle to Jacksonville to the Confederate Army up there in Jacksonville, and then I think

there was another group of cowboys who would take them on. That was mandatory; you didn't have a choice. You had to deliver them cattle.

P: There was some advantage to a cattleman in Florida during the Civil War: in producing cattle, they were exempt from military duty as long as they producing cattle.

H: Dad was exempt from World War II? He got an agriculture deferment in World War II. The only thing they did, they confiscated his airplane. He had a little Piper Cub, and they confiscated that, but he was exempt from World War II, from an agricultural deferment.

P: Go ahead.

H: No, no. I think your questions stimulate my answers.

P: All right. Branding of cattle. Now, still talking about the early 1930s or that period of time. Did all the cattlemen brand their cattle, and was there any problem with altering brands?

H: I think there was. Absolutely, they all branded their cattle. They marked them and branded them, as we do today. We still mark all of our cattle with the same marks we were using back then. We still brand them with the same brands. But, yes. You know, there was an element of criminals out there. Whether they were stealing cars or stealing cows, they were stealing. There has been two or three stories, nothing that I could ever prove, but tales of Uncle Marlin and them catching people doing things. Hell, the law enforcement wasn't around, so they just kind of took care of it themselves. I think a cow thief and a horse thief back in those days, think, a horse thief stole your means of transportation, and that was a pretty serious offense. Maybe they were a little more lenient on a cow thief, but I don't think many of them made it to the courts.

P: Joe Marlin, I just recently heard of another reason for protecting your horse, and that was until man learned to ride a horse, the genetic pool was limited to about one mile, but once they learned to ride a horse it was increased to twelve miles.

H: Sure. I think you're right. If you had to walk six or eight miles, you weren't much for breeding when you got there. You wore out.

P: The early 1930s was, of course, the time of the economic Depression, not only in Florida but in the country, so it was a tough time to start any business, and certainly it was tough in the cattle business. One of the problems that developed during that period of time had to do with cattle ticks.

H: Fever ticks. Yes, absolutely.

P: What do you know about that?

H: I know quite a bit about it. There was a fence built down where the road goes to Immokalee from Clewiston, and it was called the Deer Fence. All the cattle, all the deer that were north of that fence were slaughtered because they had carried this fever tick, all the hogs, deer and everything, and this fence was put up. In fact, there is still some resemblance of it there now. But it was put up, and it was about ten feet tall, made of what we call hog wire, woven wire. Then the state paid a world of cowboys. In fact, Dad always said they were the sorriest creatures in the world that went and worked for the state, but all they did was rode around and shot deer. That was their job. They'd kind of run around in posses of eight or ten guys, and they'd hunt deer all over this part of the country. Then, of course, the ranchers, we built all these dipping vats that the state came along here about six years ago and tried to put us all in jail if you had a dipping vat on your land. Anyway, they built all these big concrete troughs, and they would dip all these cattle, I think every ninety days. They used nothing but strychnine in the water, and it was poisonous as it could be. The cow literally would jump off in it and go plum out of sight. It was about twelve feet deep. As I was a young man, we still used the one at **Dinner Island**. We did it to just get rid of normal parasites. But the fever tick thing was, I think, in the late 1940s. Then you had screw worms, too, which was just as horrible as the fever ticks, but the fever ticks would just kill everything. The cattle would just go into a fever and, as Uncle Marlin and Dad told me, just go to shaking and fall over dead. But they finally eradicated the fever ticks with the dipping and the killing of the deer and all this stuff. Then the screw worms, you know of course, came along in that same period of time. We eradicated the screw worms in the early 1960s, and the way we eradicated the screw worms is **Doyle O'Conner's** people got together with the U. S. D. A. and literally released sterile flies. They buy these **blow** flies, or raise them, and they'd run them through some type of radar detector. It would sterilize them, and they released them. The fly is like a mosquito; it doesn't live all that long. They were releasing millions of flies. In fact, the big old DC3 would go over us, and they'd be throwing out little boxes like a wooden matchbox, a big kitchen matchbox. It was full of holes, and apparently when it hit the ground in a day or two, it would kind of dissolve and these flies would all be released. They were breeding all the female flies, but there was no reproduction. That was the way they eradicated the screw worms.

W: And it worked?

H: It worked. Absolutely. It eradicated all the screw worms. We don't have a bit of that problem anymore.

- P: Were you producing or was your family producing any cattle for local consumption?
- H: Yes. Well, not local. Not out in, like, Fort Myers. But until the early 1960s, we kept raising big grass-fed steers, and when the Cubans showed up in 1958 and 1959, they weren't used to this corn-fed meat, and there was such a market for these big grass-fed cattle. There were five packing houses in Miami – **Logan Godfrey**, Economy, Federal, National and Captain. They were all in Miami, and they bought 90 percent of all these big fat steers. We'd graze them right here on the grass. Them rascals would be three-year-old steers weighing 1,200 pounds, and we'd haul them down there. We were getting as much for those cattle as we were for feedlot cattle out West. So, that was a real heyday from about 1960. That thing kind of went south. Actually, what happened is the Cubans got more sophisticated, so they got eating fat meat. The E. P. A., they put such a restriction on the little old slaughter plants, they couldn't keep themselves up to it. But about 1975 probably they stopped slaughtering these cattle.
- P: When your family was trying to build up the ranch and had land, did they try to do it all with cash or did they borrow money?
- H: No, they never borrowed any money. We never borrowed a dime of money until I come along. Really, Uncle Marlin and Dad would not buy anything. I remember 1970, we went into the sugarcane business out on the sand, and I went over to **Ted Evans** at the First National Bank in Fort Myers, and a young man named **John Young**, who is an attorney here in town, and we borrowed \$250,000. Uncle Marlin thought that I had lost my mind. I told him then, Uncle Marlin, when you haven't got anything, you got to borrow it. So, we started a little old cane patch out there. But Dad and Uncle Marlin never borrowed a penny until I came along. That's nothing I'm proud of.
- P: It's not untypical in Florida in the cattle business that people operated out of cash and didn't borrow money. Probably the first money that was loaned on cattle only was probably in Punta Gorda. **Luther Coon** was the president of the Punta Gorda state bank, and he was in the cattle business in Glades County, and he believed in loaning money on cattle.
- H: Well, you know, I think I told you a lie. Right up there on that wall there, ya'll come here and lookit. Let me get the date. [Tape interrupted.] This might be something ya'll want to put a picture of. In 1913, my grandfather borrowed \$5,000 from the First National Bank in Fort Myers, and **Ted Evan's** father was part of it. Look at that. This brand we're still using today; it's called a Six ____.
- P: What was the collateral?

H: The cows. It says they bought 300 cattle. My granddad borrowed \$5,000 to buy 300 head of cattle. **Frank Carson** – I don't know Frank Carson, don't even know where he's at, where he lives. Did you remember a Frank....?

P: He lives in Fort Myers.

H: Fort Myers? Okay. Apparently, Frank owned the cattle. He had one year, had to pay it back on April of 1914. Apparently, he must have paid it back because we're still in the cow business. Isn't that neat? Executed and _____. Let's see, the people at the bank then: **Langford** was president, **Towes** was vice president, **Persley** was the cashier, and **E. H. Evans** was the assistant cashier.

P: Now, Towes was in the cattle business and the cattle shipping business. He owned a number of ships that would haul the cattle.

H: Now, look here. The capital in the bank that apparently it had to put down was only \$50,000. Dad got 10 percent of it. That was a big loan, wasn't it?

P: That experience is not unique.

H: No, that's really rare. That was rare, and I bet you they were all knocking on their knees when he borrowed that money. He must've had pretty good collateral somewhere else.

P: Except that there's at least one person on that board who knew the cattle business.

H: Well, that was good, yes.

P: That had to help.

H: Seriously, though. No, Dad and Uncle Marlin. I tell you what. Dad and Uncle Marlin, they lived the most simple damn life in this world when they were young men, Uncle Marlin actually until he died. Before the day is over, I'd like to tell you a little bit about his personal life because it's really unique. But Dad and Uncle Marlin and Mother and I, we would go to town once a week from out there at Gun Shy where I was raised. They'd buy all the supplies, and then we'd go back to the ranch. I mean, it was a treat to get a darn piece of ice cream or candy or anything. Today, if you got a fifth of liquor. It was that touch and go. But really lived frugal. I never did remember Dad or any of us having new cars or anything until we actually got moved to Clewiston around 1955, before televisions, of any kind of splurge in their life came along.

P: It was a tough lifestyle.

H: There was no money. You know, looking back, I guess you look at the Lykes family and the Colliers and the people who came down here and bought this all. They were a whole different mentality from the normal folks because Dad and Uncle Marlin started buying this land, if Uncle Marlin hadn't had that little old herd of cattle, although he did go get it and put it together, they would have not ever been able to buy this land. There was a guy named **Cleatis Manns** who used to work for **Olee Co.**, and he was the same age as Dad. He always said when he was a young man he'd make fun of Dad because Dad would go to La Belle, buy up some Vienna sausage and sardines and go over and eat on the other side of the river. He said, I'd go buy beer with my money. He said, I'm a little cow form for **Olee Co.** and look at Joe Hilliard. I mean, he was making that comparison that they both had the same kind of money.

P: You mentioned open range, and certainly that was what existed in Florida for many, many years. The fence law started being passed, as you indicated, in the 1930s, but there were local laws. It wasn't until Fuller Warren was governor that there was a statewide no fencing law that was enacted. Do you recall or know of how the fencing law would have affected your family's operation or cattle operations in general?

H: I think you took the big ranches like Uncle Marlin and Dad, they wanted to be fenced. They could see the protection of those fences. I think there was more people against them fencing their lands than there were for them because they would cut off transportation roads, they would do a lot of things. I don't remember hearing Dad and Uncle Marlin saying there was a lot of fussing and fighting over fences. I think it was just kind of something that just started happening, and maybe the sheriffs and all that, kind of the county commissioners, said it makes more sense to fence these ranches than it does to leave them open.

P: Another contributing factor, of course, with the development of the automobile, under the open range laws, if an automobile hit a cow, the owner of the automobile was responsible for the cow.

H: So, the fences at least kept the cows off the road.

P: That is correct.

H: And who knows? It might have come along where the county or the state went to fencing their little roads, and then the cow men would just hook on to it somewhere and fence his pastures. You know about out West? Ya'll heard about that, the fencing. I mean, they fought the gun battles over that one. I never did hear Dad and Uncle Marlin talk about anybody really objecting to the fencing here.

P: When did they start improving the pasture to any extent?

H: I know exactly because I was the guy that actually started doing it. What we would do in the summertime – this is comical, now – we actually in 1952 got us a tomato farmer named **Cecil Granger**. That farmer, and Dad and Uncle Marlin crop-shared with him, and what we'd do is we would come out there [and] we started at **Dinner Island**, which is a southern division of the ranch. That was in 1952, and we would start farming that country. So, he farmed along until about 1958. The county agent at that time, I think, was **Frank Polhill**, maybe, or **Reed Burgess** – I am not sure which one. Maybe Frank. Anyway, they started coming out with a new grass called pangola. We got a seed bed of them on. In the summers, I wouldn't help them gather cattle; I'd gather up all my classmates from high school, and we would plant grass on the ranch. We started planting improved grass on the ranch in, probably, 1957. 1956. Heck, we'd plant all summer long on that grass. We'd plant whatever that farmer farmed the year before. We would just move that farmer to another 300 acres every year. Then I'd gather all my classmates, and we'd go plant that grass. In fact, we lived in an old big barn down at Dinner Island, about sixteen of us old kids. I mean, we'd move in, roll in there on Sunday night and plant grass all week and leave on Friday nights, coming back home. That's the way we planted all that, and that's when we started planting Dinner Island. Then we got larger and larger. We still planted. Then we started later on throwing this same pangola grass when the farmer on his spring crop laid his tomatoes. In other words, we would lay it down in the beds, and he'd come on and put **fertilizer** this last time and had some covering disk. They would plant the grass the same time. Then with the farmer was through, we'd bust the beds, and the field would be planted. So, we did a lot easier in later years. Then, finally, pangola grass, it needed a lot of fertilizer and it needed pretty good water, and they came out with Argentine Bahia. Everybody went to Argentine Bahia, and today we're planting **Tiptin Nine**, which is a new Bahia, and so that's the way. Come over here and have a seat, Joe. This is my son, Joe Marlin Hilliard. Vernon, Joe, used to be a congressman.

P: State legislator.

H: State legislator, state representative from Charlotte County, and **Patty is Dr. Boardman's** wife. They're wanting to know some stuff about the company.

H: Anyway, the sugar deal and all, other than we just planned it and started forty years ago, it has totally changed up to mechanization now from the old ways we used to do it, but it is basically being grown the same way. New varieties still take fertilizer. It does not take near the water it used to take. We have got more drought-hardy varieties out, but it is not much changed.

P: But you essentially grow cane now without benefit of migrant laborers.

- H: Well, offshore laborers. There is a difference. Migrant laborers are really the people here in the United States who travel, like, from here to the peanuts and apples and that stuff. But, yes, we do not use what they call the British West Indies workers, BWIs.
- P: Now, Hilliard Brothers is engaged in providing services for other people who grow sugarcane?
- H: Right. We harvest for United States Sugar Corporation, **LEEKO**, **A. Dunson**, **Lykes Brothers**, the **Perry** family, the Seminole Indians – we harvest about 1,000 acres for them. I guess that covers it. We run one of the best subcontractors in harvesting units. We harvest about 38 percent of all of U. S. Sugar's cane, that they harvest.
- P: You mentioned about doing work for the Seminole Tribe. Have the Seminoles been friendly partners in growing the sugarcane?
- H: Yes. The Seminoles have not given us a minute problem. You know **Dexter Lehtinen** works for the Seminoles, but he really has not been a problem at all to Agriculture. He is a pretty good buddy, and the Indians are good. The Indians are into cattle and the citrus and the fish farming and the sugar and their casinos. I don't know hardly any rift between the farmers and Indians, over water or anything. They are kind of a docile bunch. Really, most of their managers are white, that we deal with, and so you don't really get to meet an Indian very often. They are just happy to go about their merry way.
- P: I know Dexter. He and I were in the legislature [together].
- H: Well, he is as crazy as a loon, but he has been good for us. He hates the environmentalists much worse than he hates me. He dislikes **Charlie Lee** more than me. Let's put it that way. [Tape interrupted.]
- P: We talked about sugarcane some. Is there anything I should have asked you about that which I did not?
- H: Vernon, I don't think so because it really is simple. I mean, you grow it, you burn it, and you cut it. There is a lot that goes on it, and there is a lot of political ups and downs and turmoil in the sugar industry, not the industry itself but, as you know, through the environmentalists and Save the Everglades and all that stuff. I think Sugar got some super bad raps. Sugar is coming back around now, getting a little more squeaky clean and doing a real good job. In fact, they have lowered their phosphorus discharge and all that in the Everglades. Thank goodness none

of our personal lands, you know, we all drain to the Caloosahatchee and out to ya'll and Fort Myers. If there is anything with the Sugar, it provides this whole underneath that lake jobs for a world of folks, and it keeps these little old towns going, and without it, I guess it would be a damn ghost town down here in Belle Glade, Clewiston, Pahokee, South Bay, and Moore Haven. It is kind of a straightforward thing: when Kennedy and Castro got to fighting, that is when we got in the sugar business.

P: Okay. Let's talk about the citrus business.

H: We started that in 1984. Simply, when North Florida got froze out, we decided to go in the citrus business. To other folks' hardship was our gain. Hendry County today has the most trees and the most oranges and the most acres. It has surpassed Polk County now in oranges because it just simply was warm, and they came this way. A world of cow pasture got devoted into citrus, so we lost a lot of cow pastures [because] it went into citrus. It was not necessarily highly productive cow pasture land, but it still changed the landscape of Hendry County quite a bit, [and] Collier, Lee a little, Glades a lot. All took up where the North Florida counties up around the Ocala/Haines City area were. But Citrus is going through its upheavals right now. Citrus prices are lower today than they have been in twenty-five years and simply because there are just so many oranges in Brazil and Florida. It is just a glut on the market. Then they have got this canker thing right in the middle of us right now that their destroying groves around here left and right. Knock on wood, we do not have any canker today, but **LEEKO**, they found a big spot in there the other day, the Collier family has got a world of canker down there on them. It is actually mostly showing up in grapefruits, but some Valencia and some Hamlin, but mostly grapefruit are the most susceptible to it. In \$0.60 a pound solid, you don't make much money, but citrus used to be a pretty genuine...you could make \$1,000 an acre after you got the groves up to about ten years old. But you don't make nothing those first ten years, so you have to have some staying power to get in it.

P: How is your citrus operation divided in terms of species?

H: We were about 65 percent Valencia and about 35 percent Hamlin. Hamlin is the early variety, and Valencia is the late. We sold a large tract of land to **LEEKO** of 7,500 acres here, back two years ago. With that, we sold most all of our Hamlins, so we are just now 100 percent Valencia, and we got some grapefruits, but mostly all Valencia oranges.

P: When you produce it, what do you do with it?

H: We sell it to Tropicana. We have had a contract with Tropicana since 1989, and it goes on until 2005, and we have got a floor and all that. We are fortunate we

don't get these \$0.60 prices out there now. We have got a floor that is much better than that, so we are still making a pretty good living off our groves. But, boy, in general it is a sight. I would say 50 percent of the growers in Florida have these floors, so they are not going to be on the cash market, but the cash market is hard for right now. Of course, citrus, you have to spray it a lot. The trees, the oranges, there are a lot of little bugs that get on them and all kinds of different diseases that can get on them besides the canker, but the canker is really a serious thing right now.

P: What is the world market now in citrus?

H: Glutted. Brazil has got so much, and Brazil, something that is a spinoff of that, if gas prices were not so high, Brazil also is absolutely the largest producer of sugar, but they're using their sugar to make ethanol, which runs in their cars. If it weren't for that, they'd be exporting a world of sugar and they could be hurting us in the sugar industry, too. Brazil is the old sleeping john. I mean, it is so agriculture, it could run anybody out of the cow business, the sugar business. The worst thing about Brazil, it doesn't cost them much and they got the cheap labor, but they don't make great production per acre down there. Now, they're ate up with canker, too, but they're just living with it.

P: How has NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] affected the citrus business?

H: So far, not at all, but here before long, it is going to start affecting because I think after seven years or eight years, the tariff starts coming down a little bit, and that enables countries like Brazil and all the other countries that bring their oranges into the United States, it'll pay a less tariff on them. So, it's going to affect. If we start a relationship with Cuba and get some American technology down there in Cuba and start producing better oranges, you know, Cuba has a world of grapefruits. Of course, that's all you need is few more grapefruits. Grapefruits are terrible. Citrus is really on its knees right now. Cow prices are real good, sugar prices are okay, and citrus is terrible.

P: With a mix, then, you are able to do all right.

H: We do okay. But it is a mix, and I will tell you it is a constant thing. These long term contracts and all that didn't just happen; they went by sweat and blood. We were very fortunate enough to have enough foresight to get into those long term contracts, and we were very fortunate that there was some opportunity out there to get them back when we got them. Right now, you couldn't get a darn long term. I am concerned what we are going to do in 2005 because they're just giving year and year extensions. Now, but we do have a clause in our contract that if neither one of us breaks it our contracts will just continue to roll over each year.

P: How dependent are you on migrant labor in the citrus business?

H: Pretty much so right now on picking. Every one of us are. They have not developed a mechanical machine that's worth a damn yet. They got a lot of them out there, but they will tear up your trees more than they will pick your oranges. In fact, if the citrus industry has one real problem other than price, it is the migrant labor, although there has been plenty of them, but it sure gets hairy around here in June and July when the peaches and that stuff start coming in upcountry, because it's hot here and them boys just as soon take off and get where it's cool, and the apples on up. So, migrant labor is a big concern. There are plenty of them if they will just stay here.

P: Hilliard Brothers is a large agricultural operation, and certainly you have been very successful, but what do you see for the future of Agriculture in Florida?

H: Well, personally, we're not getting any bigger, and I think there are going to be opportunities. All segments of what we're in are going to have their ups and downs. I think Cattle is getting more sophisticated, and markets are opening up where they're wanting a positive stream of meat and more high quality meat. So, I think we're getting into some niches there. In sugar, I think it's going to just rock along like it is. Like I said, Cuba is going to play a big part in it. If we open up trade with Cuba – although Cuba is selling all their sugar now, to somewhere – the only thing that worries me a little bit is they'd get better technology over there, and Americans would start dumping money into it. Then, I would imagine some of the old families that used to be in Cuba... Of course, most of them all died off down there, just young children left, and, I mean, they'd love to go back to Cuba, but they wouldn't add anything to Cuba. But when Castro shut that thing down, a world of good sugar, people who ran the mills and stuff left. Castro is still struggling over worn out mills and no parts, so the sugar industry is not near up like it is. The citrus industry is the same way down there. Oranges, everybody says it's going to be all right, but I will tell you what, I don't see Brazil producing any less and I don't see us producing any less. I don't know what the hell is going to happen. I guess you've read that **Bob Crawford** has opened up, and China has now started taking some citrus products. Of course, they're probably only taking ten drums, but if each one of those people drink a glass a day, there would be more citrus going there than any we are producing now. So, world markets, I think, is the answer. Try to get these countries that have some money that can buy this stuff. But I think agriculture is going to be tough right on. I mean, it's been tough. The corn farmers aren't making any money right now. Tomato growers and all that is up and down. It's a tough road out there.

P: It's always a gamble.

H: Always a gamble. Like I said, our company started as a small way in that little

development up there in North Carolina. See how that goes. But in the stock market, we've been real fortunate. We've put a lot of money in the stock market, and we've made a lot of money, but that rascals acting funny right now, too.

P: And you haven't made any money until you sell the stock.

H: You're just like dad. That's exactly. Dad used to get so irritated with me. We'd make all this money on GE on paper, or Dell or something, and he'd say, hell, son, let's sell. Barbara is the same way a little bit, and all the stock brokers say, oh, no, don't sell, hang on. Well, I remember I had some **Berkshire Hathaway** which went to \$80,000 a share here back last spring. I had ten shares of that stuff, so I had \$800,000 worth of Berkshire Hathaway. I am not telling this to be [proud]. But I bought it all for **\$430,000**, so I had made \$400,000. Today Berkshire is **\$580,000**, and I've lost that whole thing. I'm still not as bad off as I could be but just left \$400,000 on the table and watched it all the way back down to zero. I was smart enough to sell quite a bit of GE here a while back and got out of that and then re-bought it all right back at a good price. Yeah, if you don't sell the damn stuff, what good is it? **Rusty Whitley**, one of our accountants, they've got almost their whole retirement plan on Dell Computer. It was \$52 something here six or eight weeks ago. Today it is \$26.

P: You shouldn't mind taking some risk in the stock market. You take enough in the agriculture business.

H: Isn't that it? You know, and all these accountants say, oh, no, if you sell, you're going to have to pay capital gains taxes. Well, hell, if I'd have sold that Berkshire, I would've paid the capital gains and still had a pocket full of money. So, I'm dumb when it comes to stocks. I mean, I made plenty of money, but I still got them all.

P: Well, that finishes the questions I have, but do you have anything else you want to include in this interview?

H: No. I don't know what ya'll want to do, if this is our last interview or not, but I'd like to get through here and give you some visual, take a tour of the ranch.

P: That would be great.

[End of Interview.]