

IRC 6

Interviewee: Mr. Cox, "Doc" Charlie McClure

Interviewer: Unlisted

Date: Unlisted

I: It is always a pleasure to talk to pioneers, you might call them, and I think we have two very interesting pioneers of the Indian River area. Anyone who has lived in Vero Beach and Indian River County as long as Mr. Cox and Doc Charlie McClure as long as they have been here, you have to call them pioneers. Gentlemen, which one has lived here longer? Doc, when did you come to Indian River County?

M: February, 1916.

I: About how large was Vero Beach at that time.

M: There was not any Vero Beach to speak of. It was not **incorporated**.

I: What did you call it?

M: Well, we called it Vero.

I: And the beach was not added until quite a while after that, was it?

M: The beach was there but there was not anyway to it, except by boat.

I: Did the family bring you in with them?

M: I was single when I arrived here.

I: And from then on, it was a case of you getting started in business. You have been in business here quite a while, haven't you?

M: Fifty years. I celebrated my 50th Anniversary.

I: You got a nice recognition from....

M: The Chamber of Commerce, a plaque, fifty years of service.

I: Right. Do you know how many businesses there were in Vero Beach at that time?

M: This side of the track, there was the bank, the drug store, the general store, and a meat market.

I: Have you always been in the drug store business? Is that what you started with?

M: Here, yes.

- I: And where was your drug store at that time?
- M: Just back where the bank building is now. The drug store was part of the bank building.
- I: Let's ask Mr. Cox. When did you come to Vero Beach?
- C: June 1, 1930.
- I: And it was not much bigger in 1930 than it was in 1916, was it?
- C: Well, yes. I would say it was quite a bit larger then. We had the Main Street there, and all the buildings were filled up with businesses of various kinds. I would say there were around, maybe, 3,000 people.
- I: And where did you come from to Vero Beach?
- C: Fort Pierce.
- I: That was a pretty good sized community at that time, wasn't it, Fort Pierce?
- C: Yes. It was not twice as big as Vero but almost.
- I: At one time, was there some question about Fort Pierce being the county seat which would include Vero Beach? The boundary lines were overlapping back in those days, were they not?
- C: I think the county was created in 1924 or 1925. I am not sure which.
- I: But in 1925, there would not have been any question. When you came to Vero Beach, it definitely was Indian River County then.
- C: That is right, yes.
- I: Do you attribute the economic growth in the downtown area—I use the word downtown area because there was not anything else then—to the growth of agriculture here?
- C: Yes, largely, and tourists.
- I: Was there much tourist business at that time?
- C: Yes, there was quite a bit.
- I: Let's talk in terms of relationship, 1966 or 1967. Would you say there proportionately as much tourism back then as there is today?

- C: No. I think we have more tourists now than we had at that time. In percentage of population in tourists, the town and county has grown, and I do not think there is any bigger percent of tourists compared with the population now than it was then.
- I: Doc Charlie, if the tourists came in those days, did you see many tourists before 1920?
- M: Not before 1920. There were people going and coming to look at the land and buying the land and settling back in those days, and they were digging these canals and draining the country.
- I: Making it fit to walk on?
- M: That is right.
- I: When would you say that tourism became a factor in our economy then? 1935?
- M: No. I would say around 1921 or 1922.
- I: That early? Alright. Then, they demanded and helped call for the demand of increasing retail establishments?
- M: Correct.
- I: Who were some of the pioneer retailers when you opened up?
- M: **T. H. Dean**, Tom Dean, **Bill Allyson**, **W. A. Mayor**, **T. E. Junt**. They were the earlier...
- C: **Paul Simmons**. He was here, wasn't he?
- M: **No**.
- I: Can you name some of the following generations, and can you follow a few of those down the line in what has come of them since then? I know Allyson is still in business. How about some of these others? Do they still have people in this area?
- M: Mayor has a grandson who is here but not in the retail business.
- I: Let me ask Mr. Cox. When you came to Vero Beach, were you a funeral director at that time?
- C: Yes sir.
- I: And you had made that profession before coming here?

C: That is right.

I: And stayed with it and watched the growth of the area. Well, name a few more of these retailers as we began to build Vero Beach, as they say, down Main Street.

C: Well, Paul Simmons was here. **Langbeans**, they have been here quite a long time. **McFarland** at what is now the **Grant** Furniture store. Buckingham Wheeler, they were in the insurance business. They have been here a long time, a lot longer than I have.

I: These are interesting developments in the economic growth of the community. Then, as we continued to grow, we needed a bank. What banking facilities did you use?

M: We had a bank in 1916 when I came here.

I: In 1916?

M: The Farmers' Bank.

I: Was that part of the Barber Estate at that time?

M: No. It was owned by a group of local people. **Louis Harris** was the president, and **Mr. William Atkins** was the cashier, on the corner right where it is now. It was a little one-story brick building.

I: This is very interesting. You soon became able to buy just about all products and services that you find today to a large degree about when? By 1930?

M: I will tell you how we started out. I got my ice cream from Jacksonville in a tub on the train, and I got my ice from Fort Pierce on the train, delivered to the store in 300-pound blocks.

I: Wow. Was there much truck service through here?

M: There were not any trucks. We did not know what a truck was back in those days.

I: I suppose you had to rely a good deal on supplies by train, too?

C: Everything came by train when I first came here.

I: Including the tourists.

C: Yes.

I: Times have changed.

C: Indeed.

I: That is sort of a backhanded slap at the railroad. I imagine rail service was rather crowded, was it not? It was the principle mode of transportation, so it had to be crowded, was it not?

C: Yes, it was crowded. You would go down to the depot there when the tourists were going home, and there would be lots of folks there. In the spring, why, there would be a lot of them getting off, and it was a problem to get reservations lots of times for folks.

I: Speaking of the tourism element in our economy, did the season last the same way it does now? I mean, we normally look at the greatest influx of tourism here about the first week in January through Easter. Did that used to be the season, too?

C: I think so. I think that is about right.

I: Doc?

M: The tourists mostly lived on the beach around the Rio Mar Club. They had cottages over there, and they would have their meals in this club. We very seldom ever thought of them.

I: Well, how did they get there?

M: By boat. Across the river by boat.

I: Was this a commercial venture? Was there a commercial venture carrying people back and forth across the river?

M: They had their own private boats. The Rio Mar Club had one. To get to the beach, you usually used night fishing boats that they ran the fishing business with, across the river in a boat to go to the beach at the old Coast Guard station.

I: And where was that located?

M: Up at Bethel Creek.

I: It is amazing what a newcomer such as myself can glean.

M: You know where there is a rail over _____?

I: No.

M: Bethel Creek.

I: Well, what do you know about that. And, as the tourism came in, you say people began to buy land. Of course, this would have been for the agriculture here.

M: The agriculture built the town.

I: At the time you were here, who were some of the agriculturalists?

M: **Eli Walker** was the leading one, and **Judge Andrews**, who later lived in Fort Pierce.

I: When you say agriculture, at that time, it was almost 100 percent citrus, was it not?

M: No. Beans and tomatoes. Small crops. If a guy had ten acres, he was really in business. I have seen them ship beans by parcel post.

I: The farms themselves, then, were not of large acreage?

M: No, small, five to ten acres.

I: Since then, it has changed.

M: In **Royal Park**. I have been over there, and people were raising beans and tomatoes.

I: Were either of you fellows land speculators at that time when you came to Vero Beach in the 1920s and 1930s?

C: I was just about as broke then as I am now.

I: Doc, did you ever dabble in real estate, as the saying goes.

M: I dabbled, but I did not mix my drug business with it, so I did not lose.

I: So, you came out all right.

M: Yes.

I: The big depression of 1929, did it affect the economy here substantially?

M: No. It did not affect me. There were not enough people here to be affected much. Well, the banks closed, but did it come uptown, I would say no.

I: Did you see much out of town shopping at all? How did you get from here...I

imagine U. S. 1 route was a dirt road?

C: Not when I came here. The old highway was the main road between here and anywhere south. It was in about the same shape it is in now, rough and needed repairing, but 1 was not in existence at that time when I came here.

I: The principle thoroughfare was on the location of Old Dixie, was it not?

C: That is right.

M: Old Dixie came right through town right by the Indian River _____.

I: And it still is Old Dixie. Did they call it Old Dixie at that time?

M: No. They called it Dixie Highway.

I: And it went right on down to Miami.

M: Right on down to Miami.

I: I imagine you can still find traces of Old Dixie in many of the area south of Indian River County, can you not?

C: Oh yes. It is still there, all down in Fort Pierce right along the river there.

I: Is the River Road and Fort Pierce still...?

C: That is the Old Dixie.

I: A most scenic route and one which many people took then simply because it was on the river.

M: It was the only road that went right to Fort Pierce down through the town of Jensen into Stuart. When you got to Stuart, you had to catch the ferry. There was no bridge.

I: What are some of the things which impressed you the most about the growth of our fine community here, retail-wise and business-wise? Being in business right down in the heart of the town, you have seen many things happen, many businesses come and go. I am sure you have some recollections and reminisces of this growth.

M: Well, a lot of them have come and gone.

I: What do you think has been the principle factor which has caused those to go, which have gone.

M: Retiring and old age, a few, sickness and death, many others.

I: Very few of them have been business failures?

M: That is correct.

I: With that thought in mind, let's turn a little bit to the subject of tourism here. Do you anticipate that Vero Beach can be any greater a tourist mecca than it is today? We say tourism increases our population by several thousand people every year for a period of three or four months. Do we have a potential for even greater attraction?

C: I do not see why not. We have, I think, one of the nicest towns in Florida. People who have come here in the last few years, I ask lots of them, how did you happen to get here? Why did you come? Well, we have toured the state and we have looked here and yonder, and we just like it better here than we do anywhere else that we have been. Any number of people have told me that. When I meet a stranger and he has just moved into town, why, I try to find out how come he came here.

I: We have a crossroads in Vero Beach which, at the present time, is 14th Avenue and 20th Street. Has that always been the hub of the city?

C: I would call it the hub since I have been here because it has been the busy corner. Going back to tourists, I think one of the best things that ever happened to Vero Beach was the bridge across the river there and the development of the island over there. There is a lot of good property over there. A lot of people like the water, and the building of the bridge, to me, was one of the nicest things that could have happened to us.

I: When did the business develop on Ocean Drive? When did you see the first opening of business over there or in that area?

C: I would say after WWII is when it began to grow the most. That was a slight growth all along. First one and then the other would put up a little business. The real growth, I think, started after we sort of got rid of the mosquitos and sand flies to a great extent during WWII.

I: Doc, can you name the first business over there?

M: The place on the beach there just in back of that drug store, that was the first one...

I: Right on the ocean at Humiston Park. That is where the first of it came through.

- M: That is right. It sold ice cream and hot dogs and things on Sunday.
- I: Right. That is the Seabreeze. From then on, why, we just began to get more and more business located over there.
- M: Building streets and moving in.
- I: Now, if Rio Mar was an active area for tourists, then we see that there was construction all the way down A1A almost as far as there is today. Now, I do not mean going as far south as ____ Beach, but there must have been activity a long way down the beach.
- M: Well, not beyond the golf course.
- I: And that is just about as far as it goes today, basically. I am sure there are a few scattered areas of business down there and some mighty fine business. But, I mean, in the overall picture, business did not go much further than the golf course from the 1920s then. Since the 1920s, it has not gone much further.
- M: You mean residence. There was not any business down in there. The business was all on the beach.
- I: Right on Ocean Drive.
- M: That is where the business was, around Ocean Drive. Rio Mar Club was there and the golf course.
- I: Did the city or state build that wooden bridge?
- M: The state and county.
- I: The state and county built the wooden bridge which was removed in 1946 and became the Merrill Barber Bridge at that time.
- M: I think that is correct.
- I: That was a long life span for that old wooden bridge, wasn't it. Did you ever get trapped in traffic on there?
- M: Got everything. It was shaky.
- I: Makes you think of the Wabasso Bridge of a few years ago. The people quickly took to the area. Now, I notice in old photographs of Beachland Blvd. that it was not paved for quite a long time. How in the world did traffic get back and forth through the dirt road with as much traffic as there probably was. There was only, probably, one road to the beach, was there not?

M: That, I cannot explain. They did not have much occasion to go to the beach, though. They would turn and go south to Rio Mar, and they had a pretty good road down that way.

I: I see. So, actually, Beachland Blvd. was not opened up until a little later on, all the way over to Ocean Drive.

M: You see, that hotel was built there in about 1925, I would say.

I: And it lasted until 1965.

M: It was gone longer than that, wasn't it?

I: Well, in round figures. Yes, it did go earlier than that. Well, the growth of retail establishments here has been, as you say, attributable to agriculture building the community. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

M: I would say the agriculture business has been the...

C: Been the backbone, I think.

M: ...of the business, business district.

I: I want to thank you both for being with us today. It has been a real joy to talk with such pioneers as Mr. Cox and Doc Charlie McClure, and it assists us in putting together facts, data, information about Indian River County which we trust will go down in history. Join us again the next time, and until we meet again, thanks gentlemen, and so long for now.

M: I appreciate having the opportunity to be here.

C: Thanks.

[End of the interview.]