

IRC 11

Interviewee: Banty Saunders (Monologue)

Date: May 23, 1968

S: I thank you, and I wish you kept right on talking because those were real sweet words. When your program chairman asked me to tell the Fellsmere story, I wrote one of my fastest rules I have and that is not to be talking when I should be listening. I knew, after I told him that I would tell the Fellsmere story, that I was really speaking out of tongue because I am quite sure that you people here should know or do know more about Fellsmere than I do, but I am going to try and tell you the part that I had with Fellsmere. Maybe you do not know it, but I will get up to that later.

Back in 1910, there was an Englishman named **E. Nelson Fells**, very much of a gentleman and evidently very wealthy, who came down to Florida on a land-buying spree. He found somebody over in DeSoto County named **Jack Hurt**, and he bought five townships of land from him, small deal, 116,000 acres. Developed through that purchase was the St. John's _____ grant, then commonly known as St. John's Marsh, most of it. Those of you here know that is pretty good land, but the bottom is pretty close to the top. He was smart enough to organize three companies, the Fellsmere Farms Company and the Fellsmere Sales Company and the Fellsmere Railroad. At that time, there were no automobiles in that area, and there were no roads from Sebastian. The town of Fellsmere is about ten miles west of Sebastian. There were no roads, and the only way he could get people out there to see his land or get the machinery out there to dredge that 100,000 acres of muck land he had out there was to get a railroad. The first thing he did was have not only a short-line railroad but a standard gauge, so when anything came to Sebastian, it would go right on out. It hired the J. G. White Engineering Company which, at that time, was supposed to be one of the best engineering companies in the country to engineer the proper draining of all that land. Of course, they got all the statistics from the government that they could as to how many gallons of water was poured on that land any given time. They add it all up, and they found out how many ditches they had to have, how long and how wide, and the main canal to get rid of it. They got their figures all right, but I do not think they took into consideration that all that rain might fall at the same time. That is really what happened.

Everything went along pretty well until about 1950. Before that, I wanted to say this, with the Fellsmere sales company, they organized at that time, I think, one of the greatest sales organizations you could have. They had their headquarters in Kansas City, and they would funnel people through Kansas City until they got a carload of them. Then, they would bring them down to Fellsmere. They had a farmhouse there where they had a dining room, kitchen, and living room. Then, they had a little _____ to live out of additionally, so they had perfect control of all their people they brought down there. And, they had this sales organization.

Now, why they did this, do not ask me, but they sent up to Maine. I guess they thought we were going to run out of potatoes, and they sent up to Maine to Aroostook County and got the best Irish potato growers they could find to come down here. They went over to Texas and got the best onion growers they could get. They went down to Dania and got some of the boys to tell us about tomatoes. They emulated AT&T as best they could: when one thing would not go, they started another. Above all things, I do not know where they got it in their minds, but I looked up one morning about a block from where my office was, and they had a cotton gin. I do not know why in the world. I never heard it. I do not believe it was ever used out there, but it was there, and they raised camphor trees and they raised strawberries. They kept on rooting, but something would happen all the time. With all that, they tried to do their part and tried to be sure. I do not know where they got the money. Do not ask me how much they paid for it. Those were the two things I never could find out. I do not believe our tax _____ can even tell you where they got their money and how they paid it out. But, they kept on, and after that is where I come into the picture.

I was working at East Coast Lumber Supply Company, in the office there, and one day, the general manager said to me—he called me Howard—Howard, how would you like to go to Fellsmere and run a lumberyard for us? I did not have any idea yet what in the world I wanted to do. I was just a little over twenty-one, and I said, all right. I was ashamed to tell him I did not know where it was or ask him what it was going to pay. I said, when do you want me to go there? He said, Monday. Well, I took a train to Sebastian and got off and went to Fellsmere, and I walked down the street to the old Fellsmere Inn. To show you how well this Fellsmere Company was cooperating with what the people wanted when they came there, they had arranged with East Coast Lumber Supply Company to have a branch there. They shared the bill. All I had to do was wait until the mule came to deliver the lumber with. Every house you built then was a frame house with pine siding and flooring and ceiling and the side for shingles. You could get all the lumber out pretty quick. In no time—I am sorry I never kept a record of it—enough lumber, to the best I know, to house about 1,500 people. It was quite a thrill.

I learned then, when I went to Fellsmere, and Fellsmere had been dear to me and dear to me for this reason, I had to change all my pattern of life. I had lived at Fort Pierce all my life, knew everybody, could say anything I wanted to anybody and get by with it. But, when you saw fifteen people in Fellsmere, you would do well if you ever found three from the same state, and it would be hard to find three Florida crackers there. They just had them from every part of the United States. I do not know why because I think some of them could then just as well stay there where they were, but they came to Fellsmere anyhow. But, I knew that to get along and make anything out of the lumber business that I had to do what Mr. Dale Carnegie said, only a little bit better, I had to make friends and not

influence them, I had to keep them. That is where I changed the pattern of my life, and it has worked well ever since.

I will get back to the town of Fellsmere now. It was incorporated in 1912. It was a commission form of government. It was the first town in the United States, I think, that had women's suffrage, five years ahead of the world. It was the second town in the state to have concrete streets. Of course, I was in the building-material business. I will give you two guesses as to who sold the cement, but it was there. When it came time to swear the first city officers in, they noticed that my name was not on there and I had told them that, well, there was not question about that. I was a notary public. I could make money swearing them in but if I was the mayor, I would not make anything out of it and I could not sell them any lumber. So, one year after they were incorporated, they bonded for \$50,000 to build those streets. Fifty years after that, they looked me up, down in Fort Pierce, and they were going to have a bond burning. I had never seen anything like it in all my life, and I had never participated in one. But, they had a holiday. They burnt the last bond. When they looked up to see who was there when they swore in the commission, it had to be Banty Saunders, and he happened to be living.

But, Fellsmere was planned the best if, I am so sincere about it. Why, they tried to do everything right and what happened to it, the way it did, they planned that town better than any town I ever heard of any place. It was a perfect plan in every way. The only possible thing you could say was wrong with it was that the streets were twenty-five feet wide instead of fifty, but they knew you could buy two if you wanted fifty feet, so that was it. But, with all that, they had the best sales force, they had the best legal talent, but everything seemed as if it was just what it should be. Still, when I got married, I married in Fellsmere, built my own home and lived in it the first night. It was a very lovely wood, French stuccos, cypress shingles on the side and on the roof. Of course, I had to leave it, but Fellsmere was a lovely place to stay. I think if I had to pick my place to retire, I would just as soon stay there, and I still think that Fellsmere is going to come back. You got too many good lots up there and if people ever find what they can find, for nothing else but to have it for their perfect retirement, I think it will be there.

I hear when they lost everything else, they started a sugar mill there. That did not last too long. I hear now that Garcia is going to raise a lot of cattle out there and some racehorses and some citrus. I believe if they can raise some citrus out there, why, it would not be a shame to see. I started to say, when I came here, if there were two things I have been sure of about Fellsmere. One of them was that I was sure there would never be another Fellsmere. Now, the other thing I was sure of is that there would never be another Banty Saunders, and I think I am sure yet.

At this time, I would like to break all protocol and pay a little tribute to my friend Jim Vocelle. Jim Vocelle has meant more to me than any of you will ever know. He helped me when I was first elected to the legislature. He would stop by and he would coach me so that when I went up to Tallahassee, if I do have to say it about myself, I did more than a whole lot of those boys who were already there, had been there. All through my life, he has been my friend, and I just wish he was city attorney for Fort Pierce instead of city attorney for Vero Beach, but that is off the record, of course. They told me not to tell any jokes, and I thought I would not, but those boys down there in Fort Pierce, at that Kiwanis Club, they keep telling stories on me. When my brother was singing here today, I was thinking about it. They are telling now that I got the ambition to write a song. Instead of asking what it was going to be, they said it was going to be the singing song. They asked me how I was getting along with it and said, the last they had heard of me, I had not gotten by the second bar yet.

But, in my life when I was growing up, I always had an ambition to be two things that I would like to retire with, but I did not know I was going to get them so quick. I wanted to be a justice of the peace of a small town, about the size of Sebastian, and have a little country newspaper. I would get me a good constable and I could aggravate people to death with my newspaper and I could aggravate them to death with my constable. I would have him any time [that] I did not like anybody too well, and I could spend my life at ease. Lo and behold, I ended up having a newspaper and was a justice of the peace in Fellsmere when I was twenty-five years old, and you talk about having fun. Of course, we had everything in Fellsmere, until Florida Craft, except a hospital and a jail and a mortuary. It did not look like we needed any of the three. We got along all right. I helped bury the dead. I do not think you have a jail yet. I think the people are just too good. I had an old Scotch friend there who was on the scavenger wagon, and he was really a character. He would get drunk, and we would get drunk. He would do you no harm, but he would get drunk and he was just a nuisance. So, they pulled him before me one night, and I tried him all by myself. I never made any charge against him. He did not know the difference. I opened up a couple of law books and did a lot of looking. Finally, I said, Mike, with this Volstead Act [the anti-alcohol Prohibition law] in effect as it is now along with everything, you are going to have to do better; we just cannot let you keep going the way you are going. He said, what is it going to be, judge? I said, I am going to sentence you to be sober for sixty days. You know, that boy never took a drink during those sixty days but when his sixty days was up, he was right back at it again.

I had another character there who was my friend. We had an old boy from Indian Territory, he said, and he was always telling about the Indians and he told me he had been scalped by Indians. Finally, I got familiar enough with him and he was pretty well bald-headed. He put my hand on the top of his head there, and I could feel the stitches on the top of his head just like on a baseball. That was the kind

of people we had there. We had them from all over the world, and they were good people but they were just so different. I still thank you for the time, and I appreciate it more than you know.

[End of the monologue.]