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Interviewee: Tom Tyler

Interviewer: Dave Tegeder

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DT: This is Dave Tegeder with the University of Florida and Mr. Tom Tyler of Palatka. We're conducting an interview for the State of Florida's Cross Florida Greenway Project on Monday, June 16, 2003. We're located here in Palatka at the Holiday Inn. The interview is with Mr. Tom Tyler. Mr. Tyler, tell us a little bit about yourself. When were you born? Where have you lived and what have you been doing for quite some time?

TT: I was born in Lake Helen, Florida, June 13, 1933. My family moved to Palatka when I was seven months old. I was raised in Palatka, grew up in Palatka, and that's about all about it. I went to school in Palatka.

DT: You went to school here?

TT: Yeah. So, the second phase of the Barge Canal opened up and they was hiring operators. I put in an application and become an operator clearing the Florida Barge Canal.

DT: When you say operator, what did that job do?

TT: I was operating heavy equipment, bulldozers.

DT: Bulldozers?

TT: Yeah.

DT: Anything else?

TT: Well I can run it all, but I didn't run it all on the canal. My job was bulldozer operator and that's what we done. They had cranes out there on our company and on the other company they had the monster, what we all called the monster. It was a tree crusher, which I'm proud I that I give its last ride to it to the hill where they cut it up [laughing]. I brought it down the Oklawaha River, the old riverbed itself, on a barge and carried it to **Stoksis Landing**. That's where they unloaded and cut it up.

DT: Now when you say you carried it, at that time you were operating a barge?

TT: They come and got me to move it. I was on the Barge Canal clearing. We had a contract for clearing the trees out of **Rodman Pool**. I was on a layby there, I was superintendent on that job and I was on the layby. **Greg Gibson** and **Greg Adelesberg** come to me and ask me if I would move it because **M.D. Moody** of Jacksonville owns **American Cranking Company**. He wouldn't rent out my

boat. He told them if they'd come to where I was and ask me, he would rent me the boat, but they had to pay. That was the deal. So, they come and ask me and I agreed and they agreed on my wages and my two deck hands' wages. I went to Jacksonville. My deck hands were captains of my boats out there on **Rodman Pool**.

DT: Now these were tugs?

TT: Yeah. So, I sent the two captains to Jacksonville, paired them in Jacksonville, and we brought down two tugs because I had to come through **Rodman Locks** with that thing on the barge. The push bar on it was eighteen foot high. The operating tower was way higher than that. It was somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five foot wide. It just would fit on the barge. The barge was 125 foot long and it covered the whole barge. In fact it drew seven foot of water, so I had to bring it down the old riverbed because I knew the old riverbed, because I was raised on the Oklawaha River all my life. So, I brought it in and that's where it wound up, being cut up. We done a lots of pushing. The company I was working for was ENI.

DT: What did that stand for?

TT: **Larry Isket** from Lauderdale, he got the contract on one side of the river. Well, he got the contract on one part and EME, Earth Moving Excavation, got other side. I worked with **Larry Isket**, ENI, until we got to Ft. McCoy. We started at Cedar Landing, the old Cedar Landing, and we went to Ft. McCoy, clearing, pushing trees.

DT: Now you're mostly with, in your case, with heavy equipment in tandem with cranes that are also pulling them down? You had bulldozers and cranes?

TT: Yeah, I was an oiler on a crane that was pulling the logs down, stacking them, burning them. I went as an oiler, not an operator, but I could operate.

DT: Now was the monster working with you?

TT: No.

DT: When we say monster we're referring to the tree crusher, right?

TT: Yeah, tree crusher. We all call it the monster.

DT: The tree crusher, it wasn't working with you? Was that at the other end?

TT: That was another contractor had that. It was **Greg Gibson** and **Greg** out of Leesburg, Florida that made it. The one track on it was twenty-two foot wide.

The other track was twenty-two foot wide. They had one **DAD engine** pulling one set of track and the other **DAD engine** pulling the other track. It was a big old barge with tracks on it. It pushed those trees. It was a monster. It was big. No, I stayed as operator. In fact it got so wet on the canal that ENI come tell me, the vice-president come tell me and wanted me, to go to the Bahamas, which I did. They sent me over to the Bahama Islands and I worked until it dried off, and I come back and went back to work when everybody went back to work.

DT: Really, do you recall when that period was?

TT: It was middle part of the 1960s. I thin it was about 1965, 1966.

DT: So when the project was just starting to take off. Real quick, how did you find out about the job?

TT: That was well advertised around Palatka.

DT: So it was local advertising in papers and everything like that? Were most of the people working on the project from Palatka? Were there outsiders so to speak, people from other towns?

TT: There was a few outsiders, but lost of the men from Palatka did work on the canal they did. Lots of my good friends was from Palatka or lived in Palatka that done it. Palatka always carried the Barge Canal. They was always for the Barge Canal. There were lots of people against it, but Palatka stood with it and they still stand with it.

DT: Yes, they do. Talk about that clearing process. How did that work? How many cranes and bulldozers were operating withing a certain area?

TT: I worked for both companies, EME and ENI both, but I worked for ENI first. We had five bulldozers run, widepeds, elevens, which was the size of the machine. Five of us were working together clearing, pushing trees. Sometimes, you push a tree out there and the ground would shake three hundred foot around you, muck. You know, you're working on muck. If one of us got down, got stuck, the other one would come over and push us out; you know, we'd go again. It was a thrill and experience for an operator to work in something like that. I'd never worked in anything like that. They had a crane, a drag line, they dug a canal on both sides of the right away which was three hundred foot wide going through. They dug a canal on both sides and kept pumps running twenty-four hours a day to get the water out of the swamp. One day they tied a forty-foot pole to the bucket and stuck it straight down. The muck was forty-foot deep. The experience of working on a play like that, you'd have to keep tip toeing. You'd have to push a tree down and walk on it and get another one and keep walking on the trees you push down until it dried out a little bit and then you could come

back and pile it. The cranes was taking what we called the higher land, because they was working on matts and they was pulling down trees where the bulldozers got in it good, but the cranes had to work someplace so we give them the higher ground. It was a good experience for anybody. It would have worked. I was the last person to work on it when Nixon shut the thing down when they took all the money. I was working for a company out of **Hidasberg**, Mississippi, LNA Contracting. I was superintendent on it. We had three tug boats, six barges, and three cranes picking up the floating material out there on the lake after they flooded what the monster pushed down in the mud. Then, it floated but once it got water on it. So, another year of contract Corps of Engineers did. I was superintendent on it, and we went out there picking up them floating logs. I kind of figure in my own my mind who shut it down beside Nixon, but I can't prove that.

DT: Yeah? Tell me about it.

TT: I think I might.

DT: I do want to talk to you about that, about your thoughts of the criticisms of the Canal Project, the Florida Defenders of Environment, and Nixon and everything.

TT: I happened to be at the right place at the right time when a certain fellow come up with a colonel out of Jacksonville with the Corps of Engineers, which I was fearing for him to the railroad company. The railroad proposed to him that they are just a bystander listening. They had a way to build a deal that they could let the flat cars down in the water, pick up a barge, put a barge on it, and pick it up and they could railroad it all the way across the state of Florida and put it in at Yankee Town. Now that was proposed that day I was standing there listening to the railroad company proposed the government to do, which that didn't go in effect either. But I believe in my own mind that the railroad shut this thing down, put pressure on Nixon and that was the thing that shut it down. I don't know why they would kick so hard on this cross-barge canal. They've got another one down south. They come through Lake Okeechobee and they hit it at Moore Haven and it goes into Ft. Meyers. There's a cross-barge canal there, but everybody here was hollering, Miami was hollering, that we get out of water and this and that and the other. There wasn't no truth to all that.

DT: What did you think from other criticisms coming out of Gainesville, Marjory Car and the Florida defenders of the environment? Were you very much aware of it?

TT: Yeah I knew, but I didn't pay attention to all that. Something that would help, especially Palatka, it would have helped it quite a bit for the Barge Canal to go through. Also, I heard, I don't know for sure, but I heard that Jacksonville Electric, Florida Power and Light, and Florida Power went up in Pennsylvania

and bought a bunch of coal mines. The intention was to float her down to Mississippi and float her in at the English, Yankee Town, where the plants was over there. They had already laid out twenty or thirty acres of property. They would unload the coal there and put it on barges to ship it all over Florida, because they'd use the Florida Barge Canal. They could put it on the barges and carried there to whatever power plant they had, but I see the railroad is hauling it.

DT: It was always seen as part of a national economy and using those resources. You mentioned the Corps. Did you have much contact with Corps officials?

TT: I worked for the Corps for a year. My last contract was for the Corps of Engineers.

DT: So when Nixon de-authorized the canal you were a Corps employee?

TT: No, I was contracted under the Corps of Engineers, my company was. So they had to put me on maintenance to finish up the contract. We were like three or four months of having a contract field, so the Corps switched us over to maintenance so we could finish our contract.

DT: You've talked a bit about the canal as being crucial to Palatka and its economy. Is that the case that you did see it as part of progress for Palatka?

TT: Oh yeah, it would have been.

DT: As a life-long Palatkan, what was your impressions of seeing the river change so much?

TT: The river wouldn't have changed. There wasn't but one place that they would have changed the river and that's south side of the bridge here. They would have made a canal in there so they wouldn't have to go all the way around the big ____ about that. They would have come right through here and it would have been great for Palatka.

DT: As part of prosperity for the future?

TT: Yeah.

DT: Let's go back and talk a bit about the monster, the crusher. What was it like to see this thing in operation?

TT: It was something you'd never seen before. It would go in water. It was supposed to be watertight, a barge. It had tracks on the outside. If they needed any weight they would pump water inside the machine itself. They had a compartment they could put water in to make more weight, the water would make

more weight. It would actually swim. It would float; dump all the water out in the Oklawaha River and it would float just like one of these amphibious ducks you know they got, and it would go up the river with the tracks. It was fine. They had a good one. It was an experimental machine. It was heavy, she was real heavy. It done a great job. In fact I understand that the government come and was thinking about sending it over to Vietnam when the war was going on over there, we were doing the canal when the war was going on over there, to go over there and clear some of them jungles, which it would have done.

DT: Oh yeah, I've seen film footage of it. It's pretty extraordinary.

TT: Yeah, it is.

DT: In comparison to a bulldozer it just . . .

TT: No comparison.

DT: None at all in terms of scale?

TT: No, that thing will walk up to three or four foot tree and just push it on over and walk right on top of it.

DT: Just keep going.

TT: [It would] keep going, it wouldn't stop it. Only one thing would stop it and that was mud.

DT: Did that happen?

TT: I seen it get stuck at Cedar Landing. It took them two weeks to dig it out, pull it back on the hill . . .

DT: Pull it with what?

TT: Drag lines, they carried two drag lines down there and dug it out and pulled it back on the hill. Well, it walked itself back once they got footing for it. **Mr. Craig** come down and told them that wasn't supposed to stop it, put it back in there. So it was two weeks they brought it back to the hill again, but it would actually float. They run it twenty-four hours a day when it was stuck. They would have all the water out of it and the tracks would go. They run it twenty-four hours a day of paddling, digging a hole hoping to find something harder. If it didn't then they had to hook to it and pull it back out. We worked right in front of it, so we knew what was going on. To me, it was a good experience. It really was.

DT: When the project was over you moved the crusher up to what was it again?

TT: **Stokes Landing.**

DT: Talk about that, how you would load it on the barge. How many miles is that?

TT: It was at Orange Springs where the crusher was setting. I brought the barge up. I had deep enough water for the tug and all. I didn't know it was going to draw so much water. They got it loaded where it was setting above Orange Springs and it mashed the barge down in the mud and I couldn't move it, so they had to unload it. So I knowed where a place was, I'm trying to recall it's name but I can't recall it, on down the river that was deep. I told them bring it down there. We'll load it there on deep water, and we loaded in deep water. That's something tricky is loading a machine that size in deep water. It's a little touchy there.

DT: Did you float it onto the barge?

TT: It run itself down there, floated down there. It run itself down there, and I had the barge cabled off and everything and they come on the hill and run it up on the barge and then from there on I carried it down the old river bed. That's the only deepest water we had for the draft of the barge. So, it took us a little while to bring her down. I guess it took us three or four hours because I had that small boat, I had it for the breaks on the back end. When you're towing, you have to tow it. A machine that high, you can't push it because you can't see around it. So, I had to tow it. I was on the front boat and we towed it into the locks and the back boat had the breaks. It's all in the daily news. All you got to do is look it up. They carried pictures of it and everything.

DT: It's 1971 right?

TT: No, that was 1969. I believe it was 1968 or 1969 when I brought it down.

DT: Okay, now you took it to **Stokes**. Did you see them cutting it up for scrap?

TT: No, but they did. I seen pieces of it in Jacksonville at the cattle ____ place. The track parts and everything, they sent them there. That's what happened, they cut it up right there.

DT: I've talked to some people and it's kind of lore, and who knows where it went.

TT: I know where it went.

DT: It seems that it was cut up for scrap.

TT: Yeah, it finished it job and there wasn't no more work for it so they cut it up right there at **Stokes Landing**.

DT: I guess it was just too expensive to move.

TT: Well, you couldn't really truck it. You're talking about twenty-five foot wide of barge itself. It was so heavy. You couldn't have trucked it down the river. They built out there. That's where they put it together, at the dam. They built that sucker right there and put her to work. That's what happened to it.

DT: Tell me if anything comes to mind, tell me about working on the project. Any good stories working on the project?

TT: No, we had our fun out there working. We was caged in where we couldn't get hurt. One fellow wanted to get your attention he would just push a tree down on you. We would catch him not looking we would push one on him too. That would scare him to death. I have seen a machine down to the seat stuck. Hey, they see you're stuck, two or three come over there and push you out. It was challenging and it was lots of fun to be there.

DT: Were the fires set at the same time that you all were out? Did you have someone lighting piles of wood?

TT: We had a fellow who would have to pile it and we run across some old Cypress logs up there that we couldn't get to the hill. I wish we could, but some of them was sixty or eighty foot long, three foot in diameter. It would take two machines to push it up on the burning fire, you know burn it up. On down south of Orange Springs we run into some trees down there that was two to three foot in diameter and had been chopped with a chopping axe and a link. They had chopped them logs with chopping axes. So they was old logs, old fashioned one. We found lots of things in that swamp. I was glad I got the experience to do that. I would stand up on the barge on the Oklawaha River about this time of the year and see them big forty and fifty pound catfish schooling right down on the bottom. It was beautiful. They bought a place from my father over on the river. He had a place on the creek there. The agreement was if they didn't make a barge canal out of if the land would go back to him, but he has passed away and they're fiddling with it over there and threatening people. It should have went on through. Once they destroyed it they should have finished it. They got enough locks built, I think they're like one more lock from having the whole thing [done]. That's over there by Ocala or somewhere. They should have went ahead and dug that hundred and something miles and opened her up. That's a loss of our tax payers' money lay out there in the swamp. It costs money to by them locks and put them locks out there. I'm on record to bring in the heaviest load at **Rodman Lock** there are. I brought the heaviest lock through the lock. I brought three tug boats, six barges, two cranes in at one time. I put them in the locks at one time.

DT: Really?

TT: Yeah.

DT: That's at the **St. John's Lock** up there?

TT: Yeah, it's supposed to be on record, I don't know where it is.

DT: Yeah, there are lock records, yeah.

TT: It's on record where I brought the monster back through on the barge, it's supposed to be. Yeah, a bunch of us around here made a living out there and enjoyed every minute of it. It made men out of you, no boy could run out there.

DT: Yeah, summertime out there can be pretty rough.

TT: It was hot.

DT: So when Nixon de-authorized the project in 1971, what then happened with you and the job? You had to continue your contract for a brief period.

TT: In 1971 the Corps of Engineers changed it from being a contract to maintenance. They put us on maintenance. We were doing the same thing, maintenance, picking up the logs out of the pool. We finished our contract when he shut the money off.

DT: When did your job at the canal basically end, then?

TT: Well, three or four months after he shut the money off or whatever. That was the end of it.

DT: So it was 1971, then. What did you do then?

TT: Oh I worked for this company. I was superintendent over the last job on it, and oh they sent me all over the state of Florida. The last big job I done for that company, we put the 500 power line. It went from Ft. Lauderdale to New York. I put the first stage in right through the middle of the Everglades. My boss come down, the man who owned company, he come down. He was three years older than I was. We was kind of like brothers you know. He asked for a pen, he wanted to write something down. I said I had one on the floor board there. He said give me your pen. I said I don't have one, you've got a pocket full of them. He said how are you running a \$25 million job without a pen. I said because my boss has got a pocket full of them. [laughing] But that's the way it was.

DT: Well, anymore thoughts on the canal?

TT: I've got lots of thoughts. Anything else you want to know? [laughing] I don't know

it all, but you know. They called me to work to build a dam and I didn't go because I was busy with I-95. I was working on I-95. I started on the clearing job, so if anything comes up let me know.

DT: Well, I want to thank you so much for taking this opportunity and leaving us with a good interview. It was a pleasure.

TT: Well, I hope it was a good one. It was good experience for anybody; but anyhow, I was there.

DT: All right, well thank you.