

May 20, 1967

Interviewer is (I)

Interviewees are Walter Buckingham and John Wheeler

I: We have with us today two pioneer residents of Vero Beach. We have Walter Buckingham, and we have John Wheeler. It seems to me like I have heard of an insurance company called Buckingham Wheeler, and I think these two started it. By the way, that was not the first thing that you were doing though, was it?

B: No, that was not the first thing that I did here in Vero Beach. The first thing that I did here was to go into business with Waldo Sexton in the Indian River Products Company on January 1, 1920, for the purpose of growing everything that would grow in the Indian River area: beans, potatoes, citrus fruits. Our idea was to grow everything, and we tried.

I: Now, we will let Mr. Wheeler say something.

W: Most certainly, I do not feel like a pioneer because there are so many people who have been here much longer than I have. I first came in the month of January, in 1915, for just a brief visit. My schoolmate friend Waldo Sexton had suggested I come down in the month of January, which I did. I recall distinctly the main canal had recently been dug, and another fellow and I walked from the railroad down to the river on this _____ bank on the recently dug canal. It had not even **grown up in weeds** at that time, and that was a very interesting experience that began. Then, I did not come back until 1924.

I: That main canal you are talking about, is that the one just north of Vero Beach now?

W: Yes, running down through the golf course property, opening up into river near

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the Barber Bridge.

I: And, of course, there were no bridges then. You had to walk down there. By the way, in case you wanted to get to the other side, just how did you do it?

W: We did go over to the ocean. To do that, we went down to **Knight's** dock. Joel Knight had a one long inboard motor fishing boat. So, from Knight's dock, they would take us up to the Coast Guard station, which was at Bethel Creek. That is now city park property over there. Then, we would just walk that short distance from Bethel Creek over to the Coast Guard station, to the lookout tower and the bathing shed. That was the only way we could over to the beach at that time.

I: Called Jaycee Park now, is it not?

B: Jaycee Park now, I understand. Yes.

I: When you were there, John, in 1915, did they have the wooden railroad upon which they could move the big boat that they had, either for launching in the ocean or launching in the Indian River, the Coast Guard contingent who stayed there at that time? Do you remember?

W: I do not recall having seen the wooden railroad track.

B: Well, they had such a track. I am not sure that I ever saw it. I may just have heard about it. But, I know they could launch their rescue boat, either in the ocean to go out to help some vessel that was in distress or they could move it over and get it in the Indian River and go north and south in order to get over to the mainland for supplies or whatever they needed.

I: Earlier, you both mentioned Mr. Sexton and, somehow or another, I got us off the track here. Let us go back and talk some more about Mr. Sexton. Just when

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was he here? You both mentioned that he was here before you got here. Is that right?

B: Yes, he was here before I came. Waldo Sexton is my first cousin. That is the connection that I had with Waldo, to start with. After he finished college, he went off to Ohio for awhile. He was with the Barber people in Akron, I believe it was, the river town. **Barberton.**

W: Ohio, Cincinnati's Barber, the Diamond Match Man.

B: That is right. Then, after he stayed there for a little while, he went with a deep tillage outfit in Cleveland, and that is the place where he met Charles H. McKee, who figured later, in a big way, in Waldo's activities here in this area. As a salesman for the deep tillage machine, he came to Florida to demonstrate it here on the demonstration farm that **Conway** was in charge of. He went ahead and demonstrated the deep tillage machine and undertook to sell the machine to them. I do not know whether he sold one or not. I know he stayed at the Sleepy Eye Lodge, and I know that his expense check from his company was slow in arriving. Waldo ran out of money and could not pay his bill, so he stayed on a few days. Then, he went out and saw some land that he liked, and he decided to buy a forty-acre tract of land. That is where his home is right now. The next day, he went back and bought the forty acres next to it. And the next day, he went back and undertook to buy another forty which was adjoining, and **Doc Leroy Hutchinson** said, young man, how much money do you have? And he said, \$500. He said, well, you have bought enough land for the time being.

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So, Waldo did not buy any more land for a little while. But, he knew good land.

Waldo knew good land. Then, later, he became an agent for the Farms' Company here.

I: Just what year was that? Do you remember?

B: That would have been about 1913 or 1914. I am not sure. I do not have any way of knowing. John was here in 1915, and Waldo was established here at that time, was he not?

W: As I recall, he came here in 1914 because in the winter of 1914-1915, I know that Waldo had been put in charge of the sales' company Cleveland office, and I got a letter from Waldo suggesting that I catch a Pullman at Cincinnati. They would round up prospects and get a Pullman load and then bring them down to see the land here. So, I caught the Pullman in Cincinnati in January of 1915, and that was the first time that I came down here. So, it was in 1914, I think, that Waldo came down here.

B: Now, I have a picture of my father and Eli Walker and Waldo and some others taken down here about that time. So, my father, James W. Buckingham from Morristown, Indiana, must have come down on one of those trips. Do you remember if he was here on the trip that you were here?

W: Not at the time that I came. I remember Joe Hill, who was one of our early newspapermen here. Joe Hill was on that group because he was handling the material for Hill, Hutchinson, and Young and Indian River Farms. Joe Hill worked for what is now the Press Journal for many years.

B: Waldo was a pretty important part of the Indian River Farms Organization. He

was just an agent, of course, but he brought in a lot of people from Cleveland. Waldo knew good land, and he would pick out for these people the good black land. A lot of the people who came in came in as a result of Waldo's agency. I know he brought down Dr. Humiston and Dr. Sawyer, and they not only bought land out three or four miles west of Vero Beach and established groves out there but they went across the river and bought the land which is now Riomar. They were the original developers over there at Riomar. Dr. Humiston built a house, and Dr. Sawyer built a house. They had to carry the timber over on barges and had to cross the river in boats to get to the place where they were building houses over there, but they had a vision.

I: This Dr. Humiston is the same one that the park is named after?

B: He is the man for whom the park was named. He was a great man to beautify the place and influence others to beautify.

I: I have heard a story that Mr. Sexton bought a lot of land but he never sold any. Is that right?

B: No, that is not right. No, he did both. He bought a lot of land but...well, he did not sell his own land too much.

I: That is what I meant.

B: No, he kept buying land for himself. The story is, more or less, true that Waldo was inclined to buy the land next to him. That is all he wanted.

I: And, then, if he ever did anything with the land, it was on a lease basis, was it not?

B: Well, that was true not only of land but of lots of other properties that he had. I

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think Waldo was the first man down here to think anything about the ninety-nine-year leases, for example. Waldo had wonderful ideas, and he had a wonderful imagination, and he was way ahead of his times in a lot of ways. A lot of the things that he conceived or else took part in were just ahead of the times. Do you remember the Autotel Company?

I: No, I think that was ahead of my time too.

B: Do you remember the Autotel Company, John?

W: I heard of it in the early days, yes. I tell you, one of the most interesting things to me in the development of this community is how the McKee family got here. Descendants of the original McKee...you know, Charles McKee was a Pittsburgh man, an attorney for some interests there. Then, Charles McKee went to Washington. It was on a honeymoon, as I have been told, that Charles McKee and his bride were headed down to Palm Beach. They were driving down and there had been flood waters, and they could not get across the river at Stuart so they stopped here and stayed at the old Sleepy Eye Lodge. That is where Waldo Sexton got acquainted with Charles McKee, and Charles McKee got interested in property here and bought 1000 acres of land, including the site of what is now the McKee Jungle Gardens. Then, as another story, following his death, when Arthur G. McKee, the Cleveland engineer who was also at Riomar in the winter season, bought out the Charles McKee interests. Then, the **Royal Park** development was financed by money furnished by the McKee interests. And now, the third generation of Arthur McKee of the _____ and the seamen

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are carrying on.

B: That is exactly right. Waldo did know Charles McKee, however, before he made that trip to Florida. He knew Charles McKee when Waldo was the agent for the deep tillage machine company because Charlie McKee was the man who was financing that company, which finally went broke. So, Waldo did know about Charlie McKee. Charlie McKee died, you know, about a year after he came down here. He had invested a lot of money through Waldo, and then he had married this lady from Washington, Mrs. Clara McKee. After Charlie McKee died, then Arthur McKee from Cleveland, who was known as the brightest mind serving the steel industry, came in and picked up the Charles McKee interests and carried on from then on. So, it was Arthur McKee, a younger cousin of Charles McKee, who became the McKee who furnished so much of the money, and imagination too, for the developing of the McKee Jungle Garden and the **Oslo Hammock** Groves and other property here, including Royal Park.

I: Just when did Mr. Sexton start doing the big things or unusual things to...well, when I am talking about big things and unusual things, there is a big table down there at McKee Jungle Gardens. There is a big cypress stump out there. When did he start doing these unusual and odd and big things? Was it along about the time he started buying everything, or did it come later?

W: Waldo and Walter, of course, knew each other as youngsters. My acquaintance with Waldo began in the fall of 1908 when he came to the University, having gone his first year to Indiana University thinking he would be a doctor. But, when they put him to examining cadavers in the alcohol vats, he decided he did

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not want to be a doctor. So, then, he came up to the University and became what they called us in the agricultural school, a cowbarn engineer.

B: You were in an engineering school, so you had to be some kind of an engineer.

W: Well, they had an assortment of schools, but it was primarily agriculture and engineers. I was an Indiana farmer, and I wanted to go to Purdue and did.

B: Well, I was a cousin of Waldo and when I was finished with high school, back in 1909, and was thinking of going to college, Waldo immediately suggested that I go out and sell aluminum cooking utensils during the summertime to make some money to have for when I went to college. I found out later that Waldo had about twenty or thirty young men working under him selling aluminum cooking utensils and that he was getting a share of the commissions on everything that they sold. So, I would say that when it took to conceiving big things that it started way long before Waldo ever came to Florida. It was in his mind to start with. He was the first young man from his community where he lived, which was known back there as Buzzard's Glory...

W: **Morrow** Township.

B: Yes, Morrow Township but, nevertheless, Buzzard's Glory, and Waldo was the first one who went to high school from that area. He went to the county seat to Shelbyville High School.

I: And that \$500 to buy 140 [acres] and then another forty and then another forty that he did not get was just part of this big thinking.

B: That is right. It was natural to him.

W: Well, I tell you, he worked hard for that \$500 because I know that when he was in

school at the University, when I knew him, he never wasted his time playing like many of the rest of us did. He was always working. He worked for the University in the extension department, even during the summertime. That would take him around over the state. It was necessary for Waldo to work and earn money because he put himself through school. One of the things that interested him very much [was] an opportunity to turn a few dollars. He would make the rounds of the pawn shops in the cities, and he would find where fraternity pins had been pawned and where they were redeemable by payment of a few dollars. A nice fraternity pin, he would buy that pin and then bring it back to school and sell it to men in the fraternities. Just a way of earning a few honest dollars. Otherwise, they would have gone to the junk pile. So, he worked for everything he had.

B: I have one or two fraternity that came to me through that channel. So, you can see that Waldo had big ideas from the very beginning.

I: And he still has.

B: That is right.

W: Well, they were constructive ideas, and an enormous percentage of them hatched into something useful to our community.

I: He has a large hill over there in the island that they call a mountain. Just what made him think of that? Do you have any idea, or is it just something you cannot explain, something he did?

B: Waldo was always able to take advantage of what he found and make some use of it. You know, over at the Driftwood, he has a lot of driftwood articles. He

would pick up a piece of driftwood that no one else would see anything in, and he could see something in it. He would see something of a little different shape, move it around, and make it something of interest. Well, now, that mound over there, we ought not to call it a mound. It is a mountain. Waldo conceived of it as the highest spot between Jacksonville and Key West, and he conceived that it would be a landmark from which people on the river could get some signals. And it was a little mountain. That is Waldo's mountain. But, the way that it came into existence was that Mr. **VanBush** had purchased the land across that branch of Bethel Creek, and Mr. VanBush had a dredge in there, dredging out spoils and building up his land. Waldo thought that he ought to have part of the spoils on his side of Bethel Creek, so he got a dredge to come in and dig the water much deeper and pile the dirt out on the land there for future use. As it grew higher and higher and higher, Waldo saw the mountain in his own mind. So, he just built it higher and higher and higher and made a mountain of it.

I: You know, you could walk up and down that several times during the day, and that would be all the exercise you would need to keep you in perfect trim.

B: I have spent a little time on top of that mountain in contemplation. It is a good place to get away from the world and think about things of greater importance than the mundane world.

I: It would be a nice place for that too. I notice you have a lot of notes over there. Have we covered any of those?

B: No, we have been going all around them. There are enough notes there to last for a long time.

I: Suppose we take one of them and start from there.

B: Oh, we have covered this pretty well. I do not have a thought out policy here. There is one thing that I think when we are talking about old times and the conversation which might conceivably, sometime or other, be of value in history of Vero Beach and Indian River County: I think the location of the land might have something to do with it. Now, people make history—there is no question about that—and we have been talking about people here, nearly altogether if you will notice. Well, people do make history and in the old times were people, and that is what we think about. But, the location of Vero Beach is interesting. Why did Vero Beach not grow up farther to the east or farther to the west, or north or south, than it did? Why should this beautiful little town of Vero Beach have been right here where it was?

I: Alright, why?

B: Because it had its feet out on the water here. This is a little higher elevation right here where we are right now. It was a kind of a sand ridge—as you go on further south, it was known as the hickory ridge because hickory trees grew on it—and it was the only area in this part of the world that was high enough so that during flood time, you did not have water standing in your yard or in your street. So, that was the logical place to start the little town. Now, the Florida East Coast Railroad, in putting its railroad down, came right through here, you will notice. They did not go any closer to the river because if they had, they would have gotten into the salt marsh, the prickly-weed marsh back there. They did not go on top of this ridge because it would have been so dry in times that there

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tracks, perhaps, would not have had enough moisture for ballast. They did not go on west of here because they would have been in water again, because the land which is now in the Indian River Farms drainage district and is well-drained was not well-drained in the early days. So, Vero Beach naturally was started right along here where there was enough elevation that it was safe to build houses.

I: Where did Vero Beach get its name?

B: I believe that in a book written by [A. P.] "Pearl" [L.] Newman [Stories of Early Life Along Beautiful Indian River], that was pretty well taken care of. I hesitate to try to recall how Vero Beach got its name. As I remember her account of it, one of the Giffords named Vero Beach. I believe the word "vero" means truth, and someone thought of the word "vero" as a name for Vero Beach.

I: I know it started out as Vero, and then beach was added a long time later.

W: As I recall, when the original Gifford family from Vermont settled here, Mrs. Gifford, who would be the grandmother of Dr. Gifford and the grandmother of Dorothy Gifford, who are yet here with us...it seems to me that their grandmother, who was the mother of Charles Gifford, their father, gave the town its name Vero from the Latin meaning, truth.

B: As I remember, it was in the Gifford family that the name originated. You know, when the Florida East Coast Railroad put its track down through here, they wanted to show on their folder lots of towns as if they were going through a well-developed area, so they encouraged different little communities to select a name that they could put on their railroad folder. Of course, I presume Vero had

its name before that, but Oslo Community, south of here, did not have any name.

They approached the Scandinavian people down there, the **Helsits** and **Holstroms** and the **Bandiksons** and the **Martins** and asked them to give that community a name because they wanted to put an express station there and they wanted to have a place for the trains to stop. Old 29 and 30 would stop there, and they wanted them to have a name for the community. Well, they thought of the original name of the capital of Norway, which was Oslo, and they decided that they would call that community Oslo.

I: Which one, Oslo or Indrio, had the most pineapples?

B: Oh, Indrio had the pineapple.

I: I can remember going from Vero Beach to Fort Pierce and stopping somewhere there at a packing house—now, this was a long time ago—and getting a whole crate of pineapple, and I was just wondering where I stopped, Oslo or Indrio.

B: Speaking of pineapples, Mr. **Axle Holstrom's** brother **Nels** was in the pineapple business in a big way back in the early days, and Mr. Nels Holstrom was quite a character. He was summoned to be on the federal grand jury in Miami. He did not go the first day because he was packing pineapples. He went the second day and his name was not called, but when he was standing at the rail without a name having been called, the judge said, who are you? And he said, I am Mr. Nels Holstrom. He said, you were not here yesterday, were you? He said, no. Why were you not here? I was busy. What were you doing? I was packing pineapple. And you are not busy today? No. Well, he said, bailiff, put him in

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jail overnight. And he said he was busy.

I: Well, with that, I think we are going to have a call a halt because our time has run out.

W: That suits me.

I: We thank both of you, Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Buckingham, for coming down and telling us about the old times. [End of interview.]