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CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: JOE RUTHVEN
INTERVIEW: JAMES M. DENHAM
PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA
DATE: FEBRUARY 9, 2004

M= James M. Denham (Mike)
J= Joe Ruthven

M: I’m at the house of Joe Ruthven on February 9,

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M: Did they sell their house here in Lakeland?

J: Yes.

M: Right off the bat in 1970, 1971?

J: Yes. Early on, I don’t remember when they sold it, but they did sell their house, yes.

M: Even so, Charles Canady stayed here in Lakeland, is that correct?

J: Charles went to Washington for quite some time, maybe through the first or part of
the second term. I don’t remember exactly when he moved back but he moved back to
Lakeland to run his office.

M: So the office in Lakeland continued right after the election. The office was
established here in Lakeland, I guess, right after the election.

J: Not with Charles here. It was established later on. Charles was in Washington, I’d
say, for the full first term.

M: But somebody else was here.

J: Yes. He had a Lakeland office, yes.

M: Did you ever talk to Lawton about his Senate activities, what he liked the best?

J: Not really.

M: He didn’t want to talk about that kind of stuff when you were together?

J: No. And I think a lot of the stuff he was working on, they hadn’t voted on, and it
would be kind of premature. I think you have to be very careful what you say.

M: Did he ever ask you about any issues that he was wrestling
 with, what you thought
about this or that?

J: Not really, we were more involved in his campaign when he was running for office

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J: Yeah, either up there or back in Florida, one or the other. But when Lawton got into
real difficult decision
-making, like when he was trying to decide whether to run for
governor or not, he went out and spent the weekend or longer in the woods, hunting and
just enjoying nature.

M: Do you remember going hunting with him?

J: No, I’m not a hunter. I don’t hunt.

M: Who do you think would have been his favorite hunting buddies if he had to
assemble a group of about a dozen?

J: Well, he and Aldine Combee, who is no longer with us, were good friends. Of course,
Aldine had a big ranch here.

M: Is he kin to Neil? Father?

J: Yes [he is kin]. No, I think maybe Aldine is his uncle I’m not sure. But it’s the same
family. And [Lawton] spent a lot of time at Ben Hill Griffin’s ranch and also at Burke
Kibler’s. So in this area, I would say that’s where he spent most of his time. But he did
a lot of hunting up in Tallahassee with some friends, and I’m not familiar with those.

M: Does Whit Palmer ring a bell?

J: Yes.

M: Do you remember in those early years in the senate if he had any kind of substantial
relationship with Buddy MacKay other than maybe they had served in the State House
[together]?

J: In the early years, I don’t think so. I think this developed while they were in the State
Senate.

M: Can you remember [Lawton’s] first re
-election campaign to the U.S. Senate in 1976?

J: Oh yeah. I remember a whole lot.

M: Okay, can we go into that? It sounds like you were a lot more involved in the
campaigns than a lot of the other stuff.

J: Well, we did a lot of the grunt work. I had some carpenter’s on the payroll at that time
and they made up thousands of signs, assembled them together and we’d haul them in
our trucks and Greg would go out every night putting up signs. We spent a lot of time
doing that type of work for Lawton, a lot of time.

M: By 1976, obviously he was the incumbent, which meant his campaigning was
obviously a lot more sophisticated than 1970. What were the major changes that you
remember?

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J: All of [Lawton’s] campaigns were kind of loose. You might think of it as being a well
-
oiled organized campaign. Lawton’s campaigns were looser than that. I guess all
campaigns are just mass confusion because things change, people change, events
change, so it’s really high pressure. You’ve got to be flexible and ready to change
directions and move and go onto different issues. Most of our support of the campaign,
as I say, was from actually constructing signs and putting them up. I can’t tell you how
many employees I had out hanging signs and sticking signs up along the road anywhere
we could get them.

M: In 1976, your kids, Greg and Joe Lawton, would have been how old?

J: Well, Joe Lawton wasn’t here

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J: Refresh my memory. Who was running against him at that time? [Lawton Chiles ran
against Van B. Poole]

M: I can’t really remember myself.

J: That makes me feel better then. You know, in his campaigns for the senate, I always
felt like he had a very comfortable edge over everybody else because his walk related to
the average working man. As I’ve said earlier, you don’t meet those people in the
Kiwanis Club or whatever club, but you know they’re there, and they were on Lawton’s
team and they got out and voted. So in my mind, he had that vote locked up just from
his walk and his dress and his relationship with the working people.

M: In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected. In 1976, four years earlier, Jimmy Carter was
elected. What do you think [Lawton’s] opinion of Carter was, first?

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J: Judy and I were in Sun Valley, Idaho, at a meeting, and he called me at the hotel to
tell me he wasn’t going to run for the Senate, and we discussed it on the telephone. And
I appreciated his call. This was before he had made the announcement. And I said
‘Lawton, you’re going to find that it’s a big adjustment from being in the senate to going
back out doing whatever you want to do. You know, you’re accustomed to this lifestyle’,
and there is a certain lifestyle being in the Senate. Somebody is always picking you up
at the airport and driving you here and there, and suddenly you walk out of office and a
lot of those people you thought were your closest friends are political friends. They’re
official friends. When you get out of that office, they stay with the office. And it is a big
jump. It’s a big jump for anybody in public office. All you’ve got to do is look around at
some people who’ve been in public office for a long time who lose an election. They
have a hard time making that adjustment. And I’m sure he did too. He never admitted it
or talked about it. But all the public attention you get when you’re in public office, 90% of
it is for the office. And anybody in public office, and I keep reminding my daughter of
this, remember, 90
-95% of all the accolade you’re getting is for the office, it’s not for you.
If you can remember that and take it in stride, I don’t think the adjustment is as bad, but
it is a big adjustment to go out of office. And it was a big adjustment for him too. He
didn’t dwell on it a lot but if you read a newspaper article, he hadn’t driven a car in a long
time and was trying to find a parking place to go make a telephone call to somebody.
We didn’t have cell phones then like we’ve got now. But you get accustomed to people
doing those things for you and suddenly you don’t have it. It is a big adjustment and I
think it was a big adjustment for him. It had to be.

M: Do you think Rhea had any involvement in that decision, or do you think he just
made it on his own?

J: I’m sure they discussed it.
 It’s a demand on your time and I’m sure it gets tiring after a
while, but I think it was his decision. I think he thought it was just time to move on.

M: Did he mention anything about what he was planning on doing in lieu of this?

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J: I don’t remember where I was wh

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M: Okay. Can you remember the election night?

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Republican, even more now. What were your thoughts as you went into the 1994
campaign?

J: I thought it was going to be very, very close. I felt some resentment about this, with
this being Lawton’s hometown, that so many people here were not supporting him, and
some of them were longtime friends. They had just gotten on the Bush wagon and it
was really embarrassing. I know Lawton was very depressed about it when he had the
meeting here.