CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **AL BELLOTTO**
INTERVIEWER: **JAMES M. DENHAM**
LOCATION: **LAKELAND, FLORIDA**
DATE: **AUGUST 16, 2005**

M=James M. Denham (Mike)
A= Al Bellotto
B=Betty Bellotto

M:

finish delivering them on Saturday. But that was my really first outside job that I had.

M:

A: Oh no. You couldn't do that. But fillin' that vat with that ol' pitcher pump and then every so often you had to pump that sucker out. You pumped it on the

A: Well I know that ’36, the reason I go back to that, [is that] we started fencing all of our property –

M: Was that something that you were happy about? Do you remember your father talking about the fact that it’s compulsory but we need to do it anyway? It’s a good idea? Of course I’m sure people did it before they had to.

A: Yes. But our property that [Dad] had bought earlier up there, that part of it [that] was in Johnson Island and came out toward Loughman to where now Hwy. 17-92 is, we fenced all that. We started in ’36 fencin’ all that. In fact, the other memory that I have is we had spent most of the summer on fencing a lot that property and then in one night we had some people come and cut between every post because they only owned 160 acres and 700 and something cattle, so those cattle were grazing on our land at that time. Of course, when we started fencing our land in, that cut their grass out. So this is what happened. There was some of that went on in those days.

M: Without going into a whole lot of detail, if you would like to talk about it, what did you know about the fence war down in Polk County with the Allbritton family? You would have been a really little boy at that time, I think.

A: Yes I was, but I remember that there were some people killed south of Mulberry.

M: And it had to do with phosphate land too, didn’t it? The phosphate company started fencing.

A: Yeah. Right. They started fencing and the way I understood it was, these people owned a lot of cattle and they had gone and cut fence a couple of times before this happened, but anyway, there was two or three of ‘em got killed one night down there over this fence law.

George Mann, Buck Mann’s daddy, started dipping some of his cattle. That vat believe it or not would be right in the middle of Hwy. 27 where Dundee, Winter Haven Road crosses Hwy. 27, if you went about 50 feet straight north where Hwy. 27 crosses, that’s where the vat was. So George Mann had Buffalo Ford

War II experiences that you'd like to talk about that you may not have remembered to talk about last time?

A: I don't think.

M: The commander of your ship, the New York, his name one more time was?

A: Christian Kemp.

M: Of course, we've just commemorated this weekend V-J Day and there's been a lot of material on television. Would you say that World War II really shaped you or shaped your character, made a lasting impact on your life?

A: Yes I would, in a lot of ways. One of the things that I think it helped me to understand [was] the feelings of other people and living at such close quarters and defending each other and those type things, learning to get along. It had a lot to do. I think also it had a lot to do with probably making me a lot closer to my Maker, the blessings, the things that I was taught, you know.

I think about so many times and I never talked this much and I don't think I've even talked this to my wife, but the approach that my granddaddy had when we were hunting, certainly they shared a lot of consideration defending our ship and me doing what I did with my gun.

A case in point, a lot of people don't know this, but when you're hunting, if you get into a flock of wild turkeys, what [Granddaddy] taught me was, [if] you start to shoot one out of them more than one, try to shoot the one in the back. A lot of people'd say, "Well I'd shoot the one in the front", but that's not the way he taught me and there's a reason behind that. If you shoot the one in the back, the other turkeys, I don't care how far they are out front, they'll come back to it. I used some of that same philosophy when I was in World War II. That's not good to say.

M: When you were a gunner.

A: See the Japs at Iwo Jima and Okinawa in caves, they'd come out and try to move from one place to the other and that's where I'd use some of that strategy with that 40-mm gun. Also, we were told and taught two things we didn't do, we respected the Red Cross and graveyards. We didn't fire at any of the cemeteries.

Well when we got to Iwo Jima, we found out that was not a true story because

M: Were you ever able to go on shore after some of those battles or did you just stay on the ship the whole time?

A:

cattle. We wanted to put that money back in to try to grow the size of our operation. So in the early years, we worked for the livestock market on sale days-Betty worked in the office and I worked the scales. And then I started buying cattle and selling cattle and started hauling cattle for other people. And we ended up with an office with five people working and at one time had 35 trucks running all the way to the west coast, all the way to Canada. We were haulin' for other people in that same time we were haulin' cattle that we'd bought.

M:

man that had the most money, there was like three or four of ‘em invested in the development and they had already laid out the roads and started layin’ it out and blockin’ it off to be sold, and the man out of Orlando dropped over with a heart attack. So the other people financially could not do what they wanted to do so they came to me to see if I’d pick up his part of the interest in the investment and in time, we started negotiating for us to try to buy it and I realized, you know, that we were going to have to pay way above the normal land prices for ranch land.

So we ended up buying it to keep it from being developed and also to use it in our operation. In the ‘50’s, we spent a lot of those days trying to improve the land that we had in ditching and canaling and trying to control the water situation to harness it in the canal, and we ended up havin’ to buy a dragline and do that.

M: At the time you bought that extra piece, did they have cattle that they sold you as well?

A: Yeah, we bought the cattle that were on there and equipment that they had that was on there, a tractor, some choppers, and that kind of stuff. We did buy the equipment that was there and the cattle.

M: When was your first child born?

A: ’52.

M: And then the next one came?

A: ’54. Then ’56 and then ’64 was it?

B: Eight years after Chris was born.

A: That would be ’64 Al, Jr.

M: So obviously that took a lot of your time. Were they involved in the process, in the cattle, did they have a role to play in all of that even though they were girls? I shouldn’t say that, but, primarily girls anyway.

A: Yeah, but let me say this. They had to get up 4:30 every morning when we worked cows. They had to help us pin cows and of course there again, this is what most cow people do, I mean, they use their family labor ‘cause they can’t afford to pay for ‘em. During all those days, there wasn’t a world of money to be made in the cow business. You made a

their way, I mean that's what it gets down to. So just like in the check off. It had failed twice.

Well, Charlie Lykes and Bud Adams, Gilbert Tucker, and some of them came to me and said, "Al, if there's anybody can pull this off, you can be it", and I say that not puttin' roses on myself but, I evidently did some things and I always worked on the grassroots level. I always felt like when you went into a project, most projects are not any good if you don't have unity and support from your people, so I started off in my little bit of thing when I started off trying to lead, that's the way I always tried to do. I've got to get all these people in my court.

Well I was pretty successful in pulling off some things that I pulled off over the years, so they came to me and said, "Al, you need to pick this up and see if you can get it turned. We have failed". So that's how I went back in as chairman of the Beef Council the second time in '86, I believe it was. I'd been chairman in the '70's, early '72, is when I first went in when it was falling apart on a volunteer basis of 10 cents a head on the market. Two or three of 'em had pulled out and this, that and the other, and gotten into it, so the man who was chairman at that time said, "I'm not doin' anything. We need to get another one". Well that's when the cattlemen wanted me to come in and I did, and I got that turned around.

M: Can you summarize the check-off, what it did, and why people might have opposed it.

A: Well at the time it was created it was a 10-cents-a-head volunteer contribution. When you sold an

So what I did, I traveled all over the state, went to some of the biggest strongest leaders in the state and I took ‘em county by county, and I’d go to ‘em and if there was say 10 in Polk County, I’d find out who was the strongest leaders, that was the first thing. I’d go right to their ranches, to their houses, and talk to ‘em and explain to ‘em and show ‘em. Well we ended up; we were the second in the United States. We had 95.8% support.

M: Where did the money go directly into?

A: Half of it stays here at our local Florida Beef Council in Kissimmee and the other 50 cents goes into the National [Beef Council]. And I contribute, I really do, Mike, I think that what has [sustained]

Boy I mean they're true supporters now, but they were just staunch against it, hard against it, 'cause they didn't understand. But now they're a different story.

M: Who would you say, in your activities in the '50's and '60's and '70's, and even '80's, were some of the most supportive political leaders that you interacted with in terms of helping you do some of the things that you've been able to accomplish? State level or national level.

A: Well, I think state level you'd certainly have to give a nod to Fred Jones. Fred Jones was probably, in my book, one of the most common horse-sense guys that we ever had. I remember, I invited Beverly Burnsed the first time she ever sat on

M: Yeah, I was right. He was congressman. Elected in ’32 I think and served until into the ‘70’s, is that right?

A: Yeah. He was a great guy. I had a lot of respect for him as a kid growing up. Then I got to know Jay and I still know Mr. Peterson, even during those days I respected him. I’m trying to remember – of course, Spessard Holland was another one that I felt like was very true-