CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **HOMER HOOKS**
INTERVIEWER: **JAMES M. DENHAM**
PLACE: **LAKELAND, FLORIDA**
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M= JAMES M. DENHAM (Mike)
H= HOMER HOOKS

M: Today we are interviewing Mr. Homer Hooks and we are going to talk today about the legacy of Lawton Chiles and hopefully follow this up with future discussions of Mr. Hooks' business career and career in politics. Good morning Mr. Hooks.

H: Good morning, Mike.

M: As I mentioned, we, really, in the future want to talk about your service in World War II and also your business career, but today we would like to focus on your memories of Lawton Chiles. Even so, can you tell us a little bit about where you were born as well as giving us a brief biographical sketch?

H: Yes, Mike. I was born in Columbia, South Carolina, on January 10, 1921. My family moved

H: I don't remember him; Fred Cone in Gainesville.

M: Well, you wouldn't have remembered him. He was in the 1860s.

H: Well, I'm glad I don't remember him. Anyway, Al is a special person and when we get into my military memories, we can talk further about him, but he saved my life literally on one occasion and I saved his. So, we came out even on that. He is retired now. After the war, I stayed on another year in Europe in the Army of Occupation in Bavaria and then came back and tried to get my career in journalism launched. I appeared before, had an interview before Jimmy Clendenon, who was at that time the state editor of the Tampa Tribune, and Jimmy knew of my career at Florida with The Alligator and so forth. So, he gave me a job as a green reporter on the Tampa Tribune. This was, I think, 1945 or something like that, and I stayed there about a year and then he moved me over to Lakeland to cover the citrus industry, and I began to look around and I saw that all of my bosses at the Tribune were young, professional journalists and that my future probably la

in the regular Army and offered all kinds of enticements - go to language school at Monterey and so forth, but I didn't go for it. So, I got out of the Army and went to Lake Wales as a marketing manager for what was then Florida Citrus Canners Cooperative, later became Donald Duck and later became Citrus World. I believe that is the current name, and then my career in citrus proceeded from there. I came back to Lakeland, and this ties in with Lawton now, in 1957, as Executive Director of the Citrus Commission or Department of Citrus and met Lawton, who then began his political career against Roy Searles.

M: Do you remember Roy Searles - what kind of fellow he was? What kind of personality? What kind of work he did with the citrus, phosphate and cattle folks around here and how was he liked?

H: He was a good a man and an effective legislator. He sort of typified the old school, the pork chop school of politics. He was not widely known, but he ran a good race based on following basic ethics and ground rule principles of lower taxes and services to the people. I don't recall his name on any particular great piece of legislation, but think for his time and his place in history, he did a good job. Lawton captured the imagination of the typical bright, young newcomer who was willing to take on new challenges. The world was changing, of course, as it does constantly and he was able to capitalize on that and he won. I don't recall if I had the vote here, but he did defeat Roy Searles rather handily.

M: Now, would you call that an upset?

H: Yeah, to the extent that Searles was an established politician who had been in office quite a long time. According to my notes, Mike, Chiles got 13,900 votes and Searles got 11,959; roughly a 2,000 margin. He was exactly overwhelmed and he fought a good hard race, but Chiles captured the imagination of the young people, the Jaycees, young lawyers and young professionals who were looking for change.

M: The so-called leaders in the county would have been the phosphate, the citrus, the cattle and they all had leaders, I am sure, in groups, and wouldn't they have been reluctant to lose Roy Searles?

H: I agree. I think in most cases the leadership of those industries were attuned to Searles and supported him, but they could not control everybody who worked for them, nobody ever has, and Chiles worked hard. He went door-to-door and I think he limited contributions to $10.00 or some other ridiculous figure. He had the knack for communicating with people at the common man level so to speak.

M: So, would it be fair to say that you could see those traits in him from the beginning?

H: From the very beginning, yes. One of the great things about Lawton was his ability to relate to the common man.

M: Do you remember any of the issues or concerns at that time that would have been policy issues that Chiles would have spoken to or was it just that he was a young fellow, determined, enthusiastic and just wanted to work for everybody? Do you remember any issues in 1958 that would have cut certain ways?

H: I remember that even in those days, the very earliest days, his concerns for education and

child health were coming more into focus. Those had not been addressed before. Chiles did that and these grew as one of his main tenents through all of his years of service, and I guess that is 40 years in legislative service in Tallahassee and Washington. Child welfare was always

many ways that it was a natural progression in leadership in the state and I think both benefited from it.

M: Do you have any personal knowledge of their collaboration? He would have been young, young at that time compared to Collins. Do you have any personal knowledge of his interaction with him?

H: I have no specifics, Mike, except to the extent that Chiles supported most and maybe all of the Collins program in the legislature because he truly believed in the same things that Collins did in terms of racial equality, opportunities for the poor, education and child care.

M: At that time, in 1958, you would have been just about to take the job in Lake Wales.

H: As a matter of fact, I was in Lake Wales from 1952 to 1956 and left there in 1957 to come to Lakeland to take over the Citrus Commission.

M: Okay, so you would have, obviously, worked a lot with Mr. Chiles in terms of your interest groups.

H: Yes.

M: Can you go through a little bit about what it was like back then to lobby? You have a career in lobbying that probably goes 40 years. How was lobbying different back then compared to the ‘80s and even today?

H: Mike, that is an excellent question and I could probably take the rest of your day answering it, but I won’t. I’ll be brief.

M: Please, please feel free to elaborate because I can’t think of very many other people who would have any better insights on that subject.

H: Well, it is easy to dismiss lobbying in those days as a wild house party of beaus and broads and bribes, the three B’s, but it is largely exaggerated and overstated. There were good people in the legislature who approached their jobs honestly. The big difference, in my opinion, is the professional staff that is available and it became apparent soon after that that people who are trained and educated to know government and how it operates began to be hired by legislators and depended on a great deal by legislators and so the emergence of a professional staff in the offices of the legislators was perhaps the most significant development of those days. Old fashioned lobbying existed then and still does despite all the rules, registration and accountability of the money spent and all of those things, but in my opinion, and I have stated this many times, that lobbying is nothing more than human relations. It is getting to know your

H: I don't think that, sounds like it fits right in.

M: So, would you say that even though things were changing, there were still some abuses at that time when it came to lobbying - gifts, junkets, booze and broads - that kind of thing. Were women involved much at all in government back then? In the staff?

H: You mean elected?

M: No, obviously not elected, but as staff?

H: Yes, they were beginning to be more and more important. Here I have to toss some plaudits to my old rivals at Florida State University. I am a Gator, as you know, but they began to furnish a lot of professionals, young professionals to the legislature to work in either the legislators' offices or in the agency offices. They were very able and effective young people. So, to answer the question, yes, there was change taking place gradually, and in some cases more rapidly, in turning to a more professional legislature.

I have a comment here that I lifted from somebody's notes about Lawton's comment on politics, specifically the Democratic Party. Here I am quoting, he said,

> "The Democratic party has grown apathetic and disorganized. We just haven't had a Democratic party in Florida. We have a few counties that have a good Democratic organization. We have a number of counties that have social organizations or debate societies or something as a place where you can stir up some controversy, but they don't go out and deliver the votes. They don't knock on doors. They don't produce votes. What we've got to do is produce that."

I think that is kind of interesting. I wish I had the date that he said that, but his comment was to the effect that the reason the Republicans were becoming more important was that the Democrats had become smug and complacent.

M: Complacent, sure. That sounds like.

H: They had been in charge for so long.

M: That sounds like the '70s or '80s range.

H: Yeah, because he was of the old school that you knocked on doors and you talked to people and you listened to them and he deplored the fact that this was no longer the case.

M: Now, you commented on and everyone comments on Rhea Chiles' involvement in his career and in his first run for office. Do you remember any specific incidents that you can recall in that regard that she was out in front with in those early years?

H: I don't recall any specifics except that at every rally I attended she was there and this was not true of most candidates. In those days the ladies showed up some times and smiled and looked with awestruck eyes at their husbands like somebody said Nancy Reagan used to. Rhea was an active politician. She knew people. She knew how to call them up and get votes. She was not above going house to house. She was a right hand supporter.

M: Do you remember.. He was in the House, of course, from 1959 to 1966 and then in the Senate from 1966 to 1970. Do you remember any specific legislation that sticks out in your memory that he was involved in or major bills that he would have pushed for very successfully?

H: He actively supported us at the Department of Citrus in those days. It was kind of a novel thing to collect taxes from growers. In fact, I see the headlines - when Yogi Berra said it was déjà vu all over again because the whole concept of generic advertising is being questioned now and it was then, whether it was effective to say buy Florida orange juice when nothing on the can says that. So, anyway, Lawton was very effective, and those were the days when we were fighting Tang. Do you remember when the astronauts were taking Tang on board and this wonderful product which was fake orange juice, as we called it, and Lawton picked up on that and supported us actively in our efforts to clarify the rules on advertising and so forth so that we would be protected. I remember we came up with the phrase, “Get the real thing in Florida orange juice,” and he supported that all the way.

M: Now, the member of Congress from this district at that time was James Haley. Do you remember if he and Lawton had any substantial interaction?
He was from Sarasota.

H: I don’t remember. Haley had a good career, a distinguished career with Lawton in Congress, but I don’t recall any specific interaction between the two of them.

M: Okay. We have already gone over some of Lawton’s colleagues. Do you know whether he was friendly or involved personally or professionally with Governor Askew?

H: No, but there again.

M: They would have been contemporaries.

H: Like with Leroy Collins, you could almost cast t

M: 12½.

H: Yeah, 12½ minutes, that is all I've got. He could sit there and extemporaneously, because he didn't know his subject, and speak for 12 minutes and 30 seconds and then..

M: Did a great job every time.

H: Not very well.

H: Yes, and at that time also, I remember that Lawton and Wilbur Boyd were preoccupied with the state road system. Do you remember Hayden Burns?

M: Yes, I'd really like for you to reflect on that if you could, or [give us] your memory on that.

H: Well, I don't have much memory except to say that Hayden Burns was pushing his road plan, which Chiles and Boyd actively opposed, and they went to the mat. I mean, it was a dog-eat-dog controversy. I think Chiles and Boyd won out.

M: That is something I want to follow up with Ed Price because he was involved in that, too.

H: Yes, you should because he was right in the middle of that. Has Hayden Burns passed away?

M: Oh yes, and Farris Bryant, too, last year. Okay, let's see. In 1970, Reuben Askew also was running for governor. Both were coming in out of the state legislature and both ran their own campaigns obviously. Did they really collaborate at all that you recall?

H: I think they were both so busy with their own campaigns they didn't have much time, except in political philosophy. As I said earlier, they were cast in the same mold in their concepts of elected office.

M: I guess now we can talk about the walk a little bit. What did you think the first time you heard that he was going to do this?

H: It was the craziest thing I'd ever heard! And I wasn't alone. Good friends of his, like his law partner, Julian McClarkson, and his law partner, Bill Henry, and I, and I'm pretty sure Burke felt this way but you'd need to get that from him directly, we counseled Lawton that this was a total waste of time, that it would produce zero votes if any, or fewer than zero, that he could spend his time more effectively in going to the cities and going some house-to-house and door-to-door of course, but what good would it be to walk from Clewiston to Bonifay Springs and see eight people, to put it in stark terms. Of course he overruled us, wisely, and continued with the walk. I don't know if I discussed this with you; I contacted the Lawton Chiles Foundation in Tallahassee, and they downloaded to me on the computer Lawton's journal on the walk. It's a fascinating document, many, many pages. Apparently, every night before he went to bed in the camper, which followed him, he would dictate or write his impressions of that day. I've read it through carefully. I've got it and I'm going to give it to you and you can keep it for whatever purposes.

M: I've read snippets of it but I haven't ever seen the whole thing. Wonderful! You could just give me the website and I could certainly do that if you'd like to keep that.

H: Okay. It's at the Lawton Chiles Foundation in Tallahassee. I don't have the website right in front of me, but I'll get it for you. There are several things about the walk that I think are worth commenting on, amusing incidents and very serious incidents as well. One of the most amusing was that the very first day, out of Century, Florida, which is very close to the Alabama line, he saw a lineman working on a telephone pole so his very first comment was, "I'm Lawton Chiles. I'm running for the United States Senate and I'd appreciate your help". The guy mumbled something and Lawton went on with his spiel, y'know, and the lineman kept waving at him and Lawton said, "What is it?" and the lineman said, "Well, I think I'd better tell ya, I'm a

native and a voting resident of Alabama." Well, Lawton didn't bat an eye and he said, "Well you've got friends. You're working in Florida right now. Just pass the word." And he did. I thought that was interesting. He ran into one of his stops at a livestock auction. He didn't know anything, or much, about livestock, but he found out that they had real problems in the pricing situation. And the wheat farmers got only 2 1/2 cents out of a loaf of bread, that the cost of fertilizer and help and tractors and interest on their loans took away the rest of their money. They begged him and implored him to do something to help them out. He made note of that and remembered that. I made a note here that; at that point, Lawton was more interested in walking than running. He was running for Senate, but he was walking to educate himself, and he did. It was told that the way to defeat a charging dog was to empty his pant pockets out and point his finger right at the dog and that the dog would immediately stop the attack. Lawton says he tried that in DeFuniak Springs when a dog charged him. He took his pants pockets out and pointed right at the dog, and the dog kept coming, so he abandoned that plan right away and got back in his camper 'til somebody took the dog away. There were delays in construction of I-10; you remember the interstate highway that runs from Lake City westward. He got on that when he got into the senate. He commented near the end of the walk, and I'm leaping ahead but I want to make a point here, of what he'd learned from the walk.

> "Yes", he says, "I do feel great and have a confidence that I didn't have before I started this effort. The contact with people has really been valuable. I truly feel like I know much better now what people are thinking. I have learned so much from the walk that I can better represent them in Tallahassee and in Washington. For example, I have learned an awful lot about farm matters, soybeans, livestock, cotton, corn, peanuts, and shade tobacco. I've learned more about parity prices and marketing aids, and I know the effects of the high interest rate on farmers and businessmen. I understand the need for industry to locate in North Florida, and I saw the housing need and the growing concern about our over-centralization of our government and the inability to reach public officials anymore was made crystal clear". And this is an important part, "I've learned something about listening. I know now that no matter how much money you can spend on television, and even if you reach a million people at once that way, you can only listen to one person at a time. So I'm more satisfied, happy, and confident with what I'm doing, knowing that when I complete my walk from one end of Florida to the other, I'll better understand the State and the people and be better able to serve as United States Senator. I believe the people will know this too."

I think that a pretty profound summary. And he said this toward the end of the walk when somebody asked him, "Well really, what has it meant? What has it done?" And he summarized it in that way, that it taught him to listen. This kind of characterized his effect in politics through the years.

M: Do you think the walk had an impact on other politicians? It was a success and everybody tries to model success.

H: Well, nobody emulated the walk, for instance, 1,000 miles, and he estimated he talked to 4,000 people. But what happened after that was that people began to see the value of one-to-one appeals and relationships. I've noticed even in the local races here in Lakeland, we see more candidates one-on-one coming to the house, leaving a brochure, speaking to the Rotary Club. This doesn't mean there's less television, because in fact there's more, as you know, particulari

M: Do you think Bob Graham and his workdays is kind of an element of that?

H: I think that's exactly on the point, and the congressman who scheduled regular meetings in their district when the congress was not in session. I can remember now that Charles Canady said, "I'll be at the Elks Hall at 10 o'clock Wednesday morning. If you have any questions you want to talk to me about, I'll be there". I went to a function Senator Bill Nelson put on a year or so ago in Bartow. There was no big deal made about it, but the hall was full. There must have been 200 people there with 200 questions. They wanted to know about Afghanistan and Iraq and they wanted to know about Osama bin Laden and all of that, so this gave Bill a chance to really relate to people's concerns one-on-one. So the answer to your question is, yes. Lawton's walk had a profound effect on politics.

M: Do you have specific memories of going to a place where he would come in to Clewiston or Bonita Springs or somewhere like that, or even Lakeland? Do have any personal memories?

whatever it's worth, I told him what I thought. This was a real mess. I don't know how much you know [about it]. It was very complicated and involves tariffs and trade agreements and breaking down the walls of tariffs which impede trade really but at the same time you've got to protect your home industry. You can't wipe out the people whose livelihood depends on the tariff to keep the cheap foreign competition out. So there are two sides to those issues and Lawton was kind of caught in the middle of something and he called me about it.

M: Again, and a lot of this is speculation on your part, but what do you think he liked best about being a senator?

H: I think he saw himself as participating in the molding of public policy at the highest level. I can answer that with a quote that I remember very distinctly why he didn't like it. He said, "In the Senate, you have no follow-through to make sure things are done", and this is why he ultimately ran for Governor of Florida, because governors are the ultimate decision makers about what happens. In the Senate, you're just one of 100. He was very frustrated and this is why he left the Senate. I'm leaping ahead, I know. But anyway, he was reluctant to run for Governor, but he thought that he hadn't completed his mission, if you will, in politics because he saw the missed opportunity. Maybe "missed" is the wrong word, too strong. But in the United States Senate, he contributed to the public good by making public policy, but he couldn't follow through in the execution. Conversely, in Tallahassee, he could. With the help of the legislature he could get things done and then follow through to their execution and a good example of that, of course, is health policy for children and babies. Mallory Horne one time had advised him to quit acting like a senator and act like a governor, "which you are", pound the desk and tell these guys what they've got to do and then get it done. And he took that advice.

M: That also was coming at the time when the emphasis was going back to the states. The Reagan Revolution had created this national agenda and the momentum was towards giving power back to the states, and all of that.

H: Yeah, take it away from Washington. And he believed that, of course it can be excessive, you can just abandon the Federal Government and turn back everything to the states and not provide any funds for them to do what Federal Government wants to do. That's an ongoing and classic argument between the states and the Federal Government. Sure, we'll do these programs. Who's gonna pay for them?

M: Right. Can you remember any of his re-election campaigns? 1976, 1982, any anecdotes or memories of those campaigns that you can remember?

H: In looking at my notes here, of course he beat Bill Cramer in 1970, a Republican. I think Bill was in Congress at that time. And then John Grady in 1976, he handily won that.

M: Gosh, that's a real blank in my memory.

H: I don't remember much about it really. And Chiles won by 800,000 votes, so that was a sweep. Then in 1982, he beat Van Poole, who was a former State Senator, and I knew him well, by about 600,000 votes. And then in 1990, he beat Bill Nelson in the Primary and then beat Bob Martinez, who was running for re-election, I guess, as a Republican Governor, and then beat Jeb Bush in 1994. I don't recall any specifics of those campaigns except that he didn't walk again. He'd done that. But he had widespread newspaper support in those times. The press loved his style; his "he-coon" remarks and his "aw shucks" kind of personality had

some people, probably infuriated some people. But his reputation and his integrity towered over all of that and he was successful in the race.

M: He would have obviously had to assemble a new staff. Were there any holdovers from the Senate that joined him or, in your memory, was his staff pretty much all fresh and new?

H: Frankly, I don't remember who came back with him if any of them did.

M: Was Dexter Douglas involved at that point, that early?

H: I know Dexter was a close personal friend and advisor and later became his attorney, as Jay Peterson did.

M: And Dan Stengel?

H: I don't know him. But I think Dexter certainly was in the picture.

M: At that time, the Democratic Party was really losing ground and had been losing ground a lot.

H: That may have been when he made that statement about 'there is no organized political party'.

M: Things were really, really turning against the Democrats by that time and obviously the first Bush Whitehouse was very aggressive, and obviously young Jeb was already moving forward. Can you comment on the 1994 campaign between [Lawton] and Bush, and the pressure that that exerted?

H: Well, I think there was a great deal of pressure. The Big Tobacco thing was beginning to move. I think that was in his second term, but he could see it coming and, in a curious way, this tied in with all of his previous positions on health because it wasn't just an attack on the Big Tobacco companies as big corporations. It was because, in his opinion and many others, they were killing people.

M: Public health.

H: Yeah, public health was an issue, and the state was spending taxpayers' money to rehabilitate the health of people who were being damaged by the Big Tobacco companies. This was his rationale. Now you're asking if that took place in 1994? I don't remember the dates, or when this began to happen, but I know that on the advice of Mallory Horne and others, he took on the tobacco case and I think [this was] the first state in the union to sue.

M: So Mallory Horne was instrumental in encouraging Lawton to do that?

H: Yeah. I have my notes and Mallory Horne told him to "get tough" with the legislature in the anti-tobacco legislation. This was in his second term. So he took Mallory's advice. He did get

H: It was really a pleasure, a work of love because it recalls so many things that were jumbled up in my head, like my son's recollections of putting up posters.

M: There's no reason why we can't do this again if you think of other things about Lawton Chiles. We don't have to schedule it right this moment, but I really would, at your convenience,

M: On the other hand, nobody has been friendlier to me in mentoring to me than Sam Proctor at University of Florida. Nobody has been more kind to me over the years, and I consider him kind of a model, too, for me.

H: Oh, I love Sam! He is a great man.