

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA – FALL 2012**

**Interviewee: Rodney Potter**  
**Date of Interview: October 31, 2012**  
**Place: Bradenton, Florida**  
**Interviewer: Patricia McChesney**

***Interviewee: Rodney Potter***

*Rodney Potter was born in 1936 in Bradenton, Florida. He has lived in Manatee County all his life. As a kid in the 1940s and 50s, he did a lot of hunting and fishing and even gathered scallops before they disappeared from the area. He has worked on the same lumber mill, though it has changed owners several times over the years, since graduating high school. In 2010 he was named Manatee County's Distinguished Citizen of the Year.*

***Interviewer: Patti McChesney***

*Patti McChesney is a second year Anthropology student at New College of Florida from San Antonio, Texas. She joined this project in order to learn more about the history of the area. She is also very interested in studying history from the perspective of people that lived through it.*

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**McChesney:** Ok, so I was looking on the, I was looking it up on the internet and I saw that it said that you had been working here since 1955?

**Potter:** January 11, 1955.

**McChesney:** Oh wow.

**Potter:** mhmm.

**McChesney:** How old were you then?

**Potter:** I'm 75, in two weeks I'll be 76.

**McChesney:** Wow, So I guess you were—

**Potter:** I had just graduated from high school.

**McChesney:** That's a long time.

**Potter:** And I— And I'd been out up in Idaho, I was born here, but I went out to Idaho to work in the timber, timber industry because the pay was so great out there which would help me, you know, pay for schooling. So... that's uh, I chopped down big trees.

**McChesney:** That sounds like really hard work.

**Potter:** It was fun.

**McChesney:** And then so, when you came here in 1955, you've been working here since then, like, continuously?

**Potter:** Yes ma'am.

**McChesney:** Can you tell me a little bit about the area when you were working?

**Potter:** Well, I was I was born here, in 1936, and Bradenton was a real small town. It was probably, the city was around 16,000 people. And, there was this narrow street between here and Sarasota. Sarasota County used to be part of Manatee County. It split off a number of years ago. Manatee county was very large back then, it spread off into other areas. But, the main difference between then and now, when you think about the city of Bradenton and the city of Sarasota, is that there weren't any shopping centers. These cities were really nice places to go. You could see everybody in town, the town usually closed at noon on Wednesday. It stayed open late Saturday night and late Friday night so you had a chance to see everybody. The drug stores, soda fountains, is what we had back then, which we don't have anymore. It was a place to go and meet everybody. It had a juke organ, you know what that means?

**McChesney:** I, uh...

**Potter:** You know it had a —, you know the thing you put a quarter in? and— yeah

**McChesney:** Oh like, it played songs and—

**Potter:** Yeah. Movies were nine cents for a double feature. There was a lot of farming, agriculture was one of the main things here. It's people made a living doing— see we used to be, before transportation got to be so easy, this part of the United States—Florida, was a bread basket for the Eastern half of the United States. So we raised a lot of food in the wintertime and shipped it north. There were thousands of truck farmers then. You know what a truck farmer is?

**McChesney:** I don't.

**Potter:** Truck farmers is a small farmer, usually a man and his wife and numerous children. And they had a number of small acres, and they produced vegetables and they sold 'em at a state farmer's market, which there are none of those either. [00:03:11.25] And there's almost no truck farmers left, but there was lots of 'em back then. And what you would do is you'd produce your cucumbers, your tomatoes, your peppers or whatever it was and you'd take it to a packing house that was owned by the state, that's called a state farmer's market. And then we'd get an auctioneer there. So you would drive up in your old truck. I used to work there when I was

fourteen. And you'd drive up sometime in your 1929 model or 28 model truck, load it down with whatever you produced, and then they'd auction it off. It would be people here of all the United States, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, buying produce so they could haul it back. And it was— it was a lifestyle that we don't really have anymore. It was very... and also cattle has always been big here. You know, one time Florida was the number one cattle producing state in the United States. Not Texas, but Florida. Yeah.

**McChesney:** Mhmm. Wow.

**Potter:** We're still big on cattle.

**McChesney:** I think that I read that there was still more cattle here than Texas.

**Potter:** Yeah. Now, most of the truck farmers have been absorbed by great big farmers that raise thousands of acres of tomatoes, cucumbers, peanuts, all kinds of things. So that's changed. The way of the small farmer is just about gone away. That was a lifestyle that isn't around anymore. Same with the old timey lumber mill. The old timey lumber mill like used to be here housed the people that worked there— a lot of 'em. You had a company store, and you had a place for people that were ill, like a nurse, you had a person that would marry you. You never got paid in money, you got paid in script. And you would take the script to the company store. If you want to pay for those tomatoes or ---- or whatever, and that's how you got paid, so you never got any money and that was a lifestyle. I'll show you a picture before you leave of exactly what that represented. And there's so much lumber round here back then a lot of that stuff goes to the north, New York, Chicago, because of the stress rated lumber like yellow pine. You know what a pine tree is?

**McChesney:** Uhh...

**Potter:** Okay well a pine tree is where— they're very plentiful around here. That was one of the lumbers they shipped to the North, 'cause it's strong like steel is strong, you know, stress rated pine is strong. See you could use it to build big buildings and things. My father had a shoe shop. He came here from Georgia and opened up in the twenties. And back then, you know, making orthopedic shoes, making saddles and a lot of things, you know, it was good business. And it's still in the family, one of my brothers, my younger brother, still owns this shop, so it's still in business over a hundred years.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** Still on the same street in downtown Bradenton. Downtown Bradenton had restaurants, now it's mostly a courthouse and a place where lawyers are. Back then it was everything. Doctor's office—if you wanted your tonsils out, go to the doctor's office and the doctor'd use some ether and take your tonsils out there and send you home. Like, it was pre-insurance and hospitals were dangerous because they didn't have the sanitation that we have today. They just...

you didn't go to the hospital. And if you had a baby, chances are you had it at home. My brothers were born at home.

**McChesney:** Wow. I was talking to John Ryan and he mentioned that you had...

**Potter:** Yeah, 'scuse me?

**McChesney:** That you had, when you were younger, you had seen schools of manta ray?

**Potter:** Oh, yeah!

**McChesney:** I was wondering if you could tell me a little about that.

**Potter:** Well, it looks like something from outer space where you see a school of manta rays. They're actually like, floating on top of the water. I mean it's so graceful, and so beautiful and it's so huge. It's just, it's... I have a beach house on Little Gasparilla Island, and it's pretty primitive. That's down there where Boca Grand is. And so it's not much traffic in that part of the world, so you get to see a lot of things.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** The manatees have come up on the beach for years, to get water, they hunger for fresh water. You know, instead of salt water, so as long as you give 'em water they'll stay there. They like to have their back scratched. And when you catch fish and you clean 'em, you have a board you put 'em on. The seagulls and the pelicans will come and take it out of your hand. Right there. And also when you're catching mullets in the inter-coastal waterways the tarpon will come up and take em out of your hands. But it's kind a like a fantasy land. One of my friends who worked, you know what Cyprus Gardens used to be?

**McChesney:** I don't know.

**Potter:** Cyprus Gardens was a place where they had young ladies waterskiing, and it was just a beautiful fantasy land, you know. And one of my friends who was over there, Maylene Blackburn, back then, in the 50s waterskiing. She swims with porpoises still. Mhm. Yeah and she's my age. You get in the water with them and they seem very friendly. Of course the game wardens don't really allow that. Unfortunately.

**McChesney:** Wow. Um...

**Potter:** All the old courthouses, most all the old courthouses, were where you were sentenced, where you were imprisoned, where you were executed. Like we had our own gallows. If somebody needed to be hung, they hung 'em here. And since it was pre-tv and sometimes pre-movies, you know, you got a lot of people come to watch and one of the men that I know's

granddaddy, built the last gallow. And he didn't know how to build it because there weren't any plans, and the man that he was hanging, and I'm not gonna mention his name because it's somebody you might know, but he killed a man in cold blood, so he was sentenced to hang and so everybody that could come to watch him hang. People are like that. And the rope was too long, so he dropped, when they dropped the door his feet touched. So they had to shorten the rope hang him again. Horrible right?

**McChesney:** That sounds awful.

**Potter:** Yeah.

**McChesney:** Man. I think that John Ryan also mentioned that you had done cattle drives?

**Potter:** Yeah, one of the last, one of the last cattle drives from Rye Bridge. There used to be ramps scattered around Manatee County, Sarasota County, where you load your barges, you put the cows on, a lot of cows went to Cuba and other places from here. Which you just take the range cows, load em up, and so there were ramps where you'd load the cows. And there used to be a ramp, right at where (inaudible) is now, on highway 64, so there was a bunch of cattle where Rye Bridge. And so I was on the last cattle drive, where you load the cows, right there on highway 64, right along that ramp. That was in the 40s. Made me feel like a big shot.

**McChesney:** I can imagine!

**Potter:** Yeah.

**McChesney:** What was that like, to do that? Was it scary? Was it fun?

**Potter:** It was, no, it was wonderful. It was... you were just kind of following a leader. The older guys would show you what to do, so there really wasn't much danger in it. You'd get a little bit sore, riding a horse a long ways, but it was wonderful. You'd eat along the way, build a fire, cook things. A typical cowboy outfit would be a tin can with a hoop on it, and what the real cowboys would do, they'd put a layer of coffee beans on the bottom of the can, okay? And then they would put some bacon on top of that, because you know everybody had their own pigs that they—wild pigs you see, you smoked and cured 'em, so you had the bacon. Then they'd put a biscuit on top of that to keep it all together. You'd go by a stream, and you'd take the biscuit out and the bacon and you'd pour some water on the coffee beans and build a fire. You'd make some coffee and you'd eat the sandwich with the bacon and the biscuit. That was a typical cowboy meal.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** Some of the cowboys who I know that were alive back then had one of those, those cans hanging from the ceiling, in parts of their room, just to bring back the good memories of it. Back then, people didn't have much money, but they had a great lifestyle. You see, it wasn't money, it

wasn't required, A lot of people, most people had farms. A lot of people didn't have running water, but they had pitcher pumps and windmills, and so you didn't have to pay for electricity, you didn't have to pay for a phone. You had to pay your taxes, and just about everything else was self sufficient. People kind of lived off the land. Just think, you have bills to pay, right?

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**Potter:** Back then, you had very few bills to pay.

**McChesney:** Sounds nice.

**Potter:** Mhmm, definitely. There's still people live like that, very few, but still, like that. And also, people used to put up things. You know what that means? If you produced like butter beans or black eyed peas, you know what they are right? Or tomatoes, you would can them or you'd put 'em in a mason jar. You'd have a big pot. You'd cook it all and sanitize everything and then the mason jars, you'd seal it all up, so when you harvested your food. Or sometimes cows, you know you made hamburgers, and --- and gravy. You'd put them in jars so you could grow your stuff, and then you'd have enough to last a year, because no refrigeration. So you'd do that. And also you'd smoke things. Everybody had smoke houses. And you'd smoke the venison, and the pork and that's you know, they did that thousands of years ago. What you have to do you know, is cure something. You put something in with salt and other things that makes it, preserves it. And you smoke it, and you can eat smoked stuff. And now they use chemicals and refrigeration, but back then it was a little different.

**McChesney:** Mm.

**Potter:** That wasn't very many years ago. We still eat smoked mullet. That's a delicacy here. Very plentiful. [00:14:56.10]

The beaches weren't developed back then, There was one beach that went from here to Bradenton Beach. It was a wooden bridge, during the Second World War you couldn't buy any material, it was so rickety that when you'd go across it, it'd go back and forth. And to keep it from caving in, all the mothers and fathers required that the school bus park before they got to the bridge and all the children would walk across the bridge. When they got to the other side, then the bus would follow, because they figured the bus loaded with the children was too much for the bridge to carry. That was in the 40s. That was where, off Cortez now.

**McChesney:** Wow. I think I saw on online, that you had done a lot of hunting when you were younger and also you harvested... clams? I'm sorry, I'm not sure what....

**Potter:** Scallops.

**McChesney:** Scallops.

**Potter:** Scallops. Yeah. Well what it used, I had a 1929 A model car. It was a nice car. We would load four shotguns in it, double barrel shotguns and old shotguns, and we'd go to school and we'd leave 'em in the car. Usually a hundred rounds of shotgun fires. And after school we'd go hunting. And we killed doves and quail. And we ate a lot of doves and quail, cause they were very plentiful. But we didn't have locks for our doors on our cars, and the switches instead of key switches were like light switches. So you could just switch your car on that way, so you didn't have to worry about losing your key. So we'd have all that equipment at school wide open, nobody ever took anything. And never had an incident. It wasn't against the rules to do that back then. Can you believe that?

**McChesney:** No, that's amazing.

**Potter:** Yeah it is. But, yes, we used to hunt a lot. And we used to fish a lot. So you ate a lot of wild game then. Scallops, what we would do, we'd take one of our mother's drawers out of one of the cabinets, like, this, take the bottom out and put glass there. So you could push it along the water. And that would solve the reflection of the chop in the water. So you could see like a lens, you could see the scallops beneath there. And you would take a big wash tub, put an innertube around it, and we'd walk along, and we'd pick up the scallops and we'd put them in the big tub until we got a big mess, then we'd take 'em to shore. And they were very plentiful, clams were very plentiful, oysters were very plentiful. Some of the places where we'd give 'em to were called a pantry, because if you wanted to eat something you know you could go to the pantry. It was just really just a beach and a nice shoreline. Called a pantry. Game was very plentiful back then. A sports man would never empty anything, he'd only take so much. You know that's, in the wild, game, you know like fox, or a bobcat, will only take what it needs. A dog or a cat, specially the dog, will kill a whole lot of things and eat very little of it. Because see, you know, it's kind a like, you don't ever wanna eat your seed corn so you'll have something to plant. Wild game knows about that, domesticated animals don't understand that. You understand? People are a lot like domesticated animals.

**McChesney:** Did, um, was the scallop, the way that you did it, was that the way everybody did it, or did you come up with that?

**Potter:** I don't think anybody else ever did it 'cause they were afraid of their mother. Now most people just walked along and then picked them up and weren't worried about the reflection. Later on when I got married and had children, I put the children in the tub with the scallops so they could go ride around with me.

**McChesney:** That's really cool.

**Potter:** It was. Another thing that we used to have that we don't have now,[00:19:08.19]for young people, I'm telling you this because of your age, you know, when we were your age, we had places we went to in Sarasota, a place called a Smack. And it had the speakers like a drive-in

movie, where you ordered your food, and these pretty little girls in roller skates would come out and bring you your food. And they would have these uh, like soda fountains, they'd have the music, so, and everybody had 'em. They were all over the place and that was before TV so the radio was a big thing, and going to— What you'd do when you had a car, and if you borrowed your mother and daddy's car, you'd go to four or five drive ins, 'cause that was the meeting place for everybody. In the day time it'd be the soda fountains and at night it'd be the— [phone call interrupts]. But that was a wonderful thing to be able to do. Drive around and see all your friends and dance in the parking lot and have a hamburger for fifteen cents or a cold drink for a nickel. It was wonderful recreation. And also, everybody likes to drive. You like to drive right?

**McChesney:** I love it.

**Potter:** Yeah, at your age, you know it's a big thing so... And back then you could buy a car for 85 dollars, not a new one, but a good car. When I was fifteen I bought a nice car with a rumble seat. You know what a rumble seat is?

**McChesney:** I don't.

**Potter:** Okay, you know where a trunk is on a normal car? A trunk opens like that, a rumble seat opens like this. So it lays back in the back of the, what you open up is a seat. The seat is down here. Understand? So you had the front of the car there and you had a rumble seat in the back. It was kinda neat, everybody liked rumble seats. And so I bought a car with a rumble seat and big old side white wall tires, and red leather seats, and just really nice. And my mother and father said I couldn't drive it until I was old enough. And so it didn't have a tag on it, and I didn't have a license. And so one day they were gone and I was gonna go to the drive-in, you know the drive-in like, the Old Patio was the particular one I was going to, it's on highway 41 between here and Sarasota, used to be. And driving there, I ran into the sheriff. I hit the sheriff's car. I didn't have a license, I didn't have a tag, and I didn't have an excuse. And so, can you imagine how you'd feel if you ran into the sheriff? And you know what the sheriff did? He got out of the car, he says 'Rodney is that you?' And I said, 'Yes sir, Sheriff Bailey.' And he says, 'You alright?' And I said, 'Yes sir, Sheriff Bailey.' And he says, 'Well, have a good day.' That's how things were back then. I didn't damage his car bad, so he wasn't upset. I thought he was gonna report me to my parents, but he didn't. So, we were always friends. Friends for life. Things were a whole lot simpler. School had real strict discipline. We had belts where you, you got belt line if you misbehaved. You know what a gauntlet is?

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**Potter:** Where you had two lines of people, and you'd run down through there and people hit you with your belt—with their belt. Well they was... we had paddles. Take a baseball bat, put a paddle on one end of it, so yeah. Discipline was rough. Also, they'd make you run laps until you were exhausted. Discipline was— we just didn't have much problem. Somebody'd be bad one



time. So it made it easier for everybody else. It was good. And a lot of the teachers were there for life. In 1954, I was tryin' to make an A in English, because it was important to me. I like to write. And Mrs. Davis was the principal's wife. And she gave us a test, was gonna, mean it was gonna tell if you were gonna get an A or you weren't. It was 20 archaic words. You know what that means?

**McChesney:** Old words.

**Potter:** Very old yeah. And so I was sitting on the dining room table at home trying to find out what they meant, and I couldn't find it the encyclopedia, or anything. And so my mother came by and said, 'What's wrong, son?' And I said, 'I can't figure out the meaning of these words.' And she said, 'Oh that's the same test she gave me in 1930.' So my mother made an A twice. She gave me the answers. Yeah.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** It's hard— hard to believe right?

**McChesney:** Yeah, can't imagine. [24:05]

**Potter:** Indian mounds are, uh— you know what an Indian mound is?

**McChesney:** The shell middens?

**Potter:** Yeah, right. Well during the twenties, during the Depression, the federal government drafted men into working, building roads and bridges and stuff. Sea walls. And so, a great way to find a whole bunch of aggregate stuff to mix with the cement was an Indian mound. So the workman would go to an Indian mound, which was great, right, and make seawalls out of it. And so some of the seawalls that we discovered when we were young had arrowheads in it. See, and so we'd take our little hatchets and we knock the arrowheads out of the sea walls.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** Yeah, wasn't that a terrible waste? You know where Desoto Point is? It's up Memorial? Anyhow, it's out towards where, that's where Desoto landed. And there was hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pieces of Indian pottery out there. Most of it was just skipped across the water. The children would go out there and throw it across the water.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**Potter:** But also out there, there was, you know, salt was a big thing. You had to have salt to preserve stuff, and for taste. So there was some evaporation area out there, you know what I

mean? Where— where the water would come up and evaporate and leave the sea salt, and I think there're still remains of it there today.

**McChesney:** Wow. That's amazing.

**Potter:** Mhmm. You can ask me anything.

**McChesney:** Okay, so, I guess um, I'm curious more about the shell middens because I haven't ever seen one, I've just read about them.

**Potter:** About what?

**McChesney:** The shell middens? The—

**Potter:** The shell mounds?

**McChesney:** Mhmm. I was wondering—

**Potter:** Well, a shell mound. Where they lived— okay? They would, they lived on the land, know what a conch is?

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**Potter:** Okay, well they liked to eat conchs, and there's a place down there that's a mound bigger than this room of conchs. Where the Indians lived there for years and years and years, and they would travel from inland, where the fishing and hunting was good certain times of year to the— to the ocean where it was. You know they moved, with the seasons and where the game was. Because they had to have something to eat. They didn't farm back then. And so what they would do, they would take, they would bury everything, including the people in the shell mounds. And so a good thing for you to remember, when your pile of garbage gets too big, okay? I call it Seminole, because of the Seminole Indians. And you leave it and you go to someplace else and make another pile of garbage. People do that, in life. In school. When you get so far behind, in your work when you wanna move on. Then I call it Seminoling. Because you have too much garbage there, you had to get away from it, it started to stink. See what I mean?

**McChesney:** Yeah, I do.

**Potter:** That's relative to the people's lives. Right?

**McChesney:** Mhmm.

**Potter:** Mhmm. So there's quite a few Indian mounds left still around. That they haven't been destroyed. [27:14]

**McChesney:** Did you go look through them when you were younger?

**Potter:** Mhm, yeah, sure I did.

**McChesney:** Did you find—

**Potter:** Yeah, we used to- used to be fascinated when we'd find a human bone. That was when you're young, well you're young, when you're young it's fascinating.

**McChesney:** Mhm.

**Potter:** Friend of mine was doing what you like to do. What your line of, what your career is in. He followed the Intercoastal- know what an Intercoastal Waterway is?

**McChesney:** Mhm.

**Potter:** Well, they cut through Indian mounds when they were going south. And he would go with 'em. So when they cut through the Indian mounds he would collect the skeletons. And he could tell you from the size of the skull and the height of the bodies, you know, what tribe they were with. The tribes around here, they were mostly tall. The tribes south of us here were small. And he kept it inside. He had a duplex, and one half of this duplex, three bedrooms, was dedicated to skeletons. When he died, unfortunately, his son gave it all to the museum of New York City. It should've stayed here. Yeah, yeah, they were fascinating. Down where my beach house is, on Little Gasparilla Island, you can find thousands of sharks teeth. All different sizes, all over the beach. You know they're country find.

**McChesney:** I saw one once in a store, but I've never found one.

**Potter:** Mhm. [phone call interrupts]. One of the places downtown, that used to be so popular was called Council's Pool Hall. You know, all cities had a pool hall. [29:13} People'd, you know, billiards, play pool? And the one we had here called – it was called Council's– the man that owned it was called Council Smith, had been there for a hundred years, and they were famous for their hamburgers. And they were also famous 'cause they didn't allow girls there. If you– if you were in there and the telephone rang and it was your secretary wantin' to say 'is Rodney there?' Say 'Nope, I've never seen him.' It was– it was a different world back then. You know? And that was.. and Council's is still in business. I still own the record for eating the most hamburgers, or cheeseburgers there. I ate, when I was fifteen, I ate ten all the way.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**POTTER:** And nobody's ever topped that.

**McChesney:** That's a really hard to beat record.

**POTTER:** Yeah. It is. What we used to do when we were your age— there was no bridge to Longboat Key from Bradenton Beach. It was washed out in one of the hurricanes. So you had to go all the way— Have you ever been through Lido?

**McChesney:** Yes.

**POTTER:** Okay, well you had to go all the way through Lido and then up through Longboat Key. And where the Colony Beach Club is, that's where we used to— that was our place to go picnic. So there'd be three or four carloads of us boys and girls, and we'd go out there, and we'd always invite the Cortez girls. Because Cortez was a fishing village. And the Cortez girls were always pretty, like you are, and also they'd always bring their fish. So they'd all be cleaned. So we'd build a fire, just like the Indians used to, and we'd build a fire and we'd take sticks, forked sticks, and we'd put the forked sticks through the gills of the fish. After we'd washed them in salt water. And so they would turn a bronze color, and they'd be cooked in no time. We'd put our blankets out. Longboat Key Police would come check on us two, three times a night, Friday and Saturday night and sometimes Sunday night, depending on where the school was. And we'd dance and just have a great time. We used to swim way out past the sandbars and float in the moonlight for hours. It was wonderful, it was a wonderful lifestyle. And now you can't do that anymore. They don't let you do that. But they do let you do that on my island, Little Gasparilla Island. We still do that. We build a fire on the beach, and if you want to go out and swim and float, nobody's gonna stop you. Most people don't, 'cause everybody's afraid of sharks now.

**McChesney:** Do you ever see sharks when you go there?

**POTTER:** Oh yeah. We've caught sharks. You know, when there's — Boys, probably a little bit more reckless than girls. We just never thought about getting hurt. Nobody ever got hurt. So, at eighteen, I think you're probably more mature than eighteen year old boy probably. How old are you?

**McChesney:** I'm nineteen.

**POTTER:** Nineteen, I figured you would be eighteen, nineteen or so. You know, good age, good age. It's a good age to learn.

**McChesney:** I see your Distinguished Citizen of the Year award. What was that like when you got that? It sounds—

**POTTER:** The citizen's award? Well they do it at the fairground. They pick somebody out every year, and it's supposed to be a big surprise. And they drag you over there under false pretenses and they give you the award. It's really an honor. And the year after that I was called the most distinguished graduate of Manatee High School.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**POTTER:** So, I've got a number of wonderful, wonderful, flattering awards.

**McChesney:** That's really cool.

**POTTER:** And I've got the Old Timer's Award at the, for the Lumber Association. You look at it, some of the things up there. Several Governors have awarded me different times. One year, I was awarded "Official" at the dog track, which... I don't gamble. And, for anybody that's a good thing, to see how miserable people get when they lose all their money. Man, this is really fun. People get really upset, which, you know, I'd be.

I made some notes about different things. I talked to you about beach life. Most of the schools back then had ag. plots, where you raised vegetables and sold 'em. There was a lot of people back then, which there is now too, that didn't have much money. So if you wanted to go to the Farmer's State Fair, which is always a big thing, you know, we'd make enough money selling our produce to have money for everybody to go and enjoy themselves. Yeah. That was a way to learn. One thing we did, one year, we had a huge crop of corn. And everybody's corn came in at the same time. And one thing in business that's always prevalent, is the amount available. Usually, if there's a whole lot available the price goes down, because a little bit available the price goes up. So we took all of our corn, we put it in an ice house, where they make ice, and—and we kept it there for quite a long time, 'till the price went up. And so it teaches you about—about life. It was a good thing, in school back then. I went to the Manatee Junior College the first year it was open. And you knew just about everybody back then.

Another thing when, when I was growing up, the mosquitos were a problem. Some of the places people wanna live now, they wouldn't live then. Like Longboat Key. There was a terrible amount of sand gnats. You know what that is? People call 'em no-see-ems. They make you get measles.

**McChesney:** Oh.

**POTTER:** Yeah, because they sting you. Well, it was terrible back then because they hadn't drained the Island yet. You know, there was still water standing there. And so nobody wanted to live there. And some of the places out around the mouth of the river, in Manatee County and also in Sarasota County, where there's mansions now, is where the migrant workers used to live. Because of the bugs. Nobody wanted to live there. It's different. Now they've drained it all the — lot of the million dollar houses are right there on the water. That's where people wanna live now. But it was, back then, you'd go there and it'd just be shanties. People were hard up then. Of course, they lived off the water too. They ate fish and scallops and everything.

**McChesney:** Did you, you probably fished a lot when you were younger?

**POTTER:** Oh yeah.

**McChesney:** Was that, like, was that a social activity?

**POTTER:** It was. I had a girlfriend in it. Well actually a friend girl, that went fishing with me a lot. We were like brother and sister. And, yeah, we'd go fishing and we'd bring the fish home and our parents would cook it. It was fun, yeah.

**McChesney:** It sounds fun. I used to love fishing when I was little.

**POTTER:** Most of the girls back then, or a lot of the girls were tomboys. Because there was a lot of things to do like that. There was still some sissy girls too. Are you a tomboy?

**McChesney:** I think so.

**POTTER:** Well, that's good. It's nice to be able to do everything. Well, we'd go on our bicycles. We'd take our wide reels, our fishing gear, go out to the shore on our bicycles. Everybody had a bicycle.

**McChesney:** That sounds really fun.

**POTTER:** Mhm. I started to tell you about the DDT? You know, to kill the mosquitos, they had DDT trucks. You know what DDT is?

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**POTTER:** It's a bad spray.

**McChesney:** Mhmm.

**POTTER:** And so they had foggers. And they'd go through the neighborhood and treat us with all this DDT fog. And the children would go on their bicycles and get to ride around in the fog. That was a thing. Everybody did it. Yeah. And nobody knew how harmful it was. People would open their houses up to get the DDT inside the house to kill all the mosquitos. Yeah. So you know, we were innocent of a lot of knowledge back then, that we've been exposed to later on. But it didn't kill anybody so, at least, that I know of.

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**POTTER:** My grandfather was Game Warden here. His name was Handlebars Hilton. And he was born in the eighteen hundreds. And he had a mustache that was big like this, so it was like handlebars. So you could see who he was from behind. Yeah. And I used to go with him out in the woods to where he did his job as warden. Back then there was a bounty on buzzards. [38:21] There was a bounty on crows 'cause they were carrying disease. So he took a cedar knot and

made a rubber band with a piece of inner-tube and made a crow call. So he could get over there in the bushes and call the crows up and then shoot 'em. 'Cause they were carrying a terrible disease. And that's why he had to do that. And the buzzards too. Because they were carrying the disease from eating carrion that was infected, understand. But none of that happens anymore. Because we don't have the disease anymore.

I was a cowboy for a while. Back in 1954. I had a friend girl who was in rodeo. She was older than I was, she was a rodeo star. And she had horses. And so we would go to the big ranch, which was 37,000 acres, And this is a terrible thing to tell you, but a screw worm is a, you know... a normal fly, house fly, lays an egg that causes a little worm called a maggot, and the maggot lives in dead things, okay? But a screw worm fly lives in live things. Like if you had a scratch on your arm and you got an egg there, you could have a worm living in your live flesh. And when a cow would birth a calf, anyplace there was any scratches, there would be the eggs deposited. And so the cow would be, would be eaten alive. You know, they would just, they would eat craters from the cow. And so what we would do, we would lasso them, I would. And throw them on the ground and then we would doctor 'em. And we'd doctor 'em by taking all of the maggots out and then we'd paint it with something called crinosone, which is a real strong and that would burn it, would cauterize it. And that way, so, it would do that for the calf and the cow so they would live. And you're probably wondering what happened to 'em right?

**McChesney:** Mhm.

**POTTER:** University of Florida developed a sterile screw worm fly. And so in old military transport, airplanes, they brought billions of them out and they bred the fertile flies out of business. So now there are no more screw worm flies. Except in Mexico. They're still there. And that was a terrible thing.

**McChesney:** Sounds horrible.

**POTTER:** Yeah. My Grandmother Potter died before 1920 in the flu epidemic. It killed people in Europe.

**McChesney:** Yes, the Spanish flu?

**POTTER:** It killed people in Europe and the United States. It was the number one killer in the First World War. And so she died from that, when she was eighteen after she'd had three children. People got married back then, you know, very young. My mother's family came over from England in 1623. You know, the Mayflower was 1620, they were 1623. And then they migrated from Dover, New Hampshire to Alabama and then to Florida. After the Civil War there was so much bad stuff going on. After the war was over, the raiders and such, that they had to

leave their lumber mills and such and go on to Florida to escape all that. The bad stuff that was going on. History doesn't talk much about that.

Another thing too. I'm very Southern. My brother and I married sisters. And I tell people we had to because our cousins weren't old enough. Nah, that's not true, we didn't marry sisters. See people expect Southerners to be inbred. Married within the family, you understand? We like to talk about our children and our brothers and we tell funny stories. Like, one of my brothers was so ugly when he was born. You know, back then when a— it was unusual for babies to be born, 'cause there wasn't very many people, and first thing a mother would do is take the baby to church to show it off. But my brother was so ugly that my mother walked two miles to a bar instead of taking that baby to church. She almost smothered him. She diapered the wrong end. And when she nursed him, she had to wear a mask, 'cause she looked down the milk wouldn't flow. See that's cracker stories. You never heard anything like that probably.

**McChesney:** No.

**POTTER:** If you're around a campfire with a bunch of old crackers, you'd hear things like that. Mhm. When I was growing up, there weren't, there just weren't any hospitals to speak of. It was mostly doctor's offices. And Saturday mornings, if I wasn't working, the big thing was listening to the radio. [43:45] They had something real scary called Inner Sanctum, Hop Along Cassidy and, oh Fibergee and Molly, English Andy, Cisco Kid, and that was the type of things— it was pre-TV and so it was the radio. And they give you an ability to visualize because of that. You didn't have a picture in front of you, but you had a good picture in your head. It was good, it was good. You could still find some of those. Also every Friday night was fight night. And everybody was into boxing, and so you'd gather at somebody's house and listen to the fights, or the grownups would listen to the fights. And when it was over, they would put boxing gloves on the children, and I was always big and my cousins was always big, so we always got to fight and were made to fight. And so these grownups would be so excited from watching, or listening to the boxing that they'd make the young people box. You know, real, real boxing gloves, and so you'd box until they got tired, not when you got tired. Back then, you see, there was, they tried to make you tough, because of the wars, and the idea was to have everybody grow up to be strong. Like little warriors. After the Second World War. And another neat thing about that, during the Second World War, everything was rationed. You couldn't buy butter, you couldn't buy a lot of meat, you couldn't buy gas, couldn't buy tires, couldn't buy shoes, you got coupons. Rationing coupons, that you bought things with and, so, in all the schools at recess, you could draw hate pictures. Pictures of Tojo, from Japan, or Hitler or Mussolini. Instead of sitting there drawing pictures of flowers and birds and stuff, you'd be drawing hate pictures, you know, ugly pictures of the leaders of our enemy. And also they had a scale in each room, and when you brought in boxes of leather or boxes of rubber or tin foil, they would weigh it. And you got promoted, you know, from a Private on up, depending how many pounds you brought in. I made Master Sergeant. When the war was over I had gotten all the way up to Master Sergeant 'cause I had



brought in so many pounds of that stuff. The point to that is that all everybody in the United States, was in the war effort. You see? We were united for our lives. So we wouldn't be Germans and Japanese. You know, it was a different thing. The submarines were right off our coast. Some of 'em were sunk in Tampa Bay. The Coast Guard used to stay at the beach. Patrol the beach. All the headlights on the cars had to be painted black at the top. All the streetlights were black at the top. All the people that faced the beach had to have black blinds so the light couldn't shone through. And they would check you to make sure that that happened. Yeah, it was serious business. So they tried to raise a whole bunch of warriors. And it worked. Yeah, believe. Scary times.

**McChesney:** Yeah.

**POTTER:** Mhmm. You know the reason we weren't invaded? You need to know this. The real reason we weren't invaded by all those Japanese and Germans out there? Because every household in the United States was armed. And today they still are. See the people trying to take away our armaments are making us very vulnerable. See, they know if those guys came on land, they're gonna die. Because they couldn't, you know, people wouldn't tolerate them. Understand? So we shouldn't have arms control. That's all.

**McChesney:** I can't imagine that. That would be so frightening. During a war.

**POTTER:** Yeah, you just got used to it. I used to love, they would pull a tube behind an airplane. And the one's at Tampa, and at Bradenton-Sarasota Airport would learn how to be fighter pilots. Would shoot those tubes behind the airplanes as if it was an airplane, and it used to be so great when you were little, you know, to see all these planes going up and shooting down these tubes, I mean it was exhilarating to see that. And that—

**McChesney:** Wow.

**POTTER:** And of course, now that I'm older, I think, well, what'd they thing was going to happen to the spent bullets? You know, the cartridges? I found one on the street at a busy intersection, when I was little. One about that long. It came out of one of those guns.

**McChesney:** Wow. When I, I used to live in El Paso and the bullets would come across from Mexico, and you could find them near the fence, you could find just little shells and you could find them embedded in the buildings and things. That was always really exciting.

**POTTER:** Mhmm. Yep. Yeah, I guess so. It's dangerous. What people do round here, a lot of the black people to just celebrate the holidays, Christmas and New Year's and Fourth of July, they shoot up in the air. So guess what happens?

**McChesney:** The bullets come down?

**POTTER:** The bullets come down. And we had, at the last holidays, holes in our roof here, where the bullets had come down. So we had to patch the roof.

**McChesney:** Oh wow.

**POTTER:** They weren't malicious in doing it they were just unthinking. Yeah. Can you turn that off just a minute?

**McChesney:** Oh sure. [49:39]

.....Break..... new tape.....

**POTTER:** Okay, back to small town. So everybody knew everybody's business. So there was a realtor— a realtor here in town, kind of a short feller, he wore flashy, real flashy clothes and cowboy boots, wasn't a cowboy, and had a big Cadillac . And his name was Alex. And he would drink a lot. So he was known for being an alcoholic. And there was a big fundraiser at Zim's Restaurant, that was a place between here and Sarasota. It's closed now. The parking lot was shell, so you would have places scooped out in it, you know, just where the water would come and go. So one day, the mayor, I mean governor, was down here fundraising. Hundred dollars a plate, had a horseshoe place where you ate, and so I, my friend were there in the parking lot, waiting for it to stop raining, and Alex drove in and he drove right over this great big pond, right underneath the car, great big dip. And, so he's short, so he tried to get out of the car, he reached for the ground, and he missed, so he landed right on his face, hat, 10 gallon hat like Texans wear, and went right in the water, you know, mostly submerged in that old grey dirty water. So my friend went over there and helped him up. He was drunk, and he'd bought his ticket, hundred dollar plate. And when he got inside, horseshoe place to eat, the governor was right at the point of the horseshoe, on the outside. There were two places left to sit, and they were right in front of the governor. So Alex sit right in front of the governor, and there was no liquor there. He ate his steak, and soon as he did, he laid his head in the plate, so when the governor was speaking he was snoring. See. We just don't have characters like that anymore. My friends, the ones that helped him on the inside, were very embarrassed.

Another time that there was a— it used to be you traveled with trains— there was a flamingo special. It was going to a big banker's convention, and Alex invited himself to go. He wasn't a banker, but he was a great customer for the banks, 'cause he arranged for a lot of mortgages. So they treated him with respect. And so two of the distinguished bankers were going, and so Alex went with them. Of course he was drunk, and so he went to sleep, and when he went to sleep, you know he slept with his mouth open. So the next morning, they had a club car where they had their own bedroom, their own bathroom, and everything. You know, that kind of a suite. And he went in there to the bathroom where one of the bankers had put his false teeth in a glass of water. And so he drank the false teeth and then spit 'em out, threw them down the toilet, and so the poor

banker who was supposed to speak at the convention had to stay in his hotel room, didn't have any teeth. That's terrible, isn't it?

**McChesney:** Yeah, oh my gosh.

**POTTER:** Can you imagine drinking false teeth? See if you didn't have a strong stomach that probably would have made you ill. We had one grocery store downtown, one major grocery store. It was called the PenCash. It's an old, old timey grocery store. And when they got a stock of bananas in one time, it had a boa constrictor in it, little baby snake. And so they kept it until it was huge. And you'd go in the grocery store, the back wall there was this huge live snake in there. It was behind chicken wire, so it couldn't get out. Huge snake. And it was, it scared a lot of people half to death. My mother didn't like to go in there. But there was a, downtown, there was a shoemaker named Clooster. He came from Italy, Mr. Clooster. And he and his wife lived in a little teeny place and did shoe repairs. And they were old timey, didn't speak any English to speak of. But every day he would walk twelve blocks across town, to go to the PenCash grocery store to tell the man that owned it, who was also the butcher, he would say, 'two slices of bologna, a thick one for me, I work, a thin one for my wife, she don't work,' and that's what he got every day of the week. You understand he gave his wife a thin piece because she wasn't a shoemaker? Old country. Old country. Another town character. My father had a man working for him. A black man named Joe Wade. And Joe Wade was bad to fight. And so back then, if they got in a fight and somebody died and you'd put 'em in jail for a week or two. And during the war, my father needed the help, because people were, he was taking car tires and cutting the rubber up for people's soles, 'cause you couldn't buy leather or rubber 'cause it all went to the war effort. So he needed help, so he'd get him out of jail for two or three times for killing somebody. And the last time he decides he was gonna let him stay. So finally they let him out, so they called my father and they say 'look, Joe says he's coming over there to kill you because you wouldn't let him out of jail.' So I was there. And sure enough he came in, this black fella, and he went over to where my father was and he started threatening him, and I thought 'oh no,' I was quite young. My father just took a hammer, hit him right in the forehead. Whomp. Fell right down just like an inflated balloon, a deflated balloon. Just fell right down on the ground. And there weren't enough police cars back then, so he called over to the jail, said 'well come get Joe, he came over here wanting to kill me, he's unconscious and bleeding all over my shop.' So they sent a man over there to carry him back to jail. Sounds primitive, don't it? And the man, his name was Jacket, Victor Jacket was the police man. Great, big, strong guy. And so he leaned Joe Wade up and when he picked him up, he got top heavy and more of his torso went on the other side of Jacket, and so when he fell down, head fell, he did, he fell right on top of Joe Wade's head, which smashed it pretty good. And so for about two years there was a solid trail of blood from my father's shop to the courthouse where they carried him to.

**McChesney:** Did he, did he live?

**POTTER:** Sure he lived. He lived. Can you imagine, no police cars?

**McChesney:** No.

**POTTER:** During wartime, it was a different world. We had to sell our car, 'cause we couldn't get tires or fuel for it. Didn't have to sell it, but we did sell it. They made a cab out of it. Then we could get a cab. [7:20] We used to have a milk man that would, that was nice. The children would run up behind the milk wagon and get ice out of it. Because you know, usually you didn't have ice. People still had refrigerators, but they wouldn't have iceboxes. So you wouldn't dare take your ice out of that, you know what an icebox is? So you would have iceboxes. So you'd rather get some ice, or dry ice, out of the milk truck and the one we had. The man we had was named Walt. And the children would get up in the trees. Climb the trees. And so a lot of times when the milkman came, his first job was to help the children get out of the trees. Because you know the mother was there, she wasn't about to climb the trees. So we used to talk, Walt used to come in here for years, and we'd talk about that. That's what you call really personal service. Deliver your milk, get your sons out of the trees.

**McChesney:** That's really funny.

**POTTER:** And you had, there was a man named Innick, that was born in Norway. Spoke very, very poor English. And he had an old --- car, and you see, back then the wife usually didn't have a vehicle. You usually had one vehicle, and that was the man who went to work. The wife stayed home, took care of the children. Mostly. Mostly that's the way it was. Because there wasn't any other way. And, and a lot of things that we have now, we didn't have then. So it was a cheaper time to live, you didn't have any air conditioning, a TV, you didn't have McDonald's. You cooked it yourself. Money went further. You didn't hire out to get things done, you did it yourself. So Mr. Innick would take a sheet and lay it down on the seat of his truck, and he would bring chickens and ducks, all cleaned, and fish, door to door to the wives, to the mother's houses. There was another thing called Jewel Tea, and it was a fancy wagon, fancy truck, and they sold tea and coffee and other things for the wives. And some of these veterans from the Second World War would push a cart, and the push cart had a driving wheel on it. And they would go to a house, knock on the door, tell 'em they were veterans, and they would sharpen your scissors, sharpen your blades and all that. Yeah. And the city transit bus would come 'round, and lot of times that was the only transportation some of the people had. For a nickle or dime you could get to town. Instead of having to walk or call a cab. So things were very much simpler back then. There wasn't so much of worry of worlds as there is today. Normal.

When I was 13, I worked for a dairy. My father was in the hospital. I worked 7-14 hour days, each day was 14 hours. 98 hours a week. And I got paid 58¢ an hour. For working at the dairy. And that was \$49 a week. The men earned \$36 a week, 'cause they didn't work the hours I worked. So that was a lot of money back then, \$49. Now you spend more than that going out to eat. But that was a long time ago. In the 40s. What I did at the dairy was pack grass. What you

would do was called, broadcast. You'd have, it's bermuda grass, which is grass that has a long runner to it. You'd pull your arm over it like this and you'd spread it, that's called broadcasting. See it was all done by hand, except for the tractor part, now it's all done by machines. [11:08] When I started working here we didn't have very much, very many machines. Box car load of rubber weighs over a hundred thousand pounds. That's a lot. And I used to move the cars by myself. I'd push 'em, hundred thousand pounds by myself. See what most people don't realize, once you get 'em started moving, they're easy to move. So they would go to the crossroads down here, and the car would stop because they'd see the train coming, and they'd think it'd be a locomotive. It'd just be old fat Rodney, pushing the car by himself. I used to enjoy that. Some of the people that we would hire, would come from the salt mills, had never seen a bathroom. They didn't know what exactly it was. You'd have to, when they came to work, you have to show 'em. Where to go in the bathroom, and what to do. Yeah, it was more primitive. A lot of 'em couldn't read or write. But they would, we— we helped 'em. By teaching them how to do things so they could prosper. Ask me anything sweetheart!

**McChesney:** Okay, what was it, how did... you've been working here for so long, how's the place changed? You mentioned there weren't a lot of machines. I guess.

**POTTER:** Well, number one, we didn't have computers. See this machine here? That's a 1926 comptometer. They taught that in school up until the '50s. And I still use it. I can do things on that, quicker than you can do things on this. Agnes? Did she leave? Oh well. I can do things quicker on that than you can on a computer. 'Cause I used to use it. See I've been using it for over 50 years. I do the computer with my left hand, I do that with my right hand.

**McChesney:** Really? Wow. Is it like a typewriter?

**POTTER:** It's like an abacus.

**McChesney:** Oh, okay.

**POTTER:** It multiplies and divides. Adds. Does all that. So you can do two or three things at one time. And it's quicker on that. Some things are quicker on this, 'cause it has memory, that has no memory. So I need both of them. When I started working here, things were simpler. You know a lot of, back in 1955, one of the things that I did was cut out coffins. You know what a Potter's Field is? That's when people die, they don't have any money to be buried with. So they have to go to what's called a Potter's Field. The reason they called it that was because potters, people that make things out of clay, were usually very poor, didn't have money to bury themselves. So, I would cut boxes out of it, hundreds of them, that was my job back then. We did a lot of machine-ing back then. Lot of cutting. Had one guy that chopped off his thumb, and all that, just like that, just like that. Went to Doctor Suggs, he was one of the only surgeons that was around here. Doctor Suggs took scissors, trimmed off the excess flesh, and then stiched it up. Same day, he's back working the same saw.

**McChesney:** Oh my gosh.

**POTTER:** Yep.

**McChesney:** It was, um, one of the automatic types of saws?

**POTTER:** No it wasn't automatic, it was just a saw. Just a regular arm saw like that. One fella, lot of the black people have rhythm in what they do. They just have natural rhythm. And that's not being prejudiced in saying that, I mean that's just, it's a, it's a compliment. Had one guy named John Henry. And he was a black and white negro. His skin was just as pale as yours and then some of it was just as black as your hair. Because he'd been in an explosion, and the steam had cooked him. And so, everywhere that had been, was cooked, and came back pink. And he was running a saw and the board kicked back and tore his nose off. All the way, tore it off. This is a terrible story. And so I was running that part back then, I was very young, and they said 'quick, call an ambulance! Call an ambulance!' This was back in the 50s. So I called an ambulance, and the ambulance got there and they said, I can't pick him up, he's black. You have to call the black ambulance. So I had to get back on the phone, call the black ambulance, 'cause the white ambulance didn't carry black men. Isn't that terrible? I really felt, I felt terrible 'cause I thought he was gonna die, 'cause I called the wrong ambulance. That's unbelievable, isn't it?

**McChesney:** Is he okay?

**POTTER:** Oh, he's fine. His nose is a little crooked, but he was alright, so. He was back running the same saw, his nose was a little bit greenish and yellow looking when they put it back on. It was mostly straight. It was a good conversation piece, having this detached nose. He just had a crater there, where the nose was.

**McChesney:** That must've been terrifying.

**POTTER:** I was pretty upset. Yeah. He was unconscious. He wasn't upset.

**McChesney:** I guess that's better.

**POTTER:** Yeah. I felt like hugging the black ambulance driver when he got there. 'Cause I felt like such an idiot. So that's definitely different than what you see today, isn't it.

**McChesney:** Definitely. Wow. Are there still, like, a lot of accidents in the—

**POTTER:** No. No.

**McChesney:** There're safety features I guess, now.

**POTTER:** No, they're not very many accidents at all anymore.

**McChesney:** That's good.

**POTTER:** We don't do as much machining here as we used to. We still do everyday, but it's not like it used to be. We don't make coffins anymore. We do a lot of cutting of boards, special sizes and we got a machine that produces all size of woods.

**McChesney:** Do you make a lot of things? 'Cause I guess, you work with a lot of lumber and things, do you make things?

**POTTER:** Well, for instance, we have all this stuff that we make. Like this. This is all special moulding. Our own private brand. All kinds of sizes. If people can draw it, we can make it.

**McChesney:** That's really cool. Wow.

**POTTER:** When we had our old timey shop, we made paddle boats, swamp buggies, cabinets, doors. If people wanted it, we made it. Because you see, you couldn't buy a whole lot of things. You had to make it. You see, now there's a lot more available than there used to be back then. So if you wanted, you made it. We made all our own moulding, made a lot of our, a lot of our own doors. Very few things were pre fabricated back then. It's a different world now.

**McChesney:** That's really neat.

**POTTER:** It's more into mass production now then it was back then. Most everything was custom. Labor was cheap, and so it wasn't manufactured like it is today. I bought a house from 1912. In --- Blvd. Which is a nice place to live for \$14,200 in 1959. And the man who built the house, well actually it was built in 1910, but it was finished in 1912, was a vice president of one of the banks. What do you think he made it with? He had an acre on --- Blvd and a big two story house and a garage. What do you think he made it with?

**McChesney:** 200?

**POTTER:** A dollar a day. The house and all the property cost \$800. Back then.

**McChesney:**Wow. That's amazing.

**POTTER:** It is. And he went back and forth to work on a bicycle.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**POTTER:** When I started working here, how much do you think I made? 1955?

**McChesney:** I don't have any idea.

**POTTER:** 85¢ an hour. And I'd work 65-70 hours a week. A dentist back then made a hundred dollars a week. That was a lot of money. I thought if I ever made a hundred dollars a week I'd be really a rich man. But what they start— they always paid us in cash. They'd give you an envelope, you know. [20:04] With the cash in it. Then they started paying us in checks. And I didn't— I wasn't married, and I hunted and fished a lot, and didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't have any bad habits. Didn't gamble. So I just started saving up my paychecks. Thought, didn't have a bank account, yeah, you know, just keep the money in a drawer at home. I just kept saving it, saving it, the checks, saving the checks. Finally the pay master, Mrs. Ryan Hart said, 'Rodney if you don't start cashing some of those checks, we're gonna stop payment on 'em.' So then I took the money down to the bank, and there was an old lady down there named Mrs. Barbara. She was boss lady of the bank. So I gave her all my checks and I said, 'Just open up an account for me, Mrs. Barbara.' So I kept bringing the checks and bringing the checks. And didn't take much money back then. Gas was 15¢ a gallon. 15¢. Right? Movie was 9¢. Hamburgers were 15¢. Steak was 99¢ a pound. Or less. Bread 11¢ a loaf. And so my mother wanted to go to Georgia, and I had a 1929 A model that I paid 85\$ for. Great car. It had blinds you pull down in the back, armrests, really a neat old car. I loved it. Wish I had it today. And, so I decided I needed a better car to go to Georgia. And this was 1957 or so, so I went to the bank and I told Mrs. Barbara, I said, 'Mrs. Barbara, Mrs. Barbara,' I said, 'I'm gonna buy an Oldsmobile car that's in another state from the Packard place. Packard was a real nice car back then. A man named Gordon Smith, he had a Packard dealership. And he had this Oldsmobile somebody'd traded in from another state. And she said, 'Nope' she said, 'I've seen your car. That 1929 A model, that's a plenty good enough car to go to Georgia.' She said, 'I'm not giving you any of that money.' I said, 'Mrs. Barbara, it's my money!' And she says, 'I know, but you don't really need to get it out of the bank, you let it stay there. It's good for you. At your age.' She said, 'I'm not giving you any money.' So I went home and I told my mother. I'm grown right? And I said, 'Mother, Mrs. Barbara won't give me the money to buy the car. My money to buy the car.' So she wrote a note to Mrs. Barbara, said it was alright for me to get my money out of the bank. Yeah. The moral of that story is you were everybody's child back then. People looked out for you. And when she gave me the money, she wasn't happy. She said, 'I'm gonna be watching you and watching that car, so you better take good care of that car.' If you misbehaved, the police would take you home. Another thing they did, the state's attorney here, his name was Max Smiley. He was real good, real good guy. Sunday school teacher at the Methodist church. And some of the boys, the rich boys were rebellious. They did things that were wrong. And so what he would do, he would send the sherrif's department down to the school to pick you up if you were bad. They'd take you from school, which would shame you. Put you in jail, in the courthouse, a special section they had for young people, back then, not in there with the hardened criminals. And you'd go to jail at night, and on the weekend. And during the day, you'd go to school. And so if you weren't in school, you were in jail. Friday afternoon, went to jail. Monday morning, they'd pick you up, come take you to school. They'd keep that up as long as the daddy and the prosecuting attorney, state's attorney, decided you needed to be there 'till you learned your



lesson. Some of those boys ended up being attorney's and doctors. That helped change them 'round. Taught 'em that they couldn't be rebels. It was a good thing. I know some of them today, 'course we don't talk about it. I went to school at Ballard School, which is still there. It's on a place called Ware's Creek. And the uh, Ware's creek came right up onto the school ground, there was no fence. But the alligators would come up and sun on the school ground. And where we were down at the recess, you know, Kindergarten up to 6th grade. And we could watch the alligators in spitting distance, on school grounds. Every once in a while somebody's dog would, dog would follow 'em to school, get eaten by an alligator, yeah. See how things change?

**McChesney:** Yeah. Were they really big alligators?

**POTTER:** Oh yeah, yeah they were big. Especially big when you were only about four feet tall.

**McChesney:** Wow, I've never seen an alligator more than one that big.

**POTTER:** I live on the river, and in a very primitive part of town, I've got about 1600 feet of riverfront that I bought a long time ago, and we've got a lot of alligators, lot of alligators. Some of 'em 13 feet long. And my children swim in the river, and my grandchildren swim in the river. But I usually stand on the bank, the bank's real tall, with a gun, just in case. Never had anything happen, but you wanna always, when I see an alligator close around I get the children to get out of the river. But you just have to be careful. I'll tell you snake story.

**McChesney:** Okay.

**POTTER:** We had a big ranch that we used for years and years and years to hunt. Had a little cabin out there. Really wonderful. And one morning, one of my brothers went out quail hunting, know what a quail is? Okay. And there was frost on the ground, icy on the ground. And while he was gone, his dog, Dixie, this really fine pointer dog, stepped over this big snake, 'cause it was so cold the snake wasn't moving. So he raised up the shotgun. And threw it back in the jeep and brought it back to the camp and said, 'come on out here and help me skin a snake.' The snake was 6 feet 6. Which is really big and it was about that big around, probably around 4 inches in diameter. So I went out there, still real cold. And I grab the snake like this, my hand around my wrist as if my fist is the snake's head. And my brother took a straight razor and you know what that is? And he started splittin' the snake. What you do is, you split the snake then you roll the skin away from the flesh, 'cause we had people that like to eat the flesh. And so he was doing that and it kept trying to pull it out of my hand. I mean really strong and I was holding on as hard as I could, and it was trying to pull it's head out of my hands and so I said, 'Freddy, how did you kill this snake?' he said, 'I shot it's head off.' I said, 'No. I'm holding it's head, so I stood on it's neck, and took a rag and wiped it's head off, and it was very much alive and it's eyes were looking up at me, right? And it was really upset, 'cause we were skinning it alive. And what Freddy had done, he'd shot off it's lower jaw, so it still had it's big ol' fangs, in there. I don't know if you've ever been scared or not, but sometimes when you get startled you can feel all the

hairs on your body. I could feel all the hairs on my body. Because here we were skinning a 6 foot 6 snake that was very much alive.

**McChesney:** Yikes, that's really scary.

**POTTER:** So I was like, scary. I chopped the head of the snake off so it wouldn't suffer anymore.

**McChesney:** What kind of snake was it?

**POTTER:** Rattlesnake.

**McChesney:** We have a lot of those back home.

**POTTER:** I know you do. We've killed a lot of them. They're, they're not friendly. They're really, they are not aggressive. Now, cottonmouth's aggressive. But rattlesnake will go away from you, unless you corner it, or unless it's losing its, its shedding its skin. When it can't see well, it feels threatened, so it'll strike at you, but as long as you don't bother it, it'll go away. It knows you're too big to eat, so, they like to eat mice and rats and squirrels, maybe baby rabbits. Birds. But no, they only strike us when they're threatened, like you step on them or something.

We've had people working for us that couldn't read or write, like I told you. Some of the best drivers we used to have couldn't read or write. But they were so smart, you know, you could give 'em three or four deliveries and tell 'em where to go and who to go to and they could do all that. They couldn't read or write. Well it got to where what I would do so that there was no problems, I would color code everything. They knew colors, so whatever it was going to a certain job, I'd color it yellow, I'd put yellow on the ticket. And you know, different ones would be red, blue and green so we had 'em color coded to make allowances for the people that needed to work but were handicapped. Couldn't read or write. Now everybody we have can read and write. Most everybody's very, very, very literate. You want that book?

**McChesney:** Oh! Could I have it?

**POTTER:** Sure. Mhm.

**McChesney:** Oh, thank you!

**POTTER:** Another thing people used to do, when you were young like you are, and they'd say, 'Come along with me, Patti, I need for you to do this.' and you'd do it. And you'd work for three or four hours of hard work and you'd get through and you know what they'd say? 'Thank you to you, better pay you.' That meant you never were gonna get paid. 'Thank you to you, better pay you.' You always had to be willing to do it 'cause, you know, that was what was expected of you. Didn't necessarily mean you were gonna get paid.

**McChesney:** I remembered that John Ryan told me to ask you a lot of things about, said you'd talked to him, a year ago or something, about um...

**POTTER:** He's a really nice guy, I really like him. Fine fella. He speaks very highly of you.

**McChesney:** Oh really?

**POTTER:** He did.

**McChesney:** Oh wow.

**POTTER:** He said you were very smart young lady.

**McChesney:** That's really nice. He said that you told him a story, I guess about, I think it was about the manta rays. I think that he said you told him a story about seeing them. Was it the story that you told me?

**POTTER:** Mhmm.

**McChesney:** Oh okay, I just wanted to make sure that I didn't skip that.

**POTTER:** Yeah, yeah we used to go, what's called floundering. And floundering, a flounder is a fish that has both eyes on one side, and they kind of bury themselves in the sand, you know about that? So all you see is an imprint of it. And what we would do, we'd take a metal Coleman lantern. You know what I'm talking about? A gas lantern? And we'd put a belt around, a belt around our neck and we'd walk around like this. At night. All over the place. And you'd gig 'em with a straight steel gig, and that way you'd reach down and pick 'em up this way, so they never could get away. Then you'd put 'em in a croaker bag, a cloth bag, strapped to your waist. And that's how you'd do it. And we'd have all this bloody fish right next to where the sharks and everything were, and never thought anything about it. But we would sell the fish to some of the nursing homes because there was a shortage of things they could get. And we'd sell them, pretty good things, lot of fun. It's called floundering. Very fun thing to do. We'd do it just about all night long. And now nobody does that anymore. Some of the bad things about all the road traffic are fish and scallops need grass. And we have a lot of turbulence over the sand and covers the grass. See? So then you don't have scallop food, you don't have place for the minnows to hide. So that way you don't have the fish coming there to eat the minnows. Understand?

**McChesney:** Um, you mentioned that you used to, you would catch sharks sometimes? Is that—

**POTTER:** What?

**McChesney:** You would catch sharks?

**POTTER:** Yeah. We would, I shouldn't tell you this, but there was a place down off Siesta Key called Midnight Pass, used to be. So we'd take half inch hemp rope and we'd take a shark hook, it'd be like a six foot chain, great big hook and we'd put three fish on it, three big fish and we'd wade out and we'd throw it just as far as we could to catch a shark. In order not to lose our line, we would tie the rope around our waist. Two of us. Had it been a big shark, you wouldn't be talkin' to me now. 'Cause we woulda been the one been caught. You know? It woulda pulled us all out to the ocean. Never happened. We never got any real big ones and so, yeah that's how we used to catch 'em. Sometimes we'd gig 'em too. They're hard to gig. They're tough.

**McChesney:** Yeah, their skin is really thick. Did you eat them? Do you—

**POTTER:** We didn't eat 'em back then. We usually gave 'em away. People like to keep their mouths or teeth. I don't know what they did with 'em really. They mighta eaten them. I don't know. They, they were fair game back then. They are now too. But yeah.

**McChesney:** Do you know what kind of sharks they were?

**POTTER:** I don't really remember. I didn't really pay much attention to that back then. But, we used to go spear fishing too. And we would take an arbolette, which was called, which was a surgical tubing, like a sling shot, through the spear and hook your fish like that.

**McChesney:** Wow, that's really...

**POTTER:** It was like that. People still do a lot of that. It's a lot of fun. Have you ever done anything like that?

**McChesney:** No, never did that. I had a slingshot as a kid, but that's about it.

**POTTER:** We had a long spear that would come out of that arbolette. Then you'd have a string around your belt and you'd catch a fish and put it on there and keep on going.

**McChesney:** Was that, did you do that in a boat or did you just—

**POTTER:** Both, both yeah. We would take our boats off the bottom. We would find boats that had been abandoned and be full of sand on the bottom. We'd take the sand out of them and we'd bring it up and then we'd take it to shore, and we would take bronze nail, bronze quarter inch nails, and we'd put it back together, so it wouldn't leak, then we'd paint it, with an oil based paint, and we'd take. We'd have free boats. It didn't cost anything. That we would put together ourselves. It had been washed up during a storm or something. Course, that's legal. I guess they might be deemed as a menace to navigation 'cause they'd be just loose. We had several boats that we got, used for years and years and years out of them.

**McChesney:** That's really cool.

**POTTER:** Mhm. Was always proud of that. And the boats weren't very sturdy. If you were out in the channel and a big boat came by, the bottom of the boat would go up and down and the sides would go in and out. I recall they weren't very sturdy. But we were young so we didn't worry about it.

**McChesney:** That's so cool.

**POTTER:** Yeah. I throw knives. One of my hobbies is throwing knives. When you go to the movies for 14 cents down at the Palace Theater down in Bradenton, on Saturday, they would have a matinee. And they would have a man throwing knives at a beautiful young lady up there and bursting the balloons and all that. And taking a whip and popping cigarettes out of her mouth and doing all these neat things for 14 cents. So when you'd go home, you'd try these same things. So, I got to be a very accomplished knife thrower, and I still am. I have a collection of knives. I can probably, see that knot right there in the corner next to those foxes? I could probably hit that every time with a knife.

**McChesney:** Wow. That's amazing.

**POTTER:** It's just, when you do it so much that really there's a science to it. See? You know how many revolutions the knife's gonna turn, and so you know exactly right to the half inch how far you have to be from the target, and you release it at the same point every time. So it's not casual like it looks like it is. It's very precise. Like playing a musical instrument. One of my friends, I showed him how to do it. He shoots cigarettes out of his wife's mouth. So I know how to do that, too. But, what you use is a soft bullet. See? Everybody thinks you're using a real bullet, so if you actually hit somebody it wouldn't kill 'em. It'd hurt, but you wouldn't kill 'em.

**McChesney:** That's good.

**POTTER:** Mhm... yeah. I have horses.

**McChesney:** Really? Do you still?

**POTTER:** Still do. We live on the river, like I told you. And there's alligators. And a baby alligator when it's threatened sounds just like a child. It makes a noise just like a baby. A real baby. A baby person. A baby human. And we were travelling in our canoe, me and my daughter, she was probably twelve, and saw a bunch of tiny gators. And I told Elizabeth, said, "Elizabeth don't bother the gators! 'Cause the mother's over there." She picked a gator up. The gator was probably 18 inches. Put it in the canoe. The baby just callin' for its mama, "Mama, mama!" And then I thought, oh no, here she comes. Just as fast as you can, I told my daughter, said, "If you ever paddle in your life honey, paddle now." So we out ran the gator, actually halfway it just kind of lost interest. So we took the gator in the house, see my house was big and it had three bathtubs and showers, so it was downstairs, one of the downstairs tubs we just turned into an

alligator house. So we had a house gator. But my wife's backwards, she made us get rid of it. I gave it to one of the guys that works here, and he kept it in his living room, and it would – he'd buy fish from the pet stores. You know the fish they use to feed things? Yeah that's what kept it alive. And you'd go to visit him, and you'd be sitting on the couch and all the sudden the gator'd stick it's head out from under the couch. It was startling, and it was very entertaining to watch the people's reaction when they'd see an alligator, right there, at their feet. Yeah. You wanna turn that off?

-----new tape-----

**POTTER:** They gave me a blue bag, like you get at a clothing store? A blue plastic bag. It had three ripe tomatoes in it. People do that kind of thing. Tomatoes, fish, potatoes. Things. And so I walked out that side door there, and there was a man there, cross the parking lot, with a gun. And, he told me, "give it up." He wanted to get that bag because he thought it was a bank bag. For a buck, you see? And I carry a gun, so I said, 'I got a gun.' So he said, 'You shoot me, I'll shoot you.' And he shot at me, missed my throat by that far. Still holes in the building out there. Where he shot at me. So I had to shoot him, so he wouldn't kill me.

**McChesney:** Oh my gosh.

**POTTER:** But he ran. He was so high on crack, he ran three blocks. You know where the coroner's office is? He died three feet from the coroner's office. So he delivered himself to her, so to speak. Bad guy. He'd already shot some other people. He was a bad guy. One of the business slogans, rules, I have is to make it easy for people to be honest, thereby you make it hard for 'em to be dishonest. Remember that, that's a good thing.

**McChesney:** That's really smart. Have you ever been through hurricanes?

**POTTER:** Was a hurricane in 1960 I guess. It had 160 mile an hour gust. Didn't have any water or electricity for a couple weeks. 'Course I worked here at the time and we were really busy with calls. There was a lot of damage. And it's very selective. Some places would be all messed up and right across the street'd be fine. I guess it causes a whole lot of little tornadoes. One year when I was young, it blew the river, blew the water out of the river, Manatee River. You walk on across it except for a channel. It was weird. I thank God we haven't had one for a while. They're not good. Here, you know, it makes people so frantic, when we're getting ready to have one. See back then, you know, back in the 50s you didn't know it was coming till it was almost here. So now you know way ahead of time and it makes a lot of people really hysterical. You know, I have women call up here, men too, 'What do I do about this, what do I do about that?' One of the things they call about 'What am I gonna do with my dog?' I say, "Bring the dog in the house!" Right? The people just get hysterical. A lot of that's the news media's fault. Because they show all this horrible pictures going back to the beginning of time, just like it was just now happening today, which it wasn't. So it scares people. It's good for business, but I'd rather not have that

kind of business. Yeah. We sell thousands and thousands and thousands of sheets of plywood during that time. About three miles from my house, there was a man named Johnson who was partially eaten by a gator.

**McChesney:** Oh Wow. What happened?

**POTTER:** He fell in the water, and when he did the gator got his head.

**McChesney:** Oh my gosh.

**POTTER:** Mhmm.

----- Pause, New tape-----

**POTTER:** Well, one of my cousins, George Potter, lived in Sarasota. His daddy was George Potter, the Potter building at the fairgrounds? That's named after my uncle George Potter. And George Junior, we called him Georgie, had a got a Cushman motor scooter. You know what that is? It's a, they still make motor scooters, boxy things you sit on, they usually have a seat in the front and the back. And so, I would go down there and spend some of the summers with him. And we were like, 12 and 13, and that's when they had the civil air patrol. And everybody was concerned about the atom bomb, because of Korea and stuff, and so people were building bomb shelters. And so our job was to be on that Cushman motor scooter and go so many miles out of town and when they sound the alarm like there was gonna be airplanes coming to bomb us we could say we heard it. See? So they could tell how far the alarm went. And that was in the 50s, I think. Might of been in the late 40s. Something about Sarasota that you wouldn't think of.

**McChesney:** Wow.

**POTTER:** There was a swimming pool there. Out there at Lido. We used to walk out there. The Manasota Key was very primitive, a lot of shrubbery and stuff back down on the beach. The Island that I own part of now, Little Gasparilla Island, was undeveloped. Have you ever been to Boca Grande? You need to go to Boca Grande sometime. There's a lot of history there. They built a railroad, some smart people built a railroad from New York City all the way down to Boca Grande because you see, transportation was a problem. Cars weren't very good and the roads were terrible, so you could get on a deluxe train in New York and go all the way down there to the Gasparilla Inn, which is a great big hotel. Still there. Still there. In Boca Grande. Get one of your boyfriends to take you down to Boca Grande. Or girlfriends. Because you can go to the hotel, that's really old. 1910, 1920 it's pretty well like it used to be. But they built, they built a trestle down there, several trestles and it's still there. The railroad people are still there. Really neat. George Bush and Mr. Bush senior are, that's where they vacation, the president. There are beautiful estates down there.

But, waterways in Sarasota. Well, there wasn't a bridge from Bradenton Beach to Longboat Key and so you could drive down the beach, fishing was great. It was all like public. Nobody cared, there wasn't a fence or anything. Just wasn't much development out there. There weren't many people.

Sarasota of course had the circus. Ringling had the eastern part of Sarasota as the circus quarters. We used to love to go down there, feed heads of lettuce to the hippopotamus. And, they had a gorilla down there named Gargantua. Huge. He played with tires and stuff. When I was little we did that. We'd go down there quite often 'cause my uncle George was, and we'd go visit all the different things. And it was the winter, of course so you could just mosey around in there. Pay almost nothing to get in. You were right there where they lived. They weren't putting on a show, you were just right there where they lived. It was just fabulous.

**McChesney:** Wow. Did you see the elephants?

**POTTER:** Yeah, mmmm. I had an elephant given to me. There was a man, stage name Rex Williams. He was the trainer. I've had so many interesting things happen to me in my life, you just wouldn't believe it. But there was a man, Rex Williams, stage name, and he was from Europe, a trainer for the circus. You know about that, being from New College you would. Anyhow, so he was a trainer, he trained elephants. He was world famous for doing that. And he has a wife named Ava, and he had two daughters. And his daughters were the same age as my daughters. And they got to be good friends. And his daughters would go to my house and my daughters would go to his house. And he kept the elephants at his house. You know, just like you'd keep a dog. He kept elephants. He had 'em chained so they wouldn't wander off. And he had a beautiful elephant with great big tusks, and it was the one that was the poster for the circus. This big beautiful elephant with huge tusks, and he had a blanket on top of him, and then he had the tiger on the blanket. And his wife Ava was real pretty, she had long blonde hair, and she'd ride on back of the tiger. So you had the elephant with the tusks, the blanket which was almost like India rug, you know very fancy, and the tiger, great big tiger, probably weight 6 or 700 pounds, and then his beautiful wife right on top of that. That was, that was the poster you saw everywhere. 'Cause it's unbelievable. Tigers and elephants are enemies. Right? So, but it happened. So he called me up one day and he speaks a little bit of English and he says 'Rodney, I bring elephant to your house.' And I said, 'No, uh, Rex, not today though.' And he said, 'Good, thank you, I bring elephant to you house.' Man, you know if you, I don't know how your mother is, but probably if your daddy brought home a guest for dinner, and she didn't know about it, she'd be a little bit mad? But how about if somebody brought an elephant to your house? So I just thought 'Man, my wife's gonna kill me 'cause I'm coming home with a great big old elephant, right?' So I said, 'No do not bring elephant.' He said, 'Good, I be there, I be there.' Didn't understand a word I said. So I said, 'let me speak to Ava,' his wife Ava, she speaks English. So I said, 'Ava, I can't keep the elephant at my house.' She said, 'We know you can Rodney. We've been to your house; you have a lot of land, and we're gonna bring the elephant.'



And I said, 'Please don't do that,' I said, 'Your little girls, my little girls playing around in that yard with the elephant, they're liable to get stomped on.' She says, 'You're probably right,' so they didn't bring the elephant. Come to find out the reason they were giving me this elephant, it was worth a ton of money, was because it had arthritis. They were spending 400 dollars a week for cortisone to give the elephant shots. So I would have had a doctor's bill, minimum of 20,000 a year just to keep the elephant. And it would've lived a long time. So thank god I didn't have the elephant. You know, I kind of thought it'd be neat to have one. You know, ride around on it? I shoulda kept it for a week. You go wade down the river on an elephant. Wouldn't that make a beautiful shot? So, they ended up putting it to sleep, later though. [END]