

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW WITH: Monroe Brannen
INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham
LOCATION: Florida Southern College, Lakeland, Florida
DATE: March 9, 2000

J=James M. Denham
M=Monroe Brannen

J: I am here today at Florida Southern College with former Sheriff Brannen of Polk County and today is March 9, 2000. Mr. Brannen, can you say a few words for us to make sure this tape is going to pick us up?

M: Yes. Good morning. I'm happy to be here with you.

J: We last spoke in 1997. That's been a lot longer [ago] than I thought it had [been], but I had to transcribe that, so I wrote down 1997, and we talked about all kinds of things during those three hours, we had three hours together. We talked about your growing up in Lake Butler, and your uncle, your uncle –

M: Wiley Brannen.

J: Wiley Brannen, and I tracked down some things since I listened to that again, and I found some information that I'd forgotten about as far as your uncle goes, and that was quite an interesting coincidence. We also talked about your days as a Lakeland policeman?

M:

J: Do you remember any remarkable or outstanding or unusual drug busts or crackdowns or anything like that? What was the most dramatic one that you can remember?

M: Well, I don't remember, I remember one time that we got \$11,000 but I don't just remember –

J: In cash.

M: In cash. I remember that. I don't remember just what year it was in. Then you know, back in those days, this county was a dry county, whiskey-wise, I was pretty good on that one day or the next, but I don't remember. Of course I've been away from there for 18 years and my memory is not like it once was. But we had no problem with our people.

J: Now Polk County during those years was still pretty rural, were there a lot of people growing marijuana out in the woods and things like that?

M: No, not here.

J: Do you remember nearby counties where that would have been a problem? Say Pasco County? Or Hernando County?

M: Well, Pasco County –

J: Or Osceola County?

M: Osceola County had a little problem with it but we was much larger than them, you know, mileage-wise because Polk County's the largest county in Florida, the second largest. Palm Beach is the largest county mileage-wise. But we had no problem with the people like that. But it just kept gradually getting worse. I don't remember just, I know one time and I don't remember who it was that, in a murder case and the person had \$25,000 cash dollars on him, and that come through our county. And it was his money, and there was others that I don't remember any more much about.

J: Okay. Well tell me about the Mulberry holdups. How did all that happen?

M: Well, the way it happened is two police officers working in the department--and down there, one who was a chief and the other one was, I don't know what to say officer, and one night on a Saturday evening at eight or nine o'clock in the afternoon, we had a holdup that deputy went out there, deputy was with the policeman and they went to the store, I don't remember which one it was, there on 92 or 17, and to talk to this girl in the ____ and carried her to the bank, but it was made up. He started to get out but robbed him and he threw the money back to the people that stole it, it was one of the policemen from Mulberry, so really it wasn't we went out and tried to talk to her -

J: To the policeman?

M: Yeah, two of the policeman, and he didn't want to talk to us, said it was nothing happened. So it went on back and to a little bit and they just never could get it together. We had it together.

J: How long was it before you got a feeling that there was something wrong?

put him on probation, I don't remember right now, and the other one was tried and he, they

J: Do you remember what the one that pled guilty got?

M:

we had to get a release from them and the City of Lakeland. So one day a man from Bartow, not from Bartow, a man come over here, called me over the phone and he said 'Monroe,

M: Oh, I don't know, seven or eight.

J: And then he came back to work for you?

M: No, he went up there as a boy, we'd see him up there and that was his home. And then when he got 16, 18, we sent him to college up there.

J: Yeah, is that right?

M: And he came back here, his mother lived over there, and I gave him a job in the Sheriff's office.

J: Now when they would go up there, did they have a school there, or did they have a school nearby?

M: They'd take them to school.

J: How did it work?

M: Well, the children went to the Public Schools.

J: Right in that area.

J: So the families live on the ranch, too.

M: Yeah. And the families lived on the ranch. Just like every man and woman did and take care of the children. It was a good thing. The State didn't pay anything but for 16 years I was there, they didn't even pay a dime.

J: Do you know if they do that now? If they supplement it now?

M: They do everything

J: So what do you consider to be your greatest contribution to Polk County?

M: Well most, when I left from down there it was about 16 or 17 hundred dollars. And today it's over 100. . . . So where's the time gone . . .

J: Yeah.

M: Now, we didn't have enough money, but we got by with what we had, you know. We had some good people down there and I never, and another thing that I'm afraid of now is, every time you see a policeman anymore, they're shooting like 14 times or 41. Now believe it or not, when I was in the Lakeland Police Department down there, you learned to shoot with that hand just like that, one hand. And you learned to shoot with the other. But I got my arm messed up in the South Pacific. You can see a little difference in my hand, see it shake? I never could control the hand anymore. I had it in a cast for 13 weeks. I didn't complain. But anyway, that's history. I'm glad I served. But getting back to your question. The biggest contribution was to the Sheriff's Boys' Ranch from out of this county.

J: That's something you're proud of then.

M: Yeah.

J: Well, one of these days, I'm going to get you and we're going to talk about World War II, how about that?

M: Alright.

J: I don't know when or whatever, but I want to get this finished first, 'cause I know that you've got some very interesting things to tell us about that. Well, I know you're busy and you want to get back to work. I just wanted to leave you with May 25th. We're going to have our program down in Bartow, that I talked to you about, and one of the people that I was listening to on the tape yesterday that you mentioned was Bob Saunders from Tampa, NAACP. And he's going to be there too.

M: Is he?

J: Yeah. So that will be May 25th.

M: May the 25th.

J: And I'll call you and we'll talk a little bit more about it. It's over a month from now.

M: But anyway, getting back to our problems, now I'd like to read that again . . . I never went back in from of the Board of County Commissioners as long as I served to ask for more money.

J: Did you ever have to ask for more money?

M: No. I got by without it.

J: Yeah. So, since the county commissioners appropriated money every year through the taxes, I guess –

M: Every year in July.

J: For the sheriffs, that must have given them a tremendous amount of power, a lot more power than they had before.

M: Well, [you see by the old system] you go out and get a drunk and make 20, 15 dollars or 12 carrying them to Bartow, and that eliminated that and it should have been. But the other constables stayed on the fee system until around just before they abolished it in 1972, I believe they went under, they did away with the fee system and appropriated their money.

J: Now we mentioned in your last interviews that you were a constable before you were elected.

M: You had to be elected for that.

J: Oh. That's true. You were elected Constable before you were elected Sheriff.

M: Yes.

J: So that job obviously had a lot of things in it that allowed you to really meet a lot of people –

M: Yeah, well –

J: And go around, you know, and seeing people.

M: You'd think me being Sheriff here now – is this on? Then when I was elected Sheriff, I left the City of Lakeland in good standing and there wasn't no phones, direct telephone lines, you know in Polk County until, I believe it was around the third of, in 19 and 61, of September or something or other. There wasn't no direct telephone lines from here to Bartow, no direct line nowhere. And I wouldn't trust the Board of County Commissioners when I was elected sheriff and told them that I was going to put in a telephone line from Lakeland to Bartow and from Winter Haven to Bartow and they said 'we don't have the money' and I told them 'well we're going to have to get it -- about \$12,000. I got the telephone line then the next few years I got one to Haines City and got another one to Lake Wales and then naturally to Lakeland.

So the constables here, I mean I was, I went and hunted the city of Legalbrook, you ever know him Brooklyn? Well he was the Chief of Police, you know, a good person, good man, and I went to see him about the second month I was elected Constable, could have been the third, and he said 'I'm going to buy a radio to put in my car' and I did one of those would pass it he said he was going to get the thing and put it in and he says don't talk to nobody but me. And I was smarter enough to tell him that I would never show them those call if I were to have my car in Drew field where it might be in the court. I'd tell them where I was at and when I'd come over here. If I was going to Jacksonville to pick up a prisoner, I'd tell them I was going to Jacksonville and wouldn't be back 'til tomorrow evening or something, and they was nice enough.

And then this was the hardest job I ever had. There were people who'd go up to the Lakeland Police Department. I don't want to pay for a telephone call to get a Deputy over here -- they ordered me to death. That was the hardest job I ever had. And they'd call me at two o'clock in the morning, and seven o'clock in the morning. That was the hardest job I ever had.

J: And you're working alone and everything.

M: And I never had any trouble. The only trouble I ever had was one person and he beat me and I beat him up. I hit him with a flashlight. But I never had to fight with nobody. I've been all over the country and got people right by myself. I went to North Carolina one time and come back with four. That's the truth. And it was kind of funny. It was a teenage girl and teenager boy about 16, 17, 18 or 19. . . . [On one of those trips taking prisoners back to Polk County] I stopped in Lake Butler and Aunt Creasy, we always called her that . . . she was out in the yard and she had the same amount of children that my mother had. There was 11 in our family and 11 in theirs. And she seen all them dirty boys and hanging girls and how it would affect them. [She had a] nice-looking daughter, and she just broke down and went to crying. And I said 'Aunt Creasy, you don't need to worry about me. Ain't nobody going to hurt me'.