

**Oral Memoirs**  
**of**  
**Jeannie Economos**

An Interview Conducted by

Jared Muha

December 10, 2014

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories

(RICHS)

*University of Central Florida RICHS*

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## **Interview Histories**

Interviewer: Jared Muha

Transcriber: Geoffrey Cravero

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES, History Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

## **Project Detail**

RICHES is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Jared Muha is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in History. His area of interest is agricultural labor. Jeannie Economos is the Pesticide Safety and Environmental Health Project Coordinator at the Farmworker Association of Florida, who also worked as Lake Apopka Project Coordinator for the Association, as well as for non-profit organizations such as the Audubon Society, Save the Manatee Club and the botanical gardens.

## **Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Geraldine Matthew is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on December 10, 2014.

## **Abstract**

An oral history interview of Jeannie Economos, the Pesticide Safety and Environmental Health Project Coordinator at the Farmworker Association of Florida (FAF), who also worked as Lake Apopka Project Coordinator for the FAF, as well as for non-profit organizations such as the

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Audubon Society and Save the Manatee Club. The interview was conducted by Jared Muha at the FAF in Apopka on December 10, 2014. Topics discussed in the interview include a summary of her career, the Lake Apopka Project versus the Lake Apopka Restoration Act of 1996, the Farmworker Association of Florida, pesticide health and safety, common environmental challenges facing farmworkers, the necessity of farmworkers, the evolution of farmworkers, African-American farmworkers in Apopka, the jobs and education partnership after the shutdown of Lake Apopka, effects of the shutdown on African-American farmworkers, the influx of Hispanic farmworkers, and the future of farm labor in the United States.

## **Jeannie Economos**

Oral History Memoir  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Jared Muha  
December 10, 2014  
Apopka, Florida

0:00:00

### **Introduction**

**Muha** This is Jared Muha on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, with Jeannie Economos at the Farmworker Association of Florida. So, Jeannie, uh, do you wanna start by, uh, telling us who you are and a little bit about yourself?

**Economos** Sure, my name is Jeannie Economos. I, um, am the Pesticide Safety and Environmental Health Project Coordinator here at the Farmworker Association of Florida. I've been in this position since 2007. Um, I came back to work at the Farmworker Association in 2006, um, and in 2006, I was working on immigration issues, um, but prior to that, from, um, 1996 until 2001, I worked at the farmworker association as the Lake Apopka Project Coordinator, um, and prior to that, um, I've spent the last – since – well, the last 30 years, um, working for non-profit organizations on everything from the Audubon Society and Save the Manatee Club, um, to the farmworker association and the botanical gardens, but my passion is environmental justice and social justice, and I – and I worked on Indian rights issues, uh, for a while also, as a volunteer.

**Muha** Great, thank you.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

0:01:16

### **Lake Apopka Project and the Lake Apopka Restoration Act of 1996**

**Muha** Um, I – I heard you mention the Lake Apopka w – w – can you say that one more time? The Lake Apopka Project?

**Economos** Well, um, it – we didn't have an official name, but, um, when I began in 1996 – um, that was before the farms closed on Lake Apopka – when the State of Florida passed the, uh, Lake Apopka Restoration Act of 1996, which was, um, the, um – the legislation that gave the [St. Johns River] Water Management District the authority to buy out the farms on the north shore of Lake Apopka. So the farmworker association began work on trying to address the issues of the farmworkers related to this proposed buyout. Initially, we actually tried to stop the State [of Florida] from – before the legislation was passed, we tried to stop the state from buying the farmland, and tried to, um, get a coalition of groups

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together to, uh, support sustainable agriculture instead. That didn't work. Um, the state bought out the farms, um, and so, from '96 to '98, we tried to get programs for the farmworkers, um, and then after the farms closed, we were doing, um, disaster control – trying to get housing and food for people – before we learned about the serious contamination and health issues. Um, so – um, so – yeah – so I was the Lake Apopka Project Coordinator from '96 to 2001.

**Muha** Great, thank you.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**0:02:52 Farmworker Association of Florida**

**Muha** Okay, um, so I'd like to start by just asking about, um, farmworker association much more broadly.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**Muha** Um, so can you just tell us broadly what the Farmworker Association of Florida is and what it does?

**Economos** Well, it would take a long time to tell you everything that we do. Um, we were founded in 1983, uh, incorporated in 1986, expanded statewide in 1992. Um, we do a lot of things. I guess our two main focuses over the past, um, 30 years, um, have been immigrants' rights and, um, pesticide health and safety. Um, we do lots of other things, too, which would take a long time to say, including things like wage theft, disaster, um, education and response, um, civic participation, um, housing. We did housing for a while, but, basically, I think the best way to describe our organization is that we are very grassroots. Um, our Board of Directors are[sic] almost all current or former farmworkers. The head of the organization is a former farmworker. We have leadership committees of farmworkers in each of the areas where we have an office, and we're – we really feel that we are run by the grassroots. We are not top-down, we're bottom-up. Um, even though we work on, uh, individual, local, state, regional, national, and international issues, we're really driven by our base, which is – are – which are the farmworkers in each of the areas, and I think that's the beauty of our organization. That's why – one of the things that I feel so strongly about is that we are a really, um, you know – we – we – we offer services to farmworkers, like we help people fill out food stamp applications and unemployment. So we do help people on an individual level, but we're not a service organization. Our – our – our goals are to change policy and empower farmworkers to become agents of social change.

**Muha** Oh[?].

**Economos** Mmhmm.

0:04:57

**Pesticide health and safety**

**Muha** And – and you mentioned earlier that your role has been in pesticide health and safety.

**Economos** Yes, yes.

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** Um, and so that entails a lot...

**Muha** [*clears throat*].

**Economos** Of different things. Um, it – we – we have a training for farmworkers to train them about pesticide health and safety, um, and we train a minimum of 500 farmworkers every year in Florida, um, and that – we have five offices in the state, so that's about a hundred workers in each area. Um, we also train healthcare providers on how to identify, treat, diagnose, and report pesticide-related illnesses. We file complaints when there are violations of regulations in the workplace, um, and we work on pesticide policy issues. We try and[sic] change pesticide policy at the state level and at the national level, and – and we work internationally too with Pesticide Action Network. Um, so I could go on, but that's [*laughs*] – gives you a little overview of it.

**Muha** Great. Well, thank you.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

0:06:01

**Common environmental challenges facing farmworkers**

**Muha** Um, so – and – and I know this – this might be a challenging one to – to do briefly, but do it in whatever length you'd like. Um, so can you speak to, um, you know, environmental harms that farmworkers are – are commonly exposed, uh, to and – and – and why that's important?

**Economos** Um, a lot of farmworker organizations – well, first of all, there aren't many farmworker organizations, but the ones that do exist, um, are often times focused on wages, um, because farmworkers are low on the totem pole. They get very poor wages, um, and some of them are focused on other kinds [sic] – kinds of abuse, like labor camps and things like that, um, but, uh, um, pesticides are really harmful to farmworkers' health, and scientific studies over the past seven to eight years have increasingly showed[sic] that pesticide exposure can harm the second generation and the third generation of farmworkers, and they can also have – in the past, um, farmworker organizations were focused on acute effects of pesticide exposure, like, um, you know, farmworkers in the field vomiting or – or passing out or whatever from pesticides, but we know more and more now about long term effects of pesticide exposure, um, and farmworkers

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are the invisible ones. They are, um, treated like workhorses, not like people, um, and they are not afforded the same protections – health and safety protections – that other workers are protected under OSHA<sup>1</sup> standards. Um, they're, um – they are, um, under the [Agricultural] Worker Protection Standard of the Environmental Protection Agency, and those standards are lower – less than the OSHA regulations that protect workers from chemicals[sic] exposures in other kinds of industries. So, um, it's vitally important, because these people are making money for the owners of the industry. Whether they're a small grower or a large grower, industry could not operate without the workers, and yet, the workers are risking their health and their lives and that of their families by being exposed to pesticides on a regular basis, and we should all care because we're all human, but we should also all care because it affects our food and our environment, and what happens to the least of us happens to the – to all of us. So it's, uh, critically important, um, and I could go on, but I won't [*laughs*].

**Muha** Good, thank you.

**0:08:48** **Necessity and evolution of the FAF**

**Muha** Um, so why do you think there's a need for an organization like Farmworkers Association of Florida?

**Economos** Um, well, let me just give you a little example. We do pesticide trainings, as I mentioned earlier, and we have five offices in the state, so we tend to work with farmworkers in the counties in the areas where we have offices. A few years ago, we ended – started going to different areas, like Wimauma and Wahneta and Winter Haven, where there's farmworker populations – migrants – and there is no farmworker organization there as a support for them, and when we have gone and done pesticide trainings in those areas, we've seen a huge difference. The level of education of the – of – or – or knowledge – not education – the level of knowledge of the workers of their rights and about pesticide exposure is much less, and we have gone and done trainings in areas where there was no farmworker organization presence, and the people have begged us – after an hour and a half or two hour training, they've begged us not to leave. They've begged us to come back, and, to me, that says it all, because even if we don't touch farmworkers directly – for example, here in the Apopka area – even if we don't touch them directly, what we are doing here, by osmosis, gets out into the broader community, and it raises people's level of understanding of their rights, it raises their understanding of the risks in their workplace, um, and people know that they can come here for things like help with wage theft and things like that. So, um, not only do I feel that, you know – I see what – what we do here every day, but also, having gone to these other areas and seen the difference in the level of, um, information that the people have. It's really been a stark contrast. So that to me just is – says it all.

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<sup>1</sup> Occupational Safety and Health Administration.



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**Muha** Well, thank you.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**Muha** So you mentioned that, um, Farmworkers Association was founded in—in 1983. Uh, can you speak to—and I know you’ve—you’ve been involved since the ‘90s—but can you speak to how you think it’s changed since its founding?

**Economos** Yeah, um...

**Muha** [*clears throat*].

**Economos** I mean, we have expanded, um, statewide. I think one of the biggest things—I mean, we—lots of things have changed, but I think one of the biggest things that, um, I’ve seen change is our, um, deeper connection to, understanding of, and action on a global level—an international level. So, um, while we continue to be very grassroots, we work in coalition with groups like Pesticide Action Network International, La Via Campesina, uh, Domestic Fair Trade Association, and other organizations like that, um, that, um, make us, um, connect what we’re doing at the local level to much bigger, broader global, um, trends, policies, um, actions, um, multinational corporations and how they’re affecting things at the local level. So I think we’re much more involved in that, and I think that helps, uh, eh, reinforce what we’re doing locally, but also, um, moves us to a different level where we can, eh, rather than just trying to get a—a particular nursery or farm to pay their workers better or to, you know, um, stop using or—or exposing their workers, we’re looking at it on a much more global level. That it’s systemic—not just systemic in the United States, but systemic globally, because of transnational corporations and how they’re affecting governments, and, you know, international trade agreements. So I think that that’s really significant and that helps inform the work that we do locally by having that big, broad national perspective and working in coalitions, uh, nationally and internationally.

0:13:15

**Ethnic makeup and race relations among farmworkers in Apopka**

**Muha** Okay, great. Thank you. Um, so having spoken now for, uh, about 13 and half minutes, um, I haven’t yet, uh, heard about, um, farmworkers’ role in—in black community—and bl—black farmworkers. So I’d like to ask about that if you don’t mind.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**Muha** Um, so what has been your role, um, in the lives of former black farmworkers in Apopka?

**Economos** Well, um, we, eh—we used to have, um, an African-American, um, organizer with the farmworker association, um, and for two reasons—one, we no longer had funding for the Lake Apopka Project, um, and also, the African-American

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organizer that we had become very sick. We don't have an African-American organizer in our organization right now, um, but because I've been working with the farmworker community on Lake Apopka since 1996, even though I was gone for a few years and came back, um, you know, I – and since Lake Apopka is my passion, I have become the African-American farmworker organizer for the farmworker association, and, um, th – uh, the people know me and we have a long-term relationship and the African Americans in this community, um, know that – they trust me I hope – I think. I like to believe that they do, um, and, um – and they know that, um, I really care about them on an individual level, but I care about the cause too.

Maybe I should start by saying that, um, when the farms on Lake Apopka were operating, um, there were, um, mostly Haitian, Hispanic, and African-American farmworkers. I know I might be jumping ahead on your questions, but, um – but, um – and, uh – when – by the time the farms closed in 1998, the majority of farmworkers on Lake Apopka, at that time, were Hispanic. Uh, the Haitians that worked on Lake Apopka were mostly migrants that would come up from South Florida, harvest corn, and then travel the seasons. Um, there were some Haitians that were more permanent, or seasonal residents here, but a lot of the Haitians that worked on the farms were migrant. Um, a lot of the Hispanics were seasonal, so they were here eight, nine, ten months out of the year. Some of them were here permanently all year-round, because Lake Apopka had such a long growing season, okay? Um, the African-American community was older, uh, in general, um, on Lake Apopka and smaller, um, in – in – in – in terms of numbers, um, and because a lot of them were older, a lot of them worked in the packing houses. Um, even though some of them still worked out in the fields, a lot of the older women worked in the packing houses, so they could sit during the day and help grade – you know, grade the – the product as it came through.

Um, so when the farms closed on Lake Apopka, a lot of the Hispanics were absorbed – were younger, uh, in general. This is, you know, a generalization. Um, a lot of them were either able to move to other areas to work or they were absorbed in other kinds of industries, like the nursery industry or construction or laying sod, but the African Americans, because they were older, um, because they didn't know anything else but farm work, um, they pretty much, um, got left behind, and so, um, when I came back, um, after being gone for several years, um, I wanted to make sure that the Lake Apopka story didn't get lost, and so I began working with mostly the African-American farmworker community to keep the Lake Apopka story alive. Most of the Hispanics, um, again, were not, um, um, as interested in continuing the Lake Apop – there were a few. Um, uh, a couple of them moved away, um, but the African Americans really feel like their story needs to be told, because today, if you talk to people about farmworkers, you know – there's other farmworker organization that seem to be all focused on Hispanic farmworkers. If you talked – if you talk to people about farmworkers, they think, *Oh, Hispanics, Mexicans*, okay? Well the African Americans feel upset about that, okay? Because they say, "Wait a minute. We're farmworkers. We

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were farmworkers here before the Hispanics were here,” and this is not to be, you know – to – to, uh – to pit – to pit the races against each other by any means. It’s just that that that history needs to be captured and not lost, and I know that the farm – the African-American farmworkers that I work with feel very strongly about that, um. Because I feel like I work for them, I feel very strongly about that, um, and because what I have read, not that I’m the most well-read person in the world, but, um, I haven’t seen anything in Florida history. I’ve seen like – like, um, peripheral references in other books, like you’ll read books about, you know, uh, discrimination against blacks in Florida...

**Muha** [clears throat].

**Economos** And there might be a reference to, um, oh, um, “It – it happened in an orange grove,” or, oh, um, “and he was an orange picker,” but I have not seen anything that has really talked about, specifically, the role of African-American farmworkers in Florida history. I haven’t seen it anywhere. I don’t know. Did I answer your question? I kind of...

**Muha** Absolutely.

**Economos** Okay.

**Muha** Not a problem. Well, so you said a few things that I – I want to pick up on later, if you don’t mind, um – or expand on later, um, and I’ll – I’ll ask about that, um, but I – I would like to, um – to – to return to – to your role, um, within black farmworker communities, um, and then I’ll – I’ll – I’ll come back to – to s – a few things you mentioned, uh, about memorialization of – of, um, black farm labor in Florida and, um, some perspectives and what have you. Um, so, um, you mentioned that you’re currently the person that acts as like, um, a liaison between the farmworker association and – and former black farmworkers. Um, so I’d like to know – I mean, it – is – is that – well, so – so is your work then centered around, um, their lives as it pertains to employment or their role in the community? Or, like, what – what do – what do you do, um, with them?

**Economos** Well first of all, I wouldn’t use the word “liaison.”

**Muha** Oh.

**Economos** Because, um, we actually – it can – we have, um, what we call “leadership committees,” and so, um, because our – our office in Apopka has a Hispanic, a Haitian...

**Muha** [clears throat].

**Economos** And a[sic] African-American leadership committee, s o I call the – the African Americans that I work with mostly, um, are key people – are leadership committee. So they’re actually part of the organization.

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**Muha** Okay.

**Economos** Um, so, um, um, yeah, so I—I would put it in—in those kinds of terms. Um, uh—initially, um—well, we have tried everything over the years, in terms of the Lake Apopka farmworkers, um, and initially, it was not just African Americans, it was all the farmworkers. I—you know, we—we talked about trying to get class-action lawsuits to address the health issues of the farmworkers. That didn't work. Um, we tried to get, um, funding, uh, from the National Institutes of Health to do, um, a[sic] scientific studies where we can actually test the blood of farmworkers, and that wasn't just His—uh, African-American, but all Lake Apopka farmworkers—to look at, uh, levels of pesticides in their body to see if, you know—to—to identify that as a problem. That didn't work. We've tried—we did a health survey, um, actually Geraldine [Matthew], an African-American farmworker who was a staff member here, did a survey in 2005 of about 150 mostly African-American farmworkers, 'cause they were still here. That didn't get any traction. So basically, what my position in—in—has evolved into, I guess, since everything else has not gotten anywhere, is to keep the legacy alive...

**Economos** And to tell their stories.

**Muha** [inaudible].

**Economos** Because I feel like that's what they want, that's what I want to see happen, that's what they deserve.

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** So that's kind of what my role has evolved into. Um, the book, *Fed Up* [: *The High Costs of Cheap Food*], that was published as way to keep those stories alive. Talking to you [laughs] is a way to do that too. Um, the quilts is[sic] a way to try and do that. Um, you know, um, hopefully, we're gonna have an iTunes film, um, so those are some things that we've done, but kind of an answer to your question, um—most of the people that I work with are too old and too sick. They're—I shouldn't say "too old," because Geraldine [Matthew] and Linda [Lee] are my age, you know, and I'm still working, but most of the people I work with are on disability [benefits].

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** They're not even—some of them are over 65, but a lot of them aren't over 65, but they're sick. So they—so it's not in terms of trying to get anybody any jobs because they can't work, and that says a lot to me, um, but, um—so it's not in terms of getting jobs. um, it's mostly to keep the legacy alive, but at the same time, you know, they've become friends. I'm close to 'em. It's personal, you know? So I do things like take food to Geraldine when she's on dialysis and she doesn't have anything to eat and she has nobody to help her, or I'll—Linda has a

problem with her – this county trying to – code enforcement trying to cite her house because of her roof. So we’re trying to help her, uh, get the right paperwork to get her roof fixed. So, um, I mean, it ends up, um, you know, for our community, and that’s what it’s all about is really feeling like a community, and that’s how you build trust, you know? Um, they call me on the weekends to see how I’m doing. I call them, you know? Its, uh – um, we took a field trip to St. Augustine because they had a – an exhibit on 500 years of African-American history in the United States. We were gonna take a field trip this weekend to the Harry T. Moore museum.<sup>2</sup> Um, so it’s a, you know – it’s a commitment, and it’s become personal. I care about ‘em.

**Muha** Thank you. Appreciate that.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**0:24:47** **Shutdown of Lake Apopka**

**Muha** [*clears throat*] So – and, again, I – I do – a lot of what you said I do want to ask about later. Um, but, um, just to – so I’m clear, um, most farmworkers, uh, or former farmworkers from your observation, if I understand correctly, um, you know, after – after the shutdown of Lake Apopka, what did they do? I mean, from your observation, it seems like you’re saying most of them didn’t return to – to any jobs or...

**Economos** Well, so that’s a long story too. Right after the farms closed it’s a – I’ll try to do this short – um, th – there was a thing called the Jobs and Education Partnership and they set up this outreach thing for – I think it lasted a year and a half maybe – to try and do retraining of farmworkers, to try and offer them classes, to try and get them other jobs. Um, it was real mess. It was for all f – not just for African Americans. I mean, like – like part of it was English classes for Hispanics. Um, it was pretty unsuccessful. Some farmworkers, like Linda Lee’s sister, Margie, got a job at a nursery. This was before the [Great] Recession happened in the, you know – a few years ago.<sup>3</sup> This was at the boom of building and construction and nurseries and stuff, So some of them did get other jobs for a period of time, but most of the African Americans – again, most of the Hispanics and Haitians were absorbed, so, um, they eventually settled out into something – most of them – a lot of them.

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** Most of the African Americans got left behind. Geraldine always talks about how, um, “I don’t know what happened, but after the farms closed, people started getting [*phone rings*] sick and started dying.”

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<sup>2</sup> Harry T. & Harriette V. Moore Cultural Complex.

<sup>3</sup> 2007 through 2009.

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[*phone rings*]

**Economos** And I know from I own experience, sometimes, you know, when you're, you know...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** If you're not active, you know, you – you start to get depressed and you, you know – and people had this – they had to go to work every day and they probably didn't have time to even think about their healthcare, but a – after the farms closed, a lot of people did start getting sick. A lot of them were sick beforehand, um, like Linda Lee had, you know, a kidney transplant beforehand. Some of them were absorbed for a little while in other jobs, but most of them were older and not in the best of health and didn't last very long.

**Muha** Hm.

**Economos** Um, but some of them were already on disability.

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** Um, so, um, I don't know of many that got jobs in farm work. Um, Magaline[sp] was smart. She got out early, before the farms closed, and got a job as a janitor in a school, and worked there up until about a year ago, um, but the ones that stayed in farm work, most of them, um, didn't know anything else, um, didn't really get plugged into anything else in terms of a job and/or, you know, were sick and really couldn't – couldn't get out there in the world, but had serious health problems. So, yeah.

**Muha** Thank you. Um, so, okay – so what I'd like to ask, um – right. Okay, so I'd like to ask, um – and this might be a – a difficult question to – to answer, but, I mean, so, since the – the shutdown of m – most Lake Apopka farms, w – what has been the most dramatic change that you've noticed in the lives of – of the former farmworkers who are black?

**Economos** Um, I think – well, uh, I think that there's been a little bit of – there's been a little bit of dissolution of community. So, um – for example, um, the African-American community in this area are [sic] not what you would traditionally think of, because they are very settled here. Um, there might be two or three or four generations. A lot of them might have come here – their parents or grandparents might have come here in the '30s and '40s. Well, probably I should say '40s, because that's when the farms started on Lake Apopka, okay? And so, w – they – whereas the Hispanics came later, like in the '60s and then again a wave in the '80s, um, the African Americans were here much longer. Um, there was some public housing, subsidized housing, USDA<sup>4</sup> housing for farmworkers. It was

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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called Hawthorne Village. When the farms closed on Lake Apopka – you could only live there if you had so much of your income from farm work. That included nurseries, okay? When the farms closed on Lake Apopka, the African Americans that lived in Hawthorne Village, like Louisee [sp] and other people, uh, Angela Tanner, they were no longer working in farms, so they couldn't, um, record that...

**Muha** [clears throat].

**Economos** "I get this much money from farm work." They couldn't live there anymore. They had to go find someplace else to live. Some of them had to go find rental housing, and it wasn't subsidized, so it was too much money for 'em. Um, some of them had to go live with family members. Then they finally closed down Hawthorne Village completely. They tore it down, 'cause [sic] it was in bad shape. Those African-American f – farm – former farmworkers ended up having to go to Lake City, so, some – so, it – it did affect some of the – a little bit – there's still quite a bit of community cohesion, okay? 'Cause [sic] some people like Linda and Geraldine and Betty and Irma are, you know – own their own homes, okay? But it did separate some families because of that. So some families had to leave the area, um, because of the housing issues. Some of the younger ones – because there was no more work here – did have to leave and find work other places. So it did affect the community, in that sense, and then, it also affected the community because I think when people weren't working, again, you have issues of, you know, people being depressed because they can't work, financial problems because they're not working. Um, some people were sick, but they just kept working, and then they had to try to get on disability, and if they were under 60, they had to wait two or three years. Oh, it was terrible. Some of them had to wait – uh, you know, in the meantime, while you're waiting to get on disability, even though you're on, you know – you have all kinds of health problems. Um, how do you survive in the meantime, you know? You're not old enough to get Social Security, you know, you're not well enough to work, so you're in this limbo. How – so it did cause a lot of financial problems for people. Like I said, when the farms first closed on Lake Apopka, we weren't thinking about health then. We were just thinking about trying to get people, you know, housing and jobs and food and furniture and a place, you know, uh – just real immediate needs.

**Muha** Yeah.

**Economos** Um, so, yeah, but long term, I think, uh, the health issue is the biggest – biggest thing.

**Muha** Okay, thank you.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

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**Muha** Appreciate that.

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**0:32:18 Replacing African-American workers with Hispanic workers**

**Muha** Um, okay, and so – so – and – okay. So next one I'd like to ask – I mean, you mentioned a couple times a difference between, um

[*phone rings*]

**Muha** How the shutdown affected...

[*phone rings*]

**Muha** Hispanic farmworkers and how it affected black farmworkers in – in Florida. So I'd like to ask

[*phone rings*]

**Muha** A little bit about, I guess, a shift that occurred, um, on farms in – in Florida and – and specifically in Apopka, um, and – and what you mentioned, you said that there were, uh, waves of – of Hispanic immigrants in the '60s and '80s, as...

**Economos** Mmhmm.

**Muha** As you perceived it.

**Economos** Right. Mmhmm, mmhmm.

**Muha** Um, so the thing[?] that I'd like to ask – so why do you – why do you think that – that that shift took place, eh, eh, from – in our opinion. Um, was it growers' preferencing [sic] Hispanic farmworkers? What do you think...

**Economos** Well, I think...

**Muha** The reason...

**Economos** It was several things. Um, one is I think the Civil Rights Act – the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 was one influence, because, um, after that, um, blacks had more opportunities to, um, get out of farm work and get into other kinds of jobs, um, and the younger generation of, uh, African Americans – this next generation – wasn't, um, subject to the same Jim Crow – not that it didn't still happen, especially in Apopka, um – but, legally, it wasn't supposed to happen. So the second generation, um – whereas for example – I'm jumping around – but, like, um, Linda's parents – Linda's grandparents were farmworkers, Linda's parents were farmworkers, and she was a farmworker. Well, her kids didn't have



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to be farmworkers. They were born after the Civil Rights Act was passed, okay? Same thing with Geraldine, same thing with Betty, you know? Their next generation, um, didn't have to – they had more options than, um, the previous generation. So the Civil Rights Act was one thing.

The end of the Bracero Program was another thing, okay? Um, so when the Bracero Program ended, um – well, that was mostly in – that was here too, but the end of the Bracero Program, um – which brought, um, Hispanics into the United States – okay, it ended, but then the growers had an opportunity to go and get, uh, thr – without the Bracero Program to go and get cheaper labor from, you know, Mexico and bring them here to work, okay? And then, I think conditions in Mexico, um – people, you know – workers coming from Mexico, I think, um, you know, the – well, in the '90s, NAFTA<sup>5</sup> made a big difference too. There was an influx of, um, farmworkers from Mexico after NAFTA, but in the '60s and the '80s, it was conditions in Mexico, it was the end of the Bracero Program, but I think it was just, you know, demographic changes. A lot of African-American farmworkers were getting older and moving out, and Linda will tell you a story about how, you know, it was mostly African-American farmworkers. She remembers one day going out to the orange groves. They would get up every morning, go to the orange groves, pick oranges, and then take the bus – you know, the crew bus back home. She said one day, they went out to the grove and there was a – as she says, a Mexican f – family there that had slept there all night long, okay? Well, the African-American farmworkers were upset, because the Hispanics that were there – and this is, you know – this is how the industry ends up causing racial divide. The Hispanics that were there all night long could pick earlier in the morning. They could stay and pick later at night, and when you're being paid by the piece, you know, you're not getting paid by the hour, they were able to make more money, okay?

So, um, you know, people from Mexico saw econom – economic opportunity here and they started coming here, and they kind of, you know – the – the – it – there became that clash of – and the Hispanics would work cheaper, and – and sometimes they would work faster, and part of that was because a lot – some of the African Americans were beginning to know what their rights were, um, and some of them would stand up for their rights. Whereas, the – a lot of time the Hispanics didn't know they even had any rights, and they would put up with more abuse, and that's – again, that's kind of a generalization, you know? Um, but, um, G – G – Geraldine would s – says sometimes, you know, "Oh, I felt sorry for the Hispanics, because they would come here – s – some stuff that we wouldn't put up with, you know, they would come and they would – they would take it." So I think there's [sic] lots of different factors, but I think those are some of them.

**Muha**

Mmhmm.

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<sup>5</sup> North American Free Trade Agreement.

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**Economos** Yeah.

**Muha** And then, from your observation, uh, what do you think the perception on that question of – of black farmworkers is? What do you think – do you think they would say the same?

**Economos** Well that's – like I said, a lot of that's stuff that I've heard. In terms of the Civil Rights Act, that's my perception and th – things I've read too, um, but in terms of some of the other things, I mean, I – I hear that directly from them, you know? That they – they have said that. That, you know – that, um, the Hispanic workers would work longer hours, they would put up with more abuse, um, sometimes they would work faster. Again, if you have – especially after the 1960s, um, if you have an aging African-American population, they might not harvest as fast. Whereas, the Hispanics coming in are younger, um, you know, and they would work faster. If you see the – and now it's not even Mexicans as much as it is Gua – uh, you know, Guatemalans and Salvadorans. the training that we here – had here last night for the farmworker women, they were all young and they were from Guatemala, um, and they were all – I would say – 20s, um, early 30s. They were young and they were all farmworkers. So, you know, I think that had a – is a factor too.

**Muha** [*clears throat*].

0:38:32

**Remembering farmworkers**

**Muha** Great, um, and – and then, um – following that question, um, in your experiences with former farmworkers in Apopka today, I mean, what – what stands out, uh, to you about their perspec – perspectives on farm labor? Um, given that most of them are now former farmworkers. Most of their children aren't farmworkers. Um, what do you notice about their perspectives?

**Economos** Well, I think they're all very proud of it. Um, there are some, like Mary Tinsley, who will say, uh, "Oh, I – I used to pick oranges when I was a teenager and I never, ever wanted to do it again, so I decided to go to college and never do it again," you know, um, but, um, her mom is proud of the work she did, you know? Betty Woods, who died last year, um, said that she loved it. She loved being a farmworker. Geraldine – she'll say, "We fed the world." Um, I love Geraldine. She's so powerful, um, and they're – they're proud of what they did, um, and they should be. They deserve to be proud of what they did, um, and, um – and I think the ones that I – I work with, of course, probably have a higher consciousness about all of these issues, because they have been working on this, and, you know, um...

[*phone rings*]

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**Economos** And have been connected with the farmworker association. We, you know, do do consciousness raising stuff, but even...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** When we go down to Indiantown, and the farmworkers there—the African Americans there—I think they're proud of what they've done...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** And their contribution. Um, some of them love it. Geraldine's really proud that she was the fastest corn packer [*laughs*], you know, and it was kind of competitive. Um, Linda's proud that her father was a crew leader and he was a good crew leader...

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** And he treated his people well and—and, um, they have all kinds of stories. You could listen to them for hours and days and months and never get all the stories that they have, and it's a very rich, uh, history, which is why I think it's so important to capture that, because it's just very, very rich, both in terms of good and bad. Um, you know, it's—we—we talk about the discrimination against the blacks in Florida, the country, um, but...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** What was it like to be black and a farmworker? Kind of the—the...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** And I hate to put it like this, but how society looks at it is like the...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** Lowest rung on the totem pole in terms of, you know, the type of job that you do. Um...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** So I think that that's a really super rich history, and, um...

[*phone rings*]

**Economos** They have stories talking about being on the mule train and them laughing and...

[*phone rings*]

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- Economos** And singing slave songs to get them through the day, um, and it's just very, very, uh, rich, cultural history, um, and they talk about their interactions with the Hispanics and the Haitians, um, and some of it's good and some of it's bad, you know? Um, and – and, uh, um, so, yeah – I forgot what the original question was [laughs].
- Muha** No, you did great. Well, the original question was about farm – farmworker perspecti – or black farmworker perspectives...
- Economos** Oh, yeah.
- Muha** Today and what stands out to you.
- Economos** Yeah, yeah.
- Muha** So if there's anything else you wanted to add...
- Economos** Um, well, I – I, a – again, what stands out to me, because of the people I work with is that they feel very strongly that they want to be remembered. Yeah.
- Muha** Well, I wanted to ask you about that because, uh, throughout this – this interview, a few times you've mentioned the importance of, um – of history and – and being remembered, um, so – so, yeah, I mean, and – and you've mentioned, uh, the quilt, which – which was Linda's project...
- Economos** Hm, yeah.
- Muha** Um...
- Economos** Well, every – it – Linda did the most of it...
- Muha** Okay.
- Economos** It was everybo – I don't want to – yeah.
- Muha** Okay.
- Economos** Yeah, it was everybody's pro – it was a project of the farmworker association. Linda was the one that really did most of the quilt squares, but everybody was involved...
- Muha** Great.
- Economos** So...
- Muha** Well, if I understand, she was l – like the – I – I don't – I...
- Economos** [laughs].

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- Muha** Perhaps the leader of it? Or...
- Economos** She and Sara [Downs]—Sara.
- Muha** Okay.
- Economos** Together were—yeah. If it weren't for—they—they were the two that really drove it forward. So, yeah.
- Muha** Okay.
- Economos** Yeah.
- Muha** Well, so...
- Economos** Mmhmm.
- Muha** But I—I wanted to ask you, I mean, you know, it seems i—if I—if I understand correct[sic] I, uh—I mean, has—do you think the history of—of black farm labor has been remembered in Apopka?
- Economos** No, I don't. I don't. I—no. If you go to the, uh, uh, Museum of the Apopkans over here, um, there's almost nothing in there about African Americans at all, much less African-American farmworkers. They finally did—actually, I need to—they finally did invite us to bring the quilts there during, uh, Black History Month. That was nice of 'em, um, finally, um, but, um, uh, there's almost nothing about bla—the, um—if you go to Winter Garden—because I don't want it to sound like it's just Apopka, 'cause[sic] it's the whole—Lake Apopka is really big, so there's farmworkers f—that worked on Lake Apopka that were from Zellwood and Eustis and Mount Dora and Astatula and, um, Winter Garden. Winter Garden—there's a big African-American community there. Linda's sister lived in Winter Garden. Um, I used to go ride my bike in Winter Garden, and they have a big mural on the side of one of the main buildings in Winter Garden of citrus, and it's a white guy picking oranges, um, and I'm like, *No*. [laughs] *It probably wasn't a white guy picking oranges*, and, um, you know, and you go to Winter Garden and there's almost nothing about, um—I think it's a little bit better over the last couple of years. Um, Winter Garden just had "The Last Harvest[: A History and Tribute to the Life and Work of the Farmworkers on Lake Apopka"] exhibit there and I didn't even get to go see it, um, but, uh, it's virtually—no. It's—it's—it's hidden. It's deliberate. If you go to, um, Oakland Nature Preserve, um, that was started by Friends of Lake Apopka, there is nothing there about farmworkers at all. If you go to Magnolia Park and the boat ramp and you see the sign there about the history of Lake Apopka, there is nothing there about farmworkers or African Americans in the community. So, no, I think it's not there and I think it's deliberate. Yeah.

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**Muha** And – and you’ve noticed that you – you – you think it’s important to the farmworkers in Apopka and – and those who worked on Lake Apopka that they be remembered.

**Economos** Absolutely, and – and they have talked about – I mean, the quilts are great, and the book is great, and we’re – I think everybody’s happy to have both of those things, um, have happened, but, um, I think – some of them have told me that they would like to see a memorial in the city of – that – that – sanctioned by – because the book and the quilt and “The Last Harvest” – that was the farmworker association doing that. Nobody outside – I mean, Dale [Finley Slongwhite] is outside the fa – you know, but nobody outside the farmworker association. What are they doing? It’s all been driven by, you know, the farmworker association. Who else out there has made a concerted effort...

**Muha** Mmhmm.

**Economos** To do anything to remember the farmworker association? You are, but, I mean, who else is really doing anything to recognize farmworkers at all here – much less African-American farmworkers in this community? So no, I don’t think it’s remembered, um, and I think it’s deliberate.

**0:46:45** **The future of farm labor**

**Muha** Well, thank you, um, and then, as – as my last question, I – I wanted to ask you, um, if you had any thoughts on, uh, the future of farm labor in – in Florida, and perhaps, uh, more broadly in the United States or the South.

**Economos** That’s a really good question, because, um – that’s a really big question, because, um, you know, there’s continuing competition from globalization, um, the recession has affected the...

**Muha** [*clears throat*].

**Economos** Nursery industry in Florida, um, imports of tomatoes from Mexico has a – affected the tomato industry in Florida, the drought is affecting the nut industry in California, as well as other kinds of crops. Um, so lots of different factors are affecting, um, agriculture in the United States. Um, subsidies for commodity crops, like, um, corn, soy, and wheat are affecting – they, eh – it just blows my mind that they call fruits and vegetables “specialty crops.” That just is mind-boggling to me, you know? tomatoes are a specialty crop. Corn is not a specialty crop. Gen – genetically-modified corn is not a specialty crop, but, you know, your healthy carrots are. Um, so specialty crops are at risk, um, because of the huge agribusiness farms. Um, so I think that there is a real danger of, um – or threat to agriculture in the United States. The global, you know – forces of globalization around the world, um – I do take hope from the food movement, um, where a lot of, um, people are, um, wanting healthy, organic, local,

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sustainable food, even though it might not be fair trade food, um, for workers, but a lot of, um, small, independent farms are starting up at a very small scale, but poor people can't afford to buy that. I can't afford [*laughs*] to buy that, um, produce. Um, so you're still going to have your big grocery store chains, you're still going to have, um, you know, your, um, need for cheap food. So I do think it's a really big concern where – and I think farmers know that. The writing is on the wall for some of them.

Um, tomatoes, you know, the – tomatoes are a big issue in Florida. Um, the tomato industry in Florida wants to continue growing tomatoes the way they're growing them, which is picking them early and – and, um, then treating them with methyl bromide to ripen them, whereas Mexico is growing vine-ripe tomatoes and that they're shipping here, and people want those more. So, um, if agriculture, um, diminishes – and we've already seen that on a small scale in Apopka. The recession, um, put a lot of farmworkers out of work in Florida. Um, nurseries went under. Miguel estimated about 50 percent of the nurseries. I don't know if that's accurate or not, but quite a few nurseries, um, closed, which put a lot of workers out of work. Immigration policies have affected agriculture. A lot of workers, um, are afraid to travel, um, the seasons like they used to, because of immigration policies in other states, um, like Georgia and Alabama that might be really horrible. Um, immigration policies have affected migration into the United States, which has affected how many people come here to be farmworkers. So, um, there's lots of different forces at play here, and, uh, I'm not real[sic] good at forecasting the future, but I think we have some real issues that – that are gonna come up, um, and I think we're gonna end up seeing a lot more imported food and a loss – lot less work for farmworkers. So...

0:50:59

**Closing remarks**

**Muha**

Good, okay. Well, um, as far as my questions, that's all. Um, was there anything you wanted to add or say before I stop the recording?

**Economos**

Um, I just want to say that I think – I think there's a real place and a real need in Florida history to document the role of African-American farmworkers. I mean, I – I kind of said that already several times, but, um, I want to say it kind of in a different way now, because I think it's important to put African-American farmworkers – not just to remember that they were here and they had lives, but to really look at that in terms of the economic development of Florida. That – you know, we hear about, um, [Henry] Flagler and the railroad and other people in, you know, uh, uh, major, uh – who I can't think of right now – major people in Florida history who, you know, created the development of Florida, but none of that could happen, okay? A lot of that was based on – a lot of the economy in Florida was driven by agriculture, okay? And the railroad and all these other things – where part of it was to move agricultural products, part of it was to bring people down here to start orange groves and vegetable fields, and none of that could have happened without African-American farmworkers, and I think

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it's really crucial not only to remember the lives of the farmworkers here, but to put them in some kind of really profound historical context, um, in the – in Florida's history, you know?

Even, um, Patrick [D.] Smith, who wrote that book, *Angel City* [: *A Novel*], okay? The main characters in that book were white farmworkers that came down from Tennessee or Kentucky or something like that, um, and the peripheral characters in the book were African American, okay? I – it's really vitally important to see how – there's even more about, um, the Indians – the native Indians in Florida and what happened to them then there are[sic] about African Americans historically in Florida as part of the development and what caused the economy to grow in the state, and I also think – one more thing I think is crucially important is to – to demonstrate or to understand that African-American farmworkers, in Florida and other parts of the South, have a direct line to slavery, and I think that that thread needs to be pulled through, um, because the conditions that farmworkers experienced and continue to experience, but, again, it was – e – e – even before Lake Apopka, you go back into the '20s and '30s and '40s before Lake Apopka, you know, that – it was still the legacy of slavery. So I think somehow that thread needs to be woven through all of this, um, because I don't think you can look at – at – at it in a – in a vacuum without bringing – bringing that in, and how the conditions on the farms were related to, um – how con – plantation conditions and slavery in the United States. So...

**Muha** Okay. Well, thank you so much. Um, this...

**Economos** Thank you.

**Muha** Has been – oh, absolutely [*laughs*]. This has been Jared Muha with Jeannie Economos of the Farmworker Association [of Florida] on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

*End of Interview*