

Oral Memoirs
of
Benjamin Franklin Wheeler III

An Interview Conducted by

Desta Lee Horner

June 18, 2019

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories
(RICHS)

University of Central Florida RICHS

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Desta Lee Horner

Transcriber: Geoffrey Cravero

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of 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.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Benjamin Franklin Wheeler III is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 18, 2019.

Abstract

An oral history interview of Benjamin Franklin Wheeler III, a descendant of the Wheeler and Lawton families in Oviedo. The interview was conducted by Desta Lee Horner at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida, on June 18th, 2019. Some of the topics covered include the family history of the Lawtons and Wheelers, the significance of the pine timber industry in Oviedo, the career path of Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr., the role of Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr. in the incorporation and development of Oviedo, withstanding freezes and destruction of crops and trees, shipping citrus on the railroads and the decline of the citrus industry in Oviedo, working in packing houses, varieties of citrus production in Oviedo, transitioning from citrus to celery production, how packing houses served a social function, building a railroad on muck land and dealing with derailed trains, how Seminole County was

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formed and the consequences of its formation, George Kelsey and enforcing the law in a small town, eccentric characters and interesting stories from Oviedo, how churches influenced life in Oviedo, how the Oviedo lights became an urban legend, how being a bedroom community shaped the City of Oviedo, how the Oviedo Fire Department evolved, his experience with race relations in Oviedo, how Alafaya Trail became a paved road, deciding on where to build Florida Technological University, and his closing remarks.

Benjamin Franklin Wheeler III

Oral History Memoir

Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Desta Lee Horner

June 18, 2019

Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

The family history of the Lawtons and Wheelers

Horner My name is Desta Horner from the Oviedo Historical Society and I'm here with Ben Wheeler, whose family had been residents in Oviedo for many generations. We're gonna talk about the history of Oviedo. This interview is being conducted at the University of Central Florida in collaboration with the RICHES program.

Ben Wheeler's been around a long time. Tell me something about you and your family.

Wheeler Well, my earliest ancestor t—to come here was a Civil War widow named Narcissa Melissa Lawton¹. She had several children, one of which married my great-grandfather, John Thomas Wheeler. Um, they moved to Dade City and he had a stroke. He was a sawmill man. And he had a stroke and died. So R. W. Lawton, who would have been Narcissa's brother, sent one of the Aulins—I think it was Theodore²—to Dade City with a two-wheel oxcart. And loaded them up, whatever little bit they had, which probably wasn't much, and brought 'em back to Oviedo [*sniffs*].

Horner Who married Wheeler in order to get the Wheeler in your name? One of the Lawtons married a Wheeler?

Wheeler Yes. Clara Isabelle Lawton³ married John Thomas⁴. Um, she was—no. She wasn't a widow. Narcissa was a widow.

Horner Mhmm.

Wheeler And this was her daughter.

Horner So she married a Wheeler.

Wheeler Yes.

¹ Narcissa Melissa Lawton (March 6, 1817 – August 16, 1883).

² Theodore "Judge" Aulin, Sr. (October 17, 1874 – December 4, 1961).

³ Clara Isabelle Lawton (May 28, 1845 – 1912).

⁴ John Thomas Wheeler (– 1889).

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Horner And that – was that Ben Wheeler I? The Ben Wheeler?

Wheeler His name was Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr.⁵

Horner How many more Benjamin Franklin Wheelers are there?

Wheeler Two more.

Horner Two [*laughs*].

Wheeler My father and me.

Horner Oh. Okay. So the, uh – so the Whee – how did the Wheelers get here? I mean, the Lawtons got here after the Civil War. Where did B.F. Wheeler, Sr. come from?

Wheeler W – w – well, John Thomas, who was B.F., Sr.'s father,...

Horner Ah.

Wheeler ...came here after the Civil War. And he claimed a homestead and sawed all the timber off of it. And once the timber was gone, he let it grow back. And that's when he moved to Dade City[, Florida].

0:02:58 **The significance of the pine timber industry in Oviedo**

Horner Well, the timber was always a big – particularly pine timber...

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner ...was always important in Oviedo. What did they do with the pine – with the pine? Cut it up? Saw it up? What do you do?

Wheeler It was used mostly for lumber. The first thing they did was chip it for turpentine. And once the trees had g – given up all their turpentine, then they would cut 'em and make lumber out of 'em.

Horner Were there a lot of sawmills? I read one place where there were five sawmills in the area. I...

Wheeler I couldn't swear to the number, but there were several.

Horner In order to slice those into planks for...

Wheeler Right.

⁵ Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr. (January 2, 1878 – 1954).

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Horner ...houses.

Wheeler Mhmm.

0:03:38 **The career path of Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr.**

Horner Kay. Well, Wheeler set up a business. Who did he set up a business with? What – what business did he get into?

Wheeler Well, his father died when he was 11. And he had a younger brother and a mother to support. And R.W. Lawton brought him back here. And he just took any kind of work he could get [*clears throat*]. One of the things he said he did was hoe orange trees. There was a big grove out there where Winter Springs High School is now. And he said he would walk out there, hoe trees all day and walk back for a penny a piece.

And there was a – the Coast Line – the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad had a – a depot agent here named Mr. Crutchfield. And he and my grandad took a shine to each other. And he let him hang around the depot. And he taught him Morse code. Let him help sweeping[sic] and whatever needed to be doing[sic]. And my grandfather ended up being the depot agent when Mr. Crutchfield retired.

Well, as depot agent, he made a princely sum of \$15 a month, which r – really – a lot of people couldn't even get a job. But he got that. And that's when he endeavored to buy the property on – south of Lake Jesup, where the big brick house is.

Horner Where the Evans-Wheeler house⁶...

Wheeler Right. And he obliged to pay \$5 a month on a mortgage.

Well, he said there were a half a dozen old tangerine trees on the place. And started taking care of 'em. And about the second year he was attending to 'em, they yielded six boxes – which, a box is two bushels – of tangerines. And he took 'em down to Nelson Brothers Packing House and sold 'em and got \$5 a box for 'em. Now, that's like six months' worth of mortgage payments. And he said that got his attention. And as time went by, um, Mr. Fred Nelson wanted to get out. And so, my grandfather bought his portion of Nelson Brothers. And later, Mr. Steen Nelson⁷ wanted to get out. So he bought his portion and then he named it Nelson and Company.

⁶ Located at 340 South Lake Jesup Avenue in Oviedo, Florida, the Wheeler-Evans House is on the United States National Register of Historic Places.

⁷ Steen Nelson (December 1, 1862 – December 9, 1956).

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Horner But, actually, it was Wheeler who owned it. Why didn't he change the name to Wheeler?

Wheeler Because the brands they had were already established. And he didn't want to start over.

Horner So everybody up North that this was – the fruit was shipped to...

Wheeler Right.

Horner ...knew that name: Nelson.

Wheeler The brand name was White Rose.

Horner When there was a White Rose label...

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner ...you knew it came from a good place [*laughs*]. W – well, what business did your – your grandfather get into if he owned a – the citrus packing house, Nelson and Son – and Company? What else did he do?

0:07:30

The role of Benjamin Franklin Wheeler, Sr. in the incorporation and development of Oviedo

Wheeler He was a real forward-thinking man. And he saw opportunity where a lot of people didn't. He, um – he was instrumental in getting Oviedo incorporated as a city. It was one square mile.

Horner [*laughs*].

Wheeler But the relations with Sanford as the county seat were such that he didn't foresee Oviedo getting a fair shake out of the county. And so, he got it – got Oviedo incorporated.

He was also on the county commission. He, um, was the driving force behind the county buying what's now called the – well, what is it called? The Five Points Complex⁸? Eh, the original purpose of it was to have, um, indigent home and, um, pauper's cemetery. That grew into being an old folks home. And they grazed – they raised all their own food.

And then years later, the – the county began moving their facilities out there. Their fire department and courthouse and jail and animal control.

⁸ Five Points Operations Complex.

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Horner And sitting in the middle of all of that official administration is still what was the old folks home.

Wheeler Yes.

Horner It's still there.

Wheeler Yes.

Horner It's never demolished.

Wheeler It's now part of—it's now the home of the Museum of Seminole County History.

0:09:32 **Withstanding freezes and destruction of crops and trees**

Horner One of the things about the citrus industry in Oviedo was the freezes that would happen regularly. How did people withstand the destroyed[sic] of—of their crop? And sometimes even destruction of their trees?

Wheeler Well, all of 'em didn't stand it. Um, there was a disastrous freeze in 1890-f—December of '94 and February of '95. And i—it was—it was destructive enough that a lot of people just gave up and moved. Uh, there are stories about houses with dishes still on the table and food in 'em. And th—they were just left. People just le—just lost heart and left.

B—but the—the few that remained eventually did come back. Uh, my grandfather being one. Mr. Lee—C. S. Lee⁹ being another one. And there's probably some names that I don't recall now.

Horner What about the Clonts's? Were they doing c—uh, cel—um, citrus at that time?

Wheeler No. The Clonts's came in 1924.

0:10:24 **Shipping citrus on the railroads and the decline of the citrus industry in Oviedo**

Horner Mokay. Mm. Well, when you have this packing—and Wheeler—I mean Nelson and Company packed fruit...

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner ...in these crates to send north. Um, how could you send them north? On the steamboats that originally plied the s—Lake Jesup? Or how did they get them up north to New York?

⁹ Charles Simeon Lee (October 27, 1892 – November 9, 1991).

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Wheeler I'm sure at some point they shipped 'em on a steamboat. But my recollection is the railroads.

Horner And which railroads did...

Wheeler Well, there were two that came to – to Lake Charm. That was the Atlantic Coast Line and there was the Seaboard Air Line. And they both had s – spurs that went down into Black Hammock to the celery pre-coolers and washhouses. At one time, there was[sic] two trains a day – one on each railroad out of Oviedo – of nothing but produce [*sneezes*]. Excuse me.

Horner [*laughs*].

Wheeler There's a lot of, uh, confusion about the two railroads because they later merged and became Seaboard Coast Line. And then they was[sic] incorporated into the family lines. And then it was Seaboard's system. And then it became CSX [Corporation], which is what it is now.

Horner When did those trains stop running through Oviedo? 'Cause there's no trains there now.

Wheeler I'd say in the early eighties.

Horner Why didn't we need the trains anymore?

Wheeler Well, all the produce traffic had gone to trucks. The – the railroads were so contrary about the service that people got tired of it. And, uh, at that time [*sniffs*], the Northern railroads – the Pennsylvania, the B&O¹⁰ – those lines were having terrific union problems. And our stuff would get to Washington, D.C. and sit.

Horner So Oviedo was in trouble. They couldn't get it to market.

Wheeler Right. Right.

Horner Well, there was another train in Oviedo. The Dinky Line.

Wheeler That was the Seaboard.

Horner Was part of the Seaboard.

Wheeler Yes.

Horner Mm.

¹⁰ The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

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Wheeler It had previously been the Florida Central and Peninsular [Railroad] [sniffs]. And the tracks were so raggedy that they were forever and a day getting derailed.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler And the local folks nicknamed it “The Friends Come and Push” [laughs].

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler But a lot of people think the whole system was the Dinky Line and it was not [sniffs].

Horner Just the part that ran from Oviedo to Orlando.

Wheeler Right.

Horner Okay. How long did the Dinky Line last? That’s not...

Wheeler Well, it became part of the...

Horner Ah.

Wheeler ...CSX. And so they all came up about the same time.

Horner Okay. Why did our – we don’t do and sell and pack citrus anymore in Oviedo. And it was the big moneymaker. What happened?

Wheeler Because of the freezes and the greening virus¹¹ [sniffs].

Horner Shut down the whole citrus...

Wheeler Shut...

Horner ...part.

Wheeler ... down the whole thing. Statewide production is down 75% now.

0:14:30

Working in packing houses

Horner Um, you were talking about – the trains would go to the packing houses. What – how were the packing houses run? Who did the – you just bring it in from the fields and what do you do with it?

¹¹ Citrus huanglongbing (HLB), previously called citrus greening disease, is one of the most destructive diseases of citrus worldwide. Originally thought to be caused by a virus, it is now known to be caused by unculturable phloem-limited bacteria.

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Wheeler Bring the fruit it from the field?

Horner Mhmm.

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner Just pluck it off the tree?

Wheeler And picked and – and put in boxes. Those two bushel boxes. Brought to the packing house. And then it was graded. And washed. And cleaned. And packed by size into shipping containers. And those went on the railroad.

Horner Just loaded them up on the railroad.

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner But it – yeah. I heard about that. Putting them in by size.

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner If it was a bunch of tangerines, you could fit 120.

Wheeler So many. Depending on the size. Um, and that was determined by the USDA¹².

Horner Mm.

Wheeler You had to have an inspector all – all the time. And the sizes were [*sniffs*] – on tangerines they were 80s, 120s, 176s, 210 and 246.

Horner Wow. They must have been small tangerines.

Wheeler They were. They were little bitty fellas.

Horner [*laughs*]. What if you had a grapefruit?

Wheeler Now, we didn't pack many grapefruit. I'm not real up on the s – sizes on them. I know there was a 40. And a 48. I think the other one was 72.

Horner [*Inaudible*] – those are the small grapefruit. Get 72.

Wheeler Oranges – round oranges were 80s, 100s, 120s, um...

0:16:35 **Varieties of citrus production in Oviedo**

Horner Did that mean that we had different varieties of oranges?

¹² United States Department of Agriculture.

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Wheeler Oh, yeah.

Horner We do.

Wheeler Sure.

Horner What varieties did we make – did we s – grow?

Wheeler Well, we had tangerines. Dancy tangerines. Later, they developed the Orlando tangelo. And we had a world of them. And then, there was the early oranges like the Hamlin. And the pineapple. And the Parson Brown. And the Valencia. But they all come off at different times [*sniffs*].

Horner Well, that's nice. You don't have to pack 'em all at one...

Wheeler No.

Horner ...time.

Wheeler No. You can't pack 'em all at once.

Horner [*laughs*]. Who did the work? Who w – who worked in the packing house? Who picked the – the fruit?

Wheeler Well, you had picking crews. And you'd have a foreman. And he'd go out and recruit help to pick the fruit. And then, the packing house had their own crew that packed. And graded. And put crates together. And everything that it takes to run a packing house [*sniffs*].

Horner Did they live in Oviedo?

Wheeler Everybody did. Oviedo was never – until this latter day – a bedroom community. If you l – if you lived in Oviedo it was because you worked in Oviedo [*sniffs*].

Horner Something to do with agriculture.

Wheeler Unless you were a merchant or a preacher. Or something like that. Yes.

0:18:11 **Transitioning from citrus to celery production**

Horner Um, but by the mid – beginning of the twentieth century, there was a shift from citrus to celery. Who brought celery to Oviedo? And why was Oviedo such a good place to grow celery?

Wheeler Well, the first place it came to was Sanford. And at that time, they di – they thought that you couldn't grow celery on muck. It had to be grown on sand, which that side of Lake Monroe there where Sanford is was ideally suited to that.

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And then the King Brothers decided they were gonna try it in Oviedo. And we had some sand land, but we had more muck than we did sand. And so when they found out they could grow it on the muck, then – it expanded rapidly then.

And celery was high dollar crop. Number one: it was considered kind of exotic [*sniffs*]. And number two: once the [Great] Depression hit, there was a tremendous dis – demand for celery because they used it in soup kitchens. It was, you know – it'll stretch anything that you put it with [*sniffs*].

Then, about the time the Depression was over, World War II came along. And for reasons that I never understood, celery was not considered, um, necessary for the war effort. And so they didn't impose any price ceilings on it. And the price of celery just went through the roof during those war years. And people made money just like going to town on a Saturday. Um, in 1929, Seminole County's celery crop was worth about \$15 million. Just the celery crop.

Horner Well, I'd heard we'd been called the C – Celery Capital of the World for – [*laughs*].

Wheeler Well, we were. They didn't – there was no, uh, Zellwood. There was no everglades. The celery came from Seminole County.

Horner Well, when you're growing celery – it sounds like celery is a rather delicate...

Wheeler It is.

Horner ...crop to grow.

Wheeler And it takes a lot of water to grow it. And we had ample water supplies. We had the flowing wells, uh, to keep the fields wet. And it did well here.

Horner And there were plenty of celery fields around Oviedo.

Wheeler Oh, yeah.

Horner [*laughs*]. Well, when you, uh – when you laid – put the celery out – I've heard that you have to put the celery out first in small plots. Then you pick 'em up and replant them.

Wheeler Yes. You plant seed beds and raise the plants up until they're big enough to set out. And then you transplant 'em to a – to the field.

Horner And let 'em grow.

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner Well, how did they get enough water to handle?

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- Wheeler** They developed a system of subsurface irrigation, which simply put was r—r—rows of tile under the ground. And the tile was not cemented together. It was just joint to joint. And you'd turn those wells on. And anywhere that there was a joint, water would seep out.
- Horner** Sort of like a drip line...
- Wheeler** Yeah.
- Horner** ...only large and...
- Wheeler** Mhmm.
- Horner** underground.
- Wheeler** And you could raise and lower the water level by, um, a system of stops. At the end of each row you had a—a concrete pocket and holes every so often. And however high you wanted the water to go, you stopped off the holes. And, of course, it would seek its own level.
- Horner** Um, [inaudible]. [laughs]. Well, once your celery is grown in this muck land and you decide to harvest it, then what do you do with it?
- Wheeler** You harvest it.
- Horner** [laughs]. Yep. You're gonna harvest it. What—but you gotta get it up north. How you gonna do it?
- Wheeler** Well, [clears throat]...
- Horner** Get to market [laughs].
- Wheeler** ...for many years, it was cut by hand, uh, and put in boxes. And then it went to this celery washhouse, where it was washed and packed. And, again, there were sizes for it. And then they would put it through a pre-cooler bath to get it cold. And pack it into boxcars [sniffs]. And those boxcars had bunkers. One at each end. And they'd load it down with ice. And then they had a chipper there. And they would blow chipped ice all, eh—all over the top of the celery. They didn't—they didn't—a car wouldn't hold it to the ceiling. There was about three feet from the top tier to the ceiling. And they'd blow that full of that chipped ice. And the cars had fans on 'em that ran by a belt drive. And that circulated the cool and kept 'em cool until they could get where they were going [sniffs].
- Horner** So the celery was crisp when it got there.
- Wheeler** Yeah. It had to be.

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Horner Otherwise, it would be all wilted. If you take it out of the field and you stuff it in a crate and haul it north, it's gonna be all wilted [inaudible].

Wheeler Oh, no. No. They didn't do that.

Horner [laughs]. You mentioned that there was a, um – a celery packing house out at Lake Charm. And then there was another celery packing house in Oviedo.

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner So you had two of them operating at the same time. Is that because there was so much celery?

Wheeler Yeah. And there was[sic] more than two. Um, there were at least two more in Black Hammock. I'm not sure exactly – there might have been three. But, yes. There was a – well, how many pre-coolers would it take to make a trainload of celery [inaudible] every day?

Horner I don't know.

Wheeler Well...

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler ...just imagine.

Horner How many cars would there be in a train? I mean, do they haul a hundred cars? Or...

Wheeler It'd depend on the time of the year. But the trains weren't near as big as they are now. There'd probably be ten or twelve.

0:25:25

How packing houses served a social function

Horner Y – you told me that you used to go over to the packing house yourself when you were a young man.

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner What did it – what was it like? And what were the trains like?

Wheeler Well, the packing house was just about the nerve center of town. If you were looking for somebody, you'd meet 'em at the packing house. 'Cause there was always somebody there. And we didn't have, you know, City Hall and police department. And fire department. And Town House Restaurant. And all of that. You went to the packing house. You'd buy you a soda and sit down and sit

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down there with a package of Lance crackers and wait for 'em to come if they wasn't[sic] already there.

Horner [laughs]. And the – and so they'd come and load the train. The packers would load the train. Everybody else is sort of sitting and, uh – or – and coming and going. And socializing.

Wheeler But it was the same when the packing house wasn't running. It was a meeting place.

0:26:35

Building a railroad on muck land and dealing with derailed trains

Horner Ah. Well, what about the trains themselves? Were they modern and useful?

Wheeler Well, they weren't modern like what we have now. Um, like I said, they had fans and belt drives for refrigeration [sniffs]. The...

Horner You – you told me that the – the trains were – uh, the t – the tracks on the trains weren't that good.

Wheeler They weren't. One of the big obstacles to settling this area was, um, wet, low ground. And the tracks – if you see the route of either one of those railroads, they snake like this. Because they go from one high spot to the next to stay out of that muck. And they put the ties down on the bare sand. They didn't have any ballast or anything. And, uh, the rail was light [sniffs]. So the trains were slow. They did often times get off the ground – get on the ground. But that's all there was.

Horner Well, when the trains would get on the ground or derail like that, what do you do? I mean, everything stops [laughs]?

Wheeler Until they get it back on the rail. Back then, they didn't have cranes. And, uh, that's – railroad had some wreckers, but they were too heavy to come out there on that light track. So it was a matter of a gang of big, strong men. And jacks. And wooden blocks to jack that wheel up. And then the locomotive would pull it just enough to get it guided back over on the track [sniffs].

Horner So the boxcars had to be lifted up, so to speak.

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner And then placed back on the track.

Wheeler Yeah. And oftentimes there would be, um, places that were missing spikes and things like that. They'd have to nail it back down so it wouldn't roll again. It wasn't – it was a case of the rails rolling over – is what derailed 'em.

Horner No wonder the trains stopped coming [laughs].

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Wheeler Well, that's a — that is an ironic story. From the time the rails were laid in the 1880s until about 1980, those rails were the same rails that they put down originally. And rail is measured by the weight of a three-foot section. And those light rails were — some of 'em were sixty pounds and some of 'em were seventy pounds for three feet. And after all that time, they decided to re-lay the rails. And they put hundred-pound rail all the way from Sanford to Oviedo.

Now, the Seaboard had done theirs earlier. But this was the — the Atlantic Coast Line. And we found out later the government gave 'em a grant to upgrade this line. And then like two or three years later, they got approval to abandon it. And they took all that up. And took it and moved it. Used it somewhere else [laughs].

Horner [laughs]. So the whole tra — the whole tra — rail line from Oviedo to Sanford...

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner ...was torn up.

Wheeler Yeah.

0:30:51 **How Seminole County was formed and the consequences of its formation**

Horner [inaudible]. Um, when we talk about Oviedo and we talk about Seminole County, neither of them used to exist. You were mentioning, uh, that your — was it your grandfather who helped get Oviedo...

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner ...incorporated as a town?

Wheeler Mhmm.

Horner Where did Seminole County come from? 'Cause it wasn't originally Seminole County.

Wheeler Well, you have to understand that because of the citrus and the celery and the other farming, Sanford swung a pretty big stick at that time. And they had tried [clears throat] two different times with a referendum to move the county seat from Orlando to Sanford. And failed. And Sanford — the people in Sanford thought that world emanated from Sanford. They were conceited and, um — I don't know what else to call it. They...

Horner Arro...

Wheeler ...thought...

Horner ... — arrogant.

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Wheeler They thought—yeah. Arrogant. And Sanford was supposed to be it. And it was it, as long as the things were coming by the steamboat. ‘Cause that was as far as they could come. But when the railroads came, that changed. And then along came Colonel Henry Sanford¹³. And he was determined he was gonna make Sanford something.

And in 18—about 1875, there was an infamous murder trial in Orange County that was coming up between the carpet baggers and the locals. The carpet baggers had imposed a head tax on cattle. And this is right after the Civil War, now. And [*clears throat*], of course, a carpet bagger was in power. They had—they were the sheriff and done all of that. And he sent out some men to the outlying areas to collect that cattle tax. Well, they took the sheriff, tied him to an old bottom plow and dropped him in Lake, uh, Kissimmee.

Horner So the sheriff’s now dead [*inaudible*].

Wheeler Sheriff’s dead. And there’s this murder trial coming up of who supposedly did that. And all of a sudden, the courthouse burned down.

Horner Now is this the courthouse in Sanford or the courthouse in...

Wheeler No. It was...

Horner ...Orlando?

Wheeler ...Orlando. There was no courthouse in Sanford.

Horner Oh. But now it’s burned down.

Wheeler And it burned down on the eve of this trial. Well, whatever evidence they had, of course, was gone with it.

So the question arose as to building a new courthouse. And Henry Sanford went to Orlando to the Board of County Commissioners and proposed that, uh, the courthouse be built in Sanford, inferring that that’s where it should have been all the time. And he would give the land for the courthouse. Provided, of course, it was built in Sanford. Well, Mr. Jacob Summerlin¹⁴, who was a leading citizen there, stood up and said, “Well, people are used to doing business in Orlando. And I think they ought to continue to do business in Orlando. And I’m gonna loan the county \$10,000 to build a courthouse. And they can pay me back or not.” Well, of course, that dashed the hopes of—who wouldn’t turn—who wouldn’t, in that day and time, turn down that kind of money for a courthouse?

¹³ Henry Shelton Sanford (June 15, 1823 – May 21, 1891).

¹⁴ Jacob Summerlin (February 20, 1820 – November 4, 1893).

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Well, that was the second time – no. That was the third time they had been thwarted. There were two referendums before that that didn't garner enough support. So the courthouse was built in Orlando. And, not to be outdone, they formed – Sanford formed a Divide the County committee. And there were six or eight of the real prominent citizens in Sanford that spearheaded it. And they elected Forrest Lake¹⁵ as the, um, Representative for Orange County.

Horner To the State Legislature.

Wheeler To the State Legislature. And in 1913, he had gathered enough support that he put a bill through to create Seminole County. And according to the f – r – record, it passed way in the middle of the night on a – almost the last day of the session.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler And [clears throat] he rushed it over to the governor for f – signature before anybody could catch on to what was happening. And, uh, that became Seminole County.

Well, Orange County was fit to be tied because it – he was their representative, too. But he didn't let any of them know [laughs] what he was doing. So that's how Seminole County got here.

Horner So we became our own county because we were a piece of Orange [County]. And then we tricked 'em into letting us have our – into having our own county.

Wheeler And in the effort to get that done, uh, there was a group of citizens in Oviedo, including a former c – Orange County commissioner, who did not think it was a good idea. And didn't support it. And when [clears throat] the thing passed, the new commissioner set out to exact retribution from all the outlying areas that didn't support it.

Horner Uh, oh.

Wheeler And...

Horner [inaudible].

Wheeler ... that's why we had the kind of roads and schools we had. Because they didn't get any money.

Horner So they – they strangled Oviedo...

Wheeler Yep.

¹⁵ Forrest Lake (July 15, 1868 – January 24, 1939).

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Horner ...in effect...

Wheeler Yep.

Horner ... from all the county money...

Wheeler Yep.

Horner ...for improvements.

Wheeler Oviedo. Chuluota. Geneva.

Horner They didn't get any road money.

Wheeler No.

Horner No school money.

Wheeler And that did not change until the Supreme Court got into the segregation issue. And took the funding authority away from the – from the county commission and the school board. And mandated that they had to make a level playing field. And that was in the late sixties.

0:39:08

George Kelsey and enforcing the law in a small town

Horner Well, Oviedo was a pretty small town well into the seven – the...

Wheeler Yep.

Horner ... seventies. I mean, 800 people. Maybe 1,000.

Wheeler Oh.

Horner Small town.

Wheeler It was about 2,500.

Horner By the time we get to late-seventies.

Wheeler Right. It was one square mile on the map. Um.

Horner We didn't even have a police department. Or a fire department.

Wheeler We had a volunteer fire department. And we had one policeman. And he was also the constable for the unincorporated areas. He was empowered to enforce the law.

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Horner So what we called today a sheriff. He would have been a deputy sheriff for this area.

Wheeler Probably. Yes.

Horner But now we don't use the term co—constable.

Wheeler No. They've outlawed that office.

Horner Who was the constable? Who was this...

Wheeler George Kelsey¹⁶.

Horner Ah. He's pretty much of a, uh—a legend in Oviedo.

Wheeler Yeah. He—he served for a long time. Uh, and he was also the city police.

Horner And did he do a good job?

Wheeler He knew what was going on.

Horner He knew what was happening.

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner And everybody's family. And everybody's [inaudible]...

Wheeler Yeah. He had eyes and ears everywhere.

0:40:41 Eccentric characters and interesting stories from Oviedo

Horner [laughs]. Um, he was a character. Are there any other important people in Oviedo that ought to be mentioned? Any other eccentric characters?

Wheeler [sniffs]. Well, there was a few of 'em that were kind of humorous. But n—none to the extent that George was. Mr. T.L. Lingo had an insurance agency in the back of that, uh, building that they just tore down on Broadway Street. What used to be the drug store. And he would send his bird dog across the street to the post office to get his mail. And they'd tie it up and put it in the dog's mouth. And he'd bring it back over there to him. And, uh, he'd send a note down to the grocery store in the middle of the block for a pound of steak. Or for hamburger or whatever. And they'd wrap it up and give it to the dog. The dog would bring it right on back there to him.

Horner Didn't eat the steak?

¹⁶ Andrew George Alexander Kelsey (August 22, 1915 – September 17, 1981).

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Wheeler No. No.

Horner Well, you're a Lawton way back along. What about the Lawton family? You're related to them. A couple of generations ago.

Wheeler Yeah. Well, Professor Lawton— T.W. Lawton¹⁷, for whom the school¹⁸ is named, uh, was the— probably the first person to get a college education in, uh, Oviedo. And he rode the Dinky [Line] back and forth every day to get to school at Rollins [College] [*sniffs*]. Now, I don't know whether he bummed or if he bought a ticket but...

Horner [*laughs*].

Wheeler ...that's how he got there. He became, I think, the second superintendent of schools for the county. And he...

Horner Yeah. The first elected one. The first one was appointed by the governor...

Wheeler Right.

Horner ...when we finally became the...

Wheeler Right.

Horner ...the county. But...

Wheeler And, uh, he served until about 1953. So it was thirty-some years. When he got ready to retire, somebody figured out that if each child in the county would give a penny, they'd have enough to buy him a new car. And so they all put their pennies in and bought him a brand new Chevrolet sedan when he retired.

Horner Appreciated gift.

Wheeler I'm sure.

0:43:32 **How churches influenced life in Oviedo**

Horner Where'd— where did the people in town go to church? 'Cause I've always heard that the churches were very important in Oviedo.

Wheeler If the churches were behind it, it would happen. Well, [*clear throat*] there's two things that a— any little small town has a plethora of. And that's churches and gas stations. They might not have a grocery store. And they might not have doctor. But they'd have churches and gas stations.

¹⁷ Thomas Willingham Lawton (November 14, 1882 – October 20, 1963).

¹⁸ T. W. Lawton Elementary School is located at 151 Graham Avenue in Oviedo, Florida.

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Horner [laughs].

Wheeler There was the First Baptist of Oviedo, the First Methodist of Oviedo [sniffs]. And then there was, um [clears throat], Church of God, um...

Horner And, of course, the black churches [inaudible].

Wheeler I'm trying to think of the name of the one – oh. Mission Road Baptist Church. Antioch. Fountain Head. Um, there were two more down in Lawtonville, but I can't think of the names of either one of 'em. One of 'em's still operating. But church was a – a big, uh, factor in what went on in town.

Horner D – did the Methodists and Baptists cooperate? I mean, they lived – they were...

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner ...fairly close together.

Wheeler Yeah. The early days, they had service every other Sunday. And whatever Sunday it was – that the Methodist Church, everybody went there. Then the next week, they'd go to the Baptist Church.

0:45:17

How the Oviedo lights became an urban legend

Horner [laughs]. [clears throat]. Well, to get on a bit of a lighter side, uh, when it comes around Halloween, we always hear talk about the spooky Oviedo lights.

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner We're famous for having the spooky Oviedo lights. What were they? Or are they, if they still exist?

Wheeler There are [clears throat] – they still exist. But the reality of 'em has been blown way out of proportion. Back then, if you went down there to the bridge on a bright moonlit night, you could see a sparkle in the water. And it was phosphorous. And that became i – i – it was just a curiosity to go and see. And, of course, that bridge is way out beyond anywhere. And the kids'd like to go there.

Um, but then it got to be the Oviedo lights. And if we went to Winter Park or Sanford, we'd hear the kids talking about the Oviedo lights. And, oh, there was this ball of fire coming down the road. And, um, there was somebody hung in the water tower. Um...

Horner Was that true? Somebody hung in the water tower?

Wheeler No.

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Horner [laughs].

Wheeler None of that was...

Horner None of...

Wheeler ... true.

Horner ...that.

Wheeler None of that was true. But you couldn't convince anybody that i—I'd say there was more chemical enhancement...

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler ... that went on than anything else.

Horner [laughs]. Oo. Okay.

0:47:10 **How being a bedroom community shaped the City of Oviedo**

Horner S—Since you are so knowledgeable—mm—uh, lived in Oviedo and your family lived there, is there anything else that's unique or special about Oviedo that you remember?

Wheeler [sniffs] Well, it's kind of lost this now, since we're not a bedroom community any more, but there was a community that engulfed everybody. And there were any number of things that were citizen-initiated that we would've never had otherwise. The swimming pool for one. The Memorial Building for another. The doctor's clinic for another. The Woman's Club started the first garbage collection. The Woman's Club funded the first, um—I don't know what you'd call it now. We called it a rescue wagon. You know, a van with oxygen and sh—

Horner Ah.

Wheeler First responder kind of thing.

Horner 'Cause there was[sic] no EMTs...

Wheeler No.

Horner ...so...

Wheeler The firemen manned it.

0:48:29 **How the Oviedo Fire Department evolved**

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Wheeler Um, you were asking me a while ago about how did you reported[sic] a fire. Well, there was a big whistle up on pole by the firehouse. And you went there and pushed the button. And you could hear it all over town [sniffs]. And, uh, people would come. The men would come and they'd tell 'em where the fire was. And – and they'd go to it. It usually amounted to saving the house next to the house that was on fire.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler Because a lot of those houses were tarpaper and wood and all. And they just went up like a box of matches.

Horner Mm. So do you just come up – the old fashioned thing. Do you come up and pump the pump? And spray the water on the house next door?

Wheeler Well, not quite that primitive.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler Um, in 1947, the City bought a Ford truck. It was the first one they could get after the war. And the young returning veterans built a tank – a water tank on it. And put a pump on it. And that was the first firetruck.

And then, in 1957, the City bought another, uh, commercial-grade firetruck. So we had two. But it wasn't uncommon at all for a fire whistle to blow and somebody to rush down there who didn't know where the fire was. And didn't know how to operate the pump. And they'd get in the firetruck and go dashing off somewhere. Somebody'd have to catch 'em and bring 'em back [laughs].

Horner [laughs]. Eh, they c – they couldn't pick up the microphone and say...

Wheeler No.

Horner ...“Dispatch. Where you going?”

Wheeler No. There wasn't any of that. Now, George Kelsey did have a radio connected to the sheriff's department. But that was it.

0:50:46

How being a bedroom community shaped the City of Oviedo (continued)

Horner [laughs]. Well, I was trying to think if there was anything else I didn't – it is interesting that Oviedo was so close-knit that they did sw – the swimming pool, the Memorial Building in f – in memoriam to the Second y – World War people. And, uh, the canning m – m –

Wheeler Yeah.

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Horner ...kitchen.

Wheeler That was a...

Horner The community canning kitchen.

Wheeler ...a thing for the war effort. But that Memorial Building and the clinic – both were built with as much donated labor and materials as there was p – probably more than what was purchased [*sniffs*]. Dudas gave the lumber. Um, Bob Ash was a brick mason. He laid all the block. Joe Leinhart had lumber that he had cut in Black Hammock years ago. He furnished all the w – trim and the woodwork for the inside of the building. He probably put it up, knowing him.

Um, it was a – it was a concerted effort because Dr. Martin had retired. And he had to move to Orlando in order to retire because people wouldn't quit coming.

Horner [*laughs*].

Wheeler His office was right beside his house up there where the Baptist church is now. And people just wouldn't take no for an answer. And so finally, he moved. And that was another thing my grandfather was a[sic] instigator in. He called together the leading businessmen in town. And they said, "The only way we're ever gonna get a doctor is to build a place for him to practice." And so, the major – mostly the major farmers in the area went together and raised some money. And then set the volunteers to work.

Horner And they built the clinic.

Wheeler And they built the clinic.

Horner You know? 'Cause the – the farmers at that time would have been the leading lights...

Wheeler Yeah.

Horner ...of the community.

Wheeler Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Horner 'Cause they were the ones bringing in the income.

Wheeler Mhmm.

0:53:14 **His experience with race relations in Oviedo**

Horner How did the African-American community and the white community get along with each other?

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Wheeler [sniffs] I don't ever remember any – any discord of any kind except for that one incident in high school. And that was quickly put to rest. And we all just got along.

Horner I heard a story once from a – a man who said that, uh, Benjamin Wheeler bought him a car. 'Cause he was – he didn't have the money. And he needed it because he was the crew chief. And he needed to get the guys to work. Do you remember that story?

Wheeler Oh, yeah. Yeah. That was Buster Garrison. And he – he was an entrepreneur. He hauled his crew to the grove. And then he'd put sides on his truck and load it with oranges. And haul 'em to the juice plant. And, of course, old trucks were always...

Horner Breaking.

Wheeler ... something wrong with 'em. And he finally went to my dad and said, "Mr. Frank. I mean I need me a new truck. And I ain't got no money. And I don't want you to tell me no [laughs]."

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler And what did – what did Frank Wheeler say?

Horner He got him a truck.

Wheeler [laughs].

Horner I don't know what their arrangements were. I'm sure he paid some on it. But Buster was a, um, hugely industrious person. To work night and day. Do anything you want him to do. Gladly. And my dad just saw the worth of it. He sent him over to Holler Chevrolet. And I'm sure he called Mr. Holler and said, "Get this man a truck." That's the way things worked back then.

Um, years later – years later, I had a mirror get knocked off of my Chevrolet truck. One of the outside mirrors. And I went to the place to get it seen about. And I was in my work clothes. And I had my little dog with me. And the only thing I had for a leash was a piece of hay bailing twine about so long. So I made a leash out of that. And me and her were walking around outside. And the – the service writer said, "Well, I don't know if we've got the part. And I don't know if we've got time to put it on." And all this, that and the other. I said, "I'll wait." 'Cause this was in Winter Park, now. And there was – I'll never forget this. There was a salesman. He had rose-colored glasses and a pink ultra-suede coat on.

Wheeler [laughs].

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Horner And he came out there to smoke a cigarette and took one look at me and my dog and wheeled around and went back inside [*laughs*].

Wheeler [*laughs*].

Horner And so help me, it wasn't a minute or two, Mr. Holler came out. And he walked over there to me. And we shook hands and started talking. You know, just passing the time. And all of a sudden, that service writer came out there and said, "Mr. Wheeler, we gon' get you taken care of [*laughs*]."

Wheeler [*laughs*].

Horner You looked like you didn't have two nickels to rub together.

Wheeler That's...

Horner He didn't...

Wheeler That's...

Horner He didn't know who he was dealing with.

Wheeler That's what they thought.

Horner [*laughs*]. And you're one...

Wheeler I...

Horner ... one of the most important families in town [*laughs*].

Wheeler Can't judge a book by its cover.

Horner [*laughs*].

0:57:25 How Alafaya Trail became a paved road

Wheeler I guess the one story I would tell again, because it's so funny to me.

Horner [*clears throat*].

Wheeler Our county commissioner in this district was B.C. Dodd¹⁹. He lived out there in Goldenrod. And at that time, the commissioner got to say where the road money was spent in his district. Well, I want so and so fixed. Or it's — you know, whatever. So Mr. Dodd stood up and he said, "I wanna pave that road from the city limits of Oviedo to the county line." Which is now Alafaya Trail. It was just dirt before that. And the commissioner from Sanford jumped up and says, "I

¹⁹ Basil Corbett "B.C." Dodd (February 2, 1907 – October 28, 1982).

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don't know why you wanna do that." Said, "Ain't nobody ever gonna use it."
[laughs].

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler And he says, "You hush, Pope. I didn't say anything about what you did in your district. And this is what I wanna do." And how prophetic that decision turned out to be. Because where Mitchell Hammock Road crosses Alafaya was the city limits. And from there on out this way was dirt. Clay.

Horner And he was the only one that was farsighted enough to see you're gonna need her. Hm.

0:59:19

Deciding on where to build Florida Technological University

Wheeler That was – that was in the early sixties. We had heard about what was gonna be the new space university, but nothing had actually happened.

Horner Ah. Yeah. 'Cause they hadn't chosen the site yet.

Wheeler Right.

Horner Boy. He was taking a gamble.

Wheeler Yeah. He was.

Horner Maybe that's why Dodd Road is named after him.

Wheeler Well, he was a – he was a prominent figure. And he was huge. He was, uh, like 7 foot something tall. And he wore – they've got one of his shoes in the Goldenrod Museum. And it's – I'm not kidding. It's like that.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler He was a giant. And, of course, that went along with his demeanor.

Horner [laughs].

Wheeler At that time, they were trying to decide where to put FTU²⁰. And one of the sites they looked at is where Seminole Community College is. And another site they looked at was there at – across from Lockwood Road and [County Road] 419. And Mr. C.S. Lee offered to give 'em the land if they'd put it there.

Horner [laughs].

²⁰ Florida Technological University, now the University of Central Florida.

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Wheeler But Mr. Billy Dial²¹ in Orlando, and a few more like that, th—they wasn't gonna have that. So FTU got put where it is. And as a conciliation prize, we got the Iron Bridge²² sewer plant and Seminole [State] College. And where they are is no accident.

Horner Uh huh.

Wheeler There is still some animosity there.

Horner So we're here at UCF. And it's out of the farsightedness of Mr. Dodd. And...

Wheeler Well, he...

Horner ...we got a way to get here.

Wheeler ...he played a role in it [*sniffs*].

1:01:28 **Closing remarks**

Horner Well, is there anything else that you would like to add about Oviedo? Something that you really appreciate about living in that town. Growing up in that town.

Wheeler The people. I had so many good friends. And—and a lot of people worked for my dad. And, of course, I got to know them. And, uh, I miss 'em tremendously. And I miss that sense of community.

Horner The whole downtown is gone now.

Wheeler The whole downtown is gone. But what's really gone is that fellowship. If you needed something that somebody in the community was—that was their forte, you just went to 'em and said, "You know, I need a well put down." "I need a survey made." "I need, you know, whatever it was." And, uh, they all worked together [*sniffs*].

I wrote a column for *The [Seminole] Voice* one time about they all worked together. And I can't find it anymore. But I named a couple of dozen things that happened that way in Oviedo.

Horner Somebody needed their fellow man.

Wheeler Well, we need a clinic. We need a city hall. We need a swimming pool. We need garbage service. There was just a—a lot of things that—and they would have never happened any other way. Because we weren't going to get any support from the county. And the city didn't have any money.

²¹ William Henry "Billy" Dial (December 12, 1907 – March 23, 1999).

²² Iron Bridge Water Pollution Control Facility.

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Horner Hm. Yeah. Well, thank you, Ben, for talking to us. And letting us...

Wheeler My...

Horner ...know...

Wheeler ...pleasure.

Horner ...about Oviedo. And you're – you're a fount of knowledge.

Wheeler I'll probably go home and say, "Dang. Why didn't I tell 'em that?"

Horner [*laughs*]. I'm sure you will.

End of Interview