

Oral Memoirs

of

Rex Clonts, Jr.

An Interview Conducted by

Joseph Morris

November 2, 2011

Linda McKnight Batman Oral History Project

Historical Society of Central Florida

Museum of Seminole County History

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Joseph Morris

Transcriber: Savannah Vickers

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Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Rex Clonts, Jr. is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 2, 2011.

Abstract

Oral history of Rex Clonts, Jr., conducted by Joseph Morris on November 2, 2011. Clonts was born in Orlando, Florida and raised in Oviedo. In the interview, Clonts discusses his family's work in agriculture, celery farming, how Oviedo has changed over time, the effect of Walt Disney World and the University of Central Florida on the region, the citrus and cattle industries, the relationship between the Oviedo community and the Sanford Naval Training Center, and fire ants in Florida.

Rex Clonts, Jr.

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Joseph Morris

November 2, 2011

Oviedo, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Morris It is November 2, 2011, and I'm talking to Rex Clonts[, Jr.] at his residence. I am Joseph Morris, representing the Linda McKnight Batman Oral History Project for the Historical Society of Central Florida. Mr. Clonts, could you tell us a little about your life?

Clonts Well, I was born in 1949 in the hospital, in Orange Memorial Hospital in Orlando, to Rex Clonts, Sr., my dad, and my mother, Thelma Lee Clonts. I'm gonna talk a little bit about their life, if that's okay.

Morris Perfect, sir.

0:00:40

Family background in agriculture

Clonts My dad came to Oviedo riding in the lap of his mother – he was one year old, age of one – in a Model A Ford, from north Georgia in 1937, I believe. And my mother was born here on Lake Charm in Oviedo. They both passed on rather recently. They – so, basically, both lifelong residents of Oviedo. And after the war [World War II] they married, and I'm the oldest of their five children. Four of us still live right here in Seminole County, and have one sister who lives in Cartersville, Georgia.

Morris What kind of jobs did your parents do while they lived in Oviedo, sir?

Clonts Their families were in agriculture. Oh, let me start over. Let me start back just a little bit. My mother's family had – her grandfather had moved down here in the 1880s, and her father – my grandfather – C. S. Lee, was born here on Lake Charm in Oviedo. And his dad was in agriculture, taking care of citrus trees. And so my grandfather was always in the citrus, vegetable, and cattle business. And so my mother was familiar with all those endeavors coming up, and it was natural that she married a farmer – my father. His father also had begun farming shortly after arriving in Oviedo.

Morris Same type of farming, sir?

Clonts Both of them were vegetable farmers growing celery.

Morris Okay, sir.

Clonts They grew some other crops from time to time, but specialized in celery farming. And so – growing up here – that's what my family did. We had some orange groves, but the majority of the family focus was on the vegetable farming operation. C. R. Clonts Associated Growers was the company that my grandfather started in the early 1940s, and at one time we farmed over 200 acres of celery right here in eastern Seminole County-Oviedo area. You got a mosquito on your cheek. Got him.

Morris Thank you, sir.

Clonts Celery farming was extremely profitable, lucrative during the early '30s and '40s. Sort of the heyday of the Oviedo celery industry. So their timing was good. But over – after the war, when all the boys came home from the war, and a lot more celery was being grown in the United States, markets went down. Prices went down. The small farms here in Oviedo weren't as easy to operate – weren't as efficient. And so my father and grandfather purchased land in Zellwood – in the Zellwood muck area on Lake Apopka. And they did that in anticipation of needing to be having a more modern, large, contiguous farm. So they purchased that in the year I was born, in 1949. So when I grew up, we were farming both places. My father was farming both – multiple small farms here around Oviedo – Black Hammock, Mitchell Hammock, the Slavia area – and we were raising vegetables at our Zellwood farm. And that was 650 acres. And as a child, I remember going over, and every year they would clear up another portion of that farm. So they started by farming just 40 acres, and then over about another 10 or 12 years, they cleared the rest of it so that they could farm all 650 acres over there.

When I went off to college, I specifically – I went to school so that I wouldn't be a farmer. I could have stayed home and been a farmer. So I was planning on working in the business world, and just before I graduated realized the one business I could control was coming back here, taking over the family farm. And so I came back and joined actively working full-time in 1971, when I got out of college. And I moved over to Apopka and ran that Zellwood farm. We grew celery, lettuce, carrots, sweet corn, occasionally onions and parsley – several crops over the years, but the staple was always celery, sweet corn, and carrots. And in about 1978, we closed down our last Oviedo farm. Up until that time, we'd been farming both places, but we closed that down, and the last farm land that we were actively farming is now – is in Mitchell Hammock – is now a sod farm along Mitchell Hammock in between Mitchell Hammock and Chapman Roads. So, no longer used for vegetables. Family still owns the land, but we don't farm vegetables anymore.

Morris Okay, sir. So your family's no longer in the farming business, but they were in the farming business up until 1978?

Clonts Well, we still were in business here in several ways. We always had orange groves here.

Morris Okay, sir.

Clonts And we have cattle ranches.

Morris Those were my follow-up questions.

Clonts Yeah. You know, you'd find most people that had been multi-generational in the vegetable business in Central Florida also have had orange groves and cattle, because the three just naturally go together here. And you can, if you're successful in one, you're able to be successful in the other, usually.

Morris How come they go together like that, sir?

Clonts Well, vegetables are very seasonal, so, you know, you've got a fall crop and a spring crop, but you got time on your hands during the other portions of the year. So orange grove tends to be more year-round work, but is not as intensive as vegetable farming, so you can sort of work the two together. And then if you've been successful in the vegetable business, usually you reinvest in land, and very often the best use for that land is cattle. Only certain types of land are good vegetable land, but cattle you can graze just about anywhere in Central Florida.

0:11:32 Celery farming

Morris Okay, sir. Could you give us a little insight into how you grow vegetables – celery in particular, citrus in particular – like the methods of how you would go about it?

Clonts Celery's, in nature, celery grows, um – stop it.

Morris Sure thing, sir.

0:12:06 RECORDING CUTS OFF

0:12:07 Celery farming

Morris Okay, sir. Would you like to continue?

Clonts Yeah. Celery in Central Florida is – the seed is planted in the fall, and it's planted in seed beds so that you can grow a large number of plants in a small, controlled area. You can herbicide them. You can control the irrigation. And as those seeds – because celery seeds are a very difficult seed to sprout. It's not much larger than a large fleck of pepper, and takes a long time to germinate to get any substantial size, and so we would start planting seed in August. But because that seed is so tender, we would oftentimes cover those plants.

First of all, laid burlap out as soon as you rolled the seed down out on the ground, and let the seed actually germinate under the burlap where it would be cooler and moister. You kept the ground moist with subsurface irrigation, and

actually surface irrigation between the beds to keep that environment just right for those little seeds to germinate. And then you would remove the sacks after the green – after the seeds germinated and started to show the first leaves. And we would grow them in the seed bed for about four months, and then we would transplant those plants, pull them up by the root, knock the majority of the dirt off the root, and pack them in boxes, take them to the production field. And we used a New Holland transplanter, which is a fairly simple machine that, as it's pulled through the field, opens up a furrow, and it has a wheel with a set of fingers on it, and you can put the plants one at a time in the notches in the wheel, and as it goes around and puts the root in that furrow, it releases that plant. And we would have a bank of six of these wheels on the back of a tractor-drawn machine, and go through the field and transplant – we called it “setting” – the celery plants in the field. And from that point, they got immediately irrigated with overhead irrigation so that the ground got packed good[sic] around the roots, and they got a good start. Then it took anywhere from 75 to 90 – and if the weather was cold, maybe 100 – days to produce that crop. So growing celery's four months in the seed bed, and three months in the field. It's a long cycle, especially when you consider that in the off-time you're having. Someone usually would gather seed from an arid region like Utah or California. Had our seed grown. So between the production of seed and the planting of seed and the growing of the crop, was just about a year-round endeavor. And we did all our harvesting in March, April, May, and June.

Morris Why did you transplant it from the seed bed to the production area? What was the difference between – is it soil?

Clonts No. Well, yes. It did happen to be different soil, but you could take ten acres of seed beds and grow enough plants for 200 acres of field production, and so was much less expensive to take care of that – to do the fungicide, and the weeding, and keeping the insects off of it on ten acres. And then you – when you pull those plants and spread them out where they would get to a large stalk, planted them at the right distance apart, you could have 200 acres of celery out of that. You only had three months to take care of that 200 acres.

Morris Oh, okay, sir. So it was easier to guard and protect them when they were younger that way?

Clonts Yeah, much easier, much less expensive to protect them. The transplanting operation was expensive, but it was not nearly as expensive as it would have been trying to put those plants – to put those seeds directly in the field and take care of them the whole seven months it took to grow that. And you could, also when that – the seed beds – that ten acres that that seed bed was on...

Morris Mosquito's trying to – he's gone. He's just scouting you out, sir.

Clonts The ten acres that seed beds are on is very – you intensely farm that, and one of the preparations of doing that intense farming – this will keep the mosquitoes out – is that you level that land meticulously. You tried to – you ran a very

intricate irrigation system all tile-drained, and you used – your seed bed land was your most prized possession in the celery business. That seed bed – a good seed bed – plot that was the right consistency of soil and the right ability to not only hold moisture, but to get rid of moisture when you had too much rain – to get rid of excessive rainfall – was very important. So celery farmers did a lot of work to try to get their seed bed just perfect and have the right plot of land to do that with.

Morris So that was pretty common then, between celery farmers?

Clonts Yeah. Every celery farmer in the state had their own seed beds. And now seed – most celery seed or a good portion of it – is grown in greenhouses. It's grown in plant trays – in the trays of plants in greenhouses. So it's got much more of a controlled environment to grow in now, than when we were growing them outside. But still the best plants are the ones grown outdoors. It's just a lot tougher, a lot more work.

0:20:23

Bleaching celery

Morris Okay, sir. Did you ever bleach the plants – whiten them?

Clonts That was a practice that kind of came to an end in the mid-1940s. Until then, yes. They took the boards and put down the sides of celery, at least a portion of it, and they would bleach it. I remember them doing that as a child – I shouldn't say that. I remember them talking about it, but I don't actually remember seeing it.

Morris Okay, sir. But why did they do that? I personally don't understand.

Clonts It was a practice that – I don't know this for sure – but I think that it allowed celery to be harvested, and stored in root cellars, and carried much longer through the year, than if celery were left green and packed away and stored. You know, a lot of the original celery growers were Upstate New York and Michigan. In the North, when they grew celery, they grew it in the late summer, harvested it, and stored it, and shipped it out little by little during the wintertime. And so people would traditionally take celery, put it in a root cellar back in the – back before refrigeration. And it was very important to try to preserve that as long as you could before so that you had vegetables, and if you stored potatoes, and everything that you harvested in the fall, you stored and ate on it as long as you could. We're not used to that nowadays. Nowadays you go to a supermarket and they got, you know, just about every vegetable year-round, but that's just happened in my lifetime. Prior to that and prior to refrigeration in the early part of the 1900s, vegetables were very seasonal. And so you had an excess – you had an abundance at harvest time – you tried to store that as long as you could. And bleached celery would store better than green celery.

Morris Okay, sir.

Clonts That's the reason. That's the long-winded explanation for bleaching. And because it traditionally had been bleached, even after refrigeration came along in the early part of the 1900s, celery was — had always — people were used to eating bleached celery, so that's the way it was done. That was phased out, and my understanding is that the military, right before World War II, came out with a report that said green celery was better for you than bleached celery — was more nutritious. And that one report was sort of the tipping point. They had been up until then, for the few years before that, they had been growing bleached and unbleached celery, and after that, bleached celery became a thing of the past.

Morris Okay. Well, thank you, sir.

Clonts All right. That's the long-winded explanation. It's kind of like, you know, why did all citrus juice come from a frozen concentrate can a few years ago, and now it's available in a not-from-concentrate carton in the refrigerated section of the store? It's sort of the same thing. It's an evolution of technology and what people are used to. And you can't — people don't change their habits overnight. It takes a while.

Morris All right. Gotcha, sir.

Clonts But all the celery starting in the late '40s then, was not bleached celery.

Morris Did your — so I'm understanding — well, you didn't grow it that way, but your father and grandfather each did?

Clonts Grandfathers definitely did. Yes.

0:25:34

Childhood memories of mules

Morris Okay. Well, how, you said earlier that one of the stories you remember — hearing them talk about bleaching the celery. Do you remember any other childhood memories popped into your mind? You know, whether's[sic] it in agriculture or just at school?

Clonts Well, when I was — I do remember my father's — excuse me — my grandfather's mules. He had obviously started — mules were used a lot, exclusively in the 1800s, and quite a bit in the early 1900s, because in Oviedo most of this celery farming was grown on muck, and that soft, organic land, the heavy tractors of the day wouldn't stand up. They'd do fine out here on the sand land, or where they were mostly used in the Midwest, but that muck soil was, you had to have good flotation. And they would even take the mules' hooves and wrap them in sacks, and tie around the hooves to increase the footprint of the mule so that he wouldn't bog up as much when he went through the field. And at the end of the day, untied those sacks off the bottom of the mules' feet. And the next day, if it was still soft and wet out there, they'd retie them. That would keep him from bogging up. He'd only sink three inches instead of sinking eight inches.

Morris And the mule accepted this.

Clonts The mules accepted it. And you know, back then, if you were going to be a farmer, you had to be able to have a good—you had to know your mules, and be able to train them, and be able to work them. And it was an art to have a good team of mules. So I remember as a kid, the conversation between my dad and my grandfather, where my dad was saying, “What in the world are you doing keeping those mules? You haven’t plowed a field with them in five years now, and we’re not gonna ever use mules again. I don’t know why you’re fooling with them.” And my grandfather saying, “They’re my mules. I can’t just get rid of them.” So until those mules died, which was probably—I was probably six or seven years old—he still had a barn right on the end of Lake Charm at Florida Avenue. Along Florida Avenue there, he had a barn with two mules in it. But I’ve never seen them work the field. I’ve seen pictures. I’ve got pictures of it. In fact, I’ve got pictures of my grandfather with his mule team and his first tractor in the field, and he’s smiling. I think he’s more proud of the mules than he is the tractor.

Morris He had two mules? Is that like a normal amount, or...

Clonts Oh, well, they generally used a mule team. They generally used two mule teams farming here. Now, I have no idea how many total teams he had, but probably, you know, two or three teams of two.

0:29:13 **Working in the fields**

Morris You said your grandfather had worked the fields. Did your father also work as a farmer?

Clonts Yeah. Yes.

Morris And growing up, did you do the same?

Clonts Well, I worked summers, you know, but—so when school got out in the summer, I’d go work with Dad, and work all summer long at the farm. But my dad always told me that, you know, he wanted me to be whatever I wanted to be. You know, don’t—he didn’t expect me to come back to the farm. If I did, it was going to be my decision. He wanted me to make that decision on my own.

Morris Okay.

Clonts So as I said, when I went off to college, I went so that I wouldn’t be a farmer, but ended up coming back.

Morris When you came back, sir, did you work mostly the administrative? Or did you also go back and work the fields as well?

Clonts No, I worked the fields. I mean, you know, times had changed, but we had a crew of tractor drivers and – but I was the farm manager. I oversaw not only decisions on what we were gonna plant and where we were gonna plant it, but when the planting times were gonna be, and how we were gonna try to space the crop out, what personnel we needed for packing, and shipping, and selling.

0:31:01 **How Oviedo has changed over time**

Morris Okay, sir. Can you tell us how it's changed over the years, like Oviedo and the areas you've lived in? Since you were growing up, I'm assuming there's been a lot of changes between then and now.

Clonts Well, Oviedo in the 1950s was an agricultural economy. Between the citrus and the vegetables that were grown, the basis for all the economy and all the services here was built around agriculture. That started changing in the late '50s, as some of the new equipment that was available had opened up new farming areas in the United States, and competition. For instance, in South Florida, the Belle Glade area opened up, and it was more economical in a lot of ways to grow products down there than it was up here. So, these farms tended to fall on harder times, and the more marginal farms and marginal farmers dropped out, sometimes bought up by other farmers, and sometimes that land was just taken out of production, never to be put in. There was lots of small pockets here in Oviedo that I remember having vegetables in them, that have not have been farmed in thirty years now.

Morris Now, that started occurring the '50s, you said, sir?

Clonts Well, late '50s.

0:33:13 **Arrival of Walt Disney World and the University of Central Florida**

Clonts And with the, you know, two things happened about the time I started to go to – I graduated from high school and left to go to college. One is [Walt] Disney [World] opened up, and the other is that UCF [University of Central Florida] was established in our backyard here. And Disney really was the beginning of Orlando being a tourist destination. It had been a wintertime destination for a hundred years, almost, but it had not been a year-round tourist destination until [Walt] Disney established Disney World here.

UCF, being so close to Oviedo, changed Oviedo in that it brought in not only the teachers, professors, but all of the services that a large university requires, and, of course, the students. And so, it makes Oviedo a little bit more of a bedroom community to that college – doesn't make it – Oviedo's not the classic college town, but it is definitely a bedroom community to UCF. My perspective, because I left for college and didn't come back to Oviedo – I lived in Apopka after that to run that farm, and just moved back fairly recently. I lived in Apopka for 35 years, but had lots of interests here. My family was here so I was, you know, monthly I

was in Oviedo. And so I could see Oviedo change without being part of that change, you know, sort of being distanced from that change.

Morris Okay.

Clonts And really, not easily described, but a very constant growing and getting less and less dependent on agriculture, more and more dependent on the high-tech industries and moderate. You know, medium manufacturing, light manufacturing, and of course, tourism.

Morris As a farmer, did you see UCF and Disney World as problematic for your business or for your community in Orlando?

Clonts No, no. You know, you don't try to rail against progress. It is—and you adapt to it. So, our family's operation adapted as needed to those, and one reason why we closed the Oviedo farms down and just concentrated on our Zellwood operation was because that was the more modern farm of the last part of the 20th century, and the Oviedo farm was the farm of the first half of the 20th century.

Morris Okay, sir. And since then both have farms have been closed down, correct, sir?

Clonts Yes. We sold our Zellwood farm to the State of Florida as part of a restoration project to clean up Lake Apopka.

Morris Okay. And that was 1979?

Clonts No. No, we shut that down, sold that in 1998.

Morris Oh, okay, sir. And have you been working elsewhere since then, or traveling, or...

0:38:11 Evolution of the citrus industry

Clonts Yeah. We had citrus groves, and we expanded those after selling out the vegetable operation, but basically downsized. I said I retired when I sold the vegetable operation, because I work so much less now than I did back then. But I still stay busy and enjoy growing oranges. You know, even the citrus business has evolved. When I was on the outside, I didn't think the citrus business changed very much in, you know, my whole lifetime. And then once I got involved in it, I realized it is evolving. So it's an interesting business to be in. I really enjoy it.

Morris How has it evolved?

Clonts Well, we were, once again, especially around Oviedo, there were lots of small orange groves. You could send a man on a tractor down the road. If your farm was right here, you could send a man out on over to Casselberry or up to Lake Mary on a tractor pulling an implement, have him do work that day, and drive back in the evening to do work on a ten-acre grove. Now, the liability exposure

of putting a tractor on the road, you wouldn't do—you know, you couldn't make enough money on a ten-acre grove to just cover the liability exposure. So, groves now tend to be large blocks of a hundred acres, 75 to 500 acres. Anything less than that is pretty hard to caretake.

Irrigation systems—groves weren't irrigated except by portable aluminum pipe. In real dry times in the spring, you would hook portable irrigation pipe to a pump and irrigate down that row—and for two or three hours—and you would shut the pump down, move that pipe through the grove, and reassemble it, and water another strip. Now everything is micro-jet, where there's a sprinkler under every row, under every tree, year-round, a permanent micro-sprinkler. The irrigation's mostly done by a timer and moisture sensors in the ground so that you don't—nothing's ever touched once it's installed out there.

Morris Oh, okay. Because all I ever see of the orange trees, sir, I don't get to see underneath the ground. I didn't know what changes had occurred.

Clonts They've all got a sprinkler underneath them now.

Morris Okay.

Clonts And we're planting much closer than we used to. Trees used to be planted on a 25' x 25' spacing. Now, generally, you plant on a 12' x 24' spacing, so there's a lot more trees to the acre, and everything's worked one way down a row instead of two ways, like they used to do it in a grove. Used to be able to drive down two ways.

0:42:27

Central Florida weather

Clonts It's starting to rain. Do you believe that?

Morris No.

Clonts Did you leave your windows down?

Morris No, sir.

Clonts Okay.

Morris No. It must be that one random cloud, right there. That's the one catch about Florida. You never know when it's gonna rain, even with the sunny skies.

Clonts Wow. I'm so surprised at that. I can't—I wouldn't have thought it's gonna rain today, as cool as it was this morning.

Morris On the plus side, it doesn't snow randomly.

Clonts Nah. Well, not very often.

Morris I think I've seen it snow in Florida one time.

Clonts Yeah.

Morris But the snow disappeared before it hit the ground, and that was in the late '80s.

Clonts Yeah.

Morris Have you ever seen it snow in Florida, sir?

Clonts Yeah. Yeah, about three different times I've seen where snow stayed around.

Morris Really?

Clonts Yeah, but not – the Christmas freeze of 1983. Snow stayed in shady spots for two days.

Morris Wow. Would not have expected that from Florida.

Clonts Yeah.

0:43:28

Cattle industry

Morris You said you still have the citrus industry as the business. Do you still do cattle, or ...

Clonts Well, the Clonts family never was in the cattle business, but we owned pasture land.

Morris Oh, okay.

Clonts And so, we've never been involved directly in the cattle business, but we know it well because we've always had land that we leased to my cousins and to other cattlemen who ran the cows, kept up the fences, and paid their lease for all that.

Morris Okay.

Clonts So, was a way of having a ranch that was active cow ranch without having to be hands-on day-to-day in the business.

Morris Okay, sir. And I'm assuming that made it a lot easier, then?

Clonts Oh, yeah. Basically, you're just a landowner. In the cow business, we've just been a landowner and landlord to the cattlemen.

Morris Okay, sir.

Clonts And it's my mother's brother, Robert Lee, was very involved in the cattle business all his life, so they leased most of our land.

0:45:19

College education

Morris Okay, sir. Jumping off subject, you mentioned when you went to college. You were old enough to go to UCF, were you not? Or was UCF ...

Clonts I could've gone to UCF, and instead I chose to go to University of South Florida down in Tampa.

Morris Oh, really? I didn't even realize that university was as old.

Clonts Yep.

Morris So you're a Bulls fan, then?

Clonts That's right.

Morris My best friends would love to hear that. I, however, went to Florida State [University].

Clonts Oh, yeah. Well, that's another good school.

Morris It's a good school.

0:45:46

Plane crash near Oviedo High School

Morris Are there any particular historical events that come to mind, when you think over the course of your life, sir, that stick out?

Clonts Hm. You know, thinking back into my childhood, I remember one that was – and I don't remember what the year was, probably was about 1961 or '62 – a jet aircraft flying a training mission out at what was then Sanford Naval Training Center [Naval Air Station Sanford], crashed just a few hundred feet from the edge of what is now Lawton Elementary School, but it was the Oviedo High School, which had all twelve grades at that time. And being in class, and hearing that crash, and all the flames and all the confusion afterwards. The pilot died in that crash. You know, one of those things you never forget. But I have forgotten the year. *[laughs]* So I guess I do forget it.

Morris Oh, okay. But you remember the event though, right, sir?

Clonts I remember the event.

Morris What grade were you in at that time?

Clonts It seems like I was in about seventh or eighth grade, something like that. Maybe I was younger than that, because my memory's still pretty fuzzy. But still it was – I remember the confusion.

Morris And was it over by the next day? Did you return to classes normally?

Clonts Oh, yeah. And, you know, it was the talk of the town for months and months, but things got back to normal fairly quickly – not, you know. Military jets were still, at that time, you know – it was the new technology.

Morris Right.

Clonts So it wasn't – we heard jets flying, but, you know, you didn't see that many jets back then.

Morris Unless they crashed right outside your school.

Clonts Unless they crashed next to your school.

0:48:58 **Relationship between the Oviedo community and the Naval Air Station Sanford**

Morris Then it's hard to miss them. What kind of relationship did the community have with the military – the base – right there? Especially the farmers.

Clonts Oh, I think it was a good relationship. You know, Florida was – a lot of people who were in the military during World War II, when they got out, ended up coming back to Florida, because Florida had been such a good place for military bases in the '40s. Got the climate where you can train year-round, you know. It's a whole lot better being stationed on a base in Pensacola than it is in upstate Michigan in the wintertime. So Florida had lots and lots of bases that trained soldiers of all types in the 1940s. As I said, a lot of those people got a taste of Florida, and once they were out of the military, and maybe got married, and – you know, said, "I know where I want to go." And they moved back to Florida.

Morris Can't blame them.

Clonts Nope. It's been happening ever since.

Morris It has, sir. It has. It's still, I think – it's still known for its military bases being more preferable to work – train – here. Because you have some of them in Jacksonville, some still down in Tampa.

Clonts Sure.

0:50:40 **Fire ants in Florida**

Morris Yeah. Is there anything we haven't covered, discussed today sir, that you wanted to make sure we got to?

Clonts No, I didn't have any agenda, and I don't think I've done a very good interview. I think I've done a pretty average job at this.

I remember when fire ants had first gotten into Texas – because fire ants are not native to Florida – and, so fire ants in the mid-'60s were getting into the state

from the coastal states, but they had originally come in in Texas and then spread from there, and the [Douglas] DC-3 airplanes would fly on ant bait over the whole state. They would take a grid of eight miles by eight miles, and they would systematically fly at about three or four hundred feet high, dropping ant bait on a hundred percent of the ground surface.

Morris Ant bait was ...

Clonts Well, the ant bait was to try to kill fire ants that were coming into the state. Obviously was not successful.

Morris Obviously. I didn't even know they weren't native to Florida. I just kind of figured they were native everywhere.

Clonts No. *[laughs]* They seem like it now.

Morris Yeah.

Clonts You know, that's something that I don't think you'd see happen today. I mean, there's new pests now coming into the state of Florida, but at the rate of two or three a year. And you know, we've got pythons in the Everglades – that the idea of trying to eradicate an insect like that once it's got established in the state is probably never going to happen again.

Morris Probably not, sir. Did that cause any kind of panic or worry with the farmers? If they took it seriously enough to be spraying the entire state to try to get out fire ants?

Clonts Well, fire ants had been – fire ants are a pest, but you just learn to live with them. I mean, fire ants can kill a newborn calf if that calf gets born in the field, and the mother cow drops that calf in an ant pile. I mean, fire ants cause damage to livestock right now. They can kill a newborn calf, but that's not a high rate of mortality, because it doesn't happen too often, so it's not something we try to eradicate anymore. But there was a time when there was a very organized war on fire ants.

Morris Who organized this war?

Clonts Well, it was at the request of citizens, but it was the government and Ag departments [Department of Agriculture], and so on.

Morris Okay. When you say fire ants, you're talking about the red ones? The black ones had already been here, correct? Or did they both come at the same time?

Clonts There's lots of species of native ants here, some of which bite and some which don't.

Morris Okay.

Clonts But the fire ant is the one that, you know, when you step in the mound, you just get swarms of them.

Morris Right. There's one in my front yard.

Clonts Yeah. I take those out every time I see one. I get the ant bait out and kill it. But I don't try to eradicate them all over the state.

Morris That would be a little extreme, wouldn't it?

0:55:06

Closing remarks

Morris But, is there anything else, sir?

Clonts No.

Morris All right, sir, this has been invaluable. I really appreciate it. Thank you for letting me come over and talk to you today.

Clonts You bet.

End of Interview