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Oral History with Joseph Knight

Grandson of Peter O. Knight

Andrew Huse

Peter O. Knight [married] Lizzie, Lizzie Fries and she was from South Carolina. They had two sons: Joe, my father, and Peter O. Knight Jr. Then then my dad and my uncle had two children. He had Peter first, and then me. Phil had Rola and then Peter Knight IV. Rola was named for her mother. Phil's wife, they all called her Girly but her given name was Rola. Girly was from North Florida. We mixed up and actually we're kin to Charlie O. Knight's family, a little bit, but on the other side the Parishes. And the Parishes with kin to everybody. It's a big family, a big clan.

I don't know much about the [Peter O. Knight] house, I've only been in it a few times. It didn't look like anything else in Tampa. And we [with wife Harriet] traveled after we were married, we were up in [the old Knight home in] Pennsylvania and I began to see the similarity to his house.

He was from Pennsylvania, and so he built a brick house. Them walls were this thick. I remember lightning hit it one time just knocked a little hole [laughing]. It didn't do much damage. They lived there in 1903, they built that house and moved out of the one we were talking about, the [Tampa Historical Society] house and they lived there. She died in I think '41.

He died in '46, and he was a 33rd degree Mason, and they really send them away good, 33rd Degree Masons. It's honorary. They don't do organizations

much anymore. That used to be big, the Masons and the Shriners, and they all do good work but it's not as big a deal now as it used to be.

He came from Pennsylvania to Florida. He came by train and then took a boat to Fernandina, northeast Florida. They caught a train that ran over from Fernandina to Cedar Key. It was a train that ran through there. Then he went by boat, ended up in Fort Myers, and that would be in 1885. He was not yet of majority, and somehow he ran for mayor down there. He was elected mayor before he was 21. He was a ball of fire. But he said the reason he was in such a hurry is his daddy died real early, and he wanted to do everything he could do early. Of course he lived to be 80, but anyway that was the reason for his haste. Then he realized that Fort Myers wasn't gonna get it for him, so then he went to Atlanta, and he met his wife and they were married, I understand, up there. She was from South Carolina. On the back of that wedding picture she wrote "heaven or hell" [laughing]. She probably had that right. Then he came to Tampa, and that worked out for him, that would be at about around 1889 because Daddy was born there November in '90. And of course he lived there ever since, he and his wife.

They [local and state politicians] all knew each other, everybody knew each other and it was Democratic. There was no Republican Party. Mayor [Robert E. Lee]

Chancey, was a high shot member. I remember I was a kid in there, they were talking about one of the elections, and they ran things. This is all graveyard talk since they're all dead now, but they were trying to decide who was going in and how many votes to give them. They didn't want it to look too lop-sided. He was just kind of holding his head, but that's the way things went. There was a lot of interesting people. Charlie Wall was one, he's a story in himself.

I remember [domestic worker] Julius. It was as if he was with him till he died, the black man Julius, and Emma. There wasn't a lot of humor in that family. I mean at that time I was old but things were fairly serious. The difference in my mother's family when we went down to see [the] Parrish [side of the family], there was a lot of humor, a bunch of happy Irishman. He used to say he was Pennsylvania Dutch but [was really] Scottish and Irish.

My grandmother she and my mother didn't get along too well. [Grandmother] started claiming some kind of aristocracy in South Carolina. Mother would say, "Damned slave owners."

I'd heard my mother tell for years about [my ancestors] coming over [to the Unites States] on their own boat. It was true, they came over in 1650 which is way back. The pilgrims came in 1620 so they were thirty years later but [then] the [family] name was Beall.

D.B. [McKay] and my grandfather were political enemies. He also warred with trial lawyer Pat Whittaker. Grand[father] wanted to run everything his way. He did, usually. But Tampa Electric [Company had to submit] to a utility board that would set rates, and that didn't do worth a damn. He

just didn't like somebody else telling him how to run his business. He had always been fair. He fought Whittaker's bunch. Until he died, he battled the utility board. He never could accept that.

It's amazing what he was involved with in Tampa after he got there in 1890. He was involved in every damn thing. He was a Yankee interloper [among] all these old families, McKay, Whittaker, Lykes. They had a saying about him, it was "Rule or ruin." If he couldn't rule you he'd ruin you. He was strong. He was just like someone at Tammany Hall. They ran Tampa.

That Prohibition was a joke. Tarpon Springs was just as bad as Tampa. You had ways to get stuff in. The Fort Harrison [Hotel] building was the only tall one. They would signal out to the Cuban smacks whether it was safe to bring in the liquor or not.

I was born in 1927. Born at home in Elfers. Doctor Rowlett came out to stay with mama.

My grandfather was [involved in the] Tampa and Tarpon Spring Land Company. They bought a lot of land from Tarpon. Major Connolly was in charge of it and I've got some of the old maps and they were developing that area. There was nothing much up there except Elfers, New Port Richey. Elfers was a little Cracker town and [Connolly] started planting groves, mostly grapefruit. Pinellas County was grapefruit groves. Oranges got hot and grapefruit got hot in the '20s.

Daddy went out there, he was the older of the two boys, [and] got involved in farming and developing that property. There was quite a large acreage. They bought it, seemed like a dollar and a quarter an acre or something ridiculous like

that. They were way ahead of their time because in the boom crashed and it was nothing there in the thirties. After the war they began to really start developing. They started in Pasco County. It didn't have the zoning that

Pinellas did so they started these little developments and they could then build a good, cheap house without the restrictions in Pinellas County. In other words, in Pinellas County, you had to dig down and pour a footer and put steel in it then you'd come up with some block, and header block, and then you'd pour the floor. Up there [in Pasco County] they did what they call the bell footing. They'd dig down and flare out and pour the whole damn thing at one time. It was a good floor but it was wasn't up to the code [of Pinellas County]. They put rebar in, but of course some of them put it in and get it checked and pull the rebar out [after inspection]. They said it'd been pulled out so much it was shiny. They'd keep reusing it. [Laughs]

They really stopped at the county line and they started, these developers, to buy a ten-acre tract and we sold stuff to them. They would come here from outer space or somewhere, God knows where a lot of them came from. They'd take a regular ten [acre tract] and they'd run a road in and back out. They could get sixty lots on a ten-acre tract, six to the acre. It was a nice sized lot and they built these little houses and they were building them for six thousand dollars. This is right after the war and the fifties. These people come down from the north, these old Yankees and Midwesterners, and most all of them lost their money in banks during the crash and they carried their money with them. Need six thousand? They counted out, it was all cash. It was a nice house.

My brother and I, we had to grove but a good friend of his was an electrician. He'd get behind [and] we'd help him wire a house, pull wire and stuff. He could do the fine part, we were more or less just grunts. The development just grew. It was like a spreading cancer. People wanted to get out of the cold weather. They were retired. And you had a lot of service people, some that were injured then get benefits come down here. A lot of them came to Indian Rocks right after the war. They bought cars and they were usually Oldsmobiles because their feet were messed up, or legs, and Oldsmobile pioneered the gearshifts and controls under the steering wheel.

I went to grammar school there in Tarpon to the sixth grade. I was somewhat of a problem child and our family was somewhat dysfunctional I guess, or maybe quite dysfunctional. They [parents] decided I needed to go off. I went to Florida Military Academy [now Stetson Law School in Pinellas County] and graduated with high honors. I was down there six years and made a lot of wonderful friends. The problem is, they all dispersed. Admiral Farragut Academy was a competitor. They took over some old defunct hotel that has a history. It was built originally by a fellow named Taylor and he called it the Rolyat, that's Taylor spell backwards. It was a gorgeous place.

I went to service in the Army. I was lucky, my brother was in the South Pacific for thirty-nine months on an LCI [amphibious vehicle Landing Craft Infantry]. He did enough service for the both of us. I went in after the war because the G.I. Bill was going to run out. I went to Korea. I was lucky, I was there in '48 and came home. Everyone knew there was going to

be trouble, and there was. Just the luck of the draw.

I went to Gainesville and studied agriculture and met her [my wife Harriet Getzen] there. Her grandfather gave the land to the University of Florida when it was in Lake City. They were prominent in the legislature. I graduated in February of '52 and we moved to Indian Rocks. There was a cabin there that my mother had built, a summer place, and [Harriet] and I moved in. It was pretty primitive. We were there eighteen years and then we bought this lot. We've got twenty-five feet of elevation here. We had four children, '53, '55, '58 and '60 and have four grandchildren.

I went to work in the grove. I'd drive to Elfers in the morning. It wasn't a big drive then. Highway 19 was two lanes and there was one light at Gulf to Bay. Most people think you put a seed in the ground and pick fruit the next week. You plant seeds, they come up seedlings, you bud whatever variety you want of oranges or grapefruit, tie all this stuff up in a nursery and send them out. It is quite involved like any other business. It is long term, it isn't something you can get into, particularly now, the equipment is so expensive. A lot of it is rented. A piece of equipment would cost thousands of dollars [to purchase]. I remember the mule and wagon.

The developers would go to those tax assessor, "We offered him so much money, X number of dollars for this property and it's assessed at nothing. The tax assessor was a friend of our foreman [who explained that the developers] went to him and said, "we offered them \$20,000 and it's assessed at \$500. They would eventually start raising the taxes on my grove. It wasn't warranted.

A developer bought the damn thing and developed it with these \$5,990 houses, homestead it, and take the whole damn ten acres off the tax roll. And then they wanted schools, fire, police, and roads. It was bound to come. We started selling land in the '70s. When we finally decided to sell, it was kind of hard, they couldn't buy it all. They wanted to buy it piecemeal. So we needed to run it as grove as we sold it off. It wasn't total satisfaction, but you sold a piece of it. Eventually, they got it all. The one that bought the most was named Boyce. I'm retired but I'm always busy doing stuff, refinishing furniture, real estate and housing.

I'm well, happy, and satisfied. I've had a good life, a wonderful family. And I look to Harriet the way Rockefeller related to Henry Flagler. He said he Flagler was the brains of the outfit. Usually, the women are the smartest anyway. I enjoyed talking. That's about all I can do these days anyway.