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Les Dunson oral history interview by William Mansfield, May 24, 2005

Les Dunson (Interviewee)

Bill Mansfield (Interviewer)

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Bill Mansfield: I always put a label on the disc by saying, This is Bill Mansfield, with the University of South Florida’s Globalization Research Center, talking with Mr. Les Dunson in his offices in Winter Haven, Florida, on May 24, 2005. And Mr. Dunson, we always get people to start out by having them state their name and telling us when they where born and where they were born. So let her go.

Les Dunson: I’m Les Dunson and I was born here in Winter Haven, Florida in February of 1962.

Mansfield: What day?

Dunson: The 16th.

Mansfield: The 16th, well you didn’t miss Valentine’s Day by much.

Dunson: Just by, a couple of days, that’s right.

Mansfield: Okay, and what about your education?

Dunson: I have an agricultural economics degree from the University of Florida.

Mansfield: How did you get into the citrus industry?
Dunson: I’m a third generation grower. My grandfather came down in the 40’s and got involved in the citrus business and it’s been in the family ever since.

Mansfield: Where did your grandfather come from?

Dunson: Alabama.

Mansfield: Okay. How would you describe your current occupation?

Dunson: Right now what we do is grow citrus. We have a total citrus management company. It does harvesting, marketing, care taking, of our own groves as well as those of others.

Mansfield: How many acres do you own?

Dunson: Right now we own approximately seven hundred and fifty acres of groves.

Mansfield: And how many do you care for?

Dunson: We care for—uh—it’s sort of hard to say, exactly. We do a lot of contract work. We probably care for twenty five hundred acres and then we may do contract specific types of work (spraying, herbiciding, fertilizing,) in another five thousand acres.

Mansfield: My goodness that’s a lot of oranges. Everybody’s been talking about the trade legislation, the Free Trade of America Areas.

Dunson: Right.

Mansfield: So tell me what you know about that.
Dunson: Well, I’m fairly familiar with the trade legislation and what they are trying, the relaxation of the tariffs and the push to relax tariffs on many different products, citrus included.

Mansfield: And if the tariff is relaxed how will that affect your business?

Dunson: Oh, I’d say in a disastrously, negative way. In that we have certain guide lines. Doing business in America we have a lot of regulation in all facets of our business, whether it be, environmental, or labor—all areas. We enjoy that in America and appreciate that, in America. At the same time we can not abide by all this regulation and compete with countries who don’t have those regulations. So our cost structure is driven, in a great part, all the things [in Florida] that we need to and want to comply with. In the other countries, the cost structures are not driven by that. Therefore they can bring products in that are far less than our cost of production. [That’s it] in a nutshell.

Mansfield: When you say other countries, Brazil is the one that—

Dunson: Brazil is the main country, they are the largest citrus growing country in the world, in fact Brazil and Florida are the only two large producers. [Brazil] not only [has] the advantages of the cost structure but the advantage of a monopolistic situation, if they don’t have Florida to compete with.

Mansfield: How did you become aware of the efforts to relax the tariff and the threats posed by Brazil?

Dunson: Mostly through our industry organizations.

Mansfield: Which industry organizations?

Dunson: Florida Citrus Mutual, mostly.

Mansfield: And how did they let you know, through their newsletter?
**Dunson:** They do a newsletter and I happen to serve on the board of Mutual for several years and through that, and they also keep you aware through the publications that they put out.

**Mansfield:** Some these questions might seem sort of obvious and ordinary. But years from now, when someone is researching this, they won’t have the information available to them that we have now, so I’ll just ask you to be patient with me for some of these questions.

**Dunson:** Right, sure.

**Mansfield:** So what did Citrus Mutual tell you? How did they discuss it with you?

**Dunson:** That’s a good question. You know we—As I go back and try to remember, just informed us of the legislation and the push. Mostly we’re aware of the political environment of the—the President, mostly the agenda for President Bush and the Republican Party has been free trade and relaxation of the tariffs and free trade. That’s been a mantra, so I guess that’s the starting point and as you go from there with the actual free trade agreements that are being negotiated, they inform us of the details of those agreements.

**Mansfield:** So it was mostly through the publication, or did they have a special meeting? Or call folks up on the phone to talk about it?

**Dunson:** Mostly through the publication, as far as the members go. As far as the board goes, we have monthly meeting and [we] are updated on that.

**Mansfield:** And you were sitting on the board when this—

**Dunson:** Right.
Mansfield: I guess, to place it in time, when was this, when it first came before the board?

Dunson: Well, we’ve been dealing with trade issues in citrus forever. I mean it’s a constant. It’s not just something that came on the forefront. The Free Trade of the Americas Agreement came on board four or five years ago I guess. But trade is always a concern, with the different agreements. Every year there is some type of—GATT, or whatever meetings. Every kind of different trade organization meeting, so it’s a constant. Not that it just came to the forefront, but certainly the Free Trade of the Americas is more direct in dealing with Brazil.

Mansfield: So you felt like that was more of a threat?

Dunson: Yes.

Mansfield: Now I don’t want to put words into your mouth.

Dunson: No that’s correct.

Mansfield: Maybe we should back up just a little bit. Sitting on the board, of Florida Citrus Mutual, tell me about your duties and responsibilities as a board member.

Dunson: As board member of Mutual it’s more to provide guidance to the management and direct the policy of Mutual.

Mansfield: So when the issue of Free Trade in America’s came up, did they call a special meeting, or was it on their regular agenda?

Dunson: It was just on their regular agenda, as things evolved.
Mansfield: Well, if you could, thing back in time and describe what it was like in the meeting when that came up. Were people groaning and rolling their eyes and clinching their fists?

Dunson: There is always concern, certainly when trade agreements come up. And I don’t think there was a certain date, that I recall. It more evolved. These things evolve and the agreements start being talked about and then more specifics become available. So it takes a lot of time to go through them and listen to the details and decide what direction they are going to take.

Mansfield: So when you heard about it, what was your immediate reaction?

Dunson: Certainly, we were not in favor or appreciative of trade tariff reductions.

Mansfield: And what were some of the ideas that were floated around, to keep the tariff in place?

Dunson: I’d say mostly it’s a just education of the value of citrus in Florida.

Mansfield: When you say education, who would you be looking to educated?

Dunson: The general public, and legislators, legislators and the general public.

Mansfield: What methods were discussed to educate the general public and the legislators?

Dunson: You know I don’t know that, you getting real direct into the discussions of the Mutual Board and I don’t know whether those are public.

Mansfield: Well if you’re not comfortable—
**Dunson:** Well I’m not really comfortable saying “this was discussed at this meeting, or that meeting.” Or anything else.

**Mansfield:** Now I ask these questions because I think future historians, economists and political scientists would be interested in how decisions are made. I hope you don’t think that this is like some sort of investigation, because it’s not. It’s just academic research.

People often see legislation or policy, the policies of the Citrus Mutual board and see it in its finished [form] but they don’t have any idea what goes into putting [policy] together and so that’s why I’m asking these questions, to get information on how policy is made. How one idea comes up and another idea comes up and people work together to form the policy that meets the needs of the Florida citrus growers. So that is the information I’m working towards. If you’re uncomfortable answering particular questions just let me know and we’ll go on to something else.

**Dunson:** Right.

**Mansfield:** But I’m not trying to catch anybody.

**Dunson:** Right, yeah. And there is nothing to catch. It’s just a matter that I’m not on the board anymore and what ever board discussions we had I the time, I’m not sure that I can recall, or am willing to get specific about how those things were discussed.

**Mansfield:** Okay, but could you tell me about the different ideas that were floated, or would it be better for me to go on to another question.

**Dunson:** Well, I’ll try to recall. But like I said, I recall talking about educating legislators and obviously they formed a group, the CTOC [Citrus Tariff Oversight Committee] on dealing with this tariff. [It was] a group of people from within the industry and really going to focus battle directly on this issue.

**Mansfield:** So did you have much input into that?
Mansfield: Okay, so the Tariff Oversight Committee was put together and what did Citrus Mutual do after that?

Dunson: Really, the Mutual Board had no real input. That was a group or a [committee] to deal with the tariff and they reported on going to the Mutual Board, over time. The Mutual Board had really no day-to-day influence on that group.

Mansfield: Why was this special committee formed, rather than Citrus Mutual dealing with it?

Dunson: That’s a good question. I don’t have any answer for that.

Mansfield: [laughs] Okay.

Dunson: Honestly. I guess they felt that they could reach out. You know the industry has changed a lot. They are some large growers that are affected and can be politically connected and things like that, that aren’t on the Mutual Board, that they felt could pull into that type of committee.

Mansfield: Could you explain that to me again? You said there were some large growers that are politically connected that aren’t on the Citrus—
Dunson: Citrus Mutual Board, or may not be a member of Florida Citrus Mutual.

Mansfield: And so this Tariff Oversight Committee was created to involve—

Dunson: Well, I mean, as a direct—itself as a direct focus on the tariff, it might bring some of those people in that believed in fighting the tariff, but were not willing to be members of Mutual per se.

Mansfield: Why would they not want to participate with Citrus Mutual? I thought that was the central voice of citrus growers throughout the state?

Dunson: It is, but some big corporations, they just don’t want to participate in anything. It’s bottom line, they don’t want to pay the toll. That’s the honest truth.

Mansfield: Okay, so the Oversight Committee involved a broader representation of citrus growers?

Dunson: I’d say that’s a fair statement.

Mansfield: All right. Some of the people I have interviewed—I’m trying to think—a grower down in Sebring, was talking about the proliferation of smaller grower organizations, like Gulf Citrus [Growers] and [Highlands] County Citrus Growers Association. He said, it was his opinion, that Citrus Mutual was not responding to the small growers as effectively as they one time and that resulted in these other organizations being formed. How would you respond to that?

Dunson: Well, certainly they feel that way and it’s possible. You know, Mutual has focused on some big items, in Washington and Tallahassee. Maybe there are some local items that they needed to fill in with these groups haven’t done a good job o doing that.

Mansfield: What else has Citrus [Mutual] done, since the Oversight [committee]?
Dunson: I guess they continue with the Oversight Committee and continue to process this. The whole point is trying to get citrus removed from any kind of tariff reduction agreement.

Mansfield: And with the current administration advocating free trade, how are you all dealing with that?

Dunson: Again, trying to educate the administration and the legislators on the value of citrus and the uniqueness of Florida citrus as a market and as an industry, relative to other commodities or items that other people make and grow around the world.

Mansfield: And what are you telling them?

Dunson: Probably the main points are, not every country in the world grows citrus. There’re two major suppliers, Florida and Brazil, and that’s it. Without Florida’s competition, number one, Brazil is a monopoly and—really the whole premises of free trade is for the benefit of consumers and low prices. Free trade in juice does not achieve that goal, because Brazil will control the price at that point to whatever they’d like for it to be. At the same time they can bring products in here at a lot [lower price] flood the markets at times and hurt Florida growers. And Florida’s industry provides a huge tax base and a lot of different benefits to Florida that are unique to this industry.

Mansfield: And if the Florida growers go under then that revenue is lost?

Dunson: Right. It can’t be replaced. It’s not like we can grow tobacco, or some other product here. It’s just not—been possible. So even with our soils and our climate we’re not conducive to another crop. We can’t just switch to another crop that is as productive.

Mansfield: Somebody said the processors figured in to this scheme of things. How do you see the processors working in this?
**Dunson:** Well, that’s a complicated issue, given that the majority of the Florida processors are now owned by Brazilian companies. It’s hard to figure out what their goals exactly are. I mean, certainly they have the assets and they bought them. They have investments here in Florida they’d like to [process] Florida oranges. At the same time, it does benefit them in Brazil to shrink the Florida crop.

**Mansfield:** So would you see the processing faction as being an advocate or an adversary, for keeping the tariff in place?

**Dunson:** The majority of them would probably be adversarial, to keeping it in place, just because of their large interests in Brazil.

**Mansfield:** Adversarial?

**Dunson:** Right, adversarial.

**Mansfield:** Okay. What kind of an interaction do you, as a grower, have with the processors?

**Dunson:** Very little, other than selling. I mean we market fruit to those people and that’s about it.

**Mansfield:** Have you tried to influence the processors?

**Dunson:** They are not easily influenced. You know, the owners are in Brazil, or another place. They’re not here. You know, the industry, thirty years ago all of the companies were owned by Florida or US companies and basically, they were people you knew. You might socialize with them, or they know you from other areas. You could communicate and you could, maybe influence them to some degree or another. Today they are owned by some corporation, somewhere else, or Brazilian companies in Brazil and you don’t have any contact with the actual owners.
Mansfield: That seems like it would be kind of frustrating to have it just that much further removed.

Dunson: Sure it is.

Mansfield: What about the Department of Florida Citrus? How do you see their role?

Dunson: You know, I see their role no different that it has been in the past. It’s a valuable role. I don’t know if that is going to continue or not, with the lawsuits that are going on. But I think they’ve had a valuable role in marketing of citrus, over the past several years.

Mansfield: You said that their role has changed?

Dunson: It hasn’t really changed, yet, it has the potential to change dramatically, just through the lawsuits.

Mansfield: If you could, tell me your perspective on the lawsuit.

Dunson: Ah. You know, in general I think there probably is some good that comes out of the advertising in general, the generic advertising of orange juice. I hate to see that—removed. But it is an unknown factor. We really don’t know the exact benefits of it.

Mansfield: What, the generic advertising?

Dunson: Right.

Mansfield: I heard on the radio, just yesterday, there was a similar lawsuit by the beef producers.
Dunson: Right, yes.

Mansfield: And you know, there were some cattle ranchers suing the Beef Board over a tax for generic advertising. So, in light of that [lawsuit, which was settled in favor of the Beef Board], how do you think that will effect the [orange grower’s lawsuit]?

Dunson: You know it’s interesting, because that’s the first win. The beef industry and the citrus industry [sic; Florida Department of Citrus] has had losses in every court up to that in every court up to that point. You know, when you get something in the court system like that, you get wins and you get losses. You never know. It’s going to take years and you never know what the end result is.

But that’s really the first win these groups have had. It’s sort of early and hard to tell what that really means. In most of the circuit courts, they’ve lost.

Mansfield: How do you think that would—if the lawsuit is upheld, how do you think that will affect Florida citrus, the Department of Florida Citrus?

Dunson: Well, certainly it will affect the [Department]. The Department of Florida Citrus is going to go down to just a purely regulatory body for the industry.

Mansfield: But, if they win, how do you see their role changing? If the Department of Florida Citrus wins.

Dunson: If they win, I don’t see their role changing much. Certainly they need to be managed properly and have good leadership and make good marketing decisions. But their role, I don’t think it will change.

Mansfield: When we started the interview you said that free trade has been an issue with Florida citrus, going back for years. Tell me about that and what was leading up to the Free Trade of the Americas.
**Dunson:** Well, you had all the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] agreements over the years and WTO [World Trade Organization]. There’s been efforts to reduce the tariff on orange juice for twenty-five years. This is not the first time it’s occurred.

**Mansfield:** Why does it seem like it’s more of a threat now?

**Dunson:** I think mostly due to the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. First NAFTA came along and now they’re trying to expand that to FTAA and being very specific about Brazilian orange juice and trade, with the Southern Hemisphere.

**Mansfield:** well, the fact that the governor of Florida is also the brother of the president, how do the Florida citrus growers and Citrus Mutual and the Tariff Oversight Committee use that connection?

**Dunson:** Well you know, again, it’s just a matter of trying to educate. And whatever political connections you can have to get close to those people and help educate them and get them to help understand our plight. That’s the way Mutual is trying to work towards.

**Mansfield:** We’ll switch channels here now, because the other area we’re interested in is what growers are doing to survive, to stay in business. A lot of people have told me that cutting their costs is an important part of staying a viable grower.

**Dunson:** Sure.

**Mansfield:** So tell me about your strategy.

**Dunson:** Well, certainly cutting costs is just a huge part of the equation. We do everything we can in our production areas and different areas to cut costs. Certainly the industry has been working hard towards mechanical harvesting. And that’s one of the biggest areas, probably the only area we have left, where we can cut costs significantly,
over time. So the industry is working hard to achieve that. There are several companies out here that seem to be having some success in mechanical harvesting, with a long way to go.

**Mansfield:** You said you’ve been doing everything you can to cut costs, could be more specific?

**Dunson:** Well, I mean it’s hard to say. There is a lot that we can do. We’ve never been frivolous in our spending, as far as care taking and that side goes. But we’re just trying to—ah sometimes in years we have to cut the fertilizer back, or different parts of the deal, then you have to. But the groves need a certain amount of care. And we’ve done all we can to try do that at the least amount of cost. That’s why I said there’s probably not a lot of room there to reduce costs. It’s more in the production area, it’s more in the harvesting area.

**Mansfield:** Then tell me about mechanical harvesting. Have you used it?

**Dunson:** We used several different types of mechanical harvesting, without much success.

**Mansfield:** Could you tell me about that in more detail?

**Dunson:** We’ve tried the trunk shakers and the tree—shaking systems, a couple of them, certainly not all of them.

**Mansfield:** Tell me about the trunk shaker.

**Dunson:** The trunk shakers looked like they showed some promise, but in our opinion they were very violent on the tree, up here on “the Ridge.” In order to get—and still, even with that violence it is difficult to get the percentage of fruit off, that would make it economical.
**Mansfield:** But you say “trunk shaker,” how does it work?

**Dunson:** It’s a machine that grasps the trunk and it makes a really violent shake of the trunk to shake the tree to shake the fruit loose.

**Mansfield:** So it shakes the tree and fruit drops?

**Dunson:** Yeah, and you know, you’d get 80%, 85% of the fruit to shake off the tree, with those machines.

**Mansfield:** And how do you collect it?

**Dunson:** Well, you just have to send people back in to pick it up off of the ground. That was one of the problems with it, the inefficiencies, sending people back in to pick it up off the ground.

**Mansfield:** Is it damaging to the tree?

**Dunson:** Ah—slightly. They’re still trying to figure that out. It’s in the early stages and they are trying to figure out how damaging it is. It will take years to know exactly, but it certainly does some damage to the tree.

**Mansfield:** So you’ve got trunk shakers and tree shakers. How do the tree shakers work?

**Dunson:** Most of them have many small arms that go in the tree and just, almost like a strong vibration, or a cyclical movement to get the oranges spinning and flip off the limbs, is how they are designed [to work].

**Mansfield:** You’ve said you’ve used that. Tell me about it.
Dunson: It’s the same results. We got probably 80% to 85% of the fruit off the trees, on the ground. They don’t yet have a system perfected to pick it up off the ground, so you had to send labor back in do that. And it did some damage to the tree, probably not as much as the trunk shaker. But [it’s] really not that effective.

Mansfield: It must be kind of frightening to use an unknown technology like that.

Dunson: Well it is, but we’re always trying to test out and find something that will reduce our costs as much as possible.

Mansfield: Is there any kind of compensation for damage to the trees?

Dunson: No, no. It’s up to you as to whether you want to use the product of not.

Mansfield: I can’t imagine having to make that decision.

Dunson: Well, you certainly don’t do it on everything, but we have enough groves to where we can test it and see what we think of it.

Mansfield: Did you test it on your own groves?

Dunson: Yes.

Mansfield: I didn’t know if you’d do that on something you managed.

Dunson: No, [we tested it on] our own.

Mansfield: And you didn’t find it satisfying?

Dunson: No we didn’t. No, we didn’t see the economics of it, having to pick the fruit up (by hand) and having the tree damage, and that kind of thing.
Mansfield: Well, did a salesman come around and say, “We’ve got this great machine for you to try.”

Dunson: Yeah, sure.

Mansfield: Well, tell me some more about that.

Dunson: There are several companies out here that are trying to develop machines, trying to be the first one in the market that does this. So they are experimenting all along and trying to get us to test it out.

Mansfield: Several companies, do you recall the name of the company?

Dunson: One of them was a Mongoose, out of California. And they had a trunk shaking machine. I can’t recall the name of the company with the arms, off hand. I don’t remember. And we tested some for IFAS, they were working on some of those machines also.

Mansfield: IFAS?

Dunson: Yes.

Mansfield: So they came out to your grove and you were the guinea pigs?

Dunson: Yeah, sure. But so far we haven’t seen anything that’s that promising, for the groves in this area.

Mansfield: So you think you’ll continue using hand labor?

Dunson: I don’t think we have a choice at this point. We’d like to move to something else, but we have no choice.
Mansfield: One of the [issues] that people have brought up is the idea is that most of the labor is from Mexico, South America and Central America. And somebody said that labor is a commodity just like oranges. So what’s your attitude on—what is it—the guest worker policy?

Dunson: Well, certainly we’d like to see a guest worker policy in place. The one that is available today is not—is very expensive and doesn’t make economical common sense to the force today. But we’d like to see a good guest worker program available.

Mansfield: Well how has the labor in oranges changed over the years?

Dunson: It’s generally evolved, mostly over the last twenty years, more to Spanish [speaking] labor.

Mansfield: What preceded [that]? 

Dunson: Just the average person off the street that wanted to pick fruit for a living, for a job.

Mansfield: Do you have any idea why the local labor has fallen off and it’s come to imported labor?

Dunson: Mostly, the availability of other types of work.

Mansfield: You said that you started—you’re a third generation citrus producer, so when you first started out, working in citrus what were you doing?

Dunson: Mostly in the production. When I was younger I worked in the production area and then later on, after I got out of college and came back into the business, I worked more in the harvesting, marketing and buying and selling of fruit.
Mansfield: And how has that changed since you first started?

Dunson: The marketing has changed in that we used to have, probably fifty different plants to deal with and talk to, and [develop] relationships with them. And now we’re down to a handful of mostly Brazilian companies. That’s the biggest change.

Mansfield: You say it’s changed, but how has it affected what you do?

Dunson: Ah—it’s affected our marketing abilities and how many people we can talk to and deal with, number one. It’s affected our delivery abilities, in that we used to be able to deliver fruit to a lot of different plants. Which helped your efficiencies and your ability to pick fruit and deliver it. You could pick more fruit during a particular day or week and deliver it to more plants. And now we have fewer plants to deal with, so you’re on a much more structured—basis on how many loads you can pick a day and where they have to go and that kind of thing.

Mansfield: So you actually limit how much you pick based on what orders have come in?

Dunson: Right, what the plants will take.

Mansfield: So that’s made it more complicated?

Dunson: Yeah, sure it has.

Mansfield: What about the price you get?

Dunson: The differences in pricing are just that pricing is not available as much as it used to be. You used to be able to get a price, just about any time you wanted. Now days, it comes and goes. There may not be a price available on the market for next year’s fruit,
for—right now—a month or two. Then you might have some opportunity to sell some and then you may not for another month.

**Mansfield:** I’m sorry, you said there might not be a price available? Could you explain that?

**Dunson:** The processors offer price contract fruit, for the future. They may contract fruit for next year and they may start now. Or you may see it in the summer or the fall. They contract fruit all along. It used to be that they’d contract fruit any time; that, if you could call several of them and you could generate a price for your fruit now, for next year. Now there aren’t very many left and you may call all of them today and not have be able to sell your fruit, and tomorrow and next week, you don’t know when they are going to be interested in buying fruit, or not.

**Mansfield:** I’ve had people tell me about contracts: long term contracts, short term contracts, and the cash market.

**Dunson:** Right.

**Mansfield:** I understand the contract, where the company says “We’ll buy your fruit for so much.” But tell me about the cash market.

**Dunson:** Well the cash market is virtually that, on a short-term basis. In other words, [they say], *We’ll by ‘X’ amount of fruit for next week, the next month, the next two weeks.* It’s still a contract, it’s just a matter of a shorter term contract.

**Mansfield:** Somebody explained to me, said it was kind of like playing cards. If you used the cash market sometimes you might get paid better.

**Dunson:** Well, only because it’s a short term contract and it’s going to go with the market. Where as, if we contract all of our fruit for next year, at this point in time, that’s
more of a flat, or market. Where as, something could happen in November of next year to cause the contract price to accelerate or decelerate—go up or down just in a short term time frame. That’s—more relative to that particular time which is still a contract, it’s just a shorter term in dealing with a point of sale contract.

Mansfield: What do you foresee as the future of Florida Citrus?

Dunson: That’s a good question. [I foresee] a smaller industry, most likely corporate farming, very difficult for the small growers to survive in, at best.

Mansfield: That sounds kind of bleak.

Dunson: I’d say that it is fairly bleak at this point. You never know, about the time things look the worst they get better. But, costs of doing business, labor, the demand for housing. The real estate market in Florida is red hot and it’s taking a lot of grove properties out of production. Those things in them selves are going to shrink this industry pretty dramatically over the next five or ten years.

Mansfield: I’m always scared to ask this question, but do you see yourself—how do you plan to stay in business, with the market contracting?

Dunson: As I see myself, I’m not that optimistic about the business. We have other businesses. We have real estate development, warehousing, other investments. You know, we’ll go with the flow.

We’ve been in this business three generations. We’ll stay in it as long as we can. If it’s not a good investment, we won’t be in it. It’s something we’re trying to figure out right now. We don’t know, exactly.

Mansfield: That’s one reason why they asked me to undertake this project now, is because it’s still happening.
Dunson: Exactly! And it is still happening; we’re very uncertain and not very optimistic about it.

Mansfield: I interviewed one grower and he seemed almost heart broken, talking about the future.

Dunson: Well it is. I tell people, it’s hard to imagine. A lot of businesses, whatever they do, whether they are in it retail, or sell tires or make something, it’s not a matter of whether their business is going to be there, it’s just a matter of how they perform in their business as to how well their business does. It’s not many times that you get unfortunate opportunity to be in a business that you really don’t know if there is a future or not, much less how well you operate. You could be the best operator in the industry and still not have a business in ten years.

A lot of people are just farmers, really. You love growing citrus, We love the groves and being out in the groves and seeing them at the different times of the year, whether it’s the bloom, or the harvest, or the summer flushes. It’s always changing and it’s really—something, the way people live and it’s not just a business. So it is heart breaking for those people.

Mansfield: Sounds similar to North Carolina.

Dunson: It’s very similar. And you can name many commodities, not just tobacco. You can go all throughout the Mid-west. You know we were a unique industry for a long, long time. We weren’t really a commodity business, but today, we’re no different from the grain business, or any other business.

I don’t know why were’ exempt from going the same plant as tobacco or whatever else. We’re really not exempt from that. And I think that’s really the focus we’ve tried to keep our eyes on. We’re not exempt from that and we need to do other things. It can happen to us, just as well, even though we think it is a great business and it’s a great product.
Mansfield: What kind of pressure do you get from development, from the real estate industry?

Dunson: Tremendous.

Mansfield: I had a man tell me that barren groves were selling for more than active groves.

Dunson: Absolutely. For example, in our area here; right now you can sell a citrus grove, for the land beneath it, for twenty five to thirty thousand dollars an acre. And a grove, from an income stand-point is not worth six of seven thousand [dollars per acre].

Mansfield: Do you find yourself in the position of choosing to maintain the grove or getting the money for it. Do you ever find yourself torn between those two positions?

Dunson: For little while, but not for long. [laughs ruefully]. We’ve sold quite a few groves in the last few years. You can’t—with what’s going on around it, for the dollars involved with selling, verses producing, with all the problems we’ve got, it’s not really a difficult decision.

Mansfield: One man said that he would go on producing until the developer made him the right offer.

Dunson: Right.

Mansfield: Do you see that as a parachute?

Dunson: Absolutely and what a blessing for those people that have that opportunity. We could be sitting here with out that opportunity and land that’s worth no more that what it is worth for farming. It would be a difficult business at that point. But it is a parachute
and a great opportunity for those people. And it will help shrink this business and make it more profitable for those growers that are still in it.

Mansfield: So you see the contraction of—

[End Tape 1, Side A. Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

Mansfield: —orange production as beneficial?

Dunson: Sure, and necessary.

Mansfield: Who do you think will come out on top? Who do you think will survive?

Dunson: I think the big corporate growers. They will survive for sure, They are going to be in it long term. They’ve got big groves that are efficient and they are [located outside of the] high real estate value areas. They’ll be there and they’ll survive and they’ll do well. And there will be a lot of small growers that are scattered through out and they’ll do well also.

Mansfield: Ands this is a question I should have asked earlier, but I assume that most the orange that you produce goes to orange juice?

Dunson: That’s right. We have maybe 10% of the fruit goes to fresh. That’s a typical Florida grove, most of it goes to juice.

Mansfield: I’ve been throwing questions at you for the past hour and I appreciate you taking the time to answer them. Is there anything you want comment on that I haven't asked about?

Dunson: Not that I know of. I think we covered everything pretty well.
Mansfield: I always remind people that the information you’ve shared with me will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida’s library and in order for scholars to have access to this we need your permission. So there is a release form that I have to ask you to sign.

Dunson: Right. Sure that’s fine.

Mansfield: And I’ve been photographing everybody I interview. So do you mind if I take your picture?

Dunson: Not at all.

Mansfield: Okay. Again, thanks and I’ll just [turn his off].

[End of interview]