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Ron Hamel oral history interview by William Mansfield, June 6, 2005

Ron Hamel (Interviewee)

Bill Mansfield (Interviewer)

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Interview with: Ron Hamel
Interviewed by: William Mansfield
Location: La Belle, Florida
Date: June 16, 2005
Transcribed by: Wm. Mansfield
Edited by: Ron Hamel & Wm. Mansfield

[Tape 1, Side A.]

Bill Mansfield: I always but a label on the disc by saying, This is Bill Mansfield from the University of South Florida’s Globalization Research Center talking with Mr. Ron Hamel, June 15, 2005 in the offices of Gulf Coast Citrus Growers Association in La Belle, Florida.

Ron Hamel: No coast.

Mansfield: No coast?

Hamel: Gulf Citrus Growers Association.

Mansfield: Oh Gulf Citrus Growers Association, okay. Is there a Gulf Coast Citrus Grower—?

Hamel: [Shakes his head, no.] There is a company called Gulf Coast Citrus.

Mansfield: But this is just Gulf Citrus Growers Association?

Hamel: [Nods his head, yes.]
Mansfield: Good. I’m glad you set me straight on that. But we always get people to start out by having them state their name and telling when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

Hamel: Okay. I’m Ron Hamel with Gulf Citrus Growers Association, executive vice president.

I was actually born in Webster, Massachusetts. My Dad was in the Navy and we basically traveled all over the US. [We] lived in the west and the east and the north and the south. [From] New England we worked our way down the cost, Virginia, Georgia and then Florida.

Mansfield: Okay. And if you don’t mind, what was your date of birth?

Hamel: July 7, 1945.

Mansfield: Okay, tell me about you educational background.

Hamel: [Starting off, I] went high school, got out and went to a school called Lake City Forest Ranger School. I thought I was going to be a forester. Then I went from there to Orlando Junior College and was in pre-forestry and transferred to the University of Florida in pre-forestry and got [“overly challenged” with] the advanced chemistries and physics. I did real well in the forestry and the practical courses and then some of the sciences tripped me up. So I went to business school and then over to journalism and PR [public relations]. And I actually majored in journalism and public relations with a minor in forestry.

I was planning to go to work in forestry, either business, a forestry company (like International Paper or St. Regis) or even the US Forest Service. But got twisted around and ended up working for the “milk guys,” the dairy industry, for many years. So my first real career type of job was with the dairy industry as PR director. Then national vice president for public affairs with the National Dairy Board.
That was up in Washington—Arlington, Virginia actually. [After about four years] I wanted to come back to Florida. [So I searched for employment and was] hired me to start the [Gulf] Citrus Growers Association. So, I’ve been here since [May] 1988. I’m the initial and only executive director of this trade association, representing the citrus growers in these five counties of southwest Florida, which is about 25% of Florida’s citrus industry.

**Mansfield:** You said forest ranger school in Lake City, Florida?

**Hamel:** Yes, and then the University of Florida.

**Mansfield:** Well, I was going to ask you how you got connected with citrus, but you’ve answered that question for me.

So you came down here to help organize the Gulf Citrus [Growers] Association?

**Hamel:** Right.

**Mansfield:** Tell, tell me about that. How did it get started?

**Hamel:** Well, a few of the growers in this region—uh—let me start back a little bit.

The citrus industry of Florida has been around many, many years. In the late 70’s and 80’s there were a series of freezes. The [severe freezes] were pretty much north of Route 60, which is considered the north-south line. At that time a lot of the central Florida companies were hit pretty hard and these series of freezes had growers looking around to where they might go. There were a few pioneer growers that had moved down this way. And the combination of the weather and improved technology, to manage the water here—manage the water table. ‘Cause it’s a wetter part of the state, it doesn’t drain as much as other areas. Citrus trees can’t get their feet wet. Their roots are very sensitive to [water.]

But anyway, some of the pioneers got going and as these freezes hit there was a strong impetus to grow citrus in this part of the state. The core group of leaders in the
industry here, that had been farming and working for these different citrus companies said, “You know, we need to organize because we have a lot of things going on simultaneously. We have rapid growth going on in this part of the state. There is going to be a lot competition for the water resources and land use and a lot of these other issues. We need to get ourselves organized. And then we need to market our product.”

At the time, when they were forming, they felt that we grow some of the best grapefruit in the world here. The Indian River had been commanding better prices for their fruit because they had name identity in the market. So these guys also anticipated establishing a “Gulf Citrus” identity in the world market, to enhance the price of fresh fruit, from out of this area, primarily grapefruit.

So, me being a kind of PR marketing guy, out of the dairy industry, they were looking for someone to come in and build their image and their product line, so to speak. And develop identity for the region, similar to what the Indian River had been able to do over on the east coast.

So those guys got together and structured the organization, back in the mid-eighties. [They] pretty much organized as volunteers and then they started getting serious about forming and put together a dues structure, collected some money and said they were going to go find a director, to bring everything together. They started searching.

I had heard about it through some contacts here in Florida, because I’d put feelers out, saying “Hey, if any interesting jobs come up in PR or marketing, or anything with Florida agriculture, I’m interested in trying to come back to Florida.” So I got a call about this [position]. I love this part of the state. For years I’ve always admired the southwest Florida area, particularly island areas, Captiva and Sanibel. And being a sailor I saw an opportunity to come down and sail in the Gulf and all of that.

But [the area growers] felt that the pressures, on the regulatory side [including] water allocation, land use, wildlife habitat [issues] and all of these issues that were going to [increase] the regulatory side. And they [also] saw the opportunity on the market development side. That’s what served as the basis for bringing the growers together, to address their collective needs.

Mansfield: Establishing a regional identity?
Hamel: Right.

Mansfield: But you said it was mostly grapefruit?

Hamel: That was one of the prime fresh crops and of course, today, we don’t grow that much grapefruit. But at the time, it served as catalyst, to get a better price for the fresh product. That was one of the rallying points, to get the group together.

And that was strong! Initially I would probably spend about a third of my time working on that. Trying to build identity for the region and then the product and working with the different growers and packing houses that actually had that product line. Touring VIPs from different countries and host groups. We did a lot of that, in the formative years.

Mansfield: How has it changed in that time? How has what you do changed?

Hamel: Well, what happened is the grapefruit market itself kind of soured, to use a pun, to some degree.

Mansfield: [laughs]

Hamel: The prices, there was a heavy production of grapefruit that depressed world prices. Even though we were trying to market some of the best grapefruit in the world, from this region, the base prices of grapefruit turned out to be so low that the interest to keep grapefruit, or increase the size of that crop [dissipated]. It didn’t take long—then it on top of that, if you’re trying to launch a marketing initiative, you need to put some funding behind it. And as the fruit prices dropped the willingness to spend funds to promote the product dropped.

Therefore the emphasis, as well as the growth in the region and the pressures on water and land use and these things moved very quickly, compared to [how those growers who formed] the organization realized. So the emphasis of the association
shifted from the fresh marketing angle to the regulatory angle as well as the community relations/PR. [Our leadership wanted to tell the “citrus story”] to the county commissioners, legislative leaders and elected officials to build a political base for [the] industry. [So that, in time of need, they would help us.]

So, now the majority of our time is invested in dealing with predominant regulatory and government affairs issues as well as doing PR/community relations for the growers in the five counties. Actually more in the coastal counties than in the rural because folks in the rural [areas] have a pretty good idea of who the citrus industry is. Verses the folks that are moving here rapidly, to the coast, that need to be informed and educated of how strong a citrus growing region this is. Most people don’t have a clue when they move down to this part of the state, how strong an agricultural base is to the east of them, as they move to the west coast.

**Mansfield:** I want to make sure I understand you, but it sounds like the organization went from being primarily a marketing group to really a lobbying—lobbyist organization to educate government officials about the needs of the citrus growers. Is that correct?

**Hamel:** Well, I don’t know that it is that stark a change. We still focus on the marketing of the product, to some degree. And if you factor in the public relations angel as well as the legislative lobbying effort, I think that would be about right. We probably spend now, less than 5% of our time on the fresh deal and the marketing aspect. [We] rely heavily on the Florida Department of Citrus, which is funded through grower taxes. We want to make sure that our message is getting into the hopper. So I spend time [as] liaison with the Department Citrus and their staff and all that as well. To make sure that the voices of our growers are heard as part of the over all industry.

**Mansfield:** Okay. I want to ask you about getting your message into the hopper. But before I do that, tell me the five counties that you all cover.

**Hamel:** Okay. We cover Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry and Lee Counties.
Mansfield: Okay. You cover orange growing and grapefruit?

Hamel: We cover anything that’s considered a citrus product.

Mansfield: And since the grapefruit market has kind of dried up, it’s primarily oranges now?

Hamel: Yes. Heavy, I’d say probably 90% of the crop here is round oranges for juice. They call them round oranges, verses square oranges. [chuckles] No, that’s how they classify [juice oranges] as round oranges. But they grow Hamlins, early varieties as well mid-season oranges as well as Valencias.

Mansfield: But round oranges is what they term oranges destined for juice?

Hamel: Yes.

Mansfield: And do they really use the term square oranges, or are you just pulling my leg?

Hamel: No, I’m pulling your leg.

Mansfield: Okay, great. Tell me about how you all get your message into the legislative hopper.

Hamel: Well, we do it from any number of ways. We maintain regular contacts with our elected officials in this area. We work closely with chambers of commerce and economic development groups. We work with our state colleagues, which we do industry wide. We work with the Florida Department of Citrus. So any number of ways, we participate in different forums and activities that are geared towards informing elected and civic officials about our industry, and those kind of things.
Mansfield: Could you site some examples, when you talk about how you inform them? You said that could range from tours of groves to lectures. So I'd be interested in knowing the different means you use to keep them informed.

Hamel: We’re regular members of the Southwest Florida Chamber of Commerce, which also includes [our] five counties. That’s one of the ways. They have a government affairs committee and we participate in that.

In Lee County there is a very strong political group of civic and business leaders called Horizon Council, which is an advisory board to the County Commission on, primarily business and economic issues. We’re participants in that. We’re the only agricultural group that’s a member of that.

These are the different kinds of things I’ve enlisted Gulf Citrus as a part of, or a member of, or gotten our growers personally involved with. So we’re a regular participant at their various meetings and different events. If an issue is important to us, we attempt to get these organizations to support. Also [we] inform the various elected officials that have the authority to deal with some of these things.

Mansfield: Could you illustrate that an example? Like an issue that is important to you all and how you dealt with it.

Hamel: Yeah. Going back to why you’re really here, the trade issue, for example. This is probably the more focused of the efforts. Because the two biggest issues that have hit our industry here, in the last twenty years, have been the citrus canker and then the whole threat on the tariff reduction and the trade issues.

Through these personal contacts and regular participation with these groups, we’ve been able to actually get in and work [with] these organizations, to pass resolutions and send letters in support of protecting our industry.

Let’s say, the last round on the tariff, the FTAA [Free Trade of the American Area] and some of these other issues, when we launched the tariff protection initiative. We, in the industry, were asked to go out and get with the county officials and other business organizations, to get signatures and petitions and resolutions, in strong support
of our industry by maintaining the tariff as an important part in keeping the industry an economic contributor to the communities. So, on various occasions, either before the Southwest Florida Chamber of Commerce’s government affairs group and then the full board, or the Horizon Council board, we’ve had resolutions and letters of support, advanced on our behalf. We’ve worked these in every county, but through the chamber’s help and through the Horizon Council help, we were certainly able to muster up some pretty good political support for our position on the tariff protection initiative.

**Mansfield:** I hate to seem dense, but you say you would get petitions and letters of support before chambers of commerce and county commissioners?

**Hamel:** Yes. And just the board—of—the Southwest Florida Chamber of Commerce, for example is pretty well recognized in the region as kind of the movers and shakers of the business community. When they come out with a policy or they come out with a petition or a resolution, it’s pretty well distributed throughout the community, primarily focused on the civic and elected officials. So working through those guys and particularly, let’s say the Horizon Council, for example, a resolution [was drafted by] the Horizon Council in Lee County, and then [went] before the board of county commissioners and was passed on our behalf, in support of protecting the tariff. We’ve had these in every county. We’ve had them in Hendry County, Collier; all of our five counties had passed resolutions in support of our position. And [they were] communicated up the line, to the state elected officials and the federal elected officials, into our senators and the whole nine yards!

Ultimately the tariff decision comes down to Congress and those decisions are made, either the Congress is going to vote these up or down, through trade promotion authority, which the President has. So Congress can vote, up-or-down, on these agreements, but they usually have very little authority to change these agreements. As I understand it the administration’s trade officials, and the administration will draft the trade deals. That’s the whole concept behind the trade promotional authority, they make the deal and Congress will vote it up or down, they can’t modify it.
Mansfield: Okay. I just want to make sure I understand you, the Horizon Council and the board of county commissioners, amplify your position and that makes it easier to be heard in Tallahassee and, ultimately heard in Washington?

Hamel: When elected officials get letters and copies of resolutions, coming out of a wide group of people it definitely gets their attention, more than if we just did it ourselves. It helps to fortify our message and strengthen the message, by informing the other elected officials that have the authority to make decisions over these kinds of matters, the importance of maintaining that tariff to keep the citrus growers in business.

Mansfield: Was it you who developed this strategy? How did you all come up with this plan?

Hamel: I think there was a statewide action plan and part of that action plan directed the different groups and organizations, like us (we have several regional groups in the state) to go out and do these things. Now, with that said, the fact then boils down to what kind of relationships had you established in these different areas. So when it came to us, we were the first group in the state to have all five counties in our region to support us, because we had built this network of support, through our community and governmental relations committees and activities. We were not strangers to our key elected officials and business leaders, when “our ox was in the ditch,” so to speak.

They knew who we were and when we came to the table with these issues, after we explained it to them, they were certainly in support of what we were saying. We weren’t trying to “cry wolf” on this tariff, so to speak, on this tariff protection. When the reality of it is that Brazil is doing just fine in the market place without taking our market and forcing our growers out of business, to create what is interpreted as a monopolistic situation. If you knock Florida out, then Brazil is about the only big citrus group left. Even though they are the number one grower today in total acres and volume.

Mansfield: You said there was a state-wide action plan, does that come down from Florida Citrus Mutual, or the Florida Department of Citrus? Tell me about that.
**Hamel:** Well, I think it was a combination. A number of meetings had been called with industry leaders and organizations, to brainstorm about coming up with a tactical plan. And, as I indicated, at the time the Department of Citrus was politically active and so was the Citrus Mutual. So, collectively, the industry, a combination of the leadership of those groups and the organizational regional groups, kind of like ours, all came to the table to agree that we needed a game plan and everybody needs to be part of it.

Then at that point they strategized with some, experienced Washington insiders that had lobbied and been involved in a lot of big issues. They also became part of developing the game plan for an industry wide effort. All the organizations and the membership of these different groups became involved in it. Everybody had a part to play and a roll to fill in this thing, including dealing with media and the local officials and all of that.

So that’s what I can remember of the evolution of the plan. I think it was kind of a collective effort to put it together, raise some money, get the Washington, logistical insiders involved. [Then] hire them to help steer the ship and be on the front edge, everyday, day to day, in front of the delegation [in Washington], our Florida delegation as well as the other key leaders with in congress and within the trade offices.

**Mansfield:** Well that speaks for the power of organization, doesn’t it. Did you participate in any of these strategy meetings? I’m trying to imagine what it is like.

**Hamel:** Yes.

**Mansfield:** Tell me what you recollect about that.

**Hamel:** Well, we had a number of them. Initially, I think everybody agreed that this was a big enough issue that we had to have unity in the industry. And, if I recall, we would each bring three to five people to the meetings. Our executive committee, or sometimes just the executives, like myself and my president, our government affairs chair. [We’d] talk about, not only the need, but some tactics and how to build—you know, support the industry. It’s kind of a PR effort as well to get the farmers, the growers involved.
I think we had two or three of these and then the consensus was that we certainly needed more money, more financial support. Additionally we needed some “outside the citrus industry” leadership, from people that have worked on major issues in front of Congress and the President and those kind of things.

So [once] that consensus was reached, the leadership became involved with [the law firm based in Washington, DC.] As part of the [rallying process, our] groups would have some of the principals in these [DC based law] firms to come and speak at their meetings, to keep them informed of what was going on and why. At the same time they would tell then how they could get involved in this and be part of the solution, to protect the tariff.

So, all the way, from the top down to the average grower, out here through this networking and through this leadership and involvement, it [reached the point] to where any grower that wanted to write a letter and get involved certainly had some professional expertise and counsel to make sure that message could be delivered.

**Mansfield:** So when did these meetings start taking place? An approximate date will be okay.

**Hamel:** I think the big tariff stuff started—well—I mean you got to go back. You could start back with NAFTA, but they always say around here, “We got the shafta in NAFTA.”

**Mansfield:** [laughs]

**Hamel:** We didn’t have near the grassroots initiative that we did for this last go-a-round, because we got stiffed pretty well in NAFTA. [My understanding in there is that] we haven’t shipped the first orange. And they are shipping product in here. So, obviously from our perspective, we don’t have a whole lot to gain in these trade deals. Especially the countries that have been popping on the radar screen. We’ve got a lot to loose from letting them have our markets and nothing to market back, which is contrary to what most of the trade people are going to tell us.
But I would think this last initiative probably—I’d have to go back and pull the
dates, but I think it is four or five years old already. It’s whenever we really started
picking up vibes that they were going after this Free Trade Zone [sic; Area] for the
Americans, the FTAA.

That seemed to be the rallying call because that [proposal included] Brazil. And if
Brazil was able to eliminate the tariff there was a consensus in the industry that we won’t
be able to compete, not as we currently exist with regulations and the un-level playing
field. Primarily labor and harvesting costs, you know land use and environmental kind of
stuff. This is a daily fight for our people. I mean there is a lot of effort going forward to
deal with the labor “rules and regs” and all of the environmental rules and regulations
that our growers have to face everyday.

**Mansfield:** Were there competing strategic plans? Did people have different ideas about
what would be the best way to work this? Was there a struggle to come up with the best
one?

**Hamel:** No, ‘cause I think almost anybody that had any significant contributions, there
weren’t any bad ideas. I mean most people advanced creditable, very tactful ideas. [They
were] people with direct contacts with a lot of leaders, as well as some of these grassroots
initiatives that I was speaking of. From letter writing to E-mails, to whatever
communication methodology you wanted to employ. But I don’t know that anybody had
any really bad ideas. I think that everybody though that we ought to inform the public, so
there was public relations built in. The media, there were media briefs. Certainly
hundreds of elected official briefings. This whole concept of getting county commission
petitions and economic development [boards] petitions and chamber [of commerce]
resolutions. I think it is probably one of the best executed communications efforts going.

They even brought the President down during the hurricanes to make statements
to the effect that “We’re not going to let the industry get beat up, while it’s down.” Some
of these pretty strong public commitments to know that the industry is under a lot of
stress and we don’t want to add any undue stress, such a trade deal that could cripple the
growers.
**Mansfield:** From the people I’ve interviewed I’ve gotten the feeling that there is division between the large growers and the smaller growers. How did that play itself out in these meetings?

**Hamel:** I don’t—I guess I don’t know if I would classify it as a division. I think I would more classify it as a change of business about there is a change of business acumen, you know, the way that it works. I think we, in this region have more larger growers, on a per capita basis than any other part of the state. Therefore my board is composed of a few small guys, a few middle guys and few large guys. I don’t see much of a divisiveness, per se on my board. Now we’ve had some of the bigger growers pull out of the organization, feeling that some of these regional groups are not as good an investment as they think they might be.

Of course our people feel that’s pretty short sighted. But I don’t know, philosophically, [that] on the tariff issue or the canker issue, there [is] a big [difference] between [the way] a little guy looks at it or a big guy looks at it. I think they look at these issues pretty similarly, through the same colored glasses. And those glasses are not very clear nor are they very positive! So I think that had a lot to do with the same thing. We can get around a table and argue over the best way to fund the Florida Department of Citrus advertising [program] and [some] things. But, when it comes to issues of the eradication of citrus canker or protection of the tariff, that there is pretty strong unanimity in the industry, both small and large, that will play itself out.

**Mansfield:** I can see how they would both want to keep the tariff in place, but I just wondered if there would be some different approaches on how to do that?

**Hamel:** I haven’t experienced that here. But I think everybody agreed on the plan and how to fund the plan. You know, it’s predicated on volume, so much in fruit and everybody felt that way was fair. Everybody is paying a fair share, if they are paying. It’s just like anything else, it’s a volunteer thing and some people just don’t volunteer.
Mansfield: What is it—I can’t think of its exact name, but the Tariff Oversight—

Hamel: The Citrus Tariff Oversight Committee.

Mansfield: Which is separate from Citrus Mutual and the Department of Citrus?

Hamel: Right.

Mansfield: Tell me about that organization.

Hamel: As the initiative started it was felt, in order to collect funding, in order to built consensus in the industry and in order to really stay focused on this tariff protection plan, they needed [to assemble] a pretty broad and high powered group of individuals. [People] with a lot of respect in the industry and also a lot of investment in the industry, to become the leadership in the tariff protection initiative. And through Citrus Mutual and at the time, the Department of Citrus, they collaborated and came up with individuals that they felt would represent the industry well and, at the same time, be respected by the growers. Then they put together the Tariff Oversight Committee—what ever they call it. The CTOC, Citrus Tariff Oversight Committee.

They put together that group And that group was also responsible for hiring the—um—firms the various types of legal firms to work with the industry and come up with a strategy, to focus in on the leadership at the national level to protect the tariff. So each [geographical] part of the state had individuals on that committee. We had three or four on it, from down here.

Mansfield: Would it be safe to say that making [the CTOC] separate from the Citrus Mutual and the Department of Citrus, kind of put it beyond any disagreements that people might have?

Hamel: Yes. It definitely produced the political—um—feeling that it was [not dominated] by any one group.
**Mansfield:** I’ve heard some people express some displeasure with Florida Citrus Mutual. What have you heard?

**Hamel:** Well, any organization can’t be all things to all growers. I guess it depends upon your perspective. There are probably the same number of people who would speak very highly of [Mutual]. So from down here, we have a fair amount of growers that are members of Citrus Mutual. We probably have more members on a per capita basis, in [Gulf Citrus than] there would be Mutual members. We got a lot of Mutual members that are, quote, “mutual” members, both in our group and [in Florida Citrus Mutual].

**Mansfield:** [laughs]

**Hamel:** I think in this particular case, that would be short sighted on the grower’s part, because I think Mutual deserves a lot of credit to take on the responsibility of that tariff protection. Now for years, prior to Andy LaVigne’s reign there, Bobby McKowan was the executive director there. Bobby had a reputation of being pretty close managed with just having a very few people to provide input and him being the initiator and the leader. He managed communications extremely tight and internal. Where as Andy’s role has been broader based and more grass roots oriented, to get more people involved and an attempt to build consensus more than Bobby. So some of that “frustration” towards Mutual could very well be generated through the past leadership there, rather than Andy.

I think Andy has done a much better job of coming in and establishing better communications with the organizations and growers and working to build consensus on these issues. Bobby was more “take the bull by the horns and we’re going to do it Bobby’s way or no way.” You know—“*I’m going to take my football and go home.*”

**Mansfield:** [laughs]

**Hamel:** At times it’s somewhat frustrated people. So there might be some spin-offs over that. But like I said, I would certainly go on record as being very complimentary towards
the efforts of Mutual to involve the leadership and to build consensus, to take the
initiative to position the industry. [To] go out on a limb, so to speak, to raise those kind
of funds to do what we have to do.

From our perspective, the industry has suffered severely economically in the past
five to eight years. There haven’t been too many profit making seasons and on top of it,
you get canker and tariffs. The battle is being fought not only, you know, in this global
arena, but under probably more financial stress than we’ve ever faced.

**Mansfield:** When did Andy LaVigne take over, come in to Florida Citrus?

**Hamel:** Gosh! Probably five to seven or eight years ago. You’d have to go back and look
that up.

**Mansfield:** I interviewed him and you’d think I’d remember.

**Hamel:** You know time flies when you’re having fun. I bet you I’m wrong, that it’s been
longer than that, but I would say five to seven years.

**Mansfield:** Okay, so it feels about like that [length of time]. You were telling me about
Bob Crawford at the Department of Florida Citrus and he had a more political—

**Hamel:** Yeah, Bob’s background was more political. He was a farmer, came up out of a
farm family. He ran for state representative and then was state senator and then was
president of the senate then was agriculture commissioner. Then he was hired on as the
executive director of the Department of Citrus.

His approach at the department was much more political than anybody had
experienced over the years. But, Bob was a politician. Therefore his leadership focused a
great deal on the power base he had established through these various elected positions,
all the way up to agriculture. In fact, at one time President Bush was considering him to
be Secretary of Agriculture for the US. He was one of the [candidates] at the time. So he
had substantial political achievement and political acumen. His approach at the
department was much more politically oriented than any executive director.

Of course, I’ve only been through four and two of the four are the same person.
When I came in, in 88, Dan Gunter, who is now there, was the executive director. Then
Dan went into private industry and the department hired a marketing guy, Dan
Santangleo, who was pure marketing. He came out of—I guess it was Proctor and
Gamble, or Campbell Soup, one of the food marketing companies. I though he did a
really good job for several years, in repositioning and refocusing the department on the
marketing.

When the administrations changed, the democrats from the Lawton Childs era.
The commissioners were changed, because these are gubernatorial appointments. They
felt they had to make a change in leadership, so that’s when they started looking around
and that’s when they brought Bob Crawford in. The republicans took over the governor’s
mansion and it kind of shifted from the democratic selections to the republican selections.

**Mansfield:** How did the growers respond to a more politically active Department of
Citrus?

**Hamel:** I think, initially they were fine. Of course we started to face pretty severe
economic times, where the marketing and the PR—

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

**Hamel:** The Department was doing under Crawford wasn’t getting the job done either.
We were having to rely on a lot of the—a—political stuff. So I think people started to get
edgy about it. After a while—the bottom line wasn’t changing any. In fact it was going
from bad to worse. I think they took so much of it. Then there seemed to be some
infighting between Mutual, who used to handle the political stuff and the Department
which some people felt should not be involved in it. At least not at the level that it
seemed to be. So there was some political infighting about that and at the same time the
results weren’t there, especially in the marketing and the return to growers. That’s part of the reason they fund the marketing program is to help on the bottom line.

So Bob—I don’t know exactly how many years he was there, it might have been three of four [years] that he ran the department [before he resigned]. Then [the Citrus Commission] brought Dan back, because [of his knowledge and background]. When he was in the private sector, his job was in marketing, working with the different citrus companies to enhance sales and stuff like that. He’s done a real good job of bringing the Department back and getting focused, letting Mutual and organizations like ours getting more in the political side of it.

**Mansfield:** There is that controversy, oh I guess it still going on where several growers are suing the Department of Citrus.

**Hamel:** Well, that doesn’t have much to do the international trade issue, it has more to do with the philosophy on whether or not the return on your investment from your tax dollars to generically promote a product is a good investment. There is a difference of opinion with these individual companies that are suing the Department on those grounds.

**Mansfield:** Do you think that kind of internal controversy with the Department of Florida Citrus, did that contribute to forming the Citrus Tariff Oversight Committee, to make it an independent organization?

**Hamel:** I’m sure that all of those factors weighted in to some degree.

**Mansfield:** How do you think—

**Hamel:** Several growers wear several hats. You can be a citrus commissioner, you can be a Citrus Mutual member, you can be a Gulf Citrus member. You could wear several hats, you could be chairman of the Gulf government affairs committee and be a citrus commissioner.
This is not really a huge industry. Like any other, you have a grower leadership base and usually that leadership base or their family has been there for generations. It’s both good and bad. It’s hard to bring in some new blood and come up with creative ideas when you’ve got a lot of traditional generational input and philosophies built up. I think the tariff oversight committee was pretty much put together to collect and manage that money. The Department, they collect money, the tax money, principally to market the products, not to do political communications.

**Mansfield:** I just read that some people fear if the lawsuit is successful, it will spell the end of the Department of Florida Citrus.

**Hamel:** There are people that are in the lawsuit that have, on several occasions publicly said that they do not want to end the Department of Citrus. There is a role for the Department of Citrus that might not be in generic advertising.

**Mansfield:** I’m trying to think, somebody said they were going to wait and see—its been appealed. They’re going to wait and see what happens after that.

Where do you think you stand—where does the Florida citrus industry stand in the efforts to keep the protective tariff in place?

**Hamel:** I think the expression that Yogi Berra always used, “*It ain’t over ‘till it’s over.*” I think that is how we stand. I think we’ve done a masterful job through the CTOC to get our messages out, to make people and more importantly the [Bush] administration aware of the sensitivities of our industry towards this.[They] have been publicly communicated on numerous occasions by President Bush and the administration.

I think we’ve done a great job on that, but it’s just like anything else, we can’t let our guard down. There’re trade agreements being cut as we speak. The CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement] is underway. There is a lot of pressure being put on our industry to support the passage of CAFTA, which some people say is similar to NAFTA. One more trade agreement that will help structure the FTAA, which is our tariff protection mechanism.
So I think we’re doing great. The message is getting out there at various levels in various channels. I don’t think the Brazilians are happy at the level of support we’ve been able to garner through this collective initiative. But, we’re not out of the woods yet. We’ve got to stay the course. We’ve got to be vigilant. We’ve got to continue to invest in our battle. We need to continue to educate our growers and keep them informed and involved. So I think we’re in for the long haul. I think a lot of the strength of this effort, for right or for wrong, could be attributed to the good leadership at the top. But more importantly the grassroots efforts at the regional and county levels, with the growers themselves getting involved in it.

But people had to motivate them to do that and that’s where the leadership in the CTOC and the initiatives of Mutual and the Department the organizations, like ours, has got to drive these guys, to get them to fight the battle. Farmers like to farm, growers like to grow, they don’t want to go to city hall. They don’t want to go into Dodge. They hire people like me to do that and part of my job is to get them active and to get them motivated and get them trained and educated to go out there and plead their case. The powers that be want to hear from the growers, not from the hired people.

**Mansfield:** How hard is it to organize farmers?

**Hamel:** It’s like herding cats.

**Mansfield:** [laughs] Could you expound upon that a little bit?

**Hamel:** I’ve never herded cats. I’m just pretending. It’s a continual effort. The key is to recruit the right leaders and motivate them. Keep them excited, keep them moving forward and assisting them to be successful and keeping them involved. It’s a challenge. It’s a challenge, but it’s fun. It’s very rewarding when you can see that you’re making progress. We have a lot of that here.

And we also try to recognize them. They get embarrassed and “kick dirt” when you’re saying nice stuff about them, but I think it wears well. By human nature people like to be recognized for their efforts and we try to do a fair amount of that here.
We’re always ready to say thank you and to recognize them and to pat them on the back. But I’m also ready with the stick behind them, when I need to get them out. So it’s a challenge, to get them motivated, even when their lively hood is at stake. It never ceases to amaze me that I get more entrenched in some of these issues and I don’t have one single citrus tree, not even back yard tree. And yet, I’ve got to be the motivator.  

You’ve got to be willing to accept that when your association management, It’s not just growers, it’s any association.

Mansfield: Some people I’ve talked to have said that the growers are confronted with so many different challenges, water use, land use, canker, that it is hard to get them organized. So tell me some more about the different issues that are challenging the growers.

Hamel: They are so numerous. I don’t know where to begin.

The water issue here, I mean water and Florida! It is a very local issue but it is a regional issue, the way the districts are organized. In our particular part of the state, water is a major issue. I’m on a group called the Smart Growth Committee for Lee County, which is a growth management group, citizens group, picked by commissioners. There are very sensitive areas in the county and they don’t want any growth or development in these areas because they are trying to protect the water resources for growth and people and the environment. From the agricultural perspective we are constantly facing competition from urban growth and the environmental community on water. Water management, water conservation and water quality. So growers are having to become a lot more educated and a lot more sensitive—uh—in how they manage their water.

I would think the same would be true, through out the state and probably throughout the country. Basically, farmers are good water managers. They have to be, to be able to raise their crops. They don’t usually waste it. So a lot of our water battles have to do with PR and getting out there and telling that story. It is difficult to get farmers to go out there to tell their story, when it comes to water management. So we’re trying to do that too, with tours. Bring them out show them the physical aspects of water
management, be it the micro-jet irrigation technology, the computerized systems—you know—all of the technology that’s being employed on the farm.

So it’s a communications issue. Of course the water issue is so closely linked to the land use issue and land management. And then the species issues that has to do with the Endangered Species Act. There are a lot of critters that make a citrus grove, or those adjacent lands that are all part of the grove community “home.” So those issues get brought into the perspective. We got to manage critters. We got to manage water. We got to manage land.

We got folks moving in from around the country and now that they are here they don’t want to be next to a farm. So they want to pass ordinances saying we don’t want people out spraying for pests, or we don’t want people out plowing ground. So we get tree ordinances and land management ordinances and spray ordinances. So there is always something on the horizon.

Mansfield: What about the canker issue? That seems to be—

Hamel: Well that one was brought in. At least from my perspective, the more international and global we become the more we open our selves up to pests and disease coming in. People bringing in all kinds of stuff. Not only that, but the importation of pests and diseases as well as bad products, being shipped in. If we open up our markets and other countries aren’t inspecting from the food safety perspective as well as we’re trying to do here there is a lot of vulnerability there. You know, if an orange comes in and it ends up at a grocery store and it’s sold and the press hits and says “oranges are spreading diseases, customers aren’t going to buy oranges period. It doesn’t matter where they come from.

So those are big issues. Globalization, all of these things, just make farming and citrus growing more complicated and more complex than they used to. More and more societal pressures and growth pressures, global pressures are being brought to bear.

The canker is a classic example of how the importation of these things (because we are so mobile) came in and got settled in to the airport around Miami. And the rest is history. It’s just spreading all over through natural means as well as people moving it.
Mansfield: What do you think the future holds for the Florida citrus industry?

Hamel: [pause] I wish I had a crystal ball.

Mansfield: [laughs]

Hamel: I have to be optimistic. I’m probably in a region that has truly been blessed in many ways. Including the fact that Mother Nature sent those storms to other parts of the state rather than our region. [Sound of Hamel knocking the table.] That’s knocking wood so that we won’t get our share of hurricanes here, like we got peppered last year, all around us. Just a little tip of this region got hit.

So from my perspective, in this region I have to be positive. I feel [the citrus industry has] probably got as much staying power in southwest Florida as any other part of the state. There are a number of reasons for that. We’re south of the freeze line, for the most part. I think we have more capitalized operations. I think we have more diverse operations. I think we have excellent leadership and management in our region.

And certainly, if we can protect our water and our land rights, I think the community sees us as white hats [good guys]. We’ve done public opinion polls [and they show that] people love us. They like our industry here. They want us here. We’re environmentally sensitive. We’re sustainable. If we can keep our prices up and keep that tariff [in place]. I think our guys, when they draw their swords, they are going to be in there. They are going to stay in the battle. They’re going to fight. So I have to be optimistic about this part of the state and the industry.

People ask me if about that because they hear about all of these things. As early as this morning, with the Governors Breakfast, I brought orange juice for the mayor. Our mayor was the host. It was the cabinet for the day. The Governor and the Cabinet come down for the day to these communities, and today it was “Fort Myers Cabinet Day.” And I got our guys out there, went and bought the orange juice and everybody served it and the Mayor got up and said: “I want you guys to drink this great orange juice, because the growers here provided it for you.” That’s all part of it. I mean we’re out there in the
community. We’re active and I have to be optimistic about it. I think we keep fighting wars and I think we’ll hang it there.

If we can get our economics coming out a little bit and bring in a little more technology, particularly in harvesting. Again, we’re kind of pioneering that here. So we’ll be the first region to really get heavy into the mechanical harvesting and get these labor costs more inline, which will make us more competitive in the global market.

Mansfield: Do you think that, with all the people who used to earn money picking the oranges are displaced by the machines?

Hamel: Well, I don’t think it would be all of them and I think the vast majority of those funds are sent back to the countries [of origin of the farm workers]. It’s going to change the industry. I think there is going to be a different group of technologically oriented laborers that are going to run the equipment and service the equipment. It’s becoming more and more difficult for us to hire—um—hand workers and laborers because of the competition from construction and nursery companies and service industries that are taking that labor source from us. It’s driving our prices even higher, which is making us even less competitive, with our competitors to the south [Brazil].

I predict, within five to seven years, we’ll be harvesting 30% to 40% of the citrus from this region, mechanically. I mean, we’ve got the ground, we’re a flat woods growing area. We don’t have any hills. We’ve got bigger operators, larger acreage. The technology is going to work here. We’re going to revolutionize the industry here within five to seven years.

Mansfield: Well, I’ve been throwing question at you for the past hour. Is there anything you want to tell me about that I haven’t asked about?

Hamel: No. I think you’ve pretty much “covered the waterfront.” No, I think we pretty much covered it.
Mansfield: Let me thank you for taking the time to share this information with me. I’ve sure enjoyed it and feel like I’ve learned a lot too. Also I need to remind you that the information you’ve shared with me will be deposited at the Special Collections of the University of South Florida. In order for scholars to have access to it we need to get you to sign a release form. Any questions you might have about that.

Hamel: No.

Mansfield: Okay, great. Let me shut this thing off.

[End of interview.]