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Bill Mixon oral history interview by William Mansfield, June 09, 2005

Bill Mixon (Interviewee)

Bill Mansfield (Interviewer)

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Bill Mansfield: I always put a label on the disc by saying; This is Bill Mansfield from
the University of South Florida’s Globalization Research Center, talking to Mr. Bill
Mixon here in his offices in Bradenton, Florida, on June 9, 2005.

And Mr. Mixon, we always get people to start off by having them state their name
and telling us when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

Bill Mixon: Okay. I’m William P. Mixon, Jr., known as Bill. I was born right here in
Manatee County Manatee, Florida in 1928.

Mansfield: What date?

Mixon: May 26, 1928.

Mansfield: We always get people to tell us about their education.

Mixon: My dad had been in the fruit business all of his life. I started going to the groves
with my dad almost as soon as I could walk. I feel like a lot of my education. As far as
citrus culture has come from my Dad.

Of course I graduated from high school and I went to the University of Florida
and then I went to Florida Southern College. I was one of their first students that went to
get a degree in citrus. I did not get my degree. But I took all the courses they offered in
citrus, because I needed to get back with my father who was trying to run the place by himself. All I was interested in was getting the information I needed to order fertilizer, spray materials and some of the chemistry I needed to know, in dealing with fertilization.

Then, I had a background in business. I had been keeping the books for a company, a small company. Making all those entries and paying the pay roll, ever since I was big enough to do it, all most. So I was really self-educated in all of the ways. I was very strong in my belief that I could make a success in the fruit business. When I was in the University, my father told me that things were so bad in the citrus industry at that time, he saw no future in the citrus industry. I was in college and I was determined that I wanted to try. So I told my dad, give me ten years in the business with him and we’d see what would happen. After ten years, I would go ahead and take a job with some one else, if we hadn’t made a success. Now we’re celebrating our 66th year in business. And (knock on wood) in all the years that I’ve been here we’ve never had a year that we didn’t show a profit.

The Lord has been real good to us. We believe that He, God, has been the one who has guided us through all of the problems and He will continue to do it from now on.

Mansfield: Okay. You said things we bad when you were in college, when was that?

Mixon: That was in 1946. I started at the University of Florida. It was before we discovered that [the industry] could concentrate orange juice. Shortly after that the concentrate came into the industry and we were able to concentrate orange juice and store it better and have a better product. We were able to see the price of fruit jump a lot, in those first years that concentrate came into being. When we got an inventory we had to educate the public on how to use it.

But it was a great success. That helped us out a lot in the years after that. My dad told me, before; we were in a disastrous situation here in the industry. Our fruit prices were far below production costs. You couldn’t sell them anywhere and that’s when we decided that we needed to make a push on our gift business and start trying to get people locally to patronize us. Not only with citrus but other type gifts that we could ship north.
That’s when we began to put a lot of the effort there. That’s when I got married and my wife was a very good, very good person. [She] had a lot of talents and was responsible for developing our mailer list of about eighty thousand [active, mail-order] customers.

Mansfield: So that was in the mid 40’s then?

Mixon: [No, it was the mid-50’s.]

Mansfield: So you’ve been doing the fresh fruit and how would you describe it? Gifts?

Mixon: The gift fruit business.

Mansfield: Okay. So you’ve been doing that for a long time?

Mixon: We were doing it back then, but it was very small and of course we were very small. But it was profitable. We made money at it in the very beginning. We had a lot of problems in the transportation area, when Railway Express was about the only way you could ship fruit back in those days. They were having a lot of problems with unions. Their labor costs were so high that their cost of shipping kept going up and their service got worse and worse.

We as Mixon’s, my Dad and the people here, on the west coast of Florida, the other small gift shippers, we got together and decided we were going to start a business of shipping our own fruit. And we were responsible, in part, for beginning the Florida Gift Fruit Shippers Association, which is still in business. We have a big terminal we built and one time we shipped the biggest portion of all the gift fruit shipments going out of the state Florida at our terminal. We had our own trucks. We’d haul it and we’d put it in UPS and parcel post delivery.

On the other end we’d have certain key cities that we’d deliver to and then we’d put it into the post office in zones one and two. We did the same thing out west, only we’d go less frequently than we did to the eastern part of the country. We’d go to Canada
also. We improved our gift fruit shipments tremendously. It grew very, very fast once we got into this good area of transportation.

**Mansfield:** You started gift fruit before orange concentrate?

**Mixon:** Yes.

**Mansfield:** When orange [juice] concentrate took off—

**Mixon:** It didn’t effect our gift fruit business. In fact our gift fruit business even grew faster, because it was a lucrative business, if you did a good job. But our problem was with the Railway Express. They didn’t handle our packages right. They’d tear up our packages. We had to find some other mode of transportation; we wouldn’t have been able to continue.

**Mansfield:** Tell me, where did the idea for the gift fruit come from?

**Mixon:** We had customers that would come South in the wintertime and spend time here and of course they had their children back north. They would want to do something, gift wise, and back then fruit was a real treat to the families. Families would just love to get a box of fruit rather than some of the junk that you buy in the stores. The families got to where they really depended on their moms and dads, grandma and grandpa sending them boxes of fruit.

A lot of them got fruit—we started what we call, ‘standing orders.’ The parents would get down here in the fall, October. Their parents would start a standing order that we’d ship their kids a box of fruit, every two weeks, to a month apart, through out the citrus season. We had hundreds and hundreds of standing orders for these people back in the north. That’s what we built on, was that.

**Mansfield:** How did you figure out to develop this market? Was it—?
Mixon: This [came from] being in direct contact with the people that came south to Florida. My wife was responsible for that. She had personal relations with these people. She got to know them real well. They depended on her. We had a small family operation and we built [their] confidence—they got their confidence in us, by the way we handled our business here locally. Then they started shipping fruit and it was so successful and people liked it so well. They would tell others. And that’s the way we grew. We didn’t grow by large advertising or anything like that. We grew one customer at a time.

Mansfield: I’ve always heard that word-of-mouth was the best advertising. It’s the most honest.

Mixon: That’s right. So we built our business on the pride that we shipped good quality fruit. Here, in this area, our quality of fruit is unexcelled. We can grow some of the finest quality fruit in the world, especially grapefruit. Over the years we’ve built a real good clientele of people who want good quality fruit.

Mansfield: Was there any kind of—what is it? The Agricultural Extension Service, or any kind of—anybody that gave you all any kind of advice?

Mixon: No. Because there was really no history of it. We work with the Florida Citrus Commission. We worked with the University of Florida, with their technical people, in raising fruit and advertising through the Florida Citrus Commission. We convinced them that the gift fruit shippers were a vital part of the citrus business. And even today, they still appropriate monies for the gift fruit shippers in advertising for us. Because we do pay the advertising tax into the citrus commission, so, we feel like we are a part of it. They felt the same way and give us so much money for advertising purposes.

Mansfield: When you went to the Florida Citrus Commission, did they have any kind of—I don’t know how to describe it—business people that could advise you all to improve your business? How did they help you?
Mixon: No, no, we didn’t get any advice that I knew of from the Citrus Commission. We actually taught them. We were the teachers because we were really the only ones that had experience. That’s the way it grew.

We grew from experience. It was on a one-to-one basis. It wasn’t like big business; this was an individual talking to an individual. You built that confidence and that’s the way our business grew. Of course it grew on the east coast of Florida very rapidly because, at that time they were a lot more tourist oriented than we were here on the west coast of Florida.

They had a potential. Of course the Indian River Fruit that they advertise. There were more moneyed people on the east coast and they were able to get higher prices for shipments of gifts from their coast than we were from here on the west coast of Florida.

Mansfield: Did you study what the people were doing on the east cost, to get some ideas?

Mixon: Oh yes! [With the Gift Fruit shippers] we had speakers had that would come in. We’d have a convention once a year and [at] most all of the conventions we would get speakers in areas with similar type businesses in other parts of the country. Of course direct mail was in its infancy then. We had people that thought they knew a lot of the answers in direct mail. We found out that most of their experience was not workable in our organization. But there were some things that we did pick up, in direct mail and that’s the way we grew.

We had speakers and we’d have three of four days of convention. We’d have, of course, people that sold the different items that would be in our little gift shops. They’d come there and have their booths and we ‘d look at their stuff that we could sell, other than citrus.

Of course we started out very small in the gift area. Fruit was our main thing, but now the gift end of it is a large part of our business.

Mansfield: Well just to help get some sort of time frame in this, when you were going to these conventions and having people talk to you about direct mailing, when was that?
Mixon: This started in the 50’s and we’ve done it ever since. We still do it.

Mansfield: You said that you were teaching the Florida Citrus Commission, what do you teach them?

Mixon: We had—before they would appropriate monies for the gift fruit business that had to know that it was a business that would amount to something. We do not and have, nor ever been, a great volume user of citrus fruit but we are a vital part [of the citrus industry]. We taught them that by our contact, directly with so many hundreds of thousands of people, every year, that we were not only developing a gift fruit business but we were developing business. When we could not ship fruit, or they could not [get it from us] they could go to the grocery store and buy fruit, so we were actually an advertising agency for the Citrus Commission. With our one-on-one business we felt like we were doing a lot better job of direct advertising than they were, with the millions of dollars that they spent. We convinced the people that we were doing a wonderful job of advertising Florida citrus, all over this country, Europe [and] Canada. Even though we didn’t move a large volume of fruit, we were a vital part of the citrus industry.

Mansfield: So, beside yourself, who all went to the Florida Citrus Commission? Did you form a committee?

Mixon: Yes, we had the Florida Gift Fruit Shippers. I didn’t go many times myself, but the Florida Gift Fruit shippers had committees on different areas. We tried to develop different kinds of gift containers. Florida Gift Fruit Shippers, we’d do mass purchasing of different items. That’s the sort of thing the Gift Fruit Shippers did.

Actually most of it, after we had the Gift Fruit Shippers established, we had a director there—a person that was in charge of all he work the Gift Fruit Shippers did. He was the one that put forth these committee meetings with the Citrus Commission. They went to most of the Citrus Commission meetings. We were involved all over the citrus industry, because we felt like we were a vital part of the industry.
Mansfield: When did the Florida Gift Fruit Shippers organize?

Mixon: It was in the 50’s. I don’t remember the exact time. We were one of the first people. We helped to organize it really, here on the west cost. It was organized by a group of small shippers here on the west cost of Florida. The main reason it was organized was to deal with transportation. Because, at that time, our transportation provided very poor service and it is so critical to our business.

Mansfield: You mentioned the leader who approached the Florida Citrus Commission, who was that?

Mixon: We’ve had numerous ones over the years.

Mansfield: But who was the one that [went before the Citrus Commission]?

Mixon: I’d say it was Bill Stubs was a very vital person. He was there for many years. Al Voges—[was another]

Mansfield: Al Voges?

Mixon: Al Voges [spells] V-O-G-E-S. I believe that’s how you spell it. We’ve had numerous others—well not numerous, but those two were there the longest time of anybody and was very instrumental developing the industry and developing our transportation system. That was a major job in the Gift Fruit Shippers, was developing a transportation system. Of course when you ship several million packages you have to have a modern terminal where you can handle the fruit quickly and that you don’t have long transportation times, where your fruit will spoil.

They would represent us every time the Post office would propose increases, we would have men to go to Washington on our behalf and try to hold down the cost on gift fruit shippers and gift fruit shipments from Florida. We were very instrumental in doing that. In many cases we saved lots of money, by holding down the price of Florida gift
fruit and the citrus industry, through our representation with the different areas of government in Washington, DC concerned with setting the new [postal rates] and what not.

**Mansfield:** So you all were politically active right from the start?

**Mixon:** Yes. We had to be because we had to go through government to get a lot of things done that we needed to do, in order to have a good transportation system. And we always has a watchful eye on anything that would effect the gift fruit shippers, as far as cost is concerned and programs that would be detrimental to our business.

**Mansfield:** When I talked with you on the phone the other day, you said that you really didn’t pay that much attention to the Free Trade of the Americas Act and the protective tariff. So tell me about your involvement, or lack of involvement.

**Mixon:** I was very involved when they were trying to pass the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Act] program. I went so far as to even call a meeting of tomato growers and citrus growers in the area. Then I was [on the board of directors] for Florida Citrus Mutual for eight years. When NAFTA was proposed, both Florida Citrus Mutual and the Farm Bureau (which I was active in and president of here locally) they both came out in support of NAFTA in the beginning and even voted for it to be enacted. Both organizations went for NAFTA, they thought it would help us.

After they studied it, at first they were against it and then they were all turned for it. Of course when Farm Bureau and Florida Citrus Mutual went for it our legislators had no problem trying to push it.

In our meeting here in this very packinghouse I had fifty or sixty growers, and our representatives from Farm Bureau and Florida Citrus Mutual. And there were four or five of us shippers here in the area that were still totally against NAFTA. We could see ahead what was going to happen. And it turned out exactly like we said it would. Even though they voted against us and decided to support NAFTA, they later realized it was one of the biggest mistakes they had ever made.
Mansfield: When you say you could see what was going to happen, tell me what you saw.

Mixon: Knowing from working with government, that government would react to situations very slowly. There would be a lot of government—it’s known that government works very slowly. Of course they were telling us that government would react if there were an over supply of say, tomatoes or other commodities brought in from other countries. They would be using [the United States] as a place to dump their stuff at give away prices and it could ruin our prices here in this country. We were told by the people that were proposing NAFTA that they would get right on it, immediately. It would not effect the markets here as we had suggested it would.

Well, it turned out that it did. Like in tomatoes you have a very short period of time. Mexican imports could come in here and drop your market prices to zero over night. Then our growers would be, of course, caught in the middle. They couldn’t sell their products at a price that they could produce them for. You’d complain and going through all the red tape and government it would take them months to do anything about it. Then the season would be over the damage would be done.

[It was] the same thing in citrus. We had the dumping of large quantities of juice into the trade and it deteriorated the markets. We could not compete with these countries because their labor costs were so much less than ours. They could deliver [their products] to this country for lower prices than we could possibly deliver it to the processors for. Even though they paid a duty on it, it still wasn’t enough duty to off set the difference in labor costs to us.

We could see this and I tried to tell these people this, in this meeting and other meetings. The government was able to convince enough growers and big organizations, like Farm Bureau and Florida Citrus Mutual that, in the end, it would be a help to us. Of course it has [turned out] exactly like the few of us (who opposed it) said it would.

Even today we have court cases in progress against the dumping of juice from Mexico [sic; Brazil] at prices far below the world market. Even though we’ve had a disaster in three major hurricanes here this last year. It almost wiped out our grapefruit industry and a large percentage of our oranges were lost. And with the tremendous
damage and loss from the hurricanes we did not get any higher prices for the fruit to speak of, except for the grapefruit did go up some. The reason grapefruit went up was because we had no competition from any other part of the world. That just shows you that it [NAFTA] does effect us very much. The imports come from other countries. Orange juice they could get from other countries, grapefruit they couldn’t. That was the difference.

**Mansfield:** The initial fear of NAFTA, that I read about, was that the juice producers were worried that Mexico would be shipping inexpensive orange juice here. But they said that Mexico was more of a fresh fruit market.

**Mixon:** Yes, like tomatoes.

**Mansfield:** What about oranges? How did opening up the boarders to Mexican oranges affect you?

**Mixon:** There’s been some effect from Mexican fruit. Not a great deal, from the fresh fruit side of it. It was more tomatoes and that type of stuff effected Florida growers. It almost broke them. It was a terrible situation and still is. The part that really bugs us is that the government said that what they were trying to do was help Mexico to raise their standard of living.

Right now I read in the news papers were all the reports that were supposed to be given the people, the growers and what not, telling us what had actually happened since NAFTA has been in effect [have been curtailed by the government]. But we know form us probing into the records, that NAFTA has plainly been a total failure in doing what they wanted it to do, to help Mexico. They have not improved their standard of living. Their wages haven’t gone up. Our government has held this information back from the American people. We are going to demand that this be put out.

And this is information that’s just come out in the last few weeks, concerning the refusal of our government to let the people know what has actually happened in Mexico.
How little effect it had on [the Mexican standard of living] and it did a great deal of damage to the industry here in Florida.

Not only in Mexico but like, in Brazil, where the main part of your orange juice comes from. This season would be a perfect example of how NAFTA was a part in promoting the sale of juice. We can’t blame the processors here in the state of Florida for buying juice that is a lot cheaper than they can buy it here in Florida. But it has ruined an industry. It’s just played havoc with the tremendous losses from the hurricanes and no higher prices for the crop that you’re raising (what little you had left). Most of your small growers, especially your small growers, are either getting out of the business or scaling down to whatever they can take care of themselves.

**Mansfield:** You said that “we conducted investigations to find out the real effect of NAFTA.” Who was that?

**Mixon:** Well, there’s been several people that have dug into the records. Our government was supposed to know our industry know all these figures and they did not. They want to keep it as quiet as they can, because it has been a failure. There was an article in the *Bradenton Herald* just this past week, I forget who wrote the article, but they have probed into it and they found out a lot of these figures they don’t want us to know. We feel like some thing ought to be done about it immediately, to show them that you must be very, very careful in making trade agreements.

It seems as though agriculture is one of the areas that they can trade off, because they have the least resistance to it in our government. Where as, in your automobile industry they can fight it more than we can. So they take the line of least resistance.

What has brought this all about is a new trade agreement is being proposed and I noticed that the newest one [CAFTA], Florida Citrus Mutual has come out, this past week, saying that it would have little effect on the industry. But there again, we look back on what Florida Citrus Mutual came up with when NAFTA was proposed. (Even after we told them what it was going to do.) I personally have little confidence in what they have said [about] this new trade agreement that it would have little effect on us.
They don’t really know. It’s just what they see from what the government puts out. Trade agreements seem to be the important area now that they are using to get what they want from other governments.

**Mansfield:** So they are using trade as sort of—

**Mixon:** Negotiation. They’ll actually trade off and industry. They want admit to that, put that’s exactly what they are doing, in order to get some other items that they want to get from other countries. It’s a trade off is what it is. And we the people here in Florida, especially agriculture—and I’m sure in other areas.

From talking to a lot of farmers that I come in contact with, from all over the country. It’s effected wheat. It’s effected corn. It’s effected cows and hogs. It’s not just one thing. Our government has been very lax in protecting the agricultural industry. Consequently here in Florida in the citrus industry the small grower is being eliminated in my estimation. Only the very large corporate type farms can exist and even they are having a tough time. We’re under a real chain.

And the growers have been plagued with numerous diseases. It has caused millions and millions and millions of dollars worth of damage. The growers are just losing hope. The government is against them in one way. Then we have all of these diseases. Canker and tristease and Fietopera, things that are effecting millions of trees—killing trees. It has caused the growers to try and find other ways to make a livelihood. That’s what’s happening in the industry right now.

**Mansfield:** Am I understanding you correctly—did I hear you say, that Florida Citrus Mutual was not being responsive to the needs of the Florida citrus grower?

**Mixon:** I don’t say that they are not responsive, but some of the solutions, or effects, I think the ones that are putting out this information don’t fully understand it. They proved that when NAFTA was passed. And the small grower is having real difficulty in believing them now.
Mansfield: You’re not the first person I’ve talked to, to tell me that. Do you feel that Florida Citrus Mutual is more concerned with the interest of the large growers over the small growers?

Mixon: Well naturally. That’s where their assessments come from, is a box assessment that keeps Mutual going. I believe strongly in Florida Citrus Mutual. I was a director in the organization for eight years. We had a very strong organization. But the emphasis now seems to be political, rather than the real down to earth problems that we have.

In my estimation if you’re a small grower and you tell them your problems—They show very little interest in developing the things the small grower would like to have developed and [solving] the real problems that they have. They are more interested in going to Washington and trying to talk with these legislators and congressmen. It just seems to me like they are spending too much time on that, when they should be working on the real problems that are causing the small growers and even the larger growers to go out of business.

Mansfield: Tell me what you feel are the problems confronting the small grower.

Mixon: Of course the small grower doesn’t have any market except he processor. He’s at the processor’s [mercy]—most of them are processor-growers. And when you have the situation with Brazil, where they are dumping the juice and holding the market down. You don’t have the fluctuation of market prices like you use to have.

Used to [when] you’d have a small crop of fruit, here in the state of Florida—and the price of you fruit would go up. Now it has more or less become a level situation. The processor knows if the price is going to go up, they’ll just get more [juice] from Brazil. It has put the small grower out of business, because they can not operate on as small a margin as the larger grower works on.

Mansfield: What could Florida Citrus Mutual do to help he small grower? What solution do you see?
Mixon: It’s to fight NAFTA and these trade agreements that have caused these problems. To help small grower, put more emphasis in dealing with diseases, like canker—which is a major problem here in the state of Florida now.

In my estimation [canker has] been blown far out of proportion. I had canker here and lost fifty acres of groves to canker. I do not believe in the way they are trying to conquer canker. They need to be spending as much money on research to find a way to control canker, rather than to just turn to blindly to thinking there is no way of curing canker. I feel like if we can go to the moon and we can develop all of these other things that seemed impossible just a few years ago, that research in this country could find a [better] way to control canker, rather than to burn and destroy thousands and thousands of trees every month. That’s the system that they are using now.

I’ve expressed that and the people that are in charge won’t listen to me. Even some of the research people have backed me up, saying that I was right. They have actually cause some of the major research people that were thinking the way I think—and it wasn’t just thinking because I wanted to contrary it was based on research.

We have pathologists that were in the industry that spent many years in Brazil and Argentina with canker. These people of what should be done, how it should be done was put aside. It was said they didn’t know what they were talking about, in spite of their fifteen years experience with canker.

One in particular, and I won’t call his name, I got to work very closely with him when I lost fifty acres to canker. He told me of his research in Brazil and Argentina. I have a very close friend, who is dead now, he was a commissioner of Agriculture in both Texas and Florida. When he found out we had canker he called me. He was in his late nineties and on his deathbed he wanted to talk to me about canker. He told me about his experiences with canker. He’d been given credit for destroying canker in the state of Texas. He said, “I had nothing to do with it. Mother Nature took care of it. We had a great freeze and it killed the trees. And I was given the credit for getting rid of canker.” He was also the Commissioner of Agriculture for several years here in Florida. And He said, “Let me tell you what they are doing is not working and will not work.” He said, “I tried everyone of these ways of destroying canker before we had the great freeze.” He said, “This will not work. We got to find away through research to control it. We got to
let the research industry get to work on it. Spend some money and we can develop [a treatment]. ”

The part that bothers me, our state people have not allowed anyone, that I know of, to bring any of their products into the state of Florida to [try and treat the disease] on an experimental basis.

When we were working with the state and they said they were going to destroy fifty acres, which they did, we offered—we had one thirty acre grove that had canker in one little corner. There was a company in California that heard about it and they offered to come and bring their own materials, that they felt like would control canker. They could prove [its effectiveness] beyond a shadow of a doubt. I went to state officials and sought permission [for them to treat my trees]. And the state officials said, “No. We can not leave this canker there for you to work with. It’s liable to spread to other areas of the state.”

I don’t know what their feeling is now, of letting people work on it. But the last I heard is that they wouldn’t let anybody experiment with anything in the state of Florida. They said it would be a big liability. What bothers me is that canker has spread worse since they destroyed our trees. There are areas here; with in fifteen miles of us, that they only destroyed trees within 125 feet of where they found canker. And in one area, a big residential are, they found canker and they just destroyed one side of a tree, where they found canker. And those areas have been free of canker for ten or twelve years.

It was eaten up with canker. There were several trees in the yard and they wouldn’t even push them over. Sometimes they’d just trim them back. They have not had canker to reoccur. And [the state officials] will not listen to any of this I tell them. The nineteen hundred foot rule and destroying acres and acres of citrus when they find one or two [infected] trees is just not the answer. They need to do research and we can find a way to control canker and these other diseases that are ruining the industry.

Mansfield: This is the Florida Department of Citrus that you’re talking about?

Mixon: No, I’m talking about the Plant Board, the state Plant Board.
**Mansfield:** I know the Florida Citrus Mutual, which is the grower’s organization then there’s the Florida Department of Citrus.

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

**Mixon:** The Florida Department of Citrus, they handle the advertising programs and the regulatory side of the industry. Florida Citrus Mutual has more clout and made report on canker and keeps up with it but its information comes straight from the Plant Board, the state Plant Board.

The Plant Board is the one that needs to be—they’ve got a large committee that meets. I think they have developed a situation in our state that is very bad. When canker first began here on the west coast [of Florida], they were going to destroy part of our [trees]. And they did. They were even going to close our business because we were within five miles of a canker find.

I had to go to the Department of Agriculture; USDA and I requested a meeting with all the top officials of the USDA. I met with those people and they agreed. They had a special meeting just for our company, because it was our total livelihood. They were going to close our packinghouse down. I got a lawyer that had been involved in USDA and government projects. [He] was very good at it. I hired him and we went to Orlando. So I met with our attorney and he said, “Bill even though I’ve dealt with many cases, you would be far better than I would ever be to explain your case to the USDA officials.”

The USDA agreed to meet with us and listen to our complaints and tell us if we could open our packinghouse. This was in the summer months and we weren’t going to be able to open our gift fruit business at all. So we all met in Orlando and the attorney went with me and I presented out case.

I believe it was the USDA head in Louisiana. They questioned me and he said, “Bill, let us go back and conference for fifteen minutes and we will give you an answer, whether you can open your packing house.” In less than fifteen minutes they came back and they all agreed—these were the top officials, from all over the country—and he said, “You go home and you open your business as if nothing has happened. They have not found any canker in your groves.”
So we came home. But we had to do this on our own. This is where Florida Citrus Mutual should be involved. With this type of case they should be more involved. And they should be more involved in trying to get research to take care of this disease.

**Mansfield:** Now when was that?

**Mixon:** This was in 1999.

**Mansfield:** That must have been pretty frightening to have to—

**Mixon:** Well it certainly was, because we’re a business that’s been here all of our lives and my father had seen canker here before. They did not do like they do now. They just burnt the [infected] trees. And this is what some of the research people I mentioned earlier, about in Brazil. They could find canker any time they wanted to look. It would be on the old wood. It may be five years and it would go away and you couldn’t find canker on the leaves of the trees. It would not do any harm. But, he told me, with the right weather conditions it would pop back up again. They would use one extra copper spray and they were able to continue to good crops of fruit.

**Mansfield:** You said you hired an attorney to go with you? Would you mind telling me who that was; just for the record?

**Mixon:** I would have to go back and we are still represented attorney fund and he’s still on there in Sarasota. I don’t remember his name. That’s been several years ago, and that was the only time we ever used him. But he had worked for the USDA so he knew how they operated. He knew how to get them, He said we had a right to be heard. And we were heard and they agreed with us, that there was no problem.

These are the things our organizations shouldn’t fear doing, but politically they try to—it’s like everything else, you give a little to get something else. They don’t want to disturb [anything] and any pressure on some of the officials that they like and seem to
be doing a lot for the industry. I realize that situation, but sometimes you have to back away [from what’s comfortable] and do what is necessary to get the job done.

**Mansfield:** One of the things you talked about that interested me was opening your grove up to tourist. Am I correct in understanding that?

**Mixon:** We like to have tours. Here again we’re doing a lot of advertising, not only for ourselves but the whole industry. We find that so many of our young people in our schools don’t have the foggiest idea about fruit. They don’t even know about different varieties and they’re being trained in our schools. So, several years ago, we started a program. We hired a young lady to take care of tours. We have many, many busloads of students to come from the different schools. We take them on a tour, a walk in the grove and explain the different kinds of fruit that there is. We give them free orange juice and we let them ask questions.

It’s a training program and the schools—our schools here in this county, Sarasota, Hillsborough and the counties surrounding us have sent many bush loads a of young kids, from second or third grade through elementary areas. They seem to be more interested that any other age group. You can’t get them too young and then if you get in to the teenage years, they are interested in other things besides fruit. [laughs]

**Mansfield:** [laughs] Oh yes, I know about that.

**Mixon:** We have had a lot of success in this. The kids go home and tell their folks about where they went that day for a school program and then they bring their folks back out to see us. Their parents are interested and we have tours for grownups that explain all the varieties [of oranges]. We take them down through the grove, We have the trees labeled, how long they been there. We answer questions about production. So many people don’t even know that citrus fruit is a seasonal deal. They think the have it all year round.

**Mansfield:** When did you start having tours?
Mixon: We started some ten years ago, I guess, in a very small way but now it’s gotten to be a pretty big thing. We’re totally booked through the main part of the season. We can only handle so many. Sometimes we’ll have three busloads here at one time. We have to have extra people. We require that the schools send teachers with the buses, to help control the kids. We show them how the fruit is processed.

It’s a very popular program. We also have lots and lots of busloads of tours that come in here. People are down if Florida for a couple of weeks and they take these tours. The buses come in here and we let them walk in the edge of the grove and not let them touch the trees, on a count of canker. We don’t have canker here now, as far as we know. We really have to be careful. We want to abide by the state laws and we try to. But the people are very interested in knowing about Florida citrus.

Mansfield: Where did the idea come from, to open it up for tours?

Mixon: Well we had people to inquire, if we ever offered tours. That’s where we got started. We started in a small way and we have a person now that her full time job is on tours. She also does PR work, with Citrus Commission. Last year she went on and represented the state at a convention in Jacksonville. I allowed her to go with the Florida Citrus Commission. They had a big convention and she was one of the key people there.

We did that on our own. It’s not that we don’t want to work with the Citrus Commission, and Florida Citrus Mutual. But we need to get down to the grassroots of things in the industry, other than not paying any attention to the small problems that we have.

Mansfield: Do you all charge for the tours?

Mixon: Yes, we do now. We have so many and it’s a big expense to us so we generally charge a minimum fee. Not only do we charge, we also have a deli where we prepare light lunches for them. They can come here and spend two or three hours. We put that in to figure for the tour and the lunch. It’s very economical. It’s for school kids and
everybody. We have an area where they can sit and eat and just spend quite a while here with us.

**Mansfield:** So you basically just show them the groves?

**Mixon:** We show them through the processing plant. We show them where we make the juice. Usually they can see the juice being bottled. [We show them] how we bring the fruit out of the fields. We wash the fruit and grade it. Then they can see the packing process and the close up and how we ship it. We explain to them how we have a computerized system. We ship all over the country and we know right where our fruit is at all times.

It’s more than just fruit. The people can see the trees [without getting too close]. We don’t let them pick any fruit. We try to abide by all of the rules, the regulations to prevent the spread of canker.

**Mansfield:** I think it’s great that people can get an idea of where the fruit comes from. I’m sure they are interested.

**Mixon:** We have millions of people coming to Florida every year and we feel like the small grower and the gift fruit shipper are doing a tremendous job in helping to tell the world about citrus. It’s a one-to-one basis. People come here and they actually see it. They are intrigued by it. We have more comments now from people, telling us that they are so delighted to see that there are still family firms that are working in this country. We’ve had multitudes to tell us, “Don’t ever close this business. Don’t ever get into large corporate operations. That’s so cold. We like to see the individuals prosper. Families grow in farming and we want to see that held intact here in Florida.”

**Mansfield:** Earlier you talked about processing and turning oranges into juice. I understood you to say that you didn’t do that?
**Mixon:** Yes we do. That’s a vital part of our business. But we sell all of the juice right here. We don’t go other places. It’s all sold and retailed [here]. Some people will buy thirty, forty or fifty half-gallons of juice and put it in their freezer and store it. We’ll freeze juice here and a lot of people will come [to Florida] for just a couple of weeks and they’ll take coolers and put frozen orange or grapefruit juice from our place here. Take it back north with them.

**Mansfield:** What was it you told me earlier, that you only sold here because of the inspector, or something?

**Mixon:** There is so much regulation to it. When you start spreading out and selling in commercial channels, you have to have an inspector here at all times when you’re squeezing that juice. And you have to run a lot of extra tests that are very, very expensive. So we have chosen not to even pursue that area because we’ve seen several people try and it’s been a dismal failure.

Of course the large processor doesn’t like for us to sell our juice locally and try to create a market here. That’s directly against them. We just sell a very high quality juice here. We can sell a better quality juice and we have regular customers that will drink only our juice. We try to hold a very high quality and we do. The juice end of it is a good retail business.

**Mansfield:** I’m trying to remember what you said, right before we started [the interview], about how the large processors influenced legislation or something?

**Mixon:** Yes. We’ve actually had one of the very largest processors, that [was represented by a lady] at one of the big meetings. She told us, “We’re going to put you out of business. We are going to regulate you out of business. You, the small processor, the one that’s making fresh juice for your stands and things up and down the highways. People like us [the big processors] we’re going to regulate you completely out of business. And they just about done it, because they didn’t want out competition. She was a very vocal, strong representative of Citrus Commission and a processor. This particular processor is
very strong in our regulatory operations in the state of Florida. But this lady stated, “We’re going to put you out of business.” ‘Cause we were complaining about a lot of the new regulations that we have to come under. Even now that we don’t sell commercial juice, we’re still under some very strong regulations.

To our knowledge in over 75 years of selling fresh juice they had no complaints, almost no complaints from juice being sold by these small operators. Were as they had a lot more complaints for the big processors than they did us. But still with 75 years of history behind us, with no problems—except one small incident, but I think it was in Disney World. They had some E. coli. But it wasn’t a small juice operator that furnished them the juice. It was a larger operation.

But as far as I know, we had no problems for the small shipper. But we were causing people to buy our juice rather than the large processor’s juice and their aim is to put us out of business.

Mansfield: What can the small growers do to stay in business?

Mixon: I think the small grower will have to specialize. Have a good product that will bring people back to them, rather than go some where else. That’s the main thing, they need to specialize. Either specialize in squeezing the best juice in the world from the highest quality of fruit. Specialize not quantities of fruit, but they need to ship gift fruit packages all over the country and all over the world. There is a tremendous market, ‘cause people love to give gifts and citrus is an unusual gift, if you do a good job.

We have means of fast transportation. It’s not cheap but most people today that are out there in the market they want a good product and they are willing to pay for it. They don’t want to wait three weeks to get a package shipped they want it now!

In my estimation, we are our own worst enemy when we try to cut corners and not give them the service that they want.

Mansfield: So that’s what small growers can do?

Mixon: Yes, they need to specialize.
Mansfield: What about, do you see any kind of collective strategies that small growers can use, together to counter the [might] of the large growers?

Mixon: Of course the large growers aren’t even interested in the small grower. He’s not interested in gift packaging and stuff like that. We’re not against the large grower, but we want to see the smaller grower survive. All growers were at one time small. It’s the key of the industry. That we will have small growers at the start and then they will grow bigger and bigger over the years.

But now, with the attitude of the Plant Board and these areas that regular the industry, their attitude makes it almost impossible for a small grower to survive any more. So the small grower is fast getting out of the industry. In the end the industry will not be here in Florida, if we don’t make some changes in our attitudes. Even the large ones are having great difficulties. Many of them are going out of business.

And when you have control of the industry by Brazil. I understand from just reading that Brazilian interests have over 50% of control of processing in the state of Florida right now. If it is being controlled by outside interests, we’ve got some real problems. We can’t let our Federal government have trade-offs on us and to protect these people, ‘cause they are going to be out there trying to get everything they want. And that’s a lot of your problem right now. These trade agreements are putting that are putting our top officials, our president and many—they just [take] the easy way out. They think it will help us in the long run, but it hasn’t proven so. Our trade deficits are getting larger and larger all the time. This can’t continue, if we’re going to have a country.

Mansfield: One question I for got to ask when I first started, and this is something we ask everybody. How would you describe your current occupation? That’s changing [directions]

Mixon: When I have to fill out questioners telling what I am, I just put that I’m a citrus grower and a gift fruit shipper. Now that’s the way I tell them what I do. Retail, we do some commercial shipments to small chain stores over the country. But the commercial end of it is growing smaller and smaller all of the time.
Another thing is our drug industry—Excuse me, let me open the door for this lady. [Interview interrupted]

**Mixon:** I had a thought I wanted to pursue, but I guess—I don’t know what it was now.

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

**Mixon:** That was what I wanted to—I had a thought that I wanted to tell you and I don’t remember what it was. [laughs]

**Mansfield:** Well it will come to you here in a minute.

**Mixon:** Okay.

**Mansfield:** But, one of the tings I wanted to ask you about earlier, when you all went to the Florida Citrus Commission to make sure some of the money was allocated for the fruit shippers, tell me about that.

**Mixon:** We convinced them that it was a vital part of the industry. That we were paying the same advertising tax that had been put on all the other growers. Of course, if you want to have an argument, which we didn’t want, it’s actually taxation without representation. Because we were a separate industry, doing a different job from the processor.

**Mansfield:** Could you tell me who all went? Was it just you and the Mixon fruit people?

**Mixon:** No it was generally the Gift Fruit Shipper’s Association. We had more clout there. We had several members go with the director of our organization. He would go and present it. He went to all of the Citrus Commission Meetings. He was known there and we would be asked by him to go with him to back him up. The Citrus Commission has
been very good to us and they realize we are a part of this. Over the years it has worked and we have gotten our share of our advertising monies back.

**Mansfield:** This disc is all but used up. Have you got time to talk with me for a few more minutes?

**Mixon:** Yeah, I’ll talk with you for a little bit.

**Mansfield:** This is disc number two of Bill Mansfield’s interview with Mr. Bill Mixon, right here in Bradenton, Florida. And you were just telling me about the difference between the small grower and—

**Mixon:** I was saying, when I was a director for Florida Citrus Mutual we have our monthly meetings and people would come in and we’d have our district meetings and that’s when we’d listen to the small grower. But a small grower, individually, most of the time gives up before—He’ll go maybe to one meeting. He’ll tell them his problems and nobody will show any interests and try to help him. Then he gives up and says, “I’ll never go back to that again.” Were as a big organization can send highly [experienced] people there that can convince the Commission, or convince the board of directors of an organization that what they are saying needs to have some immediate attention and it generally gets more attention.

In the end, a small grower just gives up and says, “It’s no use for me to go before the Florida Citrus Commission. It’s no use for me to go to Florida Citrus Mutual. They want do anything for me anyway.” And that’s the attitude that has developed.

And—being a Florida Citrus Mutual director I realize that. Working with small people. I’ve always been for the underdog. I’m different than most. Because generally speaking the underdog needs more attention. The big dogs will take care of themselves.

**Mansfield:** What was it? I was talking with Dr. Jim Griffiths up in Lakeland, and said that because Florida Citrus Mutual was not meeting the needs of many of the smaller growers, all of these smaller organizations came into being. Would you agree with that?
Mixon: Yes, very much so. I know Dr. Griffiths. He’s a personal friend. He was on the
staff of Florida Citrus Mutual when I was there. I belong to his organization. He is a very
outspoken person in the industry. He’s very knowledgeable. But there are a lot of people
who turn him off when he gets up to speak, because he doesn’t mind getting up speaking
the truth. People listen to him. And that’s why he formed his organization of small
growers. He has some big growers too.

I think he is in his nineties now. He was here at our party, this last spring and I sat
and talked with him for quite awhile, because we’ve known each other for years.

And he is absolutely right. You get these organizations and Mutual is definitely
one. Right now the Mutual grower end of Mutual is probably at the lowest ebb it’s ever
been. It used to have grower representatives for all of the districts in the citrus growing
area. Those people would call on you in the field. They’d try to call on every grower and
get their input.

In fact I had a Mutual representative [here] last week. He’s been with mutual
many, many years. But he covers half the state and he may see me once every four
months. And he sees very few of the smaller growers, he just sees the bigger smaller
growers. I feel like this has been the downfall of Mutual. We’ve had some of our latest
people that ran Mutual they were more interested in what was going on in Washington
than they were interested in what was going on right here with the small growers. I
realize that on the money side of it, the expense of having grower representation.

But, on the other hand, that was the heart of Mutual. We used to have grower
meetings in the several districts. Now they’ve been combined into one or two, just in the
larger areas of citrus. Some of that is justified but a lot of it is not. Consequently, many
growers have lost interest in Mutual because they don’t really have contact with them any
more.

Mansfield: I just want to make sure I understand you correctly, Citrus Mutual has really
moved away from representing the interests of the small growers and—

Mixon: I think they won’t tell you that, but they have, whether they believe it or not. By
not having your regular meetings and by not having our grower contacts, with the
representatives of Citrus Mutual on an on-going basis, they’ve lost contact with a lot of the industry, whether they know it or not.

**Mansfield:** Do you have any idea, any feel for when they started losing contact?

**Mixon:** Gosh, I’d say at least fifteen years ago. Yeah, ‘cause I can remember when I was on Florida Citrus Mutual board of directors we had real strong representation, real strong input from small growers. We’d have meeting here in the Palmetto area and the Bradenton area and we’d have forty or fifty growers. They’d cook a steak and they’d get out the growers. The growers would mingle with each other and discuss their problems and you solved a lot problems. Many times you’d get more out of the fellowship and talking to other growers than you do out of the people that’s the speakers. You get the real problems to come out. And one grower will find a way to solve it and he’ll deal with another one. In the smaller Mutual meetings you’d ask questions. You’d get small growers to ask [questions] and talk about their problems. Were as, like your Mutual meetings—the annual meeting, where there is supposed to be several thousand people there, very few would stand up to say anything among all of those people. They just wouldn’t do it.

They’re small farmers. They don’t want anything to do with that. You got to get down to where they are. They’re good people. They have a lot of good ideas and a lot of good energy. They will back you to the hilt, if it’s something they really believe in. I’m sorry to say, but all you got to do is look at the statistics of the amount of growers that belong to Citrus Mutual any more and look at the annual meeting that they have and see how the draw of the multitude of growers has gone down, down, down. It’s a sad situation. It’s not an organization lie we once had.

**Mansfield:** Big crowds can be intimidating and sometimes organizations, just like people, can get too big for their britches.

**Mixon:** You’re right. They get to where they deal with the big problems rather than they do with the small problems. There is an old saying that holds true for any organization,
Take care of your pennies and the dollars will take care of themselves. That’s take care of your small growers and the big growers will take care of themselves. That’s what I’m trying to say.

**Mansfield:** That sounds like a good place to stop.

Let me thank you for taking the time to talk with me this morning. I’ve truly enjoyed it. And I’ll remind you that the information you’ve shared with me will be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida Library, for research and we need your permission for people to use this information. So I’ve got a release form I have to ask you to sign.

**Mixon:** I realize too that things have changed over the country, and all farming organizations are having a lot of the same problems. I don’t want to put the blame on any people. It’s just like in the citrus industry, one of the biggest things that has hurt us, and it has been very unfortunate, is the inter action of drug companies against citrus juices, like grapefruit juice. They’ve almost wrecked the grapefruit industry because the drug companies have said that grapefruit juice interacts with their drugs and you should not drink grapefruit juice when you’re taking certain drugs. We hear it hundreds and hundreds of times in our retail business. “We love grapefruit, but we can’t eat it any more. Because we take high blood pressure medicine.” Well here is Florida Citrus Commission and Florida Citrus Mutual, this should be their top priority, because it has effected the industry. Not only in grapefruit but orange juice too. They need to tell the truth about it. They are supposed to have an ongoing thing, part of our monies are appropriated by the Citrus Commission to carry on tests. I’ve been to two or three meetings and heard the head of the citrus commission speak and they were going to have some great news on grapefruit released. This has been three or four years ago and to this date I have not seen any release of information that would curtail these drug companies from telling these people not to take grapefruit juice.

Of all the studies I’ve seen is that you can still drink your grapefruit juice, but if you take medicine it will cause your medicine to be more active. You could actually cut down on the amount of drugs you’re taking and take grapefruit juice and it would cause
that portion of your drug to be more effective. It would be less expensive. You wouldn’t have to take as much. Well the drug companies are totally against this.

Mansfield: They want you to take as much [medicine] possible

Mixon: And they are fighting any information that will curtail the use of drugs. They are fighting it tooth and toenail. They have large amounts of money to do this and it has really hurt the grapefruit industry in the state of Florida and orange juice, in the same way.

So this is thing that ought to be put forth, that this one thing has almost destroyed the grapefruit industry. There’s a lot of people that still eat grapefruit. But masses of people have backed away from grapefruit. What has happened we’ve seen the per capita use of fresh juice go down, down, down. This has been the main cause of it.

Mansfield: Well, I hope we get this straighten out. And I’m going shut this thing off.

[End of interview]