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Doyle Carlton, Jr. oral history interview by G. Pierce Wood, Jr., July 30, 1997

Doyle Elam Carlton Jr. (Interviewee)

G. Pierce Wood (Interviewer)

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Interviewed by: G. Pierce Wood
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PW:= G. Pierce Wood, Jr.
DC:= Doyle E. Carlton, Jr.

PW: Good morning and welcome to the University of South Florida Library Oral History Program. I am Pierce Wood, and our guest today is Doyle Carlton Jr. Doyle is a Florida cattleman. He's the son of a Florida cattleman, and a grandson of a Florida cattleman, and we will be talking a lot today about the Florida cattle business. I hope we will also hear about some of his experiences as a State Senator, as a candidate for Governor of Florida, and as a boyhood son of a Florida governor. The Florida cattle business is perhaps the oldest industry in Florida. In the second voyage of Ponce de Leon, in the year 1521, he came to the west coast of Florida to establish a colony. And he brought with him a herd of Andulusian cattle. That was the first recording of any type, of any landing of cattle in what is now the continental United States. So Florida was first in the cattle business. Those cattle and their ancestors are part of the great Florida cattle herd today. During the 18th century, Florida had great cattle drives. And the Florida frontier was as wild as any frontier in the West. Doyle's family goes back to those days in the 19th century. So without further ado, Doyle, why don't you tell them first where we are?

DC: We are in Cracker Country at the Florida State Fair. Before talking with you about the cattle business, as I have viewed it during my lifetime, let me go back a little further. My grandmother and grandfather Carlton were married in 1867, Pierce. They built a little log house about four miles west of what is now Wauchula. He worked cattle for another man. A big part of his pay was in cattle. He accumulated a herd of cattle of his own. He worked some in timber. He eventually got into the citrus business. And through real hard work and thriftiness, 18 years after they were married they were able to build this house. And this house has an interesting story to tell in several different ways. There were 10 children in that family. One girl, who was the oldest, and nine boys. You'll see here on the front porch of this house that there's a stairway going up to the boys= bedroom. In the back there's a stairway going up to the girl's bedroom. There was no door in
between. Well, I often wondered, why this, why this? Well, my aunt Ella, who was
the only girl, told my wife just a few years before she died, that she felt like she had
raised one family before she had one of her own. She and the mother of those boys
helped cook for those boys. Her mother and dad wanted her to get some rest.
Another feature of this house, my dad was born in this house in 1885. His mother
and father insisted that all of those children get an education. My dad went to the
Stetson Academy in his teens. He graduated from Stetson, got his law degree at
Stetson. He got two jobs at Stetson to help pay his way. His dad helped him as
much as he could. He met my mother at Stetson. My mother had this interesting
story to tell, Pierce. She said when your daddy came to Stetson he was so far
behind academically that he had to just study hour after hour. He would actually
put wet towels on his head to stay awake to study. He got his law degree, went to
the University of Chicago, got a law degree, and another from Columbia
University. He moved to Tampa, and started practicing law. He was the 25th
Governor of Florida. Elected in 1929. His father was in the cattle business; most of
his brothers were engaged in cattle. I would spend much of the summers with my
uncles and cousins down in Hardee County working in the cattle during the
summer. Can you imagine, there were 36 of us first cousins? We were more like
brothers and sisters than cousins. But my beginning in the cattle business--I have
this picture--I don't know how clearly it might show here. But you'll see my dad on
one horse, and I'm a seven-year-old boy on the other horse. And those little cows
which you see were Spanish cows about which you were talking, Pierce.

PW: Right.

DC: I imagine that little cow would weigh about 500 pounds. And today=s calves
weigh more than that. This was 1929. Most of the range then was what we call
open range. Most of the land was owned by the government or non-residents; the
mineral companies, or timber companies. And many ownerships of cattle ran in the
same area. They would usually gather cattle about twice a year for marking,
branding, selling and dipping. And you say what about dipping? What was that
for? Well, we had the fever tick. And the fever tick was more than just a little dog
tick. They were very large. And when you would dip the cattle, that would kill the
fever tick. But it did not eradicate it. It just gave the cow some temporary relief.
And in the middle `30s the compulsory dipping law was enforced; which said that
all owners of Florida livestock shall dip their cattle once every two weeks for two
years to eradicate the fever tick. Can you imagine what a burden this put on the
people who owned cattle?

PW: Actually dipping the cows.
DC: Well, actually they built these dip vats. They would move the cattle down the chute. They would jump in the dip bath, swim out to the other side. The vats were deep because the cows’ heads had to go under because the ticks were in the ears of the cattle and you used the medication to put into the water that would be strong enough to kill the ticks, but not so strong to harm the cattle. When compulsory dipping came, it was for the purpose of doing away with the tick. Totally eradicating the tick.

Pierce, this was really the birth of the cattle industry in Florida, because with people having to gather their cattle once every two weeks, they had to buy land or lease land, fence the land and that brought about better management practices. And here came a real influx of pure-bred bulls. And I remember some of the first Brahman bulls that I saw. They would breed those bulls on these little Spanish cows and the calves were much larger. They call that cross-breeding and this hybrid was bigger. After a number of years these daughters from these old Spanish cows and the Brahman bulls were bred to Angus or Hereford, or other types that would improve the beefing qualities of that calf and also enhance the size. So, really, even though the dipping was a tremendous burden, I think this really got the cattle people in Florida started on a progressive program. I told you before we came to have this discussion that there were three essentials for growing good cattle: good breeding, nutrition, and care. You had to give the cattle proper nutrition, with a good breeding program, with high quality bulls, and then you had to give care. And then right after the eradication of the fever tick, what happened? Screw worm infestation.

PW: So you got another king-sized program to deal with. What did the screw worm do to damage the cattle?

DC: Pierce, a fly--screw worm fly--would lay an egg on any bloody part of an animal. That egg would hatch into maggots. Those maggots would eat away at the animal. Practically every calf that was born, the fly would lay an egg on that bloody navel. Those eggs would hatch, and then those maggots would eat away and eat away and if they were not killed, they'd kill the calf. And so after the dipping, we had to ride the cattle regularly to doctor just about every calf with screw worms. And it was not only detrimental to livestock industry, but to wildlife. It cut down the population of deer in our state, because of the killing impact it had on those young deer.

I'll never forget, when I was in the state senate in 1957, Dr. Clarence Campbell the
state veterinarian, came to my office the first day of the session. I was chairman of
the livestock committee and he asked for an appropriation of $60,000 to eradicate
screw worms in Osceola County. And I said, well, Dr. Campbell, will it work? He
said yes, it'll work. And I said why not the whole state? What would it cost to
eradicate the screw worm in the entire state? He said, $5 million. That would be
more like $50 million now. So we contacted Senator Spencer Holland, one of our
United States Senators, who was chairman of the agriculture committee in the
United States Senate; asked if they could make available for us $2 2 million if we
matched it with $2 2 million and that the purpose would be to eradicate the screw
worm, and that we had been guaranteed that the program was foolproof. He made
that money available. I got a committee bill with 26 co-signers on it in the Senate.
The leadership in the house did the same; we appropriated the $2 2 million and
they began the program to eradicate the screw worm. Now you might ask, how did
it work? Well, over in Sebring, at the old Hendricks Air Force Base in Highlands
County, they created a fly factory. Here they produced thousands and thousands of
screw worm flies. They sterilized the male flies and then they put bags of these flies
in little airplanes and flew all over the state. They dropped these bags; they would
burst. These male flies would breed the female flies. The male flies were sterile.
The female fly would hatch the eggs and then she would die. But those eggs were
not fertile. So after two years, the screw worms in Florida were eliminated. In those
days we had bi-annual sessions of the legislature. We met every other year. When I
went back to the legislature in 1959, the screw worms in Florida were totally
eradicated.

PW: They're using somewhat the same technique with medflies now, as I
understand it.

DC: Well I've heard they might do that. They're spraying differently now. See, we
didn't spray for the screw worm flies. We just dropped the flies out as I had
explained earlier. But I've heard some discussion that this might be a possibility. I
don't know whether that would develop or not. But then, this happened in ’59. You
know Texas, the largest cattle state in the nation, came after we did with the
eradication of the screw worm and most of the other states followed our leadership.
It was such a contribution to the cattle business because you'd have to rope and
catch all of those calves and doctor them. It made the cattle wild. But now we've
been on a program these past years of good breeding and good care and good
nutrition. Most people don't realize this, but we have approximately two million
beef cattle in Florida. We are the third largest beef cattle state east of the Mississippi
and we are the tenth largest beef producing state in our nation. So, I've seen all of
this during my lifetime. From the time when I was a little boy with that little cow
there. Eradication of the fever tick, the screw worm.

Pierce, not only do we produce a lot of calves, but some of the calves that we produce today are of the best quality. My son called me Wednesday. He had been working some cattle and I had seen his calves and they looked so good. He called me and said, Daddy, I just wanted to call you to give you the weight on these calves. They weighed over 600 pounds. That little cow that I showed on the picture didn't weigh near that much. My son is actively engaged in the cattle business. My two daughters and their husbands are. They have their own program. I have my own program. There are certain things we do together. But we do many things individually. It's been good to our family and we've enjoyed it. You know I love it to this day, Pierce. I have other investments now, but I still work in those cattle a couple of half days a week. Just because I love it. There's no way to ever reach perfection in growing cattle. You know, when a person thinks they are real good in anything, then the chances are they're not gonna get any better. I say you can't reach perfection. When you take a hundred cows, and every year your calf percentage is 100% and your weaning weights on all those calves run over 600 pounds, and you put that weight on them at a low dollar figure, now that's when you reach perfection. But you don't find anybody in the cattle business that has reached that point yet. So this is one reason it's so challenging. I better let you talk now.

**PW**: Well, I wanted to ask a couple of questions. You talked about the open range. When did that come to an end? You said that...

**DC**: It came to an end in the middle of the `30s when the compulsory dipping law was enforced, because people had to fence their cattle. As I said, they gathered them every two weeks and the state officials were there. If you had a herd of cattle of 150 and you only brought 135 to dip, you'd get penalized. You had to back ride and go get those others. So this all happened in the mid-`30s. People had to buy some land, or lease some land, and fence their cattle.

Then you know, Pierce, after that many of the ranchers would joint-venture with some of the vegetable farmers. We might take 200 acres of palmetto woods that had very little nutrition on it and here comes a watermelon farmer or a cucumber farmer. So we would make an agreement with them and share the cost of preparing that land, and they would farm it for two years. Then we would follow that farming with planted grasses. They usually didn't like to farm a piece over two years because they liked what they call "new ground." So we followed that cycle and a pasture development program went on through all these years. We not only can
carry more cattle on acreage, but the quality is so much better and it enables us to produce these good calves.

PW: Where are the markets for Florida cattle? What avenues do the cattle follow when you sell them?

DC: We have a number of livestock markets in Florida. One in Tampa, Lakeland, Okeechobee, Wauchula, Arcadia, Webster and other places. You can market your cattle through these markets or you can sell them on video to buyers from the West because there's such a demand for them. They'll take them out West and put them in the feedlot. We really are not a cow growing state, we are a calf growing state. They can grow the grain at a lower cost out there and feed cattle at a lower cost. So we have an immense market for our calves to those who are in the feedlot business and we'll ship some of our calves out there or we will sell calves to people who are in the feedlot business. My son does both. He'll ship his calves out there and he'll feed some of them or he'll sell some of them. So there's a variety of ways to market cattle. Either in this manner, or through our livestock markets.

PW: So Florida's oldest industry is still going strong today.

DC: Still going strong. Most people don't realize the worth of this industry to our state, but we're a billion dollar industry and it gives us some diversity. Of course you know agriculture is our number two industry. Tourism is number one, but agriculture is number two. And the beef cattle industry is an important part of that.

PW: Where did this term, "Florida Cracker," this is Cracker Country, where we are. Where did the term, "Florida Cracker" come from?

DC: Well, you know in those old days when they would gather the cattle, the old cowboys would have cow whips. And at the end of those cow whips was a cracker about fifteen inches long. When they would pop that whip that would make a noise and they didn't use the whips so much for whipping the cattle, but to pop it and making the noise, and gathering the cattle and urging them on. So when you had a lot of pine timber in those days, and you'd gather the cattle and then you'd have two or three men cracking those cow whips, well you could hear them for a mile or so. That noise would echo and they'd say, well, the crackers are coming, the crackers are coming. And in Georgia, you hear about Georgia crackers?

PW: Right.
DC: Well they used these whips in prodding the oxen along, but they'd put a cracker on the end of it. So they were Georgia crackers. And that's where that name had its origin. My wife came up with the name "Cracker Country," because this story that we have to tell here in Cracker Country, we're trying to tell a lifestyle of rural Florida around the turn of the century and how our people lived in those times. This was a part of their history.

PW: And how typical, well actually this is a very nice home. Some of the earlier homes were much more humble and much...

DC: Yes the first home my grandmother and granddad lived in, as I said earlier, was very meager. The little Smith house across the way here in Cracker Country came from Pasco County. But just to show you the way people lived around the turn of the century, when that young couple got married, the neighbors all pitched in and helped them build that house. They couldn't afford to build it if the neighbors hadn't helped. So, here in Cracker Country, this tells the story, the lifestyle of rural Florida around the turn of the century.

I think of our corn crib down there, Pierce. Ben Hill Griffin, Jr. gave that to us. That was his dad's corn crib. Corn was a vital commodity then. The people used the corn to make meal for grits and for cornbread, and yet it was needed to feed the livestock. Ben Hill was born in South Polk County and this was his father's corn crib and I asked Ben if he would give that to us. And I'll never forget--course he's passed away now, but he said, "Doyle, let me call my sister." He called her and he said we'd be glad for you to have that corn crib in Cracker Country. Now, you talk about lifestyle and values. Ben Hill Griffin started with nothing and went on to develop a massive agricultural empire. Started with a modest beginning. He was frugal and thrifty and a hard worker and a good investor and he contributed millions of dollars to build that stadium at the University of Florida which bears his name. That is another story that we can tell about Cracker Country and these people of that era.

PW: That's just great. Now I hope everyone that sees this film will have the opportunity to come out and visit.

DC: We like for them to come, and the people who come out here, we love to have them. We're open during the Fair, and of course we have student tours in the fall and in the spring. The youngsters come out and it's a good educational program for them. But each building has its own story to tell and so I'm glad that you folks from
the University would come out and film us today so we could share this part of rural history and the part of the cattle industry in Florida these many years. And thank you so much, Pierce, for your participation and involvement.

PW: My pleasure. It's been very, very interesting.