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J.B. Starkey Jr oral history interview by William Mansfield, August 9, 2006

J.B. Starkey (Interviewee)

Bill Mansfield (Interviewer)

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WM: This is Bill Mansfield from the University of South Florida, talking to Mr. J. B. Starkey in his offices here in—are we in Odessa?

JBS: Odessa, yes.

WM: Okay, we’re here in Odessa, Florida, on August 9, 2006.

Mr. Starkey, 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.

JBS: Okay. I’m J. B. Starkey, Jr. I was born October 19, 1935 in St. Petersburg, Florida.

WM: How would you describe your current occupation?

JBS: Well, I’m a former cattle rancher, but still a land owner and manager of ah—the property, you might say, in its transition phase, going from agriculture to development use—homes and town centers and so forth.

WM: Okay. I read in the newspaper and [the article] talked about how your dad was a rancher. Tell me about that.

JBS: He grew-up in St. Petersburg. His father passed away when he was ten years old. So he had to start working and help support his mother and his younger brother.

He was attracted to the old cowmen, who had cattle roaming free in the south Pinellas [County] area. Every chance he got he would ride with them. He learned about cow hunting and working with cattle and riding horses in the woods. And that was all he really wanted to do. That was his true love.
After the First World War, he went to work for the Post Office in St. Petersburg. Got married—married my mother, who had also come to St. Petersburg at the same time [as] my father, which was in 1899.

My father’s father was from Minnesota, [that’s] where my Dad was born, in St. Cloud, Minnesota. But his father, Frank Starkey had tuberculosis so he had to move to a warmer climate. He lived for several years after he got here, but he died in 1905.

My mother came about the same time. Her father was William L. Straub who was the first editor of the St. Petersburg Times.

So my dad, after he had worked in the Post Office for a while realized he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life doing that, so he bought twenty acres of land, southeast of Largo. Moved out there and bought a little house, they paid $60.00 for. He and my mother and my sister, who was just a baby at the time—um—moved out there.

He started adding land to it and farming and trying to raise hogs and cattle and do some farming too. [This is what he did] to try and make his living because he wanted to be outdoors.

He was a good businessman. He bought land as he could, that became available in the area, until he ended up with 665 acres. What is now Starkey Road, in Pinellas County was right in the middle of that property. And that’s where I grew-up. Called it Ulmerton Ranch. It was south of Ulmerton Road, which was named after the Ulmer family. They’d [run] a turpentine operation there, before that.

WM: Can I get you to spell that for me?

JBS: Ulmerton? U-L-M-E-R-T-O-N.

WM: Okay.

JBS: So I grew up in the country. It was way-out in the sticks in those days. We had a lot of hogs and that was the main enterprise there for a good many years. They’d fatten hogs by feeding them garbage from restaurants and hotels. During the Second World War there [were] a lot of [military] bases, training bases and hospitals in the area. There was just a world of waste food, perfectly good food, and we fed it to the hogs. That was a big operation. But times changed and by 1950 they got out of the hog business and put in pasture grass and have had strictly cattle there, until the late fifties. We sold it in 1957.

WM: I read in the newspaper that, and correct me if I’ve got it wrong, but they said that your dad sold the land—and I think it said he was heart-sick to see the way [the land] was developed?
JBS: Well, I think he was. I think that was more of a quote from me, because having grown-up on that place. It was pretty land and had nice pastures and fences. It was [an] idyllic place for a young guy [to grow-up].

We sold it in ’56—’57 and it was built with small crowded houses. And, of course, they can’t build them quite like that today, because of all the regulations and requirements for development. But it just made me sick to see that it was not done more up-scale. You know—something that you could really be proud of. I just hated to see that happen to that land.

WM: Um-huh.

JBS: So I determined, in my mind, that when this property got to the point of being developed I wanted it to have some kind of control over the type of development.

Backing up, this property [the current ranch] came into the picture in the late thirties. In the early thirties my father saw that Pinellas County [the way it was growing] was going to be too crowded for cattle operations. So he started looking for a piece of land, where he could run cattle, [but] wasn’t too far away from his home [but] was a good sizeable piece of property. This property here became available—he learned about it in 1936—it was up for sale by the timber-company’s family that had owned the land.

There were sawmills here in Odessa in the early part of the [Twentieth] century. They operated until 1925. Once the timber ran out and the sawmills shut down the owners quit paying taxes on the land. It became for-sale, after three years, so they were able to buy this sixteen thousand acres for $1.50 an acre plus back taxes, which brought it to about $2.50 an acre. That was in 1937. In December of that year they drove three hundred head of cattle from the Ulmerton Ranch, across the woods [to] up here. They spent one night on the trail in Oldsmar. So that’s how this ranch got started. It wasn’t even fenced. It was just a tract of land. There were no pastures, or clearings or buildings on it. They put a fence around it and that was the beginning of this ranch.

WM: Getting back to what you said earlier, [you said] you were disappointed in the way the land was developed down in—um—Largo?

JBS: Yes, Largo.

WM: Explain that a bit more, if you don’t mind. You said that you thought it would be more “up-scale,” or something like that?

JBS: Well, it seemed to me at the time that it was just kind of a cheap, tacky way to develop land to which I had an emotional attachment. The fellow, who bought it, bought it as an investment. He turned around and sold it to builders and developers, who then developed different projects.
And there are some nice things now, but I would like to have seen something better. I
didn’t have a real clear picture in my mind for how it should be developed, but I just
hated to see that. And I don’t want to cast aspersions on the people that live there.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: It has some nice parts to it now, just like anywhere else. It’s very busy. [There’re] a
lot of businesses, commercial businesses, along Starkey Road, where I used to walk
through the palmettos, and hunt with my dog. (laughs) That’s a sentimental thing I guess,
but we’ve—uh—tried to do things a little differently up here.

WM: Well, it sounds like no matter what they would have done it would have been hard
to take.

JBS: Yeah, it was hard to take.

WM: I know this might be a difficult question to answer but—when you say you have an
emotional attachment to [the land], describe, if you can, what the land means to you. Or
what it meant to you.

JBS: Well, I just enjoyed everything about it, all of the natural features. There were some
old ditches and there was wonderful quail hunting on that place. There was more quail on
that six hundred acres, I believe, than on the sixteen thousand acres we b
ought up here.
As a kid it was just a wondrous place.

I would wander around and go rabbit hunting, or quail hunting or fishing. There was
some good places to fish. When they dammed up Long Bayou and created Lake
Seminole, I’d come home after school and grab my rod and reel, walk down to the lake,
wade around and catch a string of fish for supper. I did that many a time.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: It was just an idyllic sort of existence. I admired and enjoyed the beauty of the
woods, and the trees and the pastures and everything. I still do, even this place. It’s just
one of those things—uh—if you feel it and have that love for it—uh—not everybody
understands it.

WM: I know. There are places in North Carolina that I did very much the same thing,
just got out in the woods and roamed around. Now [the land] is developed and you can’t
do that any more. It’s no fun to see that [development].

You talked about [how] your Dad recognized there would be development down around
Largo and you said you’re sort of managing this property, overseeing the development
here?
JBS: Yes. Of the sixteen thousand acres we originally owned, my Dad had partners when they bought the property. They had—the partners were three brothers from St. Petersburg, the Cunningham Brothers: Howard, Dave and Ernest Cunningham.

My Dad, he was the one who really knew the cattle business and they were interested in being part of it. So they had a buy-out provision that they would agree, once a year on the value of the land, the cattle and the equipment, [and] they would be willing to either to sell or to buy. If something happened to one of them, the others could buy their interest at that price. They were older men than my father and he ended up surviving, by a good many years, all of them.

The last one to pass away was Dave. He died in 1956, or somewhere along in there. My Dad lived until 1989. But he was able to end up with the sole possession of this property.

The timing worked out so that when they sold the property in Largo, the Ulmerton Ranch, (Dave Cunningham was my Dad’s partner in that.) But anyway my Dad used the proceeds from that sale to buy out the Cunningham family’s interest in this land. He ended up with total control of it in 1958, or so. It took him several years to pay it off.

Then we changed the name from CS Ranch, which it was originally—for Cuningham-Starkey—to the Anclote River Ranch. I graduated from College, in 1957—[majored in] animal husbandry. Moved here to the ranch and started clearing land. We had already cleared some land and planted some pasture. We did about a hundred acres a year for a good many years, until we ended up with almost three thousand acres of improved pasture. The rest of it was still woods. It was [divided] into north-south by the Anclote River which flows through the property from east to west.

After my Dad ended-up with the sole ownership he was advised by his attorneys and accountants, that in case of his death, the estate would have to come up with 50 percent of the value, I think it was 55 percent at that time. Fifty-five percent of the value of the land would have to be paid to the government. So they decided to sell part of the land and put the money in the bank and have that there in case it was needed for estate tax. It would prevent a “fire-sale.”

He didn’t want to see it developed either. He didn’t have a whole lot of enthusiasm for development, though he realized it was going to happen. He ended-up, through two sales in the seventies and the eighties, [he sold] the north half of the ranch, which included the Anclote River, the river bottom and hammock, to the Southwest Florida Water Management District. There was one sale that was agreed on in about 1972 and it was spread over several years. Then, in the mid eighties there was another sale, which brought the total to about eight thousand acres, the north half the ranch. That was preserved and used as a well field and for preservation purposes. The sales condition was that [the land] not be developed but used for water control. So it has been a well field that provided all of the drinking water for west Pasco [County] and still does so, to this day.
Now Tampa Bay Water owns it and they are going to connect that system to the rest of the Tampa Bay water system so that the Starkey Wellfield can get some relief from the constant pumping.

WM: Did your Dad have options to sell the land to developers or real estate people? Or was he—

JBS: He could have. But he wanted to see it preserved. I mean that was his first priority, of course I was all in favor of that too.

So that left us with the south half of the ranch, where all of the improved pasture and the cattle operation was. That went along quite well until my father passed away in 1989. By then the remaining land had improved in value, so much that there wasn’t enough money to pay the estate taxes. So we had to sell about half of what we had left to raise the money to pay “Uncle Sam.” Well it worked out this was about the time they were doing the planning for the Suncoast Expressway. We were able to, using the Trust for Public Land who then gave it to the DOT [Department of Transportation]—sold it to the DOT, thirty-six hundred acres, roughly the southeast corner of the original ranch. The east half of the land we had left.

That went to DOT and they turned it over to SWIFTMUD [Southwest Florida Water Management District]. So it is now preserved and part of the park [J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park]. That left us with about three thousand acres in the southwest corner [of the original ranch] which is roughly from Gunn Highway, to our west-end, which is now defined by Fairway Springs and about a mile from Little Road.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: So the three thousand acres we had left—uh—five hundred acres of that Trey and Frank, my two sons—Trey has a degree in finance and Frank has an architect’s degree. [See Frank Starkey interview with Bill Mansfield 8-24-06.] They wanted to do a development, so I was able to work out a deal where they could buy and develop a project on the west-end [of the property] called Longleaf.

This is a TND development, Traditional Neighborhood Design, or New Urbanism—whatever else you want to call it. I had never heard of that until, you know they started talking about it. And—uh—I began to realize that, that is the kind of development that just suited my prejudices and feelings about the land. If it is going to be developed how is the best way to do it? What’s best for the community—you know—the society and transportation and everything. And of course you try to do what you can for the environment too, realizing that you can’t save it all. (laughs)

WM: (laughs)
JBS: So that has been a good project and it is something we’ve learned from. Now it’s been sold to a—the final phases of it—have been sold to a developer who is very strong in to neo-traditional design.

Do you know what that is? Do you know what I’m talking about?

WM: I was going to ask about that, but there was a question I would like to ask. When you sold the eight thousand acres to SWIFTMUD, what kind of economic gain, or loss did you recognize in selling it to them rather than real estate?

JBS: Well, my Dad donated two hundred and fifty acres then he sold the rest of it at less than probably what he could have gotten by selling to a development company. So he wasn’t trying to get the top dollar out of it. He wanted to see the land preserved.

WM: So he put the interest of the land ahead of the interest of his bank account?

JBS: Yeah.

WM: Okay, now tell me about the New Urbanism, or Traditional Neighborhood [Design].

JBS: It’s a concept that’s growing and has started out ten, fifteen years ago. Celebration, at Disney World is the best example of it, or one of the first ones I guess and Seaside, up in the Panhandle of Florida, up near Destin [is another example].

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: The idea is to create a village or a community, modeled after small towns that were built all over America, prior to World War II, before the move to the suburbs and urban sprawls started. Where each town has a commercial and social center to it, that people can walk to within five minutes, to get a loaf of bread, or go to meet people or go to a meeting, or go to—you know—small shops. The houses are constructed in a conventional, or a traditional style. They have front porches. The houses are close to the sidewalk. The streets are fairly narrow, with on-street parking and wide sidewalks and picket fences and garages in the back, where the garage doesn’t dominate the house, as [it does] in a typical subdivision.

The people that live in Longleaf sound like they’ve had a script written for them. They just love it, because it’s a life style.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: People get to know each other. You get out and walk and visit with your neighbors. They can sit on their porches and visit with people going by. Just a lot of little twists and—tricks—you might say. Like, raising the houses, instead of a slab at ground level. It’s got three or four feet above the street and that gives the people inside more privacy
and yet it is easier for them to [sit on the porch] and talk to people on the sidewalk. There is a village green, a little town hall, a swimming pool and a playground there. But the village green is the one that gets the most use, ‘cause a fellow can take his son there and play catch or they can get up a touch football game.

Most subdivisions don’t have anything like that. [In] a typical subdivision you have to get in your car and drive, get out on a major highway and go to a big sports complex or someplace to be able to play any outside games or to do any walking or hiking. And hiking and bike trails are a part of it too.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: So we see the TND concept, where you have small village clusters that are concentrated in the middle. You have—oh—town homes and houses, businesses combined, where you can work downstairs and live upstairs. Have an office downstairs or whatever. [You can] have people more densely settled in the center of town then it spreads out as you get further from town.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: By the time you get on the outskirts you’ve larger pieces of property and homes that are more scattered and then you have access to more preserved land, with trails in it and natural points of interest. By having people at a higher density on a smaller area, then you can preserve more land, rather than trying to build—just spreading everybody out.

So that’s the nutshell and the idea behind [Traditional Neighborhood Design].

WM: Did it take a lot of convincing to get you on-board with that?

JBS: To keep me on-board?

WM: Well, because you talked about how you—the idea of development was something that you didn’t like. And then your sons come along and say, “Let’s do a development.”

JBS: Well, there are things about any kind of development that I hate to see happen. No matter what you call it, or what kind of development it is, you’re going to [be] building houses on it and putting pavement on it. But, having said that, the realities of the economic picture are such that if we don’t do something like that and we’re forced to sell when I’m gone, for estate taxes. And who knows what would happen to that then? So we’re trying to have some control over the future. So, we started the DRI process about a year and a half ago.

WM: And DRI stands for?

JBS: Development of Regional Impact.
WM: Okay.

JBS: It’s a study required by the state for any development over a certain size, and that varies from county to county. But it’s a study of the impact “off-site.” In other words, if we put 4000 houses on this property that’s going to increase the traffic on the roads. And down the road—you know—there’s an intersection, we may have to build—pay for—some improvements to that intersection. The same principles go with schools and utilities and water.

All of those things have to be addressed. And environmental permitting and acceptability is a real big issue. That has to pass muster with the Army Corps of Engineers, SWIFTMUD, DEP [Department of Environmental Protection]. You name it. Even the surrounding counties have to sign-off on it. Every agency in the west-coast of Florida has an interest in it. That’s fine.

We started the process a year ago last spring. So we’re about halfway through with it. It takes a good two years to do it. We’ve submitted the material to the agencies now and we’re waiting for them to respond. There will be some negotiating back and forth.

WM: Has there been any negotiations about it at this point?

JBS: No, there’s been no real response that I know of. Frank would be the one that could answer that. Well—here—here it is (JBS reaches for report).

WM: Oh man! That’s quite a volume.

JBS: That’s just part of it. There’s more than that.

WM: Goodness gracious! This is the information that you presented to them?

JBS: Yes.

WM: Can you give me a brief idea of what information is in [this volume]? I see maps and photographs and—

JBS: Well, I don’t know if I could do that. I haven’t read it, but (laughing) I’ve been in many meetings where [it was discussed]. The big issues are transportation, you know what roads [are involved] and environmental. We’ve tried to deal with those in innovative ways. Like the road system, we thought early on that we would need an extension of Gunn Highway, north of [State Road] 54 and then come back and go west to hook up with Longleaf and villages in between. But the traffic consultant, that we had, pointed out that rather than having one four-lane road, it’s better to have two two-lane roads. You can move more people—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.
JBS: —and it doesn’t have the impact on the surrounding land that the big highway does. Four lanes and that’s a no-man’s land. You drive too fast and that discourages pedestrian traffic.

WM: Oh yeah.

JBS: Two lane roads are more winding and—it’s a line of reasoning that most people don’t think of. So transportation and environmental concerns are the biggest issues I think.

WM: Okay. I just want to make sure I understand you correctly. You all came up with the idea of this development, Longleaf, and then you took the proposal to who?

JBS: We hired a consulting firm, and engineering firm out of Orlando, Gladding-Jackson. Their name should be in the front of that [report]. They have traffic people; they have environmental folks and town planners and everything. Of course we’ve had input too. We’d have charrettes where their people and our people—they have engineers that we use here—and friends—you know—surrounding landowners invited to participate and come up with these plans. It’s just like: “If there’s a town center down here. How do you get the road through it, so the traffic can flow without cutting it in two?” It’s a fascinating process.

WM: It is interesting and I’ll have to admit it’s one I’m not very familiar with, so be patient [with me] if I ask some obvious questions.

JBS: Yeah, okay.

WM: But you got the engineering firm to study it, but you also consulted the landowners around [the proposed development]?

JBS: Yeah, just as kind of a courtesy—you know—we invited them to [do] presentations, not so much for their input but just—uh—

WM: To keep them informed?

JBS: Yes, to keep them informed.

WM: And what kind of reaction did you get from them?

JBS: Well, everybody that was on—you know there are only two or three that have land, that have much land that amounts to anything and they’re very supportive. Some of them think maybe— it’s kind of a new thing and some people just—Usually when they hear about it and learn about it they’re very excited about it, But it’s a little bit “far out,” in some people’s thinking.

WM: Well it is different. I wouldn’t call it far out, but it’s different.
Tell me about the [Flatwoods] Adventures Project.

JBS: After that last sale of land to the DOT and it ended up under SWIFTMUD that cut the ranch about in half. So we had to sell the cowherd, sold half the cows. The cattle operation then was not really economically viable as a business, by itself. So I started looking for a different use of the land that would provide some income.

I went to [a] workshop in Arcadia in the spring of ’98. They talked about different things you could do, hunting [reserves] wild game farms (telephone rings) and things like that. But the one that appealed to me most was eco-tours. I attended the Babcock Ranch eco-tour, out from Fort Myers and talked to them. It sounded good. So I thought, “Well as close as we are to the Tampa Bay area and the population center we have here, I believe we could do a pretty good tour.”

So I bought a school bus and cut the top off of it and built a safari bus out of it and hired a lady to manage it. In fact she worked for a company that did the business plan for it. She liked it and applied for the job. She’s done a wonderful job. But, as a business, it hasn’t really performed. So I’ve been underwriting it. We get so much good feedback from people who come, but there is just not enough of them.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: At one point I considered closing it down or going for a not-for-profit status. Laura [Starkey] is involved with that, but also looking at the future development and the conservation side of the land we have left. [See Laura Starkey interview with Bill Mansfield. 8-9-06].

We want to preserve all most all of the land that is not developed in pasture. The wooded area, which is up adjacent to the Wilderness Park, will be preserved. It will be an amenity for the people that live here and for the public too. It will have trails and demonstration projects and land management things—different ways of managing the woods.

WM: You said that you visited the Babcock Ranch and had a conversation with those folks about eco-tourism?

JBS: Yeah.

WM: Tell me more about that, please.

JBS: Our tours here, or the ones there?

WM: Well that, but the conversation you had with the people at the Babcock Ranch. You said that convinced you to start your own eco-tourism.

JBS: Yes.
WM: So tell me what they said to you.

JBS: Well, they just described—I went on the tour and that was pretty self-explanatory. I kind of modeled my tour after some of their ideas. He told me, it takes a lot of time, a lot of going out and meeting people and talking to people and presenting to folks. Which I have done a lot of. [I’ve] gone to civic clubs and church groups and told them about the tour and the history of the ranch, a lot of what I’ve told you.

The tour deals with history and cattle ranching and environment. [There is] a lot of native plants and animals and how they were used by the Indians and the early settlers. [There are] little stories about a lot of plants and things that are out there. People find it very interesting.

We have three types of habitat that we see. Each one has it’s own story. The flatwoods palmetto, and pines, flatwoods and then the oak scrub and the cypress swamp, which we have a boardwalk into. A lot of times we see wildlife: deer, turkeys. We can’t guarantee that, but we do have a couple of alligators in a pen. [laughs]

WM: [laughs] I read where you bought some ‘gators, just because that’s what people expected.

JBS: Yeah.

WM: But is that the kind of information that the Babcock people gave you? That you needed to have wildlife?

JBS: Yeah, yeah—yeah. And they have more to show, in that area, than we do. They have a bridge across a pond. It’s all natural except for the bridge. And there is just a world of alligators in there. Then they have a pen with some cougars in them. You know, they look like Florida panthers. So you can observe them, and that’s pretty cool.

On the tour that we went on, I don’t think I want to say this publicly.

WM: Do you want me to pause the recorder?

JBS: Yeah.

*pause in recording*

WM: All right, so do you see demand for the Flatwoods Adventures, the eco-tourism, do you see that growing as the natural areas of Florida [are] developed?

JBS: Yes, but of course what we are doing is—it’s kind of a bandwagon. A lot of other newer developments are taking the historical and environmental side, or more so than they have in the past. Connerton, I haven’t been up there but I know they are, very—
trying to do preservation and trying preserve the heritage and the flavor of the land. I think Bexley [Ranch] our neighbors to the east are doing the same thing. I think people are realizing it’s good business. It’s smart and it makes it a better place to live. And it keeps from completely destroying what makes Florida special.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: So I think it’s —ah— kind of a coming thing. It just makes sense, in a lot of ways to try and preserve what you can.

WM: It’s like the man said, “Once it’s gone, it’s not coming back.”

JBS: Yeah, that’s right.

WM: One of the things I read in the newspaper was—um—about the nature center? That SWIFTMUD—Well let me back up again and ask a question. There was a Pasco County Tourist Development Council?

JBS: Uh-huh.

WM: Tell me how you worked with them. What kind of assistance [did they] provide?

JBS: They did some marketing. I am on that council.

WM: Okay.

JBS: This is the only destination type tourist attraction in the county. There are other things that attract tourists, like the Dade City Pioneer Museum and the downtown area and a lot of festivals that go on, especially during the winter months, which are big draws for tourists. But this is the only place of its kind, privately run.

So the TDC [Tourism Development Council] does some marketing and promotion that [mentions us]. They have brought us groups of writers from magazines and travel companies and tour operators and such as that.

WM: Did they give you any advice on promoting Flatwoods?

JBS: No, they’re really not staffed to do that. I think the promoting part of it is [left] pretty much up to the business.

WM: They left that to you to handle.

Okay. I also read a brief article about—uh—that SWIFTMUD contributed to the construction of a nature center?
JBS: They built—in the Starkey Wilderness Park, which is the park they own, they built a nature education center, up there near the entrance to the park. The park is only accessible by foot or horseback and [you can] ride bikes in some of it. There’s a bike trail across it. But it is meant to be a wilderness park. (chuckles) You can’t just drive way back into it. Right around the [northwest] area, right up in the corner, everybody can go there. There are pavilions and playgrounds, cabins you can rent and facilitates. They build this study center, a place [up there] for a classroom and meetings and so forth.

WM: Okay. I’m glad you clarified that. Because from [reading] the newspaper article I wasn’t sure if the nature center was here [Flatwoods Adventures] or at the park [J. B. Starkey Wilderness Park].

JBS: It’s at the park.

WM: Well, it was just a short piece and I wanted to find out about that.

What do you see for the future of the Flatwoods Adventure Safari?

JBS: Well, I think the eco-tour, as I envisioned it, is probably not going to really carry anything. I don’t think it ever will. As an offshoot to it we have added a pavilion, which I built four years ago, to rent out to groups for events of different types. We were having a demand for groups coming here. So it stays pretty busy. We’re going to probably—uh—there is room for expansion in that area. As the development happens we’ll probably upgrade it and we can see maybe [constructing] a retreat or center, a place here for groups to come and use facilities and have some seclusion and experience the outdoors. That’s why we’re thinking—Laura is working on that institute. Should be a combination of study and retreat facilities and eco-tourism too.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: We also have horseback trail rides. We don’t operate [them] ourselves but we lease the place to a fellow who has a string of horses. They’re very busy and that brings people here and some of them will come back and take the tour. (telephone rings)

So it remains to be seen just what will [develop]. You start out with one set of preconceived ideas and it evolves into something a lot different.

WM: Well it still seems to be in the formative stages.

JBS: Yes.

WM: I’m impressed by your efforts to preserve the land as much as you possibly can. How do you describe your motivation for that? And the answer might seem obvious to you and everybody else, but historians would be interested in understanding your reasoning behind that.
JBS: Well I think I’ve already explained it to some degree. Anyway, my love of Florida. It’s a unique place. There is nothing like it. You know Florida’s ecology and environment is different from any place in the world. You’ll find some things in north Florida that you find in Georgia and Alabama and all around the southeastern coastal areas.

But south Florida, from here south is pretty unique and very delicate. It’s a very fragile system. If we don’t learn how to work with it and save what we can—I think we’ve already done irreparable damage to our climate, to our water, life’s ultimate lifestyle by over-development.

The vast majority of people, [who] live here in Florida, were not born here. So they don’t have any reference point to how it was, or how it should be, or what we’re doing wrong and what we need to do right. A lot of people become concerned when they move here. But anyway I hope to help educate people what they’re messing with when you develop and remove the natural systems.

WM: That’s not an easy question to answer, it’s like “Why do you love your wife?” There are so many intangible things. But I think it is important [to ask that question]. I think it will help people to understand how folks have a devotion to—ah—home.

JBS: Uh-huh.

WM: That might be part of the problem with folks who move here. They haven’t established that kind of relationship.

JBS: They don’t have much of an attachment.

WM: So you’re doing what you can to—

JBS: To help people have some roots.

WM: Yeah. Give their roots a place to grow, if nothing else.

JBS: Yeah.

WM: Well I’ve been throwing questions at you for the past hour, or so. Is there anything you want to comment on that I haven’t asked about?

JBS: Well I can’t think of anything we haven’t covered. There probably is somewhere. No, not now.

WM: Okay. I always remind people that the information you’ve shared with me will be deposited in [the] Special Collections of the University of South Florida Library, where it will be available for future research. We need your permission for researchers to have access to this.
JBS: Okay.

WM: So, its government work, I’ve got a release form I have to ask you to sign.

JBS: Okay.

WM: I’ve also been photographing everybody I’ve interviewed. Do you mind if I take your picture?

JBS: Okay. That’d be fine.

WM: Okay. Great. Let me—

Well actually, I did just think of a question I wrote down to ask and hadn’t gotten around to it. That question is what kind of pressure have developers put upon you to sell? Have they been calling you and asking you to sell?

JBS: Oh, I get two or three phone calls a week, that get to me and I’m not the one they should be talking to. And it’s (mocking a developer), “Mr. Starkey I understand you have some land for sale in Pasco County and I’d like to talk to you about it.” I usually don’t even return the phone calls.

We’re just not in that position of having to sell. When we get the DRI, then we’ll be entitled to then go forward with construction plans and permits. Which is another six months to a year process. So it’s not going to—nothing is going to happen [snaps fingers] overnight. But we’ll have it to the point where we will sell part of the project, because it’s already set. Of course we’ll be careful about who we sell to, to make sure they live up to their side of the bargain. Or we can joint venture—

WM: That’s the Longleaf development?

JBS: No, the new development. We call it Starkey Ranch.

WM: Oh.

That’s one of the things that has really surprised me. I talked to some folks down in Hillsborough County and that’s all of the regulations and permitting that people have to go through to develop land, either for agricultural use or for residential or commercial use.

JBS: Uh-huh.

WM: It’s astounding.

JBS: Oh yes. It’s a whole industry. (chuckles) An economy set up just for the consultants, planners and engineers. They have to put the together, in that book you see there
Then there’s the regulatory people. I guess there’s no other way to do it and make sure that the place is not completely paved over.

WM: I’ve heard some people say, “It’s my property. I’ll do with it what I want!”

JBS: Yeah. Well, I had that feeling too. I hate—it just runs against my grain to have some bureaucrat tell me I can’t do this or I can’t do that, when I feel like I’m doing a pretty good job. I’ve had [the property] all along.

But it’s a balancing act. You have to—I don’t think they’ll worry so much about what the farmers and ranchers will do to the land, but what the next guy who owns the land will do, that’s where you get in trouble.

WM: Can I ask one more question?

JBS: Sure.

WM: You talked about [your] awareness of the delicate environmental in this part of Florida, when or how did your awareness of the balance of the environment take place? When did that take place or how did that take place?

JBS: Well it’s grown because of changes that I’ve seen during my lifetime.

WM: Uh-huh.

JBS: I’ve always been kind of observant of things that I see in the woods. My Dad told me, one time we were riding horseback in the woods and I pointed out something. [My Dad] said, “No I never noticed that. I’ve been riding in the woods all of my life and you see things I never saw before.”

So I’ve noticed a lot of changes in the plant communities and amount of water that’s around. We’ve had dry years but the pumping and the drainage and—we’ve unwittingly—contributed to it with ranching. We used to try and get rid of water on our pastures. Many of our pastures stood in water two or three months of the year. We had to get rid of the water. So we did some drainage and so forth. But—um—changing the water tables has resulted in changing the plant communities.

I think the biggest environmental problem that Florida has is exotic pests—plants especially. Brazilian peppers, cogan grass and the soda apple and air potatoes. The list goes on. There are dozens of them that are a real problem and new ones coming in all of the time. [There are] animals and other things. It’s just something, by my observing and talking to people and reading things, it’s really gotten to be an epidemic sort of situation.

WM: Well, it sounds like you’ve turned into an environmentalist.
JBS: (laughs)

WM: Would that be an insult or a compliment?

JBS: Well I don’t know. It depends on what you mean, by environmentalist. I ’m not rabid. I’m not out—you know—to do anything militant. But [I am] trying to do things and influence things in the right direction.

WM: Some people would take that as either an insult, or a compliment.

JBS: (laughs) Yeah, I wouldn’t want to be identified with some of them. But there are responsible folks out there, who are concerned.

WM: They talk about stewardship of the land and we need to care for it, so it will keep giving back to us.

And that sounds like a good place to stop. So, again, let me thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

JBS: Okay. All right.

WM: Let me turn this thing off and then you can say whatever you want to.

JBS: (laughs) Okay.

end of interview