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Kenneth McClain oral history interview by William Mansfield, June 26, 2007

Kenneth McClain (Interviewee)
Bill Mansfield (Interviewer)

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WM: This is Bill Mansfield from the Special Collections Library of the University of South Florida and the Patel Center for Global Solutions and I’m talking to Mr. Ken McClain, here in Parrish, Florida on June 26, 2007. Mr. McClain is a cattle rancher and we want to talk with him about pasturing his cattle and his response to urban sprawl.

The first thing we ask everybody to do is have them state their name and tell us when they were born and where they were born, so let her go.

KM: My name is Kenneth Layton(??) or Leighton(??) Worth McClain and I was born in Jacksonville, Florida on May 24, 1960.

WM: Okay. I know that you ranch but you also have a day job, a regular job?

KM: Yes I’m a millwright, of sorts at Tropicana Products and I’ve been there for twenty-eight years.

WM: Wow! Okay, Tell me about your ranching operation.

KM: Well, we run about—oh—forty-five, fifty head of mama cows in one herd. And at forty head of mama cows in the other herd.

It’s strictly a cow-calf operation. The type of cattle [I have] are crossbred. The bulls are Beefmaster bulls. We feel that they are more heat tolerant and tend to stay in the pasture a little better than some of the other breeds.

WM: Well for the folks who don’t understand what a cow-calf operation is, could you explain that please?
KM: Yes. We actually take none of our cows to slaughter, unless we have issues with them [like if] they quit calving or something. We raise the calves up— we get about one calf a year per cow. The gestation period is nine months. And at about five months old, six months old, we take them to a common market. It’s an auction house, we use the one in Arcadia but there’s one in Wauchula, Florida.

The [calves] are auctioned off and they are usually taken up towards Georgia, somewhere, to a process called conditioning. [That’s where] they give them all of their shots and [where they] castrate the bull calves. They separate [the calves] out into herds that are similar size, similar breeding, similar body-types. Then once [the calves] are conditioned for a few months they take them out west for them to become fattened and turned into beef.

WM: Okay. So the cow-calf means you have the cows and sell off the calves.

KM: Sell-off the calves. We don’t butcher anything.

WM: And you’ve got ninety head [of cattle] all told?

KM: Yes. Roughly between me, and my stepdaughter, we’ve got about ninety head.

WM: Okay. Tell me about the land around here that you pasture them on.

KM: I have several leases. I used to be called the “Five Acre Cowboy” ‘cause I had a lot of little five acre pieces, or little ten acre pieces. We’ve always been trying to grow a little bit at the time. You know, hold a few of our heifer calves back, for cows. And changing bulls. You can do that every so many generations. It’s a poor man’s way of growing a cowherd up.

So we’re always looking [for land for pasture]. And every time something comes up we always either bid on, or I try to lease it, or something. We got up to about one hundred acres.

A few months ago, a gentleman came to me and offered me a piece of land, because land sales weren’t doing too good around here. [So] I increased [our holdings] to eight hundred and thirty acres, which is a pretty good sizeable chunk. But it’s not all useable. A little bit of it is rough land.

In the cow business you can’t afford to go lease and go put brand new fences on it and everything. I mean, per acre cost thousands of dollars to fence the land.

It’s not cost-effective just to go in and get you a one-year-lease, and fence it in. It just doesn’t work that way. The cowman is probably the least destructive of property, of any use there is. But it takes a lot of land to raise a cow. Everybody’s got this one-acre-per-cow thing. In [reality] it’s one acre of improved pasture per cow, but in the rougher land it can run [to] thirty to forty to fifty [acres] per cow, you know?
So, the cattleman is probably the best steward of the land, but he is probably one of the biggest consumers of the land.

WM: Okay. So the land that you have your cattle on is it leased or do you own it?

KM: It’s all leased except for about eleven acres of it. We own eleven acres and everything else is all leased.

WM: How has— I don’t know what to call it— urban sprawl— encroaching suburbs, how has that effected your cattle operation?

KM: It’s made it every tough to find more leases. And it’s really, really hurt a lot of the cattlemen. A lot of them just went flat-out of it. There are very few—and I know of none— full time cattlemen left in Manatee County, that, that's all they do. They all supplement their cattle operation with work. There might be some semi-retired [men]. Don’t get me wrong, [but] they did something else for a living. There are not any full time cattlemen left in Manatee County that I know of.

WM: Is that because they can’t find enough land to—

KM: Yes, they can’t find enough land for a low enough price, because of the tax deals too, you know? The landowner demands a certain amount of money from his land, because he’s got to pay those taxes.

It makes it pretty tough, ‘cause the tax laws have changed to where it is no longer so much “green-belted” as it is “best use.” You know a piece of property that you and I see as cow pasture and swamp; the best use to the county tax people might be—ah—four houses per acre. So, they have a formula they use and the taxes have risen quite a bit. And that kinds of runs the cattlemen out too ‘cause he can no longer lease the land for a reasonable enough price to make some money.

So, you know, it’s kind of a twofold thing.

You can’t blame the landowners. Even the cattlemen, who sold their land off, you can’t blame them. They can make more money off of the high land prices than they’ll ever make running cattle.

WM: How long have you been ranching in this area?

KM: I’ve personally been ranching this area for—twenty-four years.

WM: Tell me about how it has changed here since you started ranching.

KM: Well, the houses have just filled in all of the gaps. I mean just between Parrish and Ellenton alone, literally every piece of property between here and there has been sold for
development [or] slated for development. Yes, there’s a few cattle on there but its only because of this little building snafu we’ve had. It’s just a matter of a year; two years [or] three years and they’ll be right back on track and those cattle and those cattlemen will be gone.

I mean, because they’ll be competing with other people, further out to try to get leases and the leases aren’t there. I mean the land’s not there. It’s just flat not [there].

WM: When did you notice that? When did it start effecting you?

KM: About five years ago [2002] it really seemed to really start turning on. We saw land prices just go from—you know—for years, in Parrish you could buy five acres for ten thousand dollars an acre, pretty easily. As a matter of fact, this piece [of land] right beside me sold for forty thousand dollars just—oh probably seven or eight years ago. And now, all of a sudden that same piece of property, over here, they want three hundred and twenty thousand dollars for it.

WM: Mmm!

KM: So it’s—it did it quick. When [prices went up] it went straight out of sight. Some big landowners sold out. You know—it’s not their fault. Like I said, they got so much money for their land, you can’t blame them. Their kids are multi-millionaires now.

WM: Okay. So it was about five years ago that the development [was] starting, pushing in. How did that effect you?

KM: It made leases extremely hard to find. You were always; it seemed like, behind the eight ball. You always found out about the lease after somebody else got it or after it got slated for development. You were always [under] the gun.

At one point it looked like we were going to have to cut our herd down to next to nothing. Between that and Mother Nature’s droughts last couple of years, it looked pretty bad for a while.

WM: And so—I guess, if you can—have there been instances where you’ve been leasing land and it’s been sold out from under you?

KM: Um—yes, [there] have been a few places but I haven’t been affected by that as much some of the other cattlemen. Mine, fortunately, was under contract. Two of the places that I had [leased] were actually under contract and they had put money down on them. When things went bad here, about a year ago, the ah—buyers walked away from it. They lost more money than I will make in a lifetime on cattle, by walking away.

But land that I could have bought six or seven or eight years ago for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, for fifty acres, suddenly [sells for] three million dollars. (chuckles) But you know—
WM: (laughs) Yeah, I can’t imagine that much money in one place.

KM: Right. And it happened very quickly too. This one piece of property that I leased over here, about fifty acres, that I’m not currently using but I’ve got it kind of like on standby. The drought has affected it a lot. It’s got a little swamp in the back of it and [the drought] really, really hurt that piece of property, the environment. It doesn’t hardly have any grass on it.

But I’ve been leasing it now for about—ten years, somewhere near nine or ten years, and it was for sale. I understand the [owner] put several hundred thousand dollars in the property and then walked away. I could have bought it for what he put down on it, eight or nine years ago.

Of course I didn’t have the money anyway. (laughs)

WM: So, let’s see, how has the Cattlemen’s Association worked to help the ranchers?

KM: It’s a pretty tight knit group. They’ve done the best they can but they are in the same boat that I’m in. They are cattlemen and they’re not going to say, “Hey, my neighbor over there has got [a] hundred seventy-five acres and he’s fixing to run his cows off of it and you can lease it.” That don’t happen. They’ll lease it—you know. Actually leases are pretty well—nobody tries to step on anybody’s lease.

Nobody runs in there when somebody’s got a lease and says, “He’s paying fifteen dollars per acre a year, I’ll give you sixteen [dollars].” I haven’t seen that. Nobody’s been cutthroat or anything about it. Seems like when you get [a lease], you keep it. Unless you make the landowner mad, some way or another, or development moves in. But the new ones aren’t coming up.

[There are] a lot of issues. SWIFTMUD [Southwest Florida Water Manage District]. You know SWIFTMUD has bought thousands of acres in Manatee County. That’s a problem. It’s something I don’t quite understand. They buy the land, then they take it out of the tax rolls and then they run the cattlemen off of it and then they start mowing it.

To me that’s kind of counter productive. (laughs)

WM: Well, it does seem like they could get more use out of it if they let cattle graze on it.

KM: Especially when they say they don’t have enough money in their budget to mow it, or burn it or anything and here they got somebody willing to do it.

The bombing range over there, Avon Park Bombing Range, they have leases that are open every year, but it’s too far for me to commute. And the land’s real poor over there,
but I got to admit, they lease everything they can lease and they do it right. They maintain the fences and prescribe how many cows you can put on it and they burn it.

I don’t quite understand why SWIFTMUD or somebody doesn’t step-up to the plate. I understand they own six million acres or something like that, in Florida. That’s a lot of cattle land. I’m sure some of it is in cattle, but it took them a long time to come around and there is still a lot that’s not in cattle.

And that’s kind of hurt. You think about the public purchases of land, Duette Park and things like that. You take twenty, thirty, forty thousand acres out of the equation that kind of hurts [the cattleman] pretty quick.

WM: You’ve not been leasing land that’s been sold?

KM: No. I was under the gun, twice in the last two or three years. In other words, there was land that I was leasing that was for sale and had sold but did not close.

WM: Okay.

KM: It got all the way to closing and the man that owned it—I had already made a deal with the new land owner to continue leasing until he developed it and he called me about four days before the closing. I knew it before the realtor that he was not going to close. He was going to walk away from the table.

WM: That must have caused some anxiety to think that the land you had your cattle on was going to be sold. What do you do in that situation?

KM: Well you always try to negotiate with the future landowner, [to get] at least a few months to remove some of your stuff and let him know that you do have items on there; cows and fences and pens and stuff. So far the couple of times that it has happened, the owners, the future owners, or buyers, were pretty cooperative. Because they knew they couldn’t do anything [with the land] that quickly any way. So they were going to give me a while. One offered me the same lease, right on for another year or two, until he developed it. Then he backed out. That was the one that backed out four days before the closing.

But, you know, I called him and told him I got a notice from a lawyer that I had thirty days to remove everything. I had a big set of cow pens on there that took me a week to pull off. I said, “Before I remove anything let me find out who this future owner is going to be and let me talk to him.”

Fortunately I got a hold of him and he said, “Oh no, don’t remove anything. Don’t pay any attention to the lawyer. He doesn’t know what’s going on. I do.”

WM: Okay.
KM: He was very, very kind. And like I said, I knew before the realtor [did] that he wasn’t going to close. (laughs)

WM: What about some of your colleagues? Have there been instances where the land was—

KM: Oh yes.

WM: Tell me about that.

KM: Um—

WM: And if you can be specific and mention names that’d be great but if you’d rather not—

KM: Well, some of the deals I don’t completely know or understand.

WM: Uh-huh.

KM: But I know that a lot of them, what they’re doing is the developer comes in and buys—I know one guy that bought two-hundred and some acres over here and as they developed it, he had to build new fence. Well, you know, when you go building a mile of fence—that’s—ah—about four or five thousand dollars to build a mile of fence. He’s had to move, of course he re-uses it—if he can, but he’s still had all of the labor of tearing it down and putting it back up again. But he’s moved that fence—I think—two or three times now.

And he’s down to just about the bottom dollar now. I think of the original two hundred and twenty-five acres he’s left with about fifty acres of mucky swamp. So it’s happened to a lot of people. I just didn’t get caught in it. I came—like I said—very close. Within four days. (laughs)

WM: Well, tell me about—in that instance, the guy had to keep contracting his pastureland to accommodate the developer. What are some other examples?

KM: Umm—I know—I believe that L. V. Moran(??) had to turn around and, I think, he had to cull a herd down to next to nothing. You know—sell off older cows and go through them and thin them out. And he’s probably one of the largest leasers around of small little pieces, around here. I know he’s had to cull down and I know Charlie Brown has too.

He’s had to sell off mama cows, which is like selling off your profit. Now he might pick the older ones or the ones that are not quite as healthy, or don’t calf as well. But still, every time you sell one of those mama cows that’s making babies your selling part of your future profit. You might sell her and she might go over to the market and calf the following week. So, you know, that’s a hard thing to take.
I was to that point at one time. I thought I was going to have to sell my herd down to about twenty, twenty-five head. Fortunately it didn’t happen.

And when we lease something, we try to keep it right on, even if it is something we’re not using. We’ve got—not a whole lot of land—but we’ve got sixty-some acres, sixty-five acres that we have leased that we don’t have a cow on. There’s nothing on it. It’s just in case. Because we know that things are always changing—you know? Usually you get a year’s lease, but this last piece I leased was a six-month lease, with ninety-days notice to leave.

WM: Umm.

KM: So, I literally could get a notice, next week [that says] “Okay, that’s it. You’re gone.” In ninety days, after I just put all the panels and pens and built fence on it and got it all mowed and everything, which cost me hundreds and hundreds of dollars, I’d have to leave. (chuckles)

WM: Wow! So you’ve got a backup pasture?

KM: Right. I’ve always tried to maintain—you know, it’s been nice to have everything full, but with the economy and everything today, I kind of need it to where I can throw [the cattle] around here and there.

It’s like this, I actually lease a piece of property next to me, that’s only three acres, just in case I need more grass for my horses.

I don’t even need it. It cost me hundreds of dollars every couple of months to lease that little three-acre piece. I pay her taxes on it, and it’s very high. But, it’s just so I can put those horses on that three acres if I need it. So I try to run backups so I don’t get caught.

Like, in Tennessee right now, hay is up to forty dollars a roll. It’s normally twenty to twenty-five. Here it’s probably sixty to seventy dollars a roll and it’s normally thirty to thirty-five.

WM: So it’s about doubled.

KM: Oh yes! Hay is in great demand, because of the drought, grass not growing and over-grazing, people over-grazing. I try not to over-graze.

WM: Well, do your colleagues have back-up pastures as well?

KM: The larger ones do. They may have cows in a pasture but they are not necessarily grazing it to its fullest extent. They probably have a place where they’ve got twenty head or ten head on it, where it could hold thirty head or forty head. So yes, if they have to disperse this fifty head herd over here, they can put twenty here and fifteen there.
But you know, when you start penning cows and moving cows and moving babies, it's very disruptive to the business.

WM: Uh-huh.

KM: Those herds go together. Whenever I go and buy, say, five more cows, it takes a little while for those [new cows] to herd up with those other cows, and some of them never do.

So whenever you go to work them, rather than having to work hard I can go in there and throw pellets in there and get 95 percent of [the cattle] in and go through there with a horse and a dog and [gather the rest of the cattle.]

Well, when you’ve got these herds that split off of each other it makes moving them around ten times harder. I mean, people don’t realize how many trips it takes just to move a hundred head herd. When you only get five or six cows in a trailer, it ain’t no fast move. It’s a lot of fuel, a lot time and a lot of effort by somebody to move them. We had five trailers moving cows for a whole day. Just moving cows from one pasture to another.

WM: Wow.

KM: It’s quite an operation.

WM: You told me about the land where you have your cattle now, this is the one that was going to sell and the guy backed out. So, tell me why it’s not suitable for development, if you don’t mind.

KM: Well I won’t say it’s [not] suitable for development. I’m not a good judge of that. To me, there is a lot of marshland in this area. It’s a very marshy area and I think that the road access is a little bit narrow, I don’t see how you’re going to be able to develop a piece of property and build a road through this thing, the way it is. The road access is virtually nonexistent. I mean it’s a large piece of property that’s two miles wide and three-quarters of a mile thick, but at the road it’s five hundred feet [wide].

It’s very narrow and some of that [land] is [for] power lines, so I think it will be a while before it will be developed. I think that it may end up tying to the next piece of property and when they develop that, they will develop this one.

Plus, it’s right on the line too. When something is out on the edge of the county line, Hillsborough and Manatee and there is no access directly to [Interstate] 75, that’s got to be an issue. A lot of the people that move into this area that work in Tampa or St. Pete, access to I-75 is very important to them. Well in order to get to I-75 from that piece of property you got to drive ten, fifteen miles around in circles to do it. So it’s not an easy piece of property to get back on.
And, more than likely, if you’re headed north, you’ve got to go five or six miles south, before you get to go north. So that just made a twelve-mile trip before you got to where you just came from.

WM: Uh-huh.

KM: So that’s why I feel like it’s not going to be a quickly developed piece of property.

WM: So you feel fairly comfortable with that.

KM: For a few years. You know, but if this land thing picks back up again, who knows? I mean that’s how he ended up buying it, was because it was up for sale and everything [in the real estate market] was booming and they jumped on it. They informed me when I leased it that they were going to put it back up for sale in a year and a half, but who knows?

Things are not picking up so, it may be more than that before they even market it. It depends on how deep their pockets are really. (laughs)

WM: So, when and if they sell this land will you use those acres, those backup acres?

KM: Oh yes, I’ll go right back to those. The first thing I’ll do is try to negotiate with the developer, or whoever purchases it to use part of it, perhaps the back half of it, or something. ‘Cause it’s got some really large pastures in it and they are all divided.

That will hold my herd for quite a while. Then when it comes all the way to the end [of the lease] then I’ll probably have to move them back over here and cull some of the older ones. You know I have some older cows.

WM: So you’ll have to reduce—

KM: Reduce the herd. Which means losing future money, future revenue I mean. Because beef is going to go up [in price]. Beef is not going to go down, it’s going to go up.

Oh, everybody says we’re on a five-year high right now, ‘cause it is very high right now, compared to what it’s been. But I think because of the producers—Florida is a very big producer of calves. I think because of the reduction of land, that is usable by the cattlemen and the number of people getting out of it, I truly believe that the price of beef is going to stay high and then probably go up. It’s like urban sprawl is its own worst enemy.

It’s much like the corn situation. You know I’ve got land in Tennessee too. The corn situation is kind of unique to me. We’re making ethanol out of corn, so corn is in demand up there, so every farmer around there is turning all of his land into corn [production] and
[has] quit raising cotton, and soybeans and everything else. So all of those commodities have gone right up with the corn. (chuckles)

I think that’s what’s going to happen here. There’s going to be less producers and more people consuming and it’s just going to go up. And less land to put [cattle] on.

Like I said, we’re big land users but we don’t do a lot with the land that we use. I mean, we hardly ever fertilize. The best thing a cattleman can have is a mower.

WM: What’s that you said? You told me something about mowing?

KM: Oh, mowing is truly the best thing you can do to a pasture. It really is. It does better than doing anything else. I see these people disking—up [their pastures] and planting exotic grasses and all, that’s fine if you—that’s very labor intensive. You’re talking about a lot of land and a lot of use. Those kinds of grasses, I’ve found through the years, require a lot of maintenance. They require maintenance every year—fertilizer.

I haven’t bought fertilizer in my life. All I do is mow. I’ve found that if you stress a pasture and then move the cows off of it and then go in there and drag it, then when it comes up a little weedy mow it. It seems like that pasture does better. You know, it’s like the old adage about burning. You burn a pasture and it comes back three times greener and thicker than it did before.

And that’s about what stressing one does. I think it does a very similar thing to burning it.

WM: When you say you drag it—

KM: I have a large chain metal drag that I pull behind the tractor that is basically a no-brainer. You get in the tractor and drive around as fast as you can. (laughs) But when a pasture is down low, and it has rained it is almost like you poured fertilizer on the pasture. I mean it literally is. You would not believe how much it grows within a week. I mean it just jumps up there like you fertilized it.

′Cause you did! You just put cow manure on it. But instead of having it in clumps, you scattered it throughout the whole pasture. You have to have a short pasture in order to do that, because you’ll never get the clumps to break up.

So it’s got to be a little stressed, down low and then a rain. Then you go in there and re-drag it. Then when weeds come up, you mow them in October, September or October, that time coming into the fall. They don’t return real well. So you can control most of your weeds and stuff by doing that.

WM: But, I mean, has the Cattleman’s Association addressed zoning issues [and] land use policies?
KM: (pause) I’m not aware of them doing that. On the state level, maybe they have, put I don’t think on the county level they have, really.

Manatee County—I think all of the coastal counties, Manatee County included, I think the—I saw some numbers back, probably in the nineties of what kind of money agriculture brought into the community and it was way more than tourism. I mean it was like 60 percent of the product was agriculture. You know, groves—citrus, vegetable, ornamentals (flowers, nurseries of all types) and cattle.

I think they live in the world of denial. I really don’t believe that they understand how important agriculture is to Manatee County. I think they have really forgotten it in the last five years. The land thing and everything going up has become their big concern. How many schools, how many houses, how many more roads do they need? And I don’t see any way to feather back the building. I don’t see any way to control it.

They keep saying they can be sued because if they allow this guy to build and next door they say, “On no, no. We’re over our quota of homes.” Well they can be sued because they wouldn’t let that guy sell his property and develop. So I guess they are between a rock and a hard place. You know? They have no choice.

They have to allow the land to be developed and they don’t seem to be able to control the amount and where it is developed at.

WM: Have they—worked with the farmers or talked with the ranchers about that?

KM: No. Because some of the land that I’ve seen them try to develop, and I’ve actually been to some of the meetings, and the county didn’t throw up the roadblocks they should have. And said, “Hey, this is way too wet. Come on now!”

There was a piece of property—I went to a meeting over here— off of [State Road] 62, it runs from 62 to [Highway] 675.

WM: Is 62 a street?

KM: State Road 62 and then Highway 675, which I guess is a county road.

The piece of property ran between the two of them and in the middle of it was Gamble Creek. This piece of property gets so wet during the wet season, you could watch hay bales float on it.

I mean this is a very, extremely wet piece of property. So much so that when the developer gave us the overhead view of the houses that were going to be put on it, they were literally on islands in this piece of property, I mean they were literally little roads with islands and water all around them. I think it was—I’m going to say three or four hundred acres, maybe five hundred acres. It’s about a mile between there and it’s a long narrow piece of property.
In my opinion I think the county should have said, “You know what, there ain’t enough dry ground on this thing. You can’t even mitigate this thing. Come on now, this is wetlands. It will always be wetlands. Leave it alone.”

But oh no, they kept on playing around and playing around. But I think there were enough people complaining about how wet it was going to be. The water literally goes over the road. I asked them. I said “How high are you going to build this road out here?” He said, “I’m going to build it level to State Road 62.” Which was state [specifications] back when it was built.

I said, “The water gets two foot over the road there, on that corner, exactly where you want to come out. How are people going to get in and out during a hurricane?”

Those were some of the [issues]. And I raised [those questions].

I think it ended up dying because there were too many people in that room [opposed to the plan]. And they weren’t just mad because they were developing, ‘cause they were developing everywhere. But that was a piece of property that had no business being developed.

And the county just stood there and watched it all happen. They didn’t ask the right questions. They should have told them no. They should have told them, “There are just too many issues. We’ll give you building permits for four houses on the dry ground along the road and that’s it.” That’s what they should have told them, “That’s all you’re going to get.” But they didn’t throw enough roadblocks in.

Currently it’s being used for cattle. Which is what it should be used for. During the wet season them cows got to have canoes, just about. (laughs) But during most of the year it’s good grass and all. I mean it’s being used exactly for what it should be. It’s either that or a rice paddy, one of the two. (laughs) You know?

But I sometimes think that we have a little bit of greed disguised as progress in the county.

WM: Could you explain that a little bit more?

.Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

KM: (sighs) I think we grew too fast. I think that even when the governor realized, he was trying to throw roadblocks in there about schools and roads and things like that. They were almost fighting it, you know? “No, we can’t do that.”

That’s something I wasn’t very appreciative of. I think they should have followed it to the letter of the law and said, “No development until we get the schools in and we get the roads in. We don’t care who pays for them. If you want your development put here you
better buy the road.” You know? “If you need two miles of road down here, you’d better build it and build it up to county [specifications] so it is a good road.”

We got roads all over the place that they are building developments on today that are “F roads”, meaning failing, in Manatee County. And they are just putting an entrance on it. That’s not fixing the roads.

And they all say, “Well, you know nobody did that when you moved here.” When I moved here it wasn’t a problem. (chuckles) Now it’s a problem if you want to get your development built.

And you know what? I think that you wouldn’t see them slow down. I think they’d still be doing it, they’d just be fixing the road. They want the current taxpayers to pay the bill.

I don’t need that road any better than what it is. I didn’t need it thirty years ago. I didn’t even need it to be paved. It was [a] dirt [road] most of my life. [The developers] are the ones that need it, not me.

Like I said, even the governor tried to throw roadblocks in, about—I think it was fire departments, public schools and inter-structural roads and water and stuff. And even he tried to throw a roadblock in it. They actually—the meetings I went to they were kind of mad about it.

WM: “They” being?

KM: The county commissioners.

WM: Okay.

KM: Who have the final say, regardless. I mean, they can step over—I’ve seen them step over the planning and zoning and I’ve seen planning and zoning do things, they’re the first ones that are supposed to turn something down. Too many things have gone to the county commissioners that never should have gotten to that point.

That’s my opinion, but I’m not the only one that shares that opinion. (chuckles)

WM: Well if it is any comfort, I’ve heard other people say that about Hillsborough County.

KM: I think it is. But, you know, they keep telling me it’s progress. I keep telling them I think it’s greed disguised as progress. You like using that progress word a lot.

WM: I guess it might be progress for some people, but not necessarily for everyone.

KM: I don’t want Parrish like it was in the 1950s. I realize things are going to change. But things should always change for the better, not for the worse.
We shouldn’t have kids today that are in [portable] classrooms the day the school is built. The day it opens up, the portables open up. There is a problem with that. (laughs)

WM: Well, what was Parrish like in the 1950s?

KM: I wasn’t here.

WM: Okay.

KM: But a good friend of mine, George, that you met before—

WM: George Massingale?

KM: Yes, George Massingale. His dad bought the filling station right here on the corner of State Road 62, when they moved to Parrish in, I think, 1954, or 56. It was very rural, a very rural area.

I know when I lived here in 1970, 71 it was very rural. I know people hear this story, but I literally walked about a mile to the school bus. As a matter of fact, it was exactly a mile. If I cut through the cow pasture it was about eight-tenths of a mile. And it took me fifteen minutes to walk it, walking slow, like a kid will.

The road was about two-miles long then and it turned then to dirt, on Erie Road. And I knew just about everybody that drove down that road. There were many, many days where I walked that fifteen minutes, one way or the other to school and I never saw a car. Today you can’t even get out on that road. That was 71, 72—it really didn’t change much until, probably the late eighties, early nineties. That’s really when it changed the most, when some of these other developments started filling in back in the back here.

But until that point, you about knew who everybody was.

WM: So it’s really taken off?

KM: Oh yes, it has taken off.

WM: So what do you foresee in the future?

KM: Scary numbers here. They estimate—currently what they are calling the build-out of this area, currently there’s about fifty thousand people that live in what they call the build-out area. Which is roughly from Ellenton to the Hillsborough County line, up there where my property is, that big piece I’ve leased, to where my other lease is at, up by the power plant. [It’s] a line drawn from there to Lake Manatee. They said that’s about fifty thousand people. They are estimating in 2032, for it to be two hundred and sixty-five thousand people.
WM: Mmm!

KM: So just imagine this, times five. It’s a little scary.

WM: I guess that would kind of put a hurt on your ranching?

KM: I won’t be here. I’m literally moving. I know that it will [end my ranching], so I’m moving up to Tennessee, where there is still agricultural land and the way of life hasn’t changed too much.

We, unfortunately—there are a lot of people from Florida that are moving to that area of Tennessee. It’s a farming area. It’s not east Tennessee, Dollywood and the mountains. It’s way over in west Tennessee. It’s very farming and [a] very rural area.

We have actually bought so much land up there, family members and such, that we’ve drove the price of land up. Unfortunately we’ve created our own market. (laughs) We didn’t like it that way, but it happened.

WM: So these people are literally moving from this agricultural area to that agricultural area?

KM: Yes. You’ve got people that are selling orange groves and in Myakka City that, you know, they—I don’t know what they got for the orange groves, and I don’t know how big the orange grove was but it was a fairly sizeable orange grove. They literally traded that, it was a land swap for five thousand acres in west Tennessee. And they still have millions of dollars in their pockets.

So why wouldn’t they? You know, I mean—like I said they made so much money off of that property and ended up with a humongous piece of property up there.

The climate, it gets warm in the summer and cold in the winter. Rarely snows. [It] has the chance of tornadoes, of course we have hurricanes, so, you know.

WM: You said that you all would be moving to Tennessee, do you have any idea when that will be?

KM: Six to eight years, probably.

WM: Six to eight years?

KM: Yeah.

WM: Do you think that this area will be built-out by then?

KM: Not to that two hundred and sixty thousand, but it will be too big for us, if this next land thing happens.
I know the last time I heard the numbers there was about thirty thousand homes approved that have not been built yet. Using that number and [estimating] two and a half, or three and a half people per [home] and five trips a day on the road, you can imagine just what those thirty thousand homes will do. You’re still talking about ninety thousand people, roughly. That’s like doubling what’s already here.

That’s nowhere near that two [hundred and] sixty [thousand], but that’s too many for me. (laughs)

WM: Uh-huh.

KM: I’ve always lived in a rural area. When I was a young boy I lived on Cattlemen’s Road, off of Cattlemen’s Road, in Sarasota and it was literally dirt roads and country everywhere.

I went to Fruitville Elementary [School]. It’s kind of funny. The school I went to is now a National Monument or Historical Monument, and the church I went to, downtown there in Fruitville, a little Baptist church, has now got a historical marker in front of it. A few years ago I drove by there and told my little brother, “This is where I went to school, do you remember?” ‘Cause he was real young, he was only one or two. And he says “Wow! It’s got a historical marker.” And I drove down to the church and said, “Now that makes me feel old.” (laughs)

WM: Well there are a lot of changes going on it is interesting to hear that you would move from your home to another place, to escape sprawl.

KM: Oh yeah. And actually, most of my family [will do the same]. My oldest stepdaughter has already bought land up there [for] her and her husband. My little brother bought [land] right around the corner form me. Some of my very best friends live right across the street from me. They bought land already and they’ve already started building some stuff up there. And a couple of the guys I work with, one of them bought [land] right beside me and the other one bought down the road from me.

WM: Will you continue working cattle up in Tennessee?

KM: Probably so, yeah. It’s in your blood. (laughs) Too many generations been doing it.

WM: Well, that’s one way to deal with sprawl, I suppose, is to flee it.

KM: They’ll come a day where you won’t be able to do that, but I mean, you know—Here leasing the land has caused these problems. But none of my family ever had the money to own it all. Let’s face it, poor crackers, they didn’t have that kind of money.
If you research most of these large ranchers, most of these large places were bought in the thirties, forties and fifties by people from up north. The people that lived down here when my family lived down here, they didn’t have any money, they didn’t have anything. They were poor, very poor. Proud, but poor.

WM: Uh-huh.

KM: They didn’t have any kind of money. Oh, one or two might have a hundred acres here or fifty acres there, or something. But they never had the kind of money to buy thousands of acres to raise cattle on.

And the land was so easy to lease back then. It was no big deal. A lot of land wasn’t even leased it was just used. They just used it. You got to realize Florida didn’t have fence laws until after World War Two. So ranching—they talk about the Old West, but really the Old West was down south is what it was.

WM: One other question, you can lease the land and still make money?

KM: Oh yes, as long as you keep the leases reasonable. I mean there is a point at where you can no longer make money. And when it gets to that point, I won’t do it.

I love the life, but if I’m not making money, I’m not in it. There’s been years when we didn’t make very much, when cattle prices were way down. If you don’t make money at it, you can’t continue to do it but so long.

I mean how many of the small farmers have you seen, just walk away because they just couldn’t make the money, you know?

WM: Most of them.

KM: There’s very few small farmers now. That’s one thing we noticed about the people from Florida that are moving into Tennessee. The realtor that I’ve done business with has told me [that] it is so much different than the people he’s dealt with before, where they’ve bought a hundred acres and said “Okay, how many five acre pieces will this break into?”

The people from Florida, that are moving up there now will buy the hundred acres and then look across the street and say, “Hey, is that for sale too?” He said it’s definitely a difference.

The land prices are what Florida was twenty, twenty-five years ago. But now I’ve made the kind of money where I can afford those twenty-year-ago prices. I’m not behind the gun like I was most of my life, where I couldn’t afford to buy hardly anything.

I can’t complain. I’ll make good money off of what I sell in Florida. The little bit I own, I’ll make very good money off of it.
WM: Okay.

KM: And buy more.

WM: That’s good to know. Well I’ve been throwing questions at you for about the past hour. Is there anything you want to say on that I haven’t asked you about?

KM: No, not really. No.

WM: Okay. I always thank people for taking the time to talk with me. And [I] remind you that the information you shared with me is going to be deposited in the University of South Florida’s Special Collections, in the library. [It will] be available for researchers to use. We need your permission for them to have access to it.

KM: Of course you’ll have it.

WM: Okay great.

KM: Hope I was of help.

WM: Oh yeah. It’s been a blast. Let me shut this thing off.

*end of interview*