

Interview of “Big John” Lloyd by Joe Guerzo 8-14-2019

Joe: Okay, today is August 14th, 2019. This is Joe Guerzo with Charlotte County History Services, and I am with...

John: John Lloyd Junior.

Joe: What's your birthday?

John: June 2nd, 1954.

Joe: Were you born in Punta Gorda?

John: Born right here in Punta Gorda.

Joe: At the?

John: At the Medical Center here.

Joe: Do you remember who delivered you?

John: Dr. Shedd.

Joe: Oh, really. Okay, excellent. And what address did you live in at the time you were born?

John: I lived at 308 Dupont Street only for approximately 6 years. And then our house burned, and my dad bought a house from the city of Punta Gorda. My dad worked for the city of Punta Gorda, also.

Joe: Okay.

John: So, he bought a house from the city of Punta Gorda for like 5 bucks, and then they had it moved out to where I'm at now, 811 East Helen Avenue.

Joe: Oh, so you still live in that house?

John: Right, I still live there. I've been there over 60 years.

Joe: Wow, that's amazing. First of all, how did the house burn down?

John: It just caught on fire. I think, electrical.

Joe: Okay.

John: Yeah.

Joe: And then...

John: I was a little kid.

Joe: And nobody got hurt?

John: No, we got out okay.

Joe: The Punta Gorda Fire Department got out there quickly?

John: Yes.

Joe: Excellent. And how do you get a house for 5 dollars? How does that work?

John: My dad, he worked for the city of Punta Gorda and they had a house down at Laishley Park that was abandoned. And they said that they would just sell it to my dad, but they had to get something, so they just offered it to him for 5 bucks.

Joe: And he moved it?

John: Right. He had it moved.

Joe: Oh, that's awesome.

John: Yes.

Joe: That's just about the best deal in real estate I ever heard.

John: It is.

Joe: So, that must've been what year? You were 6, so...

John: I was 6. I was young, so it was in the 60's.

Joe: Okay, so the early 60's. Well, that's interesting. So, tell me a little bit about your father. What did he do?

John: My dad, he worked for the city of Punta Gorda. He worked there 44 years, also.

Joe: Really?

John: The same time as I did, as many years.

Joe: What was his job?

John: His job, he started out a garbage man. Back in the day, it was just a few people working for the city of Punta Gorda, so he's done it all. He was one of the first blacks that worked in water.

Joe: Oh, really?

John: No black worked in the Water Department and he was one of the first ones.

Joe: He was one of the first?

John: Right.

Joe: Okay. So, he did that. What about your mother?

John: My mother, she was a housewife. She stayed home and took care of the kids. She did some ironing and stuff for some business people.

Joe: Okay.

John: You know, housework and all, but mostly she stayed home.

Joe: Did you have brothers and sisters?

John: Yeah, I had one brother. He was Assistant Principal in Port Charlotte.

Joe: What was his name?

John: Al Lloyd.

Joe: Al Lloyd. Okay.

John: Yes.

Joe: Is he passed?

John: Yes, he passed away.

Joe: Oh, I'm sorry. No sisters?

John: Yeah, I have 3 sisters. One of them passed away and I have 2 other ones.

Joe: Where are you in the pecking order? Are you the oldest or the youngest?

John: No, I'm the youngest now.

Joe: Oh, okay. Alright, so the neighborhood you grew up in, 811 east Helen Street. What was that like?

John: That was mixed between white and black.

Joe: It was? Okay.

John: Yeah, so it was country folks. We knew them all our lives, so it was a good neighborhood.

Joe: Yeah, did you have a lot of friends?

John: Yes, oh yeah.

Joe: What kind of stuff did you guys do?

John: We rode horses. We always had horses. So, we rode horses and just rode backs and played basketball. Because the basketball and the recreation center was just across Cooper Street, at the rec center over there. So, we just did everything for fun.

Joe: Okay, and I guess we're in the early 60's at this point.

John: Right.

Joe: So, schools were de-segregated around '65, did you have to go all the way to Fort Myers to attend school?

John: No, I didn't go to Fort Myers, I went to Baker Academy School, and then I when I got into Howard Gray, 7th grade, they let us go to Charlotte High School.

Joe: So, you did go to a segregated school at first.

John: Right, right.

Joe: So, you were in 7th grade when they de-segregated?

John: Right. Yes.

Joe: What was that like? How did that feel for you? Although, you were from a mixed neighborhood.

John: Right. And I was friends with everybody anyway. I knew a lot of people.

Joe: Okay.

John: So, it was easy for me.

Joe: Did you see any active resistance to de-segregation?

John: Yes, it was some but, you know, I know how to push through all the troubles that I'm faced with.

Joe: What kind of incidents?

John: It was kind of like, some people were kind of prejudiced towards things, you know. They wasn't sure, they weren't used to being integrated.

Joe: Did you see it from the parents more than the kids?

John: No, I've seen it from the kids more.

Joe: Really? Name calling, that kind of thing.

John: Yes, uh-huh. But it finally worked out and it's kind of like everything. You got just be good and do a good job and good will come. You can't throw out a bad seed.

Joe: Did you ever have to get into a fight because of it?

John: Yeah, I got into a couple of fights and then we got to be friends.

Joe: Oh, okay.

John: And a lot of them are my friends today.

Joe: It's funny how that happens when you're a kid. You start out fighting.

John: Yeah, exactly.

Joe: That is interesting. So, in 7th grade, that's already Charlotte High School that you'd go to?

John: Yeah.

Joe: I knew they had the schools both together.

John: Right, uh-huh.

Joe: Any teachers that you remember fondly?

John: Yeah, I remember a lot of the teachers, you know.

Joe: Any in particular that you want to mention?

John: Sam Stone, he was one of the teachers there that taught us about shop, mechanical stuff and all.

Joe: Okay.

John: Mr. Durance, math teacher, English teachers. Yeah, I remember some of the teachers. Of course, it's been a long time.

Joe: I don't expect you to remember everything. I just wanted to know which ones were, obviously, stuck out in your mind.

John: They're special to me, yeah.

Joe: If you remember their names, they must be.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Well, you're a big guy now. Were you pretty big in high school?

John: I was tall and skinny.

Joe: Oh? Did you play sports?

John: I played football and then the ranchers took me out of football and they hired me. That's how I got hired on different ranches. Doc McQueen, he was one of the founders and one of the businessmen in this town, back in the day.

Joe: I know of him.

John: And he worked a lot of young men out of school, so I was one of the ones he picked to to work for him. And that's how I got to work for all the ranches in Charlotte County.

Joe: Through Doc McQueen?

John: Through Doc McQueen.

Joe: He's a big figure in local history.

John: Right. Yes, he is.

Joe: What was he like?

John: He was kind of like my dad.

Joe: Really?

John: He taught me a lot of things. He took care of me.

Joe: How old were you?

John: I was a teenager.

Joe: Okay.

John: Yes, I was a teenager. I was probably 14.

Joe: Okay, so he taught you a lot of things?

John: Yes, sir. He taught me a lot about getting along with people, about taking care of myself, and about how to act around certain people.

Joe: So, he didn't care what color you were?

John: No, he didn't care what color you were. He was good to you. If you were.

Joe: So, you worked there all through high school?

John: Yeah, I worked for Doc McQueen, and that means I worked for his sons also, John McQueen and Bucky McQueen. We got to be pretty tight.

Joe: I know Bucky McQueen. What was Bucky like when he was a younger man?

John: Bucky was a super guy. He didn't do a lot of work. (laughs) he always figured he had more brain than physical ability to work.

Joe: Right. (laughs)

John: But Bucky, he was like my second daddy, he was. He kind of took me under his wing.

Joe: He is a bit older than you.

John: Yes, he's quite older than me, but he's kind of like my daddy even today. I love Bucky and I'm pretty tight with the McQueen's.

Joe: Okay. So, you worked on Babcock Ranch?

John: I worked on Babcock Ranch a small time. I didn't work a long time on Babcock Ranch because I worked for a lot of private ranches around the county. More or less, worked for those people instead of Babcock.

Joe: I guess this was probably after A.C. Frizzell, right?

John: Right, A.C. Frizzell. No, I was too young to work over there. My dad, he worked for A.C. Frizzell. He chauffeured A.C. Frizzell, years ago.

Joe: Oh, he did?

John: He was one of the chauffeurs.

Joe: So, your dad had a second job. He had other jobs.

John: Right, he to clean cars. He did detailing on cars in town. And then he worked for U-Save Supermarket for 18-20 years.

Joe: So, did you know A.C., okay?

John: I knew him, okay. I was a young boy. A.C. Frizzell brought a lot of the black cowboys to town.

Joe: Right, I interviewed his grandson last week.

John: Right, so I knew him from that standpoint, but I was a young kid so...

Joe: So, there were a lot of black cowboys back then.

John: There were a lot of black cowboys and A.C. Frizzell Brought them around.

Joe: That's what I hear. You know, the stereotype is that cowboys are all white. But I think people need to be...

John: No, no. And you check the history out on cowboys, that's where cowboys come from, black cowboys.

Joe: Right.

John: They were boys and they worked cows. That's how they name came about, cowboys.

Joe: So, how did you start out on horses? Did your parents have horses?

John: No. Working for A.C. Frizzell and for Doc McQueen. He had horses and cows, and he made me a cowboy. And then I worked for another rancher, Boots Crane. He was out of Fort Myers. He was from Burnt Store Road.

Joe: Okay, Boots Crane.

John: Boots Crane.

Joe: And it's called Burnt Store Road.

John: Burnt Store Road and he had a lot of cows and I worked for him. And then I worked for Lynn Brewer, he was Harvey Hobbs' son-in-law.

Joe: Okay.

John: You know, from Burnt Store Road to where Burnt Store Marina is, they owned all of that property on Burnt Store Road. So, I worked for them also.

Joe: Were you going to school at the time?

John: Yeah, I was going to school, but I was working part-time. I played basketball, but they took me out of football to work ranches. But, I did play basketball.

Joe: So, you were able to play basketball? Is it because ranching is seasonal?

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, what was a day on the ranch like?

John: It was good and that's how I got into barbequing. Big John the barbeque.

Joe: Oh.

John: What happened was I would go out and help the cowboys put their cows and then the owners of the ranches would send me in to cook at the camp for the cowboys.

Joe: Oh, wow.

John: So, I became the cook, you know, for the cowboys.

Joe: So, you got really good at it. (laughs)

John: So, that's how I started barbequing.

Joe: Just as a teenager, you started cooking?

John: Yes, uh-huh. And then I started learning from that. I wasn't that good, at the time.

Joe: Of course. You've got to learn.

John: I started traveling, learning about barbequing, learning how to cook better. Then I got pretty good.

Joe: So, you take a whole side of beef and be able to cook that.

John: Yes, uh-huh.

Joe: You guys never had to the slaughtering, did you?

John: Yes.

Joe: Oh, you did?

John: We done the slaughtering and everything. Like if the cow, broke his neck or broke his leg, we butchered it. And then, have it cut up and everything. So, we've done it all.

Joe: So, the cowboys job is to make sure the cows stay in a certain area.

John: Right.

Joe: It sounds like fun for a teenager.

John: Yeah, it is fun.

Joe: Did it give you time to do much dating? Did you have a girlfriend?

John: Yeah, I had a girlfriend, you know, and I'd seen my girlfriend, and in fact, I married her years after. I had a girlfriend all through school.

Joe: Okay.

John: We dated through high school, and I married her, and we had 2 boys.

Joe: Is she still with you today?

John: No, I'm single today. (laughs)

Joe: Oh, okay. So, how as your basketball career?

John: It was good. I was one of the top centers in basketball in '71, '72.

Joe: Okay.

John: I made all-state, all-conference and got some scholarships, but I didn't pursue it because my girlfriend got pregnant.

Joe: Oh.

John: That's what made me get a job with the city of Punta Gorda.

Joe: So, this is around 1972?

John: Right, '72.

Joe: So, you gave up ranching?

John: No, I didn't give up ranching. I would still ranch on the weekends.

Joe: Oh, okay.

John: I'll never give up ranching, I worked on the weekends because my job only worked through the week.

Joe: So, what was your first job with the county? City.

John: At the city of Punta Gorda, they hired me as a water utility man. You know, fixing water leaks and all. Then, they called me at city hall and said they made a mistake. They hired me because all black guys work in garbage.

Joe: Oh.

John: At the time, no black guys worked in water, but my dad, and he was retired already. So, they called me at City Hall and told me that they're gonna have to transfer me.

Joe: Just because your black?

John: Yeah. So, that's good history story there. So, then I went to quite a few business people, so they can go and talk for me at City Hall, so I could keep my job.

Joe: Did they do it?

John: Yes. I went in and talked to Al Johns. Mr. Johns was one of the founders of Punta Gorda. I went in to talk to Bud Cole. I was working for all these people. You know barbequing for them and working on the ranch.

Joe: McQueen's, too?

John: I talked to Doc McQueen. I talked to Mr. Davis. March Davis, he owned D & M Construction.

Joe: Okay.

John: And then I was told that Mr. Johns, Al Johns said that if they transfer me then he'll 'buy city hall and turn it into a country club'. (laughs)

Joe: (laughs) Is that what he said?

John: That's what he said. He said that at the meeting.

Joe: Who was your boss at the time? Who was trying to get you transferred?

John: Richard Day.

Joe: Richard Day?

John: Richard Day was one of the ones.

Joe: So, you ended up staying in water then?

John: Yes.

Joe: Well, that's good.

John: From all the people going up there talking for me, on my behalf. Boots Crane, too. He was one of the ones.

Joe: Boots Crane.

John: He was one of the ones who went up there and talked for me.

Joe: So, what was your basic job when you first started at water?

John: I was basically just fixing leaks, installing water meters. Installing pipe. Doing anything to do with drinking water.

Joe: How did you have that knowledge? Did your dad teach you that?

John: Yeah, my dad taught me because I used to watch him work. I used to ride around town and watch the contractors work. City workers work. I just picked it up.

Joe: That's great. So, you worked for the city, not the county.

John: Right.

Joe: I guess I got confused thinking you were one of us at the county.

John: No. And I worked there 44 years before retirement.

Joe: Wow.

John: That's the only job I ever had, as far as a full-time job.

Joe: So, you stayed in the same job, same house...

John: Same everything for all those years.

Joe: So, how tall were you in high school?

John: I was 6'5. 6'4 or 6'5.

Joe: That's not too tall for a center.

John: (laughs) Yep.

Joe: Any regrets about not going to school?

John: No, I don't have any regrets.

Joe: What were some of the schools that were recruiting you?

John: It was like FAMU up in Tallahassee, Edison Junior College. Different schools were calling me.

Joe: So, you were a good player, not just on the team.

John: Yeah, I was a pretty good basketball player.

Joe: So, you had your first child when you were 18-ish, 19-ish?

John: Right, uh-huh.

Joe: Was it a boy?

John: Yeah, I had 2 boys.

Joe: And they still live around town?

John: No, one boy lives in Orlando and the other one, he got in a little trouble and he's up by Ocala.

Joe: Okay, I can always look that stuff up later.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, your son's up in Orlando. I'm going to be up there this weekend, myself. We're going to Kissimmee, I've never been to Kissimmee.

John: Yeah, that's nice up there.

Joe: So, that's it, 2 boys, no girls?

John: No, I didn't have any girls.

Joe: What about your wife? Did she work?

John: Yes, she was a nurse. She worked at the Lifecare Center and worked at Fawcett Hospital.

Joe: So, tell me a little bit about history. When the Vietnam War came, did you get drafted?

John: No, no. I didn't go to the military. I didn't get drafted or anything.

Joe: How did you avoid that?

John: I don't know. I didn't.

Joe: Did you have any thoughts on the Vietnam War. You were at the age where a lot of people were protesting the war.

John: You know, I didn't know much about it. You know, I always wanted to go to the military because they always say the military makes good men.

Joe: Right.

John: But I didn't go because I had a lot of role models that took me under their wings and made something out of me anyway.

Joe: It seemed like you did have a lot of good role models here with all these different people.

John: Yeah, I worked with a lot of good people.

Joe: Did you ever meet A.C. Frizzell?

John: Yeah, yeah. I met A.C. Frizzell. I was a young kid.

Joe: What are your recollections of him?

John: He was a good man. He was firm, and he was fair. He made sure that the black cowboys were treated right.

Joe: Right.

John: I had heard a lot of stories about what had happened back in the day, you know, when there wasn't even integration.

Joe: Right.

John: He made sure that the black cowboys were treated fairly. He brought them down here for a reason, to work for him. And he didn't let them be used and abused.

Joe: He brought them down? You mean from Alabama?

John: Yeah. He brought 'em down. So, he was very fair cowboy. He was a very fair rancher.

Joe: Can I backtrack a little bit and just ask you how long your family has been here? Your dad obviously worked for 44 years. Was your grandfather from here?

John: My dad came from Mississippi.

Joe: He did?

John: He caught a train here and then, you know, he'd been here for a long time and then he started working for different people and then he got a job for the city, finally.

Joe: Was your mom from here, as well?

John: No, my mom was from North Florida, Marianna, Florida. She was from up past Tallahassee. She came down to get away from one of her exes and then she met my dad when she was down here living.

Joe: Do you remember how they met?

John: My mom used to do laundry. So, she would iron and do clothes. So, my dad heard about this lady who was doing laundry and was doing a good job and he went to take some clothes to her. And, I guess he fell in love with her.

Joe: Aw... and he was working at the Water Department at the time?

John: Right.

Joe: Do you recollect how long ago that was? Was it in the 30's or 40's?

John: It probably was in the early 50's.

Joe: Early 50's.

John: The early 50's. Late 40's, something like that.

Joe: Do you have any recollections of Hurricane Donna?

John: Yeah, I stayed... my dad was working for the city at the time, so we stayed... the housed us where the police and fire department is on 41 and Ann. That's where the water plant was.

Joe: Okay, I know where that is.

John: That's where they housed us at, whenever Donna came through. That's where we stayed.

Joe: So, you knew it was coming so everyone was huddled up in there?

John: Right.

Joe: How many people were in there?

John: Probably 40. But it was the water plant. That's where the Punta Gorda water plant was.

Joe: How long did you have to stay there?

John: Probably about 3 days

Joe: Okay.

John: Yeah.

Joe: They didn't segregate that, did they?

John: No.

Joe: I was going to say...

John: No, it wasn't segregated. If trouble's coming, there's no segregation then.

Joe: The weather doesn't care what color your skin is!

John: Exactly! (laughs)

Joe: So, how did your house fare?

John: We lost the roof and all.

Joe: Really? And this is the first house? The one on Dupont or the one on Helen?

John: It's the one I'm living in now.

Joe: Oh, so you lost the roof?

John: Right. We lost the roof and all, but that's it.

Joe: So, where did you live?

John: We lived there for a while and then my dad had places that he would just rent for a while.

Joe: Oh, okay.

John: Just a trailer or something in the country.

Joe: How long did it take after a hurricane, for something like that to get fixed?

John: It took a while because they didn't have the equipment to do it. That was a pretty bad hurricane, you know.

Joe: Right.

John: So, Charlotte County wasn't prepared for it. So, we had a mess for quite a long time.

Joe: Okay.

John: So, it took longer now than it did.

Joe: Would you say a year?

John: It probably took a year.

Joe: Wow. It must have made it difficult to go to school.

John: Yes, it was difficult to go to school, but everybody understood the trouble that we were having, you know, with Hurricane Donna.

Joe: And you were at Baker at the time?

John: Yeah.

Joe: What was that school like?

John: It was good. It was, you know, an all-black school. We were needing books, we needed stuff, so integration helped.

Joe: Right.

John: It gave us better supplies, you know.

Joe: I always hear about how big the white school was because of people I've interviewed. How big were those classes at Baker?

John: They weren't real big. You're talking about 25 people in a class.

Joe: Okay. Did you graduate from middle school? Did they have an elementary school graduation?

John: Yeah, yeah.

Joe: So, that's about how many were in your graduating class?

John: Right. Uh huh. Yeah.

Joe: So, it's still a very small community.

John: Yeah, because the town was still small.

Joe: Do you remember any teachers from Baker?

John: The principal was Mr. Grimm, Ben Grimm.

Joe: Ben Grimm.

John: And one of the great teachers, a 3rd grade teacher was Miss Bailey, Lorene Bailey.

Joe: Related to the Bailey brothers?

John: Yeah, she married a Bailey.

Joe: Do you remember which one?

John: He was an electrician. He was the first black electrician here. Berlin Bailey was his name.

Joe: Is he one of the ones who served in...

John: No, I don't think he was one of the ones who served, but he was one of the brothers.

Joe: Well, we are familiar with the family. So, she was the 3rd grade teacher?

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, she taught everything, not just a subject?

John: Right.

Joe: What do you remember about her?

John: She was firm and tough, and she taught well. And she was a good-looking black lady.
(laughs)

Joe: That's why you remember her!

John: I remember her.

Joe: Were they allowed to use corporal punishment back then? If kids misbehave?

John: Oh yeah, yeah. And I believe in that. I just feel that you ought to raise a kid the way they are raised at home. They didn't play. They'd whoop your butt.

Joe: Did you get in trouble?

John: Several times. (laughs)

Joe: Yeah? What kind of stuff did you do?

John: Oh, just fighting and stuff like that and all. But you got a pretty good whooping for it and you paid attention. You don't want to go to the office.

Joe: I kind of feel the same way. I went to Catholic school and I feel like it made more disciplined and it made me behave, for sure.

John: Exactly.

Joe: It taught me how to behave.

John: Exactly.

Joe: Did you notice any difference in the schooling? Like you said, you probably had better supplies when you changed schools.

John: You mean when we integrated? Yes, it was better supplies. It was more... I think we learned more. Anytime you got a change like that, where you're around people that, that's doing a little been more than you. They've been placed and done things. A larger territory. So, surely, it's going to make you a better person and a better student.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And teaching you how to get along with other people, you know, of other colors. And that's some of the things that we learned. And especially growing up, you need to know how to get along with all kinds. And seriously talking, I used to borrow money from Ku Klux Klans.

Joe: Like who?

John: If that ain't pretty tight. I hate to call their names

Joe: You don't have to call out their names.

John: They were Florida townspeople that were Klansmen.

Joe: And you had to borrow money from them?

John: I used to borrow money from them. But I'm just showing you how much of friends that I was with these people. They were my friends and they didn't do any ugly things towards anybody, but they just belonged to an organization called the Ku Klux Klan.

Joe: See, when I was growing up, I was more of a little punk rock kid. And what we had were Nazi skinheads in town.

John: Yeah?

Joe: And I kind of went out of my way to kind of befriend them. And when you get to talk to them, it's kind of when they get to start thinking, 'Why am I hating these people that I've never even met before?' They realize you have the same problems you do.

John: Exactly.

Joe: I can't afford gas for my car, just like these kids don't. By doing that, by befriending them, do you think you may have changed them.

John: Yeah, oh yeah. And back in the day, when I knew they were Klansmen, they weren't doing violent stuff. They weren't doing ugly stuff.

Joe: Right.

John: They were just into an organization that you should be in. But it always takes a person to, you know, nobody knows how to treat a person, unless they be around that person and get to know them. And that's one of the things, you know. You take white people today, if they're not around any blacks, then they don't know how to treat a black.

Joe: I think that's what we need more of today, because there's so much division right now.

John: I get stopped by a cop, and I know how to handle that cop. I know how to treat him. You know, when he approaches me, I know what to say to him to make him feel like I'm okay and I'm not an outlaw.

Joe: Yeah, and plus you've been here a long time. You probably know a lot of the police officers as well.

John: But, even if I was out of town. I've been stopped in Atlanta, and a cop pulled me over and said, 'Meet me at my truck, boy'. That's what I've been told before.

Joe: He said meet you at the truck, boy? Was that recently?

John: Yeah, a couple of years ago. A cop pulled me over. I was weaving, you know, a night sleet. A cop pulled me over and said, 'Boy, meet me at the front of my truck'. And he was a K-9 guy and all, but he was a country guy.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And when I was through with it, he said, 'Big John, you are a super guy. Have a good day'. But, I knew what to say to him.

Joe: This is in the A-T-L, huh?

John: Yeah, but I knew what to say to him. I didn't go back there with no hellraising. I didn't go back there thinking that he was prejudiced.

Joe: Right.

John: And even he told me, he didn't say it because I was black. That's just his saying. That's how he talks.

Joe: Right.

John: So, everything's got to be understanding.

Joe: So, when you say you went to the Klan, was it an actual hall or a place?

John: No.

Joe: Or was it just people you knew.

John: People I knew that was in the Klan. They told me that they were Klansmen. They wasn't proud of it, you know.

Joe: They had an address at one point. I don't know if it was in the 50's or the 40's, but they actually had an address over on Grace Street, which is close to where I used to work at the Grace Street Annex.

John: There probably was. A lot of businessmen in Charlotte County was Klansmen. Local business people, but they were good to blacks. They were good to people that they loved and cared about.

Joe: It wasn't hidden, because I remember running across an article in 1926 in the paper. Front page saying they were having a cross burning on Saturday night and picnic. So, bring your family.

John: Exactly. Yes.

Joe: I wish I could ask a black person from back then, how they felt about that.

John: Yeah. I'm sure blacks didn't feel good about it.

Joe: Yeah.

John: You got to know how this day and time, that's how I learned from the most role-model people that I hung around

Joe: Okay.

John: They taught me how to get along with all people.

Joe: Right.

John: And I'm going to tell you something, buddy: L-O-V-E is the powerfulllest thing in the world, love. And love will conquer everything. And that's what the whole world needs today, more love.

Joe: We sure do. No doubt, Big John.

John: That's what it's all about.

Joe: Do you think that there's still a presence here? Because Margaret Riggs' son, told me if I wanted to talk to Klan people, he knew some up in Arcadia, but he didn't mention anybody here in town. But do you think there's still a presence?

John: I'm sure that there's some prejudice in some people that, you know, got a problem. And you're always going to have, because what it is it's a sin problem.

Joe: Right.

John: That's the problem, you know. Anytime sin come in, you're always going to have prejudice.

Joe: Right.

John: Everybody is prejudice to a degree. People are prejudice against poor and rich. People are prejudice against short and tall. Prejudice exists, you know. But I don't think there's any Klansmen here that got any hate towards color. I don't think that.

Joe: The issue today seems to be mostly immigration, that kind of thing.

John: Yeah.

Joe: My parents were immigrants, so I'm a little sensitive about how they treat immigrants these days.

John: Oh, that's true.

Joe: But you have a very unique perspective because you worked in both circles. You lived in... actually, your neighborhood was mixed.

John: I've been around poor, and I've been around rich, so I know how to deal with all kind of circumstances, you know.

Joe: You seem very religious. Did you go to any of the churches here in town?

John: Yeah, I go to True Holiness Church in Punta Gorda.

Joe: Did you go there since you were a kid?

John: No, I just started going there. I kind of... I was raised in a Baptist Church and I just got out of that and go to another church that I feel I want to attend, you know. Nothing was wrong with the church. I just wanted to attend another church.

Joe: Were you at the first Baptist church that was established here in town?

John: Yeah, I was in the First Baptist Church of Punta Gorda, Macedonia.

Joe: Was it segregated back then? Was it a black church?

John: Yeah. It was a black church.

Joe: Where was that located?

John: On Charlotte Avenue, right down the road.

Joe: Okay.

John: But, I've been in churches all my life. I just feel like, if it wasn't for God, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. So, that's where I give all my credit to, you know?

Joe: Yeah.

John: Do you see what my hat says?

Joe: Yes, I see that. 'God over everything'.

John: That's what it's all about, because that's what we're going to get down to, after a while. If you don't know the big guy in the sky, then you're going to be a loser. There's no way that you're going to win without Him.

Joe: We're all going to be there at some point, in front of him.

John: Exactly.

Joe: Okay. So, we worked our way through the 60's and some teachers you had. When you went to Charlotte High School there were no problem with dances? Were there any interracial couples that went to dances? Would that be an issue?

John: No, today it wouldn't. Back in the day, yes it was an issue.

Joe: What was the reaction to it when it happened?

John: They didn't like it. I dated white girls. And one of the reasons I didn't date white girls was just because I wanted to keep my white friends. (laughs) To be honest with you...

Joe: Who was Wampus? I heard a story about Wampus.

John: Yeah.

Joe: He was probably a little older than you, though.

John: Yeah, Wampus was little bit older than me, but I knew him. I knew him all his life. All my life.

Joe: I'm hearing unsubstantiated stories that he reacted poorly to when he saw an interracial couple.

John: Yeah, he did. But, he was just a country boy that didn't know no better. He would act ugly with a white. So, I don't think he hated blacks, as much as some people might see him

Joe: So, you're friends with him?

John: Yeah.

Joe: I imagine you meet everybody.

John: Yeah, I met him. I got a lot of friends.

Joe: Vic Desguin? Did you know him?

John: I knew Mr. Desguin. He was one of my role models.

Joe: Yeah?

John: He was my role model and the Desguin family was. You know, I went to school with one of his sons, Louie Desguin from 7th grade.

Joe: Oh, you grew up with Louie.

John: He was one of the ones that I integrated with. The Desguins were always top-notch people in town. They knew how to get along with all colors before integration. I think Mr. Desguin's dad had a movie theater in the black neighborhood.

Joe: That's right.

John: You probably heard about that.

Joe: Yes. Yes, I did.

John: Yeah, and then Mr. Desguin was a politician. And black people, they might not know Desguin, but they know the name.

Joe: Right.

John: And people vote for names. Even if they don't know the person, they vote for the name. So, a lot of black people supported the Desguins.

Joe: Right, right.

John: And then Frank Desguin, his son, you know he was a politician. So, people kept him in office too. Blacks helped do that.

Joe: Right. So, that movie theater. How big was it? I know it probably wasn't as big as the one they had downtown.

John: It was a pretty good size. It was a wooden building. I remember it when I was a little boy. It was a pretty good size.

Joe: Where was it located?

John: It was located on the corner of Milus and Charlotte.

Joe: Milus and Charlotte.

John: Right on that corner there.

Joe: Okay, so just down the street again.

John: Yeah, it's sitting right on the south side of Charlotte.

Joe: Cool. So, you went to see movies there?

John: Yeah. Yeah, I was a little kid and all, but that was the movie theater.

Joe: Okay. Any particular movie you might remember seeing?

John: Any western. I love western.

Joe: Oh, you like westerns?

John: Any western.

Joe: How long did that exist?

John: It was there for a long time. It probably stayed 'til... probably 'til the early 70's.

Joe: Okay.

John: Late 60's, early 70's.

Joe: Once de-segregation happened, were you able to go to the regular movie theater, as well?

John: Yes, uh-huh.

Joe: I know the Desguins. I wouldn't think they would want to segregate their place, but I guess in the 50's, they probably had to.

John: Yeah. Well, you know the Desguins have always been good, caring people. They love. They got a loving heart. I don't think that they... even the granddad. I think, for him to even to put a movie theater in the black neighborhood. That had to take some courage.

Joe: Was Frank older or younger than Louie?

John: Frank is older than Louie.

Joe: Okay, so he went to school before you.

John: Right.

Joe: How about the Quednaus? Did you know them?

John: Yes, I know the Quednaus good?

Joe: Sheriff Quednau?

John: Yeah, I knew him good.

Joe: What was he like?

John: He was a good man.

Joe: Yeah?

John: He was stern. He used to ride by the black neighborhood when I was a little guy. And a black guy would be standing by the road, on the street and they wasn't working, he would try to get him a job. They didn't want him standing around, not doing anything. And I thought that was pretty cool. They ought to do that today with the sheriff. Ride through the neighborhood to make sure people are working.

Joe: Yeah, we definitely have people I see on a daily basis, up at the library that aren't working.

John: Exactly. I think the Quednaus were good business people. My mom used to work for the Quednaus. She babysitted for the Quednaus.

Joe: So, she babysit...

John: Lynn Quednau. I don't know if you know Lynn and Patti. She took care of the kids.

Joe: Wow.

John: And the grandkids from the Sheriff Quednau.

Joe: She knew Tosie, I imagine.

John: Yeah, she knew Tosie. I worked for Tosie.

Joe: You worked for Tosie?

John: I worked for Tosie and Jack Hindman. Jack was her husband.

Joe: What did you do for them?

John: Worked cows. Anybody that had cows, I worked for.

Joe: Anybody who had cows, you worked for. Okay.

John: They was in the cow business.

Joe: That's amazing...

John: I don't know if you knew, Tosie was some kin to A.C. Frizzell.

Joe: Right, it all goes back.

John: A.C. was in the cow business, so they put Tosie in the cow business.

Joe: I just interviewed Bunk.

John: Right.

Joe: So, did you know Bunk?

John: I know Bunk real good. I worked for him too.

Joe: I know he worked on ranches as well.

John: I worked for Bunk Hindman.

Joe: Okay.

John: You see, how you do, back in the day, you start out with the dad. And then eventually you're gonna be working for the son. So, that's what I did. I worked for Bunk, Tosie...

Joe: So, what was Tosie like? She's a big character around here.

John: Tosie was the best lady that you could ever meet. She was a politician. And she was a loving, kind woman. And she didn't take no mess.

Joe: Right. (laughs)

John: She would fight as much as love you.

Joe: That's what I heard. I heard all that stuff about her.

John: But I know they're good. Her and her husband, they took care of me.

Joe: So, you worked with Jack, as well.

John: Right. I worked cows with Jack. I took care of their grove. They had a grove out on Jones Loop. I took care of the grove. Hoed the grove around the trees. They fed me good. They just took care of me.

Joe: So, you knew all the family. They cooked for you?

John: Yeah.

Joe: How was she as a cook?

John: Great cook. Fed you good. She just took care of you, and in fact, this is the truth. When Jack died, she had 2 black guys that worked for her. The other guy's name was Ecker Platt. He worked for A.C. Frizzell.

Joe: Platt?

John: Right. Platt. P-L-A-T-T.

Joe: Okay, no 'e' at the end?

John: Right, and he worked for A.C. Frizzell, but he knew Tosie too, see, from the day. All of them lived in Murdock. You heard of Murdock.

Joe: So, he was one of those cowboys in Port Charlotte.

John: He was one of the cowboys. Right. But he and I attended the funeral of Mr. Hindman, Jack Hindman.

Joe: Do you remember the names of some of the other guys back then? So, you got Platt.

John: You got Platt. You got Eddie Lee Smith.

Joe: Eddie Lee, you told me that name. Eddie Lee Smith.

John: Yeah, Eddie Lee Smith. You had Sammy King. They called him Sammy King. He was one of the chauffeurs for A.C. Frizzell.

Joe: Just like your dad.

John: Right.

Joe: King or Kane?

John: King. K-I-N-G.

Joe: Oh, King. Okay, excellent.

John: And all the Platt boys, you know, like all the sons. It was all the brothers. Ecker Platt and Eric Platt had a brother.

Joe: Do you remember his name?

John: Willie Platt.

Joe: Ecker and Willie.

John: And they had kids, see.

Joe: Do they still have family here?

John: it ain't many of them. There's probably some great-great grands around, but they wouldn't know anything about the history.

Joe: Right.

John: But they was young.

Joe: I'm fascinated by the history of it all. You know there are a lot of street names out here. Are some of the street names named after some of the black families that were here?

John: I don't know any of them named after any blacks yet.

Joe: Well, we definitely have Lt. Carl Bailey Cemetery over there.

John: Right, right. And then the airport is named after the Baileys.

Joe: Yeah, yeah.

John: That's good.

Joe: That's one of the things I'd like to research more about the black history here, so we can get some streets named after them.

John: Oh yeah, push that.

Joe: Excellent. Man, we're all over the place. What other family was I going to ask you about? The Crosland's?

John: I worked for the Crosland's.

Joe: Did they have ranches? I thought they were more fishing.

John: No, he was a rancher too, Mr. Crosland.

Joe: Which one? Which Mr. Crosland? T.C., the one who was in the book with you?

John: Right.

Joe: Okay, because I interviewed Bill, his son. So, you know Bill?

John: Yeah, I know Bill. I know all the Crosland's.

Joe: He's still kicking it at 97.

John: Yeah, know all the Crosland's.

Joe: I just visited. I got to know him well because I interviewed him like this twice. He was actually my first interview.

John: Okay, I worked for Mr. Crosland that had the cows.

Joe: Okay.

John: I worked for him, and not all the time. He used me when he needed me.

Joe: I didn't realize so many people had cows.

John: Cows was a big deal back in the day. They were big time in the cow business.

Joe: I interviewed Dorothy Quednau and she lives over there on Airport Road and they still have a few cows on their property. They were grandfathered

John: on Airport Road?

Joe: You're not allowed to have cows anymore, but if you were here before a certain time, you're still allowed to

John: Right, right.

Joe: They still had cows when I interviewed her last year.

John: Is that the lady that lives with her daughter?

Joe: Yes.

John: Well her daughter is the one that my mother kept.

Joe: Your mom worked as a nanny as well.

John: Right, right.

Joe: I just need to take a breath. I do these interviews and it's just amazing how everybody...

John: It's a circle isn't it?

Joe: Yeah, they're all intertwined.

John: It's a circle, man.

Joe: I need to make a chart at some point, to how everyone is connected.

John: Yes, it's a circle.

Joe: How about the Wotitzky family? Did you know them?

John: Yeah, I knew them.

Joe: Leo Wotitzky?

John: I knew him good too.

Joe: They weren't ranchers, though.

John: No, no.

Joe: I knew I could find one family that didn't have cows.

John: I never worked for them, but they were good friends of mine.

Joe: Okay.

John: Even now, his son is today, a good friend of mine.

Joe: What's his son's name?

John: Leo Wotitzky Junior.

Joe: Leo Jr.? Okay, excellent.

John: Right, he's a good friend of mine.

Joe: I read a manuscript by his father, Leo Wotitzky Sr. I'm just blown away with how much this is all connected.

John: I don't know if you met, and I'm sure you know Gussie Baker.

Joe: Of course, Gussie. I've been waiting to do an interview with her, but she seems a little too busy for me these days.

John: But all them is a circle, you know. Back in the day, you had certain groups of people that hung together. They were tight. And then as you got in that group at work, they took care of you. Gussie's dad was one.

Joe: I guess I need to ask you about that family then. How long have you known Gussie? She's probably older than you.

John: She's a whole lot older than me but I know them all my life?

Joe: Did you know Vernon?

John: Vernon? Yeah.

Joe: I always wanted to meet Vernon because I read all his books. What was Vernon like?

John: He was different. Very intelligent. Very smart man. And took care of his family. And believed in the history. And believed in this town.

Joe: Yeah, he did.

John: He put a lot of support in this town.

Joe: Yeah, you can feel the love from the page that he writes.

John: He lived that way. Taking care of people in this community. And he had a lot of power, too. He drew a lot of politicians here.

Joe: Right. Was he a politician, as well?

John: He was a politician, also. He was a state representative, I think.

Joe: Oh, okay.

John: Yeah, he was a state representative. But he always had the knowledge and he always had the contacts. And there's an old saying, 'It's not what you know, it's who you know'. And he was one of the ones.

Joe: That's kind of true.

John: And that's some of what they taught me. I learned that over the years.

Joe: That's why you need to be good to people all the time.

John: Oh yeah.

Joe: In any business.

John: Exactly.

Joe: People are on their way up or on their way down and it helps to make friend with them both ways.

John: Oh yeah. You know, I worked for the city of Punta Gorda. I had to write a letter saying that I know so many people in the area. I take off work and go to so many funerals, I had to write a letter to that effect. To let them know that I go to a lot of funerals.

Joe: Uh-huh

John: And when people pass away, I attend those funerals. I had to write a letter because I was taking off so much.

Joe: Right. It's true. Since, I've been doing this, I've been interviewing people much older than me, 80's and 90's.

John: Exactly.

Joe: So, I've been going to a lot of funerals.

John: You'll know there's going to be more people that pass away that you know.

Joe: I'm a musician, and I was just playing at the Celtic Ray about a couple weeks ago. And I was getting up on stage and the guy in the front row said, 'Hey I know you'. I said, 'Oh, you've seen me play before?' he said, 'No, you were at my grandmother's funeral'. I had just interviewed Margaret Riggs.

John: I know Margaret Riggs. She kept my kid.

Joe: Oh, she did?

John: She was the babysitter.

Joe: That's right, she had the day care center.

John: Right. She kept black kids and only charged 10 to 15 dollars a week.

Joe: Really?

John: Per kid, so she really helped families out. Margaret Riggs did. The Riggs family have been friends of mine all my life.

Joe: My baby is not even 2 years old now and I know, for a fact, that that is very cheap. (laughs)

John: That's cheap. Margaret Riggs was a role model. She was a "she-ro". (laughs)

Joe: Yes, she was.

John: She was a "she-ro".

Joe: I was very sad when she passed.

John: Oh yeah.

Joe: She was a great interview. I interviewed her twice.

John: Yes, she was sweet. Like I said, you ain't going to hardly find too many people that I don't know, if they've been here for a while.

Joe: Right.

John: I have a lot of fun in this community.

Joe: Right.

John: And you probably heard about the deal with the noose and the rebel flag. Have you ever heard about that story?

Joe: No, tell me the story.

John: This guy had a noose and a rebel flag in his yard. A cop stopped to ask him to take the noose down. And he thought about it and he wouldn't do it. So, city hall's City Manager started getting all these calls, racial calls, about what people were going to do to this guy's house. They couldn't get him to take it down because it's not against the law. So, the City Manager called me, and I talked him into taking it down.

Joe: He did.

John: They wrote articles about it. The got some...

Joe: Is that in the article you gave me?

John: I think it is.

Joe: Okay.

John: Yeah, I think it is.

Joe: How did you do that?

John: Here's my poem. You have to read my poem. Take a picture of that and read that. That's the poem the City manager wrote about me.

Joe: The Legend of John Lloyd.

John: It tells about the...

Joe: Is this a copy for me? I can take a picture of it.

John: Okay.

Joe: The Legend of John Lloyd. So, tell me how.

John: I talked him into taking it down. He was a local guy in town.

Joe: What was his name?

John: Michael Whittaker was his name.

Joe: Michael Whittaker.

John: He was a nice guy. And I talked him into taking it down.

Joe: How did you?

John: I just let him know that, I said, 'Hey, you know, you started a lot of confusion in town. A lot of things going on, man'. Then I said, 'Man, you got to take that noose down. You can leave the flag up, but take the noose down'.

Joe: Was it a confederate flag?

John: Yeah.

Joe: Okay.

John: He didn't want to take it down and I told him, 'If a little kid was riding a bicycle, a little black kid, on the road by your house, and looked over and seen that noose and the rebel flag. That little kid will think that you hate him'. And he thought about that, and he took it down.

Joe: Well, that's awesome.

John: But it made history, you know.

Joe: Yeah. What year was this?

John: This was probably only 10 years ago, 10-12 years ago.

Joe: I was thinking it was in the 70's.

John: No, only 10, 12 years ago.

Joe: Man...

John: Yeah.

Joe: I see the rebel flag still. There's some guy that drives around in that truck.

John: We don't care about that rebel flag. I'm a rebel. To be honest with you. I was born here. So, it ain't the flag.

Joe: But a noose. That's symbolic of so many horrible things.

John: When you put them together... But he took them down for us. And this is about love. Again, I felt love towards that man. And he didn't mind taking it down for me.

Joe: Where was the house? What street was it on?

John: It was on Scott and Helen, in the county.

Joe: Was it a mixed neighborhood? So, black kids would see it?

John: Yeah, yeah.

Joe: Okay. Well, that's an interesting anecdote. Thank you for that.

John: Yeah.

Joe: I guess I was asking about the Crosland family before we got into that.

John: The Crosland family, yeah, I knew all the Crosland family.

Joe: So, you knew Bill?

John: Yeah.

Joe: I knew he moved away for a while, so not quite as long.

John: I didn't know him too good, but I went to school with some Crosland girls too, you know. Jeanie Crosland, I went to school with her.

Joe: Paige Polk is one of the ones I interviewed.

John: I know all the Polk's, real good.

Joe: What about the Goff's?

John: They are good friends of mine.

Joe: What do you got on the Goff's? Which Goff's? Wayne?

John: Wayne Goff's family is a good friend of mine. And I know when he worked for Punta Gorda Isles. I know a lot of people and I'm in the catering business. The barbeque catering business.

Joe: Oh yeah, that's right.

John: So, you got to realize, I cook for a lot of the local people.

Joe: I'm going to keep you in mind. You have a card for me, right?

John: Yeah, I got one in my truck.

Joe: Either that, or I'm going to crash a party that you're catering, because I want to try this barbeque. I've heard so much about it.

John: I don't have a card with me, but I got one in the truck.

Joe: I can find you. (laughs)

John: I don't know if you know this store, but we used to own this place. It was called Big John's and Lloyd Boys Barbeque.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. Let's talk about the business. So, you're working in water. So, when did you decide to start your own catering?

John: Probably about 6 years ago. A restaurant, I was already catering.

Joe: When did you start catering?

John: I started catering, probably in the late 70's.

Joe: Oh, okay.

John: Catering.

Joe: Using that knowledge from cooking on the ranch.

John: I had a concession stand. So, me and my sons wanted to open up a building. So, we found this building and we... and my son called the owner of the building and the owner told my son, he said, 'No, I don't think I can rent you that building because I doubt you could do good there'. So, then my son said, 'Well, you know, me and my dad want to open a business'. He said, 'Who's your dad?' So, he told the owner of the building who I was, and he said, 'Oh, that's Big John. Yeah, it'll work'. He said, 'I'll rent it to you'.

Joe: What are your sons' names? Which son is this?

John: Marcus.

Joe: And what was your other son's name?

John: Johnny.

Joe: Johnny and Marcus. Okay, so you've got a John Jr.

John: Right.

Joe: So, you open this place only 6 years ago?

John: Probably... it might be 7 years ago.

Joe: Okay. So, 2012?

John: Right.

Joe: Okay.

John: So, we opened it up and then I tried to explain to my sons, I said. It was called "Big John's and Lloyd Boys Barbeque".

Joe: Okay.

John: I told my sons, 'In Punta Gorda, Charlotte County, it's a tourist town. So, that means you're going to do bad in the summer and good in the winter'.

Joe: Right.

John: So, they didn't listen to me and they got in a financial jam.

Joe: Oh, you got to stock up the money from the winter.

John: Exactly. So, my son and them got in trouble and we had invested all we had into this place and then my son started robbing banks.

Joe: Oh.

John: He robbed banks without a gun. There wasn't a gun.

Joe: This is Johnny.

John: No, Marcus.

Joe: He's the one who got in trouble, huh?

John: Right. Yeah.

Joe: Without a gun, so it's not armed robbery.

John: It's not armed robbery. He kind of, he's a big man. So, he jumped over the counter.

Joe: Around town, though? I imagine everybody probably knows you guys.

John: Yeah. But, he did the banks all over.

Joe: Oh.

John: Fort Myers, Miami, different places, Fort Lauderdale.

Joe: Is he gone for a while?

John: No, he was facing 30 years and his attorney put me on the stand. We talked the judge down. I think he only got 7 years.

Joe: Which judge was it. Was it one of the judges I know?

John: It was a judge from St. Pete. He was a federal judge.

Joe: Because I've interviewed Desguin, Haymans...

John: I know Judge Haymans real good.

Joe: Oh, do you?

John: He's a good friend.

Joe: Oh, yeah?

John: Anybody who's been here any time limit, I know him, and we've been friends.

Joe: So, I guess you know his son too.

John: Michael Haymans, he's a good friend of mine.

Joe: So, everybody is connected. They didn't have a ranch though.

John: Yes, they had a ranch.

Joe: Oh, they had a ranch, too? Did you work on that one?

John: I worked on that one too,

Joe: You're going to have to make me a list of all the ranches.

John: Not for a long time, but I worked there when he needed me.

Joe: You're going to have to make a list of all the ranches that you worked on.

John: Well, you know, you didn't work for him all the time. It's called day work. When they needed a hand, they would call you.

Joe: So, did they just give you cash?

John: Just for a day or two. Yeah. So, it wasn't all the time. See, I worked for the McQueen's all the time.

Joe: You seem like a very hard-working man with the catering and the full-time job.

John: I didn't have the full-time job when I was doing the ranch work.

Joe: No, you didn't? But I thought you were 44 straight years?

John: On the weekends, see, I worked ranch work. I didn't work on the city at that time. So, it was part-time ranch work then.

Joe: Right.

John: And then the catering part was part-time too. I done that when I wanted to.

Joe: So, you had to close this place down, or sold it to Gatorz? Is that what you did?

John: Right. Uh-huh.

Joe: What year was that?

John: I forgot what year it was. Probably about 6 years ago. Because we were only open probably a year. So, probably about 6 years ago.

Joe: You're getting me hungry. It's around lunchtime. I'm thinking about barbeque.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Okay, so we've gone over most of the topics I wanted to go over, except for Hurricane Charley. So, tell me about Hurricane Charley. How did that work out for you?

John: It worked out okay for me. I left town. I called my friends and told them I felt like the hurricane was coming. I had a girlfriend living in Fort Myers, on Daniels, near the airport. I just told all my friends, I called Bucky. I told all my friends, I told the people of the city that I was leaving. I was taking off because we were gonna get the hurricane. I felt it.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And then I watched it come to town.

Joe: How did you feel it? Like in your knees or something?

John: I just had a gut feeling.

Joe: A bad feeling.

John: I had a gut feeling we were gonna get Hurricane Charley, so I stayed in Fort Myers.

Joe: So, you got away from it.

John: Right.

Joe: How did your house do?

John: I just lost the roof.

Joe: Again?

John: Yeah, lost the roof again.

Joe: How long did it take to get that thing fixed?

John: We fixed it in, probably, 30 days.

Joe: Okay. I heard of people waiting months, even years to get their houses fixed.

John: Yeah. But no, it didn't take as long. I had a lot of friends that had the material and stuff to do it with.

Joe: Were there any after-effects in Fort Myers? Did Fort Myers feel it? Or was it just rain?

John: No, they only got rain and wind. It wasn't that bad a deal in Fort Myers. They lost electric.

Joe: As you did too, I'm sure.

John: Right. Yes.

Joe: How long? Did you just stay down at your girlfriend's, for a while?

John: I stayed down there, but I had to come up here to go to work. See, I was in charge of all the FPLN poles.

Joe: Oh, wow. Yeah.

John: So, I was in charge of all that.

Joe: So, what did you think when you came and saw the devastation?

John: I knew it was terrible. It was bad.

Joe: A lot of neighbors had it bad too?

John: It was pretty bad and then I was out whenever the President came down and talked to the Hurricane Management and talked to the big shots in this town. The sheriff and the chief of police and the mayor and all. And the president asked them, 'What do you all want me to do?' And then all those people that was in that meeting said, 'We need money. We don't need canned goods or food. We need money'.

Joe: Yeah.

John: So, they dropped a lot of money in this town.

Joe: So, this is where you met Jeb Bush?

John: No, I didn't meet Jeb Bush then.

Joe: Oh, you met George.

John: Right. I met George Bush at the meeting.

Joe: Right.

John: But it was Jeb Bush that was at another convention. After the town was put back together, he came down to thank the town and the leaders for putting it back together.

Joe: Yeah.

John: I was one of the vendors at the park. I got a picture. I probably should have brought it.

Joe: I saw the picture.

John: You already saw it?

Joe: I did my research before. That's why I wasn't sure. So, you met George before Jeb?

John: Right.

Joe: Okay.

John: So, I was a vendor in the park, Laishley Park, selling barbeque and one of the guys came up to me and bet me I wouldn't go up on stage and hug Jeb Bush. He bet me a hundred bucks, so I went up and hugged Jeb Bush. And then the security was going to get me, and the sheriff said, 'No, that's Big John. He cooks the best barbeque in town'.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And so, everything was okay. Everybody thought that was cute.

Joe: Did you meet Jeb again when he came on subsequent visits?

John: He came down to the football game at Charlotte High School.

Joe: Do you sell barbeque there?

John: No, I don't barbeque there. I was just there.

Joe: Okay.

John: As a spectator.

Joe: I'm just looking for a time when I can come and get some barbeque.

John: Saturday, come down Cooper Street, 811 East Helen, at my house.

Joe: I'm taking my lady out of town Saturday.

John: Well, check on Saturdays with me. We usually open on Saturdays.

Joe: Really?

John: We open from 11 to about 5.

Joe: On Cooper Street? Every Saturday?

John: Right off Cooper.

Joe: I'll be back the next week for sure.

John: I'll be there.

Joe: Excellent. Well, thank you for that. I appreciate it.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Good, good. All this talk about barbeque and I got a feeling yours tastes really good.
(laughs)

John: Well, we try to do a good job.

Joe: Well, if you've been doing it since you were a little kid, I'm sure you're pretty good at it.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, Jeb knows you. So, if he comes to town, he's looking for your barbeque?

John: he wasn't looking for the barbeque, he was at the football game and all the people in the stands, I told them I was going to call Jeb Bush, He says, 'No way'. I said I'm going to call him. And he seen me, and he knew who I was. He came up and he said, 'Are you retired yet?' I said, 'No, sir. I'll be retired in a few years'. He said, 'Well if you were retired, I'd take you with me, because you would get me a lot of votes'.

Joe: (laughs) When did you retire? What year did you retire?

John: I retired... it was 2 years ago, going on 3.

Joe: Okay. 2017?

John: Yeah.

Joe: He could have used your votes... in 2016.

John: yeah, he could have used them.

Joe: Oh well.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Any views on politics? It seems you are friends with both sides of the aisle because you mentioned some Democrats you're friends with, and I saw your picture at a GOP thing.

John: Yeah, I'm a Republican.

Joe: Oh, you are?

John: Yeah, I'm a Republican. And I got to be a Republican because Paul Polk, he's the property appraiser.

Joe: Yeah, I know Paul. I met him.

John: He talked to me about it. He's a good friend of mine. He talked to me about changing my...

Joe: Affiliation?

John: Right.

Joe: From Democrat to Republican?

John: So, I can vote for him. And I did.

Joe: Oh, so you can vote in the Primary.

John: Right.

Joe: I see.

John: Exactly.

Joe: So, it was more of a favor.

John: I don't know if you met one of his kinfolk, his uncle is John Polk. He's the attorney.

Joe: I met Paige, his mom. John Polk?

John: John Polk. He's an attorney in town. That's Paul Polk's uncle.

Joe: Okay.

John: And he's a good friend of mine. I worked for him, also. So, I worked cows for him. He was in the cow business.

Joe: Everybody must've had cows back then.

John: They have cows now even.

Joe: Right, yeah. Well, I think you're not allowed to now, in the city limits.

John: Right. They got cows out in the county, but you might want to call him and talk to him.

Joe: Okay.

John: He's a pretty good man in town.

Joe: So, is that the only reason you changed political parties?

John: Yeah, only reason. That's the only reason I changed. So, I can vote for my friend.

Joe: I forgot to mention Judy Anderson. She's another one who told me...

John: Her and I have been friends for a long time. I was friends with her whole family. Her mom and dad. I know her from politics. I know her from... she worked so many years for Tosie Hindman.

Joe: Right.

John: They were Supervisors.

Joe: What was a young Judy Anderson like? Because, I've only known her the last 3 or 4 years.

John: She was good. Judy ain't never been a hell raiser or nothing bad.

Joe: She doesn't seem like that.

John: No, no. She's just a good, down to earth person, and she was a politician.

Joe: You got to be good.

John: Tosie taught her to be a good politician. But Judy was just a super lady. Knew how to get people to go vote. She had some pull in this community.

Joe: Yeah.

John: A lot of people knew her.

Joe: I was surprised, because I know there are definitely more Republicans in this county than Democrats. She was re-elected over and over again, as was Tosie.

John: Yeah.

Joe: It shouldn't matter what party you're in, if you're a good person.

John: Yeah, it's true.

Joe: So, the town was much smaller when you lived here. The last question I always ask in these interviews is: What's the biggest difference you've seen in the town now, as to the way it was when you were growing up?

John: Probably the volume of people.

Joe: Yeah.

John: The volume of people and all. You know, the closeness. People are just not as close as they used to be. When somebody passed away, we used to know it right then. Now, somebody

can be passed away for months and you don't know about it. They'd be gone, and you say, 'Dang, they passed away'. So, it's a big difference in the, you know, the volume.

Joe: Right.

John: And closeness.

Joe: I didn't ask you about Bernice Russell. Did you know her?

John: Yeah, I knew Bernice Russell really good.

Joe: What was she like?

John: She was a super lady.

Joe: Yeah?

John: She was a role model in the community. You know, she knew a lot of big time people. And they gave her a lot of opportunity to help the black people in the community.

Joe: What was her job?

John: She was a house maid. She worked for different millionaires. You know, cleaning house and taking care of houses.

Joe: Right.

John: And then her other job was, you know, helping the blacks in the community.

Joe: Right.

John: She had the contacts, see? So, then she would help the Cooper Street Rec Center. She would help area in town where you had black kids.

Joe: So, the Cooper Rec Center was where most of the black kids hung out?

John: Right.

Joe: Okay.

John: And Bernice brought a lot of stuff in there. She brought a lot of help in there.

Joe: Like equipment for you guys to use and stuff?

John: Right. And Bernice was the voice for the black community.

Joe: Right.

John: A lot of people wouldn't have done a lot of things for the community if it wasn't for Bernice Russell.

Joe: Who were some of the other voices of the community?

John: Booker Haynes.

Joe: Booker Haynes. What did he do?

John: He was a deacon in the church and he was one of the ones. He was just a lawn maintenance man, but he was well known in the community.

Joe: He was a deacon?

John: Yeah.

Joe: At the Baptist church that you went to?

John: No, at Primitive Baptist. Yeah, he was at another Baptist church than the one I went to.

Joe: A different church. Okay.

John: He was one of the good men.

Joe: Is he still alive?

John: No, he passed away.

Joe: Anybody else?

John: You got my dad. He was pretty well known in the community.

Joe: Your dad is also a John?

John: Yes. Senior. Isaac Thomas. He still lives. His daddy was a known man in the community.

Joe: Okay.

John: Isaac Thomas Sr.

Joe: What did he do?

John: Isaac Thomas Jr. is the Primitive Baptist preacher on Mary Street.

Joe: Right now?

John: Yeah.

Joe: Okay. Is his father still alive?

John: His father passed away.

Joe: What's his son's name?

John: Isaac Thomas Jr.

Joe: Oh, junior. There's a senior and a junior then.

John: He's been sickly, but I think he's in a little better shape now.

Joe: Yeah, I'm trying to talk to as many people as possible.

John: Yeah.

Joe: I'm supposed to be in touch with Abd Coleman. Do you know Abe?

John: Yeah, I know Abe Coleman good. When I was a little kid. And I'll tell you another man. I don't know if this guy will talk. He's a good one if you can get him to talk, Lloyd Thomas.

Joe: Lloyd Thomas?

John: Right. He's a black man in the community.

Joe: Is he related to Isaac?

John: Yeah, he's related to Isaac. But Lloyd Thomas knows a lot of things in the community, history stuff. But, he's a harder man to talk to.

Joe: Is he? So, I'd have a better chance with Isaac Thomas Jr.?

John: Yeah, you'll have a better chance with Isaac Thomas. Lloyd Thomas might talk to you and he might not. He's a little different.

Joe: I didn't write down the first name you gave me. Was it Buster or Booker?

John: Booker Haynes?

Joe: Booker Haynes, that's it.

John: But he passed away.

Joe: Oh, he's gone.

John: And he doesn't have any kids. His kids passed away too.

Joe: What was his role in the community?

John: He was basically an organizer, you know. And people looked up to him.

Joe: Okay.

John: He was just a good man that people looked up to and trusted. So, you know, whenever a white person wants to donate something to the community, they find someone who has a good name.

Joe: Right.

John: That's how they did it. We didn't have no one that represented us. They just went to the leaders of the community.

Joe: Did you know the Biehls? I'm sure you know Danny Biehl.

John: Oh yeah. I know the Biehls good.

Joe: I thought he said he used to feed all the football players.

John: Yeah, he did. He surely did. He was one of the great people in the community.

Joe: Right.

John: He helped organize the high school football team.

Joe: A lot of people come together over sports. I guess you probably know some of the famous players and coaches who came through here.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Who was the big coach that they had for a long time?

John: Goldsmith. Coach Goldsmith. He was one of the good coaches in the community.

Joe: Is he still alive?

John: I think he is, I'm just not sure where he's at. I'm sure he is. But he was one of the ones that people recognize. He took the team to the State.

Joe: How about the players? Hargrove, did he go here? Or was that Port Charlotte?

John: Who was that?

Joe: Hargrove. I thought he was a player.

John: I don't remember.

Joe: Okay.

John: I remember him. We had a pro, that went to pro.

Joe: Who?

John: Burton Lawless.

Joe: Yeah, that's right.

John: Have you talked to the Lawless family yet? Burton Lawless.

Joe: Is he around your age?

John: He's a couple of years older than me. Burton, he's probably around 67, 68.

Joe: Is he still alive?

John: Yeah, he's still alive.

Joe: Is he still in town?

John: He's back and forth and you might want to get ahold of Paul DeGator. Paul DeGator, he's a teacher out at the high school.

Joe: Okay.

John: And he'd be a good one to talk to for the history. And he'd tell you all about Burton and how to get ahold of him and all.

Joe: Okay. Excellent. Thank you so much for all these names.

John: Paul DeGator, because he's doing some history himself.

Joe: Okay.

John: He's doing some kind of write-ups too.

Joe: You said you're going to have a book worked on about you.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Who did you get to work on that?

John: I got a guy. They gave me his name. I forgot his name. He hasn't finished it yet. I got to come up with so much money.

Joe: I thought it was someone who lived around here.

John: Yeah, he lives around here, but I forgot his name.

Joe: Okay.

John: He hasn't been here for a long time.

Joe: Well, I look forward to reading that book. After I read that book, I might want to do a second interview with you.

John: Heck yeah. You ain't kidding.

Joe: Alright.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Well, thank you for your time today, John. I know you're a busy man, obviously, and you have family.

John: Thank you, too.

Joe: I appreciate it.

John: You said you were going to take a picture.

Joe: Yeah, let me take a picture of that.

John: Okay.

Joe: It's a good thing about these cameras nowadays, you can just do that.

John: Take a picture of that

Joe: Unless there's anything you want to add. You gave me an hour and 5 minutes. That's more than most people.

John: Okay, well thank you.

Joe: Thank you. Signing off...