

George M. Casey

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Interviewer: Edward Woodward

George M. Casey was born 1941 in St. Petersburg. He described his family's background in Florida and farming beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Casey recalled the origins of his family's dairy on the north side of Ulmerton Road. His father, a school teacher who wanted to return to farming, bought 156 acres for \$35 per acre in the mid 1940s. Pinellas County agricultural agent John Henry Logan had purchased 40 Guernsey heifers from Lancaster, Pennsylvania for a 4-H program. Casey's father volunteered to help transport the cattle by railroad. When five people backed out of owning a cow, Casey's father acquired them. "And that's the way Casey Dairy got started," Casey said.

Casey recalled his father's only other agricultural venture before the dairy. In the 1920s he had 10 acres in Seminole where he planted roses for root stock. Jackson Perkins planned to pay Casey's father \$2.75 per plant. But the 1929 stock market crash changed that outcome. Casey said his father instead sold the root stock to Webb City in St. Petersburg for \$.10 to \$15. per plant, and lost his land.

Casey recalled gradually clearing all but about 10 of 156 acres of dairy land by hand with his father, two brothers and one varying fulltime employee from the mid 1940s to about the late 1950s. Palmettos were sprayed with citrus molasses. "The cows would eat the palmettos like it was candy right down and literally eat the bud out of the palmetto, virtually killing it," Casey recalled. The palmetto roots were hand-dug out with a grubbing ho, piled up to dry, then burned. Pine trees were cut with a buck saw, then the stumps blown from the ground with dynamite.

Casey's father and his uncle built the family's house with heart pine cut from the farm. The trees were taken to a saw mill that cut the wood, keeping half for a sawing fee. The house, measuring about 24 by 30 feet, had two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room and a kitchen, recalled Casey. Throughout the years additions were built on the house. Regarding the land, Casey's father sold some acreage to a Wisconsin dairy farmer. Casey's father also deeded right of way through the dairy for U.S. Highway 19, but a realignment of the road altered that, Casey said.

When Casey's father was too sick to run the dairy, Casey took over. He was 19. He had to make the dairy profitable, he recalled, so the bank wouldn't foreclose on the farm. Casey had experience assuming responsibility at a young age. In junior high school, his parents were stuck for a few days in Cuba during Fidel Castro's takeover; they had been showing Guernsey cows at an international show and expo. Casey, driven by a dairy employee, went to Pinellas Central Bank and asked president John Jenkins for a loan to cover payroll and gas and feed bills. The next day he returned with his tally written on school book paper, and secured a \$2,500 loan. He paid payroll on Friday, and his parents returned the next day, he recalled.

By the early 1960s, the dairy had about 240 cows, of which more than 150 were Guernsey. Casey recalled. Casey described dairy duties that arose at any hour during his youth and adulthood: milking cows in the middle of the night when hired help didn't show; unloading 100 pound bags of feed from a semi-truck; learning by loud-speaker at a drive-in theater during a first date with his wife-to-be, Joan, that he was needed at home to help birth a calf (Joan helped him); retrieving wayward cattle from the St. Petersburg Clearwater Airport on Christmas day; milking cows during a hurricane when the barn roof ripped off.

Casey talked about improvements at the dairy. By the late 1950s, they stored milk in a tank instead of 10 gallon cans. And Casey Dairy was the second dairy in the state to install a milking parlor, he recalled. They also acquired dairies from Arcadia to Pasco County, but most were in Pinellas County. Their milk production had grown from less than a 10-gallon can a day when the dairy opened, to 30 to 40 cans a day in the mid-1950s, to as much as 5,000 gallons a day when they closed the dairy in the late 1970s. They sold their milk to Hood's Dairy.

Casey described seasonal influences on the dairy. By September they rapidly increased milk production to coincide with school and tourists needs that lasted until May. During the summer production slowed, and milk was shipped out of state to Tennessee for cottage cheese production.

When Casey's father died in the 1970s, the Caseys sold land to pay inheritance tax. Casey said that he was "burned out" on dairy farming by then, so sold his herd in December 1979. Since then, he and his wife have had several business ventures: selling dirt; developing land; ranching; and growing blueberries.

Casey shared his thoughts about Pinellas County's transformation from agriculture to development: "In 1954 they formed the first dairy association in Pinellas County. And John Henry Logan at the county agents office was organizing it. And I remember him making the comment that Pinellas County was rapidly becoming the agricultural center for the state of Florida and there was no way it could possibly be anything but. And the way he justified it was we had four large milk plants ... we had 50 dairies south of Highway 60 in Pinellas County, mom and pop type operations. We had orange groves all over the county with the Largo Black Diamond Taylor packing house, we had H.P. Hood up in Dunedin, and then we had several of the smaller packing plants. With the water that was under Pinellas County on that ridge that runs Ridge Road and up to Countryside, by drilling deep wells, they had plenty of water to irrigate the groves with. We did not have the freeze damage that the rest of area would have ... because we had water on three sides that would keep us warm. We had the railroads coming in to transfer the products out and the truck farming, as we think of the tomato farmers, were in the Largo area. So there was nothing that could ever be but Pinellas County had to be the agricultural center for the state of Florida. Now you want to know what happened? Two things: Air conditioning and the 30-year mortgage."