Emmett M. Hood, Jr.
3 May 2007
Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Emmett M. Hood, Jr. was born in Tampa, Florida, November 12, 1916. During the late 1800s, his paternal grandfather came to the Tampa Bay area from Pickens County, Alabama. Hood's grandfather drove an ox team that dragged cypress logs (destined for mills) out of swamps. He worked his way down to north of Tampa. Soon he married and found various jobs in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Manatee counties. By about 1900, Hood's grandfather and his family were living in St. Petersburg at Ninth Avenue and Grove Street.

Hood's grandfather bought a cow and sold the milk for supplemental income (Hood's father, Emmett Hood, Sr., delivered the milk by bike). Eventually the Hoods had five cows. By 1908, Hood's grandfather bought a seven acre citrus grove at the corner of 54th Avenue and 22nd Street, and launched a dairy, delivering milk door-to-door in a Dodge truck. Hood's father took over the dairy business when his own father retired (Track 1). The dairy would expand nearby throughout the years, but was several hundred acres smaller than it might have been: Hood's father balked at paying $60 an acre for the pasture he rented where his herd grazed, typically on wire grass, palmetto leaves or white Dutch clover. As Hood recalled, his father said: "There isn't any old dirt in Florida worth $60 an acre, I'll give you fifty." Soon after, as residential growth encroached (neighbors complained about early morning noise) the Hoods moved their estimated 100-head herd to Bradenton.

Hood had his share of dairy chores, as did his four brothers (but not his three sisters.): By age seven he was hauling manure, feeding calves, and washing cow's udders before they were milked. By ninth grade, Hood was milking about 14-15 cows each day from about 5 to 7 a.m., and again after school. Guernsey and Jersey breeds, which produced rich milk, were the most common cows in their herd.  As tastes changed and cholesterol became a public concern, the Hoods added Holsteins, which produced a lower fat milk.

When Hood graduated from St. Petersburg High School, he considered attending the University of Florida, until his father directed otherwise. Hood recalled his father saying: "'Son are you crazy? .... This is where your life is right here ... you know this business ... besides, you don't need a college education to milk cows!" Instead, Hood delivered milk throughout St. Petersburg to several hundred customers, his route beginning at 2 a.m.  He recalled several obstacles on the job: clotheslines and large dogs. On the lighter side, he had a fan club of sorts. "I was young then and all the old women thought I was so young and good looking," Hood recalled. But, "I was ugly as a dog."

When World War II arrived, Hood's father convinced the local draft board to defer service for his three oldest sons, arguing the dairy - 80 to 90 cows strong - would go under if they left for war. The draft board deferred service for the three oldest sons, but required the two youngest, one a surgeon (he would return after the war to practice family medicine), to serve. About two weeks before the war ended, Hood received notice to

report to Camp Blanding. With a labor shortage during the war, the dairy used milking machines, a practice Hood's father had eschewed earlier, claiming the machine ruined a cow's production. Hood's wife helped deliver milk, her infant son resting in a bassinette on the truck floor.

In the mid 1940s, the Hood sons each paid their father $1 for the dairy and its equipment; Hood's father retained the property and buildings, and charged the sons about $1,500 a month rent. Each son ran a department: Paul, the oldest, oversaw finances and the office; John, the next oldest, was in charge of sales; Emmett took care of production; and the youngest, Lester, who went by "Dick," oversaw maintenance. Hood (Emmett, Jr.) took short dairy courses at the University of Florida and the University of Georgia to further learn about making and handling milk. He also learned how to make cottage cheese, low-fat milk, and half and half. Hood overcame the challenge of producing cottage cheese in Florida by configuring a pressurized plant that kept out heat and humidity. Cottage Cheese became a best seller among the dairy's packaged goods, which also included yogurt, sour cream and cream (Tracks 4 and 16). The Hood's also offered orange juice and eggs on their retail and wholesale routes that were produced by other companies.

The dairy grew after World War II in step with a population boom in St. Petersburg, particularly between 1950-1960. Sales had shifted from retail door-to-door to delivering wholesale to stores via 200 milk trucks and substations in Clearwater, Tampa, Bradenton, Avon Park and Venice. During the 1950 and 1960s, Hood's acquired about 10 dairies, most in Pinellas Park and a few in Bradenton, each averaging about 20 to 30 cows. Hood's also collected milk from about 30 other dairies. Large loans of $150,000 to $300,000 were acquired along the way to foster expansion. "We never did get free of debt until we sold out," Hood said. However, he added: "We never did owe more than we could handle." As the brother's expanded the dairy themselves, they rebalanced ownership with their father: they bought the remaining buildings he owned, gave him an interest in the dairy, and paid him a salary.

By 1973, sensing that customers such as Publix and Winn-Dixie would produce and package their own line of dairy products, the Hoods decided to sell their company to PET. "We got out at the right time," said Hood, who was 57. "Now the milk business is a heck of a mess. All the milk is sold through big companies." Leading up to the PET sale, Hood's Dairy had about 500 employees, 800 head of cattle in Bradenton, and were packaging about 65,000 to 70,000 gallons of milk a day. They were packaging cottage cheese for private dairies throughout Florida in Fort Myers, West Palm Beach and Vero Beach; for Winn-Dixie in parts of Alabama and South Carolina; and for a customer in Ohio. Overall, sales were up to $25 million.