

Robert J. McMullen
14 March 2007
Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Robert J. McMullen was born in Largo December 31, 1912. He talked about the Hurricane of 1921 (Track 13). He and his family lived on the north end of Lake Seminole (what is now 122nd Ave.). He recalled big pine trees blown out of the ground, turned end over end. Seminole Bridge was destroyed. They found pieces of the wood bridge near their house and in the woods.

When McMullen was about 10 years old, he worked with his father and four teams the elder McMullen supervised working citrus groves (Track 14). McMullen climbed upon the sprayer and drove a team of mules from tree to tree. McMullen's father owned about 20 acres of citrus, mainly grapefruit, and was chief of police in Clearwater during the late 1920s. McMullen talked about acquiring 40 acres of citrus (mainly grapefruit) in the 1950s that he later sold to developers of Orange Lake Village (Track 15).

McMullen described working during the Depression (Track 14). He was about 16 years old and worked in a sandwich shop toasting buns and washing dishes. A few years later he began working at a Clearwater feed store during the week making \$5, and worked Saturday and Sunday nights at the sandwich shop.

He was an avid horse rider (Track 15). In the early 1920s, during the days of open range, he drove cattle to be dipped for ticks. He described the experience. On Friday night after school, he rode his cracker pony, with about four other riders, down Starkey Road; it was only a sand trail. Once they reached the Park Boulevard area, the group spent the night under oak trees. The next morning, joined by two or three others riders, they herded all the cattle they could find regardless of who it belonged to, and drove them across East Bay Drive to William McMullen's property, north of Bay Drive, east of Starkey Road. The cattle were dipped and taken as far as Ulmerton Road, then turned loose. McMullen described the area from East Bay Drive to Ulmerton Road as being all woods. There were only three houses from Ulmerton Road to Park Boulevard. McMullen talked about some of his other interests and memories (Track 12). When he was about 40 years old, he was a member of Sheriff Genung's Mounted Posse.

McMullen entered the feed business in the early 1930s (Track 2). While working at a sandwich shop, he was hired to work at a feed store at the corner of Garden Avenue and Park Street. He worked six days a week and earned \$5. Eventually, McMullen gained half interest in his own feed store when Mr. Brandenburg asked him to join his business. McMullen later sold that store, in Clearwater as well, to his brother Lester around 1950-1960 (Track 11).

McMullen would partner with Mr. Brandenburg for other ventures, as well (Track 2): a feed store and hatchery (more on Track 4 and 5) in Dunedin; and a 40-acre poultry farm on County Road 1 in Palm Harbor surrounded by citrus groves. McMullen also had a

small feed mill in Tampa on Anderson Road (Track 7 and 12). From the mill he hauled bulk feed to regular customers and to his own farm as well. His feed truck had three compartments, each housing 30 tons of feed delivered to farms and households (Track 8). Some of McMullen's customers had about 400-500 chickens (Track 7). McMullen had about a dozen customers in Pinellas, from Tarpon Springs to Seminole. One customer, Kenneth Overcash, had a poultry farm next to McMullen's with about 40,000 birds (Track 9). McMullen delivered feed to Overcash, who was a customer for about 30 years, and processed his eggs.

However, as years passed, many of McMullen's customers weren't doing as well and "didn't want to pay like they should," he recalled. Consequently, McMullen mainly serviced his own farm from the feed mill (Track 7). McMullen later sold the mill to someone with a farm in Pasco County (Track 12). McMullen also managed the poultry department at the Pinellas County Fairgrounds from about the late 1940s to the mid 1950s (Track 13). They showed birds of different sex and breed, sometimes cross-breeds. One year they had about 1,200 birds.

McMullen bought his interest in the poultry farm from Arthur Gross (Track 2). McMullen said there were five poultry houses on the farm, each housing 10,000 Leghorn chickens. The goal was to have 40 percent of 50,000 birds produce eggs every day.

Three workers, usually one man and two women, fed the chickens and collected the eggs (Track 3). Turnover was high. Most workers (Pinellas residents before being hired, he believed) stayed six months to a year (Track 10). However there were three workers who stayed three to four years (Track 3). The women collected the eggs and the man set up the feed operation. A foreman supervised the crew. McMullen had two, two-bedroom houses at the poultry farm occupied by his employees (Track 6). His male employee began a work day soon after daylight. The women started later, about 9:30 a.m. or 10 a.m., when the eggs were ready to be collected. Eggs were gathered up to three times a day.

Technology helped streamline the poultry farm (Track 8). McMullen described upgrading to a feeding system known as the "Big Dutchman," that made feeding more efficient. Watering systems were upgraded as well (Track 9).

McMullen described how the eggs were collected, placed in a cooler, then processed and graded at a plant on King Highway in Clearwater (Track 3 ((More detail about the plant on Track 6)). The eggs were delivered to grocery stores, such as Sutherland Grocery and Pick Kwik, and restaurants in Clearwater, Largo, Tarpon Springs, and a few places in St. Petersburg. Grocery stores would buy 30 dozen eggs at a time, paying about \$.35 a dozen, but varied from day to day depending on market prices set in Tampa (Track 8).

Sometimes McMullen also sold his chickens for meat, but only garnered about \$.03 to \$.04 cents a pound for a leghorn hen (Track 7). During tourist season, McMullen said demand for eggs at grocery stores and restaurants increased, but didn't create that much more business for him than other parts of the year. When an egg room was built on his Palm Harbor farm (Track 6), they developed a good "drop-in" trade among individual customers during working hours five and half days a week (Track 8). This was about the

1970s and lasted about 10 years. Typically they had about 25 to 30 customers a day that paid about \$.50 for a dozen eggs.

Throughout this process, McMullen said his main job was to check the chicken's health and treat them as needed by altering their feed or water (Track 3). Some of the health problems he looked for: colds, worms, lice. Water-belly wiped out part of his flock and threatened his business (Tracks 3 and 4). McMullen talked about other challenges of the poultry business, describing wind as their biggest weather threat; it disrupted egg-laying (Track 7). McMullen enjoyed watching the chickens grow and the workings of the egg room (Track 12).

McMullen recalled that the problem with water-belly occurred sometime in the 1960s (Track 4). He lost about 10 percent of 50,000 birds. He replaced the lost birds with new hatchlings that he raised on an existing 5-acre farm on Klosterman Road south of Tarpon Springs. Here he described how the Dunedin hatchery worked. A Japanese couple, usually a man and wife team, determined the sex of the hatchlings. They were paid per bird, and counted about 20,000 birds a day. About every three months the Japanese couple inspected the birds.

McMullen described how the Japanese couple determined the sex of the bird (Track 5). He believed his hatchery was the only one in northern Pinellas. In southern Pinellas, the Wallace family, with whom he was close friends, had a St. Petersburg hatchery. McMullen said that family eventually moved to Dade City about 1970. Continuing to talk about the hatchery, McMullen described how they removed manure. For about 15 years, a Dr. "Doc" Allen would clean the houses, using a front-end loader and truck to haul away the manure, usually about 20 truckloads per house. Wood shavings were brought in after the manure was removed and the houses cleaned (Track 7). Allen used the manure in a fertilizer mix (some of which he bagged and sold) that included four or five other items, such as human waste from a city of Clearwater plant, and black soil (Track 5). When Allen died, McMullen had trouble disposing the manure, and stacked it up outside the houses. This was about the late 1970s (Track 11).

McMullen said he bought Brandenburg's interests in their joint business in the 1960s (Track 6). McMullen also described a deal with a neighboring subdivision on Sunset Point Road: In exchange for his Clearwater processing plant property, the subdivision built an egg processing room at McMullen's poultry farm. The exchange worked well. McMullen could process his eggs on-site, so he got rid of his coolers. McMullen described how the eggs were processed in the egg room (Tracks 10 and 11).

McMullen also mentioned other Pinellas poultry farmers in Seminole, Safety Harbor, Tarpon Springs and along Klosterman Road (Track 9). Most of these farms had 5,000 to 10,000 birds. McMullen noted that most poultry farms were run by a man and wife team (Track 10). The women picked and handled and processed the eggs. McMullen's wife, Robbie, was his bookkeeper (she had two assistants). As development increased, McMullen's business attracted more walk-in customers buying eggs, but also more

complaints about smells as subdivisions got closer. Inspections increased with complaints.

Soon, McMullen sold the poultry farm (Track 11). In the late 1970s, a former classmate turned real estate business man approached McMullen, as well as Overcash, with a buyer for their properties. The two poultry farmers sold at the same time, and homes were built on their land. McMullen was paid \$3,000 per acre. He said his old egg room is still standing, and he believes it's being used as an electrical room. Afterwards, Mr. McMullen ran his Dunedin feed store until the early 1980s.