

George Aiken Ulmer  
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Interviewer: Edward Woodward

George Aiken Ulmer was born January 3, 1914 in Hampton County, South Carolina. His uncle, a citrus field foreman, suggested he come to Pinellas County to find work (Track 1). Ulmer arrived in Elfers in the 1930s. Ulmer picked fruit for several weeks, then became a loader lifting boxes of picked fruit onto trucks. He was paid a penny per box, loading as many as 1400 boxes one day. In the meantime, Ulmer met his wife-to-be, Beryl Stansell of Palm Harbor. Ulmer became a truck driver for Stansell's father, who owned a fleet of trucks. During a haul to Winter Haven, Ulmer rode with Stansell's father and planned to ask permission to marry his daughter. Ulmer finally asked returning to Palm Harbor as they neared what is now U.S. 19. Though concerned about their age - Ulmer 18 was, Stansell 17 - Mr. Stansell agreed, noting that Ulmer was a hard worker.

In July 1932, Stansell and Ulmer married in a Tampa courthouse. They were accompanied by Stansell's cousin and his wife. Ulmer and Stansell claimed to be 21 - the required age, recalled Ulmer - paid three dollars for a marriage license, and got married. They honeymooned at the Tangerine Hotel in Brooksville, then returned to Palm Harbor (Track 2). They lived with Mr. and Mrs. Stansell, then bought a house on Ohio Avenue for \$500, the money borrowed from a friend. They lived in the house 50 years.

Ulmer recalled hauling citrus in four-wheeled trailers hitched to semi trucks (Track 3). Typically he hauled 250 boxes to cities such as Norfolk, New York City, Washington D.C., Chicago, Raleigh, and Harrisburg. Eventually Ulmer owned two trucks himself and remained in the trucking business for about 20 years (Tracks 3 and 7). Ulmer talked about hauling fruit for the Manatee Fruit Company (Track 3). He also hauled gladiolas and pompoms for Manatee, loading the flowers in Palmetto and delivering them as far as Seattle or New York City.

Meanwhile, Ulmer also oversaw a picking crew of about 20 men ages 16 to their 40s (Tracks 10 and 12). Each had their own picking sack and a ladder 12 to 15 feet long (Tracks 12 and 14). Ulmer recalled about 75 to 100 pickers arriving during the winter from elsewhere (Track 11). They came from North Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina (Tracks 10 and 11) In some cases the workers were married couples, the men working as pickers, the women working in a packing house (Track 11). Ulmer recalled seasonal workers living in boarding houses, a few in tents.

Ulmer described other aspects of the citrus industry: grading and coloring; hauling citrus to packing houses along railroad lines; location and size of several groves; preparing for freezes; budding trees; off-season work, citrus testing pre-picking, a ticket system to track each worker's pay, the three picking seasons, early, mid and late, and the industry's transition to concentrate (Tracks 8 -14). Ulmer also talked about hauling citrus to boat lines that then delivered the citrus to Philadelphia, New York City and Baltimore (Tracks 2 and 3).

When Ulmer sold his trucks to H.L. Stansell, his brother-in-law, he bought a Palm Harbor storefront (Track 3 and 4). One side was a walk-in store that sold dry goods and meat; he learned to become a butcher (Tracks 3 and 4). The other side was a hardware store (Track 4). Five years later, Ulmer sold the store to two men from Delaware looking to buy a business. Ulmer recalled that the long hours required to run his business influenced his decision to sell it (Track 4). Next, he owned half interest in a saw mill for about a year, then sold it.

About six months later, Ulmer joined the State Road Department (precursor to the Florida Department of Transportation) as an inspector, climbing to engineer by the time he retired at age 65 (Tracks 4,5 and 6). During that time he earned his G.E.D. at Clearwater High School with help from his friend Jim Jenkins, who tutored him in English (Track 5). After Ulmer retired from his state job, a plant pipe in Largo recruited him as a troubleshooter for projects (Track 6). He held that job until another company bought the business (Track 7).

Speaking of family ties to Pinellas, Ulmer mentioned several great uncles who owned orange groves, among them Julius Ulmer and Marion Ulmer (Tracks 9-10). He also said great-uncles Julius and William Ulmer were soldiers in the Spanish-American War (Track 9). Ulmer said his wife Beryl is the longest living member of the Palm Harbor United Methodist Church, joining in the late 1920s; Ulmer joined in 1933 (Track 8). Ulmer recalled delivering mail on some Sundays before church with his wife, a retired postal clerk (Track 7).