

## Memories

**Donnie Connel**

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Parents: Mother, Edna Busby Connel – Father, Theodore Connel

Mother is 93, native of Ruskin area. Lives in Sun City with daughter, Mertis, during winter. His Father was raised in Dade City. He came to Ruskin area because he was working on construction of US 41, which was built from bricks and asphalt.

Donnie was born in Bradenton, the fourth of five children. He has twin brothers, Leo and Leonard, and a sister, Mertis, who are older. His younger sister is Linda.

Donnie's Grandfather was born in the Cypress Creek area in 1887. He was a fisherman. He raised his family in a house on Paradise Island, in Cockroach Bay. Donnie said there were no titles to land at that time. People just found an empty spot they liked and built their home. He said Cockroach Bay was named by the Spanish. Looking at the beach from their ships, they saw so many crabs they thought they must be cockroaches.

For many years, there was a ferry from the Port Manatee area to St. Petersburg. Everything that couldn't be grown or made here had to be shipped in by boat. All ships came into St. Pete. His grandfather and Uncle Junior would take the ferry to St. Pete with their oxen and wagon. They filled it with supplies and brought them back to Port Manatee area. Uncle Junior had to run behind the wagon all the way home from the ferry. The ferry terminal eventually burned down.

His grandfather also filled the wagon with sweet potatoes and drove the oxen to Tampa. It was a long, slow, journey. He slept in the empty wagon on the return trip and let the oxen find their way home.

Donnie's father, Theodore, worked at The Rocking J Ranch, which was owned by Jack Stephens. One of his father's least favorite jobs was treating the cattle for screw worms. He would throw the cow on the ground, dig out the maggots and put a tar type antibiotic medicine on the wound before releasing the cow. He worked alone and it was a very hard, messy job.

Stephens eventually sold part of the Rocking J to a Dr. Gandy. His ranch was called the G-6. It later became the G-7 when another family member was added.

Donnie said children worked from a very young age. If they weren't in school, they were working. The three boys helped their father clear 40 acres for farming. First they would burn off all the Palmetto. Then, with the 14/15 year old twins driving the tractors, they plowed it twice to level it off. Leonard drove the big turn plow which was a 3-blade affair that first turned the dirt. Leo followed with a second plow that broke the clumps into smaller pieces. Driving tractors over the rough land was treacherous. Because Donnie was too young to drive a tractor, his job was to work with his father

digging out the roots of the palmetto trees and throwing them into a truck to be burned. The fields had to be plowed two or three times before they were ready for planting.

They planted Pongola grass and Bahia grass to feed their cows. Pongola grass grew fast and Bahia could with stand cold and drought. They also fed their cows a combination of citrus pulp, cracked corn and cotton seed. The three boys had to unload the 100 pound bags of feed from a 2-ton truck and put it all in the barn.

Donnie remembers a man named Jack Richardson who invented the high-crop-tractor to spray tomatoes. The regular tractors couldn't spray tomatoes because the stakes were too high. He said Richardson was a "carnie/rodeo man who worked on the farms during the off season." He was a very talented tinkerer and invented a lot of things to help the farmers. He never got credit for it.

Donnie attended Ruskin Elementary school for grades 1 through 8. At that time, the school was horseshoe shaped. The shop and home economics classes were taught on one leg of the horseshoe and there was a covered walkway to the other side where the classrooms were. People in the community were sad when the buildings were replaced with the more modern facility.

From the time he was in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, he worked. A Mr. Morgan would park outside the school at dismissal time and the boys would run to get into his truck. They would be taken to the fields where they would pick strawberries and tomatoes for five-cents a quart. He said there was another farmer who hired three of his classmates in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade to work in the fields. He said the money he earned was spent mostly on cokes and candy.

They built a pen in the woods out of cross ties from the railroad tracks to catch wild pigs. He said they would catch 400 pound pigs and walk them up a ramp into the bed of their truck. They would fatten the pigs up with cracked corn before butchering them. He said one time they caught a piglet which he named Porky. Porky was allowed to follow Donnie around outside the pen. One day Donnie came home and Porky had been butchered. He said he felt like he lost his best friend.

His brother, Leo, had appendicitis when he was about 9 years old. Gangrene set in and then Rheumatic Fever and he was placed in an iron lung. He was not expected to live. Donnie said the whole family, their minister and friends gathered at his grandfather's house and prayed. Leo recovered and eventually came home. Donnie said through all of this, Leonard, helped his twin keep up with the school work. Leo graduated with his class and now lives in St. Pete.

To entertain themselves, the children would get big boxes or the hoods of cars and slide down the hill that was formed by the railroad overpass on US 41. The west side of the overpass had a siding so trains could pull off the main track to fill up with water from a well for their steam engines.

Children spent many afternoons at the Ruskin Theater. They could watch a double feature, a cartoon and news reel for 25 cents, plus 10 cents for popcorn and a nickel for a drink. Cowboy movie star, Gene Autry, came once with his horse Champion. That was a special treat and still fondly remembered.

Teenagers could cruise around the A&W Root Beer Stand and stop in for a Root Beer Float or to play the Pin Ball Machines. It was located right next to the Ruskin Drive In. But, everyone thought the best place to go was the Shell Point Road complex. There was a big swimming pool and a roller-skating



rink at the end of Shell Point road. Donnie said the kids never went to the beach. That came later, he thought, in the late 50s or early 60s.

Whole families enjoyed the Ruskin Festival Grounds. They held rodeos, fairs and Ruskin Festival Day there. During Festival Days, farmers would come and pour loads of tomatoes into the pond. High school boys would get into boats with no oars, they paddled with their hands. They would throw the tomatoes at each other. The winner was the last boat afloat.

When East Bay High School was built, the local farm families were dedicated supporters. Families attended all the games and other events at the school.

Donnie remembered there were two policemen in Ruskin when he was growing up, but he didn't think they had much to do. He said the community handled their own problems. It was a close knit community and if anyone got out of line, a couple of men would call on them and they either changed their ways or left town in short order.

When Donnie was in high school, a Dr. Gainey built Hotelier House in the area where Dooley Farms is now located. The Doctor would entertain guests with lavish barbeques and cookouts. Donnie was called upon to help take care of the Doctor's three boys, George, Jim and Tom during the festivities. Donnie said he and the boys would spend the time horseback riding and shooting quail. He thought it was a pretty good job. He said the Doctor would pay him \$10 or \$20, whatever he felt like for the day's work.

After graduating from East Bay High School, Donnie drove a truck delivering eggs. He was drafted during the Viet Nam War. When he returned home, he worked for Cargill Egg Farm on Balm Road and delivered eggs to all the Winn Dixie stores in the Tampa Bay area. He walked to work from old Sun City to Balm, approximately six miles each way. He remembers one particularly foggy day near 301 and 674. He said he could barely see the road in front of his feet. He said all he heard was "Bam, Bam, Bam as cars crashed into one another.

After he got out of the service in 1969, Donnie met his wife, Gloria, at the 6-Mile Creek Restaurant in Tampa. Her aunt owned the restaurant and he "always stopped in there for breakfast." They started talking and then going to church and dating. They were married in March, 1970. They had two daughters, Sherri and Kathi.

Today, Donnie is retired and still lives in a cracker-style house in old Sun City. He built the house in 2000. He said he wanted to build a cracker house like the one he grew up in, but they won't let him do that because it's against modern building codes. He and Gloria like to travel in their RV.

Donnie regrets that he can't give his children and grandchildren the same sense of accomplishment and pure joy that he got from the hard work and simple pleasures he learned as a child.