

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2009**

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*A bend of the Wild and Scenic Myakka River*

*Bob Johnson is a long-time resident of Sarasota County whose civic involvement has left many marks on the area. While serving in the Florida House of Representatives from 1970 to 1976 and 1982 to 1984 and the Florida Senate from 1984 to 1992 he raised millions of dollars for numerous causes particularly focused around the arts, environment and education. In 1985, he wrote the legislation that protected the Sarasota section of the Myakka River under the designation as a Wild and Scenic River.*

*Interview #1*

**Interview with:** Senator Bob Johnson  
**Date of Interview:** October 12 2009  
**Interviewer:** David B. Anderson  
**Subject of Interview:** Oral history of Myakka River  
**Date of Transcription:** October 14 2009  
**Transcriber:** David B. Anderson

*\*Important note: The first interview had proceeded for about 45 minutes prior to this section of the recording, but a memory card crash caused all that data to be lost. This interview picks up from where the first half left off.*

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**ANDERSON:** Do you have any favorite stories from the river you find yourself telling?

**JOHNSON:** Well, all the stories of the river—well, I've been down the river with the state biologist. Have you ever gone down the river with the state biologist?

**ANDERSON:** What's her name?

**JOHNSON:** There are several of them. But you know they go down the river about every three or four days and just check and see what's happening and whether someone has done any damage or anything. I could get you a trip down the river, but it would take you about five or six hours, you know.

**ANDERSON:** That would be fun.

**JOHNSON:** But you know we started a group. Mary Jelks. If you want to talk about the river, you can talk to Dr. Mary Jelks who started a group. She came to me about fifteen years ago and she wanted to start a support group called the Friends of the Myakka River.

And the Friends of the Myakka River was formed just to raise money and support the costs of the park and the river, and so far we've raised money to buy two tractors—both of which cost a hundred-thousand dollars apiece. And so they've been restoring prairie out there with these tractors. And then we've also given the park things like boats and cars and other things. Right now I'm raising money—I've raised 330,000 dollars to restore the old palm log cabins which are the historic cabins built during the Depression under the Civil Conservation Corps—built mostly by black people who were living out there in the rodent, mosquito, vermin-infested country building those palm log cabins. But supposedly they're the only log cabins made out of palm log in the country now. But we're going to restore those in the next two years. As far as favorite stories... almost all my favorite stories are related to family and land along the river. Like having a Thanksgiving dinner and looking out and seeing four deer in your front yard. Or one Thanksgiving we were down there and we saw like fourteen turkey walking across our yard. On Thanksgiving Day, that was very appropriate. But most of them relate to things like wild boar chasing my kids up a tree or something, you know. I just really enjoy walking in the woods and sitting there watching for an owl or even an eagle. One day I was showing my grandchildren how to attract buzzards and I put a bunch of chicken necks out on the river bank because I knew the buzzards would come in and take the necks. And the buzzards (there was fifteen-twenty buzzards) landed there and all of a sudden they all scattered all over the place and this eagle landed right there and took a couple of chicken necks and flew away, but that eagle scared those buzzards off like mad. You know, it's a bald eagle. And sometimes you can look up and see the bald eagles circling in the sky like a mile above the ground. You can just see the sun flashing off them. But you know, I've seen Key West Kites out there soaring. And just watching the animal life—I sometimes go down there for lunch and just set there and eat a salad or something on the deck and watch deer come out of the woods or an alligator go by or something. It's just the most peaceful place on earth. I'll take you down there some weekend.

Well the problem is it's being, and it's going to be more impacted and destroyed. I really object to putting more people on the river and parks and you know, so-called recreation—it may be wonderful for a city or county to say we've done that, but you talk to Mary Jelks, you know, they're going to have a river clean up day this week and they'll bring in canoe after canoe of trash. They even bring in tires. You can't believe what they bring in. People have no respect for it and then to think that you're going to put more people on there and have more respect and more responsible people, it just isn't going to happen.

**ANDERSON:** When did they have to start doing those trash pickups?

**JOHNSON:** They've been doing it for—I know Mary Jelks has been doing it for twenty years probably.

**ANDERSON:** But the amount of trash has increased?

**JOHNSON:** Oh yeah, I mean, you'd have to talk to her about the volume and stuff. I've been with them a couple of times when I was available and it's just unbelievable what they bring in. It's unfortunate.

Most of the good stories relate to the uplands. But I have been out with my canoe and an alligator will come by as long as the canoe almost.

**ANDERSON:** What do you do in those situations?

**JOHNSON:** Nothing. I was walking down the road one day and I saw this pile of kindling. It looked like a pile of kindling wood just stacked up. And I said, "well that's strange." You know I hadn't seen that before, so I got closer and it all started to unpeel. It was all baby alligators. They were stacked up on top of each other. So I decided I was going to get out of there because there was a mama around somewhere. Mama alligators are not happy people. They're not happy reptiles. They're really not. You disturb an alligator nest, you better be on your way very quickly because there is a mama around somewhere that's going to take after you. And that's what people who do that deserve. They deserve to have an alligator take after them.

**ANDERSON:** I guess so. Do you ever do the Christmas bird counts?

**JOHNSON:** No I have not. There's another man out there, Owen Comora who's the bird expert. All these people would be available to you, but Owen is the real bird expert. He's on the board of the Friends of the Myakka. I can get you a trip with him, with the river biologist. But I haven't been involved with the bird count. I've seen plenty of birds. I sometimes put on my DVD down there. I put a bird call DVD and I've had as many as twenty cardinals on my deck. Just from the cardinals calling on the DVD.

But I've never been involved with the bird count.

**ANDERSON:** That sounds like a cool historic thing they've been doing for many years.

**JOHNSON:** Oh yeah, well the Audubon especially has been involved in the official bird count, but the real expert out there is Owen.

**ANDERSON:** Are there trails around your house? Are you actually in the state park?

**JOHNSON:** No, no. I'm five miles south of the state park. Yeah I've got trails cut through there, and I have a golf cart with big lug wheels on it and I can go down the trails in my golf cart. Sometimes I come up on a bunch of pigs or turkey or...

**ANDERSON:** Is there hunting allowed?

**JOHNSON:** Well there's hunting allowed. I mean I haven't hunted in many, many years, but there is hunting allowed in season. And pigs can be hunted any day in the week on your property. There's no such thing in Florida as a wild pig. By law the pig is defined to be owned by the person whose property it's on. So if it's on your property and it crosses

the line, it belongs to me. And if it goes back across the line, it belongs to you. But if it's on my side of the line I can shoot it.

**ANDERSON:** Is that because they're invasive?

**JOHNSON:** Oh, I think the law was probably passed by people who went out and hunted pigs, you know. Some people used to very much hunt wild pigs and sell the pork. We had a claims bill up in the legislature in 1972, maybe, where this man claimed that he had lost over a thousand pigs because the state had bought the land up near Perry, Florida for a state park. But they had given him like eighteen months to get the pigs out and he claimed that they violated the lease. We didn't give him any money because it was a foolish claim, but anyway, pigs are still considered to be domestic animals as far as ownership. And a wild boar can dig up a hundred feet of road in one night. I mean you take a dirt road and a hundred feet, eight-ten feet wide, a wild pig can dig it up in one night.

**ANDERSON:** What are they looking for?

**JOHNSON:** Grubs... Looking for grubs to eat.

**ANDERSON:** They sound destructive.

**JOHNSON:** Well I can show you even on my property where it's like the field was plowed up and turned over.

I mean really. I've got a skull in there with two inch tusks, you know.

**ANDERSON:** You found it on your property?

**JOHNSON:** Well, I shot the boar a long time ago. You know pigs can reproduce every six months.

**ANDERSON:** Yeah, deer and pigs. They're just all over the place

**JOHNSON:** They're just really being driven out of habitat and are being confined to small areas and they're just destroying everything that's in that area.

**ANDERSON:** Do you know about that sewage line that broke? I read that there was a sewage line in 1985 that dumped something like ten million gallons of sewage into the Myakka River.

**JOHNSON:** No, there was no sewage line that dumped 10,000 gallons of sewage into the Myakka River unless it happened down in Charlotte County. And it never happened on the north river. And if it happened in 1985 I would have known about it. But the phosphate mines over in Arcadia in 1972 or '73. One of those big phosphate mine pits broke. The wall of the pit broke and it flooded the Peace River all the way down to the 41 bridge. And I went down there and I walked in phosphate muck up to half way up my legs. You know it was just mush. It killed millions and millions of fish. They had one up

in the Alafia River about six or eight years ago. Another phosphate containment pit broke and killed millions of fish in the Alafia River. But again this is where the failure of “Swiftmud” (Southwest Florida Water Management District) comes in because they fine these people like 500,000 dollars for destroying a river and destroying millions of fish. It doesn’t even begin to restore anything or replace anything; I mean it’s just—there’s no real enforcement.

**ANDERSON:** That’s upsetting to hear.

**JOHNSON:** And you know Tampa and Hillsborough County. The Tampa Water Authority has just built a big reservoir up there near Riverview. And they spent 120 million dollars and it was constructed defectively so it doesn’t even work.

**ANDERSON:** So much for that.

**JOHNSON:** Yup. Well.

**ANDERSON:** Well how did you get into politics?

**JOHNSON:** Well I always wanted to be in politics and, you know, going back to college, one of my roommates’ fathers was Speaker of the House and another one of my friend’s father was a senator. I used to go down and watch them debate when I was in college so I decided a long, long time ago that I was going to be a senator someday. And I did.

**ANDERSON:** Follow the path?

**JOHNSON:** Well I just knew what I wanted to do and I did it. And you know, I came to Sarasota because it was basically a city of the arts and education. And even though in those days it was not anywhere near where it is now in arts and education—because you know I saved New College from being destroyed in bankruptcy and built a lot of these art things here, but anyway. And it was also a county where someone with my views as a Republican could get elected.

**ANDERSON:** Is Sarasota still a Republican city?

**JOHNSON:** It’s still dominated by Republicans, yeah. But that goes back to 1959 when they elected the first Republicans.

**ANDERSON:** Well that was smart.

**JOHNSON:** Anyway.

**ANDERSON:** Yeah, you did. You saved New College.

**JOHNSON:** Well I gave Abby Weingarten an oral history about that about two or three months ago. Do you know Amy? Works for the *Herald Tribune*. Well she’s a reporter but she’s doing an oral history for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**ANDERSON:** Of New College?

**JOHNSON:** *Nod*

**ANDERSON:** I didn't realize that. That's neat.

**JOHNSON:** Yeah, she's with the *Herald Tribune*. She's a New College graduate.

**ANDERSON:** I'd love to hear that recording.

**JOHNSON:** I'm sure she has it. I know that they'll put it in the library some day.

**ANDERSON:** Well I guess we can start wrapping but, what do you think is the biggest threat to the Myakka River coming up in the future?

**JOHNSON:** Well the biggest threat to Florida right now is the lack of any comprehensive plan to manage the state growth. I mean you have sixty-seven counties who manage the growth. You have five water management districts that manage the water (supposedly). You have the Department of Community Affairs that's supposed to oversee the growth, but they've had some of their authority curtailed by this most recent growth management bill that just passed. So now you have—on the ballot next year you have Hometown Democracy which requires a vote of the people to change the comprehensive plan in any county. But what you actually have in Florida today is: you have counties—as an example, I was on the Growth Management Study Commission in the 1970s and what you find is we had counties that were zoned for like six million people in a single county and they only had the capacity to serve maybe five-hundred thousand. So if you take all the comprehensive plans of Florida and look at what can happen today on the ground... I've heard there are as much as eighty million people allowed under the current zonings of Florida. And that, you know, you take Sarasota county alone—you take one unit per five acres, each divides seventy-five mostly; one unit per five acres, well that can end up being a couple-hundred thousand people. And when you look at the need for water resources, food and agricultural supplies, you look at the need for air quality in the sense of the habitat being preserved for the consistent air quality that's needed in Florida, well it doesn't add up. And that doesn't even start to account for transportation responsibilities that are effective or comprehensive as responsible to air quality and those things. It doesn't take into account things like affordable housing for people that you need to serve.

You know people don't know that the state of Florida has a railroad that runs from Miami to West Palm Beach every day. In fact, north of West Palm Beach. It's a private line, but for every passenger on there the state of Florida pays a fee. And why do they do that? It's because people in West Palm Beach and Martin County can not find affordable help: maids, cooks, butlers. So they live in Miami and ride the train at State expense. And they go back at night to their homes at State expense, and what you have is an economy where if in fact, that didn't exist, the people in Palm Beach and West Palm Beach (the affluent people) would not have the amenities they have because they couldn't and they won't supply them. Not that they couldn't but they won't.

**ANDERSON:** Wow, that's an interesting role for the government to take on.

**JOHNSON:** So you know, all these things add up to the real issues of Florida. When I was elected in 1970, the issues were water, education, air quality, transportation, and environmental issues. And 2009 they're still the exact same issues, you know. Same exact issues. And no solution, no comprehensive, measurable effort to deal with them. You know it's all hodgepodge.

**ANDERSON:** That's a pretty gloomy forecast.

**JOHNSON:** Well it's the real one though. And you know, if you read the newspapers at all, you'll find that something I predicted eight or ten years ago when I spoke to a group here (and one of the county commissioners walked out on) because I said that Florida was no longer going to be the state of choice for retirees. You know it was going to be Arizona, New Mexico. You know it's going to be other states because we're not providing infrastructure, we don't have a quality education program, we don't have a quality water management program that can guarantee water. And you want to see... you know what's going to happen is let the state dry up.

You know what they fight for in Israel? In the Middle East, you know what the fight is about?

**ANDERSON:** Land?

**JOHNSON:** Oil?

**ANDERSON:** Yeah.

**JOHNSON:** No. It's about water. Water. Where is the water in Israel?

**ANDERSON:** On the West Bank?

**JOHNSON:** Yeah but the water in Israel is out beyond the control of the Israeli government now. So you know. And I spoke to General Tommy Franks one time and he was speaking to the group and I asked him, I said: Everybody talks about oil. What about water? And he said you know that's very interesting because today the grand prince of Saudi Arabia landed at MacDill Field in Tampa and he came not to talk about oil but to talk about water. And all the Arab countries now are using desalinization and everything else. But the real battle for land over there is about water.

**ANDERSON:** That's interesting. You don't really hear that.

**JOHNSON:** Well that's what it is you know. Oil is a wonderful thing, but they make money and export oil, but the real fight is for land and the real argument in the Middle East is over controlling water. And there's not enough water to go around right now.

**ANDERSON:** So do you think Myakka is under threat of being tapped for drinking water?

**JOHNSON:** No there's no plan to tap the water, there's no plan to capture the water. All they want to do is put a pump in there and take the water out. And you know the Carlton Tract which supplies us water which is on the east side of the Myakka River. The Carlton Tract was designed to pump like fifteen million gallons a day. So far they've only been able to pump three to four million gallons a day. We get most of our water still from Manatee County, from the reservoir and we pay for it dearly. But we're pumping water now out of the Peace River. But you take another phosphate spill in the Peace River and where does that go? You have nothing but shutting the pumps off for two or three years. So we have no consistent water supply in Sarasota. We have no plan to have one that I know of.

So anyway. Well you play your tape and if you want to come back, we'll do it.

**ANDERSON:** OK.

**JOHNSON:** If you missed something there, we'll run it again for a while.

**ANDERSON:** I hope I didn't miss anything. That was all really good stuff.

**JOHNSON:** Well I don't know if that chip took anything, so...

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*Interview #2*

**Interview with:** Senator Bob Johnson  
**Date of Interview:** October 29 2009  
**Interviewer:** David B. Anderson  
**Subject of Interview:** Oral history of Myakka River  
**Date of Transcription:** November 8 2009  
**Transcriber:** David B. Anderson

**ANDERSON:** Ok, would you like to introduce yourself?

**JOHNSON:** I'm Bob Johnson, I have been with New College Since it went public back in '73 and I was in the state legislature and passed the legislation to save New College from going bankrupt, and later became a senator, and have supported New College for the last thirty-six years or so. And I've been supportive of its environmental and educational programs—been chairman of the Board of Trustees when we became autonomous. I was chairman for the first seven years and am still on the Foundation Board and active with the college.

**ANDERSON:** Well what about what you did as a senator for the Myakka River?

**JOHNSON:** Well the Myakka River started back—first of all, I had an opportunity in 1971 to buy land on the Myakka River, and a friend of mine called me and asked if I wanted to buy a piece of land with three other friends, and I said: You know, how much is it, and they told me and I said go ahead and buy it, and I never had seen it. So then I started going down there with my family—they were children then. And you know we

built a lean-to and a picnic table and just sort of hung out there on weekends. And then when I was in the house in the early '70s, a man named Horace Sutcliff came to me. He was the local director of the US Geological Service, and he wanted to do a study of the Tatum Sawgrass up at the headwaters of the Myakka River because the river is fed by the aquifer. So even though he was a federal agent, I got him state money that he couldn't get from the federal government, and we did the study of the Myakka River headwaters at Tatum Sawgrass. And out of that the federal government undertook a review of whether it should be a national Wild and Scenic River, but they decided that it was not big enough and long enough and all the other things they used that were fictitious. But nevertheless I filed a bill and passed it to adopt the state Wild and Scenic River Act for the Sarasota portion of the river. The bill was actually written by me and— David Thomas in the house filed a bill on the Myakka River. He had his bill before the committee and they chopped it to pieces. They put about twenty-five amendments on it. So Elton Gissendanner down there who was then the director of Florida natural resources came to me and said, "What do we do now?" So he and I sat at my dining room table that night and wrote a new bill and I passed it through the Senate basically the next day and sent it down to the House and told them to pass it, which they did. Passed it intact. And that created a Wild and Scenic River. The interesting thing is that Manatee County didn't want to come into it and Charlotte County didn't want to come into it. So we only have part of the river covered by the Wild and Scenic Act. And Manatee and Charlotte are still subject to all kinds of game-playing with the river.

**ANDERSON:** And what does that do to the Sarasota portion?

**JOHNSON:** Manatee County especially has a very serious affect because they control the headwaters and the Tatum Sawgrass. And therefore if they allowed any kind of aggressive use close to the river, it would be very detrimental to the river as a whole and especially to Sarasota County. The river south of US 41 is much wider. We have a lot of people down there that want to use jet skis and water boats and everything else. But in my bill on the Wild and Scenic, I outlawed airboats above US 41. So even though they come through there, there is very little law enforcement. They're illegal.

**ANDERSON:** What about the No Wake Zones?

**JOHNSON:** Well the whole Myakka River above US 41 is basically a no-wake river because of the manatees that come in there. The whole river should be a no-wake river. In fact probably the whole channel is, but I have seen many manatees up the river, not only adults, but infant manatees. So the no-wake was for a number of reasons. One is for the protection of the manatees and the other is that when these airboats were coming up and down the river, and the wave runners and jet skis—they would undermine the river banks. When you come down the river as you did yesterday, you probably noticed there were some high bluffs along the river and when you have a lot of high speed through there, the waves undercut the bluff and you have more collapsing into the river. And not only silt, but you have the fact that you lose river bank.

**ANDERSON:** It makes it wider and shallower?

**JOHNSON:** It makes the river wider and shallower. There are times when the river, especially when there's a drought, around April-May, there are parts of the river that you can walk across without getting water up to your knees. I've walked across the river many times. But you know there are places that you can walk across and it will be almost dry. There are times when you can not canoe on the river without dragging your canoe across the river bottom

**ANDERSON:** Are these fluctuations natural?

**JOHNSON:** Well they're natural in the sense that when they're left alone, but they're also somewhat unnatural when you get the filtration and silt from the heavy duty vessels going through there at high speeds. They only aggravate the problem. And of course when we have a drought, when the river doesn't flood—I can guarantee you in that year we'll have a drought the next spring in Sarasota county because the river and the level of water and rainfall is a measure of what's going to happen in the spring. We've had really insufficient rain this year, so were facing at least potential of a modest drought in the spring if not a full drought.

**ANDERSON:** That's cool you can tell that. I guess you've been here long enough to know these things.

**JOHNSON:** Well you just—you know I don't go by rain gauges. I go by what the river does because—and right now the river hasn't flooded—really hasn't flooded at all in two or three years. It came up this year. It came over the bank at my place about six inches. And usually it comes over three to four feet deep. Usually when the river floods I have to either—if I want to check my house I have to either swim into the house or canoe in. But I've walked in up to my neck and I've been there when it was nine feet deep under the house.

**ANDERSON:** That's wild. Do you have to swim by alligators and stuff?

**JOHNSON:** Oh I've seen a number of alligators when I was out there walking in the water, and when the river floods they come up in to the woods of course. And they're amphibious, so they can. The last time I walked in there I saw two alligators about fifty feet from me on my right. And they both went under water so I just walked to the left and went up another trail. But I don't know where they went.

**ANDERSON:** Yeah, I noticed that. You kind of see their eyes and their nose sticking out of the water and then they'll just go under.

**JOHNSON:** You should have seen some pretty good alligators yesterday.

**ANDERSON:** We counted over a hundred.

**JOHNSON:** Well I've seen them up there at least twelve to fourteen feet long; as long as a canoe.

**ANDERSON:** You told me last time that you actually chased an alligator off your stairs with a broom?

**JOHNSON:** Yeah, during one of the floods. I was down there and I went down to check the place and make sure it was secure, and my wife called me and said there was an alligator coming up the stairs, so I went out and looked and its about a six-foot alligator coming out of the flood water. I guess he got tired but, I just went down the stairs and pushed him off with a broom into the water. I got a picture of him actually, walking on the stairs.

**ANDERSON:** So I was wondering how alligators walk up stairs. It's not a problem for them?

**JOHNSON:** Well I've seen alligators out there. I've stayed out there as much as a month at a time. Driven back and forth to Sarasota every day to work or whatever, but I've seen alligators five hundred feet up my road walking. And they go out at night and they hunt for a sleeping pig or something. In fact I have a picture in here of an alligator that's carrying a 200-pound pig. Remind me, I'll show it to you. But you know I've seen alligators—oh I woke up my wife one morning about 6 o'clock. There was an alligator walking back down the road toward the river. He'd been out hunting for the night. They just walk. They can run at a tremendous speed for the first hundred feet. I mean they can really run very fast for a hundred feet before their weight takes over. And then they can catch a pig.

**ANDERSON:** They're impressive creatures, for sure. Well last time I was here, I enjoyed your discussion of what Sarasota was like when you first came here. Do you want to tell a little bit about when you came here and what it was like?

**JOHNSON:** Well I first came to Sarasota in 1948 and we visited Ringling Brothers Circus out on Oriente Boulevard which is now Beneva Road. And the circus headquarters was right across the street from where the present Shrine Club is. The circus had it set up out there, its winter quarters. John Ringling had an airfield there made out of shell. And all of his barns and tents. But anyway, all of the roads were shell or dirt. I have pictures of US 41 in front of New College, 1940, when it was a dirt road. And the whole area—all of New College, all of the Ringling grounds, were covered by pine trees. The whole thing was changed. And there's only two things in that picture. And one of them is the Ringling mansion and the other's this thing up in the right hand corner which is the dog track. There was nothing else out there. There were three houses on Charles and Robert and then there was a museum, and then there was a dog track and all you had was this Tamiami Trail which was a dirt and shell road. And pine trees.

**ANDERSON:** So what brought you here?

**JOHNSON:** Well I kept coming back and forth to Sarasota for a number of years. And when I was in college I had friends that lived here. I came here and spent weekends with them once and a while. But I ended up going to law school and I really wanted to move into a county where the atmosphere was not only good education for my children, but

also had a sensitivity to the arts. And I wanted a county where there was a Republican base so I could get elected. I intended when I got out of college to become a senator and that's what I did. So when I first came to Sarasota there were 12,000 people in the whole county. When I came here after law school, I think I was lawyer 125 in the history of Sarasota County. Now there are over a thousand lawyers out there hanging around the county. So it's grown a lot. It's certainly changed. You know when you look at the bay front, the Episcopal Church and the whole bay front was all little houses. And US 41 didn't exist. The bay was right in front of the church and everything and the road was behind it. That was Orange Avenue and Pineapple. And in the early '60s they filled in all the bay front and filled in Bird Key. They filled that all in in the '60s and built US 41 there. In the '40s when you came into Sarasota, the Tamiami Trail went by the Ringling—and it came down to about 10<sup>th</sup> Street and then it went over to Orange Avenue and went south. And it went directly through what is now Harbor Acres and went down through that housing area. It didn't go where it is today. It went down through all the residential areas and it was all shell and dirt all the way south. And so they didn't get back over to the present location of 41 until they got down to Bay Road where the Chevrolet Company is. And the Walgreens down there. And then it picked up to generally what is the present-day route, but all of Harbor Acres was filled in. All of Cherokee Park was filled in. All those residential areas on the bay down there were filled in. And we stopped dredge-and-fill about—well, about 1970 we stopped anymore dredging and filling without a lot of extensive permits and generally shut it down.

**ANDERSON:** Do you recall the first time you ever saw Myakka River?

**JOHNSON:** The first time I ever saw Myakka River was after I bought the property in 1971, and '72 I went down one day to look at the property. I couldn't get in, you know. I had to really chop a trail with a machete. I couldn't get into the place. Well there was the power line and I walked down the power line part way and chopped my way in the rest of the way. But the Myakka is just a special place in Sarasota County. It's hardly known well enough by the population as to what it does for the ecology and the natural resource. But the Myakka River itself is changing. You know like any river it meanders and shifts and then it's also changing as to habitat. The tilapia are taking over from the bass, and the better quality fish are being run out by tilapia. People—sometimes idiots—bought tilapia for their aquarium and then when they got too big, they threw them in the river. And so the river grasses and everything have been basically destroyed by tilapia. The tilapia eat a lot of larva, small fish, and so the sculpture and quality of the river has changed. And quite frankly it's become less and less attractive as a place to go on weekends because you've got boat traffic who ignore the law and then you have people, like right now, you had to pass the Venice park they're building there and that's going to put a lot of people on the river that we don't need. And it's not that they should be denied the river, it's just that it's the wrong location for a park. And Venice took advantage of the ranch [Lakewood Ranch]. They're wanting to increase their density and they incorporated the ranch and gave them more density, and in turn, the ranch gave them the park. So one bad decision leads to another bad decision and leads to the destruction of the river.

**ANDERSON:** Do you think the increased traffic on the river will be more detrimental to it than getting people to appreciate it?

**JOHNSON:** Well I don't now if you talked to Mary Jelks, but I'll tell you that when they have cleanup days like they did two weeks ago, they go down the river and pick up fifteen- twenty canoes full of trash. So how much do you think that will be multiplied? If this fifteen-twenty canoes full of trash is from maybe ten boats a day, at the most. And when you put a hundred boats or two hundred boats on the river a day, do you think they're going to be good stewards of the river? I mean do you think they care whether they throw plastic or drink cans or anything else overboard? Or lose their coolers or... we pick up tires, we pick up coolers, you name it, they've pulled it out of the river and that's with no traffic at all.

**ANDERSON:** Well you say the Sarasota population doesn't really know what the Myakka River does for the ecosystem and what's so important about it. Do you want to talk a minute about what's important?

**JOHNSON:** Well, I think my own view of the future of Florida is that anyone who comes here and wants to take benefit of Homestead Exemption and some of these other benefits of no income tax and that kind of thing ought to be required to go to places like Myakka State Park. They ought to be required to visit our schools. They ought to be required to understand the water problems and the water quality problems. You know, they ought to be required to look at the beach. I don't go to the beach. I got to the river. But I think the biggest problem for the future of Florida is that people come here for retirement. And they think they've done that... and they've raised their kids and they've done all these things, and they don't really get concerned about education or the environment or anything else. And to our detriment as a state. You know, we have to at least educate the people that come here as to what we are and what we're about, and what we need them to do to be part of a solution and not part of the problem. So, yeah, I'd like to see everybody that comes to Sarasota County that wants to live here be required to go out and, you know, get on the river, boat out there on the lake or something.

**ANDERSON:** You think that will help them love the place more for what it is?

**JOHNSON:** I think it might help them understand the intricacy of our environmental life here and what the combination of all this means as far as air quality and water supply and you know, I think the only way you know some things is to experience them.

**ANDERSON:** So what do you love about the river?

**JOHNSON:** Right now I love the quietness and peacefulness. I love to set there and watch the—you know whether it's a manatee going up the river or it's an eagle flying overhead in the winter or it's the river birds. We've had as many as twenty cardinals on our deck at one time. We've had—whether you watch the herons or whatever it is, I means it's just... I can just sit there and watch the world go by and it's always a different scene. Because I've seen herons pick up a snake, I've seen them pick up a frog. I've seen them pick up a rat. I've seen alligators with a pig. I've seen all kinds of bird life. One day I put some chicken scraps out on the river bank and these four or five buzzards came and started eating the chicken scraps and all of a sudden they all scattered like mad. And this bald eagle came in and landed right among them, you know. And the eagle of course

scared them off. So the eagle just looked there for a minute and I took his picture and he flew away. But that's the kind of thing you see. You know you see Key West Kites sailing and all kinds of birds and life. We have bobcats. We have pigs. We have deer. We have turkey. I've been down there on Thanksgiving Day and had turkey walk out of the woods. I've been there on Thanksgiving Day and had deer walk out of the woods. My grandkids love it.

**ANDERSON:** Yeah... Do you bring your family there a lot?

**JOHNSON:** Oh yes, we have family events there. Sometimes we spend the weekend there and they take canoes out. I've got three canoes down there and we take canoes out. I've got a golf cart and we got out and ride the trails in the golf cart and see what we can find. Go out at night with a search light and find deer and pigs and bobcats and I've seen two Florida panthers out there over the years.

**ANDERSON:** That's amazing. I hear they're very hard to see.

**JOHNSON:** Well they're... I've got a footprint of one of them because it was raining and he was walking down the road and I made a plaster print of his paw. But you know they're beautiful animals, and they certainly need to be protected. But we have right now—today we have poachers out there, you know. We have poachers, we have trespassers. It's just hard to control. I've got motion cameras on my place and sometimes see people walking around when you review it, you know. Trying to stick their noses in things and forgetting it's not theirs.

**ANDERSON:** That's disquieting I'm sure.

**JOHNSON:** Well I just love the river. You know it's been the most peaceful place we've ever gone to, and always been a refuge. But it's becoming less attractive with the lack of law enforcement and the opening of everything. Everybody—all the governments, city, county; they think they have to put people on the river. They want to use it as a water source yet they want to put people on the river. It's sort of counterproductive, but you know that's what happens and it's called progress.

**ANDERSON:** What is the problem with enforcement? It's not seen as a priority?

**JOHNSON:** It's just not a priority and financially they're not going to do it. The county has a series of range deputies and they do a good job at patrolling the upland and the county does have a river boat, and once in a while they'll come up the river, but they're not there often enough and long enough. I'm never out there once when I don't see people speeding down the river in jet skis or wave runners or high-speed boats. And I'm talking about twenty-foot boats that—I had a guy one day with a big red beard; he almost ran over a bunch of kids that were swimming in the river and he just looked back and laughed. And you know there just aren't enough resources as far as money. They're just going to do the job I guess where they think it's most effective, but they let people get away with it. I take their pictures when they come speeding down the river, but there's nothing you can do if the sheriff and the governments won't enforce the law that's out there.

**ANDERSON:** That's really a shame. It would be nice if you could write citations.

**JOHNSON:** Well there's the Fish and Game Commission, there's the Park Service, there's the Sheriff's Office, but I don't know that they have any collective cooperation, and I do know there's not enough of them to go around to make it work. I've seen them on the river. I've recorded people going up the river with guns. You know you see somebody going by my place with shotguns; they've already broken the law because there's no private land up there for them to hunt on. So you know they're going to be poaching. So I call the sheriff and the sheriff has actually arrested people out there. The range deputies—who are good people, they've actually arrested people out there hunting and poaching and they try to hide their shotguns under the tree branches when they get caught, because when you get caught, you forfeit your guns as well as a fine and everything. So if I see something really going on, I call the range deputy and they'll move in and do something.

**ANDERSON:** Well that's somewhat reassuring.

**JOHNSON:** I've actually had two pit bulls come running out of the palmettos and charge me on my property when there was a poacher out there behind them. And luckily I had a semiautomatic in my hand and I just laid down a spray of bullets in front of him. Well they stopped and the guy came out of the woods and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "What are you doing here because you have no business being here." And, "So-and-so said told me I could hunt here." And I said, "This is not so-and-so's land." Well, those dogs would have attacked me if I hadn't had that gun in my hand. But there are people who just think they own the land, and fortunately nobody's burglarized our place in the last 20 years.

**ANDERSON:** Do you remember your thought when you first saw the property you bought?

**JOHNSON:** Well my thoughts were that this was the Florida I knew when I was a boy and the Florida I wanted to preserve for my family. And I wanted to take a piece of it and just be able to say it's mine and belongs to the family and coming generations. But it's less peaceful now and it's less wild and scenic with all the people on it. I don't know if you saw people when you were canoeing.

**ANDERSON:** Actually, I didn't see anybody.

**JOHNSON:** Well you went down on Wednesday. Come down on Saturday. I'm going down there Saturday and there's always people on the river on weekends.

**ANDERSON:** Well, when you built your house, how did that process go?

**JOHNSON:** Well, I had to get a permit, of course, and I had to build a road in myself. The north-south road is about eighteen hundred feet from my house it's just a one-lane dirt trail that I had to have a road from there back to my house. So I designed that with taking out only like maybe ten palm trees. I tried to preserve every tree I could, and I sort of wound it through there. And I got my permits and I started building in '93, and it

actually took me four years to complete it. But I built it myself. I built it all with my own two hands. And my wife would help me on weekends and sometimes my children would come down, but I had semi trailer full of old building material. I tore down two old houses to get pecky cypress. The houses were built like 1890 and I tore them down to save the lumber instead of letting the bulldozer have them. So my house is all built with pecky cypress. Even the ceiling, the walls—the floor is all red Georgia oak. Its ¾-inch thick, tongue-and-groove. It took eleven thousand nails to put that floor down and I drove every one of them. It took me four years to build the house but I'll tell you it's probably built stronger than any house in Sarasota County right now. Hurricane Charlie came within twenty-five miles of it and we didn't lose a shingle.

**ANDERSON:** Now that's something.

**JOHNSON:** Hurricane Charlie went right up twenty-five miles east of it from Punta Gorda to Arcadia and we didn't lose a shingle. So I designed the house to be a light house with eight sides, but that got too complicated for the roof structure. The people that built the roof trusses said it was too complicated of a roof so I squared the back off and still left the front so that it had angles on it. So I can set anywhere in the living room/dining room/kitchen area and look up and down the river. It's about thirty-five feet wide and forty feet deep, and I got a deck all the way around it. It's beautiful wood. The wood itself is very... I would say artistic quality because you look at that old, old cypress, every piece is different. It's just like you could look anywhere and see a different pattern. So it's been a great, great pleasure for us to be there and enjoy it. My wife and I go down some weekends and just spend the weekends, and sometimes we go down for two or three weeks and just spend the time. We were going to do that this summer and that's when the river came over the bank about six inches so my wife wouldn't go down there.

**ANDERSON:** It sounds like a lovely home.

**JOHNSON:** Well you go down there someday and look at it.

**ANDERSON:** I will. It's after the power lines you said?

**JOHNSON:** Yeah I'm going down this Saturday. I'm going down to mow some of the roads and alongside the roads. Actually the more you mow the more wild game you have.

**ANDERSON:** How so?

**JOHNSON:** Well the turkeys, they like to be able to eat where they can see. They want to see who's around them, what's around them. So the turkeys like a clear space but they like to be near a place they can escape to, like the palmettos. And the deer like open fields more than of course the palmetto areas. So the only one that really lives in the palmetto area and likes it is the pigs and maybe the armadillos. But all the other animals prefer to have a lot of open space with place close by they can escape into.

**ANDERSON:** How are we doing on time?

**JOHNSON:** I've got about five minutes.

**ANDERSON:** Well is there anything you wanted to say that hasn't had a chance to be said?

**JOHNSON:** Well I just hope that a hundred years from now, it's still preserved. I would wish as best I can that Charlotte and Manatee County would come into it. Charlotte County has the biggest problem because they have hundreds of people living down along the river in mobile homes. And that's more Sarasota County than Charlotte in the mobile home issue. South of 41 we have hundreds of people that use those wave runners and airboats and boy, you try to do anything to regulate them, they're on fire. You know, they have a vested right to destroy what God created. Well it's very interesting, you know. I just hope that it will be preserved, and my experience with life is that everything goes in cycles. And what has been before will be again. So you have periods of destruction, you have periods of creation. It just goes round and round. You look at the history of man and you'll see the same cycles over and over again in the history of man, that what has been before will be again. The only thing we have is more technology or some other interplay, but in the end it all comes back around. Whether it's politics and conservatives and liberals or whether it's the environment preservation versus destruction, it all goes in cycles. So I think right now we're in a cycle of hold the line only because of the economy. When the economy picks up you're going to see all these developments out here trying to boom and boom and boom. And you've got some developments waiting to be built in Southwest Florida alone that are going to be equal to a half million people. When you look at the property that's already owned and ready for future development, you look at what's happening in the center spine of the state where they want to put a major six-lane highway from US 27 all the way down through the middle of Florida, and that's only to open it up. That's only to open it up and make it more developable.

**ANDERSON:** That's scary.

**JOHNSON:** Well that's what happens— that's the cycles we go through. And we're only in this cycle now because of the economy. We're not there because—I'll guarantee you if we were still riding high like we were three to four years ago, you'd be having more construction, and you know there's always somebody out there ready to take advantage of whatever comes around.

**ANDERSON:** Unfortunately.

**JOHNSON:** Anyway, you want to go down there sometime, you can't go into my property without going through a steel gate, but any time I'm down there, you'd be welcome to come down.

**ANDERSON:** Yeah, I was going to offer if you wanted help mowing the lawn on Saturday.

**JOHNSON:** No, we're using a small tractor and it's not a lawn, its eighteen hundred feet of roadway and some fields. I've got a big tractor; I've got a full-sized tractor right now. It's being serviced. Well anyway, if I can help you let me know.

**ANDERSON:** Great, well thank you.

