

Citrus Hall of Fame Oral History Interview
Florida Southern College

Interviewee:	Robert J. Barben
Interviewer:	Holly Bennett
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Camera Tech:	LuAnn Mims, College Archivist
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Transcription:	

Bennett: *Hi, Mr. Barben. How are you doing?*

Barben: Just fine.

Bennett: *So to just start out with this interview we want to start out with some basic questions. So could you tell us a little about where you grew up?*

Barben: Well, I was born in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. That's H-U-N-T-I-N-G-D-O-N, Pennsylvania, which is about 26 miles south of Penn State or State College. And I was born there on June 2, 1920.

Bennett: *Okay, I understand that you grew up on a farm?*

Barben: No, we had a farm. That is my ... it was really my grandfather's farm, my mother's father. And we actually lived in town. And the farm was just a mile north of town towards State College. It was about a 300-acre farm. And it was a farm that was owned by John G. Simpson, who was my grandfather on my mother's side.

And he had, it was a farm that had been in his family. And I think Daddy, Papa—that's what we called him—had three brothers. And he bought their interest in that farm. And there was some pretty land. We had a nice stream going through the property, and while 300 acres isn't much down here, it was a pretty fair size farm in central Pennsylvania.

Bennett: *So you had some exposure to, you know the farm life. Can you tell me a little bit about your education?*

Barben: Alright, well I went to grade school at William Smith Elementary in Huntingdon, for the first eight grades. And then I went to Huntingdon High School for four years. And after high school I went to Juniata College, that's J-U-N-I-A-T-A College, which is a Brethren church school, which I guess is probably about a hundred and fifty years old I guess. Now something like that, and it's ... has the distinction of being one of the foremost colleges in the United States that has people going to get advanced degrees.

Bennett: *Good.*

Barben: And it ranks with Reed College, which is out in, I believe either Oregon or Washington. And it was a very well-rated college, and an awful lot of boys that either go to med school or law school or go on to get advanced degrees from that school. And I graduated from there in 1941. And shortly after I graduated I received a job offer from Atlantic Refining Company in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. And I went up there in the fall of 1941 to get into their sales program. And of course I was just there a short time when Pearl Harbor came along, December the seventh, 1941.

And shortly after that in January of 1942, I volunteered for the Army Air Corp and their pilot program. And at that time to get into the Air Corp pilot program, you had to have a college degree. And of course later, they reduced the requirements quite a bit. But anyways, I took my examination in Pittsburgh, and we left Pittsburgh, I think it was about January 20, 1942. And we were sent to Montgomery, Alabama to Maxwell Army Air Force Base.

Bennett: *Now I understand that you went to and you were part of the first Lakeland Air Force training.*

Barben: In June of 1942, we were sent to Lakeland, Florida for primary training and the Stearman P-17 airplane, which was a twin engine ... or a bi-plane. And I think it had about a 90 horse motor. And we were the first English class or first American class in Lakeland. And at that time they had, prior to us, it was a Lodwick Garden Air Base, which is out where the Tiger Stadium is now. And there's still one of the original hangers, it's still out there at that field.

And we got there in June of 1942, and half of our class was British. And those boys had been in the Battle of Dunkirk, and they were sent over here for pilot training. And the instructors said that they were kind of glad to see us because as American boys, we had probably driven a tractor or driven a truck or driven a car, where a lot of those boys never had. So the ... in the airplane, the brakes were on top of the rudder petals. And so when they would tell an American boy to put on the brakes, boy, he would put them on real easily.

Where the British boys were either all the way on or all the way off, and so they tell us that they tipped quite a few of those airplanes up on the nose of that thing because they just hit the brakes a little too hard.

Bennett: *Could you tell me a little bit about how you were introduced to the citrus industry? I know you moved to Avon Park in 1943, but how did you get introduced?*

Barben: How did I get here?

Bennett: *Yea, how did you here.*

Barben: Well, we went through Sebring. We got to Sebring on December 15, 1942. And I had just graduated and gotten my wings and my commission from my advanced flying school Columbus, Mississippi on the thirteenth of December. And we had two days to get here to Sebring. And I had a friend that had an old two-door Plymouth automobile, and so we drove from Columbus, Mississippi to Sebring.

And the boy that I came with later on in December of 1945, that boy's picture was on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. And that; his name was Arthur Becktoft, B-E-C-K-T-O-F-T. And he had been shot down over in Germany, and had been a prisoner of war. And when he came back, he lived up in; I guess it was either Massachusetts or Connecticut. But anyways, his father was a friend of the author that drew all the pictures ...

Mims: *Norman Rockwell?*

Barben: Norman Rockwell. And we went to Norman Rockwell's place up there in Connecticut. And the man, I told him that I wanted a picture. They were selling pictures of the cover. And I said, "I want a picture of the cover from 1942," or 1945 ... excuse me. And it turns out that the man that was getting the picture for me was a good friend of Arthur Becktoft's father. And they said, "Oh, I remember Arthur." And I said, "Oh, we were good friends because we were in the Air Force together." And so that picture, Norman Rockwell had Arthur with the pants he had on before he went into service. And so by now the pants are four inches too short.

And it showed him in his bedroom, and it showed a picture of his girlfriend up on his dresser. And it showed his uniform coat lying on his bed. And he's standing there with the clothes on that he wore before going into the service. Of course, they were all kind of small. But anyways, we drove together from Columbus, Mississippi to Sebring. And that's where we learned to fly B-17s. Then we went out to Boise, Idaho. And then from Boise, Idaho we went to Walla Walla, Washington. And in May of 1943 we were getting ready to go to England. And unfortunately I wound up in the hospital so I didn't get to go with my group to England.

And then after I was in the hospital there for a month we were coming east on the airlines and we got kicked off the airline in Boise, Idaho. And I said, "Well, I used to be stationed here." So I got a ride from Boise into Denver. And the next morning, we got out to the airport, and we were trying to get to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And so, anyways, there was a full colonel command pilot, that meant that he had the highest aviator's rating you could get in World War Two. And he had a brand new B-17 going to Bowling Field, Washington DC. So I got us a ride on that airplane.

And coming into St. Louis, why he landed too far on the runway, and he went off the end of the runway. And had kind of a bad crash, and the airplane split right where I was sitting. So I ended up out in the weeds, and the boy next to me got killed. And so I was back in the hospital again for another month and this is a long way to tell you how I got to Florida.

Bennett: *It's okay.*

Barben: But anyways, I got back to my squadron after a month in Oregon. And I ran into a captain, and he said, "Well, Bobby what happened to you?" I said, "Well, I had a skull fracture and a few other things." He said, "Well you won't fly for six months." I said, "I didn't do anything. I was sitting in the back reading a magazine." And then in May of 1943, in the *American Magazine*, the first story in that magazine was, "There are no Atheists in the Skies." And that's what I'm sitting there reading, just before we crashed. And, so, anyway they made me transfer to a supply officer. And then in November of 1943, on a Sunday afternoon, we got a Tel-Ex saying that our squadron was being sent to Avon Park. And I remember we were sitting there playing poker and I was a terrible poker player. So I would limit myself to losing 20 bucks, and that didn't take very long. And I quit.

But anyways, someone said to me, "Well, you know, you were stationed in Sebring. What kind of town is Avon Park?" And I said, "Oh, you know it's a nice place." All I remembered was the mall downtown and where the Greyhound bus stopped. And that's about all that I remembered. And of course when we got here, there were 10,000 people out here at the bombing range, 3,000 people in town. Absolutely nothing for anybody to do except for to go to the show or something out there, and so those guys never let me forget what I said that Avon Park was a nice town.

But actually what we did, we would come to town. And you could come to town for 15, for 10 cents on the bus. And then they finally went to 15. And people got upset when they went from 10 cents to 15 cents for riding that 10 miles in from the bombing range. But anyways, most of us would go to West Palm Beach. Okay.

And the reason we went to West Palm Beach was because there were a lot of girls there, who were in the Navy. So a lot of us went to Palm Beach. But anyway, we were sent here in November of 1943 to replace the B-26s, who were here before us. So we became a B-17 training base. And shortly after I got here I got back on flying status because I had a lot of time. And four engine, they made me an instructor. And so I was out here about a year and a half as an instructor.

And what we did was we put the pilots and co-pilots and navigator and the bombardiers and the engineers and the radio people and the gunners together into a unit. And then after they were here for approximately three months, they were then ready to go to combat.

Bennett: *Okay, now how did you get your exposure to the citrus industry?*

Barben: Well, my father-in-law, Earl W. Hart, he had a couple hundred acres of grove. And he had a 9,000-acre ranch. And after my wife and I got married in 1945, he wanted me to stay here and go to work. And I said, "No." I said, "There were two things that I wanted to do. And I probably could only do one of them." But the two things were that I either wanted to go to law school or I wanted to go to the University of Pennsylvania and get an MBA. And so we went back home and I applied to law school and was accepted to law school. And so that's where I went.

Bennett: *Was that Dickinson law school?*

Barben: Yea, I went to Dickinson law school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. And it's now associated with Penn State.

Bennett: *Now what brought you back to Florida?*

Barben: Well I went to law school for the education. And I knew that I was not cut out to sit at a desk all the time. So every year, my father-in-law kept after me about coming back and going into business with him. And he had a law degree from the University of Michigan. And he didn't like practicing law either. So anyway, in 1949 he asked me to come down and talk to him. So I did. I made a trip from Pennsylvania down here and talked to him. And so we entered into an agreement that I could come down here and go into business with him.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: And he was a very nice gentleman. And we had a little agreement between the two of us. I told him, I said, "If you're giving me a job because I'm married to your daughter, forget it." Because by this time I owned 25 percent of what my father and grandfather's farm machinery business was. And I was also offered a job with a big insurance company that wanted somebody who went to law school. So I had some places that I could go, and also the FBI was hiring people and they came to law school trying to hire people. And so anyway, he said, "Well that would work fine with him." Unfortunately, we only got to spend nine years together, and he died when he was about 65 years old.

Bennett: *Oh, wow. So was that ... did he give you a lot of the education that you learned about the citrus industry? Or ...*

Barben: Yeah, in the first couple years, I spent an awful lot of time in the ranch. We were taking old scrubland and renewing it and planting pastures with different kinds of grasses. And putting in irrigation and Louisiana White Dutch Clover ... and we had one field with Louisiana White Dutch Clover in it that was high enough that it went up to the bellies of the cows. And we worked that ranch. We had about 5,000 head of cattle on about 9,000 acres, which is really good ratio.

But after a couple years, I said to him, "Look, why don't you let me go back and run the groves." I said, "Because that's where we're making the money. And then we're spending it all down here at the ranch." He said, "Well, that would be fine" with him. Because by this time he had been in the grove business since 1919 when he had come here ... he and his brother had been in World War One, and his younger brother had been killed as a Marine. I think he was about 25 years old when he was killed, Uncle Paul. And so that was when my wife's father and grandfather and mother had moved from Nebraska to Avon Park.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: Yeah ... 1919.

Bennett: *Now I understand that you started Barben Fruit Company. Was that an extension of your father-in-law's ...*

Barben: Yeah, yeah. The original was S. Y. Hart & Sons. S. Y. Sanford-Yale ... Hart was my wife's grandfather. But he was very prominent. I think he owned a couple banks ... little banks out in Nebraska. And he also had a store. Then after that son got killed, why he just couldn't stand it. So he had some friends in Mt. Dora. And he came to Mt. Dora, and then he came down here. And actually bought the land where our oldest grove is on the south side of Lake Letta.

But it was Jane's father who had actually done all the work. And he had a couple of sisters, and over the years we bought those sisters out.

Bennett: *Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about just the daily life of running the groves? Some of the things that you encountered ... some of the difficulties.*

Barben: Well, of course early on when I came here in 1950, course it was an awful lot different than it is today. And of course, in 1950 why they hadn't started hedging groves and ... we had irrigation. And the irrigations systems were, you had six inches pipe with little holes in them. And so you would have say, this was a 40-acres block, and this would be a row of trees.

And so your irrigation system would start here and you'd lay a row of pipe down here, which was a solid pipe. And you'd connect it here, and then you'd lay the sprinkler pipe out this way. And you'd lay it back out this way. Well of course the bad thing was that you had to move every row.

Bennett: *Oh wow. Why would you have to move the rows?*

Barben: Well because that's the only way that you could get water to the rows was to put that sprinkler pipe. It would just go maybe eight feet in each direction, or something like that.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: So you had to put it in there and say you'd leave it to run for a couple hours or so. And then you'd have to get in there and each one of those pipes was 16 feet long. And so then you'd have to get in there and take it all apart. And then you'd have to move it over to the next line. And so there was a lot of looking at the sky and hoping that you were going to get a cloud and that it was going to rain. And so actually in two, 300-acre block, it's probably going to take you a month to get over there so you were ... you needed water before you started.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: And so it was a lot different. And then finally someone came along and they invented a system that the thing was on four wheels. And it was a great big gun. And it would catch eight rows off the irrigation gun. And it would go down thirteen hundred and twenty feet. And the only thing bad about it was that if the wind came up you shooting it this way, and the wind was going this way then you wouldn't get ... it wouldn't get every middle. And of course you had a lot of different kinds of diseases. And ...

Bennett: *That was just kind of the daily life?*

Barben: And it was a job that you went from daylight to dark.

[break in tape]

Bennett: *So we talked a little bit about your time at the groves. One of the things that I read that you were a part of or a founding member of was the Florida Agricultural Tax Council. Could you tell me a little bit about that?*

Barben: Well, how I really got on that was I was elected in 1955 to Florida Citrus Mutual AND we were ... we had ... of course the growers we had a lot of tax problems. And so we formed this Ag Tax Council. And then the Ag Tax Council, we had all facets of agriculture. We had the timber people, the cow people, the citrus people, the beef people, and just everybody that was involved in agriculture had a representative on this Ag Tax Council. And I was appointed from Florida Citrus Mutual to represent citrus.

So anyway, when we organized that thing, why I was appointed chairman of the Ag Tax Council. And that thing lasted for about 20 years. And of course we spent an awful lot of time going to Tallahassee and meeting with the Department of Revenue. And coming up with ways that we felt were equitable ways to tax each one of the agricultural entities. And of course, that meant going to, you know, appearing before committees up in Tallahassee.

And I went up there quite a bit. And we had a couple people on the Mutual Board that was really quite acquainted in Tallahassee and the legislature. And one was Earl Wells and Earl knew an awful lot of those people up there. And so he could get you in where you needed to go to see those people. And then Jim, I can't think of his last name, he worked for Mutual. And he had been Doyle Conner's number two man in the Department of Agriculture in Tallahassee before he came to Mutual.

And I remember one time, Jim and I were going up there and I said to him, "Well, Jim, why don't you present this to these committees?" And he said, "No." He said, "I'm a hired man. And you're a grower." And he said, "They'll listen to you, but they won't listen to me."

Bennett: *So it was basically a representation of all the growers who are part of this committee?*

Barben: Yeah.

Bennett: *Of this council?*

Barben: Yeah.

Bennett: *What kind of taxing problems were you having? Was it on the property? Or...?*

Barben: Well, yeah ... it was of course taxes on your land. And the ... fortunately we had some guys who were representing various facets that knew a lot about taxation. And one of the things that we got passed was the Greenbelt Law, which of course, taxes land in a different way than you would be taxing the land if it weren't agriculture. So what we did was we would think about all the reasons why agriculture was really a gamble, and we would work that into the formulas that we used.

And of course it was very effective because a lot of, in agriculture, or a lot of the people in the legislature, not being familiar with all the problems that agriculture had. Like if a timber guy gets out there, he clears a piece of land and he plants trees, so you got to know something about all the problems that you would have in there. And then of course in our business about all the problems is the gamble that you take with the weather and everything to make it equitable. So that's what we did.

Bennett: *Okay. I understand that you helped found Highlands County Citrus Growers Association, could you ... that was a mouthful, could you tell me a little about some of that work?*

Barben: Well, the ... actually the boy that I remember that actually said that we needed something like that was Marvin Kahn, who was a grower in Sebring. And later Marvin was a member of the Citrus Commission. And what we were actually doing, we were forming a group and then we hired an

executive director so that this person could go to say the city council meetings and the county commission meetings and have a representative giving the problems of agriculture and present them to that board.

And so that's what we did, and of course, over the years fortunately, it's got to be a really, a good viable organization. And of course when we first started why it was funded by the citrus growers. And we still pay you know dues every year into that organization. And as years have gone on why now we've gone out and we've gotten people who actually do business with the citrus growers. And they have become associate members like the banks and the people who sell us fertilizer and seeds and trees and all that sort of thing.

Of course they got a great big list of associate members. And of course I was kind of shocked when we had our annual meeting this year as to how much money they actually have in the bank now. And of course when we first started, we didn't have anything, you know? And we had to get somebody that wasn't going to charge us an arm and a leg to represent us. And of course as the years go on, it's gotten to be a much larger organization. They, course, do things now that we didn't do when we first started.

Bennett: *I've always been a little bit confused about associations. Are they really just representative or is it an education tool as well. I mean what exactly ...*

Barben: Well, the ... 'course then in Highlands County Citrus Growers, each person on that board is a citrus grower. And, so ... we're actually looking out for the well-being of the industry. And of course, over the years we've had people that say they might belong to the Audubon Society or something. And we had a guy here in the county that he just actually hated farmers. I mean ... and he'd write letters to the paper all the time, you know, about how we were using too much water and we were polluting the lakes with fertilizer and all this.

So you get all these problems that come up and so what we actually do, we look into it, say like in fertilizer runoff, "Is this actually what's happening? Is this really causing a problem in the lakes?" And then of course, you have a problem where somebody may come and say build a house close to a grove. And you got the problem of spraying, and some of the spray gets on his car or something. And so it's kind of a PR thing. You know? And trying to convince people you know just how important ... like we got a guy who has a radio talk show here. And he doesn't say much about farmers. And he's always saying, "Well, you need to verify all your workers. And make sure that, you know, they're all legal and everything." And a lot of people have no idea what would happen to this country if you ran all the illegals out of here.

I mean actually it's really pretty hard. Like a grower, a guy comes in here, and he gives us some identification, we have to be very careful about what we can do with it. And so, like some of these guys say, "Well this here, E-Verify that he's legal." Like I just get on the telephone and say, "Hey, I got Mr. Jose Fernandez working for me. And here is his number." Well, in a practical standpoint, it doesn't work that way.

Bennett: *Right.*

Barben: And like I've got some people that have left me that I owe money to from my profit sharing plan. And I can't find them. And so I had my CPA write a letter and we sent the letters to the IRS, and we left them open under Social Security. And the letter says, "My name is Robert J. Barben, Robert J. Barben, Inc. I have a man I need to find out where he is. I owe him some money." So we sent these letters to Social Security. And about six months, I get them back, and they say, "Well, we can't forward these letters like you asked us because you didn't pay me 27 dollars to forward each letter."

Bennett: *Wow.*

Barben: So I write a check for 27 dollars for each one of these guys, and then I sent it back. And about three or four months, I get it back and it says, "Sorry, we can't send it in because you didn't send me 27 dollars for each one of the things." So I've gone to the bank, they've cashed each one of my checks.

Bennett: *Oh, no. Oh wow.*

Barben: I never could get it. I sent them a check, and said, "Here's where you cashed the checks." And so when you're trying to get some information out of the government it's not as easy ...

Bennett: *So this Highlands County Citrus Grower Association kind of does things for that ... helps with the PR and representation of what the citrus growers are in the community really.*

Barben: In the community?

Bennett: *Yeah, is it kind of PR for the community?*

Barben: Well, yeah, I mean like Ray Royce represents us now. And Ray goes to all the city or all the commissioners meetings and you'd be surprised at all the problems that he runs into from the county commissioners.

Mims: *Probably this labor thing is one thing.*

Barben: Yeah, labor.

Mims: *Can you talk a little bit about the changes since you first started working in the groves about the demographics of your day laborer? I mean from then until now ...*

Barben: Well of course I'd say now that a guy probably has to be a little smarter than he used to be. And of course things have changed so much since we've mechanized an awful lot of things. Like when we first started hedging why we put four or five of us on the back of a big truck and we'd go down the row and we'd actually clip the limbs so that we could find the ... get ... I've got a piece of machinery down there. And of course now, you call up a guy and they come here and hedge my groves and top my groves.

And of course when we first started, I can remember my father-in-law, he would let me cut the grapefruit, but he wasn't going to let me cut the oranges because he said that I'm cutting all the fruit off. Well actually what happens in a citrus tree is as it keeps getting bigger you get less fruit.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: Because it gets shaded out in the inside, and you just have fruit here on the end. But the reason for the hedging of the thing is that the sunshine, if you'll notice most of them are like this [gestures with hands], and this lets the sunshine in. And so you'll have a wall of fruit there. And so you'll be producing a lot more fruit because you have fruit from the outside of that tree into the center of that tree. Whereas if these trees grow together and shade out, then you don't get that fruit. So you really wind up, you produce an awful lot more fruit per acre.

Bennett: *So that's why they now hedge or top the trees so that they can ...*

Barben: Yeah, well you top them because you got a picking problem too and so you don't want that tree to get too tall or too wide. So you clip them off. But now you got machines to do it, where we used to cut down ... do it by hand. I remember one time, I built a platform on the front of a tractor and I put a generator in the middle. And I got electric saws that are on about six-foot poles. And ...

Bennett: *That's not going to do it.*

Barben: And if the insurance man would have seen me, he'd have run me off. But imagine, you've got two guys up there ...

Mims: *With lethal weapons ...*

Barben: These saws ...

Bennett: *On the end of poles ...*

Barben: and really ... and you're, you know. And so, you know, we've come along way. And now you've got Micro Jet irrigation, where you go out there and turn on your pump and you can do a hundred twenty acres at a time. And you can do this three times a week. So the horticulture part of it has changed so much.

Bennett: *So does that mean that you don't need as much labor anymore because of that?*

Barben: Well, you're probably taking care of more acres with the same person, but instead of that guy walking down every row looking at the Micro Jet, now you got him on a little four-wheeler. Or you've got him on a John Deere truck. And so the equipment that you have is so much different, and so much better. My wife and I laugh, we have three boys and they all graduated. We have seven kids, and they all graduated from the University of Florida, four girls and three boys.

But the three boys, all got degrees in agriculture. And so which we've been very fortunate. And I've said to the guys up at the university, one time I said, "Well now you know how to grow it, show us how to sell it."

Bennett: *Yeah, is there more of a focus on marketing since then?*

Barben: Oh yeah. Our oldest boy is the chairman of a committee on this greening thing. And of course they've spent millions of dollars trying to fight that disease. But anyway, Bobby was saying the other day that an economist said to him, "Well every time you raise the price of your orange juice one percent, you probably cut back four percent on your sales." But he said, "Recently, our sales at one percent up, went down fourteen percent."

Bennett: *Wow.*

Barben: But now you have ... and I was reading the other day about how much competition you have ... and you know when you go in the grocery store, and you see all the liquids you can buy, and of course most of them are junk. And you kind of wonder why ... I remember I was on the board of a large concentrate plant for 25 years. And we finally sold out to Royal Crown Cola. And their advertising man came in and he said, "Isn't it wonderful. Now I can advertise something that I'm proud of." Rather than Pepsi, or Royal Crown.

Bennett: *So there's a lot of pride in producing orange juice.*

Barben: Yeah.

Bennett: *I looked at ... one of the things you did was worked at the Florida Department of Citrus School Marketing Advisory Council.*

Barben: Okay, we started this to put orange juice into the schools.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: And the way we got going with this was that ... and then again I got appointed to this from Florida Citrus Mutual, but even after I got out of Mutual, I kept getting appointed to it. I guess I spent, I don't know, 20-something years on this thing. But anyway, to finance this thing the growers taxed

themselves a nickel a box for two years. And we initially raised 14 million dollars. And then a man by the name of C. V. Griffin, I couldn't say this publicly, but bless his heart; he took us to court.

Bennett: *Really?*

Barben: And actually we weren't really ready to roll this out into a marketing thing at that time. But anyway, he took us to court because he didn't like something we were doing. And at that time, interest on money was high, maybe 15 percent or something like that. But anyway, while we were in court, we made four million dollars on the interest on that 14. So we wound up with 18 million by the time we started.

And what we did was that we hired school food service people to go all over the country and into the school and talk to the school food service people about oranges and grapefruit and various kinds of citrus. And how they could get this into the schools. And then originally when concentrate came in, they would sell the schools a drum of concentrate, a 50 gallons drum of concentrate. Well, the schools really didn't know really what to do with it. And so anyways, in the committee, and these people were all people in the industry, and it just wound up ... I kept getting elected chairman of that thing.

But anyway, we came up with a little four-ounce package that you have now in the school. And I think maybe it was Dave Hammerick from Tropicana or somebody like that that says, "Hey, you know, we need something easy for the schools to use." So that not only worked great for the school, but it gave them a place to sell it outside the schools and supermarkets and so forth. So we found out that that package could be produced very cheaply. And so then we got to put it in the schools that way.

And it was amazing, I remember one time going to Omaha, Nebraska and I spoke to 300 school food service food people out there. And you'd go into these high schools, and I wish I'd been smart enough to take a camera with me. But you just couldn't imagine all the ideas that these people came up with about how to use citrus. And so what we had was we had people stationed in the northeast and the west and the northwest and all over the country, and they each had a territory. And they would go into these various school systems. You know, to promote the sale of orange juice.

Bennett: *Now was it just orange juice that we promoted the sale of or was it fresh fruit as well?*

Barben: Well, it mainly was juice.

Bennett: *Okay.*

Barben: It mainly was juice. And course we hoped that you know it would spill.

Bennett: *Yeah.*

Barben: It would actually spill over because when you went to those schools of course they were taking fresh fruit and doing various things with it, you know to make it look pretty, so that people really liked it. I remember one time Earl Wells and I went to the high school here in Avon Park, and we had a sectionizer machine that was actually made in California. But that thing would sectionize the orange into six pieces.

Bennett: *Oh wow.*

Barben: And, so what we did was we just set ourselves up in a food line and we'd give everybody two or three wedges. And you know you would think here in Avon Park that the kids would get a lot of fruit. But they don't. Some of those kids had never even had an orange.

Bennett: *Wow.*

Barben: And we found out that very little of that was going in the garbage. And I remember some of the kids came in the kitchen afterwards you know looking for more. And of course there was ... you know we just did it as a demonstration. And I remember one time we went to, the Mutual board, went to Atlanta. And we went into stores and we were pushing orange juice. And we'd have a little cup of orange juice, there'd be a couple growers of us, and we'd be passing out stuff to people and we had 90 percent of people going out of the store with an orange product.

Bennett: *Wow.*

Barben: But then when you actually look at the cost of doing it, you couldn't actually do it.

Bennett: *Interesting. Well we're about at our conclusion time. Can I ask you one last question?*

Barben: Sure.

Bennett: *What are some of the biggest changes that you've really seen in the industry, in your time here?*

Barben: Well, of course, there've been a lot of changes. And of course, an awful lot of the changes have come from research, research through the Experiment Station. And the, course they came up with ... well one thing we used to have ... it used to be kind of the norm that you might have maybe 60 trees to the acre. And planting might be 20 by 30, or 25 by 28. And of course now you go out to the grove and it'll just be a hedged row down there.

And so were you used to ... I used to say, "Well if I could get maybe 300 boxes the acre, I had a pretty good crop." And now the other day, Bobby came in and said, "Daddy, we picked 300 boxes to the acre off those young trees and on the older trees we got 700 and 75 boxes to the acre." And I had a block of "earlys" that one time, a couple times I got a thousand to the acre.

But we had to be real careful when we were talking to the tax people that we used averages, that we didn't ... I had one grower that a guy from the Department of Revenue went to see, and he was bragging about how much he had produced. And it took me three months to get that out of the ...

Bennett: *Oh, jeez.*

Barben: ... turn that around. But you produce, and more fruit, you're producing maybe different varieties than we used to have. And of course you got with this greening, you got people flying their insecticides and nutritional on. In order to combat this greening thing now, we're trying to get growers in an area to all spray at the same time. And that's helped a lot. And there are just so many things.

I know my wife and I kind of laugh that the boys can't think what it was like when we started in 1950. Or when you go back to 1920, they didn't have any tractors or bulldozers or anything. They were grubbing this stuff out. And using mules and things like that, so it's just been a wonderful ... I can't imagine ... I just think of how lucky I've been to be able to do something like this. And of course, now I've always liked figures so now I mainly do the books and the boys do that. And then we just had one grandson who got out of Florida Southern, Bobby's just planting 60 acres of blueberries.

Bennett: *Oh wow. That's just awesome.*

Mims: *How was it, being inducted into the Hall of Fame?*

Barben: Well, I've said this, that when you look, I've been a member of that committee for a long time. And when you look at all the people that have made a contribution to this industry through research and all the stuff that IFAS has done, all the teachers like that have been up at Florida Southern. And like we call him, Little Bobby, Bobby, Jr. graduated up there, he started off to go to Florida. His grades weren't good enough so he went to Santa Fe for a couple of years. He's just floundering around. I said to

him one day, I said, “Bobby, your grandfather’s getting a little older and I’d sure like to still be living when you finish college, son.”

Well anyways, he transferred to Florida Southern, and there was a teacher there. And they just fell in love with each other. And of course Bobby had worked in the groves. And he and this guy, I don’t even know what his name is, I haven’t met him but they just got along together famously. And he liked Bobby because Bobby knew what he was talking about because Bobby had worked in the groves. You know and so we just feel like Bobby’s got a real good education. He’s just like a real different kid.

And it amazes me; I know an awful lot of people who graduated from Southern, like R. Jones’ father-in-law and his wife. And course, he’s in his 70s now. Bubba Dunson from up in Winter Haven. And it’s amazing how many people that Bubba and his wife, ’cause she’s going now, went to school with Southern, and how close those people are. It’s just amazing. And of course actually, you get more citrus education now than you get at the university.

Bennett: *It’s a great school.*

Barben: And when we were raising money for that Hall of Fame thing, why John Jackson called me one day and he said, “Bobby, will you help raise the money?” And I said, “Sure,” because we had two raise 200,000 dollars. And so he said, “We’re going to raise 50,000 on the west coast and 50,000 on the east coast, and you get the center. So you have to raise a hundred. But it was hard.

Bennett: *Yeah. Well what we discovered is that there’s a lot of people who really love the citrus industry.*

Barben: Yeah. And I’ve always said that when we have the most problems, when things look the worst, we get the most done.

Bennett: *Well thank you so much again for everything. We really appreciate you taking the time to sit with us.*

Barben: You’re welcome. Well, you know, I was sitting there. It’s amazing, you know, like we’ve gotten some good scholarships for Southern. And course Frank Bouis and I were good friends and we served on Mutual together and some other things. And saw his wife up there, and I knew she gave 50-50, 5,000 dollars and so I met his son. And I said to this boy, I said, “You know your daddy was one of the smartest guys I ever met.”

And Frank, I think he at one point after he had been out of school for awhile, went back to MIT, I think. And he was always coming up with something. And of course, you said something about the Hall of Fame, and maybe I didn’t get to say what I really meant. There are so many people that have contributed to this thing. And you know, just like my father-in-law, he came here in 1919, and he was a real pioneer in this thing. But he’s not in the Hall of Fame. And I just used that as an example, and that’s why I said when I finished up there, that I really wanted to share this with you.

Bennett: *Well, we really appreciate you sharing that with us.*

Barben: Because without him, what chance did I really have of being in the citrus industry? And of course I’ve really got to thank my mama. My mother’s father was actually the one who started the farm machinery business in 1890. He had five kids. My mother said he had 50 bucks. And he went into the farm machinery business, and he was a big success. And as I remember my grandfather, I was 10 years old when—we called him Daddy Papa—died. And if you would go into his old office, and on your way out I want to show you some pictures of what he did business out of, but you would say this is probably the meanest, gruffest old man you’ll meet.

But he had a heart of gold. And we had a big safe in that old office that was about six feet tall and probably about four feet across. And my oldest, one of my oldest cousins, was sitting in there one day with my Daddy Papa and there wasn't nothing to look at, had an old pot-bellied stove in it. But they had a beautiful house across the street. And my grandmother said to my grandfather one time, "John, now you've done very well for yourself. Why don't you knock down that old building and build something the girls and I can be proud of." And the story I get is that he looked at her and said, "Annie, if I do, the farmers will know that I'm making money and they'll quit trading with me." And this was what the Amish people told. They told my daddy. My daddy went to work for his father-in-law when he was 29. I went to work for mine when I was 30.

And I said, "A son who is in business with his father ain't much. A son-in-law is less." And you damn sure got to work hard. And the guy at the ranch, manager, he hated me. The guy at the grove hated me. And I remember one day down at the ranch, the ranch manager said to me, "Well, what are you going to do now?" This is after lunch. "Well, I'm going to go over and look at some pastures and see where they need fertilized and then I'm going to look at some fences that need fixing."

And then I said, "I haven't really decided what I'm going to do." And he looked at me and he said, "You know you must be pretty damn important around here to be able to decide what you want to do." I said, "J. D. let me tell you something, I didn't leave a business that someday was going to be mine to come down here and tell me what the hell I got to do all the time." And from then on, we got along fine.

Mims: *Well, this has been wonderful. Thank you.*

[END]