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Land Use Oral History Project
Patel Center for Global Solutions
University of South Florida

Interview with: Ms. Laura Starkey
Interviewed by: William Mansfield
Location: Odessa, Florida
Date: August 9, 2006
Transcribed by: Wm. Mansfield
Edited by: Laura Starkey & Wm. Mansfield
Audit Edit by: Kyle Burke
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WM: We always put a label on the disc by saying: This is Bill Mansfield, from the University of South Florida's Land Use Oral History Project talking to Ms. Laura Starkey, here in the offices of the Starkey Ranch in Odessa, Florida on August 9, 2006.

Ms. Starkey, we always get people to start out by having them state their name and tell us when they were born and where they were born. So let her go.

LS: Okay. My name is Laura Starkey. I was born on December 12, 1965 in Tampa, Florida.

WM: Okay, and how would you describe your current occupation?

LS: My current occupation is two-fold. At this moment I have half-time work for Flatwoods Adventures, which is my Dad's eco-tourism business. [See J.B. Starkey, Jr. interview with Bill Mansfield 8-9-06] I'm the director of business development and then I'm also the director of conservation lands for Starkey Ranch, Starkey Land Company. Which is developing an institute for the conservation area of the ranch, as we head down the road with our plans.

WM: Could you—um—Well I guess—um —explain what you do for the Flatwoods Adventures and then the development institute?

LS: Okay. For Flatwoods Adventures—I've been with Flatwoods full-time, for about two years, having left my teaching job to come help my Dad look at the option of converting Flatwoods Adventures into a non-profit organization. It's currently a for-profit business.

We looked at that project, that option for about six months and decided that it was not the best plan for Flatwoods Adventures at this time.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: At that point I stayed on board, on salary—you know, on staff, to increase marketing and business development. Just to help with smoothing out some of the business elements of it and kind of overseeing the business side of things, in an effort to get it to where it is closer to solvent.

It's not been a real— It's a wildly successful project, in terms of the public's experience with it—you know—the people that come out here. But from a business standpoint, it has really not been so hot.

WM: The newspaper article said that and your Dad said the he was “underwriting” the project.

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: And what's the Conservation Development?

LS: The conservation project is part of Starkey Ranch, the Starkey Family or Starkey Land Company. Well, Starkey Land Company is the land holding company, which owns the ranch, which basically is made up of family members. In general we just refer to it all as Starkey Ranch.

But as far as our plans for the future go, we are going to be developing portions of the remaining ranch in mixed use, traditional neighborhood design-developments, little pods of neighborhoods, a town center, a district park, different things like that.

So we have a master plan that we're developing on that. We're going through the DRI process—the Development of Regional Impact process. And part of that project, that overall plan for the remaining ranch is to keep a chunk of about roughly a thousand acres in conservation.

And alongside of that conservation area, we want to develop an institute which will, most likely, be a non-profit organization which will encompass the eco-tours, that type of educational element as well as possibly a research facility for one of the state universities. Ah—a place for people to explore the interface between man and nature as well as continue our being a part of the living history of this area.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: So that's—we're in the early planning stages of that, just as we are with the development of the ranch. So I'm in the wonderful position of getting to figure out what that institute is going to look like and how we are going to go about making that happen.

WM: Your father said that you were developing—what?—the Longleaf—or was it Greenleaf?

LS: Longleaf.

WM: The Longleaf area and you had to go through the DRI—Development of Regional—

LS: The Development of Regional Impact.

WM: Tell me about that process.

LS: Okay. Longleaf is separate from the DRI. That was done by my brothers. [Trey and Frank]. [See Frank Starkey interview with Bill Mansfield 8-24-06]

WM: Oh, so that's already been done?

LS: That's already [complete]. What happened is, essentially it's roughly halfway completed and they have someone, a developer who is finishing the construction of the second half of the whole project. That is separate—that's already visible, people are living there, mowing their lawns and everything.

Right now we're in the DRI process of the other part of the ranch, the remaining part of the ranch.

WM: Okay, tell me about that then.

LS: Um—well the DRI is a statewide permitting, required permitting process for any project that's over a certain size, a certain threshold of size. And we made a decision that it would be more responsible and more profitable but also have more options to do a really good, high quality responsible job, if we went the DRI route as opposed to “piece-mealing” off bits of the property as we had to back against the wall, selling off of pieces.

So part of it's been a decision from our family to go with the DRI, based on—mostly wanting to be proactive, on the offensive of what we're going to do with our property as opposed to reactionary, defensive decision making. So the DRI process was a decision that we made—oh gosh—two years ago now.

WM: When you say “more responsible”—could you explain what you mean by that?

LS: Responsible in forms of—we're looking at being able to keep a big chunk of the more—you know—environmentally sensitive areas and beautiful pristine areas of the ranch. Basically the area that we're using for the eco-tours now, that is the area we're going keep in conservation. To be able and be responsible and manage that land as well as preserve it—um—that's one element of responsibility that we felt.

Financial responsibility, in terms of doing things that took into consideration the needs of all of our family members with our varying ages and life-stages and financial needs. The “realisticness” of, it's not just Granddad making all of the decisions. He's passed on, Dad's older in years and now the third generation is making the decisions with Dad. And

we're not going to be here for ever. So [we're] kind of thinking down the road, generations from now. [What will be] the best, [most] responsible use of this property. Not only for ourselves, who have been stewards of it for the last sixty-some years, but also for future generations. So for this whole area, looking at this whole region as well as this most immediate area.

Also, [I am referring] responsibility in terms of social responsibility, in terms of creating a place that twenty, fifty, a hundred years from now, that is gonna be a place that people are gonna really value and say, "Somebody somewhere back sometime, really did a good job of making this happen." Whereas instead [of] being another cul-de-sac subdivision that could be God knows what fifty, a hundred years from now.

WM: Just to make sure I understand you, you're trying to balance economic realities with environmental responsibilities?

LS: Yes.

WM: Okay.

LS: Yes. And that's really what we've had to face over the last few years already. A lot of the decisions we've had to make, we've had to consider those types of things.

(Office Assistant delivers coffee to Mansfield and takes a request for coffee from L. Starkey. Mansfield & Starkey briefly discuss the temptation to nap after lunch)

WM: But anyhow, you need to face the economic realities, but you also want to do the right thing environmentally?

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: How did you—how do [you] know what to call it, environmental awareness, and social responsibility? What brought about that, that way of thinking? How did that evolve?

LS: It's just the way we were brought up. (chuckles) I don't mean to sound—you know—overly polished about it, but we just—I—ah think a lot of landowners, ranchers [and] farmers would agree, that as farmers or ranchers, people that are in agriculture business, taking care of the land is just a natural thing that you do.

And land management here, we grew up knowing what land management is about. From controlled burns of the flatwoods areas since we were kids. My granddad and dad have always done that; for certainly as long as I can remember. For the last thirty years, anyway, they have done controlled burns, and just being concerned about the crops, which are the cattle as well as the grasses and the pasturelands, and all of those things. So it just was a natural fit, literally. Being a ranching family, maybe we have it in our genes.

But we're a pretty sentimental bunch as well. I think most people are sentimental with the land that their family, you know their [forbearers] have raised them on. But I think we're definitely a pretty sentimental bunch with the property.

(Ms. Starkey's coffee arrives)

So—um—it's natural. [The way we were] raised, a sentimentality for the land. But we're not so sentimental that we are not realistic as well.

I think our generation, myself and my sister and my brothers—I think that we've had to look at the realistic side. We aren't ranchers. None of the four of us were really drawn to ranching.

So what does that mean? Do we hire-out ranching for the next few generations? Do we go against what—you know our parents raised us to be who and what we wanted to be. That's an honorable thing. Most people wouldn't argue with that. [It's the] desire of part of the American dream.

Not that bettering yourself means not becoming a rancher, but none of the four of us happened to really be drawn, professionally, to ranching life. So, that's part of that reality.

WM: Okay. I seem to remember in the newspaper that after your grandfather passed away, you all had to sell some of the land to pay the estate taxes.

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: If I recollect, the newspaper said that at that point ranching was a real economic liability. Is that [accurate]?

LS: Yeah. The issue is—ah—part of it happened when Granddad planned for the future by putting the top half of the ranch into the wilderness park.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: That you know—cut our ranching area by half. [Though] most of that land was not cleared for pasture, a lot of it was woodlands. And then having to face the estate tax, we did have to pay in cash. His estate was valued in land; therefore we had to liquidate. And [we] were able to put that thirty-five hundred additional acres by selling it to the DOT, who needed it for mitigation, [and so we] were able to add it to the parkland.

So, in effect, we were able to add to the parkland and having to do a couple of other sales—other small developments on the fringes, we were able to pay off the estate tax.

The issue with ranching is you need a certain number of acres, I don't know that statistic [my brothers, or my Dad] would probably know. A certain number of hundred of acres

are needed per head of cattle, in order to be viable as a business. So after all of these sales, initiated by the sales to the wilderness park, due to A) wanting to protect it for future uses, future conservation as well as B) having to pay off all that estate tax. The end result, we have to have a smaller space and that becomes unviable as a ranch.

Now, another possibility would have been to buy other property and continue ranching. Again it comes back to what the current generation really wanted to do with their lives. Did we really want to continue into the ranching business?

Honestly, like I said, (laughs) we're not ranching hands. So my Dad two years ago sold his cattle herd to a family that is [ranching]. [They have] a large spread and this ranch is a satellite location for them, [and they] continue to be a ranching family.

WM: Okay that clarifies things.

LS: Okay.

WM: Ranching is pretty demanding and a risky enterprise. I can see how you might want to think about doing something else.

LS: Yeah, it's never been an extremely lucrative business. I'm sure that Dad explained this in his interview, that it's a cyclical business. There is a cycle of the cattle industry in terms of sales of beef and everything goes in a cycle. You've got good years and you've got bad years. And the value, in this area, has become higher for the land itself than the cattle business.

WM: It's like one farmer I've talked to said, "In farming you make a living, you don't make money."

LS: Right. Exactly.

WM: So you came here full-time to work with the eco-tourism?

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: Tell me about what you—how you all set the eco-tourism up. Your father mentioned looking at another ranch, or another eco-tourism enterprise.

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: So tell me what you all did to adapt Starkey Ranch for eco-tourism? Not to adapt [the ranch] but to prepare it [for eco-tourism].

LS: Well I think he did his—I don't want to repeat what he probably went over, but he got the idea through a conference or workshop he had gone to and saw a couple of other ranches doing similar things and [he] started developing [this business]. He's got such an

inventor's creative, orderly mind. [It's] creative and orderly, I should say. He figured out building these buses, adapting them into tour buses. Then he hired a woman, Rhonda, who is still with us. She's the general manager and has been with Dad since the beginning. Since the year prior to opening [of Flatlands Adventures] to the public.

She helped him develop [the tours] She has experience with eco-tourism as well as some related fields so she was highly qualified to come in and help develop this. She worked with Dad. Dad went around with a tape recorder and drove through the ranch, talking into the recorder about things that he knows about and wanted to explore—you know—wanted to present more of. [She helped him] develop the route. They looked at how to—they added the information, the knowledge, and the educational pieces that needed to be in there for all of the different ecosystems so that [it contained] family and [community] history as well as the environmental education.

So they developed this tour script and they hired five part-time tour guides and trained them over several months. [They] worked really hard on training these women. [They] all turned out being women. They've been incredibly great tour guides. [One of them recently retired] but three of them are still with us. One of them that retired was here today, out there cutting the branches on the route, so she's still around. (phone rings)

(WM and LS discuss whether the telephone call will be answered.)

So they hired the staff and started marketing it through different areas. You know, got some area media coverage. [We] joined some different associations, worked on the marketing. [We've] produced brochures.

It's been a long road from a marketing and publicity standpoint. [We] got a good deal of attention, when it first started out as a brand-new [item]. "Wow! Look! An eco-tour in Pasco County, on [a] cattle ranch! What a novel idea." So you got the "new kid on the block" attention early on.

But, of course, you have to continue that [sort of publicity] and it costs money. You have to spend the money to make the money. So we kept spending the money and spending the money, and people were starting to come in, but because it was such a new project and a new concept for this area, and not highly replicated around. There were some other businesses to learn from and other people to learn from, but there was an awful lot of—um—"figuring it out as we go," which took several years.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. I was here when they first opened, working part-time in the gift shop, so I was around for the first year or so, before I got busy with my own career and graduate school. I saw it, somewhat at the ground level seven years ago. And then coming back two years ago and looking at the non-profit option, we could look back and say that we should have gone non-profit from the beginning. But seven years into it, it was a little too late to try and shift gears and change direction from a for-profit business to a non-profit. It is such a work culture change, if you know what I mean.

So we could have gone non-profit, that's one of the decisions—you know Dad's original thought was that this could be something that actually brought in a little bit of cash flow for the ranch. That was his original thought and that was his reasoning, I think, behind not going non-profit at the beginning. And he's been involved in non-profits for the orchestra and the master chorale and other arts organizations. We all know non-profit is full of fund raising and asking people for money and there is this feeling of, "Oh we can't be asking people for money." Which wouldn't necessarily be the case. You can still sell tickets for a non-profit. But anyway, he was still thinking that it could be an economic answer, for the ranch.

[But] not completely. I don't think he ever intended it to be, except maybe in his wildest dreams, *the* answer to encroaching development on a cattle ranch. So I think a lot of times people get the impression [that] is out there that eco-tourism is going to solve the woes of a cattle ranch that has encroaching development. I think that's a little naive to think that was going to ever be a possibility. I think he was just hoping that it could be one thing to bring some attention to this property and be able to share this property with other people, at the same time bringing in some money and helping us out economically.

WM: Kind of like another crop, so to speak?

LS: Exactly! Diversifying your crops.

WM: What changes have taken place in eco-tourism, here at Flatwoods Adventures? What changes have you made, or seen in the past seven years?

LS: Well, we have added different elements. We've added horseback riding, horseback activities. We added it and then we changed our business format where we contract it out, instead of working together and doing the overhead. We changed it to where we simply lease the facility to the horseback activities. So, we're not having to answer the phones for them and do the booking. He takes care of all of that. So that's one change.

Business-wise we worked out the best way to do that. Programming-wise, people love horseback riding. Our insurance people and our attorney don't love it, because it is high risk and they're nervous about that. I don't know if I should put that in there or not.
(laughs)

WM: We can edit that out if you want.

LS: Yea [its] okay. But you know, its um—

As far as the public goes, they love the horseback riding and having a petting zoo, and that sort of thing. That's just a part of being on a ranch that people can get their hands on.

Another thing is we have a pavilion out there now that we didn't have at the beginning. We rent [it] out for private parties and events. We have a moonlight festival that's been going on for two or three years now. [It's] wildly popular. Everyone loves it. People

come out October through May [on] the Saturday night closest to the full moon. We have barbecue, we have campfires, we have hayrides, optional horseback riding. We have folksingers around the campfire. Families come, couples come. [We have] groups, birthday parties, seniors, singles groups—you know—single individual people come. I mean it's just—uh—an amazingly popular event.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: So that's been a great thing. Right now we're in the process of developing new educational programs. We've pretty much stuck with the original tour. The actual two hour buggy tour, that we started out with several years ago is essentially the same thing we're doing today. So we're working on developing variations on that, so that people, who have been on it once, will want to come back and do something different.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: The problem is that there are a few of us that would love to come back time and again and bring our friends and relatives that are visiting. But for the most part, once people come on [the tour], they feel like they've done it. Where as horseback riding, they'll come again and again. Moonlight festival, they'll come again and again.

So when it comes to education, most people, not all of us, but most people just want to hear it one time. (laughs)

WM: We don't want biology 101 but once.

LS: Exactly. Exactly.

WM: Well tell me about the educational aspect of it. Have you worked with the school systems?

LS: Yes! We are an approved field trip site for Hillsborough County; I believe Pinellas County and Pasco County. So we have school groups from north Pinellas and north Hillsborough, primarily, and west Pasco. Logistically we have within a short driving distance so the school buses can get to-and-from in time. But during field trip season, [in the fall and in the spring] post-FCAT, until a few weeks before school is out, we're booked five days a week, double buses with school groups. And then we're booking in the afternoon for non-school groups.

So we're doing really well with the schools. For example we have a middle school teacher at Tarpon Middle School who wrote a curriculum book for—I think it's eighth grade children—a book called *A Land Remembered* written by Patrick Smith. If you haven't read it you really ought to.

Have you read it?

WM: I haven't read it, but several people have recommended it.

LS: Oh it's just a delightful read. It's just really interesting. We sell it like hotcakes at our bookstore. Children read it as part of their state curriculum, of state history. I believe eighth-grade is the year they go through state history. So it is part of their history and we do *A Land Remembered* tour for kids that are reading that book in their school.

[So this] one middle school teacher, Margaret Pascal, has developed a children's eighth-grade curriculum book on *A Land Remembered*. So she's working a lot with us and is really excited about maybe developing more stuff with us.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: She is so thrilled with what we're doing. She's so thrilled with what her middle school is doing with it. We've got some really nice collaborations going on with educators in the area.

—Ah—gosh there's something else I want to mention. We have seniors groups that come out. We work with tour operators to get groups out [to the Ranch].

We are finding, from a business standpoint, when you have groups come out, it's better financially for us. Unfortunately we've just got to pay attention to primarily [business], first and foremost at this point. Because Dad—you got to love him—has been pouring so much money into this. And anyone who runs a business [knows] you just don't keep doing that after seven years.

[You could] put it to charity, but he's been willing to do it. But at a certain point—ah—I feel like my job is to make sure we do everything we can to get away from that dependence on his checkbook.

So [with] the tour operators and the school groups you have the same overhead of running a bus with a group of six people—you know—tourist, people that pick-up a brochure at their hotel and come out. To have four or six people on the bus is the same overhead as having a group of forty kids or—you know—twenty adults.

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: So, of course it makes better sense for us to really push for groups. We won't turn away individuals, but in terms of where we're marketing it—things like that are ways that we're working it, getting it better. Learning as we go what's the best marketing and business direction to go to keep the place a float.

WM: Well have you worked with the school systems? Have you gone to them or have they come to you?

LS: We usually—we do some direct marketing. They come here, in terms of the tours. We don't go into the schools.

WM: I know, but in terms of scheduling.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

LS: In terms of getting them scheduling—

We usually send out notices, with like, summer programs and that type of thing. During the summertime we get lots of summer day camps or summer camps that bring their kids out for the day for a fieldtrips. So we've sent out letters about that. We've sent packets [of information] out to the schools. At this point that has pretty much gotten enough—you know—rolling with it that we don't—I don't think we have to send those letters out as much as we did a couple of years ago.

I know two years ago we were sending out letters to the schools, but [now] if we have to raise the price we might send a letter out saying what this year's offerings are this and here are the prices. But, that element, getting the school groups out here. Now they are booking as soon as they get their budget.

Schoolteachers are calling us. I think it's late August, at a certain point, when they are doing their planning for the year we know when that time is and we're just on hand with the scheduling book. Those teachers get in there and book it just as soon as they can. It's got enough going with it with the school groups.

WM: So it sounds like it's catching on but more slowly than you'd like.

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: What about environmentalist groups, like the Audubon [Society], or the World Wildlife Fund? Have you worked with them?

LS: Uh-huh. We've worked very much with [the] Audubon [Society]. We're on the Audubon's—um—list of important birding areas. The local Audubon Society group comes and does an annual bird count. One of our tour guides is an avid Audubon member and leader in the area. She usually brings out Audubon groups, different chapters throughout the area. So, Audubon, definitely.

We've had environmental educators out. We've had—goodness—various different environmental groups. I'm sure we've had Sierra Club chapters out here and different things. But—you know—the ones that have groups in the area do get out here.

WM: What kind of permitting process did you have to go through for the eco-tourism? What—ah—county and state agencies did you have to deal with for that?

LS: I don't know. I wasn't really in on that element of that. I can't answer that question intelligently. Rhonda and Dad would be the ones to ask.

WM: Well that's a good answer. I'd rather you tell me that than invent something.

LS: (Laughs)

WM: Now what about the environmental institute that you've talked about developing? Tell me about that.

LS: We're still in the early planning stages. I've been, for the past year, kind of getting out and collecting information, collecting ideas, meeting people, making contacts, networking and have started this strategic plan of the preliminary mission statement and vision statement. I'm working on a proposal for the family that will develop into a business plan. So we're still in the real early planning stages.

Essentially the idea of it is to have two prongs to it. One prong will be land management; the other prong will be people experiencing nature. If you think of it as the two prongs being man or humanity and nature, both take care of each other. There is sort of a symbiotic relationship between—you know—humanity and nature. In this day and age and in this area, specifically, nature really depends on humanity to take care of it.

We're not the arctic wild, where we just need to leave [nature] well enough alone which is to be said in itself. But, in this area we have to [for example] take the control burns into our own hands, because we can't really let nature (chuckles), we won't, we, this society won't allow nature to just bulldoze fires through here because of property and all of those things.

So, humanity, in this area has to take care of nature and nature takes care of humanity when we do that. So I'm seeing this as a symbiotic relationship between the two. The institute will have the two prongs of that relationship, with nature being taken care of through our land management plan, which will include exotic weed control. Invasive weed species control is ongoing. There's going to continue to be more things coming in as the world gets smaller. Control burns; managing pasture lands if they want [it] to stay in pasturelands, restoration of certain habitats, that type of thing. Other elements of that would be a biological research station, which would also be feeding into the bigger picture of taking care of land while we're contributing to that down the road—the element of taking care of nature.

WM: You said you've been collecting information, getting ideas, could you tell me about what information you've been collecting and where you've been getting the ideas?

LS: Yeah. I've—there is sort of a new term for what we're doing called Community Stewardship Organization, or CSO. There is a group out in Arizona called the Sonoran Institute. They have stated a network of these CSO's. It's still kind of a new concept right now.

It's basically the idea of you have a conservation organization [and] you have a developer. Generally those two groups have been diametrically opposed and in conflict with each other. But there are a lot of developers who really want to be conservationists. There are a lot of conservationists and environmentalists who are realistic about—um—that development is going to happen, so therefore it is those two groups that are willing to come together and say, "Let's do a great thing. Given that we're going to need to develop in certain areas, let's do it right! Let's make a development that is conservation oriented, that is community focused [and is] going to bring these things together in a good way."

So I've gotten involved with that group and in learning through different projects that they have and going to visit those projects. [I've] also been seeing what's going on with other TND [Traditional Neighborhood Design] New Urbanist-type of projects around. New Urbanism is an area that is beginning to embrace conservation development more and more. I think we're at the beginning of seeing those two philosophies join together.

So [we're] going to conferences and seminars and visiting other places and getting to know people that are other landowners that are going through DRI. Specifically developers that are conservation oriented [and] seeing other projects where people are successfully using green designs, green engineering, conservation oriented development. Housing projects as well as non-profit organizations, institutes and land trust areas, where you've got a development occurring with conservation easements on the natural parts of the development.

So, I've been looking at different models of—ah—other projects that are doing similar things to what we are doing.

WM: Now have these been—you've mentioned going out to Arizona, or was it New Mexico?

LS: They are based in Arizona. I haven't been out there, but I've met with them.

WM: What are some of the projects you've looked at? Have there been any in Florida?

LS: Yes. There—um—I know Spring Island, is—um—a conservation development out of the low country of South Carolina. It's not really the same that ours will be. It is a retirement settlement, second home, higher end—you know—minimal housing type. Like one house on a big conservation lot. Maybe [there are] thirty-six homes on this island. I can't remember how many. It's a resort style of conservation development. But, they've set up what they call a land—the Spring Island Trust, or the Spring Island Institute, an organization that oversees the land management and involves the community members in preserving, conserving their island, their space.

Prairie Crossing is another project up in Illinois, just north of Chicago, which is probably more similar to what we are doing, in that they are in a suburban area. They're about an

hour outside of Chicago. You can get there in forty-five minutes on the train. They're on a train stop.

They're working on prairie restoration, so they are taking farm land that before, you know 150 years ago, before it became farm land, it was prairie land. Which as far as natural ecosystems go it wasn't just sending it back to farmland. The land had gone from natural prairie land, to [being] farmland, which was very intensive and degraded and destroyed the prairie grasses and the prairie eco-system. Now it's moving into housing, so they are taking the housing area and restoring it back to prairie grasses. [They are] using old seed banks [to restore it]. Amazing stuff that they are doing.

Of course they had a different set of habitats. They have a different set of economic circumstances and a lot of [other] things are different. So I haven't yet found any projects that are parallel, or [instead] equivalent to what we're doing [here].

WM: Uh-huh.

LS: Parallel yes, equivalent, no. So that's why it takes lots of collecting and sorting out and taking bits from the way they are doing their structure and organization here and how they are doing their land management over there and how they are creating their [land] institute over here. So, [in] taking all those pieces together we're sort of inventing the wheel, but we're not fully inventing the wheel.

WM: You're inventing a wheel that will work here.

LS: Exactly, yeah.

WM: What kind of—I mean—how have you been received with this in the local area? I know with real estate prices just going up and up and up, are people resistant to this notion? Are they in favor of it? What kind of response have you received?

LS: Well it's funny. It's funny the responses we get. Funny as in interesting. Because there are so many people that are here that have been here for a long time. There are many people that are here, that are moving here every day.

Flatwoods Adventures has an interesting opportunity—or interaction with the public because across the yard over here at our offices, Flatwoods Adventures, every day we have the public coming in, either saying “I drive by here all the time and I wondered what you're about.” Or “All I want is to come back for my daughter's birthday party. We've come here the past two years.” But we have interaction, daily, with [the] public in this area and what we're hearing from them is a combination of—a lot of times the first thing they say is, “Oh we're so glad you're here still.” Or, “So glad to see open space.” “We're so glad you're not putting houses up.” “You're not putting houses up are you?” “You're not going to ever develop this, are you?”

I find [this] interesting, because when I get into conversation with them [and ask], “Where are you from? Where do you live?” [They answer] “Oh, I live in Trinity.” Well Trinity was a cow pasture about twenty minutes ago (laughs). I mean literally, it was just a few years ago that it was a cow pasture, like they are looking at here. It looked exactly the same, the Mitchell Ranch. Now it’s their home.

There is a real—I think the public is somewhat conflicted about their feelings. They move out here because they want the green open space. Yet, they are a part of the market that is pushing the green space out. So—and then they find themselves feeling conflicted because they are happy to be here, yet they are wanting it all to stay this way. Well it’s not going to stay this way because they’re here. You know—it’s a real conflict. It’s a real ambiguity, so—I find myself a little conflicted with that attitude. But to be fair, a lot of times when I—can say—in a gentle way (laughs) when I’m in a good mood—and I can say “You know, we all love it here.” The area is booming and people move here because they like it here.

So—but I—so we have had some negative reaction to early announcements of plans for the DRI, for the development. Because people hear, “Oh the Starkeys’ are going to develop.” And a lot of people, especially those who grew up here, who are from this area, who have raised their families here. [People] who are not from here but have been here for ten or more years they tend to [react], “Oh no! Not the Starkeys! They were going to hold out.” (laughs)

But when you sit down and talk to them and explain just some of the basic issues that are at hand. I mean we don’t have time to get into all of the reasons we’ve made [these decisions]. [There has been] years and years of process to get to this point and it’s still years ahead before we’re going to actually see anything different.

When you sit and talk to someone about just a few of those issues they start nodding their heads and go “Oh okay. Oh, you’re right! Oh wow! Yeah. I see what you mean.” So—ah—I think when people realize that this is just the reality; they don’t feel quite as harsh about [our decision]. Of course there are still a few people who are pretty hard-core about the decisions. But I’ve talked to a few people who are pretty hard-core and when I tell them the whole story, they do soften up about it.

WM: That is one of the contradictions because people want to live in the country and when they move to the country—

LS: They are part of the disappearance of it.

WM: Yeah, they help destroy the country.

But what about real estate people or developer people? How do they feel about this controlled growth that you are advocating?

LS: Um—I don't know the full answer to that. I'm not in that realm daily. I can tell you as I just did about the everyday public coming in, from my living or working with Flatwoods. I think Frank can tell you more about what the business world of developers and real estate people are feeling about it [See Frank Starkey interview with Bill Mansfield, 9-24-06].

I hear bits and pieces of people who say they are looking forward to having more real estate options and some alternatives to the same old conventional—um—stuff, that you see in terms of developments, the same old subdivision format.

WM: The sprawl complex?

LS: Yeah, so people are interested. I'm hearing just people sounding more interested in conservation development and mixed use, [where] you don't have to get in your car for every "dadgum" thing that you want to do, besides what's in your backyard.

But again I don't know the answer from the business point of view.

WM: I've talked to some folks, down in south Hillsborough County and they were farmers and were glad to see the development, because that increased the value of their land. Which gave them more leverage when borrowing money, but also gave them, when they said, "We're ready to retire, we can cash this in and retire comfortably."

LS: Oh, yeah.

WM: One of the individuals I talked to didn't like the idea of control or regulation, inhibiting what he would do with his land. I think property rights is the term he used.

LS: Yeah.

WM: He said, "I should be able to do with [my property] whatever I want."

LS: It's the backbone of our country isn't it? Property rights. (laughs) Arguably.

WM: But where does one person's stop and another's begin?

LS: Exactly. But that's the fervency, people getting up in arms, literally, over property rights. That's such an ingrained American sense of entitlement.

That's a whole other topic I'm sure.

WM: I don't reckon we need to do that.

What do you see—I mean you've told me about the plans that you all have put in place, but do you foresee happening? I guess you can [show] me a best-case scenario and a worst-case scenario.

LS: Happening with this ranch?

WM: Around here, yes.

LS: Hmm—Best-case scenario, I think over the next twenty years we're going to see—um—something really unique. A place that really develops into and grows into being some really charming and beautiful and warm neighborhoods. A lot of beautiful trees and some pasture land views, and wooded areas that are kept and an area where people are able to feel a sense that “This is my home. This isn't just a subdivision I grew up in. This is my home where I raised my children This is where I grow old with my partner, my loved ones.” A place where people feel that they [have] woods to walk in and go look at. And they can hear crickets and frogs at night and [can learn] not [to] be freaked out by snakes and raccoons running through their back yard.

WM: (Laughs)

LS: Because they understand that this is what we're here for and this is great. “I can walk to my coffee shop and walk my kid to the park to play ball and then walk that way and go have quiet time in the woods, by myself.” That's what I see as best-case scenario. And healthy habitats in the woods that we keep. And some place that is an example, a replicable model, a place that people from around the country can use as an example of a place that did it right. A family that made some hard choices but took a road of integrity and—made something really beautiful, and contributed [something that will last] to the seventh generation! (laughs)

WM: Okay. That sounds good.

LS: Worst-case scenario is—um—it doesn't get to be all that. (laughing) We lose the shirt off of our backs because we didn't go the get rich quick route. Sometimes the good guy doesn't always win—you know— I mean we're looking at the cost of going with green engineering and green design. It's expensive! It's expensive to do it wrong—you know? And it's even more expensive to do it right.

Hopefully we can get the numbers to match up where we can do a green design and do it right, because the market will demand it. Market demand will pay for it. I think our world is getting [to be] nearly a desperate enough of a place that whatever cost, we've got to do green design. We've got to [be] more energy efficient and alternate uses of our materials and resources.

It will happen. But, in the meantime, will the timing be right when it comes to us having to make the numbers work? We could miss it by five or ten years, and what have we got?

WM: I guess the worst-case scenario would be you stocking shelves in the Wal-Mart in Starkey Plaza.

LS: (laughs) Hopefully not Wal-Mart. At least Target. (laughs)

WM: But either you pay for [development] up front, by doing it the smart way, or you do it the cheap way and end up paying for it down-the-line.

LS: Right.

WM: So I can see how you'd want to get it right to begin with.

What kind of—I mean—are you aware of any kind of pressure from real estate people or development people to sell out? To go ahead and turn it over to them for a quick profit?

LS: I think my older brother Trey fields most of those calls, but I know Frank gets them as well. I get some calls from people thinking I'd be an option, an "in." But especially [my brothers] get calls weekly, with offers. I think now that we're in the DRI process most developers know that we're stuck in the mire right now of that process.

But—you know—there have been pressures in the past, but I think because we've been forthright with our decision making and proceeding with our plans that—I don't know if we're getting as much pressure now. Trey and Frank might tell you something totally different. I'm just supposing, from what my experience is, being in the environment here. So I think right now we're getting some pressure, but mostly in the form of offers and—you know.

Sometimes people just still come and say, "Could you sell me ten acres so I can build a house with a little pasture in the back?" That's when we have to chuckle and smile and say, "No. That's not an option."

WM: What about the county? I remember reading about the Tourism Development Council (TDC) in Pasco County. What county agencies or what kind of support did you receive from county agencies, and I guess support or advice or (unintelligible)?

LS: Well we work a lot with the county because of the permitting and were hoping to get a district park on part of property as part of our plan. We would like to see happen for our neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhoods and the county needs one in this area so we're trying to work out a deal with them. Still remains to be seen because it's a negotiation, so it's still up in the air. So we certainly have a good relationship with the county because we have been working them for years. SWIFTMUD— Southwest Florida Water Management District— we work hand in hand with them on a lot of things. Of course both of those agencies are on the review committee for the DRI. So we're having to answer a lot of questions to them about our application. So those— certainly the county and the Water Management District— we've had to work with Tampa Bay Water with right-of-way things and things like that. Other than that I would have to refer that to Frank to answer that better. He is more in that realm.

WM: Well, I've been throwing questions at you for the past hour. Is there anything you want to comment on that I haven't asked about?

LS: (Pause) I can't think of any thing. I was kind of letting you lead the questions.

WM: Okay. Well I'm about satisfied with the questions. And I'll just say thanks for taking the time to talk with me. And I always remind people that the information you've shared with me is going to be deposited in the Special Collections of the University of South Florida Library to be available for future research. We need your permission for scholars to have access to this.

LS: Uh-huh.

WM: I've got a release form that I'll have to ask you to sign.

LS: Okay. And that will be after we look at the transcript and get it corrected?

WM: Well, you can sign it now or you can sign it when you return the corrected transcript. Which ever suits you better.

LS: Yeah. I'll sign it, maybe when we look at the transcript and get the corrections on it and sign it then.

WM: Okay. I can do that.

LS: Okay. I'll be happy to sign it. I just will, to sign it at that time.

WM: Also I've been photographing everybody that I've interviewed, so can I take your picture?

LS: Sure.

WM: Okay. Well, let me turn this thing off.

end of interview