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Ann B. Hodgson (AH): This is Ann Hodgson with the Tampa Bay Oral History Project at the University of South Florida and we're here today with John Ramil. John is the president and CEO of TECO Energy¹, he's a life long Tampa resident, a graduate of Tampa Catholic High School, has an engineering degree from the University of South Florida, and has been with TECO for over 34 years. John, welcome very much to the program and thank you so much for being with us.

John Ramil (JR): Well, it is my pleasure to be here.

AH: I'd like to start just by asking, what drew the Ramil family to Florida and, eventually, to the Tampa Bay area?

JH: My grandparents actually settled in the area. They came from Spain and actually came to work in the cigar factories in Ybor City, and so we're, my wife and I are both second generation from Tampa.

AH: And so they came to the United States in what era?

JR: They came in the, it would have been back in **the** '20s—the late '10s, early '20s.

¹TECO Energy is the leading electric company in Tampa and comprises of Tampa Electric, People's Gas System, New Mexico Gas Co., and TECO Coal.

AH: And did they settle right away in the Tampa Bay area?

JR: They did.

AH: So having grown up in Tampa Bay, what are your earliest recollections of the Tampa Bay area?

JR: One of my earliest is fishing off the Gandy Bridge with my dad. That was one of our favorite spots to go and fish in that area.

AH: And what do you remember about the bay environment? This would have been in the '60s?

JR: That would have been in the '60s, mid '60s or so. I remember it, you know, as being fun to be out on the bay, around the water. I always enjoyed that. Fishing was kind of so-so; we'd catch some once and awhile, and we'd not catch some once and awhile. And one of the great things about now is the fishing in Tampa Bay is just excellent.

AH: And you are an avid fisherman, we should mention.

JR: Yes, I am.

AH: How did you become interested in science, in nature, as a child?

JR: I was good in math and science in school, so I tended to like those courses a little bit more, and teachers kind of pushed me in that direction. And that kind of continued from grade school through high school. And then when I went to college I wasn't totally certain what I wanted to do but engineering was suggested, to use both math and science together, and that's what I ended up studying. What I ended up studying, specifically, in the engineering school, I was in the civil engineering department, and they had a specialty that was in water and water resources. And you took specialty courses in water treatment, wastewater treatment, drainage, groundwater hydrology, those types of things. And that's what I specialized in.

AH: So then what after college was your career path?

JR: I actually started working for TECO when I was a junior in college. And I was part of the co-op program. We were on a quarter system at the time, and I would go to school for a quarter and then come to work for a quarter. And I did that for about two years, and it was a great program to get experience while you're still going to school. And when I came out of college, they offered me a job at the company and actually had an opening in their environmental area, and this was, when I started full time, was 1978 and a lot of environmental activity. The Clean Air Act², the Clean Water Act³, had been out a few years, a lot of regulations were happening for all sorts of industries, including the electric power industry. And we had a growing environmental department at the time, and that was my first job here, full time job here.

AH: So the years rolled down, can you tell us how did your career progress and how did you become engaged in environmental issues in Tampa Bay?

JR: Well, the initial job tied me to it. Plus, my interest in outdoor activity and fishing and my studies around water resources, you know, all came together for me to have an interest. And then that continued even after I moved outside the environmental area at TECO, but some of my first recollections, we were in the process, in the late '70s, of installing a lot of water treatment systems in our power plants to capture the waste water, treat the waste water, and keep it from being discharged to the bay. So those were a lot of our early programs to help improve the water quality in Tampa Bay.

AH: Some of the other folks who have participated in interviews have talked quite a bit about the degradation of water quality in Tampa Bay. Do you have specific childhood or young adult or early career recollections from that '60s, '70s era?

JR: You know, it's mostly looking back. You get, you know—I didn't realize when I was a child fishing, you know, how good the water quality could become because I had no point of comparison. Now that I've seen the way the state of the bay is and how good the water quality is, the clarity of the water, the sea grasses that are there, the fishing the way it is, I will often kid people that I never saw the bottom of Tampa Bay until I was about 45 years old because the water quality is just improved so much since I was a kid.

AH: Well, let's talk for a moment. You have had a huge role in influencing TECO's environmental initiatives over the years. Could you just give us some background and talk about

²The Clean Air Act is a lengthy and complex federal law containing many provisions to improve and protect the outdoor air quality in the United States.

³The Clean Water Act (CWA) is directed at maintaining and restoring the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of navigable waters, which are broadly defined as all waters of the United States.

the air quality initiatives, you know, what has TECO done in terms of plant modifications, programmatic modifications, to really facilitate clean air in the Tampa Bay area?

JR: Sure, I'd be glad to. We've done many things, both to improve water quality directly and then a little bit more indirectly through improvements in air quality in the region, and even going back to where I described earlier the waste water systems of the plant to keep, you know, water from being directly discharged to Tampa Bay were some of our very early efforts in time. One of the big concerns with power plants, when I first became involved in the industry, was the thermal pollution⁴ from the heat discharge, and that's where a lot of the focus was and all the studies were.

As we were putting a new plant, getting ready to put a new plant in to service at Big Ben in the mid '80s that was still a concern but was becoming more of a concern was pulling small animals through the plant, entrainment⁵ and impingement⁶ of those animals. And we started doing some studies and we actually came up with the design where we put some fine mesh screens on the intakes of the power plants where, as the water was drawn through the organisms were caught on the fine mesh screens, they were washed off, and then, under very low pressure, transported to back into the bay. So that was one of our early, kind of, innovative projects directly affecting the water quality in the bay.

We also had, as we moved into the '90s, we had as we were growing and really using all of the available space at our big plant, Big Ben plant, we needed to look for a new site to add generating capacity for the growing region. And the company for many years had a large piece of land between Cockroach Bay and Port Manatee for a future power plant. As we started to get close to needing to build that new power plant, the community became more concerned about another power plant on Tampa Bay.

And I think our leadership, at the time, did something very innovative and what seemed to be risky to them at the time; we actually formed a citing committee with people from the community, and it had business people, and environmental folks, and academic folks. And they got together and reviewed the need for the plant and agreed a new plant was needed and then set out to find the best place to put the plant, and we ultimately moved that original thought for a plant on the bay over inland into Polk County, and which is now our Polk County site.

⁴Thermal pollution is the act of altering the temperature of a natural water body, which may be a river, lake or ocean environment. This condition arises from the waste heat generated by an industrial process such as certain power generation plants.

⁵Entrainment is the unintentional trapping of large numbers of fish eggs, fish larvae, and juvenile fish into the cooling water intake structure because they could fit through the screens meant to keep them out.

⁶Impingement is when large quantities of mature fish and shellfish are unintentionally killed on the screens protecting the cooling water intake structure.

So we moved future impact off the bay, which was a very, very positive thing. As we moved from the 1990s into the 2000s, we started doing a lot more things with the respect to improving the air quality and emissions from our power plants and the air quality in the region. And I think that's been very helpful to the bay, particularly the reduction in nitrogen oxide emissions, which would tend to promote algae growth in the bay, which then restricts sunlight, and inhibit the growth of sea grasses in the bay.

And we've had several programs that have been improving the air quality in the region from our power plants starting in the early 2000s when we retired our oldest coal-fired power plant, the Gannon station, and we replaced that with what we now call the Bayside station, which is a highly efficient, natural gas fire generating unit. And we did that in the 2002 to 2004 time period. And at the same time we started that project, we had a project phased in over a number of years at our Big Ben station where we put all the state of the art controls on that plant to reduce emissions from there as well.

And over that period from about 2002, 2003 to about 2010, we invested about 1.2 billion in air quality control equipment in those two plants. And the effect of that was to reduce our sulfuric oxide and nitrogen oxide emissions about 90 percent from where they used to be. Our CO₂⁷ emissions came down about 25 percent and our mercury emissions came down about 75 percent, so incredibly significant reductions from where we had been at the time. And I think that has helped quite a bit in helping to improve the water quality in Tampa Bay.

AH: And of course, the Tampa Bay Estuary Program⁸ just announced this summer that the sea grass targets that had been set as part of the cooperative planning process were actually met this year.

JR: Right, right. And that's just an awesome accomplishment, particularly for a flats fisherman who really enjoys that.

AH: TECO has also partnered with the Department of Energy [DOE], I understand, in a carbon capture demonstration project?

JR: That's correct.

⁷CO₂ stands for carbon dioxide, which is a colorless, odorless gas vital to life on Earth. This naturally occurring chemical compound is composed of a carbon atom covalently double bonded to two oxygen atoms.

⁸The mission of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program is to build partnerships to restore and protect Tampa Bay through implementation of a scientifically sound, community-based management plan. The Tampa Bay Estuary Program was created by Congress in 1991 to assist the community in restoring and protecting Florida's largest open-water estuary.

AH: Can you tell us about that?

JR: Sure. That's happening at our Polk power station, the one I referred to earlier, where we now have a significant amount of generating capacity and actually are expanding the plant as we speak. Have lots of really exciting things going on at that plant, and one of them is the DOE Carbon Capture Project⁹. One of our generating units there uses a coal gasification technology where you take coal and you effectively take the pollutants out of it before you consume it, and you end up with a gas, much like natural gas. And that project lends itself well to study how we can take carbon dioxide out of the emissions stream from that plant. We've partnered with the DOE, and we have a nice project going on with some very promising results so far. We also have another project at that plant, and even though it's inland it has a direct positive effect on Tampa Bay.

As we've looked to expand that plant, our main source of water for the plant for use in the process and for cooling has been ground water where we have to pump large amounts of water out of the ground, and that's actually an area that's stressed from pumping. At the same time, the city of Lakeland and the city of Mulberry have been looking for ways to handle the effluent¹⁰ from their wastewater treatment plants. And we've partnered with both those cities and with Polk County, and we have built a pipeline from their facilities to our plant and then installed treatment in our plant so that it brings the water to a quality that we can use it in our plants and with that we now have a zero discharge system for their wastewater and for our wastewater at the plant and we're no longer pumping about five million gallons of freshwater a day out of the aquifer from that area.

Now the discharges they had from their effluent plants would ultimately make their way into Tampa Bay again with the high nitrogen pollutant, and with that project, you know, we've eliminated that. And I'm particularly proud of that project because it, just a few months ago, won the Edison Award, which is the Edison Electric Institute, which is the Electric Utility Trade Organization; it's the highest award they give to a member company each year. And we're not the largest member of that group, so it's quite an accomplishment for a company our size to receive that award.

AH: I didn't know that. Congratulations on winning that award. Is TECO looking at alternative energy options at all? Solar? Others?

⁹Carbon capture involves the separation of CO₂ from coal-based power plant flue gas or syngas. Commercially available first-generation CO₂ capture technologies are currently being used in various industrial applications.

¹⁰Effluent is liquid waste or sewage discharged into a river or the sea.

JR: We are. We're doing two things, starting with the projects I talked about in 2002, 2003 through a project that we now have going on at the Polk power station, we're moving more and more of our traditional generation to natural gas which is much cleaner, much more efficient form of generating electricity. At the same time, we've just started to move into renewable energies. We've had a lot of small installations around our service territory at the Museum of Science Industry, at Lowry Park Zoo, at some schools, but we did our first major sized project at the Tampa airport, their new facility there. We are installing a two megawatt solar plant on top of their parking garage and that was kind of our initial large size plant. We just announced within the last couple of months, plans for a 25-megawatt plant, which will be a large, utility scale plant. That will be at our Big Ben station, and we would expect to have that operating towards the end of next year, towards the end of 2016.

AH: What kind of an array is that in terms of design?

JR: The one at the airport is pretty much a fixed array just because of where it is and the limitations there. The one at Big Ben will be more of a tracking one to get the maximum efficiency that you can get from a solar installation.

AH: These are all tremendously innovative initiatives. We talked briefly about water quality earlier, let's turn to water quality and talk in a little bit more detail about some of the water quality initiatives that TECO has undertaken over time in terms of bay improvements. Can you give us an overview of these different technologies that you've implemented?

JR: We've had, you know, improving technology at our plants for quite a period of time and have gotten our plants to the point where we have no discharges from the plants, including the storm water that falls on the plants. The technology has evolved from capturing and treatment and spraying upland to now where you use reverse osmosis and actually treat it and reuse the water as much as possible, so we've eliminated, you know, quite a bit with that. And we've also looked to recycle every place we can.

I've mentioned the Polk project earlier that won the Edison Award which was our really big one, but also for a number of years at our Big Ben station the way you remove sulfuric oxide from your power plants is through what the engineers call a scrubber and you dissolve limestone in water, and you spray it, and the sulfur reacts with the limestone, and you remove it. It needs a lot of water, and we actually used wastewater from Hillsborough County to do that, so we're not using potable freshwater in drawing from the aquifer or the water systems there as well.

AH: TECO has had a lot of land management initiatives working in partnership with other interested groups around the bay. Let's talk for a minute about the land stewardship and habitat restoration activities that the company has undertaken, perhaps we could start by talking about

the Newman Branch project. Many of our viewers and listeners won't know very much about it, but that's 100 acres at Newman Branch Creek. What's the history on that?

JR: Newman Branch Creek is right near our Big Ben station and, you know, our activities in and around it have a potential impact to that area. And, you know, there have been environmental concerns about that, so we've watched that pretty closely. And we've dedicated a lot of resources and a lot of time to helping restore that—a lot of these things, I think part of Newman Branch, you know, when there's more farming in the area, they were channelized.

And a lot of things we've done have been to return those to their original states so that the land functions more as it was expected to be. An exciting thing that we're doing in that area also though is we've partnered with the Florida Aquarium and the Florida Fish and Game Wildlife Commission, and we actually have a—in the process of putting together a conservation area that will be close to our manatee viewing center at the Big Ben station. And they'll be able to do research there—in fact, they're already doing some research there—and the aquarium will be able to further their work in helping distressed manatees and things like that.

AH: The manatee viewing center has really been a focus of activity down around the South Tampa Bay area. How did the company come up with the idea to develop that site?

JR: It kind of evolved over time. The manatees are attracted to the warm water around the power plants, and when we built our last generating unit at Big Ben one of the requirements was that on the side of the plant where the water is discharged, there was a makeshift boat ramp that people would use, and the concern became that with that makeshift boat ramp the manatees were in danger of being hit by more boat traffic so we agreed, and it was the right thing to do to close off that makeshift boat ramp that was there.

And while it was a net good thing, there were some people unhappy because they liked having that boat ramp there. So as people thought about, Well, what can we do to offset that? We said, Look, the manatees come, you know, from November through April or so, each and every year; let's put something there where people can come and see them without disrupting them. So we started with a little walkway and a platform, and little by little it grew to what we have there now, and it continues to grow as we add more and more ideas of how it can be used.

And it's great because it accomplishes a lot of things. You'd go out there during manatee season and you'll often see buses of school kids that will come visit; there's folks from outside the state of Florida that are attracted to come visit there; we use our retirees to be guides at the facilities, so they enjoy doing that as well. And, I guess, it was five or six years ago, we finally got our own sign on the interstate with the exit for the manatee viewing center. And you have to hit something like 300,000 visitors a year to get your own sign on the interstate, so that was a milestone when

we hit that mark, and we continued to exceed it. I think last year we got close to half a million visitors at the site.

AH: I understand that you are now beginning to develop adjacent properties part of a new conservation initiative there.

JR: That's what I touched on earlier with the Florida Aquarium and the Florida Fish and Game Wildlife Commission. We're partnered with them. We'll have facilities there for them to do and display their research work, and we'll also use that to connect with our customers and display some electric technologies for them as well.

AH: Very interesting. TECO has been a long-term corporate presence in Tampa Bay. Can you talk a little bit about how the corporate representatives, the corporation has participated in the different planning agencies and initiatives, and how you feel the company has influenced the planning process through the bay?

JR: I think that, you know, one of the things that we have tried to bring to the management of Tampa Bay and really to a lot of things that we do is balance. Producing energy is disruptive, and it has an impact on the environment. It's also something that people need, our society needs, and our economy needs. And we're committed to doing that in a responsible way. And, you know, what I've learned throughout my career and especially as I had more and more responsibility placed on me in my career is that you have to balance things, and it's really difficult.

It's easy to gravitate towards one thing and, you know, just push that agenda, but I think we've always tried to strike a good balance in what we do in terms of providing, you know, good reliable service to our customers at a price they can afford and be responsible citizens when it comes to the environment. And we've run our company that way, and our folks are very involved in the community, whether it's chambers, planning organizations, different groups, and we try to take that same idea of balance out to everything we do.

AH: I understand that you have committed also to an energy technology center. Is that an educational initiative or—

JR: It is. You know the way that our customers consume energy is changing with new technology. The way we produce and distribute energy and even measure it is changing with technology, and with our technology center that will be coupled with the activities, with the Florida Aquarium and the state, we'll have a connection to our customers and be able to show them those new technologies that are coming out and developing.

AH: Well, we've been speaking about many of the science and technology initiatives that TECO has implemented over the decades. Let's take a break for just a moment and we'll be back with John Ramil, the CEO of TECO Energy.

JR: Great.

Pause in recording

AH: This is Ann Hodgson with the Tampa Bay Oral History Project at the University of South Florida. We've been talking with John Ramil, the CEO of TECO Energy. John, welcome back, and thank you so much for being with us.

JR: My pleasure.

AH: We were talking earlier about many of the air quality and water quality initiatives that TECO has undertaken over the decades and how that's affected water quality, and air quality, and quality of life in the Tampa Bay area. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your perceptions of Tampa Bay. How do the company, company employees, how do they think about Tampa Bay, and how does it effect them in their daily lives?

JR: You know, a lot of our people really like the outdoors. We have a lot of people that like to fish and boat as I do, and both enjoy the bay, and see it as a responsibility we all have to make sure we continue the good work and progress we've done with the bay and make sure we don't backslide **any** with respect to that. Ever since I started with the company, we've had a deep appreciation for the bay. A lot of the people I work for were avid fisherman in the Old Tampa tarpon tournament, and as I think about it, over time, for a while people used to have to go to Boca Grande to catch tarpon. And the stories now that you hear from the fishermen, the tarpon fishing during tarpon season is just as good in Tampa Bay as I think down in Boca Grande.

AH: What do you think are the significant planning issues that are facing Tampa Bay? Sea level rise has been discussed by many folks, but there may be others that the company is considering.

JR: Well, I mean, our issue is always infrastructure and making sure that we have the places to put our infrastructure, and that we have a strong company so we can finance the infrastructure to keep pace with the growing area, and to replace our aging infrastructure as we need to. So we're always looking to make sure that, you know, we've got the right land management where we can put our facilities and put them in ways that are compatible with surrounding uses, compatible

with the bay like we moved our last big power plant siting inland rather than on the bay, looking at those types of things and making sure we keep that balance.

As we think about our generating system, we touched on some things earlier. We're moving to cleaner and cleaner sources of generation, and we're doing some of that as I described through our own initiatives. We're getting ready now to start looking ahead the next 5, 10, 15 years under our new clean power plant that the country has where, you know, we are getting cleaner and cleaner sources of generation, and we look forward to that. And we look forward to the challenge of continuing to do that, keeping our reliability up and keeping our cost of electricity affordable to our customers.

AH: Well as we close out our interview, what's your vision for the future of Tampa Bay?

JR: Just keep it at a minimum as great as it is now, make sure that everybody who has some use or impact on the bay understands what a great resource we have there. And that we have to keep being good stewards of the bay and taking good care of it, striking that balance so that we can have the economy that we want to have here and we can have the great boating and fishing and other things that the bay allows us to have.

AH: We've been speaking with John Ramil. John is the CEO of TECO Energy. John, thank you very much for being with us today. I'm sure our viewers and listeners are going to be very interested to hear what you have to say, and we really appreciate it.

JR: It's been my pleasure. This has been a lot of fun.

AH: Thank you.

End of Interview