



NEIL COMBEE

Fifth Generation Floridian

By Todd Terrell

One of the neat things about this job is that I get to visit a lot of interesting places. I've been to people's homes, university laboratories, nurseries, packinghouses, barns and one time the sheriff's office. Whenever I get a new assignment and call the person I plan to interview, I never know where I might be traveling to next. Recently a gentleman I hoped to interview was actually going to be down in Homestead for a few months handling the tomato season there before he came back to Ruskin and closer to our home base. I was perfectly willing to make the trip, but I probably would have had a hard time explaining to the magazine why I had to charter a fishing trip on the expense account while I was down there. I don't think my wife would believe it took two weeks to get the interview either. But when I called Neil Combee to see if he wouldn't mind sitting down to talk with me, I was a little surprised by where the trip took me. Based on what little I knew of Mr. Combee prior to actually meeting him, I guessed I would be heading to Polk County somewhere in the vicinity of Lakeland. Instead he turned the tables on me. Mr. Combee asked where I was coming from. He quickly decided that since I was heading out from Lithia, why didn't we meet at Fred's Market Restaurant. He asked if I knew where it was. "The one in Plant City or the Lakeland one?" I asked. Mr. Combee was gracious enough to suggest that the Plant City location was closer to me. I couldn't believe it. A story was coming to me instead of the other way around. And it was going to the Market Restaurant. I would interview the Devil at Fred's Market. I've seen the Devil there often enough; he's the one that tells me to make that second (or third) trip through the buffet line.

Here is a struggle I sometimes face when writing these stories. A number of you reading this article already know and have known Neil Combee for years. To try and get to know this man enough between bouts of fried chicken and green beans to tell you something you don't already know about him is an impossible task. So I will only try and tell you what it's like to meet him for the first time.

Once I met Neil Combee I realized I shouldn't have been surprised by his generosity at all. He's that sort of person. It was the most two-sided interview I've ever conducted. I felt like he asked about me as

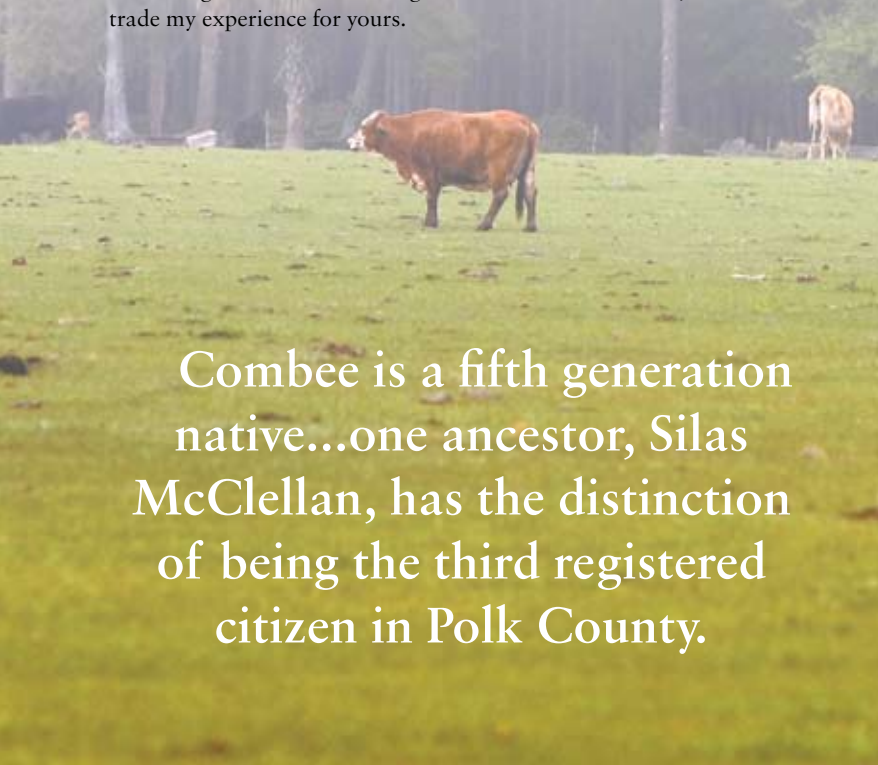
much as I tried to find out about him. He asked where I was from, which of course gave me the chance to return the question. There is something that happens when two Crackers meet for the first time. Immediately a question arises that must be settled to help place each of the individuals within context. It isn't an issue of class, religion or political affiliation. It is a yardstick that measures a truer value in the heart of a native Floridian. The question can go unspoken, but almost never unanswered. I went ahead and took the rash approach and asked straight out. For those of you keeping score at home, Combee is a fifth generation native. I can only lay claim to fourth generation status so I was immediately trumped. His pedigree beat me too, one ancestor, Silas McClellan, has the distinction of being the third registered citizen in Polk County. Considering Polk was established as a county in February of 1861, Combee's ties to history in the area are about as good as it gets.

When talking about the early days of agriculture in Polk County, Combee chuckled when he told me another family story. One of the grandfathers set his eye on a piece of land in the 1940s outside of Lakeland. After selling some other property and gathering all of the cash available, the proceeds were placed into a suitcase to make the trip to Alabama to try and negotiate a deal with a phosphate company for the land. The suitcase seemed a bit light, so in an effort to pack a bit more cash to sweeten the deal, the family car was sold and a friend was recruited to drive the would-be land purchaser to the meeting in Alabama. It is hard to imagine a business transaction of this nature today. Imagine gathering all of your worldly assets into a suitcase, selling your car to get just that bit more, and then hauling it all across state lines in hopes of finally realizing your dream. Well it worked. The original tract of land encompassed 30,000 acres, roughly in the area of present day Saddle Creek Park. It was this purchase by Combee's wife's grandfather that helped set the stage for the family's history in agriculture in Polk County.

It was these kinds of stories that we spent most of our time with sitting at the lunch table. Combee seems to take his three terms as a County Commissioner in stride. He is certainly proud of his work in the Commission and is very thankful to the agriculture community



that supported him throughout his terms. During the course of our meal together several people passed by with a glimmer of recognition in their eye. A few stopped to say hello and thank him for his service. After completing his time with the County Commission in 2004 (a long run that started in 1988), Combee was quickly appointed to the Governing Board for the Southwest Florida Water Management District. After serving for a time as the Board's secretary, he was soon elected to the Vice-Chair position. Combee's representation of the agriculture community simply changed venues as he transitioned from County Commission to SWFWMD. If it seems as though Combee's plate is full enough, I haven't even mentioned the work he does for Century Companies of Lakeland in land acquisitions. Century is one of the leaders in the area of real estate development. But for all of that, at the end of our conversation I asked the great loaded question that I usually save for the end of these sorts of interviews. When asked what he is most proud of, Combee didn't mention politics, policy-making or real estate at all. He considered himself a lucky man for having a wonderful wife of 27 years, two sons, one that looks to continue the legacy of ranching in the area and another a promising pitcher with a mean left-handed change up. His favorite times are weekends with the family at the ranch, hunting, fishing, cooking for the boys or attending baseball games watching the young man on the mound put another one across the plate. Many of you know the Neil Combee of politics and real estate and a lifetime of agriculture and surely know him better than I do. But I got to meet the gentleman kind enough to share a meal with me, and I wouldn't trade my experience for yours.



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