

# Citrus: More Than a Business



By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer

I recently attended the induction ceremonies for the three newest members of the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame, Peter McClure, Tim Hurner and Richard Kinney. It was a wonderful trip down memory lane.

When we remember citrus leaders and think about current industry struggles it is easy to get wistful. Production is down, certainly, but looking at the industry purely statistically would be a mistake since it is so much more than simply a business.

As one who grew up in the heart of the industry, I was always hoeing milweed, firing groves or moving irrigation pipes from one block to the next, and citrus wasn't even the main source of income for our family. I spent one summer planting trees, receiving a nickel a tree. If we planted more than a certain number, it was a "tree day," and we received a \$10 bonus.

I fondly remember driving through groves with my father, soaking in all he had to say about citrus. Often, we used small gray counters to count trees. He'd drive down the middle and count the trees two rows to the left, and I'd count trees two rows to the right. Now that he's gone, I cherish those times.

The groves weren't just a place for work, either. We had some fun there, too.

They were full of quail and it was easy to get a half-dozen or so. We were bad to ground-shoot them back then. Why, I killed 25 before I found out they could fly, usually bagging more than one bird with a single shot. I'm not proud of it now, but it happened.

And rabbit hunting at night was the best way to harvest a brace of cottontails. My best friend and I would sit in the spare tire on the hood of his family's old Land Rover, he with a Q-Beam and I with my single-shot .410, our fathers driving us around. After cleaning the rabbits, we'd go to the Teddy Bear restaurant in Winter Haven for breakfast. Fun times.

Groves with young trees and millet planted in the middles made good dove fields, too. A crisp Saturday afternoon under a cobalt sky seated on a hunting stool listening to Otis Boggs, the voice of the Gators, on the radio announcing, "Touchdown Florida!" was splendid.

Changing horticultural practices and too much government have made much of this fun no longer possible, but my boyhood experiences are seared in my mind like they happened yesterday.

Why the nostalgia? To reinforce what Peter McClure said at his induction ceremony: Citrus is more than a business; it is a way of life. And it isn't going away. An orange is still on the license plate of nearly every Florida vehicle because it's our signature crop. I firmly believe there will come a time, hopefully soon, when HLB is in the rearview mirror, and the next generation will make its own memories — some of work and some of play — of time spent in the groves.

