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## Florida Frontiers Radio Program #492

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## Transcript

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

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This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org). I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, Orlando actor David McElroy has been performing his one-man version of *A Christmas Carol* for more than a quarter of a century.

### **David McElroy**

I love all the characters because the emotion has carried almost to real life with me over the 25 years that I was kind of acting things before, even though I was doing the emotions. But I now feel emotionally involved with each.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

We'll discuss shipments of Florida phosphate to the Soviet Union.

### **Connie Lester**

By the 1970s, phosphate mining was the third largest industry in Florida, behind tourism and agriculture.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

And we'll talk about the traditional surfing Santas event, all that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

### **David McElroy**

Marley was dead to begin with, there's no question about that. The register of this Bureau was signed by The Undertaker, the clergyman, the clerk, and his chief mourner, Scrooge, signed it. There's an end to it. Haven't got all day to stand around mourning my deceased partner. He's dead as a doornail and that's that. My only concern is getting back to that counting house before these Christmas revellers start that din.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Charles Dickens first published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, during a period when many modern Christmas traditions were established, such as singing Christmas carols, sending Christmas cards, and decorating Christmas trees. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was instantly very popular. From 1849 to 1870, Dickens himself did public readings of *A Christmas Carol*, taking on the persona of each character. Since 1997, Orlando actor David McElroy has been staging his own one-man version of *A Christmas Carol*.

### **David McElroy**

I heard that Patrick Stewart was doing a one-man production of it, and I tried to find it, you know, of course, at the time the computer system was a little a little off. So, I found a recording of it and I listened, and it was him basically reading the book, kind of like Charles Dickens did. And then he would interpret the characters as he read. And I talked to Marilyn, my wife about it, and I said, you know, I'd, I'd like to try to take a crack at that. And she said what? Do you want to read the book? And I said no, said I would adapt it and eventually play all the roles. And we worked on it, and I worked on it, and then I had a reading of it, I think in October, in October of 97, and we decided to mount it. And we did it as a full, kind of a full production with we had masks with a ghost, we had a bed and fireplace, all these different things. And then over the years, we've just simplified it because we've gone so many different places. So that's how it got started.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

David McElroy's daughter, Chloe McElroy, has taken over from her mother Marilyn as director of the one man *A Christmas Carol* and has been familiar with the production from the beginning.

### **Chloe McElroy**

The first time I actually saw the projection was the first show, and my sister and I, with my Girl Scout troop, sang Christmas carols before the show. So, I actually remembered that one specifically because I was actually a part of it, and I was actually six years old at the time. So, I'm in my 30s now, so it's been a very interesting process, going from being a child and, you know, watching a full production of it, to actually directing it now.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

There have been dozens of interpretations of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, from an animated version with Mr. Magoo, many films, and even an opera. Some presentations have significant differences from Dickens' original story. David McElroy stays close to the original source material.

### **David McElroy**

It's almost correct with the novel. The thing I did leave out is he is flown by the Ghost of Christmas Present to a mine underneath the earth, where even the miners are celebrating Christmas because they and they're far away from their homes, and it is a rather long passage in the book. And I thought well that would be a little more difficult, even though I'm fine with all the other ones but. And the ending in the original Christmas Carol is that he does, Bob Crutcher comes in late, and he does kind of surprise him and, you know, berate him, and then and then, of course, you know, says I'm raising your salary in our production. We go the night before and do it, and then say the next day when you come in, we'll celebrate your newfound wealth and prosperity and happiness with Tiny Tim.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Over the course of his one man *A Christmas Carol*, David McElroy portrays 37 characters without relying heavily on costume pieces or props.

### **David McElroy**

It's vocal and physical. I come in with a top hat and coat, and then I switch into Scrooge during that time, and then after that I take it off and narrate it and I just have a white shirt and black pants. I think for one of the children I put on a hat and that's the only other time I do any costuming.

**Chloe McElroy**

My favorite character has always been Mrs. Cratchit. I think that she is really a feisty and fiery woman, and the way that, you know my dad David portrays it, I'm always looking for varieties of expressing the character. You know, I don't want her to just be angry, I don't want her to just be sad. Because she's my favorite character, I think I'd probably pay a little more attention to her than I do the others, but I definitely really love her because in a time where she's basically a housewife. She's taking care of all of the, all of the Cratchit children while Bob goes to work, and I didn't want her to seem like a typical housewife, and she really doesn't, you know, in the interpretation that David does of her. I think that she's just kind of almost an inspirational character for me. And I really love her. So she's my favorite.

**David McElroy**

Of course, I love Scrooge, but my second and third favorite is Bob and Mrs. Cratchit, because they go through such a transformation, as does Scrooge. They are almost tied to his coattails. You know, it's like when he's working for him 12 hours a day, making 15 shillings a week, and then he goes from that to eventually prosperity and health for his, for Tiny Tim, who was dying. I just think that they're inspirational, and because I love all the characters, because the emotion has carried almost to real life with me over the 25 years. I was kind of acting things before, even though I was doing the emotions. But I now feel emotionally involved with each one of them.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

Although David McElroy's *A Christmas Carol* is a one man show, with daughter Chloe directing, it remains a family affair.

**David McElroy**

Chloe, she's always said well you know, I'd like to do this. Call it the Christmas Carole with a woman rather than a man. And I said, well, yeah, you can have it when you take the cold dead script from my hand, but there's a couple of times I thought, hmm, maybe I've done it long enough, but right now I feel great. And it's like going to a gym. It's like every year I have to, when we rehearse it, I have to rehearse just half of it first. And then the second half, and then we keep going and going. And then finally, by the time you know we're up and going, I mean I'm energized, and by the end I'm tired, but it's tired energy.

**Chloe McElroy**

It's definitely something I told him that I would love to possibly take over from him whenever he's ready to let it go, and like he said, I don't know if he'll ever be ready to let it go. Like I didn't think that we would get this far with it, and look at that, we have. So, I did tell him I would eventually like to try to do it before he croaked, so it'd be nice to because I want him to see me do it once.

**David McElroy**

Thank you dear.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

David McElroy's one-man version of *A Christmas Carol* has been performed in multiple venues from private homes for 2500 people at the villages and at Seminole State College to name a few.

David McElroy

The ghost of Christmas Present was radiant and bright. His massive beard with ringlets of curls framed his jolly face, and his head was howling with holly and icicles that clinked together in glorious harmony. You have never seen the like of me before. Ohh, you puny little man. Have you never walked with my brothers in these later years? I can't say that I have. Have you many brothers? More than 1800. That is a tremendous family to provide for. This food smells delicious, may I have some? Of course. And drink some of my wine. You might like it. It's called the milk of human kindness. I don't know about that. It's delicious. Drink some more. You need it.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle. Visit us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) to listen to archived editions of this program, find out about upcoming events, watch our public television series, Florida Frontiers, and much more. That's [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org).

Joining us now is Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, Florida is not usually viewed as a mining state, but phosphate mining has played an important role in the state's economic history.

### **Connie Lester**

By 1974, Florida had been mining phosphate to produce fertilizer for almost a century, since 1883. As American agriculture shifted from small family farms to commercial production. In the post-World War II era, philanthropic foundations, the USDA, and land grant universities, initiated research programs to support a so-called green revolution that would feed the world through a system that relied on improved seeds, the use of chemical fertilizers, irrigation, and mechanization of farming process. In 1970, agricultural scientist Norman Borlaug, the father of the Green Revolution, received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work that was credited with saving over a billion people from starvation. As Brad Massey argues in his 2016 article, "The Hammer, the Sickle, and the Phosphate Rock" that appeared in the Florida Historical Quarterly, Florida's role in providing phosphate-based fertilizers played an important part in the Green Revolution, but generated state and national controversy in 1974, when an agreement between Arm and Hammer's company Occidental Petroleum and the Soviet Union placed the Florida phosphate mines at the center of the Cold War.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

With so many aspects of the Cold War in play, how did Florida's phosphate mining move to center stage?

### **Connie Lester**

Massey approaches the controversy from several perspectives. First, he outlines the economic, political, and environmental history of phosphate mining in Florida, and describes the events that produced the controversial deal between Occidental and the Soviet Union. Second, he examines the objections to the deal presented most notably by Florida Secretary of State Richard Stone. That quote "the deal threatened the Florida Environment, advanced Soviet Industrial Technology, was backed by American taxpayers and provided an essential finite agricultural commodity and a potential weapon to the Soviets." Finally, he explores the Carter Administration's 1979 decision to halt Florida phosphate shipments in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Reagan decision to rescind the Carter embargo. Massey bills his article on earlier histories of the Florida phosphate industry, including those of Scott Hamilton Deeley, Frederick Blakey, Lewis D Harris, HT Grace, and William W. Orr. He notes that while the earlier histories explore the origins of the phosphate industry, and the environmental problems it generated, none examined the relationship of the industry to the Cold War.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Connie, what was the economic impact on Florida, and how did Floridians view the industry?

### **Connie Lester**

By the time Occidental negotiated its deal with the USSR, Florida's mining industry produced 1/3 of the world's phosphate. By the 1970s, phosphate mining was the third largest industry in Florida, behind tourism and agriculture. The phosphate industry employed more than 61,000 workers and shipped 35 million tons of phosphate to locations around the world. Two companies dominated the mining and processing, International Mineral and Chemical Company, and Brewster Phosphate Company. Operations were primarily located in Polk County, and phosphate was shipped out of Tampa. The narrow geographic scope of the operations meant that people living in those two counties experienced the economic benefits and the environmental downside more than other parts of the state. Of special concern to many were the increased air and water pollution that accompanied the expansion of the industry between 1950 and 1970. As Massey documents quote, "Tampa area politicians complained about the phosphate dust that wafted over transporting trains, and Tampa motorists complained that the trains crawl through the city 12 times a day, causing major traffic jams. A 1965 Newsweek magazine story chronicled the clouds of phosphate dust that drifted across Tampa Bay and bathed neighboring homes in clouds of white powder." One Hillsborough County commissioner accused the industry of creating dam breaks at times convenient for the mining industry. He promoted heavy fines and mandated cleanups to end the practice. Citizens believe that phosphate pollution quote "threaten the health of humans, cattle, and orange groves." Nathaniel Reed, Governor Claude Kirk's environmental adviser, called the phosphate industry quote "the bad boys of pollution control," and challenged the industry to stop the God awful cloud that occurs when acid and ammonia plants mix emissions. Finally, many Floridians believe that the phosphate industry's water demands had a negative impact on the state's aquifer and contributed to fish kills and water pollution.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

So, what were the particulars of the deal and who opposed it?

### **Connie Lester**

The foundation for the Occidental/Soviet phosphate deal was laid during a meeting between Arm and Hammer, and then-Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, when Khrushchev expressed the nation's need for phosphate fertilizers to increase agricultural production to meet the nation's food needs. Hammer began a process of land and industrial acquisition that placed him in a position to negotiate a sale of phosphate to the Soviets. As Massey explains, quote, "he transformed Occidental from an oil and gas company into an oil, gas, and fertilizer company." President Richard Nixon's détente policy opened the last door for the deal. Opposition to the deal was swift and loud. It brought together environmentalists, public administrators, and a variety of Cold War warriors. Some compared the deal to the 1972 US-Soviet Grain deal that critics called the Great Grain Robbery. Others worried that there were no guarantees the Soviets would not use the phosphate for weapons production. A third group was already predisposed to opposition to any international deal, since they already viewed the phosphate industry as a new OPEC-style cartel. Of course, environmental concerns already in play entered into the list of apprehensions about the deal. Finally, a fourth group complained that the 20 year deal was created through a \$180 million taxpayer-backed loan. The complaints led to a congressional inquiry. When Arm and Hammer appeared before the Congressional investigating committee to address the issues, he came prepared with a variety of arguments. He claimed the deal was quote, "essential to global peace and prosperity." Detente and the potential for future trade deals would open new markets to American production. He pointed out that 10 private banks, including Bank of America, and some 100 small firms, were involved in the deal. Although the import export bank was lending the Soviets \$180 million, the Soviets were fronting \$40 million in cash, and he claimed, despite views to the contrary, the Soviets were quote "good for the money." Finally, he noted that Occidental was investing \$340 million in Soviet plants and infrastructure, in addition to the millions, the company would invest in expanded facilities in Florida for mining, shipping infrastructures, and Jacksonville port facility.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Now the 1970s witnessed economic problems that were influenced by global events. Did the phosphate deal figure into those negotiations and initiatives?

### **Connie Lester**

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought the phosphate deal into the national and international conversation again. In February 1980, the Carter Administration announced a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and blocked grain shipments and other Soviet bound exports, including phosphate. Massey quoted a New York Times reporter who claimed, quote, "the largest trades transaction ever negotiated between a US Corporation and foreign nation, the flagship of detente was in jeopardy." Occidental phosphate shipments represented less than 10% of Florida's phosphate production. But, Massey observed, the suspension troubled the entire industry, and some argued Cold War peace efforts. In 1981, acting on a campaign promise, Ronald Reagan lifted the ban. Occidental, the Florida Phosphate Council, and many American farmers and businesses applauded the boycott's end, but the lifting of the ban did not produce renewed prosperity for the industry. The high interest rates and reduced farm revenues forced farmers to cut costs, including fertilizer costs. In June 1981, phosphate shipments were down 20%, and the industry suffered at 15 to 20% decline in per share earnings for the 1981 fiscal year. Seven of Florida's 23 strip mines, and five of its 18 processing plants, closed. By 1983, 3670 phosphate workers were without jobs. Polk County was hit the hardest. In addition, the Seaboard Coastline

Railroad, the Tampa Electric Company, and the Port of Tampa reported layoffs due to the downturn in the phosphate mining and processing. Florida's brief foray into the politics of the Cold War global economy added new environmental concerns, and lengthened local industry to the 1970s Cold War detente, economic protectionism, and neoliberal market ideals.

### **Ben Brotemarkle**

Thanks, Connie. Connie Lester is Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES digital archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

This is Florida Frontiers. Every Christmas Eve, hundreds of people dressed as Santa Claus participate in the Surfing Santas event in Cocoa Beach, with thousands more watching. Holly Baker has more.

### **Holly Baker**

The annual Surfing Santas event and Cocoa Beach has become a holiday tradition for families along Florida's Space Coast. I recently talked with George Trosset, the founder of Surfing Santa, who is a native of Rockledge, Florida. He's been surfing since he was 12 years old. He told me more about the popular Surfing Santas event.

### **George Trosset**

We had our first surfing Santa, and that's singular, in 2009. I'd seen this advertisement on TV, and it was for Honda Motors, and Honda ran, they ran this ad, and they showed some people surfing some four- and five-foot beautiful waves in Santa suits. And I just said I want to be a Surfing Santa. So, my wife went to the thrift store and found me a raincoat. It was red, we added some fuzz on it to make it look like a Santa jacket. We made a beard out of this same blanket material. I called my son up; I said George I need you to be at the beach house in the morning. This is on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and I need you to have elf outfits. You and your wife and we're going surfing and I'm going to be Santa you're going to be elves and the newspapers are going to come take a picture. He showed up at the beach house, the waves were about four-foot, kind of rough but nice waves. And we paddled out and went surfing as Santa and his elves and the newspaper took a little picture that wound up in the front page of The Florida Today on Christmas Day, 2009. No big deal. Just a little family day on the beach, had a little fun, starting a new tradition. We had no idea what it was going to become.

### **Holly Baker**

Since the first Surfing Santas event in 2009. The number of attendees has continued to grow.

### **George Trosset**

So, next year I'd see friends at the mall or go surfing with somebody and they say Hey, George, what's the surfing Santa thing? I saw your picture in the paper. I said I don't know, come to the beach house on the 24th and we'll figure it out. Well 19 of my friends showed up the next year. Everyone has Santa outfits, and we had ladies and men, and we just went surfing as Santa and it worked out pretty well, had a fun time. A little party at the house. A little food, a little beverage, we even had a fire on the beach because it was a cool day. Well then, the next year we had 84 Santas show up, I knew about half of them. The next year it's 158, then 225, and then pretty soon we have 600 Santas on the beach. And I like to say that Surfing Santas has become what it needs to be. And today it's a super fun family friendly



positive, people are so positive on the beach, there's just energy on the beach when you're at the event. It's just it's very cool.

### **Holly Baker**

The Surfing Santas event takes place every December 24 and includes a costume contest. Anyone can take part in the costume contest by dressing in a holiday themed outfit of their choice. Prizes are awarded to the winners of each division: babies, children, groups, men, and women.

### **George Trosset**

The event has grown to these unbelievable numbers. One year we had over 800 people dressed as Santa. And I'm told we're on the beach, there's eight or 10,000 people coming down to watch. Now, I mean, it's a full-blown production, it takes about 60 days to iron out all the details, we start in October. It just takes a while to figure out all the things that are involved, there's permits with the city, there's the city of Cocoa Beach provides police and EMT, lifeguards, the fire departments involved. We've just had really good support from the city and others, which has allowed our event to grow and to be what it is today.

### **Holly Baker**

Surfing Santas has raised almost \$100,000 for charity through donations collected at the December 24 gathering, and from sales of official Surfing Santas T shirts. proceeds go to the Florida Surf Museum and Cocoa Beach and Grind for Life, a local organization that provides financial assistance to cancer patients and their families. Surfing Santas has become such a popular event that it has a real chance of breaking a Guinness World Record. But George Trosset says it's not really about setting records. It's about bringing people together.

### **George Trosset**

It's possible we're the largest surfing related event in the world. No other event gets 8-10,000 attendees and 6-800 surfers, but the size doesn't matter. What matters is we're making smiles. And when we hit the national media after our event, and it's on every television station you can think of, and everywhere you look there's something pops up about Surfing Santas, we're making smiles and that's what's important.

### **Holly Baker**

A simple tradition that started with a surfer and his family catching waves together on Christmas Eve has turned into a globally recognized event that's attended by thousands of people and only continues to grow larger each year. George Trosset.

### **George Trosset**

I've been told by many people that Surfing Santas is their new family tradition for Christmas Eve. And how cool is that? Our goofy little event has turned into something that people look forward to, it's so much fun. And what's really cool about the event day is you got eight or 10,000 happy people, their smile and they're taking selfies, or taking pictures with people walking by. It's all good positive talk, it's the most fun you can have over Christmas.

**Holly Baker**

The annual Surfing Santas event begins on December 24 at 8am along the beach near 3 Minutemen Causeway in Cocoa Beach and continues until noon. For more information go to [surfingsantas.org](http://surfingsantas.org). For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society, and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

**Ben Brotemarkle**

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then find us anytime online at [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) and on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by Jon White. Happy holidays, I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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