

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
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PCM-005

Interviewee: Charles DeTore

Interviewer: Candice Ellis

Date of Interview: July 1, 2010

E: This is Candice Ellis on July 1, 2010 with—

D: Charles DeTore.

E: And we are going to be talking about life in the Panama Canal Zone. To begin with, I guess we'll begin with the beginning.

D: Well the beginning is, first of all my mother was born there in 1913. And my father was stationed down there right after WWI. And I believe it was in Albrook or Fort Clayton that he was stationed at. And at that time they had the double winger planes. He was also in the [19]30s a member of the Red, White, and Blue Troupe, which is a swimming club from the United States. The Red, White, and Blue Troupe was coached by Coach Grieser. Balboa High School and Cristobal High School used to give out the Grieser Award back in the [19]50s and the [19]60s for the best outstanding swimmer. When my dad swam there for the Red, White, and Blue Troupe, his swimming partners were Ed Wood and Johnny Weissmuller. Most people don't remember Johnny Weissmuller but Johnny Weissmuller ended up to be Tarzan in the motion pictures. Well, my dad swam with Johnny Weissmuller, he was that good. We can go on to say, my grandfather helped construct the Panama Canal back in 1910, [19]11, and [19]12, somewhere around there. Well, the majority of his children were born down there which would be my uncles and my aunts, including my mother. They all worked for the Panama Canal as they grew up. Some of them were pipefitters,

electricians; my Uncle Dan was the port engineer at the time for both the Atlantic and the Pacific sides. My mom and dad met down there in the Canal Zone but eventually got married up in Pennsylvania and that's where we were born. The first part of our family were born in Philadelphia. My mother always said she had two families, one in Philadelphia, which was four boys in Philadelphia. Then when we left the United States in 1946, we went down to the Canal Zone and we lived down there. My mother had another family, which was two girls and another boy. So there were seven of us in the family. We all went to school in the Canal Zone. It was on the Atlantic side in a town called Coco Solito, which no longer exists. Coco Solito was a town site that every two years would change hands from the military...every two years the army would run it; the following two years the navy would run it. A lot of the Puerto Rican people that were stationed in the army at the time lived in Coco Solito. Coco Solito only had six streets on it. But they had eight family dwellings. The dwellings were all on columns because of the rain. If you had a car, which nobody had at the time back in the [19]40s, early [19]50s, you would park the car underneath the building. Living there you knew everybody. You knew everybody. When we lived there from [19]46 to 1950 we would have little parties underneath the house. We would go into the woods or the jungle as we called it, and cut down palm leaves and drape the palm leaves around the columns underneath the house to make it look like a wall of palm leaves. And we'd have our little forty-five record player and we'd be having a little party and a dance. In 1950 we moved to Coco Solo and we only lived there for

one year. Coco Solo at that time belonged to the navy. My dad worked for the navy; he was a navy fuel gauger. A navy fuel gauger is an individual who fuels and defuels the vessels as they come through, particularly the navy vessels. He also worked at the navy tank farm. For instance, a vessel coming from the Pacific side would offload its fuel into these huge underground tanks and then pump it across the isthmus to the Atlantic side and fill the navy ships. In 1951 we moved back to Coco Solito. There I met most of my classmates because when I graduated from high school back in 1958, we were still living in Coco Solito.

E: How far apart were they?

D: They were about one mile apart. I was more or less considered an outsider in high school because I came from Coco Solo and Coco Solito where everybody else worked for the Panama Canal Company and my dad didn't. My dad worked for the navy.

E: How were you greeted? Was it a hostile environment for you then?

D: They did not want to include me in any of their—they had their own gangs and their own parties and everything. We had ours. Now a lot of my girlfriends came from the Republic of Panama. They all went to St. Mary's Catholic School in Colón. And I dated a lot of the girls there in Coco Solo and Coco Solito. But when it came to sports, I sort of excelled. And so they almost accepted me after I beat the pants off them in track and football and swimming. [Laughter]

E: But still despite that, even, it was difficult for you to befriend these people.

D: Exactly. I just didn't fit into their little groups. When they would have a party they would all be in Margarita or Gatún or New Cristobal. And I'm sort of out of the way going towards the coast.

E: And would they be indigenous Panamanian people or were they just American?

D: No. A lot of those were Panamanian people, too. Their mother could have been Panamanian and their father could have been an American and working for the Panama Canal, see?

E: It was just the fact that you weren't associated with the canal. You were with the army.

D: I was with the navy.

E: Right, with the navy, rather. I'm sorry.

D: Correct. Let me see. Living conditions in Coco Solito were very rustic. When we left Philadelphia in 1946 and went down there to Coco Solito...very little furniture in the house. I remember some wooden crates that we used to sit on. You picked up your furniture from navy quartermasters. Because my brothers were very young at the time, we had bunk beds. There were no windows on the building at all. There were screens and very large wooden blinds that they called jalousies...Inside the house, the mosquitoes would kill you. Well, not the mosquitoes, they're called sand fleas. They're very small and they go through the screens and get into the house. The roaches were something else; you just couldn't stop the roaches from coming in. So living in Coco Solito, the navy or the army would run around almost every night with a truck that would dispense

D.D.T. to help kill the bugs. While living in the house, my mother would never clean the screens; the more dust you could get on the screens the better because it would keep the sand fleas out. In those times, nobody had air condition. What was air condition? Air condition was a fan on the wall, twenty-five cycle. It wasn't until about 1950 that they changed over from twenty-five cycle to sixty cycle so that all of your electronics pieces—your blenders, your toasters, and everything—all had to be changed...My experiences in grade school? I was a very poor student in grade school. When I left Philadelphia I was in the first grade and we had just finished school and were coming down to Panama. When I got to Panama, I was supposed to go into the second grade. But the school systems in the Canal Zone were a year ahead of those in Philadelphia. So back to the first grade I went again. That's why when I graduated I was almost the oldest person in my class 'cause I had about two years in the first grade.

E: So what would you say about the quality of the education, the teachers?

D: The education was great because you knew everybody. You knew everybody. During the sports or the festivities or whatnot, you knew everybody. There were no strangers whatsoever. As a matter of fact, in my graduating class I think there was only a total of thirty-eight people. That's how small the classes were. Okay, let me see what else I can talk about. What kinda sports was I involved in? I was involved in track. I was one of their best. I was the best from Cristobal High School. I ran the high hurdles, the hundred meters, the hundred yards, the low hurdles, the broad jump and the high jump. As a matter of fact, I still hold some of

the records down there in the Canal Zone. I was on the swimming teams, and I played football for the Cristobal Tigers. A lot of my friends, my classmates that I meet here at the reunion, that's what they remember me by, by my sportsmanship and excelling in those particular sports. After high school I did not go to Canal Zone College, although my wife did. She wasn't my wife at the time she went to college. But when she graduated from Canal Zone College and came to the United States—I guess this was in 1966—she only was up here for one semester at Old Dominion University in Virginia. Well, she wrote and told me that she couldn't take it any longer; she was coming back and she just wanted to be with me. We got married in [19]67 and been married ever since; we just celebrated our forty-third wedding anniversary.

E: And how did you both meet, in high school?

D: No. She was a young girl, very young, riding on a bicycle in Coco Solo and I was already working for the Panama Canal. I had already finished my apprenticeship, finished my tour of duty in Vietnam and came back. I had a girlfriend. I drove around in a little MG. And I could see this little girl here on her bicycle. She used to have a dog in the basket of the bicycle. I stopped the car and I said if you were a little older I'd take you out. Well by golly, I ended up taking her out. [Laughter] What kind of hobbies did I have to occupy my time? I guess my hobbies was, the wife and I were coach to an all-women's softball team on the Atlantic side. This softball team that we had were working women and these women played like men. As a matter of fact, I can remember going at least four years without losing

a game. We would play a team from Fort Gulick, Fort Davis, Republic of Panama, and other softball teams from around the Canal Zone area like Margarita and Gatún and whatnot. Many a time we would be invited to play a man's team and we'd end up beating them. They couldn't believe it. We were that good. These girls played so long together that when that ball was hit you knew exactly where that ball was going to go. Whether it was from third base, you knew that third baseman was going to throw it in that spot. You'd just hold your glove up and pow, there it was. I would help catch, just to warm up the girls and they'd throw the ball to me. It would sting my hand with the glove on; they would throw it that fast. They were that good. Anyway, the wife and I ran that team for quite a while. Let me see, holidays celebrated? Naturally, Christmas without the snow. Of course, nobody that grew up in the Canal Zone knew anything about snow. But I came from Philadelphia and it snowed there some. Christmastime in the Canal Zone, we always fought to get the best Christmas trees. I can remember one time one Christmas tree didn't look good enough so we would have to buy two, strap them to together to make it look like a good full tree. Christmas trees were sold at a specific time of the day and there would be a mob of people there waiting at that specific time to go in and get a Christmas tree. When those doors opened at that specific time, it was a mad rush to run in, grab a tree because they only had a certain amount. As long as you had your hand on the tree, that was yours.

E: Did you participate in the tree burning after Christmas?

D: We all. When I was a young kid growing up there, after Christmas, we would go around and collect the Christmas trees that the people would throw out on the street sides and we would make Christmas tree forts. Huge, I mean hundreds of trees. You would make piles of them and you would have tolls going through and wars between this mound of trees and this mound of trees. Here we are, just elementary kids having a good time. The Christmas tree burns—we would donate our trees. This was later on when we were in high school. The whole community would participate: Coco Solo and Coco Solito would be together. If you were over on the other side, Margarita would have their own Christmas tree burn. But it would be an all-day affair. You would have parties and races, water balloon tosses, egg tosses, a lot of food, and it was all donated by the community. It was free, but everyone had a good time. On the fourth of July, now, other holidays, there would be swim meets. We would participate in those. The swimming pools in the area, like Coco Solo pool, Fort Davis, and Fort Gulick pools were Olympic-size pools. They were huge, to us. They had a small diving board, a middle diving board, and a tower. The first time you climb that tower and look down at that pool you thought, jeepers, if I jumped off this would I hit the pool? That's how high it seemed to the young kids. It was great fun living in the Canal Zone. As a matter of fact, it was paradise. There was no crime, there was no drugs, just a wonderful time down there.

E: And you didn't detect any kind of racial tension between—

D: Racial? No.

E: Not at all?

D: Not at all.

E: Yep, that's what I've been hearing all day, that it's this paradise. I'd love to go.

D: It was paradise. Nobody locked their doors. I can't even remember whether we had locks on the doors. Later on though, it turned to that. I'm going into the [19]60's now, from the [19]60s to the [19]80s. It was a lot of tension there.

E: Right, it got a little rough. I know there were riots.

D: Oh yes, I can recall the riots. Let me see, the riots were in, what, [19]64?

E: [19]64, Yes.

D: And another one a little bit later?

E: I'm trying to think. I know the one in [19]64.

D: All right, I can remember [19]64. I had just gotten out of the army in [19]64 so, and working with the industrial division, I had a job on the Pacific side. See, we lived in the Atlantic side; when we went over to the Pacific side to work they would put you up in hotels. Well, the hotel that they put me up to was the Tivoli Guest House, which was the official hotel of the Canal Zone. As a matter of fact, President Teddy Roosevelt stayed there. It was a wooden structure but the restaurants were fabulous. The rooms were all wood, wooden floor, very high ceilings. Your bathrooms were down the hall. The rooms never had a private bath or toilet area or anything of that nature. But when we worked there and I was staying at the Tivoli Guest House, they had a riot. They came and they took the American flag down and there were some shots fired. One of my workers

from the Atlantic side who was a machinist—I forget his name—he was shot in the buttocks. All he could claim at the time was, he ought to get a medal for that. [Laughter] We all laughed. That was at the Tivoli Guest House. I really hated to see them tear the thing down. It was a piece of history.

E: When did they tear it down, do you know?

D: Let me see, my son was born in [19]69, [19]70. It was probably around [19]71 or [19]72, because I've got a picture of my son standing in the front door of the Tivoli while it was closed because they were going to tear it down.

E: Why did they end up closing it and tearing it down?

D: Oh, it was old. Termite-d, everything was wood. It was from the construction days. That's how old it was, back in 1915.

E: And you also mentioned that Coco Solito and Coco Solo, you said that they're not there anymore or that they weren't—

D: Coco Solito was wiped off the map. There's nothing there.

E: Just because of the small size of it, you'd say?

D: It could be because they were just the old wooden buildings. Why Panama didn't want them I don't know. About eighty percent of Coco Solo is gone. These were concrete, bomb-proof buildings where the navy officers lived. That's where we lived also. The majority of those buildings are torn down and the area is used to put containers off the ships because the free zone where the containers come into Colón, they've got to have places to put these. I mean, you're talking about thousands and thousands of containers. These containers hold the dry goods for

almost all of Central and South America. All right, how about during World War II? I can give you stories about World War II, but that was in Philadelphia. That was all in Philadelphia. I can talk about the turnover of the canal to Panama at the time. Let me see. What the heck date was that? That was around 1979. It was a very sad feeling and most people would go to these ceremonies where—the last time when they would lower the American flag. So all of these big flagpoles that held the American flag, they would have ceremonies there to take down the American flag for the last time. And it was the Canal Zone police that did the honors of taking the flags down. They would have a band playing. I believe it was in Coco Solo that they took the flag down. And the police were all lined up in their fanciest uniforms with all their medals and everything. They had a band playing and people cried, including me. It was just heartbreaking to see that for the last time.

E: Did you leave after that?

D: I left the Canal Zone in 1984. That's when I retired.

E: Okay. And where did you relocate to?

D: I relocated in Chesapeake, Virginia where I worked for another shipyard, a private shipyard. I was in charge of their fabrication shops in Virginia. And I retired from them just about three years ago. I had twenty-one years' service with them. And I had twenty-seven years with the Panama Canal working.

E: What was the transition like?

D: The transition going from...?

E: The transition going from Panama to Chesapeake?

D: It was scary. It was scary because in the Canal Zone you knew everybody. Even the people that you thought you didn't know, they knew you. They knew me because of my position, for what I did in the Canal Zone. But coming up to the States, you'd go shopping. It's surprising that you go into the store and you don't know a soul, where if you went into the commissaries in the Canal Zone you knew everybody. Here you knew no one. Frightening. Frightening.

E: When you moved to Chesapeake, do you know other people from the Panama Canal Zone who had lived there?

D: The only other people I knew here who lived here at the time was my father-in-law. He lived in Chesapeake also. He is a retired master diver of the Panama Canal. I also was a diver for the Panama Canal. My job in Panama, after serving a four-year apprentice program as a ship fitter, I was drafted due to the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and the Cuban Missile Crisis. I had to get into the service. As a matter of fact, I still have that letter from President Kennedy. It says, greetings, your country and I need you. You will be in active service by such and such a date. I entered the army down at Fort Clayton. And I was stationed there for about a month before I came to the United States for basic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. I was in the 202nd Signal and the 18th Airborne, which is out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They wanted me to join the O.C.S., Officer Candidate School, but if I did that I would have to reenlist for one more year, because being drafted, I was only eligible for two years. If I had joined the military, I would have

had to go in for three or four. So I was called a U.S., where everyone else that served three and four years was called an R.A., regular army. If I had gone to O.C.S. and enlisted for one more year, I would have lost my job in Panama. The Canal Zone was...they had to hold my job for me because I was drafted. It wasn't my doing going into the service. It was the government. So they were compelled to hold my job for me. If I had gone to O.C.S. and enlisted for another year, my job would have been vacant. So after I got out of the army after serving only twenty-five months, I went back. My job was waiting for me. Well by then, I had already served my apprenticeship four years there. I was a journeyman and I was still a ship fitter. I would say I was a very good ship fitter.

E: They saved your job for you for two years. You had to be.

D: As a matter of fact, I became the ship fitter lead man. Whenever the head man would go on vacation, I would take his place. So I was in charge of the boiler shop, the sheet metal shop, the welders, the burners, the ship fitters. I was in charge of the whole thing.

E: It was very loud there?

D: Was it loud? It was loud. Yes, it was very loud. After working my way up again I became general foreman of the launch repair facility. I took care of the launches from the Pacific side and the Atlantic side. And we had work stations at Gambóá, Cristobal, Balbóá. There was one short pier that was used right in the middle of the canal. We took care of the pilot launches, which was about fifty-three of them. We overhauled them, we painted them, we kept them running. I would have a

chauffeur that would drive me over to the Pacific side to inspect, to find out what they needed tool-wise. I would set up the schedules for overhauling, set up shift work. Everybody wanted to get on to the shift work because they would work ten straight days and get four off and then work ten more straight days. To a Panamanian—about seventy percent of my crew were Panamanian—to them four days off is a big vacation for them. So they really wanted to get on that shift.

E: Very competitive I bet.

D: Yes, yes. Okay. How did life change for the better or the worse? I think it was time to leave the Canal Zone when I did. My kids were—one of them I believe was in the tenth grade and the other one was in the fifth grade. And when I was living in Coco Solo the last year, it was very hectic because of the riots, because of things closing, given away. We lost our post office, we lost the railroad, we lost—the majority of the people in the United States don't know what we had there. We had our own postage stamps. We had our own judicial system. Judicial system, there's another thing. I was on a list for the coroner's. Anytime there was a killing, a murder, a drowning, a death, I would have to witness: investigate the body, inspect the body to say yes, this is that person, or this is what I believe happened. The Canal Zone police and the detectives, which my wife worked for, couldn't do it alone. They had to have a civilian alongside them so it wouldn't just be one side of the story. It would be two sides of the story. I can remember one suicide in the Atlantic side. I knew this man. We knew him as Frenchie and he ran the hobby shop in Coco Solo. Well prior to his death, he wrote little tags that

you put on bulletin boards and he would write, for sale one shotgun, used only once, or for sale, one Volkswagen, needs repair on the roof, and put these on the bulletin boards. Nobody took any initiative to find out what was really going on. A few days later, of all places, he parked his Volkswagen in the circle in front of the elementary school and he blew the top of the head off, plus the top of the Volkswagen. Well, with the shotgun up in here and the whole head gone, you don't see anything, just holes where the eyes used to be. I had to go and witness his body. I had to look at his hands to see whether right-handed or left-handed, and actually investigate it. And they all wanted to know, is this really Frenchie? Very hard to tell. Very hard to tell.

E: Why did he do it?

D: Nobody knows why. Nobody knows why. Anyway, there was a lot of them like that. The drownings were terrible. Do you recall the massacre in one of the Caribbean islands where they all drank the Kool-Aid?

E: Yes.

D: Granada?

E: I want to say, yeah.

D: All those bodies came to Coco Solo. All of them. What were there, two hundred of them?

E: It was a huge congregation I know that did it, yeah.

D: Anyway, they could not find enough coffins or caskets to put all these bodies because when they arrived, they all arrived in bags. The Canal Zone was

responsible for putting them into a coffin before they went back to the United States. I was also on my computer, which was very new to the market at the time. I had access in my computer to look in the warehouses. I had to figure out how many coffins we have. Small, large, whatever: all of them, every one of them, we took them all out. And they even shipped some from the United States down. I didn't have nothing to do with the bodies going into the coffins or whatnot. But it had to look presentable going back to the United States in a coffin rather than in a bag. I can remember that where they were off-loading the bodies on pier one in Coco Solo. I lived, I would say, about two blocks from pier one. Out my window of my building I could see pier one, where the hobby shops were and the navy boats used to be until the navy pulled out. I had a boat. I had a boat on the Atlantic side, it was a twenty-foot Mark Twain and I had a six-cylinder Chevy engine in it. And we would go out the break wall. Do you know what a break wall is? A break wall is a manmade mound of rock or stones or something to keep the waves from the ocean from running into the houses. So here's a break wall. It's the entrance to the Panama Canal. You go through the break wall and up towards Gatún. We would take the boats. As a matter of fact a majority of the people down there had a boat. And the majority of them went to Gatún Lake to go fishing where the bass fish are; it was stocked with bass fish. Sometimes you didn't need any bait. You just throw the hook in and pull it out and you got a fish on the end. That's how plentiful they were. Let me tell you a story about Gatún Lake. Gatún Lake is quite deep. It can go down, I would say, two hundred

feet. That's quite a ways for a manmade lake. In fact, it used to be the world's largest manmade lake. This is a freshwater lake that feeds the canal, that actually operates the chambers because it's all on gravity. Gatún Lake has a weed, or grass that grows in it called hyacinth. Hyacinth is a long tube that can grow a hundred-some feet and on the top it's like lily pads. But on the top it gets so thick that when the ships came through the canal the intake on the ships for their cooling of the engines and so forth would suck the water from the lake, but it would get so clogged with this hyacinth grass and whatnot. A couple of years they tried copper sulfate in the lake to kill it. In turn, it killed the fish. It killed the marine mammals and whatnot. What they did, was they brought from the United States sea cows. A sea cow resembles a manatee. Well, when the natives found out, they would catch them too and eat them. So what the Canal Zone did, what the divers did, we blanked off a very large lagoon of Gatún Lake and killed everything in there, especially the bass. We netted it off and killed everything in there and then waited for the following year. And we stocked it with exactly one million amur. Amur is a fish from South Africa. It's called a white amur. It will look like a minnow, but we had one million of them and they were approximately a half-inch long. Well, we put these fish in this enclosed area of Gatún Lake; they grow to about three and four feet long, look like a very giant minnow. They do not eat meat. They do not eat other fish. But we had to blank it off because if we put the small amur in the lake, the bass would eat them. These white amur only ate the vegetation. When the vegetation is gone, they will climb, crawl on the ground

and eat the grass. When the grass is gone, they will climb and lean themselves up against the tree and eat the bark. Not many people know about this. These are some of the secrets of the Panama Canal.

E: That's incredible. So what happened? Did they clear up the problem?

D: That almost solved the problem. When they got big enough where we knew that the bass wouldn't bother them, we opened the gates and they went through Gatún Lake so they are in Gatún Lake now. Called a white amur.

E: And are they edible?

D: They are not edible. They almost resemble a tarpon. Nobody eats a tarpon; it's a good game fish. I'll tell you this: you go out there with a rod and reel and expect to catch one, forget it. They will not bite a hook. They will not bite a worm. They will not bite a fish. So this is how we would catch them, but then we'd release them. You would get a fifty-five gallon drum and you'd put rocks in the bottom and you would have the drum float in the water say about one foot above the water line. You'd put sticks across the barrel and put grass on it, and have a string from the barrel to the shore and just watch. These fish would get up to the top of the barrel, start to eat the grass, and fall in. Then you can pull it to the shore, take the fish out, examine the fish and look at it—well, this is what he looks like and whatnot—and let 'em go back in the water. What a sport that was.

E: Did they ever create any environmental problems with their appetite?

D: I have never heard, never heard.

E: That's a perfect resolution to that problem then.

D: A lot of people don't know these things. For instance, being a diver you'd have to go underwater at the spillways and inspect the seatings where the gates lock in to hold the water. And they have things called culverts, which are about eight foot in diameter with big metal screens to catch logs and whatnot from going through. It's a whole tunnel, in fact, to operate this canal. A spillway controls the level of Gatún Lake. There was one in Gatún and there was one in Miraflores. They had built secretly a set of gates that would come up out of the water to protect the gates that are controlling the water. These gates would shoot up from the bottom and protect the major gates holding the water back in case they were torpedoed during the war. If a gunship or something came by and dropped a torpedo and hit the spillway, entire Gatún Lake would flow and wash away, completely wash away the Atlantic side. Coco Solo, Coco Solito, Margarita, Colón would be washed into the sea. To prevent that, they had these gates that would shoot up out of the water in case something would come by and say hey, we're gonna have an attack. Boom, here they come. They would shoot up and they would hit this before they hit the gates to the spillway. These were some of the secret stuff.

E: I like the secret stuff.

D: On the other side, on the Fort Sherman side which was all army, Fort Sherman had batteries that were underground where we had a specific type of missile that nobody's supposed to know about, but word gets around through the big wheels down there, so I knew quite a lot of it. These missiles were never used but they

were installed at Fort Sherman. I'm not sure about the Pacific side but during the war, Fort Sherman, Fort Randolph had very large gun turrets built on hillsides.

The one at Fort Randolph overlooks Galeta Point, the entrance to the canal.

They had huge gun turrets there, massive.

E: Anti-aircraft type stuff?

D: No. I'm talking about big stuff, bigger than the anti-aircraft. This is for ships coming through. The cannons on them were probably from that wall to this wall. Big, big, big things for shooting ships maybe fifteen miles out. When we were teenagers we would go up and play into these things. All the mechanisms, all the guns were gone but the gun turrets and cement foundations for all of these things were still there. We would play on them things like crazy. We as teenagers would spend most of our time in the jungles building forts. I can recall, a building burnt down in Coco Solito and they were throwing everything out. I would take wood by the truckloads. We would have a little wagon and I'd load up my wagon and I actually built a house out in the jungles. Everybody used for a clubhouse of some kind, a fun house. We used to go up, collect mangoes, bananas. I mean, you didn't even need to climb a tree. You'd just reach out and grab it, there was that many. One of the most pleasurable vegetables or fruits that you could find down there is called a rose apple. It's shaped like a pear but very dark red. The inside, when you took a bite of it, it was like a cotton ball but so juicy and had a very rose-type flavor to it. Everybody loved rose apples and ginips. Anybody from the Canal Zone know what a rose apple and a ginip is. A ginip is a small fruit that

looks like a, I would say about the size of your thumb, light green. You crack it open and there's a very orange, jelly looking thing and you just stick it in your mouth and you suck all that gooey stuff off the seed. A little on the sour side but very popular.

E: I heard of the term bread and butter for edible vegetation.

D: You might be referring to a bread plant.

E: Yes.

D: A bread plant is all throughout Central and South America. It's about the size of a cannon ball, green. The Americans and the Panamanians didn't quite eat it, but it was a staple food for the Mayan, the Aztec, and so forth. One of the explorers from England, I'm talking about 1500s, came down and brought back hundreds of these fruits called breadfruit back there. Said, this will take care of the whole country if we can grow these. Well, they never grew. They never grew. Who was the explorer that went down to the Galapagos Islands and—

E: Darwin?

D: Was that Darwin? Maybe it was he, some of his collection that he was bringing back to wherever. Anyway it never panned out. You have another fruit down there called ice cream bean. An ice cream bean is really a bean. An ice cream bean can get two feet long. And it'll look like a string bean, only a very hard brown, shaped like this. You crack it open just like a peapod. You open that thing up and inside would be these nice cotton-like candy over a big black seed, like peas in a pod. Only these little ice cream beans inside this huge thing.

E: It was stiff, right?

D: Very stiff, very stiff and hard. And you just sucked this cotton stuff off of the black seeds to get the seed out, ice cream beans. They had cannonball trees. They had another tree that...can't remember it. Looked like an oriole's bird nest, hang from the tree in a long stem and then come out with a little ball on the end. The birds would go inside, but there was a fruit like that. Anyway, you can always find a cocoa tree. Do you know what a cacao is? You're a college student, you should know cacao. You pronounce it cocoa. You could find a cacao tree. It's different than any other tree because the fruit itself grows out of the trunk of the tree, not the top where the branches are, it grows right out of the trunk. That's the cacao. Anyway, you take those seeds and you have to dry them out in the sun and whatnot and grind them all up and you can get your cocoa.

E: Cocoa, yes.

D: As a matter of fact, the majority of the people that left the Canal Zone and come to the United States, this is what they crave. They crave the difference, the flavor, the food, the way it's prepared. Corvina fish: no matter what restaurant you went to in Panama City, corvina was the catch of the day. Red snapper, corvine—they used to make a dish called ceviche. Ceviche takes the place of the United States shrimp cocktail. In Panama you don't get a shrimp cocktail, you get a ceviche. Ceviche is a corvine-type fish cut into chunks of about a half by half inch and raw. And they are soaked in lime juice and peppers. The type of peppers they use is called Aji Chombo. And it's just hot sauce and the lime juice. As soon as

you drop the raw fish in there, the fish turn white. It's done. It's ready to eat. They serve this with a dish with crushed ice on the bottom, maybe a lettuce leaf and a whole scoop of this raw fish with onions, cilantro. That's it. Fantastic. You can't get it here in the United States. You can't get it. A lot of people here in the United States substitute and try and make it with the fish they can get at the market or whatnot and say, oh yeah, I made ceviche the other night. Well, okay, it's...because you can't get the Aji Chombo peppers. They use the jalapenos, no—

E: Scotch bonnet, maybe?

D: No, no, no, the little yellow ones, real hot, about that big around. Jalapenos? No, the jalapenos are green ones.

E: Habaneros?

D: Habaneros, thank you. Habanero peppers, that's what the United States makes theirs with. All right. What else are we gonna talk about? Oh, right before we left the Canal Zone, it was getting a little on the hostile side. There would be bomb threats. There would be a lot of yelling and screaming, Yankee, go home. Well, being that they took away the Canal Zone police, the Panamanian National Guard had to come in and protect these little cities that the Americans were still living in. They would escort my kids to school. We lived just about across the street from the elementary school. But they would have to walk my kids to school with M-16 rifles. They were all armed, they were all armed. This is the Guardia Nacional, their so-called army. Actually, Panama didn't have an army.

E: How did your children transition when you guys moved to the Chesapeake area?

D: I don't think they cared for it too much until they got to know new friends, 'cause down there they knew everybody. They were into the sports and the activities and the school programs and whatnot.

E: And it was similar to how it was when you were there when you were young, just that sense of community and kinship?

D: Oh yeah, yeah, until the last couple of years.

E: And you left in 1984 and by then it was?

D: It was time to go.

E: Dangerous. Do you return ever?

D: I have not been back but both my boys have. Everyone tells me, you go back and you're just going to cry because it's not there anymore, nothing is there. The town sites that we grew up in are gone.

E: Do you have any desire to go back just to see?

D: Yes, yes we will go back. Maybe when the wife retires we might make it down there. It's either that or go to Russia. We've been around the world. We've been all over the place. Being so close, living in Panama, it was easy to go to places like Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina. It happens that you're just a hundred miles away from Costa Rica, three hundred miles to Guatemala. You're so close to everything down there. We went and saw all the sights of South America, like Macchu Picchu. Loved that.

E: Did you learn how to speak Spanish?

D: I can speak Spanish very little. But the majority of my people that worked for me were all Panamanian, so I had to know a little bit. We've been around. One of the best places that we visited in South America was Ecuador. It was beautiful, so clean. Ecuador is the only country in the world that can claim to have four seasons every day of the year. [Laughter] We landed there it was in the morning: nice weather, seventy degrees. Come afternoon, 105. Hey man, we gotta go back to the room and start changing some clothes here or whatever. We get back to the room and get ready to go to dinner and you look out the window and it's snowing. Here it is summertime, it's snowing. In the morning, the sun comes up melts all the snow and every field is covered with little yellow flowers. All the highways are lined with beautiful flowers. At five o'clock in the morning, the women are on their hands and knees scrubbing the sidewalks and the sides of their building, which are all white-washed. Ninety percent of the homes and the houses in this village in Ecuador, the homes that are painted white and with blue shutters are all over four hundred years old. That's in Ecuador. Quito is the town, which is also the capital city. I think it's the highest capital city in the world. We drove to Cotopaxi, which is one of the highest active volcanoes in the world. We rented a Volkswagen and drove up to Cotopaxi. There's a plateau before you reach the summit that you have to park your cars, because there's not enough oxygen to even run the engine in the car. You would get out and start walking and you'd take seven steps and have to stop to breathe again. I would take a cigar out of my pocket and light it one time, take one puff and instantly put it back

in your mouth to take the second puff and it would be out. That's how thin the air was. You were so high above the clouds you couldn't see anything.

E: Do you know what the elevation is? I don't remember exactly.

D: I can't recall. But, boy you were up there. No vegetation; you can come down a little bit around where the clouds are and you start seeing nothing but purple which is nothing but the volcanic ash. And about a mile down further you can see the vegetation where the trees are, the green. What a beautiful country to visit, Ecuador. All right, any other specific questions you'd like me to answer?

E: It's been a good interview. It's been great. I think we've got everything. I don't know if there's anything you'd like to add. Other than that it's been wonderful.

D: I just wish my dad was here. My dad was a swimming instructor for Balboa High School also. That was in the [19]30s.

E: Where is he now?

D: He lives in St. Pete. He's a hundred and one. Still drives, still does his own shopping. So after the reunion here I'm gonna go down and spend a week with him.

E: Sounds good. Well, thank you so much for your time.

[End of interview]

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