

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP) was founded by Dr. Samuel Proctor at the University of Florida in 1967. Its original projects were collections centered around Florida history with the purpose of preserving eyewitness accounts of economic, social, political, religious and intellectual life in Florida and the South. In the 45 years since its inception, SPOHP has collected over 5,000 interviews in its archives.

Transcribed interviews are available through SPOHP for use by research scholars, students, journalists, and other interested groups. Material is frequently used for theses, dissertations, articles, books, documentaries, museum displays, and a variety of other public uses. As standard oral history practice dictates, SPOHP recommends that researchers refer to both the transcript and audio of an interview when conducting their work. A selection of interviews are available online here through the UF Digital Collections and the UF Smathers Library system.

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PCM-006

Interviewee: Malcolm Stone

Interviewer: Candace Ellis

Date: July 2, 2010

E: This is Candace Ellis on July 1, 2010 interviewing—

S: Malcolm Stone.

E: Or Jose. [Laughter]

S: And I'm a retired Panama Canal pilot. My family built the Panama Canal.

E: So let's begin I guess at the beginning with your family and how they came to the Panama Canal Zone area.

S: Well my great- grandfather, Edward J. Neville was a railroad engineer up in Ohio. I don't know what attracted him to the Canal Zone but he went down there in 1908. I have a letter written here for you to read. He wrote it on the ship going down to his family telling them many times. He had a very interesting life down in Panama. Aside from being a railroad engineer, he owned a place up in Chorrera. I don't know what they call them, whether it was a farm, but he tried to grow vegetables and he ran into a lot of problems from the Panamanian people in this rural area. I also happen to have an article from a newspaper that he wrote back in those days. I don't have a date for the newspaper but it's self-explanatory. He loved it. I have family pictures of my family visiting the canal during construction days and pictures of my grandmother standing in the locks while they were being built. You're free to see these any time you want to.

E: Yeah. I would love to look through them.

S: Leaning over a wall and looking down into an empty chamber. It gives me the fright, but she had a good pipe to hang onto while doing that. I'm proud of the family for having built the canal. We've had five generations of my family work on the canal, which includes our daughter who spent two summers while she was in college down in Panama. She took summer jobs down there with the Panama Canal Company. So she is a fifth-generation employee of the Panama Canal.

E: Well let's see, and you were born there?

S: No, I was born in California, but, my mother was born in the Canal Zone, my younger brother was born in the Canal Zone, and our two kids were born in the Canal Zone.

E: And when did you move from California to the Canal Zone?

S: I was just one year old. There was a family divorce back in the early [19]20s or late teens that caused my grandmother and my mother—who was then just a ten year old girl, five, eight I don't know how old she was—to leave Panama and they went to California. That's where she married and that's where I was born.

E: So what was it like growing up there? You obviously moved there when you were really young so you had your entire life ahead of you.

S: I can remember most of it right at the beginning of World War II. The first house I remember living in was right across the street from an athletic field for part of the high school. That had been turned into an army encampment with guns for different weapons for incoming flights who weren't identified. I also remember that in the side of the house we were living in, they built an air raid shelter. My father at that time was a truck driver and he was helping them bring in the sand to cover the air raid shelter. We had frequent—not frequent—but we had tests for the air raid shelter, just practice alarms. On one case I do recall, they had an unidentified aircraft approaching. The sirens went off and we had to go into the air raid shelters until they could get identified. Once they got through that it was identified as a friendly aircraft and we were released from the air raid shelter. That ended during the war. There was a divorce again and then we moved to another house in New Cristóbal, which was the Panama part of the Canal Zone. I don't know if you're familiar with how that's set up down there. Where the Cristobal High School was, was actually located in the Republic of Panama. We had our own special policeman and fire department there just to protect us. But we were surrounded by the city of Colón all the other way around. I lived in there and then there was a divorce in the family. We moved into the Canal Zone which was called Old Cristóbal, and that's where I was when the war ended. When the war ended in 1945, I was just an eight year old kid. I remember celebrating with firecrackers and everything out on the streets to celebrate the end of the war.

E: With other children?

S: Yeah. And I'm a seventy-three year old man—seventy-three young man, excuse me—and I can remember things like that.

E: So you stayed in Old Cristóbal for how long after that?

S: I think we were in Old Cristóbal for two years and then my mother remarried. We still lived in a place in Old Cristóbal but it was a family type. Before that, we'd been in a twelve apartment family building with one bedroom. My mother and three kids lived in there. My brother and I used to play with matches all the time; it's so lucky we did not burn the house down with the matches. Life went on from there and we moved to Cristóbal. Then we moved to Margarita. Then we moved back to Cristóbal. I graduated from the Cristobal High School in 1955 and that's part of why I'm here right now.

E: How would you say that these New Cristóbal and Old Cristóbal towns are different from the other towns in the Panama Canal Zone? Because you did mention in New Cristóbal you were surrounded—

S: Cristóbal is not in the Canal Zone and that sends a word because the city of Colón—although it was in the Canal Zone area which was a ten mile-wide strip on each side of the canal. But actually, the ports of Colón and the ports of Balboa were under Panamanian jurisdiction, especially Colón. But on the waterfront...well I can show you a picture of that too but they're all the pictures I

have of where we were. We were right on the waterfront in Colón Harbor, a beautiful place. But we were surrounded by Colón and when we were in the Canal Zone we either had to walk or drive through Colón to get there. I didn't mind it. Those days the Panamanian people, we kind of challenged each other walking down the street but never had any fights or anything like that.

E: There was no further tension?

S: No, no. Those days there were good people. But Colón was a very, very poor town. Then you had the people who lived in Colón who were from the West Indian Islands and they come to Panama to work, to help build the canal. These people who lived in Colón were dependents of the people who came in to construct the canal, but, they didn't have jobs many of them. The unemployment rate was very, very high. On top of that, the town of Colón was at one time a marshland. It was filled in by dirt from building the Panama Railroad in 1850 to 1855. They dumped it all out there and then they built the town site up out there, although Colón was there even then I believe. I remember one day being on a street in Colón just off the limits from the town of New Cristóbal. There was a hole in the road, about that big; it was a concrete street. And I looked down through the hole, and right at the surface of the hole was water. I think that marshland and a lot of that dirt from the canal was sinking. It's a very decrepit city in many ways. The city of Panama on the Pacific side is beautiful: big high rises and everything. The city of Colón on the Atlantic Side at the Atlantic

entrance of the Panama Canal is a very decrepit city. At one time, they put military guards out there and they told tourists or people from the Canal Zone, you can go in to the first two square blocks of Colón—there were some reasonably good stores in there—and there will be military policemen to protect you—Panamanian military—but if you leave that area we cannot guarantee your safety.

E: So that was for tourists. What about the people like your family who lived there? Did you ever feel threatened just living there?

S: No, no, no. I never felt threatened by those people. They were good people. We used many of the people. Many of the black women were our maids in our houses 'cause you could get them for almost nothing. Even for what we paid them as a maid, they were making much more money than they could make working in Colón if they could even find a job in Colón.

E: What was your schooling experience like?

S: Well I went to through the sixth grade in the New Cristóbal and Margarita. That was because we changed locations. But then in 1949, my father quit working on the Panama Canal and we went to California. We were gone about two and a half years. My dad couldn't wait to get back in the Canal Zone and go back to work down there. I loved the Canal Zone. I was very happy to work down there myself and live down there. It was a great place to grow up. When I was a

younger kid, I spent a lot of time at the Washington Hotel swimming pool. It was a saltwater pool that was right at the edge of the bay. There was a concrete wall that separated the swimming pool from the Colón Bay. During the dry season when the wind was blowing, the sea coming in with the salt water would hit the wall and splash and it would come into the swimming pool area. We used to love that, it was great, but, unfortunately in those days no one ever told me about the threats of skin cancers. I spent so much time in New Cristóbal just wearing a bathing suit or shorts, that I've had a lot of skin cancers on me from lack of any information being put out in those days about the threat of skin cancers. Now I have keratosis, and I've had skin cancers removed. I see a skin doctor every six months at least, sometimes every four months to pay for my way of living down there.

E: Do you think a lot of people are paying the same way?

S: Probably a lot of the older generation. Since then, they've come up with these P.F.'s.

E: S.P.F.?

S: Yeah, and people are using those more. I've got a grandson, and he's very light-skinned. My son learned to keep him in a sleeved t-shirt all the time when he's swimming. Even though he's got a bathing suit, he's got a protection shirt on.

E: Good. When you guys left in 1949 for California for two years, was the transition difficult? I know you mentioned that all your father wanted to do was come back. I'm assuming that you guys eventually obviously did return to the Zone. What was it like returning to the States for that brief period of time?

S: We wound up in Hanford, California. Then we went down to Santa Ana and we lived in a Mexican orange-picking town called El Modino. I went to seventh and eighth grade there, I believe. It was good living there. We actually rented a home on a ten-acre orange ranch. We had nothing to do with the oranges, but I would go out with the guy who owned it and ride on his tractor when he was going through there and furrowing the ground. We enjoyed it there. But my father just could not get a good job and he wound up going back on the Panama Canal.

E: And you returned and began ninth grade there, correct?

S: It was April when we moved back and I was that far in the ninth grade. Then I went to tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade in the Canal Zone. I had a very interesting experience because summer had just started and I was playing basketball in the gymnasium when I got a telephone call from my father. He said, you've got to go to the office and get a passport and everything; you're going to go work on a ship as a seaman. It was a Texaco oil tanker. In fact, it was a motor vessel, *Cristobal* of all names. I went to work on that as a seaman. I was just in the summer between tenth and eleventh grades. I learned to be a seaman. I worked on that ship for two and a half months and I loved it. I made good money

and I had a man who I was berthing with in the same cabin. And he was a union man for the seaman. He made sure I got paid all my overtime and everything 'cause I didn't know how to keep those records. He helped me keep them. So that would be in 1953, I came off that ship with about a thousand dollars in cash. Can you imagine what a thousand dollars in cash was back in 1953? [Laughter] I bought a Vespa. V-e-s-p-a motor scooter. Brand new and it was ordered and brought into town. It was ordered through Sears. It was called an Allstate, but it was still a Vespa.

E: Do you remember how much it cost?

S: No I don't remember. Eight or nine hundred dollars, something like that. That would be guessing. I had a good time on it. [Laughter]

E: Yeah, you must have been the talk of the town. A brand new Vespa? That's pretty cool. [Laughter] Did you take girls out on it?

S: Yes. I had an incident with that. I left it parked not where I usually park it at the high school by the cafeteria. I was running late and there were a bunch of motorcycles, big and little ones that parked out front there on the city streets of Cristóbal. One of the guys—I know his name and I know who did it—but he ripped the cables off of my throttle control and brake control. I always had problems after that. I frequently had to go in and have it replaced. I know who did

it. I don't know if he was jealous of the motor scooter or whether he just didn't like it parked out there, but he just reached out and ripped.

E: Oh my gosh, that's horrible. So did you ever get back out on a ship as a seaman after your—

S: No, the following year I went out on a small ship. It was British flag and it was a fruit carrier. The captain was from the Bahamas Islands and the name of the ship was the *m/v Jacks Bay*. We carried fruit from Colombia or Ecuador to the United States, either going into Miami or into Galveston, Texas. But the food on there was terrible.

E: What was it like?

S: I mean Sunday, when you're supposed to get good food, I remember I had a piece of chicken in my hand on Sunday, like fried chicken. Oh boy, we're getting really good today. I was trying to break that thing in half so that I could eat it and it slipped out of my hands and flew across the room. [Laughter] So I made two trips on that, one to Ecuador and one to Colombia. When we got back from those trips, I had to help clean out the cargo hatches of all the dead and excess banana skins after we offloaded. Going home, I went up and told the captain, Captain, when we go through to the Panama Canal, I'm getting off this ship. We get paid ten dollars for cleaning the hatches. Not overtime, just a flat ten dollars if you cleaned the hatches. Well, he says, I'm not gonna pay you your ten dollars

for cleaning the hatches. I'll just pay you what pay you earned. I said, Captain, that's fine; I want to get off this ship. So when I went through the canal I got off. But then I went to the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point. I graduated from there and I spent some time in the navy, a short time because as a merchant marine officer I was not required to stay in the navy if I could prove I was gonna sail on a merchant ship which is what my training was. And I did go back and sail merchant ships. I sailed for two and a half years. Then my mother passed away in the Canal Zone and I returned to the Canal Zone and wound up going to work down there, first as a boarding officer. While I was working as a boarding officer, I knew people down there who ran the tugboats. I would ride tugboats with them to get tugboat training even though I already had merchant marine training for ocean things. That qualified me to become a Panama Canal towboat captain and I finally got my towboat captain license. I went to work on the small tugboats with the dredging division. They were difficult things to handle. They were good, but for towing barges they were difficult to handle.

E: And what year were these?

S: That would be in 1964 I started working there. And then in 1965, I got promoted to the big tugs, the ship handling tugs. Although we were dredging division, technically we were working for dredging division or handling the muds that were taken up by the dredges, we spent more time working on ships. We would take ships through the Panama Canal, through the cut to Pedro Miguel Locks.

Occasionally we had to take the tugboats to the Atlantic side to the lake and the Gatún locks and work ships there that needed tug assistance. And I loved that job, but I kept asking to be a Panama Canal pilot 'cause I had a second mate's license, I had sea time, I had tugboat time working in the canal. They said, no, if you want to become a Panama Canal pilot, you go back to sea and you get your master's license. Finally, in 1969, we went to a dinner and some of the pilots who were there—this was a Kings Point dinner; a lot of the Kings Pointers were pilots. They said, wow, our top pay right now is eighteen thousand dollars. I think I was making twelve thousand on the tugs. Remember this was in the late 1960s. We lived thirty minutes away from the officer's club where that party was held. On the way home I said to my wife, Jean, I'm gonna quit working on the Panama Canal. I'm going back to sea. And I said, I'm gonna go back and get in enough time to get my master license, which we did do. I took my wife and kids upin to Delaware where her mom and dad were. We got an apartment up there, and she stayed there and I went back to sea. I did ultimately get a master's license. I sailed chief mate for a whole year on the same ship. When I had that year in I was qualified to sit for a master's license and in August of 1969, I got my master's license—the same as a captain's license but master is the proper word for it. Later in that year, I was accepted as a Panama Canal pilot with a master's license. An ugly part of that is that I lost two and a half years of government service so I could go back to sea and get my captain's license. I went back in late 1971 as a pilot. In 1976, if you could paddle a canoe or row a row boat practically and were

Panamanian, you could qualify as a Panama Canal pilot. Boy, I was angry about that 'cause I lost two and a half years of government service doing it that way. So I would not take any part in training people who were not qualified as masters of ships because the training for Panama Canal pilots was putting the trainees aboard the ship with the pilot. The pilot had the discretion of letting them handle the ship or talking to them, training. I reached a point where, if you weren't a qualified master, I wasn't going to train you to be a pilot because I wasn't good enough to be one. I had the guys practically spit on me because I wouldn't train them. I said, well you've just gotta understand something. I would tell them when they came aboard. I'd tell them, do you have a master's license, no? I said, well then I will not let you handle the ship. If you have any questions to ask me ask me and I'll give you an answer, but I will not spend any time training you to be a Panama Canal pilot. I told them why. Many of them understood that. Some were Americans, there were some who were Panamanian. The Americans understood a little better than the Panamanians because they wanted that canal. So it went on that way. I retired as a Panama Canal pilot in 1992 because of medical problems and a dislike for the Panama Canal. [Laughter] Unfortunately, at that time there were things happening in the Panama Canal that weren't making me happy. Jimmy Carter had signed the Panama Canal, giving the Panama Canal to Panama. Something I'd like to make sure everyone understands: we did not give the Panama Canal back to Panama, we gave our Panama Canal to Panama. Panama had never had a Panama Canal. We built the Panama Canal

after the French abandoned attempts to build it. We took it from the French, we spent two years with Dr. Gorgas clearing the mosquitos out from 1904 to 1906. The mosquitos were cleaned out, that was done by filling in all the water places. There's actually evidence that at the Gorgas-Ancón Hospital, I guess it was called at that time, people were getting sick. So people in the hospital said, let's put the legs of the beds in tins of water, and that will keep all these insects from crawling up in the bed because they can't swim. Well those tins of water were breeding the mosquitos that were attacking the people. So they got that out, but by that time, the canal was fairly well cleaned up and they went back to work on the canal. My family moved down there to help build it.

E: When you retired in 1992 you left the Zone?

S: I left the Zone.

E: And where did you retired to?

S: I retired to North Carolina. Many people who retired from the Panama Canal came right here to Florida because there was a similarity in the weather. They're not exactly the same: one's tropical and the other is Florida, but there's a similarity between them. My wife and I spent two or three weeks in 1982 or 1983 looking in Florida to see if there was any place that we wanted to look for a home. We were looking for regions of Florida at that time where we might want to live. That's when we decided the region we wanted to live in was the mountains

of North Carolina. That was also because of the sun and the sandy beaches. I don't like beaches. I don't like sandy shorelines and I don't like palm trees. Well, I use the palm trees as a representation of sandy beaches. So we went to the mountains of North Carolina and we absolutely love it up there.

E: What part of North Carolina?

S: Hendersonville outside of Asheville, near Asheville.

E: Okay, do you know Waynesville?

S: Yeah, I know Waynesville.

E: All right, that's neat. I go to Waynesville every summer. So I'm familiar with the area, I understand your feelings towards it. It's incredible up there.

S: Oh God, I love it. Wherever the temperatures on the East Coast are ninety degrees, in the mountains they are eighty-five. Love it, love it. And our winters are mild; we don't get heavy snows. We get snow occasionally but it very seldom reduces your travel. We love it up there.

E: Yeah, it's definitely gorgeous up there. I've talked to a lot of people for whom the transition from the Canal Zone to the States is very difficult but it sounds like it was something that you welcomed and enjoyed. I guess there was probably the issue with Carter and giving up the canal and such had kind of put a sour taste in your mouth?

S: It did, but you know nowadays I'm well aware of how Panama is running the canal. They're doing a good job. There are still Americans working as Panama Canal pilots. In fact, the senior Panama Canal pilot right now is a man who was behind me at the Merchant Marine Academy. I still have several other friends who are still working as pilots down there, even though they're working under Panamanians. All this stuff about Red China—an article appeared in our *Times* newspaper, written by a lady and she said that the Red Chinese were running the Panama Canal and watch out! I wrote a letter back to the editor, and I told him, the Panama Canal is run by Panamanians. Only Panamanians and there are no Chinese involved. But what you have to do is distinguish between the ports where the cargo is handled and the Panama Canal. The Panama Canal is not related to the ports. Yes, there is a worldwide conglomerate partially owned by Red China that handles ports, but I think they handle sixty-five of them around the world. And they do run the ports on each end of the Panama Canal but they don't run the Panama Canal. Panama runs the Panama Canal. *Times News*, our local newspaper had another letter come back and they put in there that Captain Stone is a retired Panama Canal pilot and he says all that other stuff is not true. And it's not true.

E: So let's backtrack a little bit, let's say back to the 1960s. I like to talk a little about the Political awareness of the area. In 1964 there were the riots and stateside they were going through the entire Civil Rights Movement in America. Can you

compare the political awareness and atmosphere of the Zone to that of the States, the sentiment of the people and how aware people were in the Canal Zone of what was going on in the United States and how that affected life in the Canal Zone?

S: Well, it did not affect life in the Canal Zone that much. I happened to get a long weekend off that week. I was working as a boarding officer at that time and my work schedule was such that I finished late Thursday evening or early Friday morning, and then I had the whole weekend off. So, I was not involved with it. There was deaths in the city of Colón. There were military people lining the border between the Canal Zone and the city of Colón area and there were several killings there. But a friend of mine whose dad had a fishing boat said, do you want to go fishing today? We're gonna go trawling for snook. So we went out on his boat from the Cristobal Yacht Club—we're still in the Canal Zone area—and we went up to the Gatún Locks, the north end of the locks where it's still saltwater. We were fishing and they were trawling. Someone came down the Lock wall and said, you get out of here. Get out of here. You don't belong here on a boat. Mr. George was the guy who was running the boat; he was the father of one of my classmates and kept right on fishing. Next thing you knew, an armed Panama Canal launch with a whole squad of soldiers on it came approaching us, and they had rifles and guns pointing to us. There was a very young army officer on there and he says, I wanna know who you are and what

you're doing. Mr. George said, well my name is Mr. George and I'm fishing.

[Laughter] Well, the guy then realized that we were no threat to the canal. I mean, I understand the reason why they were doing that. We went on fishing and he said, well just be careful where you're going, and the boat left but it was kind of scary to see that armed craft come up. [Laughter]

E: Approaching you, bristling with guns? Yeah.

S: I don't know if that was the same time or not, but we had posted a—they took an old navy cargo vessel, a small one, and they tied up out at the brick water entrance to the Panama Canal. And I can't put the right time frame on here, but we were manning that lifeboat along with the military—or that cargo vessel. Now, we've just tied up and we're standing on there. When vessels came in, the military went out to board the vessels and protect the boarding officers, and we were with them. It was interesting; it was just a protection because they were afraid with the troubles going on down there vessels might try and come in from Cuba or other countries and enrich themselves by what was going on in Panama in the troubles of 1964. [Laughter] I was dating my wife at that time, we weren't married yet. I don't remember all the circumstances, but I could not drive my car. I was living on the Atlantic side and she was teaching on the Pacific side, and I could not drive my car across the Trans-Isthmian Highway 'cause I was in Panama. So I was able to put my car on a train, and I sent it to the Pacific side and left it over there. Then I would go over and see her frequently and I could get

by on the Atlantic side on my motor scooter or whatever it was. I don't remember, but my car was on the Pacific side and I was on the Atlantic side. Well that didn't last all that long. It was unpleasant, that [19]64. I think there were twenty-one Panamanians killed and four U.S. military. I'm not a hundred percent sure on the four military, but I know it was twenty-one Panamanians. The problem is, Panama suffered big damage from the people in Panama burning the buildings in Panama, like the Pan Am building. Pan American. It was located in Panama, but, the Panamanians set fire to it and it was heavily damaged. It did not crumble to the ground or anything. I can fully understand, if you take a country that's got an east and west part to it, right in the middle of it—north and the south—there is a Canal Zone, the Canal Zone forever by the way. Don't ever misunderstand one thing, the Suez Canal had a ninety-nine year lease on it with the French people. The Panama Canal was forever. We never ever had to give that Canal back to Panama. We had that forever and ever and ever. But Jimmy Carter, turned out was probably right when he did what he did.

E: How did other people feel at the time? What were your experiences observing the people during that time when he was turning the Canal over to Panama? How did the other Zonians feel about it?

S: Well, there were a lot of hot heads. I know I went to a meeting somewhere about it and there was a guy up front, I just met him a few minutes ago there, and he was kind of running the meeting. But I think he was a cushion between the

people and the government of the Canal Zone. Finally, it reached the point where people up front would just start talking and I finally said at the end, well excuse me, you've only been talking to people down in front. Do you want to listen to some of us people in the back too? And he said, yes, I will. I stood up, and I said some things very calmly, very loud, and very, very proper. I got a lot of applause for saying it 'cause what all the other people down in front were saying were hotspot things that should not have been said about the situation. I don't remember what it was, but I spoke very honestly about the way I felt about it. But nothing could change it. This guy who's here right now-

E: Did you recognize him from that meeting?

S: Oh yeah, I've known him for a long time. He was a minister at one time down in Panama. He knew me and he knew the Canal Zone crew that I went to high school with. But he did not know that we knew each other. So he was running the church in Gatún and he decided, it would be nice if we could have a dinner party here in Gatún at the church. I could introduce Malcolm Stone to Carol Newhart but I didn't know at the time he was behind it. So when we got to the church—it might have been their home, I don't remember—we sat down and he said, Malcolm, I want you to meet Carol Newhart. I said, we go to high school together, I already know Carol [laughter]. So we didn't get married, but I was at their wedding later on. I was the best man for another classmate of mine from high school and the Merchant Marine Academy. We still see him and talk to him.

E: What was it like interacting with the indigenous people of Panama and the islanders who came over to work? Was there any kind of tension?

S: No.

E: Racial awareness that was—

S: I had an incident happen to me when I was working on the Texaco tanker. We were going through the locks. At that time they used to put line handlers on the ship, and they just did not go down for one set of locks; they stayed on the ship all the way through the canal. I met one of these guys. My dad was manager at one of the local rate commissaries run by the Panama Canal Company. I can still remember and see that guy come up to me, a little black man. He says, your daddy, he treats my people really good. And he pointed to the **scale** and I was very proud. But I know my dad was that way, he did not object to black people. He was hard on how he ran the commissary to keep people from stealing but he was honest with them. I can still remember that guy doing that

E: Compared to the States, it seemed the Zone was a very harmonious place then?

S: The relationship between the blacks and whites in Panama during the construction days and during the days I worked there, there was no crime such as there is so rampant in the United States right now. I have been with black people all my life, but I'm getting very, very disappointed at the crime rate of the immigrants to the United States. I say to myself, and I say to a few other people,

the destruction of the United States is gonna come because of the slave trade back in the 1800s. We brought all those slaves into the United States and they did not realize at that time that's where the trouble was gonna begin. It scares me. I have grandkids and I just don't know what they're gonna live with. My oldest grandchild is eight years old, so I figure she's gonna live for a number of eighty two more years, so ninety. What's she gonna live with in the United States? I just don't know. I'm not gonna be here—I'm seventy three [laughter].

E: Well, time can only tell...

S: Okay, what else did you want to know?

E: This is really about you. Your story, what your childhood was like. Any stories that stand out in particular, funny anecdotes.

S: I was an outdoor man down there. I told you about all the time I spent swimming at the saltwater swimming pool at the Washington Hotel. I also played sports in the gymnasium all the time; if I could get to the gym and play basketball, or volleyball, or any of the summer recreation sports I did. I enjoyed it, but I also became quite a fisherman and in my lifetime down there, I owned four different boats. I did a lot of fishing both in the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and in Gatún Lake, and even went up into Madden Lake which is up above Gatún Lake. It's a reservoir for Gatún Lake and I did fishing up there. I was looking for whatever fish I could get. I fought a lot of tarpon in my life. I've fought a lot of

snook. I've caught corvina. We chartered a boat and went away for eight days. Two days down to the fishing ground, two days back, and four days fishing. On that boat, one of the guys caught a big 750-pound black marlin. Now the 750 pounds was determined by measuring the length and the widest girth of the fish and that's what they came up with.

E: How long did it take him to catch that?

S: Couple hours.

E: Oh my gosh, I can't even imagine.

S: But then when I was on the trip, I got a black marlin on a fishing pole. It was a fifty-pound class fishing rod line and everything. I fought that black marlin for an hour and eight minutes. I remember that perfect. I brought him right up to the stern of the boat and right off the tip of my rod. The leader was running right straight down, and the guys were trying to grab the leader so they could get the fish up to where we could put a gaff into him and hold him. But suddenly the fish went *hloop* and he went down a little bit and they had to let go of the leader. And then he went down a second time and the hook slipped out of his mouth.

E: No.

S: I know. I can actually say he was caught, because I had the leader right up and I released him, [laughter] but he did that to himself. I loved fishing, but again I paid

with my sun damages, but I did a lot of that. Working on ships as a pilot, I was exposed to the sun. I didn't wear enough long sleeve shirts and put sunscreen on. But I love the Canal Zone. I'm proud that both my kids were born down there.

E: Have you ever returned since you moved to North Carolina?

S: I've been back. I retired in 1992, I went down and visited the Panama Canal by plane, flew down in 1998. Then in 2008, I made a trip through the Panama Canal on a Holland-American Line ship. I have to admit that going through the Panama Canal turned out not to be exciting. It turned to be *ho hum* because I estimate—and it's an estimate because of my time spent with the tugboats and my time on ship—that I've been through the Panama Canal three thousand times. And when I made it on that American Line trip that was 3,001. [Laughter] But I don't know how many times because we worked the tugs up and down through the cut, in, out and down through Pedro Miguel Locks, assisted into Miraflores Lock, so I can't say how many times I've been through all or partial transits of the canal. So I threw in the number three thousand, twenty years plus. [Laughter] But I did love doing it. On your computer search for it A.C.P., Autoridad del Canal de Panamá or Panama Canal Authority, either one. And then it will go to a website where you can look at live pictures of the Panama Canal. Well those live pictures—they're not moving pictures, they're still pictures—they change every thirty seconds. So you see a ship high above the water and then all of a sudden the picture changes and the ship has dropped down another five feet in the water or something. Very

interesting to watch. I keep and watch that all the time. Actually, on my screen on the computer is a picture I've managed to capture of two great big container ships going through Gatún locks in the same direction. They were southbound and the ships were on the east and the west side and they were just perfect position. When you look at Gatún locks, it's somewhat crowded with container ships and I keep that picture on my screen as my screensaver. Beautiful.

E: I'd love to go down there and experience it.

S: I wish every American could go through the Panama Canal and see it. It should be treated as the modern wonder of the world. Panama is working hard to make it more accessible to big ships. It's a completely different situation. I understand everything except the source of the water, because if you continue to run the old set of locks at the same rate—and I mean you're risking losing a lot of water because it's all gravity—and then the same time running these other locks where they could save only theoretically forty percent of the water, well that's gonna risk that canal. We had a time down in the Panama Canal where the lake level is normally eighty-seven feet, and it could go up to eighty-seven and three quarters, and then, boy you'd better start emptying Gatún Lake, because if not you'll flood out the Gatún locks with the water level. One year, we actually went from eighty-seven and a half feet at the beginning of the dry season, and before the rains came again, the lake level was down to eighty-one feet because they had no rains to speak of that dry season. In Panama, you don't have winter and summer

or anything. You have a rainy season, which lasts about eight months, and a dry season, which lasts about four months. That rain is supposed to keep the lake replenished. By using the Madden Lake up top, that is a place to send water down. Normally a ship going through the Panama Canal, the maximum draft is thirty-nine feet, six inches in freshwater. The Panama Canal, because of the lake level drop, had dropped the level of the ships transiting to thirty-six feet, six inches. They were just on the verge of dropping it to thirty-six feet when the rains came again and they started getting water supply back in the lake. Shortly after that, they were able to get the lake level back up and then get the ship draft back up so they could make money doing it. There were so many good things about the Panama Canal, I loved it. What I can really say is our two kids were born there. They're both married and my wife and I have four grandchildren. Beautiful kids, and we're very, very proud of the way our kids went through life, but I told both the kids, when you get out of high school in the Canal Zone, you are not staying in the Canal Zone. Too many of the graduates of the Cristobal or the Balboa High School found the Canal Zone and the Atlantic saltwater and Pacific saltwater is so fresh that they didn't bother to go get an education. They went and got themselves boards for waterskiing. They spent their time in the Panamanian sun. I told my kids, you're not going to do that. If you want an education, we'll give you four years' college education. If you don't want that, then decide what you want to do but I suggest you go to the military if you don't like it. Both my kids went to college in the States; neither one of them had any

desire to go to the junior college down in Panama Canal Zone. They wanted to get out on their own.

E: When were they born?

S: The one was born in 1966. My daughter was born in 1966. That's Lynn. Our son David was born in 1969.

E: And they completed high school in the Zone—

S: And then they left. Our daughter actually, because she had her summers off, she came home for the summer. She went to work for the Panama Canal Company. And she is legally, by two summer jobs, a fifth-generation employee on the Canal Zone. Our son was involved in air force ROTC and he never got down during the summer so I never qualify him as a Panama Canal worker.

E: Do they visit now with their children at all?

S: They've got wonderful children. The oldest one is eight; the youngest one on the other side of the family is three or four. Good kids. I love them. We spent Father's Day, first time we spent the whole family together since college days. Our son is an air force officer: he's a lieutenant colonel and he's with missile sites. He's spent most of his time west of the Mississippi River where the missiles are but he's now stationed in Washington D.C. area and lives in Stafford, Virginia. Our daughter's up in Westminster, Maryland, and we were able to all get together for

Father's Day and it was great. [Laughter] We had a beautiful time. My life in the canal was beautiful, and I loved growing up down there even though I had some hard times on the Canal and developed a dislike for some of the people down there in the long run. I detested Jimmy Carter for what he did. That's all changed now. And I frequently watch what's going on in the canal with this channel that you could watch on the computers and see what's going on down there.

E: Do you think they're handling it well and doing a good job?

S: Yeah. So I'm very happy with what's going on down there. To divide a country completely in half—because you had the Canal Zone all the way from here to here there in the canal picture. Which way do you go through the Panama Canal, east and west?

E: East to west? West to east?

S: No, no. You go north to south. I'll show you something here, when you look—

E: Right cause it curves down here.

S: This is north right here, right?

E: Right, right.

S: And there is where you start. You're actually twenty-one miles further east when you go to the Pacific Ocean. You started here in the Atlantic, but when you finished up down here in the Pacific you were twenty one miles further east than

you were when you started in the Atlantic. But people seem to forget that Central America comes down and then it curves up around like this. I'm going to give you live pictures that were really taken. Family pictures, and that's my grandmother there. I've written on some of them using computer fictions. Those are post cards, pictures that were taken of my grandmother in the locks. That's a Canal Zone home in there. That's now forty feet underwater because when they filled the lake, the town of Bohio disappeared.

E: These are great. Does the museum have copies of these?

S: I have some copies of them yes. Have you met Joe Wood?

E: Yes.

S: I'm going to talk to Joe and see. That's the place he had up in the interior. And I don't know how he got so many people up there 'cause they're not all relatives.

E: Just for the photograph.

S: [Laughter] They're just photographs that were taken in those days. Now that's the actual letter that my great-grandfather wrote as he was sailing down to Panama. He wrote every day and put things about what he ate and what the weather was like.

E: That's great that you still have all of this, the letters especially.

S: I've had them Xeroxed professionally to make them look the same. I'm sending copies to all of my kids. And that's the article my great-grandfather wrote to probably the *Star and Herald*. It's very interesting for him to talk about the condition down there. That's again the house that's forty feet underwater. That's the family looking out the window. That's my Uncle David standing out in front of the house back in those days.

E: Yeah...It's like a town underwater, wow.

S: Now this is the town of New Cristóbal. And it's surrounded all the way back here in the town of Colón.

E: And that was taken in 2006?

S: Apparently, yes. I got it off the computer. [Laughter] This is the high school I went to, right there.

E: Oh, let's see it. Good memories. Wow.

S: And if you turn that page over I've outlined it with various sites where I live during my career down there and drew a line over to the approximate—I can't actually see the house I lived in.

E: When you went back to the area in 1998, did you visit the town and high school?

S: Yes. We did drive around there, but, what had been the Canal Zone community—although it was in the Republic of Panama in Colón—was in, some

in good shape but many in bad shape. By this time the Panamanians were very poor over there, and you did not have a comfortable feeling being in there. You were a little bit afraid. Now, those are official pictures that I got from the government offices, but the family pictures, they're all real pictures that I inherited through my family. These are for the new locks that are being built. I keep that in there for information. Here is a copy.

E: It's good to have a copy of sensitive stuff like that.

S: I protect them with those. [Laughter] I'm going to see if Joe Wood wants that for the museum. I have extra copies and they are family things. If they would take it and put them in there, because I'm really a man who's proud that my family helped build the Panama Canal. There's one in here that I say this funnily and you can't see it now...I tell people, and it's written on one of the copies I've made- that if my grandmother had not been helping to dig the Panama Canal, that canal would never have opened in 1914. It would have probably opened in 1916 if she hadn't been out there [laughter].

E: I see pictures here of her helping out and leaning over the edge.

S: Those days, apparently it was very free to just walk and go anywhere. I think that's the Pacific locks, Miraflores, and she's digging in there. The one where she is leaning over the wall is Gatún Locks. At the top of that one and on the original,

I said I'm so glad my grandmother had a pipe to hang onto or she would have fallen.

E: She could have fallen right in, yeah. She's right on the edge holding onto the pipe. Well, thank you so much for your time.

S: Well, I'm very happy to do it.

[End of Interview]

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