

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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-October 2013

PCM-014

Interviewee: Stephen Cartotto

Interviewer: Matthew White

Date: July 2, 2010

W: Its July second approximately 9:15, Matthew White for the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program is interviewing Steve Cartotta-

C: Cortatto.

W: Cortatto, my apologies. At the Panama Canal Reunion and first if you could why don't you give just a brief overview of your involvement with the Panama Canal just sort of the umbrella sort of-

C: My personal experience?

W: Yeah, when did you get there? How long were you there? When did you leave?

C: I was born there in 1951. I was a third generation at that time and I left in 1971 so I was there about 19 years. Grew up there, went to school had a great life and just didn't work out that I was going to stay there. I would like to have but I didn't work out.

W: Okay, well let's go back to that you said third generation. So talk to me a little about your ancestors when they got there, who they were.

C: Well my grandfather, he was John Eugene Ridge. He came from Pennsylvania Pittsburg area with three of his brothers. I got some notes here from him-

W: Sure, you bet.

C: My grandfather came down in November of 1909, when he was 19. His two older brothers, Joseph Patrick Ridge was a steam shuttle engineer and he worked with

the canal in 1905. Alowishes Peter Ridge in 1908 and then my mom thinks, in 1911 Stephen Mark Ridge and Leo Martin Ridge came down to work. So that's-

W: I assume these are yours mothers relatives.

C: Yeah, these are my mother's relatives, her uncle's. My grandmother had a sister- I think. Let's see was she married to Larry? Yeah- And wrote my mother and said "There's a lot of bachelors down here, so she went down and the story is that she went to a dance. So before she was married, Larry had invited her to a dance and so for some reason he couldn't go so he said to my grandfather: "Hey would you take her?" and they ended up getting married. So the brothers -I think all the other brothers left-, Jack was the only one who stayed down there and he had eleven kids of which seven of them stayed down there; my mom and my uncle John, uncle Bob, uncle Pat, uncle Buber and they worked in various areas. Uncle John worked for the water treatment plant, Uncle Buber and Uncle Bob both worked for the oil bunkering plant, you know filling ships that came through.

W: Sure.

C: Uncle Pat was a canal pilot. My mom did various clerical work and she ended up being the secretary to the governor and I was born in [19]51, I have a sister. My dad went down in the army in 1933 he was a musician. –

W: Musician?

C: Yeah he played in the army band.

W: Okay.

C: Another story my mom just told me was that they arrived in Panama on Saint Patrick's Day of 1933. Arrived in Colon and they were shipped to the Pacific side, they were going to be at Fort Clayton and they had a dance that night at the American Legion Club, I think it was in Amador and so the band had to play for that dance. Turns out that my grandfather and grandmother attended that dance so his future in-laws were there. They didn't get married until I think 1947 or [19]48 but he got out of the army. Well while he was down there he played in various local orchestras as well, you know moon lighting.

W: Sure.

C: He'd go on bivouac, he told us he'll be out in the bush camping out in Pocora or somewhere and one of the guys I think he name was Abalino Munoz had an orchestra that he'd play in. He'd come out and pick him up at the bivouac, take him into town, play their gig and bring him back. Anyway when he got out of the army- he was from Patterson, New Jersey- he went back to Jersey and the guys in the band came up and said: "Hey why don't you come back down to Panama?"

W: But did he know your mom at that point?

C: No he didn't.

W: No, okay.

C: So he came back down to Panama and he played in little orchestras, he got hired with the canal company. He was in the claims branch. I'm not sure exactly what they did; they handled the reimbursements for various expenditures and different

things like that. That's where he met my mom. She ended up working under him in the claims branch.

W: Now when you say orchestra, is it a synthesizing orchestra, a jazz orchestra?

C: It was more a jazz orchestra; he played flute, clarinet, saxophone, and he had dance bands in New Jersey. They would play proms and balls and stuff like that. It was a small, like an eight or ten piece orchestra. Had a violin- I'm looking at some of the old pictures- a violin, a saxophone maybe a guitar, drummer, a bass player, a piano player something like that.

W: Was there a thriving jazz scene?

C: I don't know if it was a jazz scene per say, he used to tell me that when Beat-Bob he just kind of hung up his horn because he didn't go outside the box pretty much, he was pretty mainstream big band stuff. You know the swing-swinger stuff Benny Goodman that kind of stuff. But some of the photos we have; it was a thriving scene there is one from El Rancho ballroom down there and it could've been out of Vegas. They're all in their white tuxes with rose or carnation or whatever, the dancing girls in their glitter suits it's just really-

W: Now is this in Panama or the zone?

C: In Panama. This would've been in Panama.

W: Okay.

C: I think the zone was much more straight ways, you know. It wasn't in my experience. There might be a bar at the local officers club or something you know where people would hang out but-

W: Did you ever go to see them play or had he hung it up by then?

C: No. He'd play at home and gave us music lessons and stuff like that. I don't know if his family was that musical but he also played the mandolin being as it was an Italian family and his parents had come over from Italy so they worked in a silk mill. They were silk weavers.

W: In Italy or in Jersey?

C: In Italy and in Jersey. Yeah so he grew up around that but later years I went through their attic and I found this old tear-drop shaped mandolin and by that time I was playing electric guitar so I took the pick guard off of the mandolin and put it on my electric guitar, ruined both instruments. He became chief of the claims branch over the years, so that's-

W: Okay yeah, but how did he meet your mother then?

C: Well she worked under him.

W: Oh, okay.

C: Yeah she worked under him and she had been dating John Drummond who was second generation. His father had come down, I think his father was a commissary division for many years and Jack ended up in the treasury division. He later became the treasurer and- so when would've this had been? - Probably the early [19]40s maybe, dated my mom. Dated and dated and dated and he went off on vacation and one year she said, Jack if you haven't proposed to me by the time you leave I may not be waiting for you when you get back. He

thought, you'll be waiting you'll be waiting. He went on vacation and my dad proposed to her and she accepted. When Jack came back it was a done deal.

W: You snooze, you lose yeah.

C: And so they got married. My dad died in 1968, he had had several heart attacks shortly after I was born in the early [19]50s in his I guess mid forty's. He was a fairly heavy smoker and he drank quite a bit. Didn't exercise so those things catch up to you. Not fatal heart attacks, fortunately, but anyway he died in [19]68 and a couple of years later my mom married Jack.

W: I've noticed that- It's not the first time I've noticed either- that people can rarely identify who's third, who's second, whose first generation Zonian. Is that something that you knew about each other? Was there any status associated with that?

C: No, I don't think so. The community was so, I guess. I don't know if the word is insular but self contained. The families had a history you know so, my grandfather had his own circle of friends and through the church organization or different community organizations and you know that kind of followed through my mom, she was a very social person; involved in the church and scouting and whatever else. There were lots of community organizations for the catholic community, the protestant community, the Jewish community and so it was very interconnected and people knew who people were and sort of like you might have any village somewhere. The elders and the generations like that it's just kind of-

W: Now let's go back a little bit. Tell me about you childhood. Where you lived?

Where you went to school? Things of that nature.

C: Well, I was born in Gorgas Hospital (*Panama*) in 1951 and first lived in Ancon, which I don't remember we had photographs. It was a four family, wooden structure on concrete piers, breeze-way garage underneath you know. Second place we moved to Los Rios which was I think a fairly new community at the time or at least the houses were new that we moved into. That was a single family unit, perched up on a hill. My mom she was I guess a pretty avid gardener and when the houses were built it was nothing but mud around them. There was no landscape and they didn't put sod in like they might do today. They put these clumps of grass in which would then spread. I guess it was Bermuda grass and by the second rainy season you had a lush lawn. She planted all kinds of native plants like crotons and hibiscus and everything. Probably the first house to be totally landscaped in the neighborhood; I don't remember having that many friends living in that neighborhood, but I was young at the time and we'd have birthday parties and stuff like that and everyone would get together. But from there we moved to Gavilan area which was in Balboa, bordering Amador, which is right on the coast. Gavilan area, where most of my childhood memories are, I was adding up some of the families I remember, I counted at least fifty kids that I knew directly that we would play with in groups or separately. So if you were in school, you got out of school, did your homework done and you go outside and someone would be there. The houses, let's say two streets, houses on each

street and in between in the back was an open yard all the way down. There would be trees, we had a great mango tree in the back that we could climb up in the mango tree, take a little salt shaker and pick a green mango and just peel it off and eat the green mango sitting in the tree. When we first moved in there was kind of a mud path connecting the two streets, which when it rained it would be just a total mess-

W: Sure.

C: After a few years they put a sidewalk in and a playground right in the back of our house, so we kind of lucked out there it was the locus of all the activity in the neighborhood, so pretty much any time a day you'd find someone out there. We pretty much had the run of the whole neighborhood which in compass was pretty much I guess, maybe a square half mile, which is a pretty good size. I don't know how many acres that and how many houses but you know for there to be fifty kids that I personally knew there was probably forty families for that many and maybe double or triple that much in the neighborhood. We pretty much had the run of it; it was like, okay I'm going out to play. Okay be back at dusk. And we'd go a couple of blocks over or, I'm going over to Sandy's house. Okay see you later. You knew you were safe. If they wanted you they could just holler and pretty much hear and that was kind of the rule, you wait to hear that yell and then come home. Later years, one of my buddy's dads had a cows horn cut off that you'd blow-

W: Oh yeah, yeah.

C: And you'd hear that horn and you'd know that was his signal to head home.

W: Whatever works [laughter].

C: Yeah lots of kids. For us a boy playing cowboys and Indians or army was the deal. We'd split up into teams and there was kind of a swamp on the edge of the neighborhood- tile flats it was it really was- lots of mangroves and mud and you know we'd kind of liked to go down there and imagine we're in the jungle. There were some older kids in the neighborhood. Mike Kerning, it's funny I talked to him about this later too, Mike Kerning and maybe his brother Tim, maybe Louigi Monavanni. Anyway these guys and a couple of us younger kids, ended up down of the edge of this tile flat and there was this grey oozy mud down there and there was some kind of like a storm drained concrete with a cast iron covered and we were standing right on the edge of this and they were saying, it's quicksand, it's quicksand jump in! And we were like, no! no! Don't make me jump in. I was scared because they were older. Jump in or we'll eat you or beat you or whatever it was going to be. So finally, terrified I jumped in and it wasn't quicksand and I got totally muddy and they ran off laughing and I pulled myself out crying, you know whimpering. I was probably; I don't know like 5 or 6 and went home in tears to my mom. My mom tore into those boys, she called up their moms and got me cleaned up and everything. So I saw Mike at one of these reunions and said, Mike, I remember you did this thing to me. He goes, oh yeah I was a real asshole back then.

W: So which elementary school did you go to?

C: Well I went to Saint Mary's mission parochial school, the catholic school

W: Oh okay, was that in the zone or out in?-

C: Yeah it was a two minute walk from my house, literally right around the corner.

The nuns there, I guess when I was there, there were Franciscan nuns from somewhere state side and particularly it was a mean nun I had for first grade, sister Mary Adela. My family pretty much I think, they adored those nuns and my grandfather had a long history of working with the Catholic Church down there. In fact, someone told my mom a story that he lived of Old Gorgona. This woman saw him sweeping the church before mass on Sunday and he wasn't paid to do it. It was just something he thought needed to be done, so he did it. He ended up working with the community house which I think at some point there was a large building right on Balboa road sort of used to be the main building of that school. They had columns kind of almost a classical-looking building. Later they expanded the school. . . But I started there in kinder garden and I kind of remember part of this story. The recess bell rang; all the kids went out of school. I thought it was over so I went home, which I just disappeared and they couldn't find me afterwards, ended up calling the house as a big to do. They found me but I went there through the eighth grade and then-

W: So how was your-by the way I'll interrupt once in a while to keep that straight.

C: Yeah keep that focus.

W: So you're the first person that I've met here that went to a private school. What was that like relative to your friends who might've gone to a public school? What were the differences? What were the similarities?

C: Well the difference was mainly that it was a religious school so we had catechism classes and we were known as the Saint Mary's Fairy's.

[Laughter]

C: In a pejorative way.

W: Sure, sure.

C: We didn't take too much offense at it. I think it was all in good fun. But surprisingly I mean, I was a large catholic community; so I the school was pretty much full and-

W: Did other denominations had their schools?

C: No. I don't think so. I don't believe there was a Jewish school and as far as the non-Catholics they just went to the public schools. I was talking to a friend last night; she went there for one year. Her parents said, it's your choice, and she went for one year. For us it was just a given, you're going to the Catholic Church.

W: Sure, sure. My understanding there's two things courses don't have because my understanding with course of the public schools is the people who I've interviewed who went there, they talk about how planned your life was there. Not only was there a school but there was this constant array of activities for you just, from dance, to archery, to the Canal Zone had supplied for kids. Did you see the same in the private school?

C: Well, actually those were available to all of us. The summer program you just had to sign up for what you might find in the parks and rec. department today. I took archery one summer, the YMCA had classes. I took an art class; I remember I was probably about ten. Swimming, we all swam the pool was the other-

W: Hot spot.

C: We went through the whole- I don't know what it's called, the beginner BSA, beginner swimmer advanced. We had our little stickers on our bathing suits and the pool was the hot spot and the Amador beach. We all had access to the military recreation facilities. We had our sticker on our car windshield, canal employee sticker so. . . Saturday, Sunday we would go out to Amador beach and hang out there, kind of privileged really it was- especially when you consider the country around it. The abject poverty right across the street you know.

W: Now did you have much contact with Panama and the Panamanians? Were you aware of the poverty?

C: Yeah definitely, definitely.

W: At that age?

C: Definitely, definitely. The groups of Panamanian kids would come in to the neighborhood to pick mangos and we would holler at them, we'd yell, policia, policia! Like we're going to call the cops you know. They might scamper off or in later years they kind of just like look at us. I can remember feeling bad about that at one point. Kind of recognizing; oh, that's not right to be hollering at them you know. We lived in a pretty much . . . I don't know a cradle to grave situation. It was

luxury necessarily you had a variety of income levels. So you had the blue-collar jobs, the maintenance jobs, the guys that, well for the white community pretty much because it was an apartheid kind of situation there. The Americans were groomed for management jobs or supervisory jobs in any of the departments or division. So if you chose as I did later to join the apprenticeship program, you would go with the idea that at some point you would be the head of a crew and your crew would consist of Panamanian local guys would be the laborers, either the west Indians or Panamanians so you know, you needed a light bulb change, you'd call the electrical division, the switch is not working, we'll send someone out. And then Mr. So-and-so would come with his helper and fix it, the plumber. Mr. So-and-so would come, you know, my dad's friend. Mr. Peterson was an electrician; there were guys that worked at the electronic shop later years you know I played at a rock-n-roll band if my aunt needed fixing, took it over at Mr. Foster's and he'd put it right. All those services were provided for a nominal fee. I think rent was pretty cheap compared to state side, income levels weren't that great. My mom tells me, yeah we didn't have a lot of money, but I don't recall ever wanting for anything. We didn't always get newest latest car like some of our neighbors might. We got like a new Chevy. It wasn't like every year, maybe every other year. We kept the car for five-ten years.

W: Where did you buy cars?

C: Down Panama, they had local car dealers Smith y Pareres

W: So you were at the Proctor School Saint Mary's till your eighth grade. Did they have a high school?

C: No, they didn't have a high school. There was a Catholic High School in Panama but- which in retrospect it would've been great to go there and really get immersed in Spanish because I never actually learned Spanish living in Panama. I could speak words I could say, agua. I'm thirsty, tengo sed.

W: So they didn't teach you at the Saint Mary's?

C: They didn't really teach it at Saint Mary's that I recall. I could be wrong and later in high school they did teach it. I took Spanish in high school and I learned enough just to get by. It wasn't in college I took some classes and learned a lot more, went back to Panama and had a great time speaking because I was more tuned to the culture going back, I could appreciate it more than growing up there. Growing up there, you didn't really have a need to learn Spanish. We had pretty much English-speaking maids; that was another thing we had maids growing up you know, housekeepers. Usually just for the day, but later we had someone living, part time living maids who would clean and cook and generally take care of us while our parents worked. Yeah the Catholic School, it was different. It was much more disciplined than the public schools. They were much more- academically I think they were probably on a par.

W: Yeah that was my next question; other people have spoken very highly of the teachers at the public school. I was wondering if it was the-

C: Yeah the academic standards were pretty high and I didn't have any problem transitioning to a public school. Yeah we would march through town to assemblies the church was maybe a quarter a mile away so we'd line up and march through town at the steps of the church-

W: Even with the school uniforms?

C: Yeah school uniforms. Guess there was a little hint, just wondering how it was like to be free in the public school world. We were so constrained with the nuns but I had some really good teachers that I liked a lot and then I had some that seemed to have a chip on their shoulder-

W: Sure, sure. Well it's true.

C: The Franciscans I think because they had to wear this wool, heavy black wool dresses you know. Then the Sisters of Mercy came down from New York and someone was saying-they complained that other kids were picking up New York accents. [Laughter] But they were white light weight cotton dresses. They were a little nicer.

W: So, high school. You went to-

C: I went to the Grande Junior High School, which was a new school I guess at that time was maybe only a year or two old. They built big geodesic dome for the cafeteria, auditorium, brand new school and that was kind of getting out into the real world.

W: Did you have trouble breaking into- you already knew the people there.

C: Yeah sure. You know when school is out, the uniform is out and then you know everyone is part of the gang. As kids, you don't inquire much about faith so if you had a Jewish friend we never talked about it. We never talked about Judaism or Protestantism the differences or whatever. It was just something that you had to do on Sunday pretty much. For us it was every day because of this church. The community became much larger at that point because you were part of that larger group. You were part of-(long distance) you had more friends from more town sites. There was Balboa, there was Diablo, Los Rios, Curundu, military and some Panamanians at that point. So you just made more friends, you had more connections. You just got more of a sense of how the community worked, who the gangs were you know, who the tough kids were and the bookish kids were, where do I fit into this world and at that time that's what happening to you anyways.

W: Sure, sure absolutely it's not that much.

C: Just kind of finding your way. At that time I started playing guitar. Well I started when I was thirteen-yeah thirteen.

W: What age are we talking about here? Until 1964- [19]65?

C: Yeah I remember writing letter in seventh and eighth grade to the G.I.'s in Vietnam, just support letters: "We're proud of you for you know, saving us from communism and that kind of stuff."

W: Now how much living in the Canal Zone? And of course you mentioned Vietnam but how much were you aware of what was going on? So we're talking about

1963-64. We're talking about a lot of events in the United States larger Civil Rights, Vietnam. How much-

C: We were pretty aware of all of that, especially of that time being in High School you know in [19]68. My dad died in [19]68 so that had a big impact on me, I was sixteen. I think I was just kind of lost for a personal hero or role model at that point. We had gotten Life or Saturday Evening Post, Life magazine, National Geographic. I remember just reading all this articles and seeing the pictures of the guys who died that week. There'd be a two split page or three 120 pictures and just looking at it-

W: Who died in Vietnam?

C: Yeah and our news outlet was mainly the army forces radio and television service. Later the Caribbean forces network and southern command network after that. It was limited but even then which is just surprising that nightly news had the footage of Vietnam, coverage from Vietnam. I think as a rule, the community was pretty patriotic. I was in the boy scouts our church sponsored a troop. It was all the kids I'd grown up with, maybe a dozen of us were in the boys scouts and we had couple of our scout masters were in the military. One was a PFC Steve Leeber another guy Pete Hamlin, he was in the navy and Pete had access to landing craft I guess his job was to pilot this landing craft to do support missions or some kind of a radar station on Taboga island just off the coast so he'd shuttle back and forth. So he'd take us out in camping trips, we camped out in Taboga, we camped in the Perlas islands, like that. Anyway we had some

involvement with the military, my sister was a couple of years older she dated a couple guys in the army. I don't know how they met even unless- I don't know how they got together. Well, I know my sister-

W: Soldiers will find a way. [Laughter]

C: Say again?

W: Yeah yeah yeah well, at that point there was much more interaction-we're talking [19]68- [19]69 on just from the local hang outs. . . parades, local parades, the army was always in the Fourth of July parade, the Veterans Day parade and as kids we're like, oh wow, check this out. They did a lot of training there, the military for Vietnam. Our house approached Albric Air force Space. They used to fly you two flights out of there to Cuba. I'm not sure exactly where but they take off in the morning and then come back at dusk. I guess they do helicopter training because eight hui's would take off, fly off to the west bank, we were out there one night and they have some kind of exercise going and the hui's were flying over and then they'd come back. We were aware that all that was going on in addition to the news and I guess around that time we started having more friends who were in the military. Interacting with them more on social bases and the guys that were on route to Vietnam or were in the Canal Zone and glad to be there, instead of Vietnam.

W: So actually the YouTube story kind of reminds me of a question and I ask to paraphrase a little bit. A couple of people I've talked to, actually quite a bit older than here. So they have a lot of stories of how World War II affected the Canal

Zone. So now I'm thinking, you should be old enough by this point to be aware of for example a Cuban missile crisis, which is quite close to you in a way. Do you remember that? What effect did it have on life in the canal?

C: We were all totally paranoid, sort of like the Russians are coming which I guess that's what it was all about-

W: Yeah exactly

[laughter]

C: We weren't that far away, Miami was a lot closer but still I can recall. . . so maybe it was- I know there was a cue, there were several cue's I think one was in [19]59-

W: In Panama?

C: Yeah, in Panama. It might have been the later one which I think it was [19]64 where the rumor was there were Cuban guerrillas up in Chiriqui province next to Costa Rica. They infiltrated, it was a really real threat and it was to be feared and opposed. As kids we were like whatever; its' sort of like, okay I understand because the Cold War was all the ducking cover stuff too-

W: Sure, sure.

C: Where you have air-raid drills and would run down to the garage and watching the sputnik. We had black and white T.V. and . . . I had a little model of the whatever that first rock it was that launched John Glenn in this first orbit. That was all big stuff for us then we were super proud to be Americans you know, the second in space or whatever it was. By the time the Vietnam War came along

one of my best friends was in the ROTC. I have to laugh because I can't talk about all the stories. [laughter]

W: Say what you want.

C: But he was like- we called him the general- because he was like the chief whatever his rank was, he was up there in the ROTC. He had the saber and would command the ROTC brigade-

W: Now it this the high school ROTC?

C: Yeah this is about the high school, a bible high school at that time. He'd later had a career I think he retired as a major or maybe a Colonel was stationed for many years in Germany. So he was on the front line, had anything happened he would've been. . . they did some kind of training at the special forces training camp on the Atlantic site. I'm not sure where that was Gatune or somewhere over there Fort Villex Special Warfare Training Center whatever it was and he talked about this mock-up Vietnamese village thatched huts and stuff like that we had to go over there and do this training. We were aware of the school of the America's, training the counter and surgency forces for all Latin America. We had no idea what was going on there and later we find out now sort of that someone was pretty interferous and-

W: How does that affect your memories at the time period now that you found out-

C: That doesn't really change my experience at all. We were pretty much happy-go-lucky and several friends and I- my first band. I had a band in junior high school so we'd play in the local school dances and a couple of the guys were let's say

maybe two, three, four, five years older. . . and they pretty much all went into the military. I remember Curtis Searcy was in the air force in fact, he might've even been in the air force at that time but he was from Currundu. Mike Bishoni and Nelson Guerrero they were like our three singers so we had this band, two guitars, maybe bass, drums, and maybe a keyboard at one time or another and these three upfront singers with the white T-shirts rolled up sleeves, tight black jeans, singing The Monkeys and Paul Rivera in the radio. We would play at the local N.C.O clubs, V.F.W, the American Legion. So we would be playing for these lifers, these master sergeants who were tough old crackers and I know there was some resentment. I can tell you that in 1960- could've been [19]67 even I got it in my head to take an army shirt and cut off the sleeves and write P-O-W on the black in a black marker and from one of the car magazines like a Malakar magazine in the back they always had adds for plastic German helmets and stuff like that you know. Iron cross and all that stuff was big so I got this plastic German helmet and we walked into a local clubhouse this was actually in the zone in Diablo clubhouse one night after we played at a teen club or N.C.O. or something. Walked in the back to get some fries and there were these two or three master sergeants sitting at the table, they wanted to kick my ass-

W: How old were you?

C: I was like fifteen and they were steamed and rightly so [laughter] here's this young kid who knows nothing about the war that they are coming back from or going to or have seen and has no respect for them, which we didn't really I

mean, because we didn't know better. I mean at that age another couple of years I would've known better and maybe would've been different or maybe not but at that point I was still the innocent. Fortunately, we had these older guys there that we able to stand between us and said, you better take that shirt off Steve. You're really pissing these guys off. So those guys going into the service I didn't know too many personally that went to Vietnam. One I didn't know he went to Vietnam till years later and we talked about it, told me about his experiences going illegally into Cambodia and conducting cover operations and stuff like that. He was still very proud of that, very patriotic about it. I on the other hand, was glad that I didn't get called up; I had high draft member I think it was 285 something like that where as a couple of my friends got drafted and actually got stationed and actually got stationed in the zone and one of them got the job as the LCM diver doing that support run. He lived at home, the other one also lived at home for a while too and he was stationed in Fort Amador and my mom saw him cleaning up mangoes under the mango tree on the golf course one day. I had a picture out of Life magazine of some drill sergeant. They had an article on the marines which I read on boot camp. This was maybe late [19]68 or something it freak me out, totally terrified me I thought, this is not for me. I tagged that picture up on my book case and I had acquired a bayonet, a small bayonet in the course of my boy scouts. I took the bayonet stuck it in the guys forehead and so you walk into my bedroom in addition to all the crap you have hanging around you know Jimi Hendrix posters and there was this picture of the drill sergeant

with a bayonet. Had I been called up I don't know if I would've gone or not, I just don't know. But we had guys that lets say would have run afoul of the law in one way or another- army guys, friends of ours. They would get their head shaved if they were arrested in Panama they would take them in, shave their heads-

W: The Panamanians would shave their heads?

C: Yeah the Panamanians would instantly shave their heads, called it coco bolo. They would get sent Special Forces training you what their punishment, which you know. . . So the counter culture was really taking off like [19]68. [19]69, [19]70, [19]71 just like it was in the States. We had a big peace march I don't remember exactly when- maybe it was 1970 and we all wore this black arm bands and we did a candle light procession I think from La Boca to the center of town, Balboa.

W: Now how did that go over because you said before, and what I've gathered from other people is a very patriotic community.

C: Yeah well it was tough, it was tough for a lot of people at that time it was like the hippy days and the drug culture and all of that. There were a lot of problems, there was a lot of involvement with that that I won't go into but it caused a lot of families a lot of problems and some kids went over the edge and never recovered, others died. So it's almost like it took that to expose sort of a . . . façade of life being perfect, which we all sort of knew it wasn't. I mean we know that life is not perfect; people have problems because we're people and we live together. In my family especially, we don't talk about those things, we don't talk

about those problems. That never helped them get any better; if someone had a mental illness of a deformity I had an aunt- there was eleven kids in my family-

W: You had ten brothers and sisters?

C: In my mom's family.

W: Oh in your mom's family, I'm sorry.

C: In my mom's family Aunt Rita I think was the baby and she was mentally handicapped and physically handicapped and I never knew I had an Aunt Rita until I was sixteen and she died I think two days before my dad died. That's sort of when I found out I had an Aunt Rita, I never met her-

W: Where was she?

C: She was in Corozal which was the mental hospital.

W: In the zone?

C: In the zone yeah. Corozal Mental Hospital I guess. I'm not sure exactly what they called it but she was there. My grandfather used to visit her all the time, my mother would go visit her, never took me. I don't know if didn't want me to know or what. But how can I live to be sixteen and not knowing my Aunt Rita that was. . . maybe I knew but it was never for-front to my consciousness you know.

'Cause there were other families that had kids with Down syndrome who were out in the neighborhood playing you know, come over to my house it was, hey tony what's going on. We know something is not right with you but you're one of us.

W: Right [laughing]

C: But it sort of seemed in my family, things were sort of covered up a little bit. Later there were other problems and my dad, he drank a lot I think that's because he was afraid because he had heart attacks. He just I don't know maybe he had a lot of anxiety about that as a way of coping. The community there was an active police force and of course growing up they all knew us, and we all knew them. I didn't get in trouble but a bunch of us in Fort Amador, they had coastal defenses built for WWI they had these series of tunnels and gun emplacements on one of the islands out there. One afternoon we said, hey lets go out to the bunkers and check it out. So we went out and they had these steel gates at sort of road level and there was a hill and inside the hill there was a long stairway maybe a couple hundred feet long going up into the defenses in the middle of this hill, concrete and everything and the gates were never locked. So we went, we were fourteen years old lets go check it out. By that time we were probably smoking cigarettes and -I don't remember if we had a flash light- it was pitch black in there and you could go from one end of the island you could say, go around the top and go into one of these bunkers down into the tunnel and come out at the far end of the island without ever going out on the surface or you could go out in any number one of entrances. So there was this room of electrical switches, which probably powered some hoist for ammunition of something and they had these wooden handles on them and I thought, I'll take a souvenir. So I unscrewed this wooden handle put it into my pocket and I ended up keeping it but the next thing we know we see these flash lights coming up the stairs or something, or either we were on

our way out and the MP's had stopped there (military police) and, hey what are you guys doing? Oh well nothing we're just you know, hanging out. He said, you better come with us. So they took us down to Balboa police station you know no evidence of any misdeeds or anything but they knew we were fourteen and up to no good.

W: Sure, exactly.

C: They took us to the police station and took us in and Mr. Filo. Dad of a good friend of mind and long time friend of the family was the desk sergeant that day. Oh Steve Cartatto eh? Well, what's going on? We were out in the bunkers and nosing around. Well I better call your mom, he called my mom. It wasn't a big deal but the point was that we knew all the policemen, they knew our parents and in later years I talked to one of the detectives, Joe Grills. At the time they would follow us around. Let's just say we were up to . . . no good, in a sense we were fully engaged in experiencing the counter culture.

W: You were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen?

C: Max, yeah. I mean in Panama . . . let's say when I was fifteen or so my mom and sister decided to go on a diet. So the doc put them on Benzedrine and amphetamines. They were bouncing off the walls and then they'd crash; and moody, and bitchy, fighting and I had no clue. What's going on? I don't know but we're on a diet [laughing]. And so my sister is like sixteen-seventeen then she gets to eighteen, its counter culture. We know that we can just go down to the pharmacy and pick up whatever we want no prescription needed. That's across

the board at fourteen you could go down to the local bodega, the local liquor store and pick up a bottle of rum, a bottle of whisky which a lot of us did. So you're talking about underage drinking, talking about underage smoking, talking about underage pharmaceutical use and then other substances came on line. It all floated freely and so I was going to say later years- well these guys would follow us around on all our escapades. We'd recognize them when we saw them; you could recognize a police car a mile away.

W: Sure, sure.

C: Marked or unmarked. He said, we were just looking out for you we weren't out to get you, just looking out for you. I get a little emotional thinking about it because we hated them so much for interfering in our affairs but you know some of us didn't get through it so you know. My mom being the governor's secretary at the time we put her at great risk by our antics. It wasn't that she was clueless but with my dad having passed she was incapable of dealing with two kids that were that rebellious at the time and so we're always respectful to authority to the adults, to the teacher and everything and we didn't get in trouble at school well, not much anyway no more than normal . . . but we got through it. But the military at that time all the things that were happening in the military in Vietnam, guys coming back addicted and whatever. That all kind of funneled in a big current. All the guys that would come down through the Canal Zone brought all the influences and substances from the States and so it was kind of a strange time in a way because you were aware of all of that; movies like Apocalypse Now hadn't

come out yet and we were looking for another ten or fifteen years but you could sort of see it happening. You could see that these young twenty year olds were in a strange world, having to fight a war that was unpopular and had come through the Canal Zone and experience this community of complete freedom. As kids we had the run of the place, we could go anywhere we wanted in the country of Panama, anywhere. As long as we could get back to the Zone was like a game of tag, if you reach base you're safe pretty much. Things started to unravel a little bit around [19]70-[19]71 they sort of had- I don't know that they ever came to any like actual laws that if you were caught in Panama you were prosecuted in Panama because it seemed that there was always someone that would come and bail us out. If we got caught doing something illegal in Panama-

W: How often did you get caught doing something?

C: I never did.

W: Oh okay.

C: My sister did, someone pulled the string. A friend of mine did, someone pulled the string and either nothing would be said or something serious would happen sort of like that. I mean you might be deported, your family might be asked to leave.

W: Now again, without saying anything else-

C: This would be twenty five year-

W: Okay so how big was this community of the counter culture. If you had to characterize it-

C: I'd say maybe of the kids I knew, probably not that big but I think two thousand in a three year high school, two thousand. I'd say there was a couple of hundred-

W: And then how many of those families might have been deported? For the shenanigans of their kids-

C: I'd say maybe- I don't even know if the family was actually sent out. I know the kids were . . . a small percentage, a very small percentage of that. But it was – I'm sure there was a stigma of it among- Well it was just hard because let's say you're in a high level government position there and you're kid is bucking the system and you're job's on the line. So it wasn't good for our parents. It wasn't that good for us in retrospect although we did have a good time. Without any regulation, without any restraints some kids couldn't handle it.

W: I just noticed it's about quarter after ten and there will be somebody here about ten thirty. On a more political level, so you were in high school in a very interesting time for the canal relative to the local Panamanians I believe it was 1964 was the protest about the flag-

C: Right.

W: And everything like that. I'm wondering given your age during that time period where you were, how did you experience all that?

C: Well, I have two pretty strong memories of that. One is that I wasn't present at the big confrontation at the local high school-

W: If I'm doing the math right, you were still in junior high at the confrontation at the high school. I'm just doing it in my head, but please correct me if I'm wrong.

C: It was before I went to high school. But our neighbor, one of our next door neighbors lived in a duplex and our duplex neighbor I recall him sitting out. He had a Jeep and I believe he had a shotgun in his Jeep – I could be wrong- I think he was still around Chris Sky saying; hey they're not coming down the street. You know I mean it's sort of like the boarder's a mile away and they're coming on moss. There's a huge crowd coming we got to defend ourselves, get your musket bat down the hatches. So it was tense that way and our neighbor next door was a policeman at Houston. He came down and gave us a forty-five and a box of bullets. He said, lock your door and take this gun if anyone walks through that door, you pull the trigger. You don't have to worry about aiming it. So that's how tense it was, you'll be fighting for your life that was the vibe. The reality I don't think was anywhere near that but you know for me in retrospect that was a long time coming. There should've been a Panamanian flag there all along. I consider myself patriotic in the way that when my son goes- we go to baseball games I take my hat off and put my hat over my heart when we sing the national anthem but I'm aware of the grey areas in our history too. The dark side which we never learned about growing up and now my kid in History class; he learns about the Trail of Tears. I was never told about a Trail of Tears, I was never told about genocide of the native peoples and that kind of stuff. Now I see all in a different light and the world is a different place to me now so I'm not a flag waver, it's just a different perspective. The Canal Zone was unique in that way, it had a Teddy

Roosevelt stamp on it you know, this is manifest's destiny, this is what we're all about-

W: Did you recognize that when you were there or did that come later when you moved out?

C: Well it really came later when I moved out. Growing up it was just an ideal situation; we didn't have crime, we didn't have poverty. On the surface it was just a Swiss clock. Later you realize well ok, there's people involved in this so that's the rub you know, people have issues and nobody's perfect transitions have to happen. In 1979 I went back for the ceremony, sort of the party really it was going to be a party because the ceremony I think happened and there was one big party at El Diablo yacht club where some friends of mine were playing and I got up and jammed with them it was just a big party, a bunch of us. My uncle Pat was taking a ship through the Canal as he came by he gave a long honk on the horn as he passed the party. You know for me, that was all supposed to happen that was the right thing to do and I'm a big fan of Jimmy Carter. Anyway, which puts me at odds with most of my relatives and my mom had one of those calendar's with the green gremlin giving the finger whatever it was, thanks Jimmy for nothing you know something to that effect. I'd walk by the supply division and there was like a mock grave in the display window saying, here lies the body of Building 614 or whatever it was rest in peace because a lot of people lost their jobs and there was a lot of anxiety and I was long gone by then and so my perspective had already changed but it was a good thing. Some friends stayed

on and I have to admire that. I went back in [19]95 with my wife; a friend of mine Jim Gesner worked on Miraflores locks and took us on a tour, let my wife lock a ship through in the control tower. It was great to see him interacting with his crew who were west-Indian heritage. We could all talk bejjim. Anyway, he told me that they had a big carnival that year and there was a bridge that connects the two sides of the locks, it used to be an alternative to the ferry before the factory ferry was built in [19]62 used to take the ferry across from the east bank to the west bank to go up to the interior of Panama. So this bridge was an alternative at Fort Clayton. The bridge hadn't been used in years; rusted shut. So he had to go dig out the plans and he and his crew took it all apart, put it all back together, got it working because there was going to be so much traffic for this carnival they needed the overflow. He was really proud of that and I was too it's like wow you know. That's the spirit that made the Canal a great place to work. To achieve something like that, that would last that long and still function you know precisely and accurately when it needed to. All through the years and innovation and navigation or whatever, even growing up we used marvel it. I'd see that big ship coming through and I'd go dang that's pretty cool, pretty cool. I'd tell my friends yeah I grew up in Panama, in the Panama Canal oh yeah that's pretty awesome. What was it like? Well it was great. It was great living there, great place to grow up.

W: So tell me a little bit about why you left?

C: Well, I was an apprentice of heavy equipment operator at a high school, me and a bunch of friends joined the apprentice program and had a job with the maintenance division, operating cranes and sorted other heavy equipment. There's a year probation every period and . . . so this is 1971 and that whole counter culture thing was still peeking. I was hanging out with the wrong crowd I'll say it that way so that was essentially the reason, details around that. . . So I got called up to the- I guess it was some Coronel maybe the deputy chief of the maintenance division or something on day. It was one of those conversations, today is the first day of the rest of your life. I was like oh; it's that day is it? We think its better that you move on and it would just say termination during probation and no specifics because I performed well. Well, pretty well as an apprentice so that was it. I didn't want to leave it was sort of like hmm now what am I going to do? My sister had already gone to the States she was in Florida, going to college and so I moved in with a friend in Panama and I think we'd still play a couple of gigs the band I was in but I didn't find any work there and I wasn't really looking for work. So I kind of followed my sister up to Florida, ended up following my parents out to California and then life-

W: Did you go to college? Did you-

C: Yeah later I went to community college in [19]75, studied music, commercial music; ended up getting a job in music preparation, which I've been doing for thirty years now.

W: What is music preparation?

C: Music preparation is preparing music for performers so if you were a composer and you compose a piece. Let's say you're John Williams and you wrote the score to Star Wars, he's one of our clients. So you give that to an orchestrator who will then orchestrate it for the band that's going to play it. He would give that to us and we prepare the individual parts for each musician in the orchestra get it to the stage, get it on the stand.

W: I've had enough experience with music to actually understand that, what you're talking about so yeah.

C: Yeah, a lot of people know it. It's one of those behind the scenes post-production.

W: So with all the unspecified troubles that you had, you still are very nostalgic, you come to the reunion and you certainly know-

C: Yeah well there are some relationships I mean- I don't even know if it's probably not Canal Zones specific but I think to a large extent it is only because you have so many generations. I can remember when I came to my first reunion it was in the mid [19]70s they would have them in Saint Pete and I just remember seeing all these people that I grew up with. All my mom's friends, my dad's friends and it was kind of a very- I don't know, kind of a warm fuzzy feeling kind of thing. Then over the years, I've only been to about four or five and you reconnect with people. Sometimes there are people that you see and haven't changed. If that guy was wild and crazy back then, he still is you know. Whereas other people have settled down, raised families but you still have that connection of those

times that you spent together down there and that's a connecting point and from there you either stay connected or don't and so there is a few people that I've stayed connected with. When I see them now we talk about what we did then and we talk about what's going on now whereas some people are still stuck back then; they don't want to come to the reunion because they don't want to know about changes. They don't want to go back to Panama because it's not the same as I remember it. For me I loved going back to Panama-

W: How often do you go back?

C: Not frequently at all. I've only been back I think maybe four times in thirty years since I've left. Now I've got two kids, it's a little more challenging. But we're going to go down maybe Christmas or something. I still have some friends down there and my mom still has some friends down there she's in her 80s so I go down and visit her friends, you stop on the roadside and get a fresh coconut you know. You can have that experience in Mexico but if you grew up in Panama it's even better. You go back and as an adult I can appreciate the culture more. When people, you call them on the phone and they say, Oh yeah come on by; they stop everything for you to come by. Up here everybody is too busy you know, I'll pencil you in for next month.

W: Well that's great, thank you very much I see the next people are coming in so thank you very much. Let me go ahead and stop this.

[End of Interview]