

**Samuel Proctor Oral History Program**  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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PCM-016

Interviewee: Russell Bowen

Interviewer: Matthew White

Date of Interview: July 3, 2010

W: My name is Matthew White, we're here with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, Panama Canal Reunion. It's July third, approximately 10:30, and we're here with Russ Bowen. And we haven't talked about anything yet. Other interviewers, they start telling stories as soon as they go in the room, but I know absolutely nothing about you, Mr. Bowen, so why don't you just give me a brief outline of who you are and what your connection is to the Panama Canal Zone.

B: Okay. Um, well, I was born in Panama, 1951. Ancon, Panama, in Gorgas Hospital, and I don't know a lot of details about how my family ended up in Panama, but what I can tell you is on my mother's side, my grandfather was from Delaware, and don't know the circumstances really that led him to go down to Panama but he arrived in Panama just a few months after the construction of the Canal had been completed and worked as an electrician. My grandmother came from New Orleans. Again, I don't know the circumstances that led her to go down to Panama, and they got married in Panama. Now my father's side, my grandfather was originally from California, went to New York-- that's where my father was born-- in New York. My grandfather and grandmother went down to Panama. He loved it. She didn't. And she ended up splitting. She always lived in New York, and he lived down in Panama. Then my father actually went back and forth between New York and Panama, and then ended up staying in Panama with my grandfather. He was a machinist, same thing he got down in Panama not

too long after the Canal had been constructed. Lived in Balboa on the Pacific side, and only lived in two different houses, lived in the Galvan area until the time I was twelve then moved to La Boca, which was really close to the mouth of the Canal and lived there until I was twenty. I went to a parochial school, first through eighth grade called St. Mary's [A parochial school provides conventional education in addition to religious education. A parochial school is typically run by a parish].

W: When you were twenty?

B: No.

W: Oh, I'm sorry.

B: Went to parochial school one through eight, and then went into the public school system. Went to Balboa High School. And then I went to Canal Zone Junior College for a couple years before I transferred to the University of Florida in Gainesville. You know, it was kind of interesting. I was traveling with some business associates and we were just kind of talking about, you know, what are some of the most-- thing that you cherish the most in terms of your background. Basically, I just told them, growing up in Panama. The experiences I had growing up there as a kid. The things that really stick out in my mind, one of my friends that happens to be here today I've known since I was two years old. His father was the director of the meteorological hydrographic branch of the Panama Canal. His job basically was kind of like the water resources management division, and they had to monitor the flow of the rivers coming into the Gatun Lake which

formed the Canal. Basically made sure that there was the proper water balance in running the Canal. But he was a very, I'd say, adventurous outdoorsman.

W: Uh-huh. Now is this your friend or your friend's father?

B: My friend's father.

W: Okay.

B: I just thought that he was an amazing man. His name was Ted Hinter. I guess this was as early as when we were about eight years old, he would take us up into the rain forest onto the main river which they damned to create the Gatun Lake called the Chagres River. He'd take us up there for the weekend and we would camp along the banks of the Chagres River. As we got older he would take a group of us, there were usually three or four of our friends and we would go up for the weekend. And then over the years we actually built an encampment, and Ted Jr. and myself, we'd go into the river-- they had rapids-- and we'd get river rock out of there and drag them up the bank. Over several weekends, Mr. Hinter, and he had some other friends, would mix up concrete. We made a big concrete slab. He used, I think, drilling rod and made steel posts and then we made a thatched roof. And then we would string our jungle hammocks from each one of the posts. That's where we slept at night. Just had a lot of great experiences camping out there in the rainforest.

W: Now what did you do while you were out there? Did you hunt, did you--?

B: We swam and there were, like I said, there were some pretty good rapids. I remember right across from our encampment at the base of these rapids there

was a large rock and we would swim across river— it was a good sized river— and we would jump off that rock at the base of the rapids and there was a real strong eddy that would just take you, you know, in a circle behind a rock again so you just kind of do a loop [An eddy is the reverse current and swirling of water created when water flows past an obstacle]. You know we swam and fished a little bit. Mainly just hung out and just swam and explored up and down the banks of the river. Saw a lot of wildlife. We would see some of the rainforest Indians, the Embera Indians and a lot of wildlife, large iguanas [The Embera-Wounaan people are a semi-nomadic indigenous population in Panama. They live primarily on the shores of the Chucunaque, Sambu, and Tuirá Rivers]. They had another lizard there, I don't know why they called them that, well I do know why they called them— it was the Jesus Christ lizard because they would run across the water. They get up a good head of steam on the bank and they would just run right across the river on the surface. They had big webbed feet. It was incredible at night how many stars you could see because it was so dark. I remember one time we were sitting there and we could actually see a satellite going across at night.

W: Now when was this?

B: Guess that was around in the late [19]60s. Remember one time we were up there and I was on the rock and a friend of Ted's said, well I'm gonna go back across the river. So he swam across, and you know the current would take you downstream a little bit. I saw him over on the other side of the river and the river

there I guess at that point was maybe thirty or forty yards wide. I looked over and I saw Ted jumping up and down waving his arms. He was pointing upstream. I looked up and there was a flash flood coming down the river. Wall of water, it was about a couple feet high. It had a lot of sticks and logs in it, because there was a lot of rain up in the watershed and it would just concentrate and create a flash flood. Looking back on it, it could have been a mistake but I decided to do it. I dove in and tried to get across river and it hit me. I got probably about two-thirds of the way and Ted fortunately ran and got his dad, Ted Sr., and some of the other guys that were there made a chain and got me as I was going by. It was a good thing because just directly downstream the river just slammed into a rock and went to the left so it was like the first time Mr. Hinter saved my life. He actually saved me again.

W: And the other links in the chain, too.

B. Yeah, right, right. And then it started to rain later that day and the water level came up so high that it actually flooded our little encampment. We had to take our jungle hammocks and go up into the jungle. The river probably came up, I would say, fifteen or twenty feet. We had to go well up into the jungle. At that time it was dark. So here we are little kids, climbing up in there at night and having to string up our jungle hammocks. The river, it took so long to subside. We were up there until Tuesday. Of course this was before the age of cell phones, and my parents were wondering where the heck are they. Because you know normally we'd be back on Sunday afternoon. Another time we were up

there and it was just drizzling the whole weekend and there were like four of us, four kids and Mr. Hinter. We were getting bummed out so Ted says, well look, let's go across the river and climb up the mountain there. Ah, okay. It seemed like it was about a 50 percent incline, of course it wasn't that much, but it just seemed like we were going straight up and climbing up through the vines and what not. We got up pretty high and we were taking a break. So we're just sitting there, hanging on to vines and trees and what not, and Ted was in front me and I look down and there was a snake coiled up behind him, looked like he was getting ready to strike him. And I said, hey, Mr. Hinter! There's a snake here's about ready to bite Teddy. And Mr. Hinter just slid down on his butt, slid down the hill, got his machete and just cut the head off the snake. The guy was like Indiana Jones. He was just an amazing guy. Tremendous amount of respect for him. Just really showed us a lot of adventures, up along the Chagres River. It was really a lot of fun. The thing I really loved about growing up there when I got a little older in high school—

W: And you went to Balboa, right?

B: Yeah. Balboa High School. We got into surfing. It was right when, I guess, surfing started in California and it found its way down to Panama. There was probably a group of about twenty of us that really got into surfing. Right around Balboa, I guess the way the shoreline was, the swells really didn't find their way into that part of the coastline. You really had to go up the coast, further up the coast, towards Costa Rica along the Pacific before you could get to some good surf

spots. It started out where our parents would take us up there for the weekend, a place called Rio Mar. It was just a great, great pastime and we built a lot of really close friendships with all the kids that we used to surf with. Got to the point where a little bit older, I mean we were still in high school, in the summertime our parents would take us up there and give us a twenty dollar bill and say, we'll see you in two or three weeks. And we would just camp out on the beach and it was a blast. A lot of good, good memories surfing. Then when we got old enough to drive, we started exploring a lot of different surf breaks and found a lot of really cool surf spots that kids still go to today and surf but now they're all— that whole coastline, that stretch of coastline, it's probably about twenty or thirty miles— it's all built up now. A place called Coronado, a big resort, and back then they were just little villages. Little dirt road villages. But it's all built up now. We used to just kind of, as the tide fluctuated, we would go to different spots because in Panama on the Pacific coast, the difference between high and low tide is about eighteen feet. You'd be surfing in one spot and if the tide got too high or too low then the waves wouldn't break right. Most of the places that we surfed were either sand bottom or a rock reef. Tide would get too low then we'd go to a different spot. So we just kind of migrated--

W: Yeah, a nomadic existence.

B: Yeah, just kind of migrated up and down the coast depending on what the tide was to go to the best surf spots. One of the places that got discovered, we called it Malibu. It was out on Chame Point. A big river called Chame River came out

and it created really large sandbar that went out into the ocean. It was a really cool break; the waves would break on the sandbar. But it was I think about five miles from where you could drive down to the beach. And you could only get out there at low tide, where it exposed enough of the sand— the hard-packed sand— so you could drive out there. We drive out there and surf but if you wanted to get back that day and the tide came up you had to wait until the tide would go back down again so you could drive all the way back. It's a six hour cycle. I remember one time we went out there the waves got really big and one of our friends thought he could make it back, it was about mid-tide. He had a Volkswagen van and he was driving down the beach and didn't get very far. A wave came up and hit the two wheels closest to the ocean, undermined them a little bit, and after about three or four waves the van was on its side. The next thing you know it was just rolling in the **sand** and he was out there trying to get in it to get his camera out, he left his camera in it. So that was probably one of about three or four vehicles that got lost to the ocean [laughter]. A surfer's going out there and just couldn't wait until low tide. It was a great spot.

W: Sounds like it.

B: Just a great surf spot. Really a neat place. I remember one day we were out there and it was over Christmas vacation. The waves were just perfect that day. As you're out on the water looking up there's— I forgot the name of the mountain, it was just a beautiful mountain. That time of the year there would be very strong offshore breezes. They would just kind of come down that mountain. It made for

good waves because you know the offshore breeze would pull the waves up. But I remember that day very vividly, because you'd drop in on a wave, you'd look at the wall of the wave was just gold because it was sundown. It was just fabulous. Some of the scenery while we were surfing was just incredible. It was a great experience.

W: Sounds like it. Now you mentioned something earlier, of course, that begs for a follow-up question. When you said that that was the first time that gentleman has saved your life, what was the second time?

B: We were coming back, and taking the cayucos. You know what a cayuco is [Cayucos are small, usually 4 seater, vessels carved from the trunk of a tree and propelled by paddling. Cayucos are used by the indigenous people of Panama as well as for recreational racing]?

W: I heard about the race the other day, I was going to ask you about that.

B: Right. Well, Ted and I were in the race too. Anyway, we were getting the cayucos out of the water and we were standing on the dock and I decided to dive off, into about three feet of water and hit the pavement, knocked myself out. Mr. Hinter was busy working on the boat, turned around and noticed I wasn't around. Came out and dragged me out of the water. So, second time he saved me [*Laughter*].

W: I've been doing this for three days now, and of the people I've talked to, you're clearly the one who's gotten out of the Zone on a regular basis. I guess my question is then, how did you interact with the local population, be they Indians—

you mentioned running into the local Native Americans. What was your relationship with the locals?

B: The Indians up along the Chagres River, I remember there was one whose name was Tony. He was the one that Mr. Hinter would commission to make cayucos. And he would make the Cayucos, but we never really, aside from Mr. Hinter, communicated with them that much. It was this kind of intrigue, as you went up the river looking at them living along the banks of the river in their **bojillos**. But we never really stopped and talked to them.

W: What about on your surfing trips, what were the Panamanians doing?

B: Right. We used to, when we were camping out, we would either walk or hitchhike to this town of San Carlos. There was a little place where they had a little bakery in this hut, and we would go in there and chat with the guy who made these sticky buns and you would go in there and talk with him. There was another restaurant, and that's when we started to learn how to speak Spanish. Even though we were taking it in high school, but that's when we really started using it. One of the things that stuck out, particularly in the late [19]60s, when the relations weren't that good for the Panamanians, between the U.S. and the Panamanians, particularly the Guardia Nacional, the police force for Panama. It seemed like they took more than a few opportunities to give us a hard time [laughter].

W: Can you give me an example?

B: There was a checkpoint when you were going up the Pan-American Highway from the Canal Zone up along the coast. There was a checkpoint in **Arraijan** that you had to go through. It was really intimidating, because the checkpoint actually had a desk that was up at a higher elevation looking down onto the road. There'd always be two or three Guardia there and they would . . . just seems like they just would relish in just making us stay there and just staring down at us, looking into the car if we had any beer or whatever. So we were always really scared that they were going to grab us and throw us in jail or something. They had a law where you weren't allowed to drive without your shirt on. It's hot, it's moist.

W: Sure, absolutely.

B: You know? We didn't like wearing a shirt. Sometimes we just wouldn't think, and sometimes they would actually pull you over for that. It just seemed like they took any opportunity to hassle us, at the time. I guess we really didn't – other than just going to the stores and the restaurants – didn't really interact with them that much. In fact, at that time, there were only two Panamanians that got into surfing. Other than that it was just the Americans that were surfing. Of course, now it's not that way. There's a lot of Panamanian surfers.

W: Do you still surf?

B: Every so often. Last time I went surfing in Panama was March of [20]08. Ended up leaving my surf board down there. Ted has a house down there, so I left it there. But, no I don't surf that much anymore.

W: Now I'd like to back up just a little bit. You mentioned going to St. Mary's, right?

B: Yeah.

W: Now that's not typical, well of anybody really, but I've heard great things about the Panama Zone school system. The teachers were great, the public schools were great. Tell me a little bit about what it was like not to go to those, at least for the first eight years I guess.

B: Yeah, well when we first started, I think it was the Franciscan Nuns. And they wore dark brown habits; they were the teachers.

W: You told me they were wool.

B: What?

W: Wool?

B: Yeah, and I don't know if that's what made them mean or not but they were really strict. Corporal punishment was the rule of the day [*laughter*]. And they used to hit us pretty regularly if you got out of line. They were very intimidating.

W: Yeah, I suspect [*laughter*].

B: I remember one, what was her name, Sister Adella. I had her for third grade, and she just struck fear into everybody because if you talked or did anything she would whack you over the head with a ruler. You had to stick your hand out, and she'd hit it and if you flinched then she'd make you turn and she'd hit the back of your hand, which really hurt. I think it was after third grade a different order of nuns came, aptly named the Sisters of Mercy [*laughter*]. And they were great. It was a really good school. I remember we would-- I think it was once a month-- all

march up to the Catholic Church and go to mass. We had to wear uniforms, with dark blue pants, white shirt and a blue plaid bowtie.

W: Clip-on or did you have to tie it yourself?

B: Clip-on. The girls wore the same blue plaid jumper dress. So we had to march up to St. Mary's Catholic Church to go to mass. I remember because all of the kids in the public schools would be going by in the school bus and they'd be yelling at us, St. Mary's fairies [*laughter*], while were going up there so they always kind of made fun of us. Made some really good friends, and there are people here in this reunion that I went to St. Mary's with, starting in kindergarten.

W: One of the things I keep hearing is how cohesive the Panama Canal Zone-- especially the children. Did going to St. Mary's set you apart at all?

B: You know, a little bit. But then, once you got into high school, that kind of went away. There's probably a group of about twenty of us that still get together pretty regularly. And a lot of them I've known-- let's see, four of them I've known since kindergarten at St. Mary's. I really value that, have those friends, and that we still get together. In fact, now we get together even more frequently. Probably once every three or four months.

W: And you all went to St. Mary's?

B: Well some of them didn't, that I know from middle school and high school.

W: Now, tell me about your childhood when you were there. Your parents, did they grow up in the Canal Zone?

B: Yes.

W: Of course that also brings another question— if they talked about what it was like for them to be in a kid in the Canal Zone. Can you think of any differences? You're talking about a difference between I'm guessing the [19]30s and [19]40s, [19]50s and [19]60s, about that.

B: I really don't know what it was like for them as kids. I remember looking at some of the photos when they were kids. One of the things, I guess it was similar between our childhoods, were we used to go up to the beach on the weekend and rent these houses right along the Pacific. I remember seeing them as kids at those same places. It was just very rustic. Just wooden houses, and they had running water but that was basically it. No electricity. I remember that and going to some of the same places, and there was one particular house in Gorgona. It was just a beautiful spot on a cliff overlooking the beach. Same deal, it was just a real simple concrete floor house. Wood frame. My dad wasn't really the best at lighting the kerosene lanterns and almost burned the house down a couple times. But I remember seeing them just going up to the beach, same thing, hanging out all weekend, going swimming, body surfing. When they got older, as young adults, they really socialized at a pretty high level. There was a couple of beer gardens, one of them was called El Rancho. They would go down there for dances. There would be probably ten, twelve piece band playing and all the women would be in long dresses and the men would be in white suits. Just seemed like they had a fabulous time when they went out at night to the El Rancho beer garden.

W: Now that's in Panama?

B: Yeah, it was in Panama. It was probably about a couple blocks in from the border. It just seemed like they had a really good time going to the night clubs and restaurants.

W: Now did you do that when you were--?

B: Yeah. The El Rancho, it wasn't that grandiose anymore. Everybody didn't go down there with a suit and tie on like they did. Everything just seemed to be really formal when they went out. For some reason people got away from that. Yeah, we used to go down into Panama quite a bit and go to different clubs and restaurants. I remember as a kid going out to dinner with my parents down there. Really good restaurants in Panama City. There was a Catholic Cathedral called El Carmen, and we would go there and right across the street from it was a great Italian restaurant called the Capri. So that kind of became a tradition. We would do that at least once or twice a month.

W: Okay. So you went to church in Panama.

B: Yeah. Most often we went to St. Mary's, which was in the Canal Zone. That same church is where my grandparents, my parents and my sister were married, in St. Mary's. The other thing was they also all went to the same place for the wedding reception. It was a hotel down there called the Tivoli. Just a grand building, just beautiful, all wood. They just had some wonderful ballrooms, just beautiful grand old hotel. Unfortunately they took it down. In its last days the only thing that was keeping it up were the termites were holding hands.

W: Yeah, I wouldn't think a wood structure of that size would last long in that climate.

B: It was a sad day when they took that down.

W: Yeah. So I just realized I haven't asked you much about your family. You had a sister, any--

B: Yeah. I have a brother, Bob, who's seven years older. My sister's eight years older. She's now deceased. We had a great family life.

W: Can you talk a little bit about it?

B: Sure, sure. My mom was just a nut about holidays. Just really loved to decorate. My mom was quite the lady. I remember I used to have a rabbit as a little kid. At Easter time she would dye the rabbit pink [*laughter*].

W: Using what?

B: Some kind of food dye. But yeah, she'd go over the top sometimes in decorating for the holidays. In the first house that we lived in, was on Oleander Street, but it started to become known as, what do they call it, Santa Claus Lane. Because at Christmastime, everybody on the street would just go wild with decorations, lights and . . .

W: And you could get your standard issue Christmas lights in Panama?

B: Oh, yeah. Yeah. The only thing that was different about Christmas in Panama, well number one thing, it's hot. You know, it's not cold.

W: Oh, yeah, it's mostly hot, I think, even when it's Christmas.

B: They imported the Christmas trees. They brought them on the ship. Everybody would go down. At one point you actually went down to the pier to get them and

then they started bringing them into the commissary. You were lucky if the needles would stay on more than about a week [*laughter*]. The other thing that was interesting about Christmas in Panama is Christmas tree burns.

W: Yeah, I've heard of those.

B: Every neighborhood, we would collect them, all the kids would collect them and you'd build-- while you were collecting them, waiting for your sanctioned Christmas tree burn. The fire department would actually come to your neighborhood and oversee it. While you were waiting and your collecting all the trees you'd make forts out of them, you know, we were kids. Then it got to be a situation where you wanted to have more and more trees, and you'd have like Christmas tree gangs and you would actually raid other neighborhoods to steal their trees. That was a lot of fun, the night of the burn. It was quite the bonfire. It was a lot of fun.

W: Yeah, that's a tradition I'd never heard of, but you're like the third or fourth person I've heard bring it up in these interviews. What do you think are the origins of it? Where did it start and why?

B: I don't know . . . I don't know how. I haven't a clue how it got started.

W: Yeah. It's an interesting thing. So talk a little bit about your experiences in high school. What were your subjects? What were your activities? Your hobbies? Besides camping and surfing, or is that it?

B: That was pretty much it. I was pretty small, scrawny kid in high school, kinda stayed to myself. But then in my senior year, I went out for football.

W: I understand there's quite the rivalry.

B: Oh, yeah. Well, you know, you got three teams [*laughter*].

W: Three?

B: Balboa High School, Cristobal High School from the Atlantic side, and the junior college. At one time there was a fourth time, the athletic club. These were young men. Most of them were apprentices in the Panama Canal Company. Of course, being bigger guys, they would normally be leading in halftime. But then they'd all go into the bowling alley and drink beer at halftime [*laughter*]. So then in the second half usually they'd get beat. It wasn't very good football, some of the worst football you've ever seen. Most of the time it'd be good if you had a score of seven to nothing. Nobody ever made a touchdown.

W: But everyone loved it, it sounds like.

B: Oh, yeah, it was a great time. And then, actually I got injured. My knee got taken out, so I didn't really play more than just a couple games. But then I continued playing in junior college, and that was fun. It was a lot of fun. And we'd have— they call it the jamboree— where we'd all get on the train and go over to the Atlantic side to play Cristobal High School. That was a good time. The train back then was really just a beautiful train. Open air with wicker bench seats, and it was just an hour ride.

W: It's an hour from one side to the other?

B: Right. It's just a great train ride. Some of it you're going through the rainforest right along the Canal, along Gatun Lake. It's just a beautiful— a lot of really pretty

scenery going through the jungle. In the summertime as kids we got into this thing where we would drive our bikes down to the train station. What do you call the guy that works on the train?

W: The conductor?

B: The conductor, yeah. The conductor would put our bikes in one of the freight cars. We'd go over to the Atlantic side and we'd drive around over there on our bikes and then come back in the afternoon.

W: And the other kids on the other side let you get away with that?

B: Yeah, they did. What are you guys doing over here?

W: Yeah, exactly. When I was a kid we had dirt clods thrown at us if we tried something like that. Oh, I had a question. If I'm doing a math in my head right, your high school or at least your later part of your-- did you call it elementary or junior high--?

B: Yeah.

W: --career would have been around the time that I understand that there was a lot of protests, both by the Panamanians and then some sort of, I don't know if you call it counter protest, over the flag. Were you involved in any of that or what was the effect?

B: See that was in [19]64. And I was not in high school, my brother and sister were. Yeah, they were there. Those were pretty stressful times. Yeah, they had-- Panamanians marched on Balboa High School. We were gonna take the flag down. So the police came and it got pretty ugly. My mom worked in the

administration building– the Panama Canal administration building– up on the hill that overlooked Balboa High School. She was rather feisty and she ended up coming down and getting in the middle of it. She wasn't hurt, though.

W: Well anyone who would dye a bunny pink [inaudible].

B: [Laughter]. Yeah, that's right. That's right. She was something else. And then the riots got pretty ugly, and people got killed. We were under Martial law when that was going on for, it seemed like, I can't remember how many days. Several days we were under Martial law. I remember my brother snuck out one time and went down to the border to watch it and he came home and he was really upset because I think he saw the first guy– first American troop-- that got shot and killed. So it really upset him and I remember that very vividly as a young kid. My brother Bob came home and was really upset over that.

W: I mean, just sitting here of course– what some thirty, forty, fifty years later now? It seemed to me that that might have an effect on how one views your life there. I mean, it's a nice life you're having and then you find out there are people over there that want to bust in. I mean, what kind of effect did that have on your view of yourself, your community, the country?

B: I mean, up until that point, the [19]60s, it seemed to be a very harmonious relationship with the Panamanians. We never felt threatened when we went into Panama City at all. I thought it was a great relationship between the Panamanians and the U.S. citizens. It wasn't until the [19]60s that you could tell things were starting to unravel. At that time it just didn't seem as much fun

anymore, going into the city. You know, you could feel the tension. And I remember one time going back after I had left, went back in the early [19]70s, and I was actually asked to leave a store by the Panamanians. I was the only American guy.

W: Proprietor? Store proprietor?

B: Yeah. I was asked to leave. You know, that's when I knew it's not the same anymore. It was a bad time.

W: Now, also in America of course there's various rioting over civil rights, Vietnam. Did that have any effect on life in the Canal Zone? Did you stay abreast of what was going on in the rest of the world or the country?

B: You know it just seemed like we were in a cocoon down there. It really did. It just seemed like we were so detached, at least that's the way I felt about it. Politics, everything that was going on in the states—

W: So did you keep up on . . . ?

B: No, no. I didn't. I don't know why. I remember as a kid in high school, we really didn't talk about that that much. We talked about maybe football. We started watching football, baseball.

W: Now did you keep up on American sports?

B: Yeah, yeah. It wasn't until I came to the states that I really started following it more closely, but when I was down there I did somewhat but I wasn't a real avid sports fan of U.S. sports at the time. Maybe it was because I was just really into surfing at that time.

W: How about the war in Vietnam, did that have any effect?

B: Well, yeah it started to. And then when I transferred up to the University of Florida. You know those were the hippie days.

W: Sure, sure. Were there any hippies in the Canal Zone?

B: Yeah, yeah. It was starting down there. It was starting. That's about the time I left. I just found that so different, because we had some pretty good riots in Gainesville.

W: Yeah, that's what I understand.

B: The Gainesville Eight with Scott Camil back in those days [The Gainesville Eight were a group of anti-Vietnam War activists charged with conspiracy to disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida. Scott Camil was a political activist and member of the Gainesville Eight]. I remember being stuck in the riots there on Thirteenth Street right in front of Tigert Hall, watching the riot. Kinda made me think back to the riots in Panama.

W: Yeah, maybe it's you. You brought it with you.

B: Yeah, I know. I know.

W: Um, oh I had something, now I forgot. Now what did you study at the junior college? Wait I had a question, let me go back a little bit. It actually brought up another question when we talked about your high school and following politics. It makes me curious, every American here in the states— maybe not every American, but the vast majority of us who at least go to public school— learn civics. You learn how the government works, and history. Did you learn that, was

that part of your curriculum? And what did it mean to someone living in the Canal Zone?

B: Yeah, it was. To me it was a subject I had to take.

W: Just another subject?

B: Yeah. Just another subject. I was more interested in science and math.

W: And is that what you studied when you went to the junior college?

B: Yeah, uh-huh.

W: And then specifically talk about your college career, both there and in Gainesville, and then your transition of course, that must have been something.

B: Right, right. Well I think, looking back, I think the quality of education that we got in the Canal Zone was really good. I think that in general the teachers were very well qualified. I was a good student. When I went to junior college, the math and the chemistry and physics teachers, I just thought were top notch.

W: Now were they second, third generation Canal "Zonians"? Or were they recruited down there?

B: I think quite a few of them were recruited. One of the things that I found— and this was right around the time that the hippie movement and Vietnam era was starting— there were two teachers down there. One taught middle school, the other one was an English comp. teacher. The English comp. teacher, everybody really liked. He was really a good teacher. In fact, I consider myself today a rather good writer. I attribute that mainly to that English comp. teacher. But they were both gay.

W: Were they a couple, or just . . . ?

B: Yeah, they were. Yeah, they became a couple. And when that became known, they were deported from the Canal Zone, because of that. Thinking back on that, and then when I came to the states, and looking back on it, it's just, wow, how narrow-minded. Here were two— well especially the English comp. teacher, the guy was just a really good teacher. If you talked to a lot of my friends that had that class, and they said, yeah, he was really good.

W: Did you ever find out what happened to him after?

B: No, no.

W: How did it come out, I mean if you knew as a kid. I would think they'd be very guarded.

B: Yeah, yeah it was. Everybody just kind of like, where'd they go? And then the rumor mill was rampant down there. It wasn't like it was in the paper or anything.

W: Sure, oh I'm sure.

B: [*Laughter*]. I know. Everyone figured it out.

W: Any other instances of that? This is the first I've heard that there— you assume there are gay people everywhere, but—

B: No. The whole deportation thing was . . . I remember there were two kids where their families got deported because their kids just got in really bad trouble.

W: Really? Doing what? That sounds like a—

B: I think, one of them just got kinda violent. Beat up a couple other kids. And his family was deported. The other one got drunk and went out onto a yacht that was

parked at the yacht club. I think he had some guns or I don't know what it was.

That family got deported.

W: Boy, that'll do it.

B: Hm?

W: Boy that'll do it.

B: Yeah, yeah. I mean you had to do something pretty bad. But if you did, you were gone. Your family, father lost his job, you were gone.

W: You talked about your relationship with some of the Panamanians. But my understanding is there were really a whole host of minority communities there. Some left over from the construction days. Did you work? Did you interact with them? Were they a part of your community?

B: Well, yeah, it was the West Indians that lived in—

W: I even heard some people mention there's some Indians, and people from China. Sounded like quite the community actually.

B: Right, right. Looking back on it, the thing that I found so interesting, was . . . looking back it was segregation. I don't know if that was by design or what. But all the West Indians lived in this place called Paraiso. Those are the descendants of people that built the Canal, and most of them worked on the locks, line handlers and so on. Looking back at it, the only time that I as a kid noticed, there was a softball league. They had their team, or teams, then they would play with all the other Zonians. But it just struck me that they lived out there and everybody else lived in other places. But everybody got along fine. It wasn't like the race

situation, you know, in the states in the [19]60s. It never was like that. It just didn't seem like there was any animosity. But, looking back I just thought it was kinda odd that they lived there and everybody else lived elsewhere.

W: Well that then brings me back to the question of your transition then from being junior college in the Canal Zone to the University of Florida. Because Gainesville, let's face it, even today is a fairly segregated city, by design or not. So that must have been a real. . .

B: I had a really hard time making a transition to the states, because there's just so many rules. Drinking was one of the things that really bothered me. You've probably heard other interviews, I mean, social drinking was pretty much a sport in the Canal Zone. When I transferred up to Gainesville, I wasn't twenty-one yet. The whole idea of having to be twenty-one to drink when they're sending people to Vietnam at eighteen, I just couldn't understand it. It really, really bothered me. We just had so much freedom in the Canal Zone. It seemed like I gave a lot of that up when I came to the states. So many rules, it really bothered me. It took me about a year; I got over it [*laughter*]. But it just seemed like I had a much freer life when I lived down there. Of course, you know, if you got in trouble in Panama, all the police knew your family and everybody. You get pulled over, and say, Russ, you don't do that again. Do it up here, you're in jail.

W: That's interesting, most kids go to school to get freedom.

B: Yeah. To me it seemed the other way around. Yeah, I was living on my own, but just society, there's just a lot more rules. Just seemed like it back then.

W: Yeah. Did you live on campus, or did you– ?

B: Yeah, I did the first semester. Back then we were on a quarter system. First quarter I did. My friend Ted, he also transferred, and we shared an apartment. So I lived off campus from that point on.

W: Hopefully a little free-er.

B: Um-hm.

W: What did you study when you were at Gainesville.

B: Civil engineering.

W: Okay. And what about your life then now? You didn't return.

B: No.

W: It doesn't seem that you returned to the Zone. Why not?

B: You know it was interesting, my father, I think he saw the hand writing on the wall. That the U.S. wasn't going to maintain control over the Canal forever. And he just really made a point of drilling that into my head. He said don't think this place is going to be the same. There's gonna come a time when we're not all gonna be here. So it worked, that sunk into my head. When I graduated, I really didn't have a desire to go back. Because I knew that unless I worked for the Canal, that I wasn't going to have the opportunity in Panama at that time.

W: And that would've been your graduation in [19]75?

B: [19]74. Yeah I graduated in [19]74. So then I started my career.

W: And do you go back much?

B: Uh, now I am. I'm going back at least once a year. And I really like it. It's a different country, a different place.

W: Do you still have friends who live— because I understand a lot of people stayed and continued working for the Canal.

B: Yeah. Yeah, I have a couple friends who still live there.

W: And so you think the transition went well?

B: Oh, no I don't think so [laughter].

W: Okay, well please share your opinion of that [laughter].

B: I had a great opportunity to work there. I worked for an environmental engineering company and we had a contract performing environmental assessments of the property that was— there were military bases, Army bases, Air Force bases, in the Canal Zone.

W: Ours or theirs?

B: Ours. So we were hired by the military to perform these assessments of the property to determine a condition of the property as it was being reverted.

W: This would be about when? What years?

B: This was in the early to mid-[19]90s. You could tell the place just was in absolute turmoil. To me, it appeared that way. The civilians who were working for the military on these bases had a really bad attitude because they're about ready to lose their jobs. It was just so much uncertainty during that time frame. Didn't seem to be a very well organized process for the reversion of the property. And so during that time you saw what used to be the Canal Zone, kinda decaying.

W: At the site of your childhood.

B: Right. Back when Americans ran it, it was kind of run like a military base.

Everything was like neat as a pin. As the reversion was going on, that came to an end. There was garbage on the streets. Vegetation wasn't maintained. Houses started to mildew. And it was just part of the process. It took a while before all of that transpired. Now, even though it doesn't look like the Canal Zone, it's in much better condition. But in the [19]90s, it just was not going well. It was just a rough transition period. Now you go back, and it's a better place.

W: Better than the [19]90s, or better than—

B: Yeah, better than [19]90s.

W: And I'm sorry, you go back about how often?

B: About once a year, once or twice a year.

W: So it feels to me like we might be coming to the end. If you have any stories or . . . I wanna make sure I hit everything you wanna hit, and that usually leads to more questions, but —

B: No, I don't think so.

W: Well, I wanna thank you for coming by today. I hope you enjoy the rest of your reunion; I understand it goes for the rest of the weekend. Thank you very much for contributing to this project. And hopefully you'll hear your voice someday [laughter], in a museum exhibit or Web site.

[break in recording]

W: We're back to talk about the cayuco race. First off, how do you spell cayuco?

B: C-a-y-u-c-o. Cayuco.

W: So tell me about your participation in the cayuco race.

B: When was the first year . . . [19]67.

W: Was it its first year or your first year?

B: That was my first year. At that time it was a Boy Scout event. Although everyone did join the Boy Scouts, that was pretty much why they joined, was for the cayuco race. Not many other scouting activities were done throughout the year. It was just a great event. All of the crews had to do all the work themselves on the boat. Usually one of the fathers would be the scout master and could help using power tools. It was a three-day race through the Panama Canal. It would start on a Friday afternoon. The first leg of the race was from the Cristobal Yacht Club to Gatun Locks.

W: So you had to travel.

B: Yeah, we had to drive over.

W: Did you get the day off? Friday off school?

B: Yeah, we actually got it off from school. What would happen is families on the Atlantic side of kids that were in the race would put everybody up. You'd be camping out underneath their house, because the houses were built off the ground. It was a real adventure; you got to go in there and camp out. The night before – or actually after the first day– you would sleep over after the first leg of the race. And then the second leg of the race you would start on the lake side of the locks and go to Gamboa. That was really the main part of the race because

it's twenty-six miles. When you get out at Gamboa, then you would start there for the third day. And you actually went through two sets of locks. So it's a three day race and it was just a blast.

W: And you got to go through the locks as they lowered and—

B: Yeah, we actually went through the locks.

W: Did they suspend? They didn't suspend cargo ships for you, did they?

B: Oh yeah, they did. Back then the traffic through the Canal was nowhere near what it's like today. So yeah, now they don't allow that. They still have the race. It was just a great event. Back then there was probably no more than fifteen to twenty boats in the race. Now there's— I think last year there were ninety-two boats in the race.

W: Uh-huh. Did you ever win?

B: No, we came in second though. Came in second one year. First year we came in third. Second year I think came in seventh. And the last year came in second.

W: Now, I've noticed a discrepancy. You said you had to do all the work on the boat. But didn't you say before that Mr. Hinter —

B: Oh, yeah. The scout master. At that time, all the boats were genuine cayucos. They would get them from an Indian. But there'd be a lot of wood that you could take off to make it lighter. So we would plane or sand off—

W: It's like the pinewood derby, they give you the kit and then you've gotta make it good.

B: Right, and then we would put – I forgot what you call it– a canvas top over the bow with the wave break. Sometimes if the water got rough, water would come over the bow. And then seats, you'd have seats. There were four people in each cayuco.

W: So these are pretty good size.

B: Oh, yeah, they were like thirty feet long.

W: Okay. I was envisioning something a little smaller.

B: Kinda like, you know what you see in Hawaii Five-O but without the outrigger [Hawaii Five-O was an American television series about policemen in Hawaii that aired from 1968 to 1980].

W: Well, congratulations for second place. I'm always back in the end of those things.

B: I actually started back up again. I went back in 2008 and did it again [laughter].

W: Oh you did? So will you explain the differences? You said before they had to be wooden, but now it sounds like –

B: Some of them now are fiber glass. Some of them are kinda hybrids, where part of the boat was an original cayuco and then they've added wooden strips onto it. Not very sustainable to be going out and cutting all the trees out of the rainforest to make cayucos. But now, it's really cool, I really like how Panama has really embraced the race. It's a big deal, now. They have corporate sponsors.

W: Really, so it's not Boy Scouts anymore.

B: Oh, no. It's a big deal now in Panama.

W: Really?

B: Yeah, it is really cool. I was just so impressed. It's a very well organized race, and there's so much camaraderie. That's the other thing that I really enjoyed about going back and participating in it. It's just Panamanians, Americans, Canadians, you know it's not like back in the [19]70s.

W: Yeah. Did people travel? Is this something that pulls in- ?

B: Hm?

W: Is this something that pulls in some sort of, a certain level of sports tourism? Do people travel from around?

B: Well, some people do. I would have thought there would be more, but it's mainly Panamanians that are in the race and a few Zonians. Still quite a few Zonians that keep doing it. In fact, my friend Ted, I think he's done the race more than anybody. I think he's done like thirteen of them now [laughter]. But yeah, it's just a really fun race. And now there's, like I said, last year there were ninety. And this year-

W: And what time of year? When does it happen?

B: It's usually the weekend before Easter. It's usually in March. March or April, I guess.

W: Oh, it sounds like a lot of fun.

B: Oh, it's a blast.

W: Now, is your cayuco- is the one you use, is it wood or do you use a fiberglass one?

B: Well, I don't own it. Ted owns it. And it's like a hybrid. It still got some of the original cayuco in the main body of it. But in the bow and stern, you can see it's got wood strips built onto it.

W: Now does he live in the Zone or does he . . . ?

B: No, he lives here in Florida. But he and his wife own a home down there, so he goes down quite a bit.

W: Okay. And I never did ask you, where do you live now?

B: I live in Clearwater, Florida.

W: Clearwater, Florida. So a lot of Zonians seem to have settled in Florida. Is there a reason for that? I would have thought Texas or California.

B: Well there are quite a few in Texas as well. Yeah, there's a big community in Texas. But yeah, it seems like most of us ended up here in Florida. Probably because the weather is similar.

W: Yeah. That strikes me as right.

B: Yeah, we don't do very well in cold [laughter].

W: Well, yeah I wouldn't think that that would-- people who liked the cold wouldn't be drawn originally. And then of course you wouldn't stay. That strikes me as right. I'm more of a snow person myself. I find myself in Florida for various odd reasons, but anyway that's nothing. Okay, well once again, if there's anything else would you like to share, let me know. Sometimes we don't get to all the stories. Some people actually show up with little notes, they want to make sure they get to every single story. Thank you for joining us. And I hope you stay

abreast of what goes on with the museum. It seems to me that the community really has embraced the museum in a way that really is good for its overall health and longtime viability. You don't always get that with various types of museums, so my opinion is a bright future for it.

B: Great, great.

W: Thank you very much.

B: All right, thank you, man.

W: Thank you

[End of Interview]

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