

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.

Oral history interview transcripts available on the UF Digital Collections may be in draft or final format. SPOHP transcribers create interview transcripts by listening to the original oral history interview recording and typing a verbatim document of it. The transcript is written with careful attention to reflect original grammar and word choice of each interviewee; subjective or editorial changes are not made to their speech. The draft transcript can also later undergo a later final edit to ensure accuracy in spelling and format. Interviewees can also provide their own spelling corrections. SPOHP transcribers refer to the Merriam-Webster's dictionary, Chicago Manual of Style, and program-specific transcribing style guide, accessible at SPOHP's website.

For more information about SPOHP, visit <http://oral.history.ufl.edu> or call the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program office at 352-392-7168.

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PCM-019

Interviewee: Dorn Thomas

Interviewer: Amanda Noll

Date: July 1, 2010

N: This is Amanda Noll with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program. It's July 1st and I'm here with...

T: Dorn Thomas.

N: All right Mr. Thomas, thank you so much for being here with me today, really looking forward to hearing some of your stories with us. Before we discuss necessarily your Panama experience, maybe you can talk about your family and how you guys got down to Panama and your early childhood.

T: See one of the first things is I don't consider I have a Panama; I have a Canal Zone experience.

N: Okay.

T: My father went down in 1907, one of the Teddy Roosevelt constructors. He was a construction carpenter, expert in wood and concrete. He ended up building the houses that they all lived in. Then he ended up spending four years moving concrete and concrete forms around the Gatún locks. I'm one of those that have a problem going through immigration, cause my American passport says birthplace [inaudible 1:14] Republic of Panama. Actually, I was born in the Canal Zone hospital, who had happened to be located along the Cristobal beach, which happened to be in the Republic of Panama. But as far as I'm concerned there

was a Canal Zone piece of property. My mother was a telephone operator, who came down in 1914. They met in the zone, married and raised a family and my dad retired in 1945 at the end of the Second War. I consider the Canal Zone living was a great place as a young person to be raised. Everything we needed was there. You can say it was provided by the government, but no it was ours and we were there. My parents made sure that I never forgot that I was an American citizen. Every American holiday, our community and all the parents put on big events. Seven o'clock, as a Boy Scout I raised the flag at the flag station. Six o'clock we lowered the flag. Memorial Day we marched in the parade out to the cemetery. We knew all of the American march music and we later learned all the Panamanian dance musics. American marches, Panamanian dances. It kind of set the tone for a way of life. I lived in Gatun; Gatun was a small American community where they were walking distance from the Gatun locks, about a hundred and seventy families. We had our own elementary school, our own dispensary; we even had our own dentist. We had a club house which had bowling allies, a movie theater, a newsstand and we had a play shed. A play shed would be today what you would call a gym. All physical activities were centered around the play shed. You gotta remember we had two seasons in the Canal Zone: dry season for six months, rainy season for six months. Dry season, at the end of the season, the ground was so dry that the ground on your lawn cracked. You could actually stick our hand down in the crack. But the moment that the rainy season kicked in, nothing but green grass, garden, night and day.

The gymnasium was staffed by a professional physical education teacher. He was also, though he didn't have the title, he was a gentleman who was responsible for certain rehab functions. So if you broke your arm climbing a tree, and it came time to get the cast off, all of a sudden the physical education teacher at the gym would grab you and begin to give certain exercises to get your muscles back in tone. I was born with a club foot and the club foot could not be treated in the Canal Zone. Every four months my mother would put me on the ship with her, and we would travel up to New York. She would check me into a children's hospital and a week later come back and pick me up and take me back to the Zone. I'd have a new brace or a new cast on my foot. This went on for several years until all of a sudden my leg stopped growing. Then we kicked in the local rehab in the zone. It was a not a formal physical center like you have today in America, but a lot of it depended upon who knew who, what, who could tell the right story. All of the parents basically, I could give you things that work and things that didn't work. I for one learned to pick up marbles with my toes in order to get muscle tone back into my foot. Marbles were too easy to pick up so they then substituted heavy metal rolling bags. When I began to dent my mother's floor dropping these balls, when they weren't supposed to be dropped, we actually went and got a round surface, floor surface, for me to stand on while I picked up the metal balls. They then moved on to the next exercise was to strengthen my leg they decided was tap dancing. My teacher was an army wife, who was a former showgirl from Broadway.

N: Wow.

T: She had a tap dancing class with about ten girls and me, and because she wanted to make sure that her girls knew all the routines we went out and recruited another boy, Tommy Lutross. Tommy and I were the two male tap dancers. All of a sudden I began to lose arguments with my peer group about who wore fluffy dresses and who didn't, so they decided to expand my rehab by teaching me boxing. For several years I was trained to be an amateur boxer. We would travel from town to town, with each town competing to the other in boxing matches. So I'm a trained killer [laughter]. If I can't wow you with my right hand, I will outdo you with my tap dancing [laughter]. I'm glad that the people down there all gathered around and my parents always had plenty of things for me to try to get better. The gym instructor would show up at our grade school during recess, and he would basically go by class, by class, by class, and he would see somebody limping or somebody wincing when he threw a ball, and he would immediately step in and do the rehab consultation with that individual student. We always thought that he was down there to teach us how to play volleyball better or dodge ball better or something, he did, but he also made sure that the person with the limp was attended to.

N: What was his name?

T: The one I remembered most was a gentleman by the name of Woody. Everybody knows Woody, he was the coach of little league basketball, volleyball;

he was the only coach we had until we went to school, high school. I was really grateful for the Canal Zone **common** and that they basically set up a Boy Scout program and the Girl Scout program as American programs, so that any ranks that we earned, if our parents left the Zone went back to the States, we could transfer back to whatever Girl Scout, Boy Scout troop that we had fit into and not lose our ranks. I'm an Eagle Scout, and I have a lot of memories about what I had to do to earn it. In the 1940s at that time, some of the Boy Scout requirements had to do with seasons, like camping. Camping was a required merit badge to be an Eagle. One of the requirements was that I would display the abilities to camp out in the winter time. Panama doesn't have winter time. Coordinating with the American program in the States, it was agreed that rainy season would qualify as the winter camps. If you go camping in the rain—my town had 180 inches of rain every year. If you could go camping and survive then you could earn the merit badge. I became an Eagle and our troop was considered to be jungle-rated. Now jungle-rated within our community meant that we could go camping in the jungle without an adult. We had to tell the adults, the parents where we were going and when we would be back, and they knew basically where we were around the outskirts of the town. Now the jungle was just over the curb of the last house and then jungle started. We would go camping and sometimes it'd be a weekend, during the summer it might be several weeks at a time. Parents if they needed us, would drive on the road closest to where they knew the camps were and just lean on the horn. Then

they'd come wandering out and find out which boy was in trouble and then that boy would be sent home to whatever the parent needed to do with them. Several summers, I spent the whole summer in our Boy Scout camp along the lake. Did all the cooking, came home to get our clothes washed of course, and when you run out of cooking oil you went and got more oil, you run out of potatoes you went and got more potatoes. As long as you could get firewood, you'd stay out there. We cooked, we didn't do much fishing; we didn't do any hunting. Fishing and hunting in our troop was not morally approved events because we just didn't want guns in the camp. Fishing was too much of an individual event rather than swimming with a whole group. We would go out there and spend the whole summer waving at our parents across the lake. They needed us they could come get us. My grandson is also an Eagle and when he was in his scouting troop a few years ago, he told his fellow scouts that his granddad was a jungle-camper, so they invited me to bring my scouting equipment and talk to his troop. I had my merit badge sash and I had my uniform shirt and all my medals and badges and put 'em on a hanger and off we went to the Boy Scout meeting and got out of the car and was coming in the front door of the church where the meeting was and all of a sudden the pastor comes running out waving and saying all excited, no, no, you can't come in, no, no. I was loaded down with knives. I had my machete and my bolo, and an axe and I had a hunting knife and a pocket knife and he told me that knives weren't allowed in the church. Okay. When the Boy Scout trip heard that I had all my knives, the meeting was adjourned and they call came out

to the parking lot to me to go through all the various pieces of equipment I had. Didn't think about it, a couple of weeks later I was invited to come to this high school, like a presentation of scouting in the tropics. Well I waltz in right through the front doors, the security officer about lost his bottom jaw, because here I have a machete, a bolo, a hunting knife and a pen knife, promptly escorted in to the principal's office. Big discussion as to what they were going to do with my equipment. What fascinated the scouts, they all knew these knives were useful, it fascinated them that as a scout I had carried this around as personal equipment. The scouting program today many of them, when they take a trip, all of the knives and axes and whatnot are under the care of the scout master. Then loan 'em out to one or two of the scouts who are qualified to use that tool, but it has to be checked back to him the night before they all go to bed. To just be told that you didn't need permission, that was my equipment and I used it and I went into the jungle, and all of my years while we were all trained in first aid, we never had anything more than maybe some skinned knees from falling off trail. We might have had a nicked finger when we were slicing up wood to get shavings for a fire, but we never cut our foot, never cut our hands off, never. It's just that there was—in order to be a scout and be jungle-rated and you had to be able to use these things. I just remember that in our town, we have to understand that the American government, when they built the Panama Canal, automobiles were a fad, never gonna replace the buggy. Wherever they had our work location within walking distance, they had a living facility. My town had homes for about a

hundred families. Everybody could walk to work. Today if you look at a map of the Canal Zone and the period that I grew up in, if you look hard you'll see that all of the towns are on the same side of the canal, except for a few towns at the very end of the canal. The end of the canal there's a couple of towns on either side, and those towns are connected by a ferry boat. All the other towns through the isthmus are on the railroad track. The railroad couldn't cross the canal. All the travel between towns had to be by rail. On the Pacific side, as we referred to the other side, those towns were connected with one road. The towns on the Atlantic side, Gatún had a seven-mile road through the jungle to Cristóbal Colón, but there was no road to go to Gamboa. If you wanted to go Gamboa you had to ride the train or you had to hitch a ride on a launch. These towns all existed and they had a stable. Every town had a stable because managers, when they got promoted, were awarded a horse. And they used the horse to get around to their work locations. And in the evening they didn't have a barn behind the house, they had the town stable and they'd take it there and they had people that would feed 'em and check their hooves and whatnot. Those stables have long disappeared because the horses are gone, but the facilities are still there except they're now used by the government automobiles and trucks. That's where the mechanics were. If you ask somebody in our town what's the building over the hill down the bottom they'd tell you that's the corral. That's the name that's always been there. Every town had a corral, no horses. We grew up thinking of the jungle as our play yard, as a friend. We did things that even today are—my wives of past have

shuddered—we as kids would from time to time find a jungle—I won't use the word critter, they were animals—in the living quarters, that could be a snake in the clotheslines or there could be a monkey back there where the bananas were we had. We as children were basically trained to get the animal back into the jungle. Now if you thought you could do it, you did it yourself. If you thought it might be a problem, you were to get the town police sergeant to come do it or help you, **store it**. It's been reported that on one of the occasions that one of the other towns—cause I wasn't involved, all I can do is tell you what I was told—some of my peer group found a big boa constrictor, about twelve-feet, in the town. They decided that oughta take the snake back to the jungle. Maybe about six, seven, or eight or these young'uns, all got their position and pick the snake up and they go walkin' down the street, headin' for the jungle...and I remember that there's a new family living in this house and have a new boy that they've been playing with. They walk up to the back door and they knock on the back door and the mother comes to the door, they said hi, we're Billy's playmates can he come out and play with us? The mother says who are you and she sticks her head out the door to see who they are and here's this snake looking at her, and she faints. Now that's bad news [laughter]. You done something to the mother or the infant. The kids close the door and go back down the steps with the snake, take a one up and put it in the jungle. For about, over a month that little fella couldn't play with us. We never really understood what it was, but I'm sure everyone that you talk to has one of two of these tales, they call 'em jungle tales.

We used to catch, you would think of it as being a crocodile or an alligator, the Canal Zone did not have alligators. Canal Zone didn't have crocodiles. They had a member of the crocodile family called caiman. Looked like a crocodile, mean like a crocodile, lived in the swamps and from time to time some of the older boys would go fishing for these and put a hunk of meat on the hook and hang it out into the swamp area. Tie the rope, they had a hook and a chain to a tree limb and in the morning when they went to school they could see the tree limb and if it was level they didn't have anything. If the tree limb was pulled down, then they knew that something had snagged the hook. Then after school they'd go bring it up and kill it and then fly down the next bus and put the body on top of the bus and take it down to the market where they could sell the hide. Why would they do this? They needed money to buy a corsage for their girl that they were gonna take to the dance [laughter]. That's the story we'd give our parents. We would stick with it. We did it, not all of us but some of us. If you think up about you growin' up, what did you do to earn spending money?

N: I had a few lemonade stands [laughter]. Baked goods, things like that.

T: Couldn't have lemonade stands in the Zone 'cause we really had limited access to ice. What else did you do?

N: I think that was my extent other than chores around the house.

T: Now chores around the house in the Canal Zone didn't exist because all the housing chores were done by the government. All the grass cutting, painting, repairs to the banisters and whatnot done by the government. Extra work opportunities for the youth were limited. Now I did things like paper routes. It's a worldwide part-time job, paper routes. I did pin setting in bowling alleys. In those days we didn't have automatic pin setters, you had a pin setter and he sat down there and dodged the balls and dodged the pins and set the pins. We thought of baby-sitting, but the funny thing that I really don't have a good explanation: boys didn't baby-sit. Boys might pet sit, they would sit pets, but not babies. Baby-sitting was basically allocated to the girls. The girls had the baby-sitting basically locked-up. Doesn't say that maybe a brother was roped in by the parent for baby-sitting duty but that's not something he talked about or bragged about. Paper routes, pin setting, some of them did fishing and they would catch as many fish as they could and haul them down to the local market and sell them by the foot. Ah yeah, lifeguard duty. Lifeguard duty for many years was restricted to the boys. The qualifications for lifeguard duty was you had to pass the Red Cross Life Saving course and if you happened to be a Boy Scout and you had first aid and lifesaving and swimming, then you basically were qualified to be interviewed. Every town had swimming pools, in every town the swimming pool was tied to the play shed where the physical gentlemen I had talked about managed it, and he certainly didn't want to be tied to lifeguard duty every time the pools opened so he would round up a couple boys and make sure they qualified and then they

were the lifeguards. Girls didn't go for the lifeguard gig. I think some of the training might have scared 'em off. I think some of the training just wasn't made available for 'em because if you were a girl—were you a girl scout?

N: I was actually. I was a Brownie and a Girl Scout.

T: Did you do lifesaving?

N: No.

T: All right. How about first aid?

N: Yes we did do first aid.

T: Okay, but swimming?

N: No.

T: Basic requirements for lifeguard duty. It's not that you couldn't do it, you just didn't have the opportunity to run down that path. I was the town pool lifeguard for seven years, so a lot of kids grew up. The play shed, was basically the Canal Zone daycare center. Today only the young parents know where the nearest day care center is for your community. We didn't have daycare. We had the play shed. Now the play shed taught us, it was a big gym, and so during rainy season we were taught all the indoor sports: basketball, volleyball, you played dodge ball. Dry season we had ball fields and so you learned baseball, softball, football. Then of course when nothing else was available the swimming pool was there

and all of us were swimmers. And the towns all had swimming meets at the drop of a hat. There were boy scouts swim meets when all the boy scouts competed, there were Girl Scout swim meets and they all competed; every town had swim meets. All of us have had various qualifications down again in the Canal Zone. Most of us learned to swim almost before we learned to walk. Your initial qualification was to get your B badge for beginner. And if you had a B badge and you sewed it on your swimming set, that qualified you to swim in certain areas of the pool or the lake. Then you worked up to...that would be an I for intermediate range. Then you got a S for swimmer. The last badge was an A for advanced swimmer. Now each one of these badges was your passport to go swimming in the lake, unlimited, swimming in the lake, stay close to shore. Swimming in the baby pool, swimming in the big pool. A lifeguard who was having a difficult session with one of the swimmers would pull the badge. And immediately by pulling the badge you demoted them one or two levels down because they acting up on you. We didn't do that too much, it was usually more whistle blowin' and that kind of thing. Now you hear the rain coming?

N: I know.

T: Rainy season. In all of my time down in the Zone, never had a raincoat. Never had an umbrella. I had a poncho. That was usually a large balloon material with a whole cut in because you kept losing it. But if you got wet, an hour or so you'd be dry. You got up in the morning and then look out at the cloud formation; you had

thirty minutes to get to school because it was going to rain. Or it's raining so I gotta wait thirty minutes for it to stop. But all of us got pretty good forecasting the rain cycles. So we knew how much time we had. Some of the men who worked on the locks that had to be out in the open all the time became veteran umbrella users. They could control it from running down their neck back when it rained. Rainy season was when you played football.

N: Did you play football?

T: Well...

N: In school?

T: Yes I did. Pulling guard on the high school team, varsity player, catcher in baseball. Did you not do water polo.

N: Was that big? Water polo? Was that big? A big sport?

T: It was kind of a fill-in sport between basketball and baseball. It was a sport that begun during rainy season. I could never—my leg never let me do that kind of sport. Never was a polo, I could swim freestyle. As long as it wasn't more than fifty yards, I did it. I did diving. And we all learned how to do summersaults, backward flips, keep our teeth. You know everybody knew everybody. And if you stepped out of line, by just doing something you really shouldn't have been doing. It took probably four hours, at the most eight, and your parents knew

about it. It wasn't so much that people told as much you as you ought to know what I saw your son doing. And if you want to do something about it, it was up to you. In our small town the police station had cells and it had one padded cell. And the padded cell was for a gentleman that maybe got out of control, there were locked in the padded cell they wouldn't hurt themselves until they had a chance to recover. The padded cell was also an excellent place...you got a choice man, four hours in the padded cell or call your parents. Never called the parents, go in the padded cell.

N: Did you ever go in the padded cell?

T: My name's on the wall. You can't be one of the upper pyramid unless you've done your time in the padded cell. It was all of them. When you were punished that way, you knew what you had done. You knew why you did what you shouldn't have been doing and therefore the punishment was appropriate. Now I will tell you that some parents enjoyed watching their children grow up. Some of the parents expected the young boys to be boys and they knew that they were going to things that were going to fall out of the tree and fall off a bicycle and that was part of learning how to be a young man. Other parents were very uneasy with that, giving that up. And so they were very, very controlling in their neighborhood. And we knew which parents were in which Cadillac. So if you wanted to agitate the ones that should be agitated, what were you going to do? Go play in their rosebush, go play in their garden in the back. If the parent was

some that treated us fair, we wouldn't let that happen. We were going to patrol our neighborhoods. Even today, at this reunion, I meet people I haven't seen for twenty or thirty years but I know 'em. I know their kids, I know their wives, and its like within five minutes we'll find some common memory, we'd sit there and laugh about it and talk about it. You think every event outside your town as I was growing up you traveled by train. So I can't tell you when I first knew all the train schedules but very early I knew that there were four trains a day. I knew exactly the time they were coming into our station and exactly the time they were coming back. And you made sure that wherever you went , you knew the train times at that station because you missed a train and you either had to wait four hours for the next one or you might have to wait overnight somewhere. If you had an event, baseball game, a basketball game, or date with a girlfriend in the other town, you had to make sure whatever you were doing was tied to when you had to be at the train station. In Gatún we were seven miles inland from the Caribbean and the last bus from the port town to Gatun left at eleven o'clock at night. So if you were taking a young lady night for margaritas, that bus came through that bus stop at 11:15. You better be on it, otherwise you had about a six mile walk right down the jungle, no street lights. You got home by following the center of the road, usually make out the center marking. You make a lot of noise. Always whistled, shuffled my feet. Basically what you're saying is I'm coming get out of the way. You know in all of my time in the jungle, I only saw a snake once. So evidently I was successful in my noise making. One time it was raining and I

had to get home. I didn't feel like walking the seven miles so I went to the police station. I presented my case. Reminded them what my parents would say if I wasn't home in the morning. So the police officers gave me a ride six miles down the road where he met with the police coming from the other town, big swap of the prisoner. And when they were taking me into my town, they said we'll drop of you off at house. I'm going no, no, no, you're not going to drop me out of the police car in front of my father's house. You can drop me off someplace else and I'll walk home. My father would have been very concerned if I would have been brought home in a police car. Yeah. You expected certain things and when I graduated from high school, I didn't quite have the money and my father was **retired** to cover the college expenses. So my parents agreed that I could sign up to be an apprentice. I was not quite, I was only eighteen years old so I had to have their permission to agree to sign a contract for four years as an electrician. For four years I was trained as a wireman, which is an electrician. And my father was very concerned that for some reason I would decide not to go to college. He had decided that you had tools and you had an education you can always find work. If you had a college education you could find better work. He had always wanted to make sure I went to college, like my brother and my sister. So he agreed that if I took the apprenticeship, I should live at home and pay my mother seventy-five percent of my salary for rent. I was earning ninety-nine cents an hour, working forty hours a week. You figure out, ninety-nine times forty; I wasn't make forty dollars a week. I would pay him seventy-five percent of thirty dollars,

so that leaves me ten dollars. That's not much in the way of spending money when you're a worker but that was the agreement. Out of his money, I could ten dollars a pay period and buy tools. So when I finished my apprenticeship I must have had fifty screwdrivers, ten pliers and everything else I needed. They took my rent money and they bought savings bonds. Don't know if you're familiar with doing World War II and war savings and after that it was just government savings bonds. He bought savings bonds with the understanding if and when, not if, when I went to college I could use the saving bonds for tuition. The hooker was that if I didn't go to school for whatever reason, like getting married, all of that money was his. So all of sudden about two years into the program, he comes along and says how's things going. Fine. Going to go the college route? Thinking about it. Is it worth three thousand dollars to you? Now that's big money at that time. It was worth three thousand dollars, I'd go to school. And when I did get ready to go school, I had a choice between MIT and Georgia Tech: two great schools, but different schools. And while I was trying to decide that, I got notified that I'd been drafted. I had been filling an air force reserve slot at the local air force base and I had four stripes. I was working on airplanes and having a good time. So I went to the air force and told them that the army was trying to draft me. And they said, that's a real shame, because we just called you to active duty as of tomorrow, you're going to be in the air force. They gave me a set of orders to go back to the post office and when the draft notice showed up they wrote a stamp: no longer at this address list. Attached my orders to it, sent it back to the draft. So for two

years I was assigned to a local air force base as an air craft electrician, worked on airplanes. Flew on airplanes. Any plane that needed a test flight, I got to fly with them, twerk twitches and check flight bugs. Check the engine speeds and I flew all over South and Central America. Any plane that was sick, I was part of the crew that would go down there and fix it So people ask me how did you like your military duty and I say loved it. Had a good time. They kind of roll their eyes, don't know what I was talking about. I did. I had a good time. Still air force is a great service. The rest of them are good too, but the air force is number one, one hundred percent. At the air force I found I qualified for the G.I. Bill, so I went off to college and I went up to MIT and I wanted to start school in the summer. They presented me the summer programs and they gave me a list of their clothing that they recommended. And I happened to notice their wearing sport coats and blazers and whatnot. I only had one sport coat. So I went down to Georgia Tech, went in and talked to them and they were starting summer school the next week. And I looked around the campus, no sport coats, no ties, no white shirts. All khakis. Half of them had khaki uniforms with the stripes torn off. I kinda feel like Georgia Tech is more my type of school. So I signed up the next week and they had a, Georgia Tech was on the quarter system because of their co-op program. Every quarter, if fifteen students signed up for a class in the catalog they would hold that course. Might be at nine o' clock at night or two o' clock Saturday afternoon, but you could take the course. And being in a hurry, I started school the beginning of summer and stayed in straight through three years. I was taking

winter courses in the summer and summer courses in the winter. But I finished a four year program in three years. [inaudible 46:15] People asked me, did I play football and I say no, I didn't want to get hurt so I played in the marching band. I think I had a lot more fun. Went with the band, went to football games. You know one story one of my first dates with my wife to be, took her down to Georgia Tech football game, cause I got tickets, I was going to impress her. Give her the best seat that I could find right next to the base drum. Bad move. She quickly moved up in the stands with my fraternity brothers, not only was the base drummer **farther away**, in fact they had some liquor refreshments up there. I had a good time with the band. I knew the band. So I joined up with General Electric after school, they moved me around the engineering training program. Then they find out I had all this Panama Canal experience on large motors, generators from the ship yards. Turns out that this is the same type of equipment that's used in steel mills. So they quickly moved me in to be in a part of the team that was installing the first computer on a steel mill. So I knew very little about computers, very little about making steel, but I knew how to make motors and generators run. So I did steel mill controls, then I did aluminum mill controls and I was assigned to a special system application office that we referred to as the turkey farm. Because we did the first application of any industry to prove that a computer could make it work. Once it was done and we turned it over to our production group to make money and we moved on to other things. I learned how to load coal on a ship going overseas to keep it **in dodge**. I learned how to make rubber tires. I learned

how to mine coal out of the underground. Built control for an unmanned train that ran through the mountains of West Virginia. The coal from a mine to a power plant, kept running into Canal Zone people. My wife swears that we can smell each other. You know when you run down the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the late [19]50s, early [19]60s, and pull into a rest area and you go into the rest room. Cause when you parked the car and you look over there and you see a Canal Zone license plate. Walk in through the rest area, and just look around in the middle of winter and see who has the tan and you walk up to them and say, okay, what town are you living in in the Canal Zone. And immediately they know somebody that I know and they can take a message back that they've run into them. I've met Canal Zone people on the twentieth floor of a Chicago Hotel, elevator opens and here comes a high school football that I played against. He was going to his bedroom and I was going down to eat dinner. Now we were all over the place. No matter where we were, no matter how we had been with each other in the zone, there were no enemies. Absolutely no ill will. We'd laugh about some of the things we'd done, it was just good to see them and talk to them. You know people ask me how I feel about the canal today. You know, I'm glad that the Panamanians are doing a fine job. To this day I'm still mad as hell at the excuse that Carter used when he said, I'm giving back their canal. It wasn't their canal. They didn't build it, they didn't pay for it, they didn't dig it. We did. It might have the right thing, the politicians to transfer it back. But when they justified by saying its theirs and we gave it back to them, they lost me. I think a lot of us here,

very irritated at how it was justified. I don't think anybody is still upset about the fact that it happened. It's the way it happened. Funny thing where do you consider, where are you from?

N: Gainesville, Florida.

T: What do you consider home, your hometown?

N: Gainesville.

T: Now ask me, where am I from?

N: Where are you from?

T: Yeah it's not there anymore. What's my hometown, it's not there anymore. Somebody gave it away. And you want to know how I feel about that? They [inaudible 52:13]. My home is gone. I was born and raised there, lived there twenty-seven years. In fact one of the jobs I had as an apprentice was taking out rings that my father had put in in 1912 and then knocking it down and putting in newer stuff. In the middle of the digging, I find his name scratched in a concrete wall. I ask him about it and oh yeah, if they would have found that I'd done that I would have been terminated. You are not allowed to put any markings on the wall. So he said what did you do. Well, I was putting a light fixture up. Well yeah. Well my name is up under the light fixture. Tell your grandson. My father walked any place on that canal, can tell you stories about what he did here, what he did

there, what his friend Bill did over there. They were building a swimming pool in our town and this was after my father had retired. They kept going up there and looking and looking and finally he went to the foreman and said your building this pool on bad ground. The guy said no, no the engineers checked it. Bad ground, it's got a [inaudible 54:00] problem. Finished the pool, put up the fences, filled it up for the big opening tomorrow. Some of the boys went skinny dipping that night at the pool. Needless to say they were spotted and the police sergeant with the siren came roaring. Everybody had plenty of time to get back out and head for the jungle. And about maybe one out of ten was taken down to the padded cell waiting for their parents. Next day all the dignitaries show up to go down to the pool to open it, except the pool is now empty. They thought exactly what you would think, what did these boys do with the **valves**? They all insisted. Water was here at five o' clock; water is not there at nine o' clock. So all of a sudden they look at the bottom of the pool. The whole bottom of the pool had sunk about six inches, about the size of your [inaudible 55:12], it just cracked and boom. Then my dad says ah, now I know what I've got to tell you. This part of the pool is on virgin ground. It hasn't been destroyed. That part of the pool is built on fill. Back in about 1920, [19]25, they extended this for a volleyball so we pushed dirt over the hill; it should have packed down, but I guess it didn't. So anyway, our pool, you can look at pictures now, taken five years later, the pool on the back wall there's a sign that says, while swimming don't mess with the patch on the bottom. Now any new person, pats the bottom like, what is that, an octopus,

whatever it is, don't mess with it. We were concerned with the way the patch was put in that it would begin to fall away from the walls, we need to reach in and pull on it. Water stayed in this time so we had a leaking pool. Now we are on the top of a hill and you lose a swimming pool full of water. All of the water is gone. What has I gone? You can't see running down the streets, you can't see it running down the sewers, where did the water go? And all of a sudden, almost three or four days later, about a mile further down the slope, all this water gushed out of the sides. **Give it a landslide**, taking that long for it to work down now when you take a look at pools of Point A, water came out of Point B and you draw a line from A to B, everything on that line might have had the foundations washed out, right. Like a post office, [inaudible 57:24], efficiency apartment buildings, Masonic Temple, all are on that line. So now you had to go in there and do drilling, try and find out where the cavern is, like a sinkhole. You're familiar down here with sinkholes, right?

N: Yes.

T: Water evidently never created a path. I guess it seeped through. My father showed up. But anyway you know the thing I remember down there; you were always to remember that you were an American: American holidays, big events. Fourth of July was always a town barbecue in our town and I'm assuming the other towns did the same. I never lived there so I can't tell you. But we would barbeque a complete steer. And that was our community party. The day before

we would prepare the fireplace. There was a certain individual, certain men who were the cooks, there were other men who were the **broodists**, stood around all night and **brooded on** as they weren't doing it. Young men were considered to be the wood bearers. The girls, the ladies, played bingo at night. As the sun was going down you started this fire, get the coals, get the rock stuff and the beef was all being prepared with the secret recipes of the barbeque sauce. Then on the [inaudible 59:30], they'd really screw you up for a month at the other end. They are all doing their thing because these were the cooks that did it every year. The ladies were in their tent, bingo, bingos a big game down there for the adults. Us kids would just stay out the way. As you got older, you had the job of keeping firewood coming. They had beer. I do not remember keg beer as much as bottled beer. But the keg beers were around. And so by nine o' clock in the morning when the meat was ready, the cooks had to be escorted home. Then there was all the families brought food. Like the men who were chosen to cook the meat, all of the families had their family specialty: whether it was potato salad or coleslaw, or baked beans. And set it in long tables and the whole town had a picnic. Usually to keep us out of the way while the food was finishing, swimming meets. Sometimes, depending upon the mood of the physical education teacher, we might have scheduled a track meet. But it was for the community. You didn't bring outsiders in; it was your chance to be the swimmer in your age group. We would have patriotic meetings. And of course at seven o' clock in the morning, the Boy Scouts and anybody who could beat a drum, we raised a flag at the

flagstaff. Gotta remember to take it down at six. That was bad news if you didn't take the flag down. The picnic would start probably around eleven, 11:10. It would run until nobody could get anymore at three o' clock in the afternoon, four o' clock. You know, I really can't remember any leftovers. I'm sure there were. And I'm sure they shared the leftovers. Maybe some of the other non-American enjoyed the food. You went home feeling like you can't wait for the next one.

Memorial Day, we participated in the parades, in the cemeteries and put the flags up. In our community, in the Atlantic side, the big parade was a mixture of American units and Panamanian units. Now within the Panamanian community, their big community band was the band with the fire department. So they would march in the parade, the Latin American beat. They would play American marches; you really wouldn't recognize the beat to it. But you could recognize the tone. So it all lined up; the Boy Scouts, who'd usually be placed in the middle of the parade. So you start off around the corner heading to the cemetery, the navy band is playing "Captain's March" and the marine band is playing "Tripoli" and all of a sudden the army is playing "Over Hill, over dale, The Caisson's are marching." Then you would get all your Boy Scout troops marching in step and getting all counting cadence and in step. The American bands would take a rest as they'd marched along with the drums. The Panamanian Fire Department Band would kick in and start playing the same music. Within five beats every one of the Boy Scouts would be out of step. They just couldn't adjust to the Latin beat. And the Panamanian band would just march along just hootin' and tootin,' beating the

drums. We were all skipping and trying to get back in step and when the band finally had stopped, it got tired. And when the American bands kicked in, we were back in step within two beats. Now if both band groups were playing at the same time, that was interesting to be because the front line of the Boy Scouts would be in step and the back ones would be all over the place. You know we knew it was going to happen. We would practice and rehearse marching, we would practice and rehearse cadence counts, we would use hand signals and everything else. And it happened. At the time it went that way and so all of sudden you just go on for the ride and have a good time. We'd march out to the cemetery and have all the patriotic speeches and whatnot. Veteran's Day we'd put the American flags and then we would amble home, leaving the cemetery you didn't march. March to the cemetery, walk home. And we would go the baseball games at Mount Hope, which was right next to the route to the cemetery. Baseballs games were Sunday afternoon and all of a sudden we would hear them coming: the funeral parades. And they would come down the street and they would remind you if you were like a New Orleans funeral band, as they marched to the cemetery, coats and all the ladies are in white dresses. All of the churches are marching behind the hearse and they're playing all of the traditional church music to say goodbye, very sedate. And you almost wanted; sometimes the baseball game would stop while they marched by out of respect. If you had a spot where the referees could stop the game without upsetting everybody, they would stop the game as they marched by. Now going back from the funeral burial, that band would be strutting

down that thing playing “The Saints Go Marching In” and every other song that you could think of because they were celebrating. They were celebrating the fact that one of their friends had gone on. And it was a good thing. When that happened the baseball game didn’t stop. We would just watch as they’d come by. Another job that I had going back a little bit to earn money, I qualified to be a soda pop vender at the baseball games. And we would carry little cases with ten soda pop bottles and when you got old enough you could carry two of them. And you’d walk up through the crowd selling soda pop. Nickel a bottle and for every bottle you sold, you got a penny. You got smart after a while by putting a little bit of ice in your soda pop. It kept the drinks a little bit colder so they didn’t fizz when you popped the can. And the real thing was to qualify to be back at the depot under the stands. One of the boys qualified to load the ice buckets. We had things about as big as these tables here, had walls around them and you stood all the bottles there just as close as you could them. And then you took hundred pound blocks of ice and you chipped it. You chipped them to get the ice down, so the thing was ice cold in about thirty minutes from the ice. Secret was to get all the ice chipping without accidentally chipping the lid in the soda bottle, because then that bottle was defective. And so you always had to have one or two defective bottles in order to mature the flavor of the bottle. When you chipped the bottle, you knew that the adult coordinator was going to have some words of wisdom for you about the qualifications of how to use an ice chipper. But we would load the trays, keep setting out these little buckets with the ice carrier. No

girl ever worked with us like that. And we could have trained her to chip ice. We probably wouldn't have let her carry the buckets because that would have been too heavy for the dainty young lady, right? But you see like I said, once again, the girl could baby-sit. But pet sitting, unless it was a cat, cats seemed to be an accepted opportunity for a young lady, but not a dog. And definitely things like snakes and whatnot, but maybe hamsters. You know we had had monkeys. A lot of the families had little miniature monkeys called marmosets. They would ride on your shoulder and you could teach them to put their tails around your neck so you could ride on a bicycle and they wouldn't fall off with you. Those kids, they were looked up to that they had their own monkey. There were some boys who were delighted to bring snakes back in to scare their mother. We had one fellow. It was his duty, and he knew the teacher who came to school. Sometime the first week he would enter a class, he would show up with a boa constrictor wrapped around his waist, under his shirt. When things got interesting and the teacher was trying to impress the students with her teaching skills, it was interesting to see the reaction when all of a sudden this snake appeared on her desk headed for her. One of our teachers went of the classroom through the door without ever opening it, just tore it right off the hinges. Needless to say the principal came in with blood in his eyes. It so routine that one time we got a new teacher in that we really liked. The principal came in and read him the Riot Act: no snake tricks with this one. You know people ask us where did you get the snake. Oh the jungle. How did you get it to the school? Well wrapped around his waist. Didn't anyone

see it? No it was inside the shirt. Didn't it squeeze him to death? No dummy don't you know that a boa constrictors tale has to grab one to something in order to crunch you? It can't just squeeze you. Everybody knows that. We got [inaudible 1:13] grade school kids together, high school kids. Remember the snake coming into school today? Yeah. Then the sloth, we had a sloth out there that also came through the window. We all saw it coming. We all waited for somebody else to tell the teacher. Then all of a sudden we realized that it's too late now. That sloth went far up on the teacher's knee and she went straight up on the desk, crossed all the arms, and out the door. And we said okay, Principal **Hoaks** will be in to see us. We better just wait for him to show up. It happened; we saw it. None of us got expelled for it. None of us got, now there might have been some letters gone home to parents, to tell us what was appropriate or not. But it was kind of an atmosphere that if you stepped out of line, you were going to be corrected. Not punished to the point that your spirit was broken, but just they were going to spend time explaining to you why you should know that's not the way to do this. Great place to live. Now you know I really could talk for about four more hours. But what have I not talked to you about? Hobbies? You know the hobbies down there, you couldn't collect stamps because the glue, the moisture in the glue would all of sudden stick all your stamps together. Model trains: Lionel trains. It was hard to collect model trains because Lionel built model trains to operate on sixty cycles. That's what the United States had. We had twenty-five cycles, which was good for the [inaudible 1:15:31]. So unless you spent the extra time to buy a

twenty five cycle control transformer, your train would burn up within an hour. If you were smart enough to get a twenty-five cycle transformer, and you didn't go into the locomotive and clip the whistle wire. Lionel built the engines with a whistle and a bell. The technique they used was such that in sixty cycle when you pressed the button, you converted the current to DC and whistles or the bells. Twenty-five cycle, the frequency is so much slower that you didn't have to push the button. The whistles and the bells ran continuously. Now if you think that a model train running in your mother's bedroom with a whistle blowing a hundred percent of the time, you have a feeling how long it would last, right? And surprisingly, all the mothers by cross communicating quickly found out where to take the pliers and what wire to cut. They got rid of the whistle or the bell. Just did it. Model trains were twenty-five cycle, and we were limited as to how much accessories we could get because the Canal Zone commissaries supplied all of the equipment. And they would by maybe Christmas time, ten locomotors sets, ten train sets. And you have fifty kids that want trains. So ten got trains and forty didn't. Well if you asked your aunt or uncle in the States to buy a train set and send it to you, they would send you a train set that was suitable to work in the United States, not one that was suitable to work in the Canal Zone and therefore there was a modification trade built up, people in the know that knew what to do to make the trains work. Lionel was the big model train. Erector sets. Erector sets also had motors and operating devices that didn't work well on twenty-five cycles. So we'd do the mechanics of putting all the post and whatnot together, but not

the elevators and things like that. The hobbies themselves, the hobbies that basically, somehow survived the tropics and they were handed down by older brother to younger brother, or dad to first born. This is going to be your hobby because we can make it work. We can support it. Don't know about that hobby because man, that's a stateside hobby. It was understood. You know when the canal was finished, ready to go into service, the management realized that guess what? Married employees are better employees than bachelors. Bachelors can't wait till Friday night to go out and spend Saturday and Sunday. And then it takes Monday, Tuesday, and maybe Wednesday for them to recover. But then they want to get ready for the next weekend. Married men, that's not a problem. They basically, at the end of the construction period when they were trying to get their permanent work force set up, they found out that the men wanted to get married. And if they got them better living quarters, called family quarters instead of bachelor quarters, more of them would marry and stay there. Then all of a sudden they found out, that if the gentlemen went back to the States, married their girlfriend who would be waiting for them, bad news when they brought that young lady down to tropic living. On the other hand if they married a girl who was there, a daughter of a family, nurse who was working there, the marriage went well. And what it was, was that the living routines were very unique to surviving in the jungle, or the tropics. The houses weren't in the jungle, the jungle was over there. But things like putting rice in the salt shakers so that you could shake your salt. Taking treated string wrapping around the leg of a table to keep insects off

of the table. The French and some of the other people had actually taken little saucers of water and put all of the legs in the water to keep the animals from getting up. But that was a prime mosquito breeding area, so that to stop. We had treated string. We were constantly fighting the battle of roaches. All of the clothes closets had racks for you to put your shoes and they had heaters to keep dry them out because it's like it's raining here right? You're going to walk out to your car, right? Your shoes are going to wet? What do you when you go home? Take them off and put them in the closet or something. Not in the tropics, they would mold overnight. So you have to remember to put them where they could dry. Well the girl coming down from the States without any preparation as to what she was facing, was just, it was a tough adjustment. And many of them just couldn't do it. So they made a management decision and they created like five professions that were going to be filled by unmarried American girls. School teaching was one, nurses were another, telephone operators were another, librarians, and the fifth had kind of a casual...if you really wanted to bring a girl down, give her a title and put her in the fifth category. Now these girls, the contract read that as long as they were unmarried they kept the jobs. They had to perform but they got the jobs. They got married; they got a thirty-day notice of termination. So the young lady would really look at the guy: do I want to lose my career by marrying this guy? Not sure, then don't. Yeah I really want to, then do it, but you're going to get fired. Every so many weeks, there would be a boat load of replacement young girls. My father being a bachelor made no bones about it. He and his

buddies would know when the boats were coming in, go down the docks and watch the young ladies coming down the gangplank. Now they didn't have Olympic-type scoring. It wasn't a ten or a nine or an eight. But definitely it was, keep her, find out where she's being assigned. That one we can throw back, she'll catch the next boat. But basically, it was an audition of the replacement people. They knew that if they didn't spot anybody of interest on this boat, there'd be another one in four weeks that would come down. It was very rigid up until the beginning of the Second World War and with all the war time employment in the States and plus the danger of putting them on a ship and bringing them down there, they began to let the ladies who were married stay in the jobs or they could be rehired in their previous position because they were trained. My mother was a telephone operator. She got married in the late twenties, had to give up her job on the locks as the telephone operator. But when the Second World War started, she got hired as an army telephone operator and she was put over in the army control centers. Now quickly she recognized that she was listening to all this military dialogue and very little of it was aimed at the civilian population, us. Report if something happened, a plane coming in and don't know what it is. Put the military into their bomb shelters. Somebody else was supposed to tell us to get in the bomb shelters. They never told us. So we all had assigned bomb shelters. So my mother would call and ask whoever, my brother or I, my sister who was sitting right there. Do you know where your sister is? Go get her home. Fine. Pillow, blankets, food, water, into the bomb shelter. Didn't take long for the

rest of Gatún. Thomas kids are going into the bomb shelter. All the rest of the town into the bomb shelter. Never once did the military fuss with us. Never once did they chew her out. I didn't think she ever admitted to that. She was telling us get in the shelter. You know during the war, we all had civil defense positions. If you were a Boy Scout like I was, I got first class at my first class training. They let me be a messenger. You wanted to train the various bomb shelters with messengers. Today I don't think I could have gotten out the first door if my mother if she really thought something was happening. But during practices I would be a messenger. When I got a little bit more [inaudible 1:28], I became a stretcher bearer for the first aid teams. My brother was trained to be an auxiliary fireman. He was supposed to go out and put out if there incinerator bombs that came down. And we all knew when rehearsals was gonna happen because everybody was polishing their helmets and getting ready, supplies type thing. But practice **anyways**. Interesting part of life. They would set off the smoke pots and they would find out how many smoke pots wouldn't ignite because somebody had taken the igniters out and used them to blow down palm trees. To us it was a big game. We were very, very concerned because half of the smoke pots didn't go off and therefore the locks was out in plain view, so they'd send the police sergeant. The police sergeant in Gatún was very important. It was up to him to keep us kids cleared away. They would educate us on that. Don't do that. The barrage balloons would be going up. Shot one down. I ran my model airplane into it. It had a big, big boom. You know they wouldn't give me my plane back. But

they didn't put me in jail and they didn't make me pay for me. They just lectured me, don't do that anymore.

N: How old were you when that happened?

T: I would have been maybe twelve years old. I had a gas engine; I had a model plane that I built. I had it running on a big field. I miscalculated and the wind blowing in and it blew the plane right around and aimed at the barrage balloon and I'm yelling at them to get the balloon out the way and they were yelling at me to stop the plane. It ran into it. The air raids, during the war, there probably were three or four or five true instances when they didn't know what was about to happen. They saw something, couldn't get it identified and our first indication in Gatún was when all of the military ran for their gun positions. We had gun positions all over town. And where there was not a gun there was usually a barrage balloon position, smoke pot detachment. When those guys all ran for those things and we hadn't heard from my mother, it was blanket, pillow, food to the bomb shelter. But those, when it did happen, we'd have to wait for the all clear. Then we'd all try to figure out who knew somebody who could tell us what happened. And all the military knew, with the gun position buddies and whatnot, was that the whistle had blown. They were trained; don't wait and ask questions, get to the gun position. We consider them as neighbors. I realize that probably the parents were uneasy about their daughters going into the military establishments. But they were all over. So if you were in my house by the fire

station and you wanted to go visit my buddy who lived down by the railroad tracks, the best way to get to him was through an army position: barracks, mess hall. If I had my sister going down to visit her little girlfriend, you think I'm going to walk the next to half mile all the way around. I'd take you right through the gun position. Never had any trouble. My father had done some friendly work for one of the gun mess hall guys and on one of my expeditions the mess sergeant called me over: I got something for your mother. Take it. I got thinking what did I do that he's gonna tell my mother. I was taking a note. He gave me a container about the size of your little black case there. Ground black pepper. Now ground black pepper in World War II was very scarce, a ration and that was military issued for a mess hall, like five pounds of black pepper. And take this to your mother and tell her that she knows what to do with it. I took it to her and she opened it and immediately that she realized share the wealth. And all of her church buddies, bingo playing buddies got pepper. Now you say now what didn't they get sugar? Didn't need sugar. We needed pepper. So you used to see a young kid in church.

N: Mm-hm.

T: Well, you would recognize that no other kid was younger in the gun position than the rest of the crowd. And all of a sudden your mother would send you over with a note, I think his name was Johnny. You knew who she was talking about, to come to dinner. Come to the house for dinner on Sunday. Now we had rationing

on certain things but I would say we never had shortage of food. It was interesting to try to get tires for cars. And it was interesting to try and shoes of the right size and style. But food, you took what was in the commissary. You might now have a wide selection of what it was but it was there. Some of the brands were real mystery meat type brands. Spam all of a sudden appeared. You had ten different ways to cook it, passed on by one person to the next. Now your parents, dog food. We were given a dog to adopt. The owner was called back in the Navy, so going to the States and had a dog, a mutt. But we had dog sat a couple of time, so the dog knew us. The dog had a really formal name called Pretzel. Now why Pretzel? Because when he went to sleep, he folded up and looked like a pretzel. Pretzel had been raised by canned dog food. Now what's the first thing that disappeared from the shelves was canned dog food? That dog was starving. So they had to get to the vet. Okay, I'll write you a prescription for cornmeal mush. Cornmeal, gotta make a mush. And I'm going to give you another prescription for ground meat. Now ground meat was plentiful. But it was, you had very little good ground beef and you had lots of scrap ground beef. So we got the scrap. And so for the duration of the war, because my father took on the responsibility of food for the family, he would cook up mush and prepare the ground beef and put it in the mush, cook it to pour into cake pans and slice it up into squares, so he had portions. And our dog was fed this handmade canned food. It took about two weeks before the dog realized that nothing else was coming and he'd better eat it. Dog did well. Couple of years later, wars over.

What's on the shelves at the commissary: canned dog food. Mmm, just like a buddy always wanted. That crap he ain't gonna eat that no more. He wants the good stuff, the homemade **stuff**. My dad must of have tried ten different ways to figure out how to get him to eat the canned food: seasoning it, salting it, putting gravy with it. Dog starving again. Take him to the vet and of course, you're on notice Mr. Thomas you are starving this dog. Why don't you feed him? So my dad decided to do. He wins, back to the homemade dog food. He lived for about another four years before he passed away. He let us know that he was the one who decided. But you see, I can remember very few people having thoroughbred pets. We all had mutts. Even the cats, you might have been able to trace their breed back if you knew what you were looking for. But to us they were just cats. I think that they call them domestic shorthaired cat covers everything. Longhair, it was too hot for them to be comfortable. So longhaired cats didn't survive too well there. You know until I was twenty-five years old, I never lived in a house with air conditioning in the tropics. We had wide open screen porches and the breezes blew. Houses were all built up on stilts, so you had a breeze waving. And what you didn't have was air conditioning. Many of our screen porches, those screen windows had no glass in them. There was no way to actually close the window in a rain storms. You closed the blinds so that the rain coming through the screens, it'd hit the blinds and run down and hopefully back out. But no glass, no air conditioning. Cars brought to the zone were delivered to the zone with no heaters. Air conditioning didn't start until after the Second World War in cars.

What you have to understand, when you went to the States on vacation and you went up there in the autumn or winter, you could take your car. If you wanted to pay the Panama Railroad Line to transport your car, you could take your car.

Well the moment you got off the boat in New York City, there were certain shops in the area that you could drive your car too and they would reactivate the heater system for you. Could you imagine driving down the Ohio Turnpike with no heaters in December? No.

N: No, I'm from Florida, too.

T: Okay well you had to reactivate the heater and then when you got ready to go back on the boat, you don't want the heater because you don't need that down there. Go back to the shop and they would give you a trade-in allowance to take the heating system back off. You can always tell a car that belonged to a short timer. Somebody that just off the boat, cause you had a working heating system. Get rid of that thing, you don't need a heater system. My popular source of stuff was the Sears and Roebuck catalog. The Sears and Roebuck catalog was always available to us in the zone. And you could order it and they would ship it to you by mail. In the late [19]40s, some place along the line, they activated in Panama catalog order servicing stores. And you could go into that store and pick anything the catalog has

[Unidentified Female:] Told you he'd be forever.

T: You leaving.

UI: No, I'm waiting for someone to come back and close up this computer.

T: I don't wanna say it. We'll have to quit.

UI: No, I'm going to wait till you're through. So keep talking. But this guy can talk all night.

T: But we would order it and then they would somehow get the message up into the United States and they would put all of the orders into a big crate and ship that crate back to us as ocean cargo rather than mail. It'd come to the store, open the crate and start pulling out all these packages. And you'd get a call that your package was here. Maybe you'd ordered it two weeks ago, two months ago. But they finally got around to ship it you, three months ago. They were a great source of parts for automobiles. You could order for like a 1936 Hudson which I had, given to me by somebody. No radio. Now how can you go out on dates with no radio? So I got a radio. Now going out on dates, that's night time driving. Going to the jungle with the old headlights you can't see anything. Sears Roebuck has a sealed beam headlight replacement. Put that on there. Hmm, this thing doesn't have turn signals. New cars had turn signals. Sears Roebuck has a kit, so I order a kit. Put that on it. Then all of a sudden, I can't keep that the battery charged. No matter what I do, I'm always having a dead battery because I had put so much new electrical stuff on the car, generator couldn't handle the

load. But the Sears Roebuck had a little kit, screwdriver and you turn the screw and you move this lever and all of a sudden my generator works and a fifteen inch generator to a thirty inch generator. Now I can do all kinds of stuff. I would buy tools from Sears and Roebuck: the Craftsmen tools. Are you familiar with the term?

N: Yes.

T: Craftsmen tools were the best tools. And as an apprentice, very important for the image when you have this old gentlemen who's teaching you how to be an electrician. Very proud that he was trained by the Tennessee Valley Authority, or whatever, well he had worked as new skyscraper in the Bronx. That his apprentice better be top of the line and you better have the right tools. Now I had a toolbox that was like an oversized fishing wooden toolbox with a handle on it. And as I got into my second and third year I was given a helper. His job was to carry the toolbox, hold the pipe while I threaded it, but he was to do anything he had to help me be better. One of the jobs he had to every Friday was take all my tools out and rub them down, count them, make sure I hadn't lost something. I didn't leave something someplace. And he would remove any rust. And his favorite trick, I had a young boy to start with because I'm an apprentice, he's an apprentice helper. He found out that the best way to get rust was emery cloth. Do you know what emery cloth is?

N: Mm-hm.

T: It's very rough. And all of a sudden my tools are shining just like the chrome plated but all the sharp edges are rounded. Now the older helpers found out what he was doing and said nah, nah, nah, you use sand paper and Vaseline. Much softer and then get the rust off and the shine. All my tools were marked with my marks and he knew everything I had in my toolbox. He would come and tell me from time to time if my screwdrivers were being worn, he would tune up the tips so I wouldn't mess up the screw. He worked for me. But yet he had complete confidence that he could tell me just about anything, what we were doing, what he was seeing, what he was finding. And I could accept that as his offer to help me, rather than I'm the boss and you do your thing. He kept telling me that the toolbox didn't feel right, a wooden box that's got tools in it. But he would be very careful that I didn't have a job that I'd use a big wrench on. And I would take that big wrench for that job and I would put it in the box and forget that I had it in it. That added about two pounds to the box and he knew to within an ounce how heavy that box is. I hear, every wrench in there he would find it and he would put it back in my shop box. A couple days later it would be back in my box, he'd put it back and never say anything, just do it. One of the apprentices, to play a joke on me, took all the screws out of my handle, took all the nuts on the back of the handle. And we went out on a job and my helper always, when we were going to board a ship, he'd throw a line down. Here take the line and run it through the handle around the box, so when we pulled it pulled on the bottom of the box. I had one of the new helpers because mine got sick one day. I don't think he was

lazy, he just didn't think, tied the rope around the handle. I climbed up the ladder; he climbs up the later and waves and immediately pulls on the rope and up comes my handle no box. Luckily, it dropped into the ship that was right there. Otherwise I had close to two hundred dollars' worth of tools. Then the fun began, who took the nuts out? Why didn't you check my box to make sure I had nuts in it? New rule: clean my tools, make sure the nuts in there. Another tale, laugh about it today but it would have been really tragic at the time. Part of my apprenticeship, they qualified me to climb towers. And I'd climb the towers at the ball park and replaced the ballpark lights once a year, twice a year. I was trained by the Tennessee Valley Authority guy cause he was line man. He could climb poles with the hooks. Well everything in Panama was steel; wood rots. But I got outfitted with the safety belt. I was trained how to put my feet. Don't let me feet get caught to something, so if I slip I would break an ankle. Then I became a specialist in working on ship masts. Going up and fixing the lights on the ships mast. They would either let me climb the mast or they'd put me on a bucket on a crane and hoist me up into that...the rules and regulations you work with down there, anything up to ninety-nine feet was regular time. Anything about ninety-nine feet you got paid an extra bonus of, I think it was like fifty cents an hour. So when we worked on aircraft carriers on the side of what they called the island to get it ready to go through the canal. If you were on the side of the island over the water, that was above a hundred feet so you got extra money. You work on the side, on the other side you were over the flight deck, not a hundred feet so they

got standard pay. So when you're working with the island itself, you took things off so it could fit through the canal, the real secret was to figure how to do everything from the high side, because you got extra money. They knew it. They knew what you're doing and they would watch it. [inaudible 1:53:12]But water tanks, water tanks were a fascinating thing to walk on. These people, community water tanks that are a couple of hundred feet in the air. And you climb on it and then you gotta walk up the top of the tank to get to the opening. Again, the tanks had aviation warning lights and they put the lights where pilots could see them, not where it's convenient to change the light bulb. So you would basically get up there and climb up the tank top to the top light fixture. Then you'd use that as a pivot point by putting your safety ropes around that then you could walk back to the edge of the tank, tied to the rope and change the light. Certain lights were convenient and easy to change. Other lights were really a pain in the neck to get to. All of a sudden those lights didn't burn out as fast. Then they found out they were putting in two hundred and twenty volt light bulbs into a hundred fifteen volt circuits and they were lasting a lot longer. They kind of told us don't do that anymore. Inside the tank they had cathodes protection devices to keep the rust from forming on the inside of the tanks and there is a long rod about as tall as this building here. And you'd go inside the tank and go over each rod and ding it with a hammer. Depending upon the sound, as a highly qualified cathode replacement technician, and eye balling how much stuff came off. You could tell whether the rod needed to be replaced. If it needed to be replaced, you

unhooked it electrically and then you tied some rope to it, get a rope stand on it, and then your helper standing up on the tank at the opening would pull on the rope, lift the rod off the hook, off its hanger and then you would guide it over to the opening and you'd pull it up on the top of the tank and slide it off the side. Of course you are supposed to yell as you let go of the stuff, choice words.

Everyone had different words that sounded better and stuff going down. Then you had to pull another rod up, thread it through the hole and work it over to the hook and hook it over and then reconnect it. Now these tanks you know there is no ventilation in them. It's really hot. You would try to get somebody to agree to get a fan, a blower, to just blow air into the thing. Usually we just paced ourselves and came out the opening and got air. But didn't take long to realize that you drop a tool into the tank, and all these tanks have big pipes that run down to the ground. You could hear the thing bing, bing, bing, you know there goes five dollar [1:56:50]. Short pieces of string tied to every tool, tied to your belt. The secret was don't make them so long that they would trip ya. You just wanted them down around the ankle. And when you walk, well it sound like Christmas bells: ding, ding, ding. But loved it. There was something about climbing the tank and other people get off the ground, and other people get off the ground you feel very comfortable climb up the ladders. I would walk around the tank top with no safety line, leather shoes and feel that comfortable with my balance until I saw the boss come up. Then when the boss was showing up, I'd really run and hook up with the safety lines. It was like a macho thing I guess. Tanks, I loved tanks. I did all

the mast works, fixing lights in the ship yard. We worked the towers at the ball field. We had two towers that were maybe ten feet apart as far as the platform. They were very flexible towers. We learned you could get in one tower by shifting the weight you give the tower to swing back and forth. So you get on the outside of the platform and start swinging with your weight until you got the other tower close enough that you could reach out and grab it and jump over it. Now we thought this was safer, then climbing back down the poll about a hundred feet. Railroad spikes that had been welded and then climb back up, that was too hazardous. Safer to just jump across. Again, until the boss shows up. But you see, growing up as an apprentice, part of the education that they were giving us was the fact that when your doing work as a craftsman, you're constantly being forced to be judge. As, or you're doing something correct? Are you taking a risk that can be justified? Are you taking a risk that is just plain stupid? And the only way you really begin to gage that crossover point is to do some stupid things from time to time. When you really almost get caught and it sinks in that what might have happened, and then you realize it might have happened because you did something that you really weren't supposed to do. You know it was a lesson that was hard to forget. My wife today will fuss at me from time to time about don't want you doing that or I don't want the kids doing this...well then you better tell them. No, they won't listen to me. They listen to you. No, no, no. You tell them. But we had a good time. I always had a paper route. When I was seven years old, I would meet the boat coming from the other town at 6:30 in the

morning, pick up my twenty papers. Now I was earning twenty cents and I would take the papers up and I would sell them first at the train station as the train went by. Then I had a people route of about ten customers. That was my portion of the paper route, there was about four kids working other portions. Later, it was actually January of 1942, you know what that date is two months past, right?

N: Mm-hm.

T: The army post all of a sudden didn't have their paper boy anymore because he was part of the army group that got transferred. So my brother and I took over the Fort Davis army delivery route for the evening paper: February of [19]42 until October of [19]44. Every night, seven days a week, 365 a day, he and I met the evening train and we picked up our papers, took them over to our family car. My father provided driving for us because he was using the paper money to put aside for my brother's college expenses and also, it was mine too. But we would sell about six hundred papers on a pay night. We would about a hundred and fifty on the night before pay night. So the soldiers bought the papers. They all wanted war news. We never had any fear. My brother and I could go all over that military post. They wouldn't let me in the beer hall because I was too young. They let him in the beer hall. I had all the officer's quarters to deliver to, the stockade. My father had us always leave one paper at the stockade and one paper at the gate house for the guards. I was allowed in the hospital. Now don't blush, but not in the VD ward. A young kid like you just can't go in and see how VD's being

treated. I'll tell you it was really the best education to me: don't fool around because you don't want to end up with a VD. But we would sell papers. Met the train at six o' clock. We'd be at the post at 6:10. We would sell papers at the movie hall until 6:30. I would run on one route delivering and my brother would run the other route. I'd get to the movie theater at eight o' clock; sell papers as the crew left the first movie, to also those going into the second movie. And at 8:30 we would fold up and go home and be home by nine o' clock. And that meant that all school work had to be done before. Any chores had to be done before. If one of us got sick, the other person had to do both routes or we had some boys that we would hire for one night. Even used my sister, who was about five years younger than us to do certain things. The American soldier, was really so trustworthy, that we never had any fears. We would take like maybe a hundred papers and put them on the sidewalk going to this movie hall, put a cigar box on top with a rock in it because we couldn't man that spot we were selling papers someplace else. We'd come back all the papers would be gone and money would be in the cigar box. Never lost a nickel. And we did that from, like I say from [19]42 through [19]44. D-Day, June the 6th, [19]44 all right, we sold 3500 papers. We sold first edition at noon, second edition about 4 o' clock, third edition at six, and fourth edition came in about ten and then my dad said no more. We will start them tomorrow. We had, I don't know if you've ever seen a trolley conductor with his coin changer over the belt, we had those that we used to make change. And dollar pills went into the pocket. But nickels, dimes,

quarters, no half dollars, half dollars went in the pocket, too. On D-Day, we probably didn't give them any change for every nine out of ten papers. They didn't want the change, they just wanted to celebrate. My dad also told us that if any soldier, anytime during our paper route, told us he was broke, he just wanted the paper to have something to read, pay us tomorrow. My dad said if he asks you and you recognize his face, might not know him by name, give him the paper. He'll get the money to you. And he would. A week later, all of a sudden you're walking into the barracks and this guy would spring around the corner, here I owe you some money, I'll give you a quarter. Now papers were a nickel. We'd bring the money home and put it out on our dining table and we would sort it and count it. Roll it. I guess about once a week my dad would run down to the bank with all the money and deposit it. Once a month we went down to the paper office and settled up our bills. Then my dad and mom, and I think my brother helped them a little bit, would figure out how much was profit. If you really think about it, when you pay your bills anything leftover is profit. So once a month we knew how much money we made. And the next day we went to the bank and bought war saving bonds and all if we had money was to buy a \$25 bond that's what we bought. If we had money a \$100 bond, we bought a \$100 bond. And when when the war was over, both my brother and I and my dad safety deposit box, we must have had war bonds about an inch and half thick, really a stack of them. Paid my brother's college education completely. Paid about half of mine. Lot of memories. Okay what have I not rambled on about?

N: Well I think you've covered so much.

T: You know I really love my sports. I loved playing football.

N: Yeah, it sounds like you did so much too, not just one activity.

T: A little bit of crunched the other guys. I was a pulling guard because I could go left, like I go right. Swimming. Well if you know one thing I didn't do much of was tennis. I could play tennis but tennis wasn't a big sport with me. I think I didn't think it was a snobbish feeling but I didn't need to play tennis. Loved, loved, bowling. Pin setting, real experience, don't know again why my parents let me do it. They wouldn't let me brother do pin setting. But they let me do pin setting and every now and then you know, one of the league bowlers...usually it was a league bowler that would be having a bad night. He would get impatient and would just want to get done and get home. You'd be down in the pit, picking up the pins and all of a sudden you hear a zah, zah, zah, zah. Oh my God, he's throwing the ball. And you look up there and if you felt you could get out of the way, you got out the way. If you felt like my God, I can't, you could reach up and pull the bar and pull the pin setting alignment mechanism down and that would give you a barrier to bounce the ball off. Now when you did that it was a loud, loud bong. Everybody in the bowling alley would know that somebody had pulled the mechanism down because the ball was too fast. All bowling stopped while the guilty party was observed. Of course your tip there was probably cut in half and whatnot. But one guy one night was really impatient at all of us. No matter

which one of us that was setting, he had choice words of wisdom that we should learn. And all of a sudden he threw the ball down the alley before I could get out of the pit. I got clear. But it was exciting when I ran. I picked the ball up; I had just enough room to get a little bit of a back swing. I threw the ball back up the alley at him. Of course when I threw the ball back up the alley it was going, bump, bump, bump, bump. Everybody thought I had put it back on the turn trough so nobody was paying any attention to it. All of a sudden somebody saw this ball coming up the alley, about ten feet before it wiped him out, yelled, went through about four of them and knocked down the scoring bench, bounced off the bench behind him and went over into the other setting area. Screams and hollers and people yelling. But they never said a word to me.

Unidentified Speaker: Hey, how much longer are you going to be?

T: All right I gotta go. Get enough?

N: Oh yes, we have plenty. Thank you so much for taking the time out to do this. I really appreciate it.

US: He loves to talk. And what a memory.

N: It was wonderful listening to him.

[End of Interview]

Audit-edited by Matt Simmons February 3, 2014