

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

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PCM 028

Interviewee: John and Karen Deming

Interviewer: Candace Ellis and Diana Dombrowski

Date of Interview: July 7, 2011

E: This is Candice Ellis on July 7 with Diana Dombrowski and John and Karen Deming talking about growing up and life in the Panama Canal Zone. So I guess we'll kind of start at the beginning. How did you guys come to the Zone? Were you first-generation?

JD: I was first-generation. I came to the Canal Zone in 1955 when I was twelve years old. My father had got a job down there. He was a magistrate there for, I guess, twenty years and then I stayed there until I was eighteen and went to college in the States. I was there about six years. That's how I got there.

KD: I was born in Gorgas Hospital in the Ancón Canal Zone in 1944. My parents met down there; they both went down as children but neither of them were born in the Canal Zone. I was first-generation born there. So I lived there for eighteen years until I went away to college. So I grew up there and...

E: What kind of work did your parents do while they were there?

KD: My mother's father—there's a little bit of history there, how he got there. It was interesting. My mother's from Irvington, New Jersey and my grandfather on my mother's side, he and his brother owned a plumbing business. I guess it was before World War II, probably somewhere in the—

JD: During the Depression.

KD: During the Depression or right after, they lost their plumbing business. It was out of work and it was a real struggle. He saw an ad in the *New York Times* looking for plumbers to work for the Panama Canal. So he answered the ad and they sent him a ticket, told him to bring a suitcase, and told my grandmother and my mother—my mother was an only child—that he would let them know when they could come down. So six months later, they packed up just their clothing and took the ship down there, and that's how they ended down there. My dad, very similar story but it was earlier than that, and from Baltimore. My grandfather decided that—he was a pipefitter—he loved to fish in the Chesapeake and he wanted to go to Panama and work and he heard there was good fishing. He took his four children then and they went down and then they had three more. That's how they ended up there, and then my parents met down there. Yeah.

E: The hospital you mentioned, which side was that on?

KD: It's on the Pacific side. Gorgas Hospital.

E: Okay. Did you guys do a lot of moving back and forth between the Pacific and the Atlantic?

KD: We did not, but my father had—there were seven siblings, and his three sisters married people down there and they lived on the Atlantic side. Their husbands had jobs on the Atlantic side. But the four boys were always on the Pacific side.

E: So it was relatively easy to travel back and forth?

KD: Yeah. We thought it was a long drive, fifty miles. It was like, oh. We have to drive over there again. [Laughter] But back and forth to visit relatives.

E: What side were you on?

JD: The Pacific side. My father was a judge there, and he would work on both sides. They had a judge on the Atlantic side and a judge on the Pacific side and then the district court judge. When the judge on the Atlantic side was on vacation, my dad could ride the train back and forth every day.

KD: It was very easy to get back and forth, what we remember, because we had a good train system and a fairly good highway. Fairly good. I mean, we thought it was good till we came to the United States on vacation. Then we realized— [Laughter] yeah.

DD: Did you come to the States very often?

KD: If I remember correctly, the leave system was pretty much the way the military is today. I think that you got thirty days' vacation a year, but you could save it up. So some families would wait until they had three months' vacation or close to it, and then they would come up for the summer and stay with relatives. Everybody had a home of record somewhere in the United States, the Americans. We came to the States about every three years or four years for maybe two months, because my dad and his father and his uncles—I mean, his brothers—all fished and they had to have their fishing time. Some families came every year for a month and took their leave. There were three ships that went back and forth. But

we didn't, 'cause of the fishing. And it was like...the excitement to come to the United States, it was like nothing that you've experience. It was like, wow. There's just so much to see and do.

E: Was the Zone a bit isolated, did you feel? Is that why people were so excited to go to the U.S?

KD: Yes, and you had so many relatives in the United States and very few relatives came to Canal Zone back then. It was very expensive to take a ship down. So everybody looked forward to going back and seeing—sometimes it was your grandparents. One time it was my grandparents were living in California for a while. To see, maybe, cousins from the other side, yeah, and to shop. We relied on whatever the commissary got, and the commissary was...we were civilians, but it was pretty much operated like a military base. We called the commissary P.X. So whatever they didn't get, we'd look in Panama, but we relied on the Sears catalog big-time. Right, John?

JD: Yeah.

KD: Everybody in the Canal Zone knew when the Sears catalog was being delivered.  
[Laughter]

E: What would you say you missed most about not being able to shop? Was it just being able to go out and buy clothes, stuff like that?

KD: I think once I became a teenager it was the shoes and the clothes, because we all pretty much got magazines. There was always *Good Housekeeping* and *Seventeen Magazine* way back then. And you'd see all the styles that everybody, all the kids in the States were wearing, and the shoes and—we were very limited, but we would take—because we were in a country that had a lot of...

JD: Piece work, I guess you could say it was.

KD: The women in Panama, the Panamanians, made most of their clothing. So we could take a picture out of *Seventeen Magazine* or any magazine of something, and go find the fabric in a store in Panama—or the commissary also had fabric—just take it to a dressmaker. No pattern or anything. We'd show her the picture and she'd say, okay, come back on Friday; she'd have it done very reasonably. Three bucks, four bucks. So, we didn't suffer that way. We could get the outfits made if we could find the fabric. But we were always in awe of what the kids in the States were wearing. So we'd come to the States; it was always: I gotta buy shoes. You gotta buy whatever you could buy and stay within your budget.

E: Well that sounds very crafty. How about differences maybe in housing as far as the U.S. versus Panama? Was there a lot of cooperative housing in Panama living together, or was it more single-family homes?

KD: A lot of cooperative housing. There were also a lot of single-family, but a lot of families, a lot of new employees started out in twelve-family housing, four-family

housing. I think my parents lived in every model house there, pretty much...I can't remember any house I lived in that was uncomfortable, or any complaints. We didn't know any difference. Everything was always taken care of: there was always somebody mowing the grass, trimming the trees. It was just...

JD: Actually, we came down—my dad had a Congressional appointment as a judge—and we got a single-family home. Quite frankly, I felt some resentment from other kids that I didn't have to start out in a twelve-family home. So you just kinda got through that.

KD: Well, you're gonna hear a lot about the housing as you do these interviews because there were a lot of different areas where people lived. Some of the areas were isolated; there might have only been a twenty-minute car drive away, but that was a long distance back then. They all had their own little sub-colonies, I should say. But the interesting part about the housing was you were assigned housing depending on your years of service and how many children you had.

JD: And the number of boys and girls.

KD: Number of boys and girls, right: who was living in the household with you. It did have to do with your rank and file, so to speak. If you were a Congressional appointment like his dad was or you had a high-level job—well, that would be a government-appointed job—they had special housing. You didn't start out in the lower level. Like for instance, my father was an electrician, which was considered

blue-collar. There could have been a family living right attached to us that was white-collar, or, next door. It all had to do with the year of service. Some people came down and they were already in their twenties; my father started right out of high school as an apprentice. It all had to do with your years of service and your children. If you only needed a two-bedroom house or apartment that's what you got. If you had another child and it was a boy, you still maybe didn't qualify for another bedroom. But if it was a girl, then they'd separate. In our case, my grandparents lived with us, so that kind of gave us an extra bedroom when we moved. And they would post it, I think it was every month, on the wall of the post office a certain date. Everybody was looking to move, and they wanted to move. They would go to see what was available, what was coming up as people moved around and left, retired. And you'd put your name in and then you'd wait to see if you qualified and if you were next in line. So, you're gonna hear a lot about how the housing worked down there. Because you really couldn't just say, I want to live on that street and I want to live in that house. Now, there was a chance that that could happen if it all worked out.

E: Because from what I've gathered it seemed that there was a lot of moving and even between the Atlantic and Pacific side, a lot of moving just based on what your job called for.

KD: In some cases there were, because I have classmates that started out on the Pacific side and then graduated from the high school on the other side and vice



versa. None of my close friends that I associated with moved like that, but there was a lot of that. But the Atlantic side was a much smaller area than the Pacific side, so the majority of the people lived on the Pacific side.

E: As far as the Atlantic side being smaller, would you say it's smaller townships, more spread out, more rural? I know that the Pacific side has Panama City. Did that make it more lively?

KD: Yeah, I believe we had a lot more to do on the Pacific side.

JD: And Gamboa's the middle, isn't it? Basically it was isolated.

KD: Gamboa's the middle, yeah. What's interesting is, you'll find if you do many interviews with people who lived most of the time in Gamboa, you'll find that they were a very, very close group of people because they were really—it was like a subdivision or a development the way that we have here, kind of isolated, and everybody who lived there pretty much worked for a certain part of the canal because the dredging division was there, and that's where a lot of—and they had a movie theater and they had a commissary and they probably had a teen club, but there wasn't much—a swimming pool, and I think they had a golf course.

E: Did they have a high school?

KD: No.

JD: No, there was only two high schools.

KD: There was only two high schools. [Laughter] ...This is an embarrassment on my part, but off the record...

JD: It's being taped—

KD: When I grew up there, well, it was segregation until the [19]60s. I was gone in [19]62, but there was a town called Paraíso, and it was right near Flores Locks. They were non-U.S. employees, Panamanians or—

JD: From the islands.

KD: From the islands. They had housing for them. So they worked for the Panama Canal, but they were considered—they were segregated. They had a high school, and I didn't much pay attention when I was in high school to even think about, well, where did the kids who lived--? Because it was quite a big community, actually, but they were all kind of by themselves. I was living in Miami and I was taking golf lessons and this guy next to me had a sticker on his car. I was getting my golf clubs out, he was just leaving, and it was a black man, and I said, oh, you're from the Canal Zone? And he said, yes, I grew up there. So, what did I say to him? He graduated about the same time I did. I said, did you graduate from Balboa High School or Cristobal High School? He just looked at me, says, I graduated from Paraíso High School. I was so—it just never—because we had football games and we had baseball games and we had all the

sports, only between the Atlantic and Pacific side. I don't know who they played. I have no idea if they just played each other.

JD: That's probably an untold story down there. You won't get that from these interviews.

E: That's the first time I've heard of that high school, because something that we're a little interested in is, of course, the racial tension in the area and just how stateside politics were affecting—I'm talking specifically about the civil rights movement and all that led up to it and how that was playing out in Panama and the Zone at the time.

JD: Well, the military was just...we had a few black students in our school, but they were military because the military kids also went to school with us. Don't forget there was that set of kids.

KD: Yes.

JD: Every two years they would come and go.

KD: Two years or three years. We did have some Panamanians that went to our school. They paid tuition to go to the American schools, right? But that was—

JD: They were usually the wealthy Panamanians.

KD: They were usually the wealthy Panamanians, and there weren't a lot of them. But Paraíso, I remember—remember, John? I came home that day, I said, I have no idea where my head was. It didn't even dawn on me.

JD: I worked construction—I always worked when I was in—before I went to Panama, I had paper routes, I did all that. Down here, I couldn't work. Finally, I got a job in construction. I made fifty cents an hour and I was the only white person working construction. And they were giving me a hard time: I was taking the fifty cents an hour from somebody else. I said, well, I want to work, too. I worked with a young man from Paraíso when the housing developments was being built in, I guess, La Boca. He and I all summer long put in windows. That's what we did. He's my age and I always wonder what happened to him. I'm sure he's still down there. But he'd show up every morning from Paraíso. Me being the only white kid there, they kind of pushed me a little bit to see how hard I could work. After about a week, they figured out I was serious. [Laughter] They gave me an easier job. So I knew what was going on, and I didn't grow up down there as a kid. I grew up as a teenager down there. I was there six years and left. It was a great six years, learned a lot. Learned stuff I would never have learned otherwise, but I knew about this.

KD: But there was never any tension. It was just a matter of fact, I guess. The people that lived in Paraíso were absolutely thrilled they were working for the Panama

Canal Company. They were very happy living there than trying to make it in Panama City, because Panama was not as prosperous as it is today.

JD: I don't know, those people had good jobs. I'm sure they missed the Americans there.

KD: They had good jobs, they had good benefits. But it was just a different time.

JD: Two different worlds.

KD: That all changed, of course, by the late [19]60s and I was gone, so I don't know. You'll probably hear it from other people how that changed after the [19]60s.

JD: But if you Google American language newspapers in Panama—I was doing that for some reason last week—there's a bunch of links to what they would call the silver—you know, because white people were paid gold—

E: The gold and silver, yeah.

JD: There's something that was associated with the—I think it might have even been called *The Silver Newspaper*. So there's some information out there, but I just stumbled across it.

E: Thank you, that's interesting. I'm sorry, when did you guys say you actually left the Zone?

JD: I graduated in 1961 and went to college in Nebraska.

E: Okay, and then—

KD: I left in [19]62 and went to Nebraska.

E: Okay, so it was before those riots, which I knew kind of changed the entire—

KD: Yeah. Yeah. It was before that.

E: Yeah, okay.

JD: There were a couple when we were still there.

E: Yeah?

KD: Very minor. The riots pretty much didn't involve the Canal Zone at all, but the university students would—

JD: Would be in Ancón, right at the...

KD: Yeah, right on the border. But it was escalating.

JD: It was part of my education. I would have been a Nebraska farm boy if I hadn't been down there.

KD: But it was an American colony. We never locked our doors, we never locked our cars, there was nothing stopping a Panamanian from coming over the line, driving up our street, parking. There was never a problem. The military bases all had guard gates; you just couldn't get in for any reason, but in the Canal Zone

itself, it was wide open but it was I guess just—everybody had maids. The maids came on buses.

JD: We could walk in anywhere we wanted in Panama, too.

KD: Yeah, it was very safe.

JD: I wouldn't recommend some of those places today, but...

E: [Laughter] Yeah, I've heard that.

JD: But when we were kids, we could go any—and my father, being a judge, probably put a lot of people in jail over time. He was there a long time and—

KD: I used to get on a chiva, the bus, and go take riding lessons in Panama. I was eleven years old, and my parents didn't worry. I'd get on the bus; I knew where to get off. There was a girlfriend going with me. We'd be on a chiva with all the Panamanians and live chickens. It was just—

JD: The way it was.

KD: Yeah, just the way it was. And nobody was fearful. Nobody was, no. It was just a great—I would do it all over again.

E: What's your guys' opinions on the education system that was in place over there?

KD: Very good, very good.

JD: Actually, I got an excellent high school education. I was very lucky to get that education.

E: Which one of the two high schools did you attend?

JD: The one in Balbóa.

E: Okay, which was on—

JD: The Pacific side.

KD: The Pacific side. My guess is there wasn't a teacher in junior high and high school that didn't have a master's degree, I would guess.

JD: I don't know.

KD: They were very well-educated, the teachers that came down.

E: Did you go to Balbóa as well?

KD: Mm-hm.

E: Okay...and I know the sports and the football and the rivalry was a huge thing. Did you guys participate in that?

JD: I'm not big enough to play football. [Laughter]

E: No? You can watch.

JD: I did do that.



KD: My only participation was twirling the baton. [Laughter]

E: Oh, that's fun.

KD: Not the extracurricular sports, but even in the—we all had to take sports and every six weeks it changed. All four years of high school.

JD: You had to play basketball, track, touch football—

KD: Field hockey. Every six weeks it was a different sport, and including six weeks of swimming every year. We girls hated that. We didn't have hair dryers, you know? If you lucked out and got swimming first period in the morning—and back in our day—you girls all wear your hair and you just can let it dry and you wear it long or whatever. But no, we all slept in rollers all night and whatever. So if you had swimming first period and your bathing cap leaked, the rest of your day was ruined. [Laughter]

E: That's funny. Did the high schools offer a lot of extracurricular activities for the students?

KD: Yes, a lot of sports, extracurricular and big sports was very, very popular.

E: And besides that, how would you describe an average Saturday night for a high school student growing up there?

KD: Lucky for us, best thing is—I don't know who's responsible for it, I can't remember now—but they built a teen club for us. It was a good size and it served

snacks and it was always all the music and jukebox and all that. Of course, it was never any drinking, and smoking was probably the worst thing back then. I mean, there was drinking but...so we always had the teen club, we always had curfews. Very few of us stayed out past, what, 10:30, eleven o'clock at night? Teen club closed, parents picked us up if we didn't drive. Couldn't drive until we were seventeen there. The movie theater was cheap; everybody went to the movies. Not only that, but it was air conditioned and most of us didn't have air conditioning.

JD: And no T.V. There was T.V. towards the end when we left, but—

KD: Nobody really went into Panama until we got our driver's licenses and there were a few miniature golf places and a few little nightclubs.

E: That would be fun. Was it easy to have a part-time job there as a high school student?

JD: No. Actually, I probably got one 'cause my father was a judge. Somehow he knew somebody who knew somebody who got a contractor to hire me. I don't think the contractor really wanted to hire me; they worked me pretty hard the first few days to see if I was serious.

KD: Babysitting, I babysat. I had a summer job one summer; we're still good friends. It was a spouse of an employee in Curundú. She was working on her PhD in archaeology. She had an area in Panama that she was involved in the

excavation, so she built this place. It was sort of in the jungle; we would get dropped off, we'd have to walk down this dirt road, and then there would be this covered area. She would bring the stuff back. It was all mapped out, so she'd put the stuff on the map of where it was when she found it. Julie and I would have to scrub these pieces of pottery. That's what we did. We had buckets of water and we'd scrub it. We got, I don't know, fifty cents an hour or something like that. We did that one summer when we were maybe sixteen. That was lucky to get that job.

JD: That was actually one thing that was—

KD: It was very hard to, because—

JD: You go to the beach all summer, that's what you do. Spend too much time in the sun. [Laughter]

KD: A lot of kids came stateside in the summertime. People would be gone, and everybody had maids and the Pan Canal Company itself, they paid people to wash—well, we had someone that washed our car. No, the government didn't pay for that. We did, but it didn't cost anything.

JD: They paid to cut the grass.

KD: They cut the grass. You didn't have yard work. You had a maid who cleaned your house. You paid for that, but it was very, very cheap. So there really wasn't

any jobs available. Babysitting was the big thing, and maybe lifeguarding in like the pools in the army bases and stuff, navy bases. Some guys were caddies at the golf course, ushers at the movie theater. There were a few jobs, but not very many. Once you graduated from high school, you could get a summer job working in the administration building. I did do that that summer, and then when I came back after one year of college.

JD: Oh, I forgot. I worked in a newspaper down there one time.

KD: So yeah. There were—

JD: In Panama, I worked at an English-language newspaper for one summer. I made a mistake; I didn't call him up and ask him if I could have the job the second summer, so he hired somebody else. But I got to do that.

KD: You really had to search for the jobs. You really did, and know somebody. Yeah.

E: How were holidays celebrated? Is there anything distinctively different from maybe Christmas—I'm trying to recall from last year the tree burning, the bonfire, I know a lot of people did that. Just any little story like that of how the people in the Zone created their own version of Christmas or their own Christmas traditions. Or Thanksgiving, even, New Year's, Fourth of July.

KD: Well, we always had a July 4 parade. Of course, back then, firecrackers were allowed so we were always burning ourselves. [Laughter] Even the parents

looked forward to July 4 so they could blow up these things. I remember my dad would—what was it called? He would light this thing. It was like an incense stick.

DD: A punk stick?

KD: What did you call it?

JD: A sparkler?

KD: Yeah, a punk stick. It was called a punk stick and we would just keep it lit, and whenever we wanted to throw a firecracker, we'd take the firecracker and stick it on there and throw it. Luckily, I don't think anyone was seriously hurt but it was kind of wild and crazy. Christmas was always—everybody lit up their house. Everybody decorated and Santa was riding an alligator. [Laughter] There wasn't anything that looked like snow or anything. It was always tropical. Christmas was a big thing, and everybody was waiting for the shipment of trees. Of course, by the time they reached Panama and the commissary had them for sale, half the needles were missing already anyway. We used to joke that you could hear the needles falling on the tile floor. [Laughter] All night long. So by the time Christmas was over, the trees were so dry that the bonfires were fantastic. They had gangs that would go around to all your neighbors and they'd promise you the tree. So the gangs would go out there and they would collect the trees, but you'd have to hide them and you'd try to find someone who did have a garage or someplace where you could hide the trees because everybody was stealing the

trees from everybody else because everybody wanted to have the largest bonfire. It was a big to-do: whole neighborhoods would, when they were going to light the bonfire, everybody had their marshmallows and their hotdogs. As soon as they got the fire down to where they could cook the food, everybody fixed their hotdogs and marshmallows, parents and kids. It was a big to-do.

JD: That was a special night.

KD: That was special.

JD: Actually, another time—I thought you'd talk about it—clothes. Just before school every year, they'd bring a ship full of clothes into the commissary. Of course, they'd have fifteen shirts that were all alike, so the first day of school—[Laughter]

KD: Everybody all had the same shoes and the same thing. Mm-hm. Thanksgiving, I don't know what other people did but I had so many relatives. My dad, there were seven children; my mother was an only child but there were just cousins and we would kind of rotate around who was having it. We'd either go to the Atlantic side or they'd come to the Pacific side. We'd all get together and that was a big to-do. If the turkey you were gonna cook was really too large to cook in your oven--our ovens really weren't that large—you'd just take your turkey to the clubhouse. The clubhouse was the central restaurant; it had the pool and the movie theater. They would cook it for you. They would just tell you what time to come pick it up, and my dad would go pick up the turkey and bring it home.

E: That's a convenient service.

KD: Yeah.

JD: It was really a big military base. You hit the nail on the head. We were in the military later on in life, and it's the same thing. [Laughter]

KD: The Canal Zone ran a lot like a military base. School supplies—

JD: They all showed up at the same time.

KD: And it didn't matter. I went to parochial school up through sixth grade and then I went to junior high and high school public. It didn't matter where you went to school; the parochial school was part of the Canal Zone. We must have paid tuition, though, I think to go there. I'm guessing minimal or whatever. But there was a week that the commissary had school supplies in, and you went and they had this special building that was huge. In it were rows and rows of packages, all the school supplies that you would—for St. Mary's School, or Balbóa Elementary, for the junior high, and high school, whatever. And everything was already sealed and wrapped in brown paper. And you went and you just got your package. You would paid for it, and when you got home you opened it up and then all your school supplies were already packaged for you.

DD: That's easy, too.

KD: Yeah, so it was very, very regulated. Everything was regulated.

JD: You had to behave yourself or if you misbehaved, your parents would be shipped out of the country.

E: Did you hear about that happening to anybody?

JD: Yes.

KD: Nobody that I—

JD: Not while we were there, after the riots.

KD: There was one. I knew who he was; he wasn't in my class or whatever, but the story was that he stole something from the commissary. My guess is he had done it on a time before that, because I don't think, one incident like that they'd ship you out. But by the end of the week, they were gone. Gone. Oh, yeah.

E: Do you know what he was stealing? Or he was just—

JD: We have no idea. It's just an example.

E: Yeah, I guess that didn't happen too often.

KD: No, it didn't. But, you know, some kids have a problem. My guess is they had a problem with him and no one knew it, and all of a sudden they said, okay, this is it.

JD: But I'll tell you another story when kids get into trouble. To this day, some adults will come up to me and say, your dad changed my life. Because what he would



do when a young man got in trouble, he would say, you can either go to jail or you can join the military. And the ones who joined the military got straightened out. I've been approached by several people over the years that told me that my father did that for them. At the time they didn't get it, but after the fact they realized that he'd helped them.

KD: But there was not a lot of problems down there.

E: What would you say the most common crime would be in the Zone?

JD: I would just say juvenile delinquency.

E: Yeah, just kids being kids?

JD: Kids being kids, but a little bit too far.

KD: Maybe a speeding ticket or a car...yeah.

JD: Probably just like when you guys were growing up. I'm sure everybody's got stories. [Laughter] No major crime.

KD: No major, no.

JD: No gangs or anything like that.

E: Okay. What was it like leaving the Zone? To come back to the United States and go to college and do that, was it difficult?

KD: Probably harder for me than John because I left—I was the oldest, and so I left and my father died when I was sixteen. I was the oldest so I kind of was—that was hard because I felt like maybe I should've stayed down there to help. My brother was eleven years younger than me, but...once I got used to living in the States--and then of course, John was in college for eight years; we got married while he was in college--I didn't have any desire to live down there. My mom had moved to Florida and my family was all in Florida then. But it was hard when everybody was still there, my sister and my brother and my mom and aunt, because you couldn't just get on the phone and call. If it was an emergency or something then you would call, but all the phone lines were under the ocean cables and it was expensive. So you would talk and I'd say something, and then there was this big, long delay and then my mother would answer. So you just said what you had to say real quick and got off the phone 'cause it was expensive. So most of it was through the mail, and it would take a week or more for a letter to get back and forth. That was the hardest part because you didn't have the communication that you have now. Now, you can practically go on a cell phone call for nothing. I e-mail classmates in Panama all the time but we didn't have any of that. That was the hardest because—and you'll probably hear that from other people our age—you were just cut off from the communication.

E: And that was more about your family than a connection to the physical places.

KD: Yes. But that would also draw people back there. They would get their education and say, well, you know, my family's still down there. I've got to go back there. That's how a lot of people went back after college and they stayed till they retired. Their parents retired and moved while they were still there, and then they stayed until they retired. We probably would've done that if our parents were still there.

JD: No, I never would've gone back.

KD: Oh, well.

E: Why's that?

JD: I'm a chemical engineer. The only thing I can do down here is work in a waste treatment plant.

KD: Well, plus he was—

JD: I didn't have any strong connections to—

KD: That was my only home. I was born there. I still feel that—I mean, home—my kids are all grown up; I have grandkids and stuff, but Panama's still—most of my relatives are buried there and I still think of it as...

E: Home.

KD: Yeah.

E: Do you get to visit often?

KD: No.

JD: Yes. We go back probably every three or four years.

KD: I would go back more often. Yeah. There's so many changes, though. It's not the same anymore.

E: I've heard. I've heard a lot of the little townships are completely overgrown and abandoned. Yeah.

KD: Oh, it's just—we took our daughter. This was seven years ago. Took her and her husband and her two little girls and we went back. I was so excited: took her on a tour, took her by all the houses I lived in that I could find, and I said, it looked better than this. But it still looked like the houses, and I was telling her all kinds of stories and she's enjoying it and they're taking pictures and we're taking pictures. We toured just the Canal Zone that day, pointing out everything: that was where the commissary was, da da da da da da. So we're having dinner that night and we're sitting there, and we'd all had a glass of wine. I said to Suzanne, I said, Suzanne, you haven't said too much. I said, how did you feel about today, seeing all these places where I lived and how old I was and moved here and this and that and whatever? Tears started running down her face. First I thought, oh, tears. Said, what's the matter? Mom, she said, I had no idea you were so poor

growing up. [Laughter] She never experienced that way of life growing up and, of course, seven years ago a lot of the houses...

JD: They were a mess. [Laughter]

KD: Things weren't looking too good and whatever. Yeah. I said, we weren't poor. [Laughter] If we were, we didn't know it. We had every need supplied for us. It was just the difference. I mean, if you both went down there today after these interviews and you hear about how wonderful and everything and you go down, you would go...[Laughter]

JD: I worked in a lot of places in Latin America after college, and what I've said is that the Canal Zone will become Latin over time. That's what's happening, and that's fine. It makes a lot of sense to me. It's their country and it's the way they want it to be, so be it. But it's different. It's not the pristine American colony with the palm trees painted white and the grass cut all the time. But that's--

KD: All the palm trees from about here downward were always painted white. The military base was that way and the Canal Zone. We had streets with just nothing but the real tall palms just lining the streets.

JD: Royal palms, yeah.

KD: If one of the palm fronds fell, oh, by the end of the day somebody had picked it up and carted it away. Now, stuff just lays there until—

JD: It is what it is, you know?

KD: It is what it is.

JD: It was time for the Americans to move on.

CE: Where were you when that transfer occurred? Did you watch it on the news?

JD: I didn't. I left when I was eighteen.

KD: We tended to follow it.

JD: My parents were still down there and my brother was down there. I was going to Argentina about that time.

KD: [19]79?

JD: No, I was out of Argentina by then.

KD: Yeah, your dad was gone. Edward was retired by then. Yeah, we can't give you that information.

JD: We're not the right people to talk to about that.

KD: But you'll get all that 'cause things really did change. I mean, it started really changing. My sister went down for the last high school graduating class of 1999, and she said that was very, very interesting. No, we were both pretty much out of there by the early [19]60s except for coming back.

E: Yeah, 'cause I know a lot of people have strong opinions about it and emotions about it, but for you and your family it was more...

JD: We'd just gone through Vietnam and the terrible times in Vietnam. This was starting to become problems down there. We didn't want any part in that.

KD: The riots of [19]64, I can totally understand and I can understand both sides. The Americans living in the Canal Zone including my family, everybody, they felt that this was our territory. That was our country.

JD: My father felt that way.

KD: There's Panama and then there's the Canal Zone, and I think that we all felt like the Canal Zone was our country. We were all very, very, very patriotic to the American flag. I mean, even though most of us never even lived in the United States, we really were allegiant.

JD: That's true.

KD: Oh, gosh. Yes. I can understand where things got heated up when they wanted their flag flying first and this and that.

DD: So that was the tension.

KD: That was the tension. The young, they saw it as their country. It was their country, and they wanted—they didn't like looking over the fence. It was their

canal; not really, but they're doing a very good job, now. Let's just hope it continues.

JD: A lot of them were educated in this country. A lot of them go to school with you guys. [Laughter]

KD: We're a civilization that's changing. Our group is going to get fewer and fewer as time goes on.

JD: I tease some people. I say, a good model for this place is the veterans of the Civil War, society. It has an ending.

E: Well that's why we're here doing this. Got to keep this alive.

JD: I know that. It's very nice of you to do this, it really is.

E: There's just so much potential, like I mentioned, for research to come out of this.

JD: Well, I personally think that I had a wonderful education. I learned about different cultures, and I led a life that would have been a lot different if I hadn't spent those six years down here.

KD: I don't know if you've gotten into early on when the first Americans were down there digging the canal, but if you have, you've probably found it very fascinating. The way of life and how things just got better and better, and then...you start from the beginning and then you go to the riots and then you go to when everything was turned over. It's an interesting story. It's very interesting. Yeah.



E: From the start of it, yeah. There's a good PBS documentary on just the building of the canal. I don't know if you guys are familiar with it, but it's called the—

KD: Mm-hm. We've seen it.

E: Yeah. From that point to this, to later on, it's a really interesting story, definitely.

DD: I have one more question before we start wrapping things up. Did you both meet in high school or college?

KD: High school.

JD: Well before, actually, before high school. I got proof. [Laughter] We knew each other because it's a small place.

KD: Yeah, because a lot of the kids took ballroom dancing. You had to learn how to dance. [Laughter] That was the thing.

E: Good sport.

KD: And sports, yes.

JD: We've known each other a while.

KD: And then we were in Spanish class together, but yeah. Of course, we didn't start dating or anything until high school.

JD: It's been, what, forty-eight years this year?

KD: Forty-eight years in a couple weeks.

E: Congratulations, that's great.

DD: Congratulations, that's cool. That's exciting. That's awesome. [Laughter]

KD: But you're gonna hear some—because our—

JD: We have a different story.

KD: We left before. I was gone by [19]62.

JD: I talked my brother and his wife into—they were down there when it was difficult. We kind of convinced them to come to the States. We helped them when they got here, you know?

E: Well, everyone has a different story and a different perspective.

JD: You oughta share that article with them before we get out of here. I think they'd be interested in it.

KD: Well, no, I just brought this because—this is more of a personal thing, but this is what drew my grandfather down: the fishing. Yes, and they're very well-known for their fishing in Panama history. They're all gone now, but...yeah, so I grew up on a fishing boat. Fishing was always that part of my growing up.

DD: What's the article?

KD: It's just on Panama fishing.

JD: That's her father, and I think—

KD: And my grandfather. He went down with the boys, and then they built a boat and they fished and worked.

E: That's a big fish.

KD: They worked there to fish there, actually let's put it that way.

JD: Actually, there's one fish there that's over a thousand pounds, and her one uncle only had one arm and one leg. He had to have help reeling it in or it would've been a world record.

DD: Okay wow. Is that him?

KD: That's it, yeah.

DD: That's great.

JD: That's from a magazine, but Guy Harvey wrote a book about it.

DD: Yeah, I saw Guy Harvey. [Laughter] That's really cool.

KD: That's the most current article, but there are a lot of books about the Panama fishing in there. That was a big to-do.

JD: That's mostly about her family right there.

KD: My one uncle, the four boys—well, the oldest one, really—he worked—okay. My father's oldest brother, he was a mule operator for the canal. The mule back then was attached to the ship with cables and they pulled the ships through the canal. It's now all computerized. Then his other brother was an admeasurer. The ships had to be measured before they can enter the canal, make sure that they were not too large. My dad was an electrician, and then his other brother ran the gas station, the one who got the one arm and one leg. We had one gas station, and that was. They repaired cars there and he ran the gas station. But they really fished. [Laughter] It was like, okay.

DD: I can tell. That's pretty serious.

KD: That was their life. So anyway, life was great down there. It really was.

DD: Sounds idyllic.

KD: You haven't been involved with the people here; it's just getting started. You gonna be here through tomorrow?

JD: You were here last year, though, weren't you?

E: Yeah. I think we're gonna stay still maybe two or three tomorrow afternoon and then head back up to Gainesville.

KD: This group of people, this reunion's been going on here for a long, long time. This group of people are the closest-knit people. You'll see someone after years and

years and years and it's like time stood still. All the class reunions they have here are just incredible, just the closeness. Anyway, it's just a very close group of people.

DD: That sounds great.

[INTERRUPTION IN INTERVIEW]

JD: Thank you guys for listening to us.

E: No problem, thank you guys. That was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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