

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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Interviewee: Roberta Williamson Musco

Interviewer: Paul Ortiz

Date: July 8, 2011

O: I wonder if we could start by having you give me your full name.

W: I'm Roberta Adele Hollander, and married, unhyphenated, Williamson Musco. My father was Charles Sanford Hollander, born in 1892; came to the Zone the first time in February of 1918. Daddy was one of the founders of the Canal Zone Credit Union. Daddy also was a Boy Scout leader, and I have his card from the registration in August of 1918 with the Boy Scout Troop 1. After his time in the Zone, Daddy was not a Roosevelt Medal Holder. He did leave the Zone, but he went back in 1929. He was there, one of his positions was working with three different divisions: he worked with the Municipal Engineers and two other divisions. I think he was one of the few people that ever worked at three different divisions. One of his jobs was to supervise was the mess and the construction at Madden Dam. He met my mother who was a nurse, who came down. Her name was Eleanor Freund Hollander, and she came to the Zone in 1929 as a nurse, Gorgas. They married in August 15, 1931, and I was born on July 18, 1932. We left from Pedro Miguel when I was born. We lived in a hut in Madden Dam, which was a very small community of probably five or six families, max. They no longer exist, of course. They've become jungle now. At that time, there was also a family named Klotz, Kathy Klotz. My mother being a former nurse, was friends with many of the physicians' wives. She knew Dr. Sampson, Irma Forbes; they seemed to have kids about the same time I was born. I'm part of the Class of

[19]50 of Balboa High School. Our class, this year incidentally, is having what we're calling the ultimate reunion, because we're meeting with the forty-niners, fifties, fifty-ones, fifty-twos, and fifty-threes.

O: Wow. [Laughter] That's great.

W: So, that's enough. What else would you like to know? [Laughter] I have a little sister, incidentally, who is also attending. Her name is Rosemary Louise Hollander, and she will be here today. Her married name is McCorkle. Rosemary was born in 1936, and we moved from Madden Dam in 1936 and moved to the Heights. We lived on **Mindee** Street, which overlooked what was the airport, and were there until 1937, moved to Florida, moved back in 1940. But Daddy stayed on with the Zone at the beginning of World War II getting primed up for the war. My mother, little sister, and I were stuck in Jacksonville from 1941 until 1945.

O: Jacksonville, Florida?

W: Jacksonville, Florida. But Daddy was in the Zone the whole time. During that period, he worked on the messes for the troops coming through, and of course continued his work with the M.E. division. During that period, he still and was one of the founders of the Canal Zone Credit Union. I was telling my granddaughter that Daddy had the safe in his room, and people would come who had a death in the States, and they would ask Daddy for money. Dr. Sampson was one of the people that had initiated the founding of the Canal Zone Credit Union. Daddy had

some prior banking experience, and he continued with that until he retired in 1953. They built a beautiful building, what used to be Fourth of July Avenue, but it's in the Zone. But they built the beautiful Canal Zone Credit Union building before Daddy retired, and he went on to do six or seven other credit unions after he retired in [19]53. I graduated from Balboa High School in 1950...

O: What was the high school like during those years?

W: Balboa High was...the Canal Zone was like Never-never-land. We never had a dirty street. Everything was immaculate. It was run by the military, and we had several generals that handled things. If the kid was bad, the kid was deported. You didn't have bad kids stay in the Canal Zone. I was in a mariner troop; we had our little sailboats. At Balboa High School I was make-up editor of the *Parakeet*. If you know what the *Parakeet* was, the *Parakeet* was our high school newspaper. During the year that I was a senior, Burt Page was one of our artists with the *Parakeet*. Mary S. Brigham was the sponsor, and we did "See Panama First." At that time, we were very lucky. We and my friends, we did Panama. We got with the Ambassador Murray Wise, we went to the museum, and we went out in the boonies to place I had never been and featured "Panama First" in the high school. The high school wasn't air-conditioned in those days. [Laughter] The year that was an eighth-grader was the year the Yankees came, and we had Joe DiMaggio outside. I was taking eighth-grade Spanish; it was seventh-grade Spanish but I was an eighth-grader that year and I was on the second floor. We

could look out and see the football stadium and where the ball field was. We did have Joe DiMaggio and all the Yankees there, which would have been right after World War II, probably [19]45 to [19]46. As I say, the high school was not air-conditioned; things were pretty hot. We had an ROTC: the kids would parade out on the parade grounds. There were girls who are classmates who were the sponsors of the guys. They had an excellent ROTC. I also was in theater, which was called the Balboa Theater. The director was Schubert Turpeyfell, and we called him Turpey, or Mr. Turpey. Actually, we had some pretty good plays. They were done through the high school, and we also had music, which was Mr. Bramstedter, and we called him Brammy. One of the nice things was at Christmastime, the old Balboa Elementary School was the site of Christmas carols. The girls would be dressed in long, white dresses and carry candles. The chorus for the high school would sing at that, including the Hallelujah Chorus.

O: [Laughter] Right.

W: What else about the high school? We had touch football. It was the first year when I was there that we brought down Miami High School, and the boys got really muddy out there. They only other competitors, of course, were the junior college and the Cristobal **Bugs**. [laughter] We also had Caribbean Girls State. Are you familiar with Boys and Girls State?

O: I don't think so.

W: Okay. In the United States, a certain junior is invited, a representative of his area, and they're very selective. My granddaughters' bigger brother is going to represent Florida in Titusville at the Boys State here in the Florida. Anyway, we had Caribbean Girls State. It was the first year we ever had it, and we had it out at one of the former Army bases. In the bathrooms, they didn't have the doors, and they had to put canvas up for us. The first year, we lived in cabins. The second year, we were junior counselors for that. It was fun because we had generals. I wrote the newsletter, and I wrote—what was it? Something about munitions, and the word that I put, I spelled the word wrong, and everybody was hysterical because instead of going to the lecture on the guns, I wrote it in writing. Everybody said, hey, you didn't go because you spelled this and that isn't the word at all.

O: Oh, no.

W: I can't think of the word. It'll hit me later. Caribbean Girls State had supposedly the representatives of either high school. They elected a president, vice-president, senators, etcetera. Still have the little pin from that. What else would you like?

O: You had mentioned on our way over, what was life like for women?

W: My mother, being an educated nurse, she had graduated from St. Vincent's Nursing School in Birmingham the week of the ending of World War I. She had

had a career; she was born in 1896. She got her appointment to the Zone from Senator Lester Hill of Alabama. She was a private-duty nurse, and she learned that there was something going on that she wanted to do. She'd had an unhappy romance, so she came down to the Zone. I have her letters. My aunt in Alabama kept every letter from my mother, and she doled those out to me when I would go visit and held them in Cullman, which is actually—this tornado that hit?

O: Oh, Cullman? I know where that is. My wife's family live near Oneonta, Springville, yeah.

W: The tornado hit the homestead that my grandfather built in 1900. Survived. My cousin's home was demolished.

O: Newer home?

W: In a newer home on the more fancier end of Cullman, but the old place did not get. Anyway, Aunt Hilda doled out letters, so I have the letters. There was a gentleman from Florida State who did do a dissertation on, not more discrimination but snobbishness of American women toward the Panamanians. I think that he commented on that. I haven't read his dissertation, but I have a feeling that--one of my mother's comments was, she was going to a ball and she was going to meet the queen of the carnival, who was black. Did she have to get down and curtsy and kiss the woman's hand? Being a nurse, single, in the Zone, in 1929, [19]30, [19]31, before she married, those nurses had a ball. What she

writes, granted there was some disadvantages—the weather—they went horseback riding, she was in a horse race. They were partied, they were fêted. She rode on a seaplane to the San Blas Islands. As you know, there was a long period when white people were not allowed to stay overnight. Between that period and lately, now you can. But at one time, you could not go to the islands. But she flew in a sea plane with pontoons, and I brought a piece of the mola that she brought at that time with me today for the mola lady. I think they had a wonderful time as nurses. One of the interesting things they had was that she wrote, the admiral that was down at the South Pole?

O: Oh yeah.

W: Okay. She was a dental nurse at the hospital. Nurses did a lot of things; she took up babies, too. But when they came back from the South Pole, the men's teeth were in bad shape. My mom wrote in her letter how they cared for these men who had just stopped from the South Pole, had come up to Gorgas Hospital for care. Gorgas, a few years ago, did feature the nurses at Gorgas and the staff. All of us who were Gorgas babies got a little nametag at one of the reunions: a little pink one if we were a baby girl or a little blue one. [Laughter] I have the nametag with me, too.

O: That's great.

W: I think for my mom, she did contract pneumonia. The dampness did get her. She felt she was more comfortable in the States, which is why in 1940 when we decided to go back, in fall of [19]41 we left from the Zone and went back to the States and were stuck during World War II. Daddy was in the middle of the Caribbean going back to the Zone when Pearl Harbor was bombed. We were, of course, forced to stay in Jacksonville. Daddy came home for four months, 'cause Zone people got four-month vacations. You could save up your two months, and then you could come every couple years instead. Daddy was a scout counselor at the local Boy Scout camp, and she was camp nurse during part of [19]44. She died in 1947; she contracted pancreatic cancer. Her nurse friends were still supportive, they were still there, many of them. As far as she was concerned as a young, single woman, I think they had a wonderful time as far as women in the Zone. Being many officers, they had the pick of the crop. [Laughter]

O: Now when you were in high school, you mentioned it was very high-caliber of a school.

W: Our teachers all were at least a master's degree. The classes that we had were mainly—I'm trying to think of the word—New York Regents qualified. That's what I understood. Mr. **Holtz** was our principal at the time. The kids that I ran with all went to college; most of them did go to school in the States, not all of them. They had to take the big exams just like they take SATs now. I know when I went to Colorado State College in education, I didn't have to take freshman English, I

CLEP'd it because my scores were so good. I didn't decide I wanted to be a teacher, so I transferred to Florida State. I think that the education that we received in the Zone—we had many friends. I was in the United Nations Club. A student whose parents were willing to pay the tuition from outside of the Zone—I think it was forty dollars a month—did pay tuition. We would get kids come from Maria Immaculada, which was the Spanish girls' educational school there. Many of the kids would go to boarding schools up north if they were upper-class Panamanians, but we had the melting pass. We had the ambassador's daughters come to our school; our homecoming queen, **Jacklyn Blough**, she was Swiss ambassador's. Anyway, we had a United Nations Club, and it was wonderful. There were about thirty or forty of them, and I was the only American girl in the club. There was a great bit of patriotism at that time and international fellowship among us.

O: You mentioned teaching earlier. Were you beginning to think about a career in high school?

W: I wanted to be a fifth-grade teacher, and I fell in love, and the guy that I fell in love with is a senior, could not teach because had papilloma of the larynx. I said, if you can't teach, what do you do for a living? Transferred to Florida State; they tested me with round pegs and square holes, and I went into business. I ended up with a degree in personnel administration, was a management trainee for Sears, ended up in the ninety-ninth percentile of Sears employees as far as

bosses. They tested me in Atlanta. In those days, the reason I didn't like retail was you either had too many people on the sales floor and you were wasting money, or you didn't have enough and you were losing money. I also fell in love with this young lady's grandpa, and worked two years for Sears, decided not to get married, went to work in Jacksonville, went home to Daddy, licked my wounds. My prospective husband, who was a vet, **Citadel grad**, came to see me before he went to France to study, called the day before he sailed, wasn't gonna get on the ship, so I got on the ship. Three weeks later, he went over and waited for me, and I got on the ship. We were married in Paris, France on the twelfth of October, of [19]56. After that, I stayed home. I worked for nine months in Charleston; of course, his parents lived in Charleston. Then, moved to Jacksonville and had six kids, stayed home for sixteen years. So that's why I never taught, but he ended up as a teacher and an educator with an NDEA grant.

O: That's interesting. Okay. You said you were the class of 1950 at Balboa High School. Did you return to Panama at any point, or did you...?

W: I flew down in 1952. Daddy retired in [19]53; I flew down my senior year from Florida State for a two-week vacation. I was taking shorthand, I was flunking shorthand. My parents got ahold of the teacher with Balboa High School, had her over to dinner, she did a little tutoring. I passed the class with a C, thank you Balboa High School. They also had Miss Brigham, my teacher, over back again—my faithful journalism teacher who I adored. Then, I did not go back again

until summer of [19]90. It was right after Operation Just Cause. My oldest son works for Uncle Sam; he's in Department of Defense. He ended up going to Monterrey in foreign language school. His specialty is Spanish, and he would summer replacements. Incidentally, he is still working for Department of Defense and he doesn't talk about what he does. He's in Germany now with his wife and three kids. They have tried to get to Germany, and they managed to get there. But Mark has been to Nicaragua, did Panamanian vacation for some of the security people, so I went for three days in 1990 right after Operation Just Cause. Met Mark, he says, okay, it's safe to come. There were young ensigns and guards for the embassy that had a house in downtown Panama, and we were in the banking quarter. Mark ran every night downtown where the statue of Balboa is. I said, I would never have gone at night as a young girl in Panama. One doesn't. He said, oh no, there's a guard every three banks. There were these young men having a party; it was right after they had had that killing for some of the embassies in France or somewhere, and they had killed the young ones at the embassy. Well, I said, where are the guards? Why are these young men having a party and there's just a little man sitting at the foot of the street with a checklist? My son said, don't worry about it, there's somebody watching. Anyway, they were right next door to some beautiful homes on the water. They had a picture of Noriega that was their target with a dartboard, and they were throwing darts at Pineapple Face, which is what they called him. We did go through Quarry Heights; we went to dinner at the officers' club, and then we

walked down the hill from Quarry Heights down through the Orchid Garden and down into the Balboa Flats. Tell you the truth, when the plane landed, I cried. This is really where I was born. It is my home. It's where I was born, it's where my parents met. My mother is buried there. Panama is a unique place. The Zone was, as I say, Never-never-land. One of my class reunion, probably twenty years ago, but he usually comes, one of the upper-class Panamanians is David Robles. He is a very wealthy, influential attorney. I said to him, well, David, how are things down in the Zone? David looks at me and he says, Panama. Every year I tease him about being president, but he doesn't want to be president when I see him at reunions. We were very, very privileged. I was privileged to have grown up in an environment that was so safe, so good, and so secure, and so patriotic. My father was in the American Legion: I still have his Legion hat from H.O. #1, his little crooked hat. As a kid in the third grade, the year we were there in 1940, they had a pen pal, and so I wrote as a result of my Canal Zone background to a girl named Lavon Polly. I corresponded her many years. One of things that I'm proud of is, being a Girl Scout, I was selected as representative, along with a girl named Yvonne Harvey from the Cristobal side, as a junior in high school to attend the Western Hemisphere Encampment of Girl Scouts. Lady Baden-Powell was a guest; this was in Michigan, and there were girls from all over the Western Hemisphere. As I say, I was representing along with her from the Canal Zone. We had them from Puerto Rico, we had every South American country. The camp had been set up by the Girl Scouts from all over the United States. So that

was a great event, and the following year because I was the representative, I did work with day camp for the Girl Scouts. They had a big send-off tea for us. The general's wife had a silver tea in honor of our going to get enough money to send us. We were very privileged to do that. We had a Girl Scout chorus. We did Humpnick's *Hansel and Gretel*, and I was the cookie witch. [Laughter] My little sister also was the cookie witch, and we know, nibbling, crippling mousy, who nibbles at my housy. If you want to hear the whole thing, I won't sing it today. [Laughter] Rachel's laughing. [Laughter] What else?

O: This is a wonderful narrative. You've talked about life in the Zone, some of the changes that happen over time, and leaving and coming back. It's a very full story. Are there any other aspects that you haven't—

W: I brought my husband. My first husband died of colorectal in 1987. I remarried three years later, and one of my classmates, Davis Stevenson, runs Condor Tours.

O: Okay, which we're also interviewing Mr. Stevenson.

W: Davis was one of my classmates. He was one of the military guys in ROTC. His wife, June—anyway, I did bring my husband, and we did the fourteen-day tour with Davis. We went to places. I had been to El Valle in 1944, [19]45, went up to the AAA place and got full of ticks with my mom. When we went with Davis's tour, he had a group of about forty people. There was also a man named Horine,

H-o-r-i-n-e. He is the big brother of one of my classmate's husband, Larry Horine. He and his wife were on the bus with us. There was a guy there who was about three hundred pounds at the back of the bus, whose daddy was the architect for the Zone. Every stop—because we toured all the towns—he had a photo op, because his daddy lived in every town. He would rumble up from the back of that bus, hot as blue blazes. He would get up and wander up the front—because he had to sit on the big seat in the back—and he would go get the picture taken where he used to live. We did go by my house, as a matter of fact. When I went down in [19]90, we did go to my mother's grave at Corozal. Davis also made it possible. Davis also makes a trip to Reprosa. You know what Reprosa is? If you go to the vendors' room, they are the jewelers. They take the lost art replicas of the pre-Columbian stuff. I have a huaca. They're talking a couple hundred dollars' worth of huaca and the earrings. Davis takes you to Reprosa. His trip is very good. They take you to one of the restaurants where the men don't have a urinal; they have a trough. My husband loved that. They also had ten-cent beer and the bus had a ice chest. Every time the bus stopped, they'd have to have a pit stop. They'd all get a drink and then we'd have a pit stop fifteen minutes later. But Davis does a terrific tour, and the only groan I have is that I did not take the extra days and go to the San Blas Islands.

O: Wow. Those are beautiful.

W: It was a wonderful tour. I would love to take my whole family when I turn eighty, which is a year from now. I don't whether money-wise I could afford it with six kids and all the grandbabies, but maybe. Again, growing up in the Zone was a privilege, and I thank you for being asked.

O: Thank you. This is a wonderful story.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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