

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

Program Director: Dr. Paul Ortiz  
Office Manager: Tamarra Jenkins  
Technology Coordinator: Deborah Hendrix



241 Pugh Hall  
PO Box 115215  
Gainesville, FL 32611  
352-392-7168 Phone  
352-846-1983 Fax

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.

*-October 2013*

PCM-038

Interviewee: Jim DesLondes

Interviewer: Paul Ortiz

Date: July 7, 2011

O: Mr. DesLondes, thank you so much for agreeing to do the interview. We'd like to start by, if you wouldn't mind telling me your full name and when you were born.

D: Okay, I'm Jim DesLondes. I was born in 1938 in Ancon, Canal Zone in Gorgas Hospital.

O: Okay, and I understand that your family has a long history in Panama.

D: All four of my grandparents went down there during the construction of the canal, and my grandfather with the same name that I have was killed on the Gatun locks in 1911. He was electrocuted three months before my dad was born. So, my grandmother took his body back to the States and buried him, and she returned to the Canal Zone and went back to the job she had there.

O: What was her job?

D: She was a telephone operator. She was from Lafayette, Indiana, and her father was a major in the Civil War. She had a family friend who was going down there to work, and she was just out of school. She took a trip with him down there, and ended up taking a job when she was there. Then, she met my grandfather. They got married and then he got killed. That's that part of the history. My other grandfather, he graduated from college in Missouri and went to work in Washington, D.C. He was an accountant, and he was recruited to come to

Panama to work. Then, he returned to the United States, got married, and took my grandmother on that side down to Panama. My mother was born in Washington, D.C., but her mother was on the ship to go to Panama and started having labor pains and they rushed her back to Washington, D.C. [Laughter] My grandmother gave birth to my mother, and then my grandfather came back and got her and took her back to Panama with the new baby. That's the grandparents' side of the program.

O: So Panama runs deep in your family's history.

D: Oh, absolutely.

O: What were your earliest memories growing up?

D: Well, I was born in [19]38, and many of the old houses were still in existence. It was just—we lived in these old wooden houses. In fact, I counted the other day that I had lived in twenty-three different houses in the old Canal Zone. I lived in nine different houses when I was a boy growing up, and then when I employed, I did the balance, I did fourteen houses during my period of employment.

[Laughter] Anyway, the old houses: I'll tell you one story that's very interesting.

These wooden, big tropical houses had scuttle holes at the floor, the sides of the house. People would take a hose and wash their house out, push all the water out through the scuttle holes. [Laughter] Those tropical houses were something else. Everybody had mango trees around their houses, they all had tin roofs on

them except for those that had the tile roofs. I can just think back about the hard rains and the sound from those old tin roofs, no air conditioning. And the bugs: the roaches were something else in those days. [Laughter] Every house had roaches. No rats, but roaches.

O: Maybe you weren't quite old enough to remember World War II...

D: I remember it well. My mother was a Red Cross worker, and she would take me—she worked on the docks handing out coffee to the sailors that were coming through on the ships coming back from the Pacific. I was just a little fella, and she would take me down to the docks with her. I had the biggest collection of sailor hats you ever saw because all these sailors coming from the Pacific going back up to the east coast would give me a sailor hat. It was quite a collection. But I also remember all the activity there for World War II. I was like four, five, six years old. My dad worked seven days a week. He worked all the time. He ran what they called Section I, which was the storehouse operation for the Panama Canal. And they were moving millions of board feet of lumber through there all the time. That was being used for different projects and what have you, but it was an exciting time. One of my best stories is, at the end of World War II the military guys used to play softball games with the Canal Zone people. You know, there'd be big, big crowds at these softball games. I was at this softball game in a little town site of Diablo. I went home for some reason—our house was about two blocks away—and while I was home, the radio was on and they announced that

Japan had surrendered and the war was over in the Pacific. My little legs started running. I ran back to the ball park and I'm telling all these people, World War II is over! Japan has surrendered! And they said, what are you talking about, little kid? [Laughter] You don't even—you know? And then the sirens—all the towns had sirens that would warn people if there's any problems—the sirens came on and the announcement was made that Japan had surrendered.

O: Wow. How did people react?

D: Oh, it was bedlam. As a little kid, I can remember everybody was yelling and screaming and running around, hugging each other. These were civilian teams playing—there was a Navy team that they were playing at the time, and it was just really, really exciting. I ended up being the superintendent of housing for the Panama Canal, and I was involved in tearing down many of the old houses and all of that. That was an emotional thing for me. Back in the [19]30s and [19]40s, we were still living in the houses on the furniture that they had brought down in the construction of the canal, because they would employ people from the States and bring them down and give them a house to live in and give them furniture to live on. The Panama Canal had these big warehouses full of furniture to be able to furnish houses for people. And then later on, they phased that program out and people bought their own furniture, and they bought it from the commissaries that were owned by the canal. But one of the projects I had working for the housing branch was to get rid of all that furniture. It was all in a big, huge

warehouse. The warehouse must have been two blocks long, and it was just full of tens of thousands of pieces of furniture. I was charged with recording it all, and we were giving it to orphanages in Panama. There was a big, vacant lot nearby the warehouses, and I was carrying—having the men carry all this furniture out, and I put the beds in one place and the chairs in another, separating it all out. I can remember cars stopping along the highway and people running up, could I buy some of that? [Laughter] I mean, it was all wooden furniture. It was good wood, but I was told, you can't get rid of any of these things. [Laughter] These are going to the orphanages in Panama. The canal turned over, like I say, tens of thousands of pieces of furniture to these orphanages.

O: Wow. So when World War II ended, you were about seven or eight?

D: Right.

O: Can you talk about your high school experience or where you went to high school?

D: I went to Balboa High School, and I graduated in [19]56. It was a typical 1950s high school. In fact, I've always felt like the people who lived in the Canal Zone were more like Americans than Americans. We were all very patriotic people, and I think most of us really knew more about American history than kids back in the United States.

O: What made the difference? What made that so.

- D: I don't know. When you live out of the country, it's just a different environment. You know that's America. And we would go back to the United States; all the employees of the canal would go back every two years on vacation. The canal operated three ships that you would travel back and forth to the United States on the ships. They would go to New York Harbor when I was a boy growing up. They changed later on and went out of New Orleans, but during the time I was growing up we'd go into New York. So I made a number of round-trips from Panama to New York and back. I can remember in the late 1940s, we got on the ship in New York City and were supposed to sail and come back. They had the biggest labor strike they've ever had on the docks of New York, and we spent two weeks living on the ship there tied up to the dock. [Laughter] I can remember, with my little buddies, we would hang around the dock and all these longshoremen were—the unions gathered them all together, they were running around with clubs, yelling and screaming. [Laughter] It was bedlam. But for a little fella, it was interesting going through that. If you study American—well, union history, you look back and see that it was considered one of the biggest strikes of all time in America. It closed down the Port of New York.
- O: You mentioned earlier, Mr. DesLondes, the sense that in the Canal Zone you were kind of more American. That was really something emphasized. Was that something emphasized in the schools, like in the books or the curriculum or the teachers or the...?

- D: I think so. I think we were more aware of being Americans, like Fourth of July was like the biggest celebration of the year in the Canal Zone. I mean, it was the biggest day of the year: there was fairs and athletic events. It was an amazing day. Every little kids lived for the Fourth of July celebration.
- O: Did you do fireworks or—?
- D: [Laughter] Oh, did we do fireworks! We could go into Panama City—see, the Canal Zone was separate and operated under separate laws. Now, you couldn't sell fireworks in the Canal Zone, but all we had to do was step over into Panama City and we could buy anything we wanted. [Laughter] And every little kid had loads of firecrackers and little bombs and everything else. You just can't imagine thousands of little kids running around with all these firecrackers. [Laughter] I mean, big firecrackers, it was something else.
- O: Okay, wow. You mentioned going to the U.S. periodically. What types of connections did your family have to family and friends in U.S. in the [19]50s?
- D: Mainly people went back to visit where their parents may have come from. Now in my case, my grandparents, my grandmother retired back to Lafayette, Indiana and we'd go to Lafayette. And my mother's father retired to California, so we'd go out to California. My mother's mother died in the Canal Zone and my father's father was killed down there in 1911. So, every year we'd go back and go visit Grandma in Lafayette and Grandpa out in California, and my mother's sister lived

out in California so we would visit with her. As a boy, growing up I did at least three round-trips from New York to California and back.

O: Wow. What were the differences you saw between California and New York and Panama?

D: Well, I don't know where this came from, but in our mind everything back in the United States was really better. [Laughter] Most of the food was imported into the Canal Zone. At one time, the canal had its own dairy; it had everything. The canal was self-sustaining, but for some reason there was an attitude that the meat tastes better in the United States and the butter tasted better and the milk tasted better. [Laughter] You'd want to go get a milkshake and things like that. We're back in American, you know? That was exciting. We're back in America. It was a perception more than the truth. Like I say, most of us just—that was America and we lived in the Canal Zone, and we knew that we were Americans and that we were living in another country, so to speak. It was interesting.

O: Some people I've talked to who grew up in the Canal Zone have said that they—every experience is subjective, of course, but some folks have said, people were taught better manners in the Canal Zone compared to say American kids in the States. Does that ring true to you or is that kind of--?

D: Yes, it does. I don't know how to explain it. You were expected to be a representative of America, you know? I think that the Americans down there tried

to represent the best of America in that respect. You follow me? There's always been a stigma between the Americans and the Panamanians, but there was two classes of people in Panama basically when I grew up. There was the working class, and then there was the upper Panamanian class. Most of them had been educated in the United States, they went to all the best colleges, they all had plenty of money. So, it was basically a class system. I'm going to tell you something about the housing aspect of it that I don't know if you've heard in any other interviews, but if an American man married a Panamanian girl they were told they had to live in the town of Ancón, which was right on the border. A lot of people don't know this, but remember I go back many, many years. There are many, many of my friends that came from mixed marriages and they were half-Panamanian and half-American, but they grew up—in a way, they were stigmatized. And a lot of them had a chip on their shoulder about the way they were treated. Their father was an American and their mother was a Panamanian. Very few of the American men—remember, the majority of the people working in the canal were working-class Americans. They were tradesmen, they were electricians, they were plumbers and all that. Most of those men that married Panamanians married Panamanians from the non-rich class of people. A lot of the men married girls from the interior of Panama; these girls had no education. So there was always that stigma. But I'll tell you, most of these guys that I grew up with that were half-Panamanian half-American did well in school, they went on to college, they became doctors and lawyers. They were terrific people. Most of

them were good athletes, too. That's what I remember about that part of living in the Canal Zone.

O: Okay. Along those same lines, Mr. DesLondes, do you remember what relations were like kind of in general between people who lived in the Zone and kind of the broader society?

D: It was like many, many other things. There were Americans there that never left the Canal Zone and then there were Americans that had many friends in Panama. I was lucky. My father had been a very good athlete down there and he had many Panamanian friends. So, I grew up knowing both. I knew both sides. I was a golfer; I spent a lot of time playing golf. I played golf and was friends with a couple of the presidents of Panama and all that. But I have many friends who really—they were quite active in Panama society...But there were some Americans that were of the type that you might call the ugly Americans...I don't know how to phrase it. You have that everywhere you go, you know?

O: Everywhere. Yeah.

D: There's prejudiced people on both sides. A lot of the Panamanian people from the wealthy side, they wouldn't think of one of their children getting married to an American because they looked at most of the Americans as the laboring class. They saw them as plumbers and electricians. They were from high society in

Panama; they didn't want their kids marrying those working-class Americans.

[Laughter] So it went both ways.

O: Speaking of occupation, when you were in high school you went to Balboa High School.

D: Right.

O: In high school, were you thinking about a career or your future or aspiration?

D: Well, I wanted to be a golf pro. I didn't work real hard in high school, so I got myself drafted right out of high school.

O: Wow. What year was that?

D: 1956. I got very lucky. I got selected to be the assistant to the golf pro at the officers' golf club at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. [Laughter] So I spent two years in a job that I dreamed of. In fact, I was assigned to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division after I got out of basic training, and I wasn't up there a week. I was going through pre-airborne training, and I got this call to report to main post to the golf pro. He wanted to interview me. He'd gotten my name and he said, I want you to come to work for me. He had paperwork sent up to have me transferred from the 82<sup>nd</sup> down to his outfit down there at the golf club. I went before the sergeant major of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division who had fought in World War II and he had all these stars on his wings and all that. [Laughter] I can remember standing in front of his

desk and this sergeant major said, you're going to leave the Airborne to go work at a golf club? He said, you're gonna ruin the rest of your life. He said, that's a terrible thing to do! My knees were knocking together—because I was so excited. I was getting my dream job now. I'm eighteen years old and getting my dream job, and this guy's trying to talk me out of it. I can remember saying, no, sergeant major, no, sergeant major. This is what I want to do! [Laughter] Oh, golly. And then I had a general take a liking to me, and he had me tutored by a very brilliant young captain. I took the West Point exam and got selected to go before a board to go to West Point. There were two lieutenants on the board, and when I walked into this room—they spent a lot of time at the golf club and they knew me well. I looked down at them and they looked at me and they told me later, you'd have never made it through West Point. So, I didn't get selected. [Laughter] Oh, golly.

O: So you were in the service from [19]56 to—

D: [19]58.

O: [19]58, okay. What came next?

D: Well, I went to the Canal Zone Junior College, and at the same time I opened a miniature golf course in Panama City. Oh, I opened three or four different businesses. I had another miniature golf course up in the town of David in Panama, and had a small go-kart racetrack. But I ended up going broke in business and going back to the United States. Then I returned to Panama in the

early [19]60s and took a job as the assistant project manager on a project for the Army, building five hundred houses at Fort Clayton and Fort Amador. But I had taken the examination to become a policeman in the Canal Zone; they weren't hiring many people that grew up in the Canal Zone. In fact, at that time there was almost a, don't hire any Canal Zone kids.

O: To work in the Canal Zone.

D: To work in the Canal Zone. There was a few that got employed, but very few. Anyhow, I took the police exam and got a hundred on it and had five points for being a veteran. So, I was at the top of the list and the riots came in [19]64?

O: Yeah.

D: And they started hiring policemen. I was at the top of the employment list, so I got a job as a police officer and worked six months and transferred into the housing branch and spent a career with housing. My last job with the Canal was chief of the community services division. I left Panama in [19]89. I got robbed—I got held up at gunpoint at Fort Amador. There's a long story behind that, but then several days later I was playing golf at Amador with a fellow who helped save my life there because these guys that held me up were what they called maleantes from Panama City. One of them had a gun, and when these two fellows that I'm talking about came to help me, they fired the gun at them and left. Then three days later, I'm playing golf with these guys and one of them gets into an

argument on the first tee at the Amador Golf Club. I went up there to help him, and the guy hit me. I've never had anything like this happen on a golf course before. And it turned out one of these guys was a pilot from Noriega, and the other was a businessman that was in things with Noriega. They didn't know anything about golf, and I ended up having like a fistfight with this guy. And he threatened to kill me and my family. That same week, these same guys with some other guys had burned down one of the yachts at the Amador Yacht Club that belonged to a Panamanian businessman and killed a guy who was working on the boat. So, I had had enough. I sent my wife and daughter back to the States, and I retired in [19]89 and left there. But it was an exciting—what was really bothering me being in charge of all the housing and everything, at this point in [19]89 we were having about five or six houses broken into every night. These were not good times. I just was unhappy with the whole situation. I was unhappy with the treaty; I didn't think they signed the right treaty. I mean, I wanted to see a treaty, but I didn't want to see the way they did it. I decided to retire, and I came back to the United States. But as a side note to this, I was part of a group that was pushing to have a different-type treaty written than was planned by the State Department. And the State Department recognized the effort that we were making, as we were getting a lot of tension in the T.V. in the United States. In fact, I got interviewed: it was on NBC Worldwide. A lot of different things like that happened. But I can still remember our whole group listening to the State Department. They came out to my house, and I had all my people in the house,

and these guys were trying to convince us to not fight the treaty anymore. They said they were writing provisions in the treaty that would give us early retirement and all—they were asking us right out in front, what would you like? What can we do for you to make this treaty palatable so you'll quit fighting this? I can remember everybody in the room saying, we don't want you to give us anything. We don't want you to write this type of treaty. This is not right to the United States. It still came out the way it came out, but I ended up getting early retirement and I had a wonderful life since [19]89. [Laughter] I've been retired twenty-some years now. I came back to the United States and became a P.G.A. golf professional. I've been the head professional of a couple fine golf courses. I've had a great life. But I still down in my heart just felt like the United States gave away more than they needed to. In fact, I was the guy who had to sign over all the houses to the government of Panama because I was superintendent of housing at the time. They had a ceremony where we signed over all these houses, and I represented the United States. Officially, when I signed that document, they became the owner of close to five thousand houses in twenty-one town sites in the Canal Zone. And from that point on, we had to deal with Panamanian officials on everything we did in managing the houses until it was all turned over. But these houses were given back to Panama little by little. It was an emotional experience.

O: I'd like to get more of your thoughts about the treaty in a few minutes, but you had mentioned something that I've never heard anyone talk about in the interviews we've done: the Canal Zone Junior College. Can you talk about that, like what you studied, what it was like?

D: It was very typical of junior colleges anyplace in the world. In fact, my brother was a professor there at the college. He got his master's degree in the United States and he ended up—I helped him get employed down there. It was a very, very good school. Many students did their two years there and went to universities back in the United States, the best universities, and did well. Joe Wood, who you've been dealing with here—

O: Yes, sir.

D: Joe Wood did two years at the Canal Zone College and graduated and then went to University of Florida and got his degree. Joe ended up being one of the top men with the Panama Canal. My brother used to kid around, he was an accounting teacher and an economics teacher. In fact, one of his students ended up going to Harvard and he wrote him a letter. He said, you were as good as any professor I had at Harvard. That was quite a compliment to him, but most of the professors there at the junior college had their master's and PhDs. It was a good school.

O: Actually, this is something that's been interesting to me also, is you're talking— where did you learn how to play golf? Who taught you?

D: Well, there were a number of golf clubs in the Canal Zone and Panama. My grandfather was one of the original members of the Panama Golf Club, so my dad was a member of the Panama Golf Club. Every weekend, my dad and I would go out there. But also there was a course called Fort Amador. It was a military course, and many of the Zone people were a member of that club. The dues, when I was growing up, were like ten dollars a month. I worked there during three years of high school. I worked there on the weekends. I made a dollar an hour. Golf has been a big part of my life. Many, many young men came out of Panama and went to college and played on golf teams back in the United States. There's five or six of us ended up as P.G.A. golf professionals. In fact, I was on the first golf team that played in the—what they used to call—it was a national junior championship in the United States. It was run by the Jaycees. In 1953, the first four guys who finished in this tournament—it was an all-Caribbean tournament—and they called us the Latin American team, but I was on that team and went to Ann Arbor, Michigan. We stayed at the university there and played golf. One of the fellows was from Costa Rica; I watched him through the years. Then several years later, I was seventeen. I got to go to Georgia and play, and that was one of Jack Nicklaus's first tournaments. He was three years younger than me. A story I love to tell: I was standing with some guys, talking. We were

the older guys there, 'cause you couldn't play after you got to be, I think it was eighteen. Somebody said, you see that little fat guy over there? His name is Jack Nicklaus. He's from Ohio. That little fellow's probably going to be one of the greatest golfers in the world. [Laughter] And I remember somebody saying, well, there's lots of guys like that around. And this fellow said, no, there isn't. That's Jack Nicklaus. He's going to be something else. And Jack Nicklaus turned out to be the best golfer there's ever been. You know? So that's an interesting little story.

O: [Laughter] Yeah, that is. What are some of your other memorable experiences as a golf professional?

D: Well, I've made sixteen hole in ones. [Laughter]

O: Wow. That's incredible.

D: Most of the golf courses in the Canal Zone have closed up because of the treaty. Now, there's a course—it's all Panama now, of course—it's called Summit. I was president of Summit Golf Course at one time. But now, Summit Golf Course is one of the finest golf courses in Latin America. The money, I think, was used to rehabilitate Summit and make it into what it is, I think came from Colombia. It was Colombian money. And I'm not going to say where Colombian money came—  
[Laughter]

O: Exactly, yeah. You mentioned a few of the other social upheavals, or the [19]64 riot. Now you were in—

D: In [19]64, I was the assistant project manager with a company called Jefferson Engineering. We were building these houses for the army. My boss asked me to go play golf; that's the only time he'd ever done it. We went over to a place called Rodman, and we were coming back through a street that runs between the Canal Zone and Panama, because he was staying—he had a house with his family in Panama City and I was running him home before I went to where I lived. Within an hour after we passed this place is when the riots really erupted. We were there an hour before. Anyway, we were in his house—we were doing a barbeque there—and somebody had the radio on, and they said, hey, there's a riot. And I had been through the 1959 riots and saw all that happened. I said, guys, we've got to get out of here. And, no, no, no, no, no, we're gonna stay here. I said, I'm gonna tell you if this gets really bad, I said, you're gonna be hiding in your houses here. So I left. I got in my car and I left and I went through the back gate of Curundú and drove it back into Ancón, Balboa area. You could see—I mean, it was unbelievable. I spent that whole night on the border sitting up on the hill with many other people watching all this going on.

O: Wow.

D: Yeah. I ended up having to get—they stayed in that house. I don't know if you have heard the stories, but there was hordes of Panamanians looking for

Americans, and these people were really afraid that they were gonna get—so all the American contractors that were involved in our company had come to this one house, and I ended up getting permission from the Panamanian Guardia. They got some trucks and we went in there and brought them out and brought them back into the Canal Zone and put them up in the Tivoli Hotel. One of the events that happened when we checked them into the hotel, I went out and I was inside the hotel but looking out of the hotel down the steps of the Old Tivoli Hotel, and a soldier got shot right there. A shot came from over in Panama City and he had just stepped out of a truck and got shot there. Those were exciting days.

O: Serving there, I recall—of course, I was there in the mid-[19]80s—some people have asked me about the kinds of relationships that we had with civilians. And I just don't remember having much contact. When you were there, I mean, the other side, did you have much contact with the U.S. military?

D: The Canal Zone people and the military people were very close. I have so many friends that were in the military there that I still keep up with, but it was through the things that you do. So I made a lot of these friends through golf, you follow me?

O: Oh, yeah. Okay.

D: Yeah. But I've heard a lot of military guys say, well, I was treated bad down there by the Canal Zone people. In fact, when I was in high school if a girl dated a

soldier, she was called rat bait. Things like that. These things happen back in the United States, too. It's the way people are. Where I live now—I live in Sun City here in Florida—I've got five friends over there that were in the military, but I didn't know them down there. And they talk very highly of the times that they lived there, and the relationships they had. One guy married a nurse. He was a sergeant in the army down there, and he married a nurse at Gorgas Hospital. Many of the girls that grew up in the Canal Zone ended up marrying military guys. Here at this reunion that's going on now, there's a lot of them that were married that way. I don't know. There were a lot of good relationships and a lot of poor relationships, but you'll find that anyplace.

O: Anyplace, yeah. Between the time of the [19]40s and maybe through the [19]70s, what types of changes did you see in the Canal Zone and even in the broader region?

D: Well, like I told you, I graduated in [19]56 and we were still—well, I'll tell you. They changed over the electrical: they went from twenty-five cycle to sixty cycle. That was a big move. Then, television came in. Now, I never had a television, I never saw a television. It wasn't in until after I graduated from high school. Air conditioning was the biggest thing I think that ever happened down there. [Laughter] I can remember that was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. You know, the canal did away with the ships that they operated; at that time they were going back and forth to New Orleans. People started flying back to the

United States when they returned. Little by little like the rest of the world, technology changed and things became different. One of the interesting things in growing up was, your shoes would grow green mold overnight in the house. You know, Panama's very tropical. We all used to stuff newspaper into our shoes and anything that got wet got moldy. But the air conditioning changed everything, but they didn't have air conditioning in the school. The building was very, very hot.

[Laughter]

O: What was your job like? I'm assuming you went into—now you were managing the housing—

D: After I transferred from the police department, I transferred into housing. I started off as what they called the assignment clerk; I assigned the houses and also ran the moving truck. I had three crews of movers, 'cause in the Canal Zone there were two ways to get a house. You got it through your service. I lived in my lifetime—I think I said this before—I lived in twenty-three different houses, but you bid on houses and you were assigned the house by your service. Let's say a house became vacant and we advertised every week. You apply for your house and your service date was the determination of whether or not you got the house. In other words, if you had the most service of all the people that put in for that particular house, you got the house. And so, people were moving all the time to get better houses. Then there was official housing. When I became chief of community services, I got an official assignment and the house I lived in was

three houses past the governor's house. That was a dream come true for me, 'cause that was a big house when I was a little boy growing up. That's where the big folks lived. [Laughter] So I had arrived in my mind, you know? I loved that house. I went back to Panama a year ago, and a friend of mine was driving me around there and I wanted to see my house up there. It had been bought by a fellow who had a lot of money, and he took that old wooden house and must have hired a very creative architect. It went from just being an old, wooden Canal Zone house to a gorgeous chalet, you know?

O: Wow.

D: Yeah. That's what money can do. [Laughter]

O: So what was your job title as you reach your senior position?

D: I was superintendent of housing from about [19]75 to [19]85, and I got promoted to assistant chief of community services, and my last six months there I was chief of community services.

O: Housing was your main activity. Were there other activities—

D: As the chief of community services, I had four branches under me. I had the library branch. We had a very, very top-notch library. We also had recreation services that came under my division. We had the housing management branch, and at that time we had slightly under six thousand houses left. I also had what

they called the buildings management branch. We managed many of the buildings operated by the Panama Canal. At one time, the division that I was chief of also had the grounds management branch. You know, as a sidebar to this, one of the things that they used to—the newspapers that were trying to convince everybody that the treaty was right used to always put in articles about the manicured lawns in the Canal Zone. Yeah, the Canal Zone had a branch that kept all the grass cut, but if you didn't keep the grass cut in the tropics you had a jungle real soon. So it was simple grass-cutting. I live in a town, a retirement community here in Sun City, the lawns are ten times better than any lawns were down there in the Canal Zone. [Laughter] But the newspapers made such a big deal with the manicured lawns in the Canal Zone.

O: What was wrong with having manicured lawns?

D: They were simply lawns that got cut. [Laughter] Oh, golly. It was a big joke.

O: Was it jealousy? Were they—

D: No, no, no. It was trying to convince the world that the Canal Zone concept was colonialism. It was the press's attack on colonialism. And Canal Zone was considered colonial, that the United States was practicing colonialism in the Canal Zone. They based their argument on making this type of treaty on the fact that the United States didn't want to be colonialistic. That's my opinion, of course, but that's what the newspapers were doing. *The Washington Post* and all the

newspapers—*New York Times*, they were constantly bombarding the people that lived in the Canal Zone with the fact that they lived in manicured houses with manicured lawns. Big deal.

O: Yeah, I thought that was a positive thing. Now, you mentioned the treaty and trying to—you were part of an effort or an initiative to negotiate a different kind of treaty. What were your goals? What were you trying to—?

D: We simply didn't feel the United States needed to give up operational control of the canal. Look, the canal had been operated all these years in the best interest of worldwide commerce. They kept the rates down. It was well-operated. We felt that, yes, some of these things—hire more Panamanians, which we had been doing that anyway. But there needed to be more Panamanians hired. There was nothing wrong with the United States operating the canal. It didn't have to be operated in the—well, I don't know how to say this. The Canal Zone concept had the appearance of colonialism even though we could prove it wasn't a colonialistic operation. But it had all the appearance of that. We had communities that were segregated not by color, but by citizenship. They called them the silver and gold communities at one time. They were referred to as that, the Panamanian employees. And these communities that had the Panamanian employees were originally made up of the people that were imported into the Canal Zone to build the canal. They were the Jamaicans and the Barbadians and all of those people that came out of the Caribbean. These were the houses that

the canal built to house these people. Then as these people married Panamanian people, they became integrated into the Panamanian way of doing things. So these towns were not originally meant for Panamanians; they were meant for the imported laborers. But it seemed as time as went on, as these people became Panamanian citizens and all that, that we were segregating the communities by citizenship and color. Because let's face it, most of the people that were imported to do the work on the canal were the black people out of the Caribbean, although there were many, many Italians that were brought in. Chinese people were brought in, and many of the Chinese people went on to become Panamanian citizens and became very, very wealthy people in commerce in Panama. Hindus: there were Hindus that came to work. There were people brought to the Canal Zone from all over the world to build the canal. It wasn't just Americans. As a matter of fact, you know, they talk about the thousands and thousands of people that died in the construction of the canal. Only three hundred were Americans that died. People don't realize that factor. My grandfather happened to be one of those three hundred that died, but most of the people that died were the black, Jamaican people. Landslides in the construction of the canal, the dynamite accidents. For political purposes, they tried to make the American Canal Zone people look bad. And it was wrong of them to do that. So many of the Canal Zone people had, like I told you before, married Panamanian girls and what have you. Probably at the time the Canal Zone was turned over in [19]99 to the Panamanians, most of the people that

were still down there—I would say more than half of them—were half-Panamanian, half-American, you know? It had gradually changed over where it was a mixture. It wasn't just all white, American people.

O: It was changing constantly, all the time.

D: Constantly changing, right. Yeah.

O: Yeah. Whereas people maybe in—I don't know—the media? I'm still trying to get a handle on this. People from the outside, say, people from the United States appears as if they don't see the changes occurring. They saw--

D: They didn't want to see it. They knew the truth. There's a lot of committees that came down here and did research. The way the truth was perverted by a lot of these newspapers, they just twisted the facts on so many things. I'll tell you the truth, I was sick at my stomach most of the time. I did an interview like we're doing here with *The Washington Post*, and I asked them to retract some of the things they said. They absolutely twisted what was said.

O: What you said.

D: Yeah, what I said. Twisted it. I never got a reply from them. But once something goes to press like that, you're not gonna change it. People read that stuff. But I think Panama has done a pretty good job of operating the canal. The last twenty years, the canal—from the point that the treaty was signed, we were forced into

promoting Panamanians and hiring Panamanians in the trade groups and going through the schools that the canal operated to become electricians and plumbers and things like that. It was almost all Panamanians put into those jobs. So little by little, even though it was still the Canal Zone, it was becoming more and more Panamanian. They've done a fairly good job of it. I think most of us were really concerned with the fact that notoriously, the Panamanian government had—like we're seeing in the United States, the politicians—you'd become president and you'd take all you could get and the people around you take all you can get. We saw that happening if they took over. In fact, the Panamanians saw the same thing. Many of my Panamanian friends said, ah, they're going to take all the money and steal it from the canal. Well, they've done a pretty good job of not doing that. I can't tell you the inside story now 'cause I'm not involved with it. But I think they set up a way of managing it that prevented a lot of that from happening. But the Canal Zone people, based on history of the way Panama had operated, were afraid that this was gonna happen. But I'll make this remark: the cost of a ship going through the canal is far greater than it ever was and that's affected world commerce and the cost of goods in the United States far more than people realize.

O: Yeah, there's the widening that's—

D: Well, they also said the canal was antiquated and they didn't need it. Here they give them seven billion dollars to widen it, you know?

O: [Laughter] Yeah, that was interesting. I know I've taken a lot of your time, Mr. DesLondes.

D: Oh, I've enjoyed it.

O: But you mentioned that you went back. When?

D: A year ago.

O: A year ago. What were your impressions? What were your feelings going back? I mean, when you left you think, this is it, I'm leaving this behind. But you—what were your—

D: Well, the Canal Zone is no longer what I knew growing up. It was one of the most beautiful little places you've ever seen. It was a fabulous place, but it has changed. Well, the world has changed. There's so much traffic in the old town of Balboa now. You've been down there, you wouldn't recognize it. I mean, I didn't even know where I was going most of the time. [Laughter] There's so many different streets now. It's become industrialized. It's a changing place. Well, I think that's—it's just not what I knew, but who cares what I knew, you know? I grew up in what I consider one of the greatest places in the world. It was fun to live in the Canal Zone as a kid. It was a great place to be. It's now just a big business. It's a big, big business. That's the difference. I don't know if I've helped you with any of this.

O: Oh, it's been fabulous. This is the difference between oral history and journalism. I mean, we're not going to be changing your words. [Laughter] It's really the final text. Were there any final thoughts you had, things we didn't talk about that you'd like to add?

D: I could go on and tell story after story, but I think you've got enough there that it's—I don't know that I've shed any different light on it than you've heard before.

O: It's been incredibly educational. I've learned a lot just from listening and the questions. Thank you, Mr. DesLondes.

D: Oh, I've enjoyed it.

O: I really appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcribed by: Jessica Taylor December 7, 2013

Audit edited by: Matt Simmons January 15, 2014