



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

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Interviewee: John Morton

Interviewer: Sarah Blanc

Date: July 8, 2011

B: Hi there. Today is July 8, 2011. This is Sarah Blanc and I'm here with Mr. Jack Morton on the Panama Canal Zone Project. Mr. Morton, can we just start with some details about your life, where you were born, and some details about your parents?

M: Well, I should start with my grandparents, who went to the Canal Zone during construction. My Grandfather Morton was a conductor on the railroad. At the time, the railroad was heavily involved in removing earth from the various cuts that were being formed to accommodate the canal. He earned the Roosevelt Medal with one bar, indicating that he had four years of construction service. On the other side of my family, my Grandfather Bath, Charles Bath, he came to the canal as a military officer in sanitation, and he was a sanitation inspector during construction. He had eight years' service with the canal during construction. Then my father, he went to work for the canal at age fifteen; he came down with his dad.

B: Down from where?

M: Down from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He started work on the Cristóbal Piers at age fifteen in an agency called the Receiving and Forwarding Agency: R.N.F.A, it was commonly known. He served an apprenticeship as a machinist and wound up with the railroad and retired in 1959 with thirty-seven years' service. And then I

was born in the Colón Hospital, as was my brother after me and my sister, five years later. We stayed in Colón until 1940, and then we moved to the Pacific side, living in Ancón at that time. My mother and father divorced in about 1943, and my sister left with my mother. They went to California. My brother and I continued with our education in Balboa High School. He left to play baseball, and I stayed on and get an apprenticeship, telephone office repair, and was drafted into the Army in 1953. Came back in 1957 and got my degree in accounting at the University of Tulsa, and went back to work for the canal. Worked in various positions—in accounting, and then I wound up in the executive planning staff and the treaty planning group, and retired in 1983. It's a good life.

B: [Laughter] That's what everyone seems to say about living in that area. It was a good life.

M: Well, as a kid, we had the run of everything. It was such a safe place that no one minded their kids running around anywhere they pleased. Even at ten or twelve years old, World War II was going on, and we could go down to Albrook Field at that time and see the planes coming in, taking off. Go up to a place called Diablo Dump and pick up airplane parts and take 'em home and construct their little play airplanes. Ten, eleven, twelve years old at that time.

B: That's very cool. Did you go to schools in the Canal Zone?

M: Yes. Went to Ancón Elementary School, and then Balboa High School, and I spent a short time in Canal Zone College, which didn't amount to much.

B: So you went to Canal Zone College before you were drafted?

M: Yes, just briefly, but it was a semester wasted. I didn't do well. I went back to Canal Zone College after my Army period on the GI Bill, and went from there to University of Tulsa where I completed my degree.

B: How did you choose University of Tulsa?

M: Well, I was in the Army with a fellow named Jerry Buchanan who lived in Tulsa. He invited me to stay with him and his family if I wanted to go to the university there, and that's what I did.

B: That's nice. How long were you there?

M: That was very nice of him. See, I went there in 1958, I believe, and graduated in 1960. While I was there I married my wife, who's also a Canal Zone girl. She was working in New York City at that time, and came down to Tulsa to be with me. We got married down there in 1960.

B: So you knew each other before and then you were both in the States at that time?

M: Yes, I met her at Canal Zone College. She graduated from Cristóbal High School in 1957. I graduated from Balboa High School in 1951. We got married at Tulsa. My first son was born in 1961, right after I graduated from college.

B: And you were back in the Canal Zone for that?

M: Mm-hm.

B: So what did you do immediately out of college?

M: I went to work with the accounting division in Balboa Heights. From there I moved onto—well, they were looking for people to get involved in computer programming. The canal was initiating a computer system in various areas of the operation. They were looking for computer programmers. I raised my hand and learned a little bit about computer programming and went to work there for a while, and then went with the systems division which was implementing the computer operations that were being started.

B: These computer operations, were these for accounting or were these for the locks?

M: No, for accounting purposes. Yes, storehouse, the retail store, and payroll. Those were the three primary functions that had nothing to do with the canal operation at all.

B: How long did you do that?

M: Oh, for a couple of years. Once the systems were in operation, I moved on to auditing. I was there for a couple of years, probably. It's been a long time ago. From there, I went on to executive planning staff and got involved in the treaty planning. That was about 1973, [19]74.

B: How did you get conscripted into that?

M: Well, it was part of the job. They put you where they wanted you and needed you. It was very interesting.

B: Definitely tell me more about that.

M: Well, it's hard to explain. Our involvement was only in the implementation of the treaty provisions that were being discussed by someone else at higher levels. We knew that certain things were coming about, and we had to plan for those changes. That was our whole approach to that problem, just to plan for the changes that we knew were coming from the treaty. Changes included loss to the military of functions like schools, hospitals. Those two functions were operated by the canal, as well as the canal. Those functions were being divested to the military down there, D.O.D. Along with that, there were a lot of personnel changes. A lot of our personnel were being transferred to military. Some were being reduced in force, and all of those things had to be planned and carried out effectively. So the plans were drawn up...I don't know what you'd call it a deadline: there was a five-year approach to what was going to happen in the

future, and then there was the long-range aspect of it. The various bureaus in the canal had to develop a five-year plan on how the treaty would be implemented, and then beyond that what they foresaw as a long-term effect on their operation. Some were eliminated. Some of these bosses were writing a plan to eliminate their job, effectively. [Laughter]

B: Wow. Did they have difficulty finding employment in the Zone after that?

M: It was nearly impossible to find employment in the Zone because a lot of the positions were being transferred to Panamanians. The workforce as a whole was being reduced by thousands, so there just weren't any jobs available. So people like me, who didn't want to live on the economy in Panama City somewhere or buy a house in the former Canal Zone, we left and went to the States to live.

B: Okay. So did you do that after this job was done?

M: Yes. In 1983, the job wasn't completely done but my part of it was just kind of distasteful, so I left. My wife wanted to go; she was tired of living down there anyway, and my two kids were in the States. It was time for me to go.

B: When was your second child born?

M: Second child was born in 1963 in Ancón, Gorgas Hospital.

B: Okay. So they both eventually moved to the States. Did they move for college?

M: Yes. They actually worked for a short time in student positions with the canal, which gave us four generations of having been employed with the canal or D.O.D. in the Canal Zone. My oldest son left the Canal Zone to start an apprenticeship in Houston, Texas, and my youngest son was just graduated from junior college with his A.A. degree, and he wanted to pursue his education in Austin at the University of Texas. So, we moved to Austin.

B: Austin's fun.

M: You've been to Austin?

B: I went for a music festival, so I don't think I saw the real Austin, but I saw a great—

M: Oh, cool. South by Southwest?

B: [Laughter] Yeah.

M: Really? [Laughter] Sixth Street.

B: Yeah, it was several years ago, but it was a really cool place. It's not like the rest of Texas.

M: No. Well, it's a college town. And big, big—it's music, for as far as Texas is concerned.

B: Mm-hm. Let's see. So your kids went to Canal Zone schools as well, right?

M: Mm-hm. They both went to Balboa High School, where they graduated. My youngest went on to Canal Zone Junior College at that time, it was called. He graduated two years later with his A.A. degree and wanted to go to the University of Texas in Austin, so that's where we moved.

B: Do you think that their upbringing in the Canal Zone was different from yours?

M: No, not at all. In fact, I grew up in the [19]40s, and they're growing up now in the [19]70s and [19]80s, and things are a lot different. Technology was different, cars were different. They wanted their cars and enjoyed them. The facilities had improved a lot over the years, as you might imagine. I think they had a lot more fun than I did [Laughter] because I was walking to get around and they were driving a car.

B: [Laughter] Do you think their history classes were more American history or world history?

M: Oh, definitely. Yes, world history. In fact, when I was in junior college, they were teaching early world history. But the history was mostly dedicated to U.S. history. Not too much about Panamanian history. You can appreciate that the Canal Zone was kind of a colony, and the people there were colonists. They stayed by themselves, pretty much. A lot of Panamanians in the workforce, and I would say the Panamanians, United States citizens got along very well at work. But there

was not a lot of integration between people in the Canal Zone and people in the Republic of Panama. It was really two different societies.

B: Were you there for the riots during the treaties?

M: Mm-hm. Yeah.

B: Did you get to witness any of that?

M: Well, not really. In 1964, the riots were primarily in the border areas of Panama City. I drove down towards that area **and covered my** car and parked and could see that the U.S. and military tracked vehicles parked, lined up along the road. You could hear the bullets flying over, but there was really no danger there. We were three or four or five blocks from any activity. Those were the only riots that I can remember being significant in my period of time.

B: Was the treaty something that you talked with your neighbors about a lot, or was it really a topic that—

M: It was a hot topic. There was a lot of people who didn't think it was a good thing to do. Of course, a lot of those people were losing their jobs. There was a lot of uncertainty in their minds about what they were going to do in the future if their job was lost. So you can appreciate that. It wasn't a happy time. The Panamanians, rightly or wrongly, were interested in having that area to call their own.

B: But you had to stay for five years after the treaty because of your job?

M: The treaty really didn't go into full effect until 1999. But, there were certain aspects of it that were coming into play before that. Actually, I left in December of [19]83, and that was really before any of the major functions transferred either to the military or to the Panamanians.

B: Did your wife work in the Zone, too?

M: While the kids were young, she took part-time jobs with the military. Then she went full-time with the military later on. Just before we retired, she got in about ten years, I think, working in criminal investigation division as a secretary and stuff like that with D.O.D.

B: Did your family have any sort of traditions in the Zone or the community?

M: We had our circle of friends, and we enjoyed partying with them either in the Canal Zone or in Panama City, either at a hotel or go to dinner at one of the various restaurants downtown. We formed a gourmet club where we went to dinner at each other's houses. Two couples would get together and plan and carry out a meal at various people's houses. That was a pretty good time. Joe Wood was part of that.

B: Oh, was he? [Laughter]

M: Yeah. Joe and Beth.

B: So, when you moved to the States after living in Panama and in the Canal Zone for so long, what was immediately striking to you about your new life?

M: Well, it was different. A lot more convenient. All the stores in the world were around you. You called it the land of the big PX. It was different having to own and maintain a house and the yard around the house, and getting used to paying taxes on property. Having to call people to do repairs on your house when they were necessary and then having to pay them to do it. In the Canal Zone, the government took care of all the housing and all you did was call the plumber, and he came and worked on it, and he left. It cost you nothing. So that was a big difference.

B: Do you still feel like you made the right decision to leave?

M: It was the only decision to be made for me. I wasn't gonna live on the economy in Panama. It was a matter of deciding where in the States to live.

B: But it was an easy decision because your sons were there.

M: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

B: What about for them when they moved here? Because they weren't moving here because of a treaty; they were just moving here for school. Did they like it more here?

M: I'm sure my youngest son did, because he was living with us. My oldest boy came for work, had his struggles. He was really an infant at eighteen. When you find yourself landing in some U.S. city at the age of eighteen never having lived anywhere in the States, it's a shock. He and his buddies were kind of at sea trying to figure out how things were gonna land in their favor, and whether they could make a go of it. But he struggled on. He's doing all right.

B: Have you been back to Panama multiple--?

M: Only one time.

B: When did you go back?

M: Well, it's actually been twice. We took a cruise down there; the ship docked in Colón, which is on the Atlantic side. Since I had lived in that area for a short time in my life, we just took a taxi and cruised around the city of Colón. That was pretty much all we did on that trip, but a couple of years ago I went with my youngest son and his wife. We spent five days on the Pacific side and looked at some of our old haunts, my old house. We got to ride a tug in the canal, and saw some friends that I hadn't seen in a long time. We had a good time.

B: What was your impression of the Canal Zone now?

M: Except for the housing areas, I would say that Panama's done a wonderful job of creating new business, expanding their existing businesses, and taking

advantage of the canal area. There was a huge container operation down there, had the container ports. So I think they've done a wonderful job of using the Canal Zone to their advantage.

B: Did it look the way it did when you left, or did it look different?

M: No, there were a lot of changes, particularly in the housing areas. Some improvements, and some old houses still standing empty and kind of run-down looking. Actually, it's for the better. I was not disappointed on the Pacific side. The Atlantic side I didn't see at all. The city of Colón was very run-down, and the unemployment was very high. That's on the Atlantic side.

B: How long have you been coming to these reunions for?

M: I think our first reunion was in 1984, right after we came to the States. We've probably been to six or eight since then. We don't come every year; I haven't been here for three years.

B: Okay, so three years ago was your last one?

M: Yeah.

B: And what do you usually talk about with people when you're here?

M: Old times.

B: Share stories?

M: How they're doing today and what their kids are doing, where they're living, and aches and pains. We're getting to that age. [Laughter]

B: The last couple people I've talked to, they have had completely different and very strong views about the treaty. I asked them, when you come to these reunions, do people ever brawl or disagree? They said for the most part, they don't really talk about it.

M: That's right, that's right. It's history.

B: Yeah, that's what they say.

M: Generally, I would say people are much happier now than they were in the Canal Zone because of the facilities and the entertainment and their laptops, silly stuff that people do. [Laughter] Coming to the reunion and partying.

B: Have they done anything spectacular at these reunions, like—

M: Have I?

B: Well, not you, but the people who put it on. Have they had anything memorable in the last couple ones that you've gone to?

M: No.

B: [Laughter] I won't tell.

M: They put on a nice dance. I would say they work hard to put on a very nice reunion. For the most part, it is very nice. We've been to various hotels since I started coming to the reunion. The hotels that we've been coming to have gotten bigger and bigger because of the size of the group.

B: Yeah, it's a huge group.

M: I'm getting too old for this party stuff.

B: That's not true. You're from Panama. [Laughter] That was another allusion that people keep making to the group coming here and the bar running out of liquor over there.

M: I don't know that that's happened recently, but it has happened.

B: Maybe more in the [19]80s? [Laughter]

M: Earlier, yes. When the hotels were smaller, they had a reunion where that actually happened. I think that was over in the Holiday Inn Airport. I don't know if it even exists anymore. They absolutely ran out of booze. And the bartender says, I've never seen so much drinking and crying and hugging, no fights.
[Laughter]

B: That's good, especially when there is contentious issues floating around. And no one fights about it.

M: There were probably disagreements among the people over whether the treaty was a good thing or not. But by and large, I would say that the people that left the Canal Zone to live in the States are pretty happy they did it.

B: So what do you think is important for people to take from your experience and your life living in the Canal Zone?

M: That's a hard one. [Laughter] I think it shouldn't be any different from what people are doing or having to do today. You take care of your kids, you keep 'em out of trouble. People have different ideas about religion and where it is in your life, but I don't think life in the Canal Zone was a lot different from philosophy of life in the States. You try to do the right thing, you work hard, keep your boss happy, and keep the kids on the straight and narrow.

B: Yeah. I've heard that if kids step out of line a little too much, they—

M: Well, it was easy to do down there. It was a definite party atmosphere in certain age groups, and there were lots of places to party. They didn't have the age restrictions on drinking and things like that that are common in the States. We're talking about back in the [19]80s and [19]70s.

B: Yeah, yeah. Is there anything else that you wanted to share today?

M: No. Sorry about that. I was going to rely on questions rather than speaking extemporaneously...We enjoyed the Panama Line steamships. We could come

to the United States every two years on a so-called free vacation. The canal paid for your transportation back to your home of record, theoretically. You didn't have to go to your home of record, but they would give you an equal amount of dollars, I would say, so that even if you spent all your time in New Orleans, you would get enough money, as long as you vouchered it, to go to your home in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, if you wished. People could come to the States on the Panama Line ships and travel around in the States and have a virtually travel-free vacation. They used that opportunity to buy new clothes and other things that weren't available regularly in Panama. Those were good memories for me, to be able to travel in the States with my dad and then have my own wife and kids to travel with, drive around in the States. We saw a lot of the country, and it was a nice opportunity. We would come up for a month, which is unheard of up here. You get a week or two vacation, but we get a month.

B: Did you take advantage of that every two years?

M: Not every two years, because although transportation was free it still cost you a lot of money.

B: Did they give you off from work as well? Did you have paid leave from work?

M: Paid leave, oh yes, sure.

B: Wow. That's awesome. [Laughter]

M: Yeah, it was very good. Beyond that, there was a time where we got—our pay was equated with civil service payroll. Our pay was civil service-related plus twenty-five percent for a while. They reduced it later on to fifteen percent, which, I call it, our tropical differential, which was very nice. Pay was excellent, the work was good.

B: But it wasn't too challenging for you when you got here and you had to start to manage all of these things on your own, like your home?

M: No, it wasn't. It wasn't difficult, it was different.

B: Yeah, I see.

M: I had to learn a new area, learn to get around in a new city. But it wasn't hard. My wife was glad to be in the States. [Laughter]

B: Always nice to have your family back together again, too.

M: Yeah.

B: Anything we missed today? Anything we didn't cover?

M: Nothing significant in my opinion. If you have any other questions, why, I'd be happy to go on.

B: I think we're all set.

M: Okay, good.

B: All right, thank you. Once again, this was Sarah Blanc and I'm here with Mr. Jack Morton and it's July 8, 2011.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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