

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

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PCM-041

Interviewee: Charles Hinz

Interviewer: Sarah Blanc

Date: July 7, 2011

B: Good afternoon. This is Sarah Blanc and it's July 7, 2011. I'm here with Charles Hinz.

H: Hinz.

B: Hinz. Thank you. Mr. Hinz, would you care to start just by telling me some details about where you born and your early life growing up?

H: Okay. My dad is from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and things were tough in the early [19]20s after he got out of the Army. So, he reenlisted and was sent to Panama with the Coast Artillery.

B: What was your father's name?

H: Charles.

B: Okay. Sorry, continue.

H: Yes. He met my future mother here in Panama at some kind of a social function, dance. They were married and I was born in the Republic of Panama. My mother is from the Netherlands West Indies. She's Dutch citizen, but not Holland Dutch, Antilles Dutch. But you can't tell that by looking at her, because she's big-boned and blue-eyed and blonde. So that's it, as far as my parents go. I was born in the Republic of Panama, not in the Canal Zone, but in the Republic of Panama. The reason for that is, there was a group of American doctors who started this hotel in

Panama called the Hospital Panamá. It was very popular with the Americans living in the Canal Zone. A great number of them attended these doctors' clinics. Dr. Harrick, Dr. James, Dr. Reeder, Dr. Runyan, all Americans and excellent physicians, and surgeons too. We were living in the Canal Zone, and that's where I went to school and grew up.

B: What was going to school like there?

H: Going to school was fun, elementary school and kindergarten and junior high and high school. The curriculum was very, very good and we got a good education.

B: Was it a lot like U.S. education or was it very different?

H: Oh, no. I imagine it was a lot like the U.S., because it was based on U.S. standards.

B: Did it run sort of like a public school, or was it still...?

H: It was only for members of the families who were working in the Canal Zone, but it was open to Panamanians also provided they paid tuition.

B: So was it a small group of people that you were with through all those years, or did it constantly change?

H: It was pretty static. We all went to elementary school together and then high school. Of course, there was some scattering in those times, but for the most part, yeah, we stayed together as a group.

B: When you came to the end of high school, what did you decide to do?

H: I went into an apprenticeship. The canal always had an apprentice program, four years, and I became a sheet metal worker. I worked in the crafts for a few years, and then I had an opportunity to transfer to heavy construction and heavy equipment operations, which I did. I got a lot of on-the-job training in that, and that's where I stayed for my whole career.

B: Okay. So this was a private company that you were working with?

H: No, it was the Panama Canal Company.

B: Okay. So how does that differ from working for a private company?

H: Well, it was all U.S. government. We were well taken care of. Some people say that we were pampered, and maybe we were. [Laughter] But it was a unique situation, being in the Canal Zone, the Panama Canal. Just this one strip of land was the Canal Zone, and the rest was Republic of Panama.

B: You were still under those circumstances where the government owned your home and all of the different facilities around you?

H: Yes, that was all U.S. government, except for concessions like barber shops, beauty shops, shoe repair shops, and things like this let out on a concession basis.

B: Can you tell me about some of the types of projects you were involved with through your work?

H: Oh, well, we had all kinds of projects. When I was working as a sheet metal worker, we did a lot of stainless steel work for the hospitals and for the restaurants. It was known as a jobbing shop. We didn't do any particular type of work. We had a wide variety of things to do. We were exposed to other crafts, like plumbing and welding and things like that. We got a very well-rounded education in our particular craft. We did roofing work; I did a lot of work in roofing. And that's about it. In the heavy equipment side of it, we did a lot of heavy construction and maintenance and repairs, even railroad systems, but not the main transitioning line; just the railroad network that went into some of these other divisions that were part of the Panama Canal table of organization.

B: You say you're pretty pampered as workers, but were there still ever any issues among people you worked with, where they wanted their working conditions to change for one reason or another?

H: No, they were very happy with their working conditions, sure.

B: Very satisfied. Was it ever dangerous work?

H: Hazardous? In a way, crafts are, yes. Not to a great extent. They had a good safety program, but accidents did happen occasionally. But no, I wouldn't say it was dangerous work.

B: Did your co-workers change at all as people started to come in and out of the Canal Zone later on?

H: Well, they had people retire and they had hired people from the States that would come in, yes. There was changes but they all fit in well. They all fit in well. We had a lot of Panamanians in the Panama Canal Company. For the most part, they were helpers and laborers and things like this, but as time went on and Panama became more involved in the operation of the canal, all these positions were opened up to Panamanians. They filled these slots. The way it stands now is they don't hire any Americans. It's just Panamanian hiring now. They've done well. A lot of people expected the canal to collapse when Panama took it over, but that didn't happen, not at all. They're doing a good job.

B: What were some of the powerful political events that happened while you working?

H: Well the most powerful was the riots of 1964. What sparked it all off was, even going back to 1959, the Panamanians said, hey, give us a break. Let's be partners in this. The United States controlled everything in the Canal Zone at that time. They said, let us participate in the running of the Canal; let us have some of the profits and make it a fifty-fifty deal as far as the profits go. But the United States wouldn't buy that. That was the beginning of the unhappiness on the part of the Panamanians. They felt that it was their right to have a say-so in the operation of the canal because it was their territory. But the United States was

very inflexible on this. That's what triggered the [19]64 riots. The Panamanians wanted to fly the flag over the Canal Zone, and that was really the turning point. They had a solid argument as far as I'm concerned, because the United States has bases overseas in Turkey and all these foreign countries—Germany—the flag of the host country always flew next to the American flag on the bases. This would have been so simple to carry out, say, hey sure, you can fly the flag next to our flag. They wouldn't. That is really what sparked it off.

B: Did you get to witness these riots?

H: Yes, I was right there.

B: Do you have any vivid memories, or was it mostly just chaotic?

H: They called in the U.S. troops; we were never in any physical danger, because we stayed away from them. People were killed and some of our G.I.s were killed and all unnecessary in my opinion. All they would have had to do was agree to fly the flag.

B: As someone who was living there at the time and kind of seeing where everybody was coming from, did you have a hard time discussing it with people in the States that didn't really understand what the issue was? Or did you not really get into it that much with people?

H: No, I really didn't get into it much. Yeah.

B: Okay. Did your family have any sort of strong feelings about it?

H: Yeah, well, we were all very unhappy about it. My wife is a Panamanian, and that's the first question that people ask me. [Laughter] Hey, how does your wife feel about it? But it was a sad situation; nobody could feel happy about it. Nobody. That was just a sad event. Doesn't bring back good memories.

B: Yeah. So your kids grew up in Panama as well?

H: Yeah, they grew up in the Canal Zone.

B: Okay. Would you say they had a similar upbringing to you, the same type of school experience and all that?

H: Yes, yes, yes. Right.

B: What do they think about their lives growing up there? Because they live here now, right?

H: They're here right now, yeah. They loved it, yeah, the kids were very happy.

B: Good. And they were born in the hospital there?

H: Yes, they were born on the Atlantic side because we were living on the Atlantic side at the time.

B: What are their names and what years were they born?

H: Carl, he was born in [19]61, and Heidi was born in [19]64.

B: You had young kids when all of the political chaos was going on. It was probably very frustrating.

H: Yeah.

B: Do you remember any other moments politically that came after that, whether aftermath or much later?

H: Well, there were a lot of changes after that. The treaty went through as a result of that. The treaty eventually went through in [19]77, and they incorporated Panamanian policemen into the Canal Zone police, and eventually they turned over the courts and the hospital eventually went to Panama. The military took over the hospital first, and then everything eventually went to Panama.

B: Over a couple decades?

H: Yeah, in [19]79, [19]77, yeah.

B: Was there any sort of backlash from the Americans when that happened or was it mostly accepted?

H: No. A lot of Americans were very unhappy about the treaty, about giving up the Canal. President Reagan himself said, hey, the canal is ours. We bought it, we paid for it, it's ours. But that's not true. It wasn't ours; we were there, like, on a lease basically. A lot of Americans still harbor bitterness over that, over giving up the canal. Some of them won't come back to Panama because of that. But it had

to come. There had to be a treaty; maybe not the treaty we got, but there should have been a treaty. They needed a treaty.

B: I just had a follow-up question for you about the treaty. Did this affect your job in any way, the treaty?

H: No. When the canal was turned over to Panama, I was carried on in my position by the Panama government. That's how I came to work an extra eleven years at the canal past my mandatory retirement, which would have been my mandatory retirement date under the U.S. system. But I retired from the U.S. government and then was immediately picked up by the Panamanian government in the same position, same rate of pay. So it was a good deal for me.

B: Nice. That works. [Laughter] Wasn't the original policy that once you retire in Panama Canal Zone, you can't really live there?

H: No, you have to give up your quarters, because the quarters are all U.S. government quarters.

B: Did most people have a similar arrangement where once they retire in the U.S., then they are able to get employment in Panama?

H: Some of them stayed with the canal, some of them. A lot of them left. Some of them took early retirement when they saw what was coming.

B: How many years did you work for the company again?

H: Fifty-five, and then I had two years military on top of that.

B: Beforehand?

H: Mm-hm.

B: What was your job in the military?

H: I just was drafted during the Korean War. I was just a private. [Laughter]

B: Did you have to go to Korea?

H: No. The war in Korea ended when we were in basic training.

B: Oh, okay. That's lucky.

H: Yeah, that's right. [Laughter]

B: So where was your training for Korea?

H: In Fort Dix, New Jersey.

B: So that was just a brief period of time where you were uprooted from that area?

H: That's right. We received additional training down in Fort Lee, Virginia, and as soon as I got out of the service, I went back to work for the canal.

B: How long did your parents live in Panama for?

H: My dad retired in 1955. He worked for the canal thirty-one years.

B: Did he move when he retired?

H: Yes.

B: In Panama?

H: No, he went to the States.

B: To the States. Okay. What finally inspired you to retire?

H: [Laughter] I had just had enough. I felt I had worked long enough. I would have stayed a little longer, but my wife had a knee replacement and I had to be with her to take care of her. So I retired.

B: What did your wife do in Panama?

H: She was very active in philanthropic work. She was very involved in an old folks' home downtown in Panama. She was very involved in garden clubs and flower arranging and things like that. She's an accredited judge from the National Garden Headquarters in the States. She's still very active in that, both the old folks' home and the flowers.

B: That'd be cool. Same home?

H: Yeah, same home.

B: Wow, that's amazing. How many years has she been helping out there?

H: Well she started when I became back to the Pacific side in 1984. That's been when she started with that particular home. But when we were on the Atlantic side, she was involved in philanthropic work also.

B: Okay. So tell me about your life now in Panama.

H: Oh, my life is easy. [Laughter] I'm retired and we have a little beach house up the coast a ways, and we spend about every other weekend up there. I stay busy. I'm not working or anything; I'm just staying busy around the house.

B: Do you have family visit?

H: Yeah, the kids. Our son comes down at Christmas, and our daughter comes down when she can. She lives in San Antonio, and she works for the U.S. Marshall there. Our son lives right here in Orlando, and he works for a publishing company.

B: What do you think is important for people to know about your experiences in the Panama Canal Zone?

H: Nothing. My personal experiences? There's nothing for them to know, not much. Like I've told you I would, I had a very unspectacular career here: a long time, but nothing earth-shattering.

B: [Laughter] It's very important, especially if you did it for so long.

- H: Yeah, right. They gave me a good send-off. I must say that the Panamanian management treated me first-class. They treated me royally. Of course I got along well with them; I speak fluent Spanish and I fit right in with them.
- B: Yeah. You could pretty much identify as Panamanian, having lived there for so long.
- H: Well, I am. I carry a dual citizenship. I have Panamanian citizenship also. That was because the dictator we had, General Torrijos, he said, hey, anybody born in the Canal Zone is automatically a Panamanian because the Canal Zone really belongs to Panama even though the United States runs it. When the kids came home for the summer vacations, those kids that were attending college in the States, customs gave them a bad time, immigration. They said, hey, where are your Panamanian documents? We don't have any Panamanian—well then you can't come in. [Laughter] That's when it was decided to—and the United States approved it, they had no choice—that anybody born in Panama was considered a Panamanian citizen.
- B: Panama does have a history of dictators. Did that make you sort of uneasy, just historically?
- H: Not at all. I wish we had him back. [Laughter]

- B: Did you still catch wind of a lot of American propaganda against them while you were in the Zone against the dictators? I'm blanking on the one gentleman's name. It's not the one you mentioned.
- H: Oh, Noriega? Yeah. Well, Noriega was involved in a lot of illegal things. He had a good deal going it's just he just shot himself in the foot. He deserved to be taken down. But no, life under Torrijos was not bad at all. Neither was like under Noriega. You just minded your own business and nobody bothered you. I knew officers in the Panama National Guard and I got along well with them. And so no. To answer your question, no. There was no problem with it, under Torrijos or Noriega. Maybe the politicians had problems, but not the run-of-the-mill person.
- B: Most of the people that you knew living in the Panama Canal Zone, did they work with you or did they have other jobs?
- H: I knew a lot of employees in Panama Canal Company, sure, through my work. People in other divisions and yeah, a lot of people.
- B: Okay. Do you have any stories or memories that you'd like to share from your life there that we should have on record?
- H: No, I can't think of any. No, I really can't think of anything exceptional that would merit... [Laughter]

B: You're far too humble for an oral history interview. [Laughter] You got to vote in Panama? Did you get to vote in any of the elections there?

H: I never voted because I was a little leery of that, because there's a law or regulation that U.S. citizens cannot vote in the presidential elections of a foreign country. So I just stayed away from the voting.

B: But you would have been able to, not as a U.S. citizen, but as a Panamanian citizen?

H: Yes, right, exactly.

B: There would be no problem?

H: Yeah.

B: I was unaware of that U.S. law about voting in another country's elections.

H: Unless it's changed, that's just the way it was. [Laughter]

B: Wow, all right. If there's anything else that you'd like to share, by all means.

H: Well, when I leave here, I'll probably say, hey I could have told her that.

B: Exactly.

H: But I can't think of anything right now.

B: You can take your time. These things are full of pauses. That's what's great about it.

H: We had a lot of interesting projects: the locks, overhauls and...

B: You can tell me more about them.

H: That's when they drain the chambers of the locks on one side. There's two lanes. To do maintenance work on the valves and the culverts and things like that, people come down from the States to see that. It's really spectacular to see the empty chambers. The Panama Canal is quite a unique undertaking, and the digging of the canal and the design, especially, because it was designed way back there at the turn of the century and still operating.

B: Yeah, that's phenomenal.

H: Yeah. I consider myself very fortunate to have worked at the Panama Canal, and spend my life here. I'm very happy that I was able to do that.

B: Yeah. It sounds like a wonderful life there.

H: Yeah, it was a good life. The beaches are nice and a good outdoor life. And we had the climates and no natural disasters like hurricanes or tornadoes or typhoons or anything like that. A lot of people unfortunately don't appreciate what they have here. That's how I see it.

B: So you're not going to think of anything else?

H: [Laughter] I'll try. I'm trying. It was a very laid-back type of life. Sorry.

B: No, that's fine. I'd like to know more just about everyday life. There's things that are going to be way different there from here, but is it because life in Panama is completely different, or was it just a matter of the times going on? Like a grocery store trip in Panama is obviously a completely different experience than the United States.

H: Well, back then, it was, I guess, but now Panama has grocery stores that compare with grocery stores in the States. They've come a long way. Getting back to being pampered, back in the old days you didn't pay rent or electricity. It was all free because you were working for the government and you're in government housing. But they changed that and then they started paying for electricity. We had a limit we could get free electricity from, and then above that limit you had to pay for it. Everybody tried their best to keep below the maximum allowed energy. Every two years, we'd get a free trip to the States. They implemented that because they wanted people that came down from the States to be able to go back to the States and visit their families and not get into a rut down here.

B: That is very nice. That's very considerate of them.

H: We had that free trip, and hospital care was very good. We had a good medical system. There were a lot of little perks like that.

B: When the U.S. controlled your rent and all of those things, was it similar when you had to get food? Did you use actual currency to purchase your food?

H: Yes.

B: But the grocer was run by the United States?

H: The grocer? Oh, yeah. They were all Americans. I'm going way back now, but then, like I say, gradually the Panamanians started to become absorbed into the Company. The only Americans you'll see down here now, they still have some pilots that take the ships through the canal. They still have a few Americans on the pilot force. Other than that, maybe a few engineers but the American presence is just a fraction of what it used to be. It used to be totally American, but now...

B: What are the feelings now when you talk to people, especially Panamanians, that were around when all of the riots were going on?

H: They consider that water over the dam. That's past, unpleasant past. They don't bring it up. You don't hear any bitter discussions about that anymore.

B: What about schools and education? Is it something that they teach about and is there a really strong emphasis on these events?

H: In Panama, I don't know what they teach in regard of that. They no doubt favor Panama's view of what led to the riots and everything. That's only natural. I hold to those views, too.

B: Should I wrap this up?

H: Sure.

B: All right. Okay. Once again, this was Sarah Blanc and it's July 7, 2011 and I'm here with Charles Hinz.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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