

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
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-October 2013

PCM-047

Interviewee: Patsy Detamore

Interviewer: Candice Ellis

Date: October 20, 2011

E: This is Candice Ellis on October 20, 2011 with Patsy Detamore talking about life growing up in the Panama Canal Zone. So, how about we start with, how did you come to be in the Zone or how did your parents?

D: My father went to the Canal Zone in 1940 from Montana. He sent an application without ever expecting to get the job. He went there with the intention of helping to build the third set of locks, which then got stopped because World War II came along. They are now on this day working on those locks.

E: Wow. He was able to get a job there working on the canal itself?

D: Yes, and he expected it to be just a temporary thing. It sort of was for him. He was there just a few years, but my mother and sister and I followed him, stayed with him there, and then I met a man who had lived in the Canal Zone since he was two years old and married him. I stayed there for thirty-nine years. I raised three daughters there. Well, actually, let me back up. I didn't do much other than just mothering until my children were grown, and then I began to kind of branch out, look around, and have my own adventures.

E: About how old were you when you went there with your father?

D: I turned sixteen just a month after I got there.

E: Okay, so you were able to attend high school there.

D: Yes, and I came from a little tiny town in Montana called Alberton, where my graduating class would have been six had I not left, to a class in the Canal Zone of something like three hundred.

E: Were you on the Pacific or the Atlantic side?

D: The Pacific side.

E: What was the high school on that side?

D: Balboa High School.

E: Balboa High School, okay.

D: But I didn't live in Balboa. I lived in a little newly-constructed town called Diablo Heights.

E: Diablo Heights. Were there other high schools besides Balboa on the Pacific side?

D: No.

E: It was just Balboa on the Pacific and just Cristóbal on the Atlantic.

D: Correct.

E: Okay. And it was between those two. Do you know if students went to high school in Panama City, or was it mostly...

- D: It was actually the other way around. Panamanian students came to our Canal Zone high schools. I don't really know of any of the United States children who went to Panama schools. There may have been.
- E: What was making that transition like? You were just sixteen. Montana, and the difference between that and Panama and going to this huge new—what was that like for you?
- D: [Laughter] It was total culture shock. But in order to get there, my mother, sister, and I traveled by train from Montana to New York City, got on a ship, and spent—I think it was probably—ten days getting to Cristóbal. Then, of course, I was seasick for the first three or four days. But when the ship docked and we picked up our luggage—which by the way I still have one of the suitcases that we used—I smelled the tropical air, the warmth, the dampness, the kind of moldy jungle feeling, and I knew I was home. It just seemed like the place I belonged.
- E: So you weren't resentful then for having to move?
- D: Oh, no. Never.
- E: What was life like adjusting to a much larger high school, a different town? What kind of stuff did you guys do as kids?
- D: Actually, it wasn't too hard in school. I'd always been a good student, and things were pretty well-regulated. Life wasn't too bad, too much change for me in that

Diablo Heights was a new town being constructed by new people, and populated by new people. So, I wasn't the only new person in town. We teenagers tended to get together.

E: Can you describe maybe a typical weekend night for a teenager in the Zone?

D: I can't, partly because my teenage weekends were different and partly because times changed over the years so that there just isn't any one thing that you can pick up for that.

E: Right. How did times change? You mentioned you were out there in 1940, was it?

D: [19]41, actually.

E: So that's right on the eve of the war.

D: Well, first the town that I lived in, the buildings were up on stilts with what we called the basement but was actually a space underneath the house where you could park your car. We had electric lights but we didn't have washing machines or dryers or that sort of thing because—I've forgotten the term for electricity now—but we had twenty-five cycle instead of sixty cycle or something like that. The lights would actually flicker because they changed so infrequently. If your eyes got attuned to that flicker, there were times when I would find that my eyes were on when the light was off, or my eyes were off when the light was on, for

just a moment. I found that disconcerting. We had blocks of ice delivered to ice boxes daily. The ice box I remember in our house was a kind of a two-story affair, in that the ice was put in the top part, food was put in the bottom section. They were separated, and there was a drain then going to a pan down in the bottom, which you had to empty or it would overflow. What else was different?

E: In that kind of war atmosphere, did you notice changes then where people panicked?

D: Ah, okay. Now I remember, you've reminded me. We lived in an upstairs apartment, and these buildings didn't have windows. They had screen all the way around the building. We lived in a corner apartment, so that there was screen on two sides of our apartment. The front part was the living room, and there was sort of a half-wall which allowed, of course, air to circulate across the upper part of the rooms. Beyond that wall was the bedroom, and then there was no dining room. There was a kitchen. The apartment next door was so close that in the mornings when my father was shaving, he could hold a conversation with the man next door who was also shaving, because our bathrooms were back-to-back.

E: During the war, were people nervous? Were people kind of on edge? Because that area was kind of a strategic hold-out.

D: Yes, in a way. There were occasional air raid alarms in which case we had to shut off all our lights, pull curtains, which we didn't have. So we had to shut off all our lights. In addition, all the cars couldn't have regular headlights. They had to cover portions of the headlights so that just a thin strip in the middle showed through. There were air raid shelters built with sandbags underneath some of these buildings on stilts. There was one town that had a freestanding air raid shelter, I remember. In fact, when I went back a few years ago, I could still find foundations of it.

E: That'd be nostalgic to be able to go back and find that. That'd be interesting.

D: Yes, it was nostalgic in a way, but things change so much over the years. It was also a little disconcerting.

E: I'd imagine it may be a bit eerie if it's out...

D: In a way I wish I hadn't gone back, just because it changed my view so much.

E: Right. You mentioned you met your husband while you were in the Zone and ended up marrying and staying there with him. Did your parents leave and relocate, did you mention?

D: Yes, my parents left after a few years. I don't remember exactly how many--five, something like, perhaps—and came to the U.S. and moved to the Oregon coast because my father wanted to go salmon fishing. In fact, they located on the Row

River in Oregon. My father bought a boat and did go salmon fishing every day for the rest of his life there.

E: But you remained. The way that I understand it is that you have to be employed if you're a U.S. citizen living within the Zone.

D: That is correct.

E: What kind of work did you do or what kind of work did your husband do?

D: He was a file clerk at the administration building in Balboa for a while and eventually ended up as manager of the printing plant in Balboa.

E: There is this decision you guys made to stay within the Zone and work. What kind of influenced wanting to stay?

D: Neither of us had ever lived in the U.S. as adults. It just seemed natural to stay there.

E: How many children did you have?

D: Three, all daughters.

E: Three kids, okay. All daughters. And they were raised in the Zone and went to high school there and everything?

D: Correct.

E: What was it like raising children there and sending them off to high school?

D: It was wonderful in those years. There was very little crime especially in the Canal Zone, mainly because you were there at the will of the U.S. government. If you got in trouble, you got sent back to the States, and your family with you. Panama pretty much took care of its own citizens. There was no real border between the two countries. You drive down the street, on one side was the U.S.-run Canal Zone, on the other side was Panama. I guess if you wanted to, you could literally stand with one foot in one country and the other foot in the other country.

E: Did you guys stay on the Pacific side all throughout?

D: Yes.

E: All right. What kind of experience did your children have in high school? Did they get into sports and other hobbies?

D: Let me see. Actually, the whole family got into judo.

E: All right. [Laughter] That sounds awesome.

D: My three daughters were all taking judo at the YMCA in Balboa. My oldest daughter found a boyfriend there, and she'd bring him home for dinner and the entire conversation would be judo. It looked to me like something interesting. So I went and took lessons myself, and I spent fifteen years doing that, managed to

get my black belt, which my daughter presented to me by removing her own belt from her judo gi and giving it to me, which I found very moving.

E: That's great. I used to do karate, too, and I really loved it. I didn't do judo, but that's really neat.

D: Well, judo was a whole lot different from karate.

E: Yeah.

D: In fact, the translation's called the gentle way.

E: Did you take judo lessons in Panama City, or was that something that the U.S.—

D: This was in the Balboa YMCA.

E: Okay, alright. Were these American teachers that they had?

D: Yes and no. Two of them were U.S. citizens, but I believe their fathers were Americans and their mothers were Panamanian.

E: So the YMCA was there. What were some other maybe organizations there that provided entertainment? Were there movies theaters for the kids to go to, things like that?

D: There was the clubhouse. There was a clubhouse in Diablo Heights; there was a clubhouse in Balboa. I don't really know about the Atlantic side. I'm sure that they

had them on the Atlantic side too, but I was a Pacific sider. Whichever side you lived on, you referred to the other one as the other side.

E: What are the differences between the Atlantic and the Pacific side? Is one side more kinda populated...

D: I would say the Pacific side was probably more populated, but as far as the oceans are concerned, the tide on the Pacific side would vary sometimes by as much as eighteen feet, where on the Atlantic side, in the Colón area, it varied by mostly two feet. My oldest daughter's first boyfriend—in fact, she married this one—was an Israeli. He was doing a study on sea snakes with the idea that if a sea-level canal were built, and sea snakes migrated from the Pacific to the Atlantic where they didn't exist, they might decimate the fish population because those fish would have not only no immunity but no knowledge. He had a number of little tubs that he kept different fish in and put sea snakes in. His theory was correct in that the Atlantic-side fish got bitten and killed by the sea snakes, whereas the Pacific-side fish managed to avoid them.

E: That sounds like interesting work. Was he a marine biologist and going to school for it?

D: Yes. He was a marine biologist specifically in the Canal Zone from Israel for that reason. I don't quite remember how he and my daughter met. I'm sure it was at the judo club, and I think probably he began judo and lasted only a short time.

But she married him and went back to Israel with him eventually. It was a few years, but she still is in Israel to this day.

E: Wow. Do you guys get to visit often?

D: She comes usually once a year; stays two or three weeks.

E: That's nice that she's able to do that. What have your other daughters gone on to do?

D: Let me back up again a little bit, because this daughter and her husband—she eventually divorced him but married another Israeli, but this time an Italian Israeli. [Laughter] So they have three children who speak English to their mother, Italian to their father, and Hebrew amongst themselves.

E: That's incredible, to be trilingual.

D: It's handy, I guess. So, I have grandchildren who are Israeli, but I also have one who was born in the Philippines, one of those Israeli man's children.

E: They were just there?

D: Yeah, they were there for a year, and then she found out the week that they were on their—after they agreed to go that she was pregnant, and had her son in Manila. She carries two passports. Her children could carry three passports, some of them, but don't. [Laughter]

E: Are they well-behaved?

D: They are now. As teenagers, the boys were...

E: Boys.

D: Yeah, they were boys. [Laughter]

E: All right, so if you want to backtrack a little back to the Zone, I'm just looking at my questions here. It sounds like you had a big family, three girls, a pretty lively household. How did you guys celebrate holidays and things like that? I know there are certain special traditions, I think, down there.

D: We celebrated in the traditional American ways, but for Thanksgiving our tiny little commissary got two turkeys for the entire community. We didn't get one. Actually, another year they got plenty of turkeys, but those turkeys had been fed fish and so they all tasted fishy.

E: Fishy? Oh my gosh.

D: Pretty awful.

E: Fishy turkey.

D: For Christmas, a shipload of Christmas trees would come down in November, I guess. There's an interesting sidelight to that. One of the Christmas trees we got one year had a little note attached. It came from a farm in Newfoundland, and the

writer was a little girl about the same age as my daughter, with her mailing address on it. They corresponded for years.

E: That's amazing. That's a really sweet story. Did you guys participate in the Christmas tree bonfire? I've heard stories about that.

D: Oh, yes. All the teenagers would collect Christmas trees, and I remember one group stored their Christmas trees on top of one of the flat roofs, one of the houses. It was kind of a tradition amongst the teenagers to steal each other's trees whenever they got a chance. But they all ended up at the same place at the same bonfire. [Laughter] So...

E: What was the purpose? Yeah.

D: But they were teenagers.

E: Right. You mentioned you were in the Zone for thirty-nine years, which is a really considerable amount of time. When did you eventually leave?

D: The year that Panama took over.

E: Okay. What were your thoughts on that?

D: I was upset. I was against it. I thought that the Canal Zone should be given to Panama, but not that way. When people say, giving back they shouldn't say giving back, because it had never belonged to Panama in the first place. It

belonged to Colombia. We bought the Canal Zone, then we paid annually for it, then we paid again when we gave it to them. So I was a little upset.

E: And you were there for the riots as well in [19]59 and [19]64.

D: That is true.

E: What was that? Because that happened in Panama City...

D: Well, not really. It originated in Panama City. The high school in Panama City that was just one foot over the border had some, what I would refer to as, professional students. They were there year after year mainly to incite unrest. This one year they decided that they were going to have a demonstration, so they brought a big Panama flag with them. Soon after they crossed the border and got close to Balboa High School, one of those kids carrying the flag tripped, tore the flag. Somehow, it got reported as the U.S. kids tore it. There was a huge uprising, I'd guess you'd say—

E: Was this [19]59 or [19]64, do you recall?

D: [19]59. Anyway, the publicity just got everybody excited, and they began a march into the Canal Zone along Fourth of July Avenue. Our United States government got U.S. soldiers from the—oh, I don't remember now exactly. But the U.S. soldiers were stationed then across the road to stop those Panamanian kids. Our soldiers had rifles, but they hadn't had to shoot any ammunition. Those rifles

were all empty. I have a kind of a vague memory of one of the soldiers coming to our house, which was not far away, and...I don't remember now why, but I only remember that he had a car. His name was Clarence Brown. He wanted to park his car in our yard to keep it safe, I believe. Anyway, one of our daughters called it Clarence's brown car. [Laughter]

E: During either one of the riots, did you feel unsafe in Panama or in the Zone? Was there unrest?

D: Unsafe. One of our police officers, who was actually standing in the Canal Zone but close to the street that was the border, was hit by a block of concrete by students tossing rocks and concrete. It was really a riot.

E: Were you more strict with your children when that was going on? Was everybody in the Zone a bit more tense? I'm just trying to get a picture of how that was spilling over into the Zone.

D: Actually, my kids were all practicing judo in the YMCA at that time.

E: So they were learning to protect themselves, yeah.

D: They were busy. [Laughter]

E: You mentioned you've had a lot of adventures within Panama. You've got this fantastic collection of literature that you've produced. I guess if you wanna—

D: Actually, I've got a printout of one of the stories.

E: Sure.

D: I made this printout as a sample to my Mexican neighbor to see if he read well enough to enjoy it.

E: You mentioned you had a diary and you've been into writing since you were...

D: In my early teens. I still daily make entries in that in my computer now. In fact, up until I had the computer and the means to record it on other than paper, I had had it on paper. I've got boxes and boxes and boxes.

E: [Laughter] A computer definitely makes that a bit easier, I guess, just storage-wise and the ease at which you can produce something of this length. Does the museum have copies of this stuff? I bet they'd be really interested in it.

D: I don't remember. They can have those two copies if you'd like to take them.

E: I know they definitely—the University of Florida is getting their collection and we're gonna hopefully have a Smithsonian exhibit in 2014 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Canal. So we're collecting these oral interviews hopefully to be a part of that, and kind of collaborating with the museum to figure this out. I don't know the exact details; I'm actually going to a meeting tomorrow about it, but I think they would probably really be interested in having this written, kind of about life there and stuff.

- D: They may possibly already have a copy of *Mama Wore Jungle Boots*, I'm not sure. But it doesn't matter, they can have another one.
- E: All right, well why don't you tell me about maybe some of your adventures? You mentioned that you're pretty active in traveling and doing things like that. That sounded interesting.
- D: This sample, *A True Tale*? The family had a boat, and we spent our weekends—first day of the weekend would usually be spent in saltwater fishing; second day of the weekend would be in fresh water. That boat would then be put into the water in Gamboa. And we would go to an island that the government rented to us for a dollar a month. This island was one of the hilltops remaining from the town of Gorgona after the canal was formed and flooded. There is a town in the interior of Panama called Gorgona, but it was named after that first town. Anyway, a friend and I were walking around on this island looking for old bottles. In the olden days, water wasn't safe to drink: it had all sorts of things in it. So, people drank beer or wine or hard liquor and once the bottle was empty they'd toss it. We found, somehow, from some old literature that one of the sidewalks in the town of Gorgona had been formed with bottles placed upside-down, side-by-side and then, I believe, concrete poured over them. We were hunting for not only just that sidewalk, but also other bottles. As we were walking along, we found a hole and my ever-inquisitive companion took a look and he saw a tail disappearing down that hole. So he grabbed it, and it was a big, angry snake.

Fortunately it was a boa constrictor and not something poisonous. But he called out to me, Patty, bring me a stick! Bring me a forked stick!

E: [Laughter] Oh my gosh.

D: Well I had a machete, but with all the trees and things, it takes a while to find a proper stick. When I came back, he was pulling on the tail when the snake turned around in the hole and came out with the head, so he grabbed the head. He said, never mind, I got it! We'd both been carrying burlap sacks to put bottles in; he stuffed the snake in one of the sacks. We were still on an island, and nobody in the family wanted anything to do with a sack with a snake in it. We had to carry it on our laps on the way back home. Well we got home and put the snake in a box, but then nobody was willing to keep the box excepting one guy whose wife wasn't home at the time. So we put the box with that snake in it in what they called their basement, and he forgot to tell his wife. So, when she went downstairs with the laundry in the morning, she discovered this box. Of course, she had to open it. There wasn't just a snake inside: there was that snake, sixty-four eighteen-inch long babies.

E: I'd jump about ten feet in the air.

D: Let me read you the rest. Al's wife, an excitable girl he met in Spain, slept late that Monday morning. About nine and a half months pregnant, she was happy to have Al buy his breakfast at the cafeteria near his office. When she finally rose,

she decided she would put the laundry in the machine to be washing while she ate her breakfast. Still in her robe and with her hair still in curlers, she carried the basket down to the laundry room and found a strange box in the middle of the floor. Setting down her burden, she opened the lid to find the insides squirming with one large, still angry snake and—I lied—forty-one babies. Screaming as though she were being attacked by a pack of werewolves, Maria ran out onto the street, waving her arms and yelling hysterically in Spanish. Once neighbors got her calmed down and reached her husband by phone, the new mother in the box was no longer the angriest one on the block. Maria didn't let Al come home until payday. [Laughter]

E: I'd probably feel the same way. What are you doing keeping a box of snakes in the basement? That's something else.

D: We eventually decided that we'd each keep some snakes. My friend kept three, and I kept one, which I named Alfred. We had to feed the snakes, of course. Snakes can go a long time without eating, but they still need to be fed occasionally. I had a friend who knew somebody who worked in the laboratory at Gorgas Hospital where they used mice in their programs for testing things. They had to cull their population now and then. Every week, I'd take a little box and hand it to my friend and say, fill it up. Occasionally I got as many as ten mice. So I'd bring them home and feed them one by one to Alfred. I had to go to the States for some reason or another, let me see if this will tell us. Yeah I had to go to the

states for some reason. So I left my oldest daughter in charge; my father was living with us at the time. She was kind of babysitting him. She took all ten mice and just dumped them in the cage rather than feeding them one by one. Alfred got—what's it called?—deer fever or something. The thing is that there was so many mice in there, he didn't know quite what to do. So he threw a loop around one and grabbed another one with his mouth, but he only grabbed the hind leg. The mouse turned around, bit him on the nose. Alfred dropped that mouse like it was hot, and went and stuck his nose in his water dish and kind of hid. And you know he wouldn't eat for three months.

E: Because he was nervous.

D: You'd put a mouse in there, and he'd just go and hide. It wasn't until three months later that he eventually got up enough courage to eat a mouse.

E: He was hungry enough. He had to. [Laughter] How big did he get?

D: He got to be almost eight feet long.

E: Oh my, wow. That's huge.

D: He was an ideal pet. He'd hug my neck if I wanted him to. He didn't leave messy feces on the neighbor's yard. What he did is he dropped little fur-covered dehydrated pellets, and I didn't have to feed him much. When I wanted to change his cage, I'd take him out and put him on a clothesline. We had actual

clotheslines to hang clothes on in those days. There were two upright posts with a wire line in between. So, I'd take Alfred and stick him on the top of one of those posts, and he'd just kind of wiggle himself across along on the line until he got to the other post, no place to go so he'd turn around and go back while I was changing his cage. [Laughter] He grew from that eighteen inches to almost eight feet, and I had to put him in a big cage outdoors.

E: Yeah. No room.

D: I never thought to put a lock on the door, you know? I'd just close the door. I guess I don't know what happened. I assume somebody opened the cage and let him out, and he disappeared. In fact, that happened twice. Once, he was found in the maid's room across the street and the maid wasn't happy. Second time, he just plain disappeared. I never did see him again.

E: That's no good. I wonder if maybe he went out and found his siblings.

D: [Laughter] I don't know, maybe.

E: One of the forty.

D: I had lots of adventures, but most of them are included in those two books so you don't really need to go over it. I believe you can have a copy of this one. Oh, there are all kinds of pictures in the back of this.

E: I think they're...yeah.

D: This pretty much tells the...

E: What was it like relocating from the Zone to come back to the States?

D: Now that was culture shock. I'd never had a bank account, didn't know how to use a public telephone. As I remember, driving was a problem.

E: Did you come back here to Florida first?

D: When my husband retired, we came to the U.S. and planned on buying a travel-trailer. We came by ship to San Francisco where my sister met us. We stayed with her for a little while, and I don't remember now whether we bought a car or...Oh, we brought our truck with us. We had bought a four-wheel drive pick-up truck with a camping top on the back of it. It was one of these pop-up tops that you could get into and sit down for lunch, or if you put the top up then you would sleep over the cab and you could walk around at night. Anyway, we travelled then across the U.S. in that truck, looking and looking and looking at various travel-trailers and not really finding anything that appealed to us, until we got to Missouri. And there in Missouri was an outfit that made the Holiday Rambler. The more we looked, the better we liked the Rambler. Our youngest daughter at that time was living in Georgia, and we continued on to Georgia and stayed with her for a little while and then decided that we really liked that Holiday Rambler. So we went back and got it. Had to modify the truck somewhat. Actually we left that

pop-up top in my daughter's backyard and went and bought the Holiday Rambler.

We lived in that Holiday Rambler for a number of years.

E: Just driving around?

D: Yeah. We drove across the U.S. We went into Mexico with a Holiday Rambler caravan, where we got on a railroad flatbed and crossed from Los Mochis on the Pacific coast to Chihuahua in central Mexico, and then drove to the States from there. I don't remember now; I'm sure we did more traveling.

E: That's great. Sounds like a fun time.

D: It was.

E: Yeah. I don't know if there's anything you'd like to add? Anything that stands out that we might have overlooked, just about your time in the Zone?

D: Mostly it's contained in those two books.

E: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcribed by: Jessica Taylor November 29, 2013

Audit Edit: Liz Gray, February 2, 2014