

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
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PCM-037

Interviewee: Irwin Frank

Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski

Date of Interview: July 7, 2011

D: This is Diana Dombrowski at the Panama Canal Conference in Orlando, Florida. Today is July 7, 2011 and I'm here to interview about life in the Panama Canal Zone. Could I ask you to please state your name and how you spell it?

F: Yeah my name is Irwin Frank, I-R-W-I-N F-R-A-N-K. Middle initial is Z.

D: What does that stand for?

F: Zane after my grandmother.

D: That's unique, yeah my middle name is my mom's maiden name too. What years were you in the Panama Canal Zone?

F: I was born there in 1935 and lived there until my father retired and I graduated from high school, Balboa High School, class of 1952.

D: To start off with, how did your family or you come to be in the Zone?

F: My father went there, I think he was sixteen years old. His sister and her husband, Charlie and Celia Cantor, owned the Metropole Hotel which was on the site which was later the French Bazaar in Panama. I don't know if the French Bazaar still exists but at the time it had an escalator, it was a fancy store in Panama City. So he went there and his sister as I understand it took him under her wing and he got a job on the canal. I suspect he said he was twenty-one to get the job when he was sixteen which is no big thing but he stayed for forty

years. In 1927 he married my mother and I had a brother class of 1947 from Balboa High School who passed away about twenty-some years ago and he and I were both raised in the Canal Zone. I lived on the Prado in Balboa, my whole life was in two locations, both were within a half mile of the, keep off the grass, sign on the Prado. And so I'm a product definitely of the Canal Zone, I went from kindergarten through high school.

D: Okay cool. What kind of housing did you live in there?

F: On the Prado we had four family concrete structures and it was quite a thing. Housing was assigned by service and my father went there in 1912, he was a Roosevelt Medal holder and because of his long service we got very good housing so we could walk all over right next door to the dispensary, you could walk to the Steven Circle which had the clubhouse, the commissary and the post office, and my mother didn't drive which was not uncommon in those days. So we had pretty good housing.

D: Okay, were you close to school and everything?

F: Oh yeah I walked to school all the time, never locked the doors, it was never a problem.

D: Okay, was your house air conditioned?

F: No we grew up without air conditioning, without television, we had one telephone in the house it was a candlestick phone, and we lived well. It was a very good life, in fact I think I live well today but I lived just as well in the Canal Zone, it was just a different era. So we had vacations on the Panama Line which were easily equivalent to a Princess Line today, just the ships were smaller instead of being seventy-five thousand tons they were fourteen-thousand or so tons. But they were every bit as nice and we'd either stop in Cuba or Haiti on our way to New York and during the war we flew on the Pan Am clipper to Miami and went on the Pennsylvania railroad in a Pullman car to New York for a vacation. So looking back I would say the older I get, the smarter my parents become. My father used to say it was a working man's paradise and its right, it was. It was an unusual arrangement we had as far as for the working man and especially for the white man, the Americans. The colored was another story but I grew up not knowing there was a thing called a racial problem or poverty because we had none of that in the Canal Zone. I used to go to my school proms, I had a tuxedo. No car had a radio in it, people didn't have radios, certainly not heaters because we were in Panama but nobody had a radio, nobody thought about all these gadgets but we lived very well, just we lived in a different time. We had maids, I used to wear starched khaki pants, starched shirts, because we had maids. So today I don't have maids.

D: [laughter] Me neither.

F: But it was a rarified atmosphere that we lived in. Looking back I didn't appreciate it because I went to school but a good portion of the faculty had master's degrees from Columbia Teacher's College in Balboa High School. The accrediting association gave Balboa High School a extraordinary or outstanding in many, many categories back in about 1947-1948. I remember seeing the report and it was exceptional but as a kid growing up you don't appreciate those things you just know you have to go to class and put up with it.

D: Oh, this is another volunteer. She'd like to take a picture [laughter] if that's okay. But each person I've talked to today has mentioned the high qualifications of the teachers at the school that left a really distinct impression.

F: The teachers were not transferred from the inner-city or anything like that, they were there for thirty years, they were part of the society. And my father used to play poker at the Elks Club with some of the teachers and it was never mentioned to me in school but I think I could tell by the look on their face if they won or lost the night before but they never discussed it with me naturally. But those people were part of the society and I'll never forget one time when my trigonometry teacher who happened to be a graduate of the United States Naval Academy who did not follow a naval career, called the house one morning at about seven and said to my father, Fred, where's that damn kid of yours? He's supposed to be here, he didn't know his trigonometry yesterday. And I went flying into that school room at about seven-thirty in the morning still chewing my

breakfast. Now that to me was the ultimate PTA meeting, when you get a call like that at the house—

D: It sounds like a really close community.

F: from a teacher and it was that kind community. Never locked the door, the key would be under the mat or the flower pot somewhere, but there was never a need to lock the door.

D: That's amazing, and the weather was nice, it was a nice place to grow up?

F: Yeah I never owned a sweater—

D: Oh my god.

F: It was hot. Once it got cool and I had to have a sweater in the whole time I was there, just once. I don't know what freak weather or something like that.

D: Where did you go in the United States, did you need a sweater then?

F: My parents went to New York so we'd go to New York, go up to the Catskills, whatever. We had an extraordinary life when I tell my kids today, and we live well but no better than we had in the Canal Zone. It was an artificial environment.

D: Did you have much interaction with the other Panamanians?

F: No I was born and grew up in the country and I don't speak Spanish.

D: Oh wow.

F: Which I think is symptomatic and I didn't speak Spanish because I learned it in school for four years but that's not how you're going to learn it. When you need it to eat, you'll learn Spanish. But I had no need for Spanish and there was very little interaction with the locals. We were an American community and when Teddy Roosevelt was the president he needed Americans to go there to be the cadre for building the canal and basically I think what he said was, you will be living in an American community, and it's true. So much so that we didn't need Spanish. Nowhere in the Canal Zone to my knowledge did they fly the Panamanian flag. I left in 1952—twelve years later—in *Time* magazine there was a story about flag riots. The Panamanians were carrying on, it was their country. We had our own police force, our own postal system. If my mother gave the maid a can of powdered milk, I grew up on Klim which is milk spelled backwards it's powdered milk. I probably couldn't get a glass of it down today.

D: [laughter]

F: But I grew up on it. It came in a gallon can, like a gallon of paint can, just a gallon can of powdered milk and if my mother gave the maid a can of Klim she better give her a note because Canal Zone police would probably stop her and want to know where she got the Klim. Was it stolen because she was on her way home to Panama? I didn't realize that, I never in my life sat next to a black student. Schools were totally segregated; it was probably as bad as apartheid in South Africa, so much so that there was no racial problem.

D: Yeah just no tension existed that you were aware of.

F: The blacks did not only live in different towns, they used—we had commissary books—they had a two and a half dollar commissary book that was brown, tan. The whites had five and fifteen dollar that were salmon colored. They used different colored money in terms of the coupons for the commissary. The dollar was what everybody used in Panama and the Canal Zone. But they rode not just in the back of the bus they rode in different buses. They didn't ride in the back of the train they rode in the back of the car. They had a different section of the train separated by the baggage car. The railroad station was divided by the baggage room. Segregation was complete and it's what got the canal built. The Panama Canal was built I would say on the back of the black man. The white man was the cadre, he gave the orders. There might have been five to seven thousand whites but the bulk of them were from the Barbados, the black man. He's the one who carried the bananas, he's the one who dug the ditches, he's the one who had the DDT or whatever strapped to his back spraying ditches for mosquitos to clear of malaria, that kind of thing. The labor was done by the black man. The supervision was done by the white man who was paid in gold and blacks were paid in silver. There was a gold roll and a silver roll so that made all the difference in the world and very very few Panamanians were hired and some got on the gold roll but most of everybody else was just on the silver roll except for the Americans.

D: And this is continued with the commissary but colors too.

F: Commissaries were not integrated, they were different. The blacks shopped in different commissaries; they were not allowed in the white commissaries. The black commissaries were in the black towns. Now when they started that these people were brought from Barbados, the Panamanian is fair-skinned but they did not hire the Panamanians they brought people from the Barbados, Jamaica, places like this. And they gave them a house and three meals a day so compared to what they had they were probably then in 1904 through 1914, the construction period, they probably were living well. But the problem was they had schools for the kids and an American class would be maybe thirty-five, forty kids but the black classes would be a whole different story where they would have maybe a hundred in a class or whatever it would be. It wasn't separate but equal, far from it. But they ended up with a generation that wanted better than their parents and hence racial problems started. I remember in 1950 the parade through Balboa, the town I lived in, by the AFL-CIO and that was where the labor problems started, before then there was no such thing as a labor problem. It's getting chilly in here.

D: Yeah it's kind of cold [laughter]. Did you follow the racial problems when you were in the states?

F: I beg your pardon?

D: Did you follow the racial problems in the states, like did you keep up with the news back in Panama?

F: No I really didn't; I left in 1952 it was over. There was no racial problem until I got to this country. But I can tell you this, I did not know as I grew up that the word nigger was a derogatory term. Just never knew it, it was just a figure of speech like calling this a table. I never knew and now it's the n-word but I would never think of using such a word. I never knew there was a problem just that it was segregated. It's like saying, how much problem do you have with Aborigines? None, there are none. It's the same thing there, never mingled with the blacks, never sat next to a black child in school. I guess the armed forces were desegregated about 1948, Truman did that and by 1952 it really hadn't hit so we didn't have military kids in the schools. The only foreign kids we had were either rich Panamanians or from the diplomatic corps who would come with their limousines and so forth. Other than that it was strictly white.

D: Wow, that's really isolated. What were your experiences in grade school and high school like in terms of maybe rivalry between the other schools, did you participate in that?

F: There was another school, Cristobal High School, on the other side of the isthmus and there was a junior college. We had a rivalry there but that was about it. The locals rate schools later, the silver the black, there was no rivalry we never played a game against them, nothing. But the rivalry was between the schools, the dominant school was Balboa High School on the Pacific side. Cristobal was minor and the Canal Zone Junior College was just small.

D: Okay, did you play any kind of sports growing up?

F: Yeah I lettered in football and track. One year we flew from Panama to Miami to play against Miami Jackson High School in the Orange Bowl.

D: Cool.

F: They flew us up and the year, it was either before or after, about 1950 I think maybe the year before it Miami Jackson came to the Canal Zone over Thanksgiving. We all put them up in our homes and the fellow who stayed with me was named Delmonico and I think he was from the Delmonico Steakhouse family. But there was all kinds of sports and in the summer time they had programs. We lived well, remember? We had archery, tumbling, boxing, all these things. Rich people don't live any better.

D: Yeah it sounds idyllic, it really does.

F: It was something that will never exist again, it was just an oddity but they'll never have it again.

D: Did you ever ride on or do you have any memories of the Panama Railroad?

F: Yeah, to this day when I see PRR which means Pennsylvania Railroad, I see Panama Railroad. The PRR was the way to go. It ran across the isthmus, it left Balboa, there was a 7:10, a 12:20, a 4:40, and a 10:10. How is that for remembering?

D: That's awesome [laughter].

F: That's when they left Balboa, four trains a day. The trains were beautiful inside, they were rebuilt by the mechanical division in 1924. There was a sign painted in the car, the wicker seats, gas lights, and they were beautiful. One of them still remains at Summit Gardens and is in total disrepair, you would never know it was the same car, kids climb on it now in Panama but they were beautiful cars. They have since rebuilt the track, the Balboa Train Station is not in use they run as far as Corozal to I guess now into Colon. But it's not the same train, when you talk to the kids today about a choo choo they don't know what a choo choo is. We had real choo choos where the steam would chug out of, these were steam engines and today they have diesel; it's altogether different.

D: Yeah, how were your holidays celebrated? Any different from back in the States, like Christmas or New Years?

F: Not that I know of. The only thing we had was the Christmas tree gangs and they made Chicago in the [19]20s probably look like nothing. The thing then was to take all the old Christmas trees and there would be gangs who would steal the Christmas trees and have big bonfires and whatnot.

D: Cool.

F: And that was about it, there was no snow.

- D: It's funny I know some people in South Florida who do that actually. But I have never heard about it anywhere else. I don't know if it's a tropical thing, to burn your Christmas tree.
- F: Those Christmas tree gangs used to really cause damage. They houses were all raised and you would park your car underneath and people would build workshops and whatnot and they stored the trees in there and then the kids would tear these workshops down. One time the police made a sweep in the schools and took everybody in that they knew was involved with this. They missed me, I don't know how [laughter]. A lot of parents had to get down to the police station to get the kids out, it was a story.
- D: So you stole some Christmas trees too?
- F: We were stealing Christmas trees, the Christmas tree gangs.
- D: Did you ever have a job when you were living there?
- F: Yeah I was a playground assistant for sixty cents an hour and that was about the only job, that and delivering papers maybe. I used to set pins in the bowling alley. Got my knee bonked by a bowling pin one time but maybe lifeguard jobs, those were the only jobs you had. Nobody really needed a job, there was no poverty. Everybody had what they had, nobody was rich nobody was poor.
- D: That's utopian.

F: And it depended on the job your father had that's all.

D: How was life changed when World War II was going on in the Zone?

F: Just more military, my life really didn't change. I lived on the Prado in Balboa which was like a premier street. One time a barrage balloon broke loose and landed right on the Prado, that was a big excitement. Every Fourth of July we would have displays of military hardware and that kind of thing. My father worked twenty-four-seven with the shipping because he was in charge of the ports at Balboa. He was called Stevedore Foreman but he never carried the bananas, he was in charge. And it was total chaos as far as I know for him with the coming and going of the Pacific Fleet. I remember going aboard the Missouri when it came back, I remember going aboard the Boise, the North Carolina, the Shangri-La, these are ships that are part of naval history today. I remembered when the Franklin went through, it was so badly damaged nobody went aboard, but it went through at an angle how it even got through the canal I don't know. There was just an awful lot of that and we had Japanese prisoners at the quarantine station which is now where the fifth naval district headquarters were. Its right near where everybody stays at the Country Inns in Amador and we went driving by just to see the Japanese prisoners. Besides barrage balloons we had air raid shelters under the house. My earliest memory of the war years was when at six years old my job was to stand there and hold a burlap sack open so that the men would fill it with sand and we'd make sandbags for underneath the house was the air raid

shelter. And the big thing was to break into the lock cabinet and steal maybe the gas masks and all this, as kids we didn't realize that this was putting someone else's life possibly at risk but that's what they did.

D: Yeah but you didn't feel threatened, your safety or anything?

F: No, no never. When I was six, seven, eight years old I hardly understood the Japanese might have bombed. Nothing like that.

D: Yeah, did you practice air raid drills in the shelters?

F: We did, my brother was an air raid warden and had a pith helmet and a whistle [laughter] which was a big deal. He was five years older than I. But no I never felt threatened, I never knew the difference.

D: Okay what were your thoughts and feelings about the turnover of the Zone to Panama?

F: Well all we really turned over was the control of the canal, we never owned anything. We never owned the Canal Zone, Panama never ceded the Canal Zone. The Canal Zone always belonged to Panama. We had a lease on the Canal Zone, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which was 1903 was never signed by any Panamanian. It was signed by Bunau-Varilla who was a Frenchman and he worked for the New French Canal Company. The company was formed after the Lesseps failed at building the canal. He got himself appointed as the

Ambassador Plenipotentiary by Panama. The president of Panama was not present when he did all this but he went into the White House and went into the state department and when John Hay, who was then Secretary of State, he signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. The company from France was represented by a Wall Street attorney, I think his—

[Interview interrupted by telephone ringing]

F: Hello? Hi, I'm in the middle of being interviewed by the University of Florida. A delightful young lady who is a history major is interviewing me. Yeah [laughter]. Okay call you later, right. Bye. My wife in California.

D: Oh wow [laughter].

F: Anyway, they signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty and the French were represented by a Wall Street lawyer, I think his name was Cromwell. And forty million dollars was paid to the French in exchange for their rights to build the Panama Canal that they had received from Colombia. And nobody to this day knows exactly what happened to that forty million dollars. Now the next day the president of Panama, named Amador, arrived in New York and he was fit to be tied when he found out the treaty had already been signed. No Panamanian had signed it, Bunau-Varilla was French. And it said, the treaty will be in perpetuity and the United States will act as if they were sovereign. No lease in this country, in the United States, is good for more than ninety-nine years. But still the lease

for the Canal Zone which basically cut the country in half said, it will be in perpetuity. Well when the Panamanians found out what was going on they kind of had questions but at the same time they became a country. Before that they were a province with Colombia, now they became a country so they had mixed emotions about whether this is good or what. But when they finally woke up to what they had, they had a foreign power cutting the country in half. It was as if we had a strip ten miles wide running the length of the Mississippi River with a foreign power acting as if they were sovereign in perpetuity, that's what Panama had.

D: Yeah that kind of dealing is so common in Central America at the time.

F: But it was not tenable from the get go in my opinion. It was an artificial arrangement so when the Panamanians finally woke up and the pressure started, and it started under Eisenhower, they wanted their country back because no Panamanian was allowed to loiter in the Canal Zone. The maids with their tins of Klim and their notes, the Canal Zone police knew to let them pass. But Panamanians were only allowed to traverse the Canal Zone but not loiter in the Canal Zone. When Panama woke up to what they had under Eisenhower in the [19]50s they started agitating. And by 1974 it got to where they signed the treaty to turn over the Canal Zone. And they were smart, they had a twenty-five year transition period to **Rios** and Carter. But Carter did not give away the Panama Canal, it happened to come to fruition on his watch but it started I think under the

Eisenhower Administration. The Panamanians wanted their country back and they are better off, I think, for it because they got this new canal under construction now and the Americans remained the United States taxpayer probably would not have invested the billions of dollars that's required to build the new canal. So with the new canal it's a new day for them. So as far as getting out, I don't think we ever owned anything, I know we didn't. We never owned it and it would have been a flashpoint had we remained, with terrorism and whatnot. Because the Canal today is a two-lane proposition and it would take little more than a large firecracker to shut it down so there would have been a lot of trouble had we remained.

D: Do you go back ever?

F: I've been back about six times. I've taken grandchildren and whatnot and it's probably obvious to you I've done a lot of reading on the subject.

D: Yeah, yeah.

F: I've pretty well kept up with it. But I've taken grandchildren and whatnot. And one of the things I learned from David McCullough's book, *Path Between the Seas*, was the Panama Canal was started the year after the first factory in the United States was electrified. So here you had electricity for the first time and long a year later they started the Panama Canal which runs on two thing, electricity and gravity. The Panama Canal was built with electricity one year after the first

factory was electrified in the United States. It ran on twenty-five cycle electricity. Everything today is sixty cycle and if you could find an incandescent bulb I grew up with twenty-five cycles and you could see them flicker. Sixty cycles you can't see that but then it was twenty-five cycles and it was the first time that a consortium between the government and private industry worked, it was a forerunner to the Manhattan Project which built the atom bomb.

D: Really?

F: Well we did the same thing there between General Electric and the United States government and later between the government and all these private companies who did the Manhattan Project which built the atomic bomb, so there is a parallel. Not exactly but it is a parallel of what can be done and that's what happened.

D: Let's see, how important would you say that Panamanian culture was in your life when you lived there?

F: Only as human interest to people who were interested. As an American I was not one, my parents did not get involved, I did not get involved with the local culture. My father knew all of the influential Panamanian business people because he ran the Port of Balboa which is at the southern end of the Panama Canal and all the cargo for the upscale stores went across his docks, therefore he knew all the wealthy Panamanians who owned those stores. He got involved; my mother did not. My mother basically was from Brooklyn and she never assimilated, we kept

to ourselves. So the Panamanian culture, it was nice, but no more than the Canadian culture would be or the Mexican culture would be. That's how it was.

D: Okay, what inspired you to do all this research into the history of the canal? When you left were you just really interested?

F: When did I do it?

D: Yeah and why?

F: I became interested. I learned everything after I left. I took a look at, where have I been? I was living history and I decided to find out what I had done, and so I did.

D: Yeah, those are actually my questions. Would you like to speak any more about anything we talked about or anything we haven't covered?

F: Just I think that the country Panama is much better off with the Americans gone. I think the Americans are probably better off with the Americans gone, having left. They pull the Panama Canal Treaty, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1904, was probably the used swizzle. that is finagle, in perpetuity as if we were sovereign. What went on in France with the French investing their money was the Madoff Scandal of its day. And Gustav Eiffel of the Eiffel Tower was sentenced to prison as a result of that because everybody invested money and they lost it. Gustav Eiffel never went to prison, he got off somehow but he was sentenced to prison. So the whole thing when you get done, it was a finagle.

However, it did create the Panama Canal which to this day is very influential in world commerce. It is significant, ships go through twenty-four-seven today and there is going to be more. So did it accomplish something for mankind? Yes it did. And was it worth it? Probably. But was it a finagle? Yes, it's no question and others say the same thing. So that's my story.

D: Okay, thank you.

F: The Panama Railroad was the highest cost railroad to travel on in the world per mile.

D: I didn't know that.

F: They charged more per mile than any other railroad because all the gold was going back and forth. Also at one point stock in the Panama Railroad was the highest priced stock on the New York Stock Exchange.

D: Hmm wow.

F: You didn't know that either.

D: No I'm sure that came Panamanians off the railroad and out of the market too.

F: Well the railroad was owned by the American entrepreneurs. One named Aspinwall, the town of Colon used to be called Aspinwall. They changed it to Colon which meant Columbus for Christopher Columbus. And Cristobal is Christopher and Colon was Columbus. But it was called Aspinwall. The United

States government later bought the Panama railroad and it was the first transcontinental railroad, it went from coast to coast before the Union Pacific and Central Pacific went coast to coast. The Promontory spike, the gold spike, at Promontory Point, Utah, the Panama Railroad started about 1856 way before the Central Pacific and Union Pacific across the continent. It was the first transcontinental railroad, the Panama railroad. It was costly to travel on and the highest priced stock on the New York Stock Exchange. Without it there would have not have been a Panama Canal. To get the labor, I still remember the labor trains to bring people in back and forth and they moved, they spoiled the excavation by way of the railroad so they could dig.

D: Yeah you gotta put the land somewhere [laughter].

F: The town I lived in, Balboa, was built on fill.

D: Wow, I didn't know that.

F: The house I lived in is now condemned. The other houses on the street are used as offices by the Panama Canal Company, the Panama Canal Authority. The house I lived in is condemned, you can see cracks around it because of subsidence. It was built on fill.

D: Yeah, so it's moving.

F: That's right. It's condemned, you can't go in it, but the rest of them are still in use, the Prado it's called.

D: Cool, is that P-r-a-d-o?

F: P-r-a-d-o. It's now renamed something **Aleman** but it was known as the Prado. And I remember when they went from left-hand drive like the English to right-hand drive. Instead of going down this side, you go this way. That's it.

D: Okay, all right.

F: Okay.

[End of Interview]

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