

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Carl Folke Sahleen

INTERVIEWEE: Carl Folke Sahleen

INTERVIEWER: Maggie Bartel Kivel for the Key West Women's Club

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: August 14, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:37:56

Kivel: Mary, you interrupted there. Shall I pull back and start again?

Malone: No, it probably is on white.

K: Oh, alright. This is another in the series of 'Key West As It Was' - a project sponsored by the Key West Women's Club as part of its bicentennial program. This is Maggie Bartel Kivel speaking, a former reporter on the New York Daily News who is a committee member working under the direction of our elder statesman and committee chairman Mary Wood Malone. This morning we are taping in the home of a national-- internationally known artist Carolyn Fuller who has with her two guests- one of whom you will hear. One guest is (Gerhardt Root?) who is the publisher of the *Swedish North Star* in New York- a 103 year-old paper. And the star of this program is a gentleman ninety years old named Carl Folke, F- as in 'Frank'-O-L-K-E Sahleen, S- as in Sam-A-H-L-E-E-N, a native of Stockholm who is himself an artist, a member of the Explorer's Club, but more important, he worked on the famous railroad that went to sea: 'Flagler's Folly'. We're calling this program 'Working on the Railroad'. Good morning, Mr. Sahleen. Welcome to Key West.

Sahleen: Good morning. May I begin the story with the very fact that I did not come down here to work on the railroad, but I came in the mistaken idea that I could act as a waiter for the Halcyon Hall Hotel?

K: For which hotel?

S: Halcyon Hall.

K: Where was that located?

S: Where the Dupont building stands today.

K: I see.

S: In Miami.

K: I see.

S: I got fired--

K: You weren't a good waiter?

S: --the first day.

K: You weren't a good waiter?

S: No. No, I didn't know anything about the things that I should have known.

K: Yes? So what happened then?

S: So, after I got fired, I walked out-- around the Riverfront of Miami and I had \$1.65.

K: What year was that?

S: Nineteen hundred and five.

K: And you had come from Stockholm when?

S: As I said before--
[audio cuts off]

M: Always a little bit of tape in the beginning [coughs]. We'll just have to wait for that.

Unknown2: How often do you have to take your treatments?

M: I take one four times a day, the breathing machine, and I take the oxygen and the doctor said use it as little as I--

U2: They never hospitalized you for it, have they?

M: [laughs] I spent fifty days in the hospital this past winter.
[audio cuts back to interview]

S:--and pick up the right plates and then bring it over and get it filled and so on.

K: I see.

S: Apparently, if I had been-- had only-- had had one week of training--

K: Of training.

S:--I would have passed because it's not very complicated.

K: Well then sir, I would assume since you lost that job you looked for another and is that how you ended up on the railroad?

S: That's exactly how it is. I --

K: Tell us about how you learned the railroad was being built and how you applied for the job.

S: Alright. Walking along the (motor front?) of Miami, I came to a flatcar, and some people were sitting on the flatcar and I asked, "Could anybody here tell me where I could get a job?" And they said, "Sure, hop on this car."

K: Just like that?

S: Yes. So, we rode down to about twenty miles south of Homestead and by that time, everything got too muddy and the railroad stopped but the building of the railroad and someone had continued on and on but it hadn't dried up yet. On both sides were canals and we, of course, knew something about that this railroad would eventually land in Key West.

K: Had you ever heard of Key West before, sir?

S: That is a question that I couldn't answer because I am not sure. Geographically speaking, I have a pretty good knowledge so it's very possible that I had heard of Key West.

K: Could you visualize, though, this railroad that was going to go to sea?

S: Well, it wasn't anything as poetic as that to us that were shoveling dirt on the grade.

K: Were you a laborer?

S: Yes.

K: Tell me what--

S: But--

K: --how big were the work gangs and what did the labor consist of?

S: Well, after about a week, I applied for a job in the water gang.

K: In the water gang?

K: Yes. And nobody wanted that job, so that was easy. And nobody had stayed more than three days.

K: Now, the water gang, was that as a diver?

S: I will explain that.

K: Yes, sir.

S: So, I stayed on it for nine months.

K: Yes, I recall you told me you were there from January until November.

S: Yes.

K: You stayed on that job then the whole nine months.

S: Yes.

K: Tell me what it entailed.

S: Well, idea was that along the grade were two dredges- pretty large clumsy sort of affairs- and they lifted up dirt and put it up under grade and eventually, worked its way forward. But to me in the water gang had to build a kind of-- well, fence- a water-tight or a near water-tight fence- around the dredge so that it could float and move freely.

K: Mm-hmm.

S: And then in addition to that- and that was the hardest job- was to take a rope over your shoulder and carry it over to a hammock, you know, the Everglade hammocks.

K: Right.

S: Very-- almost as impenetrable as the Amazonian jungles, or most of them. [both speak at same time] So--

K: Was-- Was it a matter of sort of clawing your way foot by foot through that jungle?

S: Well, it-- as far as the hammocks were concerned, we didn't have to go get in any further than to the first good sized tree.

K: Would that be about five hundred feet?

S: Oh, no. Very few of the hammocks were five hundred feet in diameter; some of them were, of course, but the first good-sized tree that we could sling a rope around for the dredge to pull its way up.

K: Mr. Sahleen, if you worked there from January to November, that means you worked during the summer months.

S: That's right.

K: Tell us something about the mosquitoes and the weather and whatnot during those months.

S: Well, when you are nineteen years old, you take things more or less as they come.

K: In stride.

S: Yes. We ran into a lot of unusual circumstances. There was one time when the supply stopped, so we lived on-- for about two weeks, we lived on nothing but frankfurters, very good frankfurters.

K: No sauerkraut?

S: No, nothing but the frankfurters.

K: Tell me, now you were probably working deep enough in the water that you would see alligators.

S: Yes.

K: Tell me about the alligators.

S: Yes. At that time, the alligator was abundant, very abundant, very much so. And we became so familiar with the alligators that the young ones, we tied up around our uh--

K: Camp?

S: --camp and we had to kind of improvise sort of a camp- a large tent where about eighty men slept in long rows.

K: How many in the camp about?

S: I would say between eighty and ninety men.

K: And I understand from the little I've read about it that they were all nationalities.

S: And particularly, the camp that I was in, they had apparently been recruited off the Bowery in New York.

K: Yes, from the skid row. Was there much drinking?

S: No.

K: They weren't supposed to drink at all on the job.

S: There was no liquor in the camps at all and that was a very strict supervision that no liquor came down there. But Homestead was the devilment place. We couldn't get regular liquor-- of course, I didn't drink at all, but I often went up with some of men that went up to Homestead to buy hair oil- that is uh--

M: Hair tonic?

S: Yes.

K: Hair tonic?

S: Hair tonic.

K: Hair tonic.

S: Yes.

K: Bay rum?

S: Bay rum.

K: Yeah, that would kill you.

S: It didn't kill--

K: They used to drink it, didn't they?

S: It didn't kill anybody in the camp. They drank bay rum but of course, nearly all these people had been recruited off the Bowery and so, their stomachs were pretty well-adjusted to whatever drinks that could come down.

K: Mr. Sahleen, tell me, what was a normal work week? You would start at what time in the morning and work how many days a week?

S: We worked six days in the week and ten hours.

K: Ten hours a day?

S: Yes.

K: From sun-- sun up to sun down, then.

S: Well, since I worked through the summertime, we had a little bit of daylight later and so on. As a matter of fact, it really wasn't any hardship to a young fellow. And it probably was no-- not much of a hardship to the bums that had been recruited off the Bowery.

K: It probably added to their life-span.

S: It probably did. And, because I had arrived with a high (collar?), I was christened 'The Baron'.

K: 'The Baron'?

S: Yeah.

K: 'The Baron of the Railroad'.

S: Yeah.

K: That's wonderful. Could you tell me, sir, what the pay was for the six days ten hours a day?

S: Well, \$1.65.

K: A day?

S: A day, yeah.

K: Plus your lodging and food?

S: No. Of course the lodging was no charge at all, you-- but we paid about \$3.00 a week for the food.

K: Tell me, what sort of food did they serve?

S: Well, except for the period when we were stuck with the frankfurters, we practically organized a kind of sit-down or a strike [both laugh] when-- to stop the frankfurters from coming down and after that, I probably did eat better on the railroad than I did for quite a few years afterwards in my life in New York and Texas.

K: You know, Mr. Sahleen, I assume you were a handsome blond Scandinavian. You're still a handsome man.

S: I was not handsome.

K: Well, you were blond?

S: Yes, that I --

K: What did the sun and the bugs do to that blond complexion?

S: I'll tell you, it did a marvelous thing to me. That is, nearly all kids, particularly kids of Scandinavian extraction, at the time of adolescence, they get a lot of pimples and so on--

K: Acne.

S: Yeah. The Florida sun cured that perfectly. I had skin like a baby after I came back to New York.

K: Wonderful. Well, you know-- now, you were telling me you worked in the water. How deep did you work?

S: Well, the Everglades water varied a little bit with the season.

K: Uh-huh.

S: The Everglades water varied a little bit with the season, but at the height it would reach us just about-- the thing is I'm pretty tall and I would--

K: Yes, you're six feet at least, aren't you?

S: So, it reached just about to my nipples.

K: Well, that kept you cool then. That kept you cool. That's why you couldn't feel this tropical sun.

S: Yes, yes. But, I had come from Sweden and the warmth of the Florida sun was a blessing to me.

K: Yes, I know how cold it gets there.

S: Yes.

K: Mr. Sahleen, you know one thing I'm not quite clear on? This business about the rope- the five hundred feet of rope- explain

to me again what you had to do with that rope to get it to the hammock.

S: The rope was fastened to the-- these--

M: Barges?

S: Well, um, they were kind of in the form of barges but they had shovels that they--

K: They were work-- work barges.

S: Yes.

K: Hmm.

S: Well, they didn't move forward on their own power. That power was used for the shoveling, but the rope fastened-- they-- a wheel was shortening this rope until you finally came up to a point where it couldn't be shortened anymore and then a new hammock had to be found for the rope.

K: Ah, I see. Now, how would you find the new hammock?

S: Well, in those days and I suppose even today, in the Everglades, you can-- you can spot the hammocks in the Everglades perhaps a thousand feet apart, perhaps a mile apart sometimes. But anyway, that's the way it worked.

K: How much of the railroad was completed during the nine months you worked there?

S: My-- we started probably some twenty miles south of Homestead and we probably were pretty close to Jew Fish.

K: Creek?

S: Yeah.

K: Oh.

S: At the time that I left--

K: Mm-hmm. Why did you leave?

S: Well, you see I had a peculiar ambition to become an artist and I didn't think that working in the Everglades would kind of help my art career very much, but many times it went through my head. I saw this country and I was in love with it and I said to myself, "Carl Sahleen, perhaps you will do better. Just stay where you are and grow up in this country." But that might have been good advice but I didn't follow it, and I went to New York and became an artist.

K: Well now, to get back to the railroad, did you ever think it would be completed down to the Keys? Did you ever think they would be able to build those viaducts and the Seven-Mile Bridge and whatnot?

S: Well, at the time that I was working there, I really had no idea of the obstacles and the things that were going to meet, everybody building the railroad.
[audio cuts off]

K: This is Side 2 of an interview with Carl Sahleen who worked on the Overseas Railroad. And on this side of the tape, we will get into some of the color stories pertaining to the men and their lives at that time on the railroad. Now, you came from a very fine family. I understand that you were baptized and christened at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. Now there must have been other men on the railroad who were as high-class as you as well as the low-class men. Can you tell me something about the men?

S: Yes. Most of them had been recruited off the Bowery, but a great many of these men were men of very fine education- Yale and Harvard- who had been drinking too much and eventually landed down on the skid row on the Bowery.

K: Did they pull themselves together, sir, on the railroad? Did this help them?

S: Well, there were probably intervals of two months when no one left the camp. Occasionally-- and it made quite a lot of trouble because you had to walk about five miles 'til where the rails began and then use a handcar to come into Homestead and Homestead was a prohibition town. As a matter of fact, I think everything that was connected close to the Flagler building of the railroad, the men were protected against themselves.

K: You mean so that they would not be lured into trouble?

S: Yes.

K: Now, what age-- what ages would these men span from the youngest, say, to the oldest?

S: Well, I was probably amongst the youngest.

K: And what would the oldest be?

S: Well, probably fifty or so.

K: Probably fifty.

S: And some of these men were professional railroad builders. That is, men that worked on one railroad then found out where another railroad was being built, this was--

K: They really loved the railroad and they followed wherever there was one being built?

S: Whenever-- yes. Well then, that was a profession, they knew how to lay the rails and spike the rail and a good man that knew had to spike the rails probably got \$5 to \$10 a day.

K: That was big pay then.

S: Yes. That was very good money in those days.

K: Well now, Baron Sahleen, these men would be without their wives. I imagine many of them were or had been married men. Now, men like women. What would they do for women?

S: Well, in a spur of generosity, Mr. Flagler or someone in the company would send a couple of girls down.

K: Mm-hmm.

S: And at that time, these old bums would take the Baron and take him for a walk or somewhere.

K: You were too young to know about the birds and the bees!

S: Yes.

K: [laughs]

S: So, I was really-- that was an inherited spirit of generosity and nobility among these people.

K: Now, do you remember the full names of any of these people or such as they knew you only as 'The Baron'? What did you know them as? Tell me some of the names. Can you remember the nicknames?

S: I don't know a single name.

K: You don't remember a single name?

S: No, and I don't think I ever did.

K: Well, what sort of nicknames would they have? Like 'Five by Five' or--?

S: Well, there was occasionally somebody that was a little more outstanding and one of them was this Swede, a sturdy fellow about 5'10 and we were about ten guys lifting-- trying to lift the barge off a sand bank and didn't budge it and this guy came over and shoved us away and lifted it and--

K: All by himself?

S: Yeah, all by himself.

K: [gasps] Mr. Strongman.

S: Well, apparently he combined two things: tremendous strength and the knowledge of using it. That is, when ten men get around, some of the outsiders and so on are very little help in the lifting--

K: He apparently knew just where to pick it up. The balance.

S: Yeah, anyway, that was one of the outstanding things that I remember. Another thing that I well remember is the time when after well, probably in July or October-- September, August perhaps, they gave me the job of being a barge captain.

K: Oh! That was a promotion?

S: Yes. It was-- it didn't add anything to my pay, but it was the easiest job in the world. All I had to stand around and with a little long stick, of course, to see that we didn't get stopped along the banks anywhere.

K: Tell me, Baron, what would the men do for entertainment after the day's work was done? Of course, they'd be tired.

S: Well, I learned during that time probably more songs like 'In the Shade of an Old Apple Tree' and 'Silver Threads among the Gold'--

K: And 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart'.

S: Yes.

K: Were you ever in any way involved in a hurricane?

S: Yes.

K: You were? Tell me about that. What year? That would be 1905?

S: Yes. We were on-- of course I didn't know it was a hurricane. I only knew that our tent blew away [both speak at same time] and everything else--

K: What time of the year?

S: Well, I guess it must have been in August or September. It might not have been a full-fledged hurricane, for all I know. It might have been a pretty centralized storm. Anyway, it hit the camp so that there really nothing left of the camp at all.

K: Was this day or night?

S: [both speak at same time] I think it was--

K: Or did it last several days?

S: I think it was in the afternoon that it came and how long it lasted and then it took about a week or two weeks to restore general order with the camp.

K: Was there damage to the fill of the line from that storm?

S: No.

K: How about the equipment?

S: Well, possibly. We had the barges that were damaged and that took some time to repair and our other equipment was pretty simple- a shovel or something, you know. And so, I think that the probably the camp manager knew something a little bit about what was coming so I think some of the tools were protected.

K: Of course, I understand, sir, that in those days, they didn't have the weather observations and the warnings they have today.

S: No, but when it clouds up and it begins to--

K: What did you do in the storm? Did someone then tell you this was a hurricane?

S: No, I just-- all you had to do, really, was to get down in the water or on the lee side of the bank-- banking because the storm would go over and pass over and you'd have at least some protection.

K: Did you lose any men in that storm?

S: No, we didn't. We didn't ourselves, but there was a camp farther down that did lose-- now I don't remember--

K: Was that at Matecumbe?

S: --between four-- no not as far south as Matecumbe. No. It probably was somewhere on Key Largo and probably, as far as I remember, some four men- might have been more but not much more- were killed.

K: Baron, how would you sum up what your experience on the building of the Overseas Railroad meant to you? Was it a good experience?

S: It was an adventure. That is, at-- at that time, I didn't take life very serious. To come down to Florida to see the tropics- which I had never seen before- meant a great thrill to me. So that part was alright; I wasn't killed. When I got back to New York, within three months, I was on my way to Texas.

K: To Texas?

S: Yeah.

K: Well, tell me this, was there anyone thing aside from your decision that you wanted to be an artist and you didn't think you'd get too far on the railroad, was there any one thing that made you say, "Just quit"? You must have just quit your job.

S: No. No, that wasn't-- that wasn't simply-- well, I had enough money. I had enough money that during these months, I had saved up enough money to be able to go back to New York and probably have another \$30 or \$40 left, and that's all that would have worried me at that time.

K: Were you surprised that eventually the railroad was completed and the trains did run into Key West?

S: Yes, I guess so. But somewhere shortly after I had been married, I took Beatriz- my wife- [inaudible] for a ride to Key West.

K: Well, that was my next question: did you yourself ever ride the train?

S: Yes.

K: Tell me that experience. What was it like?

S: Absolutely marvelous. I'll tell you why: in the Keys, and from the window, the different colors of the waters, the different-- the way the sunlight, and later on the moonlight, played on this water, that was a fantastic-- and I think that I have traveled around the world about ten times and I've been up the Amazon or every big river in North America or South America for that matter except Alaska because we Swedes don't like cold weather.

K: I imagine it was a particular thrill for you to ride down that railroad remembering as a young boy how you had [both speak at same time] swept--

S: Well, I wasn't so very much older--

K: Well, you would have had to be five or six years older.

S: Oh, yes. I was probably ten years older.

K: And did it affect you at all when the hurricane came and blew the train off in 1935?

S: Was it '34 or '35?

K: I thought it was '35.

S: Well, alright. No. No. I think by that time, the railroad had already become a little bit of a white elephant.

K: I see. I see.

S: Everybody kind of knew that the Florida East Coast Railroad- particularly from Miami south- didn't pay for itself.

K: Mm-hmm.

S: So, when the hurricane came and swept most of the railroad away, I think that the officials of the-- in Florida East Coast, heaved a sigh of relief.

K: All right, I want to thank you very much, Baron Sahleen. And now I bring you greetings from Wilhelmina Goehring Harvey, the president of the Women's Club, whose father worked on the Florida East Coast. You recall I asked you if you knew him but he was after your time, and Mrs. Harvey couldn't be here but she wanted me to say to you, "In 1910 when they had that horrible hurricane on the Florida Keys, my father, Ed Goehring, was lost at sea and drifted with the currents in the ocean for three days and three nights. --"

S: Oh, what a fantastic experience.

K: "-- Then my father was rescued by a large, ocean-going vessel named the "Alton", A-L-T-O-N, became a very famous vessel whose captain was named Captain Bell. My mother gave birth to a boy prematurely due to the anxiety of a missing husband who was found and the baby boy was named 'Alton Bell Goehring'. Did you know my father?" You've told me no. "He died in Key West and is buried in the family plot in the local cemetery. Thank you so much for coming to Key West and recalling our prestigious history, especially for the Women's Club of which I am president. Thanks and God bless. Sincerely- Wilhelmina Goehring Harvey."

S: Thank you. Thank you. I will say this--

END OF INTERVIEW