

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Kermit Cochran Part 1 & 2

Part I

SPEAKER: Kermit Cochran

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: November 26, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:59:20

Cochran: The Key West I knew as a child has long since disappeared into the past. My father was living in Punta Gorda when he met and married my mother who was a Key West girl and had been sent to Punta Gorda to work for a cigar factory. They were married in 1890 and both returned to Key West where my mother's family was living on Johnson Street. Their name was Whitehead and had come to Key West from Nassau. My dad went to work for the United States Government on Fort Taylor which was under construction at that time. They bought their house on White Street and my brother was born there about 1892. I was born on July the 5th, 1901. I was just two months old when my mother died of blood poisoning. Since all of the mothers breast-fed their babies in those days, my father had to find a woman with milk in her breasts to feed me. The only woman he could find was a black woman named Lavina Shaves whose husband, Mattie Shaves, used to burn buttonwood to make charcoal by burning the buttonwood and covering it with leaves and-- in heaps, then covering it with leaves, sand, and let it-- and sand and let it smolder. This prevented the wood from turning to ashes. Charcoal was in big demand for heating flat irons in those days. There was no electric irons in those days. They had a special pot lined with a special fire-proof mixture to heat the irons on. Mrs. Lavina Shaves nursed me until I was weaned. Then my grandmother took care of me until my father married again to a Katie Kelly who was one of the Kelly girls who had a grocery store on the corner of White Street and United Street. This building has long since been torn down. My stepmother took me to raise when I was about two years old. My first recollection of my father was after my grandmother had taken me to Nassau on a sailing vessel for a visit to her folks. On our return, when the boat was docked, she asked for Murray Cochran who stepped out from behind some people who were on the dock and handed me up to him. I believe that he took me home then because they had some new linoleum floor-covering in the dining room and I was trying to gouge out some white spots in the pattern with an ice pick and I remember her protesting that I was ruining her new floor. It was years later that she told me that she took me to raise when I was two years old. I was in the parochial school when her first and only baby was born because I remember telling the sister who was my teacher that we had a new baby in our home. I was in the first grade; I was five years older than my sister. And my teacher was very strict and did not hesitate to punish us boys. The girls were taught at the convent off of Truman Avenue- then known as Division Street or Rocky Road. The boys were taught in a two-story frame building- one for the white kids and one for the black kids which faced Duval Street. The turrets were an outhouse on the playgrounds. It was here I learned a lot about Jesus Christ. Sister (?) Anthony was the head nurse or mother at our school. She was much older and very kind and sympathetic to me. My teacher, Sister Teresa, would give us a good whipping with a heavy ruler as a paddle. She would drop our pants in the classroom in front of the other boys and whack us on our rear end. In my classroom was Dr. Light's kid and he was named Kermit, also. I remember her whipping him. We were named after President Roosevelt's son who was named Kermit, also. Our house was the last house on White Street except for one house- a widow named Dunn who died-- who lived on the east-side of our house towards the beach. Johnson Street began at White Street and only two other houses were-- was on Johnson Street where the Whiteheads lived; the other house was empty. And from the County Road to the beach was a wild wilderness. From the north-end of the island to where to the Casa Marina is now located, it was Key West in its original state. I remember the first electric streetcar on its first run. It came up White Street and turned left on what was known as County Road and went up almost to the salt pans where there were several cigar factories. Prior to the electric car, they used a mule-drawn car on steel tracks. The large cigar factories used to hire a reader who would read the news out loud then he would read from a book and all of the workers kept busy at their tables and listened intently to the reader. At the corner of Truman and White Street was know as the transfer corner where the streetcars from Rocky Road- which was the name of Truman Avenue- they would change cars and go on to the cigar factory. Mr. Willy Menendez used to have a coffee shop on the corner and all of the cigar workers and car operators would get a can of Cuban coffee there. He served coffee to take out in a condensed milk can. Condensed milk was just about all the milk that was available in those days. He used to pay five cents per dozen for clean cans. Where we lived on White Street just a block south of County Road was a wild wilderness; it was Key West in its original state. There was a very large pond just on the southeast side of our house between our house and the beach and it crossed White Street on into the government property where is now located the old remains of the Martello Tower and White Street ended at this pond. Then the city started dumping their trash

in the pond to fill in White Street to have access to the beach. As a small kid, I used to go to the dumps and pick up milk cans for five cents a dozen and avocado seeds for five cents a dozen. These seeds were shipped up to Homestead where they were planting an avocado grove. The flies from the city dump were so thick that we used to have a mosquito net over the dining room table in order to eat and mosquitoes were so thick that we had to sleep under a net that was hung from the ceiling and draped over the bed. There was no street lights for quite a few years near our house and we would sit out in the cool night air and burn rags to smoke out the mosquitoes. After the pond was filled in, White Street was completed out to the beach but the city continued to dump garbage all along the edge of the pond. All of it soon rusted and deteriorated in a few years leaving only glass and pottery. All of this was before the 1909 hurricane. By about 1906, they had built the slaughterhouse which was damaged badly in the 1909 hurricane. The ocean came up to our house and my dad was busy boarding up the house. When he was all finished, the tide and wind was coming in very fast. This was about ten a.m.. Small boats were floating by, so dad got one and we rode up to the corner of White and United Street and rode through the hurricane there at my stepmother's father's two-story frame house. I remember standing in the lee of the storm at a door that faced White and United Street. Mr. Kelly had a grocery store there and some of the neighbors came in and stayed through the storm. I watched the telephone poles as they were blown down all along White Street. Live wires were being blown around and flashes of electric came out of the broken wires. I saw the roofs of the small Cuban houses lifted up in the air and dropped on White Street. Then I saw this big cigar factory made of brick. It was two or three stories high as it blew over on a group of Conch houses and smashed them to the ground. When the storm, which blew on into the night, was over and the water had subsided by the next day, [clears throat] everything was calm and peaceful, but what havoc it had left Key West in. I remember that the Episcopal Church was completely demolished. There was wreckage everywhere and complete devastation. When we returned to our home, we found that it had been blown off its foundation and into the next lot but was fairly intact. My dad had bought a pair of goats for my brother several years before and they had developed into quite a herd of several hundred. We never bought them any feed as they lived off of the city dump. They wandered at will during the day foraging through the dumps on out along the beach and around the pond crossing over County Road into the wooded areas and back home for water and shelter for the night. In those days, the people had no way of knowing if a hurricane was approaching. The barometer was the only indication they had so they always kept a sharp eye on the barometer and if it continued to fall and gales began to develop, they all began to prepare for a bad hurricane by boarding up the windows and using a four-by-four brace from the ground up to the gables. Most of the houses sat on oblong squares of coral rock that was about three feet long which just sat on top of the ground. Some people anchored their houses by sinking several heavy timbers into the ground and bolting it to the floor beams. Just before we left the house for shelter elsewhere, [clears throat] all of us- my brother and I and my stepmother- put all of the goats into the house thinking they would be safe but about half of them perished in the storm, mostly from drowning. Some had escaped when the doors were blown open. The ocean must have been seven or eight feet deep there as there was a ring around the walls showing where the water-level was at its height. When we returned home, we found drowned goats and chickens all over the place. Many of the natives skinned them and the chickens to eat. It was a sickening sight to my dad. The natives claimed that these chickens and goats were good to eat. It took my dad a long time to clean up the house, the yard, and to move the house back in its proper place. By 1910, we had another hurricane and it blew our house off of its foundation again. This made my dad angry and he determined that he was going to secure the house against future hurricanes. So we used square-- screw jacks and heavy wooden blocks to raise the house up in the air for about ten feet. This took an awful lot of blocks and jacks. In those days, there was a house-moving contractor who moved whole houses from one place to another by blocking up the house and lowering it down on wooden rollers using heavy wooden planks for a track. Then he would attach ropes to the house and use heavy pulleys and attach one end to a drum-like turnstile that had a long wooden arm on the top. This was set up about fifty feet in front of the house. He used a mule to turn this turnstile- or winch- by going around and around. It was slow, tedious work. As the house would move forward, they would pick up the tracks and rollers and lay them in front of the house. The whole street would be blocked off but since there was scarcely any auto traffic, this was not too much of a problem. When my dad had his house in position, he used heavy steel rods bent on one end like a hook and the other end was threaded so he could screw on heavy nuts and secure them to the foundation or sills of the house. The crooked end was sunk into the coral rock and cemented. Then he built forms around these steel rods and filled them with concrete. This firmly secured the house to the rock. Key West is a solid coral rock covered with about a quarter-inch of flint and it is very hard. The ground in front our house was covered with rocks. My brother and I had to gather these rocks and break them into small rocks to be mixed into concrete. Sand wasn't in abundance on the beach. All concrete was mixed by hand. There was no concrete mixes invented yet, at least not in Key West. After the house was in position and the walls between the concrete (columns?) was laid with concrete handmade blocks, which my dad made by himself, were all in place, then my dad secured the roof by putting steel cables from the top of the gable to the bottom of the opposite side or gable. All of this was attached to a turnbuckle and all slack was removed. The basement floor was laid with about an eight inch by two inch concrete blocks. The house has been standing ever since. Although they have had many hurricanes, it was never blown down again. My father built quite a few houses in Key West that are still standing. He had a hand-operated machine that Miguel Dominguez had imported from Spain. It had cast-iron plates for the sides and the front of the block was carved in different patterns so that three sides were smooth and the front was roughly protruding. He built a house for Miguel Dominguez on United Street and the Uneeda Biscuit building on the corner of Duval Street.

He also built several cigar buildings and a number of single houses were built up at County Road for the cigar factories. He also built the Rock house and several others including a gymnasium for the school board and he was the superintendent of construction on the Casa Marina Hotel. He also built the concrete block fence around the Catholic Church and convent on Division Street. He made the forms out of two-by-ten inch boards. The concrete was mixed by hand and the blocks weighed over a hundred pounds. I believe that it was built about 1898, however, the fence still stands today in his memory. Cement came in cloth bags and was returnable at a dollar and a half a bag. So there was no sand-- there was no sand in Key West but there was plenty of pulverized coral on the south beach which was used with cracked rock in all masonry construction. My stepmother and I sold many a load of rock to T.A. Lumley. A load was about twelve inches high by four foot by eight foot. He had a horse-drawn wagon that was about eight foot long and four foot wide composed of loose two-by-six planks. They would dislodge the planks and dump the load where they wanted it. About 1912, the first train arrived in Key West. This was a great day for Key West and a big carnival was brought in for the opening event at Trumbo Island where they-- where Flagler had pumped in mud by dredges to make acres of land to build his railroad station and docks. He also had a fleet of ferryboats that ran to Havana, Cuba where they took boxcars on the ferry to Cuba and brought back pineapples and other tropical fruit including sugar. They would just back a whole load of railroad cars on the tracks onto the ferryboat and leave those cars and reload the cars and return the next day to Key West. I remember Halley's Comet when it was-- when it passed over Key West in 1909. I was just about eight years old then and was spending the night at my grandmother's. They woke me up about midnight to see the awe-inspiring sight. It seemed that it was so close to Earth and seemed to be traveling toward Cuba. It was clearly visible with the naked eye. It appeared as a huge ball of fire with a very long tail behind it. Halley's Comet was supposed to be about 13,000 miles in diameter and had a tail nearly 200,000 miles long. All of this was plainly visible at night. I have no idea just how far up in the sky the comet was from Earth; it must have been several hundred miles out in space or else it would have been drawn into the Earth's gravity. However, it was a sight that one will never forget. I saw the first airplane that flew over Key West- this was about 1914, I believe. It seemed like it was about 200 feet up in the air. I think that it was a hydroplane as there was no airport in Key West at that time. The single pilot was plainly visible as he sat in front of the wings out in the open. It was a double wing affair with pontoons. By 1918, the government had an airplane training station off of Division Street- now Truman Avenue. Many pilots crash-landed while in training there and lost their lives. The planes were also hydroplanes and had to be cranked by hand. There was another pilot came to Key West with his plane. A few days later, both were trying to be the first to fly to Cuba and the first plane had engine trouble and was delayed while the other plane made the flight successfully to Cuba. But instead of Havana as he had--was his determination, he was way off of his course and landed in Mariel, Cuba 119 miles from Key West. At this time, this feat was considered a great and important event for a plane to fly ninety miles across the gulf to Havana, Cuba. It was the first overseas flight. I can barely remember a long building halfway up the beach near the Martello Tower that-- which is now being used as a museum. This building was empty when I visited it; it had been abandoned a few years before. It was formally used to hospitalize smallpox victims. It was a highly contagious disease and there had been a number of cases at that time. I do remember, though, that they had brought several victims from a passing boat that had some of this disease and they kept them isolated on the government property at the first tower in a tent when they were treated-- where they were treated. The metal lifeboat that they brought them ashore in was still there years later. This must have been around 1910 or perhaps earlier. I can barely remember one evening, it seems to me that it was just getting dark. A crowd of people gathered on the beach near the slaughterhouse. That there was a ship on fire and they were bringing the passengers ashore in lifeboats. I don't know if any lost their lives or not, but the ship must have been completely destroyed because years later I had a skiff that my uncle built for me which I used as a kid. I would go out a mile or so and bring home a mess of fish. I passed over a lot of wreckage which I could plainly see lying on the bottom of the ocean and when I told my dad about it, he said that that was the remains of a passenger ship that had caught on fire and sank years before. Speaking of ships reminds me of the pilots in the early days. I don't know how many pilot boats there were but they were-- they used sailing ships as pilot boats and they kept a sharp look-out for any ship entering the harbor. They had an opening in the roof of their house that they could look out to the entrance of the harbor out by Sand Key. They vied against each other to have the fastest sailboat and it was always a race between them to be the first to come alongside the ship who was signaling their intention to enter the harbor of Key West. Then came the invent of the gasoline engine which was somewhat crude at first- a one-cylinder, two-cycle affair that was not too dependable. They were always trying to build boats faster than the others. There were many sailing ships that would come into Key West. The largest, I guess, was a six-masted schooner- she was a beautiful vessel. And banana boats would come into Key West and they would unload, their bunches of ripe bananas would drop off on the docks. There was loose bananas all around for anyone that wanted them. There was a fish market on these docks. Fishermen would dock their small boats and sell their fish there. They were all sailboats and they had a well in them- a square-like box secured to the floor of the boat and tapered to the top. There was holes drilled in the bottom of the boat and the saltwater came up to a level with the outside. They would keep their fish alive in this manner and one could choose the fish that he wanted; the fisherman would kill and clean the fish. We used to buy red-mouth grunts at twenty-five cents a dozen already cleaned and ready for the frying pan. They were very good eating. Grits and grunts was a very popular food and Johnny cake was popular, also. My grandmother died about 1908. I was better acquainted with her. Just before she died, she was in a coma for a couple of days. I went to see her and talk to her. She laid there with her eyes wide open and she seemed to understand all I said to her. I

could tell by her eyes, she seemed trying to talk to me, but she was unable to speak at all. She was a very good soul and I loved her very much. When my uncle Robert Whitehead died, I was able to visit him a few days before he died-- [audio cuts off]

C: I will never forget my grandmother and my uncle, Robert Whitehead, who was quite a character, a special kind of a man, really an individual of Bahamian descent. Although he never had any of the luxuries of this world, he seemed to be satisfied with the life-- with his life. He got his pleasure from his sailing boat and fishing. He made cigars for the first few days of the week until he had enough money to buy groceries and tobacco for his pipe. He enjoyed the rest of the week relaxing on or near the beach. He also made guitars and musical instruments. In those days, guitar-playing was popular amongst the Key West people. They would visit their homes and play and sing from guitars, banjos, and mandolins. In the '20s, he had a small boat that was powered with an outboard motor and had a crude sign up saying: 'Go Fishing. Guaranteed Fish or No Pay.' He had quite a few customers and he would take three or four at a time and fish around where he knew there was no fish. Then when they began to gripe, he would take them where fish were plentiful and when they had a good catch, he would say, "Well, it's time to go in." He said that people would catch more fish than they could possibly use and he said it was a sin to kill so many fish and not use them. His wife Maggie was-- worked in a-- as a stripper in a cigar factory taking stems out of the leaf. She had two children: Sarah and Robert. She would give my sister and I a dime every Saturday. We were so pleased to have this dime. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of this century, there was much grave-robbing done. As the medical profession began to advance, it seems that the colleges would purchase these corpses and no questions asked for experimental purpose as embalming dead people was not known to undertakers until we were well advanced in this century and I have heard of many cases of people who had to all appearances died and were pronounced dead but they were in a trance and later they came to life. I worked with one man in Canton, Ohio in the early '20s who had such an experience. He said that he heard everything his wife said and he just laid there. He could not move a muscle and he heard the doctor pronounce him dead. He heard his wife and children crying and was terrified at the thought of being buried alive and he said that as the undertaker was coming up to the front steps of his house he was able to snap out of it to the surprise of all concerned. But I remember of another case that a Methodist minister told my dad. I was very young- this must have been about 1907 or '08. We used to go to the Methodist Church Sunday nights. They met in the old auditorium of the old seminary on United Street and the ladies gave parties in their homes. Sometimes they would all take one pound of sugar and we would all make a candy pull and join in pulling candy. It was usually peppermint flavored and we had a lot of fun. This minister told us of a case in New York, I think, where some rich man's daughter had died and she was buried in the cemetery and that sometime that night after midnight, two men dug up her body and took it home to their apartment and laid the corpse by the fireplace where a fire was burning. One of the men said that he was tired and was going to turn in; the other said that he was going to read the paper for awhile. After the corpse was laying there for sometime, it seems that the heat from the fireplace had penetrated her body and she began to move her limbs. The man who was reading the paper was startled and looked at the corpse and saw what was happening. He rushed over to the bed and awakened his partner saying, "Hey man, wake up, we are in terrible-- in trouble. Instead of a corpse, we've got a live young woman on our hands." Early in the morning, they got in touch with the girl's father who became enraged when he heard that they had robbed his daughter's grave, but was soon overjoyed to hear that she was still alive. This tale, fortunately, had a happy ending, but think of the many others who were buried alive apparently dead only to regain consciousness and find out their predicament as I have heard of many cases where years later, graves were opened and revealed that the corpse had regained conscience and showed signs of a struggle. What a horrible death they must have had. I have heard of two occasions in Key West where two men were almost buried alive. One of the men I knew personally. He was named Lulu- at least that was what everyone called him. He was a bartender for Miguel Dominguez- my stepmother's sister's husband from Spain who had a two-story frame building on the corner of Duval Street and Olivia Street. He had a little bar on the corner and a small grocery store on the other side. The bar had those old-time small swinging doors and sawdust on the floor with the brass spittoons and no women were allowed. Lulu was a very popular man and well-liked; he had many friends. But one day, he was taken ill and went into a trance and the doctor pronounced him dead. And since they did not embalm in those early days, Lulu was laid out in his coffin in his home and prepared for the cemetery. [clears throat] They didn't keep the body very long after death, so came time for the funeral, Lulu's coffin was placed in a hearse by the Lopez Funeral Home. They have the same hearse at the museum in the Martello Tower. One could see the coffin in hearse. The sides were all glass and was drawn by horse and all the mourners rode in horse-drawn carriages. A black man always drove the hearse. He sat up on a seat out in the open and had a foot rest. They said that his feet were so big that they couldn't get shoes for him but that he would polish his feet. He wore a large top-hat and a swallow-tail coat with a rose in his lapel. The horse was covered with a black lace robe and the hearse was polished and shiny. The driver was very dignified and as they drove slowly through the streets to the cemetery, it was a very solemn and dignified cortege. While I did not witness the funeral, I had heard some of the men talking about it and this is how the story goes. Halfway to the cemetery, Lulu came back to life- or consciousness- and realizing his predicament, he became panicky and evidently kicked his way [pause] out of the coffin, then kicked open the rear glass door with a shout. The leading driver of the carriage saw what was happening and the driver of the hearse, realizing what happened, immediately brought on confusion. The first carriage turned at a fast pace and went in the other direction and the others followed. The driver of the hearse jumped off the hearse and ran as fast as he could in another direction and the driver-less hearse took off in the

opposite direction. Lulu jumped out of the hearse, badly shaken and still terrified, ran as quickly as he could to the nearest bar. He needed a drink badly. There were a few Cubans and Key West Conchs in the saloon and they were discussing Lulu's demise when suddenly, Lulu pushed open the front doors of the saloon and for a moment, those who were inside thought that they saw an apparition. In one accord, they all ran out of the back door, leaving the place empty while Lulu shakily poured himself a drink. I never heard anything more about Lulu. I asked my dad about him years later, but he said he never knew what happened to Lulu. I heard of another case of a Cuban- I believe that his name was Sanchez- he was pronounced dead and taken to the cemetery where the relatives were having the last rights administered. Just before lowering the coffin into the grave, when Mr. Sanchez came to life and started hollering and kicking in the coffin. Upon opening the coffin, he sat up to the amazement of all his friends and relatives. He, too, had a very narrow escape from being buried alive. I asked an undertaker a few years ago if this could happen now and he said no, because when they now receive a body, they cut a vein under the corpse's arms and if the person was in a trance and not dead, then blood would flow but if he was dead that no blood would flow. Speaking of the dead reminds me of an old widow who lived alongside our house on 1529 White Street. Her name was Mrs. Dunn. She was a widow and lived by herself. I don't have much recollection of her because I was very young when she died. I only remember being in her house with my folks and everything impressed me as being very old. Her body was laid out in her coffin and the house was full of guests who were paying their last rights. My dad was an amateur voice thrower and he leaned over the coffin and spoke to Mrs. Dunn asking her if she was comfortable and she replied, "Yes, Mr. Murray, I am very comfortable, thank you." And by this time, the house had emptied of all of the guests who fled in terror. This was about 1905 or '06. Mrs. Dunn wore an old hat and real old-style clothes. Her dresses or shirts-- skirts contained many yards of material and was just about one inch from the ground and when spread out on the floor, it opened into a complete circle and the upper part was very fluffy at the shoulders and an old-fashioned jacket over this. A day or so after her death, early one morning, my dad put on her dress and her old hat and walked down to where the streetcar turned left off of White Street to go out to the factories. It was about six a.m. and when the car came loaded with cigar workers, my dad looked like an apparition in the early morning dust. The motorman stopped the car several hundred feet from making the turn and he and the passengers stared into the dust thinking that they saw the ghost of Mrs. Dunn. They jumped off-- [audio cuts off] --of the car and ran in fright. Meanwhile, my dad stepped into the shrubbery alongside the road and disappeared. When they saw that the ghost of Mrs. Dunn had left, they returned to the car and quickly got out of there. I don't know if they ever solved the mystery of Mrs. Dunn's ghost. I was in Tampa during the disastrous flu epidemic of 1918. I was staying at my Uncle Jimmy Whitehead's house. Since I was just seventeen years old, I wasn't too much concerned. All public places had been closed- especially theaters and I am not sure of the churches- as people were dying all over the town. Sometimes whole families were laid up, and on the streets, people wore a mask over their nose and mouth. The hospitals were full and the people were headed-- bedded down in their homes. Many volunteers served as nurses, going from house to house giving aid. I came home to my uncle's house one day and complained that my eyes were burning. My Uncle Jimmy stuck a thermometer in my mouth and found that I had a temperature of 104. He insisted that I go to bed immediately when I-- where I remained for a week. I never felt sick at all, nor did I have any pain. I was fed by volunteer nurses. Millions of bottles of Vicks- an ointment- was used. Uncle Jimmy and his son never caught the flu. His daughter was laid up, but she recovered. About the second night that I was laid up, I woke up about midnight and I heard my aunt heave a loud sigh and Uncle Jimmy told me the next morning that she had passed away. So many people had died that they had ran out of coffins and the mills were busy turning out pine board boxes to bury their men. I don't think that they ever had an accurate account of how many died in this terrible epidemic. I heard recently though that there was over-- about twenty million people died, I believe, all over this country which hit many areas of Florida and in the southern and northern states. Key West had its share of victims, also. I never felt sick at all while I was in bed but when they told me a week later that I could get up, I could hardly stand on my legs which were very weak-- on my feet, rather, which my legs were very weak. The next day, Uncle Jimmy asked me if I would volunteer as a pallbearer for one of the neighbors who had passed away. I volunteered, but as we stood at the gravesite and the last rights were being said, four of us started to lower the casket into the ground. They had a rope under the casket at both ends and a man on each side. The man opposite me was big and strong and seemed to pull against me and for awhile I was standing on my toes trying to keep my balance as we gently lowered the casket and at the same time, having a hard time trying to keep from falling in on top of the casket. I breathed a sigh of relief when the casket finally settled on the bottom of the grave. Johnny cake was popular-- was a popular substitute for bread. It was made from flour and kneaded into a thick pancake-like affair and looked-- baked in a frying pan. Many people couldn't afford to buy bread in those early days, especially in the Depression which hit Key West first, I believe. When Harding was elected president, one of his first steps was to cut government expenses. Many employees at all of the government projects were laid off. There was no work for many of the natives of Key West. I was in Hicksville, Long Island in '28 and employed-- employment and wages were good. In '29, the crash came when many banks were closed. About '33, we moved to West Palm Beach. Soon we were broke. We applied for welfare and received seventy-five cents a week for six people. I don't know how we ever survived. Through those years, Key West was hard-hit and if it wasn't for a plentiful supply of fish and Johnny cake and grits, many would have starved to death. When Hoover was elected, things seemed to get worse until the federal government passed the WPA program of public works. High-salaried plumbers, electricians, and all trades were glad to work one day a week for one dollar. Then later, we were allowed to make-- work three days a week. The '30s were tough years for all people, especially

in the south. After the Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbor under Roosevelt Administration, things began to pick up. People were back at work in shipyards and factories and so-forth. It seems that each year, hurricanes were a threat to Key West. Although many times they passed over the Keys, Key West usually felt heavy gale winds as the hurricane passed near as the fringe of a hurricane extends sometimes as far as 200 miles on either side of the eye. So if one passes near Cuba, which is only ninety miles to the east, Key West nearly always gets some strong gale force winds if there is a hurricane in the vicinity. My brother told me about the hurricane that Key West in 1919. That he, my dad, my stepmother, and sister all went out to the Martello Tower off of White Street where they took refuge during the storm. That by the time that they arrived there, they were walking in water above their knees. I was in Galveston, Texas at the time. It seems that the hurricane hit Key West and crossed the gulf and came in at Galveston. I went out to the beach where they have bathhouses and so forth. They also had a seawall that sloped up from the beach in a curved angle and when the waves would hit the seawall with such force that they would send up a solid wall of water straight up in the air about twenty feet high and as far as the eye could see. Galveston didn't get the full force of the hurricane, but was on the fringe of it. I remember it hit one island and completely wiped out the whole town. Of course, there were many other hurricanes after that like in the '26 in Miami and '28 in West Palm Beach that didn't-- that did much damage to both towns. When I saw that old bronze fire bell out in front of the museum, it takes me back to when I was a child. Many a night, I heard the mournful dirge of that old fire bell toll out its call to the firemen. Most of the firemen were volunteers. One could hear those solemn, mournful tones all over Key West. Many times I passed the fire house, I would look in at the fire engine. It was a horse-drawn vehicle and powered with a steam pump. I would see the harness all suspended in the air all set to back those horses into their pla-- proper position and everything would drop into place and in no time, they had steam up and the fire engine was on its way. The houses were-- horses were well-trained and at the sound of that bell, they began to paw the ground, anxious to be on their way. The natives of Key West dreaded a fire because I heard some of the old-timers recall the great fire that swept Key West before my time. It had taken a terrible toll in property damage. They said that nearly one-third of Key West was burned to the ground. Whole blocks of houses were burned down; the fire would leap from one house to the other. I've been told that this fire occurred in 1886 and a Mr. (Donald?) Ferguson lost a lot of horses in the fire. As children, we were taught to have respect for our parents and the older people. In our schools, certain rules were made that we had to abide by. If we broke those rules, we were punished. Sometimes, we had to stay in after school as long as two hours and then sometimes we were whipped across the calf of our legs. One teacher, Margaret Archer, would use a rubber hose on us. We had to stand in front of the class and put our hand out in front of us, palms up. Then she would whack us with the hose and if we moved our hand and caused her to miss, she would add five more whacks. I received many whippings this way and although it hurt, I wouldn't cry and I would jerk my hand back as she came down with the hose just to make the other kids laugh. They got a real kick out of my punishment. I would complain that it hurt and she would say, "I know it does, that's why I use a hose as it doesn't leave any marks." I feel that we needed this discipline and those whippings helped to make me a little-- a better man. The boys were divided from girls at recess. We each brought our own lunch from home, we didn't have any cafeteria or free lunches while in school. We were under strict discipline at all times. The kids were not all angels either as there were many who were rebellious and disobedient. [coughs] Some of the kids at Easter time would have a lot of sport playing with raw eggs. Each one would hold the egg in his hand with the smaller edge up and one would-- [audio cuts off] --crack-- [audio cuts off] --egg-- crack his egg on top of the other kid's egg and the one that cracked would lose his egg to the other kid. There was a season for top-spinning. Some of the kids were real good at aiming at the other kid's top and if they it right, they would split the other kid's top in two. If they missed the top, then the one that missed would lay his top on the ground and the other would spin his top as he aimed it at his opponent's top. As long as he could hit the top of the-- uh, of the other kids, he would continue to play. Kite-flying was a real sport. Even the adults would join in this sport sometimes, especially young Cubans. There was a big open field off of White and United Street where the kids would gather to fly their kites which were all homemade. Some were experts at flying their kites and they would attach sharp slivers of glass to the kite tails and maneuver their kites so that the tail of their kite would drag across the other kid's line and the glass slivers would cut their lines and they would lose their kite. The kids were proud of their kites. They used to buy the material in most any grocery store. There was no supermarkets in those days. Small grocery stores, mostly Cubans, were always nearby. A special imported bamboo and rows of light tissue paper of many different colors were sold at these stores. When marble season would come around, the kids would play for keeps and sometimes, some of the kids would win all of the other kids' marbles. Some of them would have a bag full of marbles and sold them to the other kids. In the first few years of this century-- [audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW

Part 2

SPEAKER: Kermit Cochran

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: November 28, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:59:21

Cochran: --was born in Key West 1901, July the 5th. I am continuing where I left off on the other tape recording. When marble season would come around, the kids would play for keeps and sometimes some of the kids would win all of the other kids' marbles. Some of them would have a bag full of marbles and sold them to other kids. They would scratch a circle on the ground and each kid would put so many marbles in the ring, then they would make a line about eight foot away and throw their marbles at the line. The one closest to the line would have the first shot at the marbles. In the first few years of this century, Piedmont Cigarettes were the most popular brand. Piedmont was written in script all over the town on the sides of buildings, storefronts, and everywhere. I remember trying to duplicate the word 'Piedmont'. They had a small picture of all the different baseball players of the big leagues. Some of the kids had bags-- large stacks of them. They always chose who would play first and the other kid would lay his coupon on the floor. Then they would try to slide their coupons off of a table and land on the other coupon- that was the target. When he did, he would win all of the coupons on the floor. These coupons had a picture of each of the players and their history. They would be worth a fortune today. Carnival time was a great event. The whole town would turn out. Nearly everyone threw confetti at each other and the grounds were about three inches thick with confetti and they had a large variety of shows. Each afternoon and night, they would give a free show about ten or eleven p.m.. I remember one daring and dangerous act called a 'loop de loop'. A man would ride a bicycle from fifty or sixty feet up in the air on a platform about four foot wide which sloped down an angle to within about four foot of the ground and then start up in a circle about twenty-five foot and when he hit a certain place in the platform, it would trigger the platform into closing behind him and open in front so that when he made the complete circle, he would have an open space to make about a forty foot jump in the air and land on another sloping track to the ground. The center of the platform had about a six inch stripe painted in the middle for him to ride on safely to the ground. It was a very daring and dangerous feat and he had to have perfect balance. And once he started down, he couldn't stop. The whole act took about couple of minutes. One of the shows had a high-diver act. A young woman would climb a ladder straight up in the air and dive from about seventy-five foot high in a very small tank of water. This was a very solemn, breathtaking scene. All eyes were focused on her as she slowly climbed the ladder. All music and noise had stopped as she stood atop the ladder on a very small platform with her arms outstretched. She would stand waiting for the right moment while her father prayed a prayer for her safety. Then down she would plunge into the tank of water. Later, she was killed when they were performing in Cuba when she struck the edge of the tank. [clears throat, coughs] Roulette wheels were everywhere and they did a good business. All kinds of vases and dishes were the prizes, kewpie dolls and so forth. I understand that these carnival prizes are now collector items and have quite a cash value. There were wild-west shows, circuses, trapeze acts, and a seven-veil dance for men only. And when the girl removed her last veil, the lights would go out. One time, a sailor flashed on a flashlight as the lights went out to the delight of all the men in attendance.

[audio cuts off]

C: Key West always had a red-light district west of Whitehead Street near Fort Taylor. This was a sore spot for the city as there were many fights there between the civilians and the Navy, Marines, or the Army. There would be a red light on the porch of such houses and when World War Two was started, the Navy had an off-limit area in there and they patrolled the area along Whitehead Street. No man in uniform was allowed to pass in this-- in there. Bars were everywhere on Duval Street. Gambling was conducted in many backrooms of Cuban coffee shops. Rum-running was a big business during prohibition by small fishing boats. Many boats were intercepted by the Coast Guard and many made successful trips. Most of the rum was brought in from Havana, Cuba. Many Chinese were smuggled into Key West from Cuba, also. There was a number of Chinese hand laundries here and the men-- and the men wore, uh, pigtailed. Their hair was long and platted into one long plat and they wore their native costumes- a loose black jacket and trousers. They seemed to keep out of trouble and was very peaceful. Those were the days when men wore stiff starched collars attached to their shirts with collar buttons. The Chinese were kept busy with collars and men's shirts. They used hand irons heated over charcoal. Where the county courthouse is located on Whitehead Street, they had a gallows where they hung their criminals. I have heard that the last hanging was performed in about 1907. One source of information said that this was a black man convicted of raping two white women. If I remember correctly, his name was (Salvania?) Johnson- a colored man. He angrily protested his innocence and swore that he would be the last man that they would ever hang in Key West and it is claimed that they never did hang anyone since. Souse was-- Saturday was hog-killing time at the slaughterhouse and several black women would pass our house with their children on their way to the beach where they would get the entrails from the hogs. They each would have their arms filled with firewood and about a ten or twenty gallon lard can on top of their heads as lard came in those cans and

sold at the stores in bulk. Butter came in wooden pails and flour came in large barrels. These cans were well balanced on top of their heads. Souse was in a big demand in Key West. They would riddle the entrails with a stick about eighteen inches long that was run through the entrails, pushing the contents out of the other end. This was done several times and they washed the entrails in the salt water, then turned them inside-out and washed them again thoroughly and cut them up into about one inch strips, then they would cook them on the beach several times as they would change the water. Souse was supposed to be a rare treat and in no time, they had sold out. Saturday night was a big night in Key West in the early years of this century. It seems that everybody was out Saturday night. Duval Street was always crowded and the people would walk up and down, greeting each other and window shopping. The two theaters- Monroe and San Carlos Theater- were there as far back as I can remember. Those were the days of the silent movies. They had a piano player who played accompanying music to portray the picture. The comedy was usually a one reel picture, then would start the main feature which was usually a five or six reel film. At the end of each reel, they would announce on the screen, 'The End of Reel One', and so forth, 'Reel Two Will Follow Immediately'. The lights would go on for a few minutes while the operator changed the film. William S. Hart was the favorite western actor. Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin were some of the comedians. And the *Perils of Pauline*, *The Sign of the Cross* were some of the continued thrillers. Then came the Pathe news showing important events of the week. Sound movies were unheard of until the early '20s. I remember hearing several men discussing one of the films and one man remarked that the movie was so good that you could almost hear those actors talk. He said, "I'll bet someday, they will have sound movies." I first heard sound over the radio while I was at sea in 1920 from a wireless operator's earphone. Messages were sent over the air by Morse code of dots and dashes. The first sound movie I heard was about 1923. Radios began to appear in the early-'20s. They were crude affairs and had a large horn and operated by several batteries. Then came the electric radio. I think that it was around 1906, or by that time, when Mr. S.M. Spivey had brought in a small herd of milk cows and started a dairy in Key West on Johnson Street. [clears throat] He built the house on Johnson Street adjoining our house. This house still stands today. He had two boys named Jackson, the oldest, and Dewese, the youngest. Dewese was nicknamed 'Wheezy'. They had the ground fenced in all the way up to Whitehead's house where they kept the cattle and a barn where they milk the cows and bottle the milk in glass bottles. There was an open well on the corner of White Street and the County Road and they pumped this water through a pipe to Johnson Street where they had a long wooden trough for the cows to drink out of. Mr. Spivey had a horse-drawn wagon that he delivered his milk in. On the side of the wagon, he had in large letters: 'Leche de Vaca' and his name, 'S.M. Spivey'. His two boys did most of the dairy work and Mr. Spivey took care of the deliveries. There were a few boys always hanging around the barn. All of them were older than I was; they were about seventeen or eighteen years old and they were always playing with handguns and one day, Dewese shot and killed a boy at the barn and in the trial that followed, he claimed that it was an accident as the other boy was trying to take the gun from him and it accidentally went off. He said that they were just playing. These boys used to hang out at the second tower where the museum now is. There was Frankie Tynes and his brother Leo and Melvin, who lived on the County Road up past Whitehead, and George Watson who lived on White Street near the Menendez house, and a few other boys. A year after Dewese shot the boy at the barn on Johnson Street, they were all up at the Martello Tower and Jackson Spivey was fatally shot through the temple with a .32 gun. I was in Mr. Spivey's living room a short time after they brought in the body. I remember Dr. Malone, I believe was the doctor, I saw him probing for the bullet and saw him pull out the bullet with a long pair of tweezers. At the trial, the other boys all claimed that Jackson pulled out the gun and said, "I'm tired of living", and put the gun up to his temple and pulled the trigger. They said that they thought that he was only joking. It wasn't long after that incident that Mr. Spivey sold his dairy and went out of business. But Wheezy and his mother and Mrs. Marshall lived in the house on Johnson Street for many years. Finally, the two women passed away in the early-'20s, leaving Dewese alone. He worked as a (?) during World War Two and collected rent off of several Cuban or Conch houses that he inherited. Ananias was a special character. He was a black man. He had made himself a shelter sort of like an igloo on the beach a few hundred feet above the slaughterhouse out of sheets of tin and so forth that he gathered from the dumps. This was about 1907 or '08. He had one small opening that he crawled into his shelter. He had a small rowboat and fished for a living. He would put his fish in a wheelbarrow and cover them with several wet burlap bags and peddle them on the streets. It is said that he kept his money in a bottle and buried it on the beach. He was found dead but no one ever found his money. The La Brisa was a popular resort. It was at the east-end of Duval Street on the beach. It was a large pavilion where they had a bathhouse and sold ice cream, cigarettes, and so forth. The pavilion was used as a skating rink and picnics. There was a dock that extended out into the water for the bathers. The car barns, where the streetcars were kept and repaired that joined the La Brisa. The motormen and conductors- the men who took up the fares of five cents- would take their car after completed their allotted runs. The streetcars were entered at the sides, each seat extending from one side to the other and there was a step running from one end to the other on both sides of the car for the passengers to step up on as they entered the car and the conductor would use to collect fares he rang up on a meter by pulling on a cord that was running from one end of the-- to the other on both sides, which he also used to signal the motorman when all passengers were onboard to start the car on its run.

[audio cuts off]

C: A high-voltage electric wire was above the car was suspended from one pole to another on the other side of the street. This was called a trolley line and a long arm ran from the roof of the car with a small groove pulley which was

on the upper end and it would roll along the trolley line, thus giving electric power to the motors. The cars would travel in two directions: one line ran along Duval Street and turned on Truman Avenue to White Street where the passengers could transfer to the cars that ran out White Street to the cigar factories. It would turn at White Street by the armory building and go on down to Duval Street. Key West in the turn of this twentieth century had the distinction of being the only city of its kind. Besides being the southernmost city in the U.S.A, its inhabitants were a different kind of people. Many were descendants of people who had migrated from the Bahamas. Many were of Cuban descent and a mixture of southerners and northerners from the mainland and some were from Honduras. There were many intermarriages providing-- producing a different brand of people. All of their different customs were intermixed. Their food was different. Many had a Cockney accent and were called 'Conchs'. Many of these Conchs fished for a living. Many of them were spongers, and some were cigar-makers. And many of the spongers and fishermen would have their lower lips sunburned white from the sun and they were called 'cotton-mouth Conchs.' There was a good market for seafood and sponges and cigars. Key West flourished in those days. The black people lived mostly on the west side of Duval Street as also did many of the whites and Cubans. They had their own electric power plant in Key West and gas plant. They seemed to be a happy people and were content with their way of life. Although money was scarce, things were cheap. One could buy a cigarette for one cent each or a dime's worth of ham. The most delicious lime pies were made from sweetened condensed milk and was five cents a slice. Cuban coffee shops were everywhere. Coffee mills would give out the aroma of fresh-roasted and ground coffee. While I was at the parochial school, one could buy a penny ice cream cone from a pushcart. I have never tasted ice cream anywhere as good as they made in Key West. Condensed milk was used for ice cream and there was always a variety of local fruit flavors. My favorite was soursop and sugar-apple was delicious. Tamarind ice cream, sapodilla, watermelon, and guava was among the many varieties. Most everyone made Cuban coffee the same as the restaurants. They had a four-legged stand made of wood with a flat wooden top with a hole about four or five inches across and a metal ring that sat on the top attached to a flannel strainer that tapered to point at the bottom. The bottom of the stand had a wooden square where the coffee pot sat and the strainer was suspended into the coffee pot. The coffee grounds were placed in the strainer and boiling water was poured into the strainer. They never boiled their coffee and they always made fresh coffee and washed the strainer after each batch was made. One could get hot Cuban (cocos?) in the early morning from the bakery. They were a small oblong bread and were delicious for breakfast. They were about fifteen cents a dozen. I had to ride my bike to the ice plant every morning at day break and get a five cent block of ice for the icebox which lasted all day. Ice was made from salt water. Ice was delivered by a horse-drawn wagon, also. I know that the Cuban bread in Key West was much better than in Cuba or Miami. It had a softer texture than anywhere else. The little Cuban coffee shops were busy nights selling Cuban ham sandwiches. They were the best and still are. They all specialized in baking hams and many sold hot bollos made from black-eyed peas that had the skins removed and ground to a pulp and mixed with other ingredients then spooned into hot boiling lard; they sold for five cents a dozen. Fans were popular. Nearly every lady had a folding fan with her. And the women wore long dresses and funny hats- that was the style in those days. And they wore shoes that buttoned up above their ankles. They used a hook-like affair to button up their shoes. All women wore necklaces and all had long hair which was braided. The girls from the red-light district had their hair bobbed and they could be seen in the daytime when they were shopping on Duval Street. The women's bathing suits were long-sleeved and the lower part extended well below their knees and I believe they wore stockings with garters that held them up above their knees and bathing shoes. Every woman wore corsets which had steel strips sewed inside and laced in the back and snaps in the front. I was in Galveston, Texas in 1919 where I saw girls swimming with short panties and sleeveless bathing suits. Many girls were arrested there at that time for indecent exposure. I drew a cartoon that was printed in the Sunday paper. The title was 'Taking in the Peaches at the Galveston Beaches'. It showed a cop arresting a girl with a modern bathing suit. San Carlos Theater would feature a movie and comedy then a vaudeville show with chorus girls and those chorus girls were considered to be brazen and vulgar and indecent, but comparing them to the style of dress today, they had on more clothes than the average girl wears today. There was a seminary on United Street adjoining Mr. Kelly's grocery store. Professor Mohn and his wife lived in a house next to Mr. Kelly's store. There was a large, two-story building where they lived and a dining room and kitchen. Then on the extreme end was the seminary. [coughs] This was a private school of higher learning. I don't know what subjects were taught there. The school did operate for many years. It was closed before 1917 and when World War One broke out, the Navy took the property over and converted the school into a hospital. I worked on the hospital as a laborer doing all kinds of odd jobs. The worst job I had was mixing concrete by hand with a short handle, square-point shovel. There was two of us who had to turn the concrete over from one end to-- of the platform to the other. We both pushed our shovels together and then turned them over. I was just a kid and had to keep up with my partner who was a strong, full developed black man. I was glad when the batch was mixed. My back was aching and my arms were very tired. During World War Two, the Navy tore down the houses on this property and both houses for their--

[audio cuts off]

C: At the fort, they had three or four very large guns with a ten inch bore. These cannon had been there ever since I was a little child. I don't know just when they were installed but I am sure that it was sometime during the eighteenth century because I remember when they would have target practice. They could shoot a shell or shot for a distance of three miles. Ships would drag a target behind them out on the horizon and the shore battery would fire at it and the noise was so loud that windows would rattle and houses would shake and many panes of glass would often break.

This practice would last for several hours. These heavy guns, or cannon, were delicately balanced and after each shot, they would disappear in a pit. They were called disappearing guns. During World War Two, the Navy cut these guns into small pieces with acetylene torch. I asked the Naval engineer in charge of the dismantling why they were destroying these huge cannons and he replied that they were afraid to fire them anymore because they did not think that the foundation would hold up under the concussion as it was too old. I said, "Don't they make this type of cannon anymore?" And he said yes, that they do. I said, "It must cost the government a lot of money to manufacture one of these guns and it must take a long time to make a ten inch bore in one of them." He said, "It sure does." I said, "Wouldn't it be cheaper to dismantle one and ship it some other destination where this type of cannon can be used?" And he said, "To tell you the truth, we wouldn't know how to get one down from there." That they could not figure out how they were able to put-- install them in the first place as they had been there many years. I said that certainly did not-- they certainly did not have the modern equipment and machinery that they do today. He said that anyhow, the Navy needed the lead weights that they use to balance these guns with. He said that there was about 60,000 tons of lead on each gun. I saw them later as they used a derrick to put one piece of lead on a dump truck and as they lowered this huge circle of lead that was about four inches thick onto the truck that the front-end of the truck went straight up in the air and the lead would have slipped off but they quickly hoisted it back up with the derrick. I don't know how they ever got the lead and guns off of there. We used chicken wire and different colored garlands to conceal these open pits where the guns were. I went before the city mayor and got his permission to use certain tropical trees from empty lots and other native trees from the city dumps. One of the Army engineers objected. He said that the government had appropriated thousands of dollars for grass, seed, and Australian pines, and palm trees. I told him I was trying to save the government all of this money as they were constantly begging people to be patriotic and buy government bonds and war stamps. We had quite an argument over this and later, one of the lieutenants who was in charge of a number of machine gun nests that were scattered over the premises asked me if I knew where he could get some marl to build up a wall around a machine gun. And I pointed to a large heap of marl nearby and I told him that we were going to move that heap of marl that was nearby and we would dump as much as he needed at the site. He was delighted and when I told the engineer my plan, he said, "Let him get his own marl." This made me angry and I said, "Man, don't you realize that we have a war going on and we should cooperate one with another?" He said, "Forget it." So I quit the Army engineers then and there. I returned the trucks and keys to the Army and left. The Army had a barracks at the foot of White Street as long as I could remember. One of the privates would pass our house every morning on a two-wheeled cart that was shaped like a half-circle full of slops that he would take out to the slaughterhouse to feed the pigs, or hogs, with. The entrance to the barrack was-- barracks was on White Street opposite the armory and they had two big old-time cannons set in concrete at the gate. I believe they got them from Fort Jefferson about ninety miles west of Key West in the gulf as I saw quite a few of the same cannon at Fort Jefferson that had never been used. There was a parade ground in the barracks and I remember that we all went there to see a game of auto polo. The cars were Model T Fords and were open. They were equipped with circular pipes over the driver and the players would stand on the running board with their mallets. They had a box on the running board with about six dry cell batteries that was connected one to the other. I don't recall just how many cars were on each team but they would have a mad scramble when the opposite team met each other. They would collide with each other and many times they turned over and over, spilling batteries all over the place. These cars had to be cranked by hand as the self-starter had not been invented yet. As a matter of fact, I was married and living in Long Island and had a late Model T when starters first came out about 1923 or '24 and they were converting the older cars with self-starters. It was around '24 or '25 before they began to issue drivers license. They simply asked you about how many miles you had driven and that was all. I think the first license costs fifty cents. I have never heard of any more auto polo games ever being played anywhere. I have a postcard picture of this team that played in Key West. The Army occupied the barracks there at Key West during World War Two and trained many recruits on the parade grounds. After I quit the Army engineers, I went to work for a bridge construction company working on an observation tower at Fort Taylor that was about 100 feet high and there were two observation rooms atop this tower. I had to paint the legs of this tower from a bosun chair which was a flat board two inches thick and about two feet long and six inches wide. It was like an upside-down letter 'V'. The chair is hung on a hook to a pulley so that a man can hang freely in the air and lower himself up and down and tie off the rope so that he can work freely at any height. In this instance, the pulleys were not properly rigged. I was not able to tie the rope off and had to hold the rope in my hand. I was unable to be free to do the job right. While demonstrating this, my hand became stiff and while trying to change the rope from one hand to the other, I lost my grip on the rope and started falling. In this instance-- in a second, I knew that I was falling to my death. I guess I fell about thirty feet when I suddenly landed in a sitting position on a beam [coughs] that ran from one corner to the other tower-- of the tower to the other. The jar of this sudden stop caused me to see a bright flash of light with a lot of stars. I must have lost conscious for a moment. The next thing that I knew was that that I had rolled off the beam and was hanging upside-down with my arms and legs wrapped over the beam so I was able to crawl out to a stairway and stand on my feet. Realizing I was unhurt, I went back up the stairs and began to work on a narrow beam. The shock of my landing shook the whole tower and everyone thought I had been killed. Later, I was sent to a doctor for an examination but found to be okay but he advised me to take the day off to get over the shock. I guess it just was not my time. I sincerely believe that I was pushed over to this beam by an unseen force as I was falling straight down and should have missed the beam. I know that it must have been an angel that wrapped my arms and legs around the beam as I rolled over. I have had many narrow

escapes in my life, but this incident was the closest that I ever came face to face with death. I was attending Harris High School in 1914 when the Navy erected three wireless towers. They were 300 feet high and we could see and hear the riveters as they erected the different sections together. We were in an upstairs classroom on the west side of the building. All iron work was done by riveting as welding had not been invented yet. It was a noisy job. Red-hot rivets were inserted into predrilled holes and an air-pressure hammer was used to spread the bolts in the opposite-- on the opposite side together. At Mr. Kelly's grocery store on White and United Streets, there was always several men sitting on the porch or on the corner and most all of the men in those days chewed tobacco and they were experts at spitting a mouthful of tobacco juice at a target which was usually some barefoot kid's toes. And many times as I walked by, I was the target. I would feel that warm tobacco juice hit my toes and run down in between them. They got a big kick out of this but I certainly did not enjoy it at all. Another boy and myself decided we would run away from home. We were going to try to steal a ride on one of the freight trains but the train was so fast and it looked so dangerous, so we started walking on the tracks. We walked all day and about 7:00 p.m., we came to one of the camps where some of the men who worked on the railroad lived. There were some of these workmen sitting on the porch. As we walked into camp, they had already eaten their supper and were resting. They questioned us and said that we were about twenty-five miles from Key West. They said that they were paid \$1 a day and room and board. The foreman felt sorry for us and took us into the dining room and the chef gave us a hearty meal. [clears throat] He said a mail train was coming through to Key West about an hour later and he would flag down the train and give us a ride back home in the baggage car. We told him of a narrow escape we had had about an hour before when we were in the middle of a long bridge when the headlights-- we saw the headlights of a train approaching and we just barely made it safely to the other side when the train roared by. We both were glad to get home. Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home. Why do kids want to leave home? I have pondered this question. I-- if my mother would have been alive, would I have wanted to run away? I know I would have had more love and things would have been much different. I know that some of the treatment that I received at home was not necessary and was done in resentment, but I still have respect for my stepmother and I feel I am indebted to her for many things. Many of the Key Westers would catch wild birds-- especially Cubans-- and keep them in their homes. They made their own cages using strips of white pine which they cut out of boxes and drilled holes in them and inserted the stems of coconut limbs for wire. They would make a cage about six or eight inches wide and about fourteen inches high and on each end they had a trap with the top open. When set, they had springs attached to the top of the opening and a figure four trap. So when a bird landed inside on the setter, it would trip the door and lock the bird in. They used a fruit called ties-- a small, oblong fruit with yellow sweet meat and a large seed inside. The fruit was very tasty and was about four inches long and one and a half inches wide. (?) (petrels?), mockingbirds, and cardinals-- or red birds-- was their favorites. Many had canaries in their homes. They would put a bird in the middle cage to attract the other birds during the winter. Catbirds were plentiful and they would catch them, kill them, and pickle them and when they had enough, they would cook them in rice. This was called polow. Young children used to get what they called Florida sores which was believed to be from mosquito bites. Usually on the arms and legs, these sores would get to be about the size of a penny. They would form a scab and fester underneath. They were difficult to treat and took several weeks to cure. Iodine was used mostly in treatment. Some kids would have six or more sores on their legs or arms. I caught the measles when I was very young and my stepmother made me drink a tea made from wild sage, which was plentiful in Key West. This was an awful drink. Castor oil was used a lot and Epsom salts was common medicines. Since there was no washing machines, the women all did their washing by hand. They would boil the clothes in a large galvanized tub over a wood fire on the ground then scrub them on a washboard in another tub. They used liquid bluing to bleach the clothes. Octagon soap was used for laundry and dishwashing. There was no bathrooms in the houses until World War Two when the Navy brought fresh water into Key West from the mainline; this was in the early-'40s. All homes had a washstand with a large basin and pitcher of water. Very few houses had electric lights. Kerosene lamps was used extensively until about the early-'20s. There were no vacuum cleaners; floors were swept with a broom and scrubbed with soap and water using a scrubbing brush. No electric irons; flatirons were heated over charcoal. Those women certainly had a rough time of it for the first twenty or twenty-five years of this century, but they all seemed to enjoy life. Since we are interested in the history and development of Key West and the railroad did play an important part in developing Key West and made it possible for more tourists and trade with the out-- with the mainland, I think that the following remarks should be interesting to all people now and in the future. The beginning of the railroads was taken from a book. The title: *The Return of Jesus* by Carlyle B. Haynes. In the chapter, increase of knowledge regarding the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy in B.C. 534 in Daniel 12:4, "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased." He remarks how that today we see millions of automobiles on the highways. All of the air-terminals, railroads, buses, and steamship terminals are bustling with activity. People going and coming in all directions and we just take all of this for granted. When we think of the west just-- of Key West just sixty-three years ago was an isolated island and could only be reached by boat. There was no other mode of transportation available. He reminds us that just a little over a hundred years ago, all travel was done by horse and he relates how the railroads began and I quote, he says that "a little over a hundred years ago in 1817, a member of the New York legislator came to be regarded as a proper subject for a straightjacket because he expressed his belief that steam carriages would operated successfully on land." In 1825, Mr. Nicolas Wood said that for anyone to claim such nonsense-- that we would see locomotives traveling at the rate of twelve or sixteen or eighteen miles an hour-- is utter nonsense. In 1828, a debating society

made a request of the school board in Lancaster, Ohio for the use of the schoolhouse for the discussion of the question as to whether or not railroads were practical. This request was denied and the following reasons were given by the board: "You are welcome to use the school to debate all proper questions in, but such things as railroads and telegraphs are impossibilities and rank infidelity. There is nothing in the word of God about them. If God had designed that His intelligent creatures should travel at the frightful speed of fifteen miles an hour by steam, He would have clearly foretold it through His holy prophets. It is a device of Satan to lead immortal souls down to hell." Unquote.

[clears throat] It was in January 1829 that the first locomotive named the *America* was delivered in the United States; it was made in England. It was tried on a sixteen-mile line from Carbondale to Honesdale, Pennsylvania. It was not a success. The first practical steam locomotive to run in America also made in England named the *Stourbridge Lion* was used on the same line in August 9, 1829. The first American-built locomotive was the *Best Friend*, built at the West Point Foundry in New York in 1830. It was used on the South Carolina Railroad. It is said to have hauled about forty people in four or five cars at a speed from sixteen to twenty miles per hour. Several months later, the Negro fireman, annoyed by the sound of escaping steam, fastened down the safety valve, resulting in a terrific explosion which blew the engine to pieces. In 1831, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad offered a prize of \$4000 for an American engine to weigh three and one-half tons capable of drawing fifteen tons at fifteen miles an hour on a level track. This was won the next year by Messrs. Davis & Gartner who constructed the engine *York*. In the same year, Matthias Baldwin, founder of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, built his first locomotive and tried it on the Philadelphia Germantown and Norristown Railroad. This advertisement, the first ever published in America about a railroad, in a Philadelphia paper read, "Know this, the locomotive engine, built by M.W. Baldwin of this city, will depart daily when the weather is fair with a train of passenger cars. In bad weather, horse cars will run on the same schedule." The first railroad train which ever ran was used on the railroad from Liverpool to Manchester, England. It printed a set of rules for travelers: "1.) Anyone desiring to travel from Liverpool to Manchester or vice versa or any portion of the journey thereof must twenty-four hours beforehand make application to the station agent that the place of departure giving his name, address, place of birth, age, occupation, and reason for desiring to travel. 2.) The station agent upon convincing himself that the applicant desires to travel for a just and lawful cause shall thereupon issue a ticket to the applicant who shall travel by the train named thereon. Trains will stop at their point of departure as near-schedule time as possible but the company does not guarantee when they will reach their destination. Trains not reaching their destination before dark will put up at one of several stopping places along the route--" In 18-- [pause] "-- for the night and passengers must pay and provide for their own lodging during the night. 5.) Luggage will be carried on the roof of the carriage. If such luggage gets wet, the company will not be responsible for any loss attached thereto." From that kind of a start in railroading just a little over 100 years ago, we have advanced rapidly in the transportation since the turn of this century. About fifty years ago, they began to inaugurate mail flights from one city to another. In 1898, it is said that 1000 Marines was living in tents on Pablo Beach training for the Spanish and American War. The battleship *Maine* was in Key West for three days, then departed for Cuba where she was mysteriously blown up and sank in the harbor. At the turn of the century, the streets were paved with bricks but not-- but most of the roads were just plain dirt roads. I remember White Street was just a dirt road. I don't know when the-- where these bricks were-- when they were laid, nor do I know when they were replaced. I remember, though, that when I was real young that swallows would fly up and down White Street just about four foot off the ground. Some of the boys would try to kill the swallows by extending a long wire across the street- one on each side. When they saw a swallow coming, they would flip the wire up in the air but usually they missed the bird. The swallows were catching mosquitoes, I was told. I heard that two boys were electrocuted when they flipped the wire too high and hit the trolley line. Many Conchs claim that when a waterspout was sighted out in the Gulf Stream that they could flash a steel knife across cross wires and the waterspout would break in two. This is also verified in the Bahamas. At certain seasons when it would rain very heavy in Key West--

[audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW