

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Nellie Falk

INTERVIEWEE: Nellie Falk

INTERVIEWER: Unknown

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: August 31, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:15:32

Falk: --social life in Key West in the '80s and '90s, I remember, is when the steamship that ran from Port Tampa to Key West on its way to Havana and would stop over for two and three days and the businessmen would go the operas and while on their way to Havana to stop over and put on Shakespearean plays and all the different operas. I (?) some sensible things.

Unknown: Say what you know.

F: Well, of course, the plays used to take-- be performed in the San Carlos Opera House on Duval Street where the young people-- well, I know the young people used to dress and go to the other-- dress up for the opera. Then after the opera and after the performance of plays, we'd go down to Madam Bolio's Restaurant in the front of Duval Street and have dinner- nice dinners. Social life was at it's highest at the-- during that period. Then there used to be a cotillion club that used to meet out to the old La Brisa Hall. (?).

U: Go ahead.

F: My earliest recollection of Key West was the stories told to me by my grandmother who came over from the Bahama Islands in 1846. And the ships were nearly six weeks making the trip. They landed down where Fort Taylor stands on the sandy beach. There were very few houses here at the time. (?). My-- no I don't want to put that, cause that's--

U: Mama, all that goes on the tape.

F: Oh.

U: Go ahead.

F: Key West was only two streets-- sandy beach and two streets up as far as Thom-- where there's Thomas Street now. The early set-- there were not more than twenty or thirty early settlers here at that time. Later on, a ship was wrecked outside of Key West with about twenty German girls on it. They were all rescued and fam-- many of the families are descendants of those German girls in Key West. They don't want to hear all that.

U: Name a few of them.
[pause]

U: I said name a few of them that you know.

F: Well, they wouldn't know.

U: Well, regardless. One was your grandmother and who was another one?

F: My grandmother was Elizabeth (Markland?).

U: Who was another one?

F: Another one was (Mrs. Munson?)-- wait a minute, (Mrs. Munson-Pitcher?), Wilhelmina--(Earnstein or Pitcher or Munson?). That was her name, Wilhelmina (Earnstein or Munson?). I don't know, let's go back.
[audio cuts off]

F: When Key West depended on cattle, beef brought over from the Punta Rassa Florida, it came in three vessels. It landed at the foot of Simonton Street down there where the fabric center is now. [loud background noise] Early in the morning, the cattle was driven up Simonton Street at what is now Truman Avenue across to White Street out to the--

U: Slaughterhouse.

F: --the slaughterhouse where Martello Towers there is, they had a slaughterhouse--

U: At the south beach?

F: Yes. Mr. Lumley and William Towls- Bill Towls- owned the cattle industry. And they used to slaughter cattle twice a week out there and that's what people depended on. Well, I said all that. Now, that's about the cattle. Now, about the cotillions--

U: You've already said that. Why don't you talk about the factories that came to Key West- the cigar factories?

F: The cigar factories were at their highest between the '80s and the '90s. They want the name I-- do you want the name of the different factories?

U: Yes. Yes, please, give me the names.

F: Sol. Falk and Sons is one, Seidenberg Factory, (Haskew's?) Factory- (?)'s Factory, William (Arnau's?) Factory, E. H. Gato's Factory was the largest factory here. I guess there were a lot more, I can't remember them.
[audio cuts off]

U: Go ahead.

F: Gay life during the late '80s and '90s-- can you understand my voice? It sounds so harsh.

U: Mother, keep talking. Don't ask me questions because the thing's on.

F: Alright. Is that recording--?

U: Yes! Everything's recorded what you're talking about now, so talk.

F: One of the nicest parties of the '90s was one given in either one-- in 1940--year of 1994--94-- 1894, isn't that the year-- century we're in?

U: Yes.
[audio cuts off]

F: One of the nicest parties held in 1894 was at the home of Mrs. George Curry whose residence is now occupied by Mrs. Newhouse on Eaton Street. Everyone wore Chinese costumes, the food was all Chinese food, and it was attended by about fifty couples at the party.
[audio cuts off]

F: Many social events were held at the front Simonton Street in the pavilion, it was called 'La Brisa' and monthly they had cotillions which were attended by the social set of Key West.

U: The men wore--? How were the men dressed? The men wore tux and they used--

F: I don't know. I think the event when the battle-- United States war ships used to come into harbor, all the officers were invited and their guests out there. At the-- at the pavilion, they used to serve--
[audio cuts off]

F: --cotillion--
[audio cuts off]

U: Go ahead and talk to me.
[audio cuts off]

F: [inaudible]

U: Can't you lean over a little bit?
[audio cuts off]

F: (?) lady of Key West. (?). That don't make sense.
[audio cuts off]

U: Well, I don't know what's-- I don't know what's (wrong?). Wait, let me see.
[audio cuts off]

F: I used to belong to the Women's Club 'til long after I was up here but my husband got sick and I couldn't run a car so I just dropped out.

Malone: Do you miss working?

F: I guess--

Harvey: Ms. Nellie, Mary's gonna introduce you on this tape recorder now! [laughs]
[audio cuts off]

M: Are you on?

F: Yeah.

M: I am Mary Malone, a member of the bicentennial committee of the Women's Club. Today, August 6, 197--
[audio cuts off]

M: --Wilhelmina Harvey, president of the club, and I are calling on Mrs. Nellie Falk who had her birthday last month. She was ninety-one and I'm reminded of a George M. Cohan song, "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, Born on the Fourth of July." Wilhelmina, what do you want Ms. Nellie to tell you about Key West as it was?

H: Oh, I'd for Ms. Nellie to tell me all about my grandparents and the Women's Club and Key West--

F: I'll tell you something interesting about the Women's Club.

H: Wonderful.

F: When they first started-- are you ready?

H: We're ready.

F: When they started to raise money to start the Women's Club and that's probably in-- Rosina (Camarina?) lives there now, it was in the Curry property Ms. Sophie's-- Benjamin Curry's property. They put on what they called a 'gypsy encampment' and they took the fence--
[audio cuts off]

F: --down between the property on that whole block and they cast the tents there and everybody who took part of it was dressed as gypsies and it ran for one week and I forget, they made a large amount of money- well, it was a large amount for that time- but they put on-- they had fortunes in one and something else in another tent and one place they sold food, of course. And it ran one week there on that same property that Rosina lives in.

H: Well, that's wonderful. The Key West Women's Club is always broke, you know, so maybe we could practice that today and have a gypsy encampment and maybe we could raise similar moneys.

F: Yes, have an encampment, huh?

H: Right. [laughs]

M: She's giving you an idea.

H: Right, you sure have-- [both speak at same time]

F: -- (?) their costumes.

H: Did Ms. Marie Cappick--?

F: She-- what happened to her book, she wrote a history of Key West and was very much-- [both speak at same time]

M: George Allen is rewriting it or editing it--

F: Did you ever see it? I saw it one time many years ago--

M: It's never been published.

F: -- but she-- it's published, it was published. It was published away from here.

H: Really? I didn't realized it had been published either.

F: Yes. I don't know if it's ever been accepted as a first-rate seller but I know it was published, I know that.

M: Well, I know he is working on it, anyway, to cut it down perhaps.

F: She was Irish-- was she Irish or German?

H: I believe she was--

F: Irish.

H: --Irish, yes.

F: Yes, Irish.

H: And she was one of the founders, was she not of the Women's Club?

F: She was very bright woman.

H: Yes, yes. And she worked at the post-office didn't she for many years?

F: Yes, she worked there for a long time. And she had an aunt who was very educated who had lived over in Havana for many years.

H: I see. And tell us about-- again, do you mind telling us about when the ships were wrecked out here and how the local islanders would react to the shipwrecks?

F: Well, they'd try to jump on the first boat going out to the wreck because the first boat got there made money but I-- when the first boat got there, the man was a shipmaster. Anybody-- when they'd say, "Wreck ashore", every boy and everybody in town that could get aboard of a ship would go-- go out to it- to the wreck.

M: Would you tell us about the ship-- the German girls out in the shipwreck?

F: Well, didn't you put it-- it didn't record it, huh?

H: No, we didn't get any of all that beautiful story you told. Ms. Nellie, maybe we should check this, too, to make sure we're getting it now rather than to--
[audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW