

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Robert Felton

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Felton

INTERVIEWER: Unknown1 and Unknown2

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:29:03

Unknown1: Well, he came here from Germany? Von Cosel?

Felton: Yeah. Von Cosel. Germany, yeah. And I knew-- before he started he worked in a Ford garage, years ago-- Ford garage-- and then he moved to the old Navy Hospital and that's when I had the broken leg and he covered it, casted it, and--

U1: Was he in the Navy or he just worked at the hospital?

F: No. He just worked there. See, he was an x-ray expert was what he was and he took all the X-rays and he was also a Plaster of Paris. He was very good at that.

U1: Yeah? What, you crushed your legs and he fixed them?

F: He casted them up.

Unknown2: Fell off a truck or something?

F: Truck rolled over.

U1: Truck rolled over your legs?

Unknown3: [inaudible]

U1: Yeah, I'll take a 7 Up.

U3: [inaudible]

U1: Good for your heart. [chuckles] So, this girl-- he knew this girl from Key West?

F: Well, as far as I-- like I said, the girl, her family, I didn't know them. I know when she, you know, was dead. He had the, you know, the vault, you know in the graveyard there but I didn't know her people- the girl's people- at all.

U1: But was she, like, his girlfriend or something before she died?

F: I think they-- I don't know what it was said. To tell you the truth, if he was a-- I think he just used to visit the people's house 'cause-- why, I don't know if the girl was ever married or anything. I don't know of--

U1: What did she die of?

F: I don't know that. I don't remember what she died of.

U1: My grandfather had told me about that, you know. (How all this?) happened years ago but I've forgotten so much of it. He told me something about that she died and he took her back from the grave-- he took her out of the grave or something?

F: Well, no, the way I understood it, he got permission from her people- the way I always understood- to dig the body up 'cause he built, you know, a fancy tomb.

U1: Oh, yeah, a vault or something.

F: To put the body in the vault. I mean, that's-- they gave him the permission and he was supposed to put her in the vault but I guess evidently he didn't put her in there.

U1: Oh, he took her home instead, eh?

F: He took her from the grave and he kept her and he waxed her.

U1: He waxed her?

F: As far as I know, the whole body was waxed.

U1: Oh, as the body would decompose--

F: He gave it up. He gave the body up after so many years. He gave the body back to the people.

U1: Uh-huh.

F: They wanted to see it and he gave it back to them.

U1: Oh, really? That's disgusting. [laughs]

F: Now they say he-- he got to live in the old, what you call it, Butcher Pen out there on White Street.

U1: Where the slaughterhouse was?

F: Where the slaughterhouse was.

U1: He lived out there?

F: He lived there for a long time and then they made him move and he was up there on Flagler. (?).

U1: Oh yeah, we had the--

F: Stables.

U1: Yeah, the horses.

F: The horses and stuff there. But that's where he moved 'cause they made him move out of the old slaughter pen.

U1: Well, he must have been kind of eccentric since they-- you know, because most doctors are rich, you know, and they have nice houses and all of that.

F: Well, he didn't never live in nothing elaborate even though he probably had, you know-- I don't know what his family in Germany was, if they were rich people or not, but he was a-- from what I understood, he had twelve degrees from twelve different colleges.

U1: Wow. He must have been kind of batty to begin with.

F: (?) in one subject, but he was a-- you know, he was a smart man in a lot of ways. Evidently, he was some kind of mechanic 'cause when he first came to Key West, he worked down (?) at the Ford place.

U1: While he was still a doctor?

F: He didn't then. Then finally, he left there and he went to work here in the old Navy Hospital. But I used to see the old man (praying?). After I got out of the hospital, I would stop and speak to him and he'd stop and speak to me.

U1: And then he just liked that girl and he kept her in his house, huh?

F: And he-- far as I know, he kept her for a long, long time. Nobody didn't know it, but he did. He kept her and he finally had to give her up. Well, he gave her up because he knew he had the right to give her up.

U1: Was there something about he was leaving town or some-- he left town on an airplane or something?

F: No, he was building an airplane.

U1: Oh, he was building an airplane?

F: But he never finished.

U2: I remember that airplane.

F: Yeah, remember that big, big-- well, it was an amphibious plane and it was out of the old cedar from the old box factory, remember?

U2: Really?

F: And that's where he used to get, and make all the wheels. He'd cover them with canvas and all that stuff like the old time airplanes.

U1: Was he--?

F: But he never finished that old airplane.

U1: Well, do they think he was planning to take her away in it or something like that?

F: It was-- somebody wrote a story, if you could ever find that *Life Magazine*. There was a big story (of the man?). (?) They had a big story in *Life Magazine*.

U1: I remember my grandfather told me he used to replace body parts with wax as they would decompose.

F: Well, not that he-- now, he could do with Plaster of Paris, too.

U1: Oh, plaster.

F: I was going to say, he was-- I don't know what you call it, a sculptor. He had more people's heads-- you know, just the--

U1: The bust?

F: -- the bust part up, that he'd make out of Plaster of Paris. Boy, he was very good. If he'd look at you, you know, for awhile, he could just go there and make it out of plaster. He had a lot of-- he had a lot of talent, I'll tell you that.

U2: He used to work a lot with electricity, too, didn't he?

F: (?) 'cause he-- I'll tell you a story about it. I used to go there and he used to have big signs all the time. (Different places.?) 'High Voltage', 'Danger- High Voltage'.

U1: (Now?) you're Dr. Frankenstein. [laughs]

F: He'd never tell you, you know, he was close-mouthed about it but he'd talk to you and you could see the sign and all but to venture into his rooms and all, there was a rope-- there was a rope between them.

U1: This was when you visited him when you were getting treatment for your legs?

F: No, no. After I got out of the hospital, I would pit-stop there on occasion. But like I said, he never did give you any-- tell you what all the high voltage was being used for or anything.

U2: [inaudible]

U1: Yeah.

F: (Exactly?) like I said, this is stained in my mind but the thing that made the story in the *Life Magazine* was what somebody-- somebody (seen him do it?) but he did intend to bring her back to life. How? I don't know.

U1: Must have had something to do with electricity.

F: It must have because he said he could preserve the body and bring it back to life.

U1: Do you remember what the girl's name was? It was a Key West girl, I know.

F: I knew that she was a Spanish girl- Cuban girl. I believe a Cuban girl. I believe they lived on Southard Street. (?). I believe they said they lived on Southard.

U2: Well, he tried to bring her back to life right after she died, did he? In the house?

U1: What, she get sick? She died 'cause she got sick?

U2: Yeah.

F: She was sick, wasn't she? I think (Maggie?) said that- something about she was sick and he used to treat her.

U1: Oh, that's probably where he got to liking her. I seem to remember my grandfather saying.

F: (?) sick 'cause like I said, (?) father, I knew him from when I went to the hospital more than one time. The other part of that family, I didn't know. Now, I know when the family left Key West, though, the old woman, she was in (?).

U1: Oh yeah? Were they catching on to him or something or what?

F: No, they tried him. They had a trial but they didn't-- they just told him to leave.

U1: Oh, they did arrest him for having a dead person?

F: They arrested him but they had a court trial and they couldn't do nothing to him as far as I know. All they did was ask him, you know, to leave this town, which he did. He got all the big trucks and loaded everything.

U1: All his gear, eh? [chuckles] And after he left, the vault exploded?

F: Yeah, after he left the vault blew up.

U1: So the girl was in there when it blew up then, huh? They'd put her back?

F: I don't know. I don't believe he put her back 'cause they had her in the undertaker for a long time, didn't they?

U2: Seems like it.

F: After they took her from him, seems to me, they took the girl's body down to the undertaker (?) for a long time. I don't know, 'cause he moved up there (in Florida?), I know that. And then he finally died because I read it in the *Miami Herald*. (?)

U1: (?)?

F: No (?). Well, anyway was in- right in the area of (?) where (Gary?) moved to up there now (?) Park, up in there, something like that. (?) down in Key West before he died (?).

U1: And they probably didn't tell anybody where they buried her because it'd be a-- like an attraction. Everybody would be trying to dig her up, too.

F: Well, like I said, there was such a debate over it that the law, you know, (?) funeral (?). Whether they ever buried her again, I don't know.

U2: I think all the excitement might have been a cover-up.

U1: Maybe he really took her in one of the trucks. [laughs] You know?

F: If he had a chance, (he'd take a chance and?) (?) trying to, you know, bring her to life. And if he preserved her for that long, (?) because he had the organ. He had an organ in there.

U1: In the room where he had the girl?

F: In the room where he had the girl because (?) right on the corner of (Fifth?) Street--

U1: There's a (?). They call it (?)

F: Well, that's the one that I'm almost sure he cut the organ out of, they put a new organ in, threw the old one out and he got the old one and he rebuilt it. And he could play it.

U1: Played the organ for what?

F: Well, he got the old one and he rebuilt it. I never went in the place when he was out here.

U1: But he had her outside the graveyard (?)?

F: Well, I understood that he gave her up it was up here on Flagler here.

U1: Right on Flagler?

F: That's when he gave her up. That's where he had the organ and all 'cause I said, I never went inside there. But that's where he had her and he gave her up to her sister. He told her she could have her.

U1: I wonder how they came to find out that she was there.

F: No, he told them.

U1: Oh, he just came out one day and told them?

F: He told them. [pause] If I remember right, though, some of her family wanted to get the key for something. They lost the key and to go there for some special day or occasion or something to put flowers in there or something down at the cemetery. The next day, (?) to get him and that's when he told them they didn't have to go down there, that he had the body.

U1: Oh.

F: He just came right out.

U1: Yeah, he initially got them to say he could dig her up so he could put her in the vault but instead of putting her in the vault, he took her to this other place and they thought she was in the vault all those years.

F: But they made postcards, didn't they? (??)?

U1: I've heard that- something about postcards.

F: I think they made postcards and sold them. (??). (??) we didn't have no-- there wasn't no television or nothing. It was on the radio news, you know? There was a lot of weird people that come to Key West when that happened. But that's when the *Life Magazine* reporter came down here and checked it out. They had a whole big--

U1: Big scandal, yeah.

U2: Yeah, they had a (?).

F: Actually, (?) if you could check out (?) *Life Magazine* (?).

U2: (?) not too long ago in the paper (?).

U1: They may bring it out every now and then.

F: Yeah, it comes up. As far as I could re-- it was quite a thing because they don't know what the body (?). It was all waxed. (There was nothing else that you know or you could go by?) (?). But, if he could preserve a body for, say, seven, eight years like that without-- even after it was embalmed, if he could keep it-- keep a body like that, that's a heck of a thing because you don't know. What did he use?

U1: In those days, did they have embalming?

F: Oh yeah, they had embalming. (?) used to embalm people there. But to me, like I said, the funny thing, if he did have the woman like they claim he did, how did he preserve the body not to, you know, deteriorate? He could keep it for so many years. So that shows you he was smart in a lot of ways; he was a smart man. He wasn't crazy and only for that one-track mind.

U1: [laughs] Yeah.

F: Other than that, I don't know. He could have been a genius, I guess, because he take twelve degrees (?).

U1: Was she a-- how old was she more or less? Like a teenager?

F: She (?).

U2: [inaudible]

F: She was twenty-one?

U1: Were you born then, dad?

F: Yeah, he was born.

U1: He was born then? So, you all were about the same age, huh?

F: Yeah, your daddy was born then.

U1: He must have been out fishing when all this happened. [chuckles]

F: No, he was (?).

U1: Oh.

U2: I remember Jose talking about it--

F: Daddy used to go (on the boat?) all the time. (Jack?) wasn't (fishing?) then. Well, his dad was-- he was fourteen years old 'cause that's how old I was and I was in the hospital. After I got out of the hospital, (?) couldn't have been but two or three more years then I was seventeen years old (?) and he gave her up. (?).

U2: I remember when, you know, Jose talking about it a little bit and reading in the papers about it and the thing I remember most about it was that old airplane he had--

F: He left that old (?). Well, he started (erecting?) with it down in the hospital. He started to build that down here, with old man (?). Remember (?)?

U2: Yeah.

F: His daddy? Well, he used to be the (?).

U1: But he never did finish it, huh?

F: I never seen him finish it.

U1: He never got a motor?

F: I don't think he ever put wings on it. (?). I can remember two great big wheels. (?). He was supposed to be able to land it on the land and in the water.

U1: Oh, because the wheels would float. I see.

F: (?)

U2: What happened to that thing?

F: (?). That may be still up there where he died.

U1: Boy, that'd be something if somebody were to find it over there.

F: If you could find that, put it in a museum.

U1: Sure.

F: We could probably find it.

U2: (?) find that girl?

F: (?)

U1: He didn't have any family here, though?

F: Him? No. What part of Germany he come from, I don't know either to tell you the truth. He must have come from a pretty wealth to have that kind of education. To invest that way back then to get from Germany over here.

U1: Well, that wasn't long after the First World War that he came here, was it?

F: Couldn't-- Well the First World War was what '20 something. (?) I was born in '20 and (?).

U1: Was he here as long as you remembered?

F: (?). My brother used to work for Ford Motor and he went to work down here.

U1: Oh, that's when he first came to this country?

F: The first time I ever remember seeing him (walk?) and that's before he ever worked at the hospital. (?) so I imagine that's when he first came to Key West. (?) Ford Garage here?

U2: Oh, yeah. Yeah, down there on (?) Caroline Street?

F: It's almost to Caroline. It's in that alley that the building just caught fire. The hotel that caught fire over there?

U2: Oh. Yes, yes.

F: That's where he used to (?).

U2: Yeah, now I remember now that I am thinking of it. In back of it.

F: The one-- Chevrolet-- the Chevrolet used to be on Caroline--

U2: (?).

F: --you know where that (?) (Mulberg had it?)

U1: Right, I remember (Mr. Mulberg had it?).

F: Yeah, he had it there. (The World Ford dealer?) (?) (Ford dealer was right there?). He used to go down (?) comes out by the Elk's Club, go in the service department. My brother worked over there. (?)

U2: He worked there then?

F: He worked there then, too.

U1: He-- The doctor spoke English and everything, though?

F: Oh yeah, he spoke good English.

U1: He must have learned that over there in Germany.

F: Must have done, 'cause I know when I was in the hospital, he used to come in and talk to me there. (?)

U1: Yeah?

F: And he wrote his name all on the big plaster cast I had.

U1: You went to the Navy Hospital?

F: Yeah.

U1: Oh, they used to take--

F: Marine Hospital.

U1: Marine?

F: Navy, but they call it Marine.

U1: Well, all the Key West people could go there then? I mean--

F: No, not every person, all merchant sailors. My grand-daddy was in the service then because he was the one that (?). All the old folks in here is entitled to a Marine Hospital.

U1: Oh, I see.

F: See, anybody not just merchant marine. The commercial fishermen could go in the hospital just like (?). They gotta (put him in?). If something happens to him out here on the boat, they pick him up; they have to bring him in.

U1: The commercial fishermen? The civilians?

F: That's right. They got to put him in there. If you're in a boat, (?) but I have no rights to go in there. It's just that the old man brought me. (?) I suppose he (?). That's where he took me. Once I got there, the doctor wouldn't let him take me back out.

U1: The German doctor?

F: No, (?).

U1: Oh.

F: (?).

U1: Oh.

F: Yeah, he was Navy doctor. (?).

U2: Yeah, (?).

F: He was fully in charge of the Navy Hospital here and he even lived there next to it. The house right next to it? That's where he lived. He had two girls, they were our age. I can't remember their names but I know they went to school near where we were going to school.

U2: I remember once that didn't one of them marry another doctor?

F: I don't know. I don't know what become of them, but I know they (?) because they went to school, same grade and all. He had two daughters.

U1: Was there a regular hospital in Key West then or just that Marine Hospital?

F: No, there was (?) Hospital--

U1: Oh, (?).

F: -- (?) Dr. (?), Dr. (?).

U1: But Dr. Von Cosel went to this other hospital regularly or--?

F: Well, he just went there to get a job, more or less civil servant. I guess it was civil servant because when he was there-- like I say, this boy (?), he went to school with us. His daddy was their civil servant. And, (?), you know, the painter (?) Navy yard (?). Well, he worked there and--

U1: At the Marine Hospital?

F: Marine Hospital, civil servant. And (?) (Want to say Joe or something like that?) Joe (?) got the laundry (?). The old--

U1: I know the one that has the (laundrette?)

U2: Yeah, well, I've forgotten his name.

U1: (?) [chuckles]

U2: (?)

F: He died not too long ago. But he retired a civil servant. (?) all that time he was down there. Old man Solomon, Joe Solomon's daddy worked there. When I was in there, Joe Solomon's daddy worked there. (Andrew Solomon?).

U2: Was Von Cosel a doctor down there?

F: No, he wasn't really a doctor. What he really was, he took the X-rays.

U1: Oh, an X-ray technician or something?

F: X-ray technician, that's what he was.

U1: Oh, but he wasn't a licensed doctor?

F: No.

U1: But he could do the plaster casts?.

F: He was a plaster (?). He was good at plaster. I tell you, his job there, I'm pretty sure it was just nothing but the X-rays.

U1: But also, he put on the plasters then- the casts.

F: Yeah, he did the casts. He made the plaster cast. He did plaster good. (?)

U1: Were your legs broken, like-- were the bones snapped off or just cracked?

F: I just squashed them.

U1: Oh, just squashed.

F: Just squashed the right leg. (?)

U1: Well, he must have done a good job anyway.

U2: He lost his shoe, I think, funny story (?).

F: Caught my shoestring, (?) at a good looking girl (?) and then fussed with the shoestring, dropped the shoe off, hopped over the fence (?).

U1: Now, how'd you come to be lying in the street? [laughs]

F: I wasn't lying in the street. I jumped on the truck and missed.

U1: Oh.

F: (?)

U1: Oh, wow.

F: A big old garbage truck. The size of a (?). I would have been cut in half only it didn't have a (?). Had that solid rubber wheel.

U1: Were you working on it or just--?

F: No, no, I just came home to cut out here to the trash pile. I was going to the trash pile to shoot birds.

U1: Oh.

F: I jumped off down (?). I didn't want the driver to see me because they didn't want you hanging (?).

U1: [chuckles] Yeah.

F: (?) but the truck kept on going. Actually, the man never (?).

U1: Well, no wonder it crushed you with wheels like that solid rubber wheel.

F: He didn't notice. (?)

U2: (?)

F: (?)

U2: (?)

F: He was in charge of (?) and as far as I know, they paid for the legs. I think they paid eighty or something, I don't remember if it was \$200 but it wasn't that much.

U1: It'd be thousands nowadays.

F: Today? For six months in the hospital? [laughs]

U1: Oh, six months?

F: (?). You want to pay the bill?

U1: No, forget it?

F: [laughs] (?). It was \$500 just for the room. Altogether, it's nineteen hundred and something dollars, my bill for the hospital. Nine hundred and something for the doctor.

U2: (?) nineteen hundred and something.

F: I paid nearly \$2000. (?) for the doctor bill.

U2: (?)--
[audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW

