



## Selma Grenald Interview

**Kathy:** This is Kathy, interviewing Selma Grenald about her long association with Miami Beach and her career. Today's date is January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016. What I'd like to know is, I believe you were an early arrival to Miami Beach, were you not?

**Selma:** Yeah, in my mother's tummy.

**Kathy:** In your mother's tummy ... Tell us about that.

**Selma:** Well, I lived in Miami Beach all my life. My father was a developer. He also had a business up in Long Island, called Spring Harbor, near Huntington, but I spent all my life down here. It was quite different. Lincoln Road was uptown. My parents bought a home on Sheridan and 51<sup>st</sup> Street. My sister and I were ... We were like they're moving us to Jacksonville. We were hysterical. Luckily, she was 16, so they bought her a car, but moving up all the way to 51<sup>st</sup> Street was just out of this world.

**Kathy:** Where did you start out? You started out down around 5<sup>th</sup> Street?

**Selma:** Pardon me? Well, my [crosstalk 1:21] father built apartments ... Those days, there wasn't such a thing as condos. He would rent the apartment. They were rental apartments but in the summertime nobody rented it. They would be closed. The people would pay more for the eastern view because it would be cooler, because there was no such thing as air conditioning. Later on, the air conditioners were in the restaurants and the movies, where we spent a lot of time ... Lincoln Road was our shopping and Saks Fifth Avenue was

there. But the cars drove down the street in those days and they parked that way.

And then when the war broke out, all the hotels were taken over by the army. We used to ride our bicycles to school in those days. I think I lived on about 10<sup>th</sup> Street because my father would build different apartments and we would move. Then I pedaled up to my girlfriend and they would be marching with their full gear on, the soldiers, and all of the sudden, you'd look around and one or two would be fainting from the heat. They had to go with all their ... Then two guys would come pick them up. An ambulance would come to take them. It was wartime then and we had to ... At nighttime, if you lived on the beach, on Miami Beach, and you didn't – you lived close to the ocean – you had to keep your lights off and no cars were allowed because if the Germans would come, submarines would drop the bombs into the ocean and then they would run away and our boats would come. It was completely different times ...

**Kathy:** Was it scary?

**Selma:** No, it wasn't scary at all.

**Kathy:** Why not?

**Selma:** We really didn't know ... There was no such thing as television. We got our news when we went to the movies. They used to have Pathe News, I think they called it. The news would come out ... It wasn't scary. It became scary when somebody in your family went to war. He was sent over to France-

**Kathy:** Your husband-

**Selma:** I don't know whether – luckily, or not – but when he got there, he got an appendix, and they had to send him back to America. Then he was sent to Panama. He was the Admiral's aide down there and I was one of the first wives to go down there. I got pregnant with my daughter down there. That was

after the war. My husband, besides being a pharmacist, he's also a chemist. He got friendly with some Panamanians down there and we were going to stay there. My father said, "No, no! You're American. You're having a baby. You've got to come back!" So we came back to Miami. He [her husband] loved Miami better than Louisville, even though his family were there. Eventually, they moved down here.

Miami Beach, Surfside, was like ... Nothing, you know ... I'm trying to think of the word. And we used to, on Saturdays, the kids used to ride our bicycles up there and have picnics there. My father once owned all the properties in Surfside on the water, every bit of it. The war broke out. My father came home and said to my mother, "Bertha, you have one of the most brilliant husbands in the world." She said, "Why?" He says, "I sold the property and I made \$10,000 profit or \$15,000 profit ..." She says, "Oh, thank God!" I guess I would've been one of the wealthiest girls in the country-

**Kathy:** Had he not sold-

**Selma:** That was out of this world. Nobody knew it ... This was after we were married, before we had Sky Lake and-

**Kathy:** Aventura?

**Selma:** Aventura was wasteland. When the Sofers, I think it was the Sofers started to develop it, everybody said they're crazy, but there was no such thing as malls, of course. The only mall was Lincoln Road and that was completely different.

**Kathy:** When you went to Lincoln Mall, you were a teenager? You went shopping there?

**Selma:** From the time I was – I would go with my mother – five, six years old. Then as I got older and even after I got married, it was still ... I got married during the wartime. He went overseas and when he came back, everything was still wasteland above Lincoln Road. By that time, I was living on 51<sup>st</sup> and Sheridan

Avenue, which was way uptown. Was there any other question?

**Kathy:** Yes, about the typical life of young people then. You said you went to the movies a lot.

**Selma:** Oh yeah. There was no such thing as television. As a matter of fact, after the war, my sister was married to a [inaudible 7:55] who was overseas. My best friend and my sister's best friend ... None of us had any money. We got from the government a loan and we built a ... A lot of the other young soldiers came back and did the same ... We built a four-bedroom apartment house on Marseille Drive. By that time, things were beginning to move up. We lived there and we had our children there.

My husband came home one day with a black and white television set. If you can imagine ... First of all, there only two or three different channels and every Thursday night, it was a famous ... I forgot its name ... A comedian. My sister and our two friends would come in and we would watch this one-hour show. There was no such thing as that ...

Even after we were married, black people were not allowed on Miami Beach after 6:00. I had a live-in maid and I had to have a pass. Even people that worked on Miami Beach had to have a pass. Because I was a writer, I had my own pass. Then one day, my husband's drug store on 41<sup>st</sup> Street ... I guess he could tell it better than me ... He was sending black people to sit at different fountains, because if people wanted to get food at our fountain, they used to have to go through the back way and they would hand them out ... Three or four very nicely dressed black people ... I wasn't there, so I really shouldn't ... then came and sat down at our fountain and-

**Kathy:** When you say "our fountain," do you mean a drugstore?

**Selma:** My drugstore fountain-

**Kathy:** That the family owned-

**Selma:** Yeah, my husband owned. I think that was his first or second ... Anyway, three or four very nicely dressed ... I was not there. My husband was ... Were dressed nicely. Sat down at the fountain. All the different people look around ... “My God, what’s gonna happen now?” My husband walked over and said to Lillian, who ran our fountain, “Lillian, see what these gentlemen would like, and I would like to join them.” Of course, they were fed and then the next day, the newspaper came out and said, “Martin Pharmacy first to accept ... “ That was one of the milestones of the blacks starting to be able to come to Miami Beach. I was very proud of him.

You must have Ben tell this story. We had a drugstore on the bottom of Lincoln and Alton Road. They had coffee there. They raised it ... I don’t remember, but this is an interesting story. Coffee from 5 cents to like 10 cents and women started to walk around with plaques that say, “Don’t go in to this drugstore. They’re charging too much.”

**Kathy:** That was doubling the price of the coffee.

**Selma:** Oh yeah. That was a lot of money then.

**Kathy:** Sure. You went to Miami Beach High School.

**Selma:** Yeah.

**Kathy:** What was that like?

**Selma:** When I went to high school, it was on 14<sup>th</sup> Street before the one that was built there. Our classes would start out with maybe 10 kids in it. Then by the time Thanksgiving was over, there’d be another 10 people in there. We had a lot of snowbirds that would come down. Then, of course, they would go back. I was a drum majorette. My memories of high school ... I don’t remember anybody being bullied in those days. They may have been but ... Even though it was war time, it was good. It was a small [amount 12:42] ... Everybody knew everybody else. All the families knew each other. All the kids knew each other. We had, in the middle of the school – I

guess they still have it there ... I think it's not the first grade or something ... They had a patio and they would play music during lunch hour. We used to do the Lindy. That was our dance at that time, we did the Lindy.

**Kathy:** So you Lindy hopped at lunch hour.

**Selma:** At lunch hour, yeah. They played the music.

**Kathy:** How did the kids coming down, the children of the snowbirds, how did they mix in? Were they accepted?

**Selma:** Sure. One of my first boyfriends was ... I used to be so sad when he'd have to go back. No, they mixed in. That was part of Miami Beach. It was just nothing unusual because from the time I went to school, it was always like that. Life went on here, and of course, during the war, I was married by that time ... [inaudible 13:58] was part of the war.

**Kathy:** Let's talk about your writing career. You've had a long career in various kinds of writing.

**Selma:** I first started out ... It was called The Sun Report. It was just for Miami Beach. Then it became The Citizen News because it became bigger ... I did acting ... Showcase came in and I started to write for them and then the Community Newspapers, which is still out now. I think there was 12 different places, and I did the travel. For them, I was the travel writer. For Showcase, I did travel and interviews, like you're interviewing me, I used to interview-

**Kathy:** Who were some of the people you interviewed that you recall being colorful or memorable? You did interview Janet Reno.

**Selma:** Janet Reno. I was put on the Minimum Housing Appeals Board by President Roosevelt's son. He was mayor at that time.

**Kathy:** Elliott Roosevelt.

**Selma:** Yeah. I had to resign ... I was on there for seven, eight years while I was doing all this. When Ben got on the commission, because it would've been ... Then I went on to the Beautification and anybody that was anybody, Shepard Broad's son I did, I thought, in there. Maybe there's some in....

**Kathy:** Norman Braman?

**Selma:** Norman Braman, I did. I did the Bee Gees.

**Kathy:** Oh, what were they like? Did you do all of them at once?

**Selma:** What were they like? They were nice. Ben did all the medication, because they lived on North Bay Road. They were wonderful. Very plain, very sweet, very nice people – not snobby, not typical celebrities at all.

**Kathy:** You have on this list Disney World.

**Selma:** Oh, yes. My grandson loves Disney World. When Disney World first opened, they didn't get the best write-ups. I went up there and I did a story on them. Unbeknownst to me ... Well, right away, I got back and was invited to come up as a guest. I took all my grandchildren and everybody. We were treated like we were really celebrities. My grandson has something to do with them. He does some writing himself and he said that in the offices there, they have my article framed up on the wall. He saw it. Then they named a street after me, named Selma. I forgot about that.

**Kathy:** That's still at Disney World-

**Selma:** It's still ... He was just up there ... He's not here right now.

**Kathy:** Your article must've made a huge difference then.

**Selma:** They said that my ... They had gotten some bad articles written, apparently, and then I did places like Santo Domingo, when they first opened their first Hilton hotel there. I was sent down. Oh, this one would be interesting. I was sent down to Cuba by Showcase Magazine.

**Kathy:** What year are we talking about?

**Selma:** Ben? Ben?

**Ben:** Yeah.

**Selma:** What year was I in Cuba, honey?

**Kathy:** Before the revolution?

**Selma:** Oh, no. Way after. [crosstalk 18:13]

**Ben:** -Cuba ... It was our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. That'd be 1985.

**Selma:** [crosstalk 18:19] –sent down and the different ... Castro was in there and I was picked as one of the writers. There were different writers from different parts of the country. I was a little nervous and I went to my editor and I said to him ... Maybe the article's in one of the ... I said to him, "I don't want to go without my husband." He says, "Selma, we can't ... Wait a minute. I'll tell them he's your photographer." They sent us down.

We had a gentleman who worked for us, named Jose, and he worked for us for some 40-odd years. He was younger than Ben. He passed away. He left when Castro came in. His wife became a Communist and he left a young son down there. He remarried here and had a child, but always kept in contact with his son. His son got married. Son was an engineer, and they treat people with education a little bit better down there. Of course, he said, "Be sure and look up my son." I didn't even think about it.

When we were being interviewed before we were going down – things we could do and things we couldn't – they said, "Do you have any relatives there?" I said no. "Do you have any close friends there?" I said no. I didn't think about it. They said, "If you bring anything down, you must bring the bill with you and you have to pay twice for it. As long as you don't have



any, we have no problem.” We get off the airplane and they go through our luggage and they open up Ben’s luggage and there is radios, there is sunglasses, there is everything ... I went white as a sheet and I don’t understand Spanish ... they’re blabbering in Spanish and my husband says, “Here’s the receipt.” I wanted to kill him. I said, “Why would you do this?” He said, “It’s Jose’s son and he’s waiting for this.” I checked to see if ... He takes out the money and they go like this and they get into a corner and they say, “Okay.” They figured I’m a writer. They don’t want me to say anything wrong.

We get in the bus and they’d taken us to Nacional Hotel. Before Castro came in, we used to go there. It was gorgeous. They bring us to the hotel room, the place smelled so bad. Got into an elevator with some ... A lot of Russians were there. I don’t think they ever took a bath. All we did was write each other and flush it down the toilet. There was no toilet seat there, but we knew we were being bugged. Anyway, Ben called Jose’s son. They all have to walk around with passports. They brought the passports with them and we all went to a club called the Tropicana. Many years ago, it was great. They had some Russian dancers there that weren’t that great. Jose’s son didn’t speak a word of English and it was the time ... I’m trying to think of the name of the people that brought ... Went to this island and brought ... Had his whole cult poison their selves. You remember that?

**Kathy:** Oh, that had a whole cult?

**Selma:** Cult. Then he poisoned them.

**Kathy:** Oh, yes. That happened in ... That was Jim Jones.

**Selma:** In Spanish, to Jose, Jose ... Because we were saying America is so wonderful, this and that. He said “This is what Americans do,” and he was telling us about that. Anyway, when we left, they were allowed to come to our hotel room and I gave him ... We went with empty suitcases ... I even gave them my dirty underwear. We get to the airport to come home and when they

open it, when you're going ... I guess they want to see (if) you're taking cigars and all that. It's empty. They say, somebody spoke English there, "Where's all your clothes?" I said, "Somebody must've stole all my clothes! Oh, I'm so unhappy!" Anyway, that was quite an experience. It was fun."

My husband was the head of Tourist Development at the time and he was sent to Munich to one of ... Maybe he was representing Miami Beach, and countries from all over the world were representing there. In those days, he had to do an interview for Miami for the papers or whatever, by telephone. I said, "I'm going to walk around," and I see in front of one of the showcases there, they were rolling cigars. It was a Cuban place. Somebody taps my shoulder and says, "Is this Sel?" Because I wrote under Sel. I look around and I said "Yes, do I know you?" He says, "Well, I spent the whole week with you." I says, "What do you mean?" He says, "When you were in Cuba. We were assigned to follow you everywhere you went because we saw you get in a taxi and go downtown," which he did do that. I started to laugh, I said, "But you speak perfect English." He said, "I lived in America. I went back to Cuba. My mother was very sick, so I live in Cuba now." He says, "Come in the back, I'd like to talk to you." In the back, they had typewriters and [inaudible 25:30] some German girl ... He says, "You know, Castro read your article." I said, "Really? What happened when my editor read my article, I ended it up ... 'It's a nice place to visit but any other ... What Russia is ...

**Kathy:** The USSR? Europe?

**Selma:** You know, when you're a Russian, you're a ... The religion there.

**Speaker 4:** Communist?

**Selma:** Ben?

**Ben:** Wouldn't want to live there.

**Selma:** No. When you're a ... What's the name?

**Kathy:** Soviet?

**Selma:** What?

**Kathy:** A Soviet? [crosstalk 26:33] Communist?

**Selma:** Communist. I said it's no different than visiting any Communist. My editor knocks out the bottom part ... He was getting people advertising for different Cuban things, the airline ... I said, "If you do that, my house will be bombed. I'll lose every Cuban friend I have. How dare you. Just cut it." He said, "Okay. I'm going to leave it in." He did leave it in, of course.

**Kathy:** How did it finally read, the ending?

**Selma:** Exactly the way I wrote it.

**Kathy:** Which was?

**Selma:** "It's an interesting place to visit ... " Maybe you'll find it ...  
"Interesting place to visit, like any other Communist country. ...  
" Of course, we went to Russia. That's Communist. We visit there. We've been to ...  
Anyway, they left it there. So he says, "We would like you to be the guest of the government and do a story in October. We're getting some people on how/where we grow our things and this and that and the other thing." I got flattered. I said, "Oh yeah, I'd love it." Anyway, I get home and I get a letter from them, making arrangements.

**Kathy:** From the Cuban government?

**Selma:** I say to myself, "Why should I write a nice article about them?" I said to my editor, "I will not go back there. I do not want to do another article." I did what I did and I think I did a great job ... I never went back. There was no reason for me to go back and do a nice article on them. The article I did was exactly the way it was. There was cars that were 20 years old that were still

running there and fixing them up ... Those type of things. The beaches were still gorgeous down there. That's about it.

**Kathy:** Any other aspects of your writing career you'd care to mention?

**Selma:** I did a little acting, too.

**Kathy:** Okay, let's talk about that. Tell the Frank Sinatra story that you told me before we started taping.

**Selma:** I belonged to ... What's the name of the place in Coral Gables. They closed up the place for a while. What? The little theater there. It's reopened now.

**Kathy:** Actors' Playhouse.

**Selma:** Yeah. I was in a lot of those different shows, then they had classes there, and I used to take my daughter there. Then somebody was there and they were casting for Frank Sinatra's show. I did "Hole in the Head," at the theater there. I don't know whether you remember him, Frank Lovejoy. He passed away, but he was a big actor at the time. His wife was in it, too, and I was in it, in the same play, called "Hole in the Head."

**Kathy:** In a play?

**Selma:** That was the play. That's how ... When they were going to do the movie, "Hole in the Head," here and they were doing it at the Cardozo Hotel, somebody there said, "Oh, Selma was in the play here," and that's how I got in it.

**Kathy:** What was it like working with Sinatra?

**Selma:** He was a bastard. He really was. He was curt with everybody, very curt. Wasn't particularly sweet or nice. Maybe to some people, but if he didn't get his own way, boy, he would stamp his feet and everything, but he was a good actor.

**Kathy:** You noticed something different about him, the back of his head ... You were telling me earlier, a story about-

**Selma:** Oh, yeah. It was his hair. I was in different things with this, and this one was at the dog kennel on First Street. He had a bald head, you know? You get old, you get bald. He must have used shoe polish and I didn't realize ... I said it that loud.

**Kathy:** What did you say?

**Selma:** I said to the guy, "Look, he's got shoe polish on his head." He turned around.

**Kathy:** He heard you.

**Selma:** Yeah. I don't know whether you've been there, but they have bleachers there. He was right in front of me. I don't remember the guy who I was playing the part with, he was supposedly a [inaudible 31:48] in the play, I mean, in the movie. He started to laugh.

**Kathy:** How did Sinatra react?

**Selma:** He turned around and he called me a dirty name.

**Kathy:** What did he call you?

**Selma:** You bitch.

**Kathy:** You weren't on exactly good terms after that?

**Selma:** In a lot of ones where he's very professional, he didn't like something ... So, no, I never had a problem with him after that.

**Kathy:** You just did the one movie with him?

**Selma:** One movie with him.

**Kathy:** Did you do any other movies?

**Selma:** I did some small parts. Matter of fact, it was one movie, I can't remember it now, and my mother went with me, and they took

her and the part that she had to be in was she was going to be in church and go [inaudible 32:51] and I didn't get the part. She got the part and I was watching my mother going ... [laughing 32:57]. Trying to think, the other day, of the famous actress, because her name came up ... She would be my age or maybe dead now. The main thing in my life was being a mother to two wonderful children and having a wonderful husband.

**Kathy:** Were you involved in any civic activities here?

**Selma:** Everything.

**Kathy:** Tell us some of the most memorable things that you were involved with, that you're most proud of having been involved with.

**Selma:** I guess the things I did with the city, minimum housing, beautification and then I was involved in ... I was involved in so many ... Always going to different meetings ... Children ... I was on the PTA, yes. I was on the PTA all through the schooling of all my children. I had a busy life.

**Kathy:** Did you know Linda Zilber?

**Selma:** Who?

**Kathy:** Linda Zilber. She was mayor of Bay Harbor Islands.

**Selma:** Oh, sure.

**Kathy:** She was active in PTA. Even as a grandparent, she-

**Selma:** Oh yeah, the Zilber family, they lived on Miami Beach. Her parents, I think, were my age. Ben knows the Zilbers, too. Everybody knew everybody else in those days before the war, and air conditioning really made Miami Beach.

**Kathy:** At the same time, it made people go inside and stay inside, so did it not affect the community life in a way?

**Selma:** At night, all I remember, all our parents used to go to these different deli restaurants. There was one on Espanola Way. Of course, it was air conditioned there. I remember, they used to have places where they would sell ice cold watermelon because everything was so hot in those days. It doesn't do it as much, I noticed ... Is like when we were kids, walking down the street, it would start to rain, so we would cross the street and the sun would be out. That used to be constantly. I mentioned it the other day because it was raining here and when we went up to Aventura, it wasn't.

I said it sorta reminds me, as a kid, it's raining here and not down there, but when I was a kid, you used to ... Washington Avenue was the place where my mother shopped for groceries. That's where the grocery stores were. In those days, they didn't have any big Food Fairs or any Publix or anything. They would have a place to buy their vegetables, a place to buy their meats, and they used to shop almost ... Even though we had refrigerators, they would shop maybe more often than we do now. We go once a week and stock up. There, they'd go two, three times a week to get their fresh bread and everything. They had fresh bakeries there.

Everybody know everybody else. My mother would walk in, "Hi, Mrs. Mindin, I have this for you. I have that for you." Everybody knew everybody else, but Washington Avenue was the food shopping place and they had two movies there. One was the cinema movies ... Oh, and they had a movie, when I was a kid. They had what they called Jitneys and we'd get 50 cents allowance. The jitneys, I think were 10 cents, the movies were 15 cents, and then there was a Woolworth's next to the movie. This was downtown Miami and the movies I think was 25 cents and that's what was our allowance.

**Kathy:** You had just enough for bus fare and-

**Selma:** Yeah, jitney ... The jitneys must've been 10 cents each way or something, then we used to eat our lunch in Woolworth. They always had a big lunch counter there. We used to go down there every Saturday afternoon, all the kids would come.

**Kathy:** Did you go to the beach as a group

**Selma:** Oh yeah. That's where I met him, on the beach.

**Kathy:** Tell me about that.

**Selma:** 14<sup>th</sup> Street beach was the "in" beach for all the young people. He had a dental friend who he knew when he had come down a couple of years before and my best girlfriend was dating him. He was in dental school. He says, "Oh, I got a friend I want Selma to meet." I was there. He brought me over and he said, "Do you want a hot dog?" I said sure. We went across the street where they had – outside place – hot dogs and Cokes, and then he asked me out. I lied to him. I said, "I have to be home at 11:00." He says, "You're 18 years old and you have to home at 11:00?" I said, "Yeah, my parents are very strict."

**Kathy:** You were really 16.

**Selma:** Yeah.

**Kathy:** His account said he was stricken from the moment he saw you. Is that how it was?

**Selma:** I guess so. 16, and he went back to college and I went back to high school. Then he went into the Navy and the Broads, who was his relative were friends of my parents, because everybody knew each other. Matter of fact, Shepard Broad was my father's attorney. His [her husband's] stories are much more than mine because he really was the father of outside cafes and opening drug stores and being so few of them ... Starting so many things on Miami Beach.

##