Jim Ponce:
A Conversation with a
Two-legged Historic Landmark
The Sea Cloud at War
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In February of 2016, the Historical Society of Palm Beach County (HSPBC) began to process and catalogue a collection of over 100 photo negatives from the office of notable Palm Beach County judge Francis Angevine "Banzi" Currie, who died in 1979. Contained within this collection were a group of negatives depicting aspects of the Cloisters Inn (now the Boca Raton Resort and Club) that were previously undocumented within HSPBC’s archive.

In addition to being a welcome accession within the Historical Society’s collection, these negatives make a compelling case for the proper storage and housing of documentary artifacts. Heat, moisture, and acidic containers have all contributed to the deterioration of the negatives, as is often the case when historic materials are collected by enthusiastic but untrained laypeople. The laborious process of digitizing these negatives was made a priority by the HSPBC staff in an effort to record the images before they degraded any further.

Fortunately, the vast majority of these negatives were successfully digitized and revealed some interesting components of life at the resort. One such image depicts a shuttle that had been engaged in the transfer of guests from the main resort property to the Cabana Colony on the south side of Boca Raton Inlet. Rudimentary by today’s standards, the image of the shuttle aids our understanding of the practical nature in which logistical issues were overcome in an era that pre-dates the machinery and technology we often take for granted.
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Jim Ponce in his dress white uniform at the Mizner Memorial Fountain. See story on page 22.

Historical Society of Palm Beach County

Our Mission:
To collect, preserve, and share the rich history and cultural heritage of Palm Beach County.
Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Spring & Fall 2016 edition of The Tustenegee. In this issue we honor James Ponce, the Town of Palm Beach’s first two-legged designated historic landmark, whom we lost last December. In 2011, Debi Murray was fortunate to be able to interview Jim, who was recovering from surgery related to a fall he’d had that spring. Thinking that they would talk for an hour or two, Debi was surprised when Jim insisted he was fit to talk longer. After four hours of conversation, they called it a day, and Debi was exhausted from this marathon. Jim seemed as if he could have continued for far longer, but he said he thought he’d covered everything he’d set out to. We hope you enjoy reading about this remarkable man’s life.

This issue marks the end of Richard “Tony” Marconi’s tenure at the Historical Society. Tony and his wife have relocated to Clearwater, making the commute too long to maintain his post as our education curator. We hope that he will continue to share his knowledge in future issues of The Tustenegee as his time allows. Tony started with the Historical Society as an intern in 2000, and by 2003 had joined us as a member of the staff. He helped navigate the organization through its phenomenal growth in adding a full-fledged museum, and he will be greatly missed.

The Historical Society has welcomed Rose Gualtieri as our newest staff member and Tony’s successor. As education coordinator, her primary tasks will include training docents, developing new education programs, working with educators across the county, and producing new editions of The Tustenegee. Please be sure to welcome Rose when you have the chance.

As always, we are looking for articles for future issues. Do you like to research? Do you like to write? Combine the two and submit an article about Palm Beach County or Florida history to share with our readers.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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**The Tustenegee**

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**Article submission:** Please submit articles in Microsoft Word format to the following email: rgualtieri@hspbc.org, with author’s full name, email, mailing address, phone number, and if applicable, organization. Once the article has been reviewed, the author will be notified via email whether or not it has been accepted for publication. Additional instructions will be sent about images, author biography, and photographs. The Historical Society of Palm Beach County reserves the right to edit all articles. Submissions should follow the Chicago Manual of Style for writing. Authors submitting articles do so with the understanding that they will not receive compensation.
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USS Sea Cloud: Marjorie Merriweather Post’s Yacht at War

By Richard A. Marconi

Following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese naval aircraft, wealthy socialite and Palm Beach winter resident Marjorie Merriweather Post and her second husband, Ambassador Joseph Davies, chartered their grand sailing yacht, Sea Cloud, to the U.S. Navy. Converted into a weather observation vessel, it saw service in the north Atlantic from 1942 to 1944. While Sea Cloud’s service—sending in daily weather reports—may have been mundane, there were brief moments of drama. Its most important role, however, was as an experiment that made it the navy’s first racially integrated ship.

Above Left: The USS Sea Cloud, 1942. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard; Above right: Marjorie Merriweather Post, owner of the Sea Cloud. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County; Right: The Sea Cloud as a cruise ship. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
Wartime Service
When the 316-foot sailing yacht, Sea Cloud, was built in 1931 by Friederich Krupp Germanaowerft, A.G. in Kiel, Germany, it was said to be the largest privately-owned yacht in the world. The four-masted bark was commissioned by investment mogul E.F. Hutton and launched as Hussar. Hutton’s then wife, Marjorie Merriweather Post, had, at age twenty-seven, inherited the Postum Cereal Company, which would become General Foods. When the marriage ended in 1935, she promptly married newly divorced Joseph P. Davies, who became the second U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union a year later. The couple renamed the majestic yacht, which Post had gained in her divorce, Sea Cloud.

In 1941 the couple offered use of the yacht to the Navy Department, but the government declined. In January, however, a month after the U.S. entered World War II, the navy accepted. They arranged a “barefoot charter” (without crew or provisions) of Sea Cloud for the Coast Guard’s use, for the sum of one dollar per year.

The luxury yacht was stripped of all its finery at the Coast Guard station at Curtis Bay, Maryland, and converted into a weather observation ship. The masts were removed, and the hull painted battleship grey and mounted with radar arrays (antennas), sonar, weapons, and depth charge tracks, all at a cost of $318,101. Three months later, on April 9, 1942, USS Sea Cloud was commissioned in the Coast Guard as cutter WPG-284 and assigned to the Eastern Sea Frontier, with its home port in Boston at the Atlantic Shipyard. For the next few years it would patrol remote northern Atlantic waters near four weather stations off the coasts of Greenland, Newfoundland, and France as part of Task Force 24. The ship’s company, or complement, included twenty-one officers, one warrant officer, thirteen chief petty officers, and 160 enlisted men, plus several civilian weather observers from the U.S. Weather Service. From time to time, the Coast Guard also assigned up to twenty-four officers to Sea Cloud for sea duty familiarization after they had graduated from the Coast Guard Academy or completed assignments on dry land.

For its first year in the military, Sea Cloud served at Weather Station No. 2, alternating duty with the CGC Monomoy (WAG-275), CGC Manasquan (WAG-273), CGC Manhasset (WAG-276), and other cutters. On June 16, 1942, Sea Cloud rescued eight survivors from the Portuguese fishing schooner Maria da Gloria eleven days after it was sunk by the German submarine, U-94. According to the vessel’s master, Silvio Ramalheira, they had been attacked just after 10:00 pm on June 5, killing two crewmen; the rest had abandoned ship. Sea Cloud rescued the lifeboat that held Ramalheira and seven crewmembers, but the others had been separated in bad weather and never located. The weather ship delivered the survivors to
Boston on July 21. A month later, Sea Cloud moved to Weather Station No. 1 to replace the Manhasset while it was being refitted.

A year after Sea Cloud began its commission in the Coast Guard, on April 9, 1943, the navy took over its management and recommissioned it as IX-99, but retained its Coast Guard crew. Its schedule moved it between Weather Stations No. 1 and 2 over the next year, with occasional trips to Boston for an overhaul or repairs. In April 1944, it was again headed for Boston when it made radar contact with a U-boat. General quarters was sounded, ordering all hands to report to battle stations, as the vessel prepared to attack the enemy submarine. But the radar contact quickly disappeared, and Sea Cloud continued on its way.

After only a few days at Weather Station No. 3 in June 1944, Sea Cloud was ordered to proceed with all haste to join escort carrier USS Croatan (CVE-25) and its five escort ships. After rendezvousing, the group was sent to [map 40 degrees W] to investigate a raft that had been sighted. The crew searched for two days without finding any sign of the raft or its occupants. Sea Cloud served only briefly at Weather Station No. 4, from which it made another unsuccessful search in August, this time for survivors of a lost aircraft.

Making History

While Sea Cloud collected weather data, it was playing a more important role, initiated by Lieutenant Commander Carlton Skinner (1913-2004), who transferred to Sea Cloud in November 1943. As executive officer on USCGC Northland (WPG-49), Skinner had observed that a black steward, Oliver T. Henry, worked in the engine room in his off-duty time. Henry applied for and received permission to test for motor machinist mate third class, but after passing the exam, he was denied the rating. At the time, African Americans serving in the Coast Guard were only allowed to hold the rating of steward, all other ratings were available only to white sailors. Skinner stepped in and appealed on behalf of Henry, which resulted in Henry receiving the rating. Henry retired from the Coast Guard as a chief warrant officer (CWO).

Just before he was assigned to Sea Cloud, Skinner was with the Coast Guard’s public relations department, where he had contemplated segregation from a military standpoint during war. Skinner knew that enormous manpower was needed, and judged the current policies as inefficient. The first African American volunteers had been trained in spring 1942, but most were assigned to shore duty, complicating sea-to-shore rotations. Skinner came to several conclusions. First, many black sailors could hold ratings other than steward. Second, there had to be an experiment to convince others, a “demonstration that Negroes could serve in general ratings effectively.” Third, the experiment needed to be on a naval or Coast Guard ship, under a commander who would “be sympathetic to the idea, want it to work, and be willing to give it the special care necessary to make it work.” Finally, the selected vessel should not be treated any differently than other ships in service. Skinner composed a proposal to integrate a ship’s crew, which was “disapproved” by his immediate superior before passed on to Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Russell R. Waesche.
Soon after, Skinner was transferred to *Sea Cloud*, then promoted to lieutenant commander and given command of the ship. With no notice, twelve African American seamen reported for duty three days before *Sea Cloud* was scheduled to depart on a weather patrol. Their arrival told Skinner that his superiors had approved his proposal. Groups of black apprentice seamen continued to arrive on *Sea Cloud* every time it returned home to Boston.

The new crewmembers received no special treatment, were assigned the same berthing as white sailors, and ate in the same mess facilities. No changes were made to training or the daily routine. No officer was assigned to oversee the integration experiment. All officers were responsible for supervising their men, white and black, in their sections. Later, the ship received four black officers, who were treated like any other officer on board.

Skinner observed a few problems with the integration, such as relational issues between what he called “northern blacks” and “southern blacks.” With the appointment of a black Master-at-Arms, these differences were soon overcome. The more serious issue came from other Coast Guard districts once they learned about the *Sea Cloud*. “These districts,” he said, “began sending the *Sea Cloud* their Negro disciplinary problems.” After Skinner reported the problem to Coast Guard District Officer for the First District, Admiral Wilfred N. Derby, it disappeared. When the ship’s complement of African American sailors exceeded fifty percent, Skinner did note that they displayed some aggressiveness toward white sailors and petty officers. Skinner was uncertain whether this behavior was caused by the greater numbers or by a few sailors who had prior discipline problems.

Just as he wanted, Skinner’s vessel and crew received no special treatment, yet successfully completed two major inspections. He found the black and white men to be very similar. They all hated the bad weather, and they “griped and complained and swore just as much, and no more.” In fact, the commander thought the bad weather and monotonous duty actually helped bring the crew together. During emergencies, Skinner said, the integrated crew performed admirably and “without weakness, and reacted to the needs of the military mission as a well-trained unit.” When on shore leave, though, they chose to split up into their racial groups.

Being in port allowed Skinner to experiment further. He took *Sea Cloud*’s few black officers to an Officers Club to see how they would be received. During the first visit, all the patrons stopped and stared at Skinner and his officers. They found a table, had one drink, and left. The group returned several more nights after work, all without incident. Then one day, Skinner sent his black officers on their own to see what would happen. Nothing did; the white officers had accepted the *Sea Cloud*’s black officers. The crew only really felt prejudice against them at their home port of Boston. Workers at the shipyard—foremen, quarter men, and others—made derogatory remarks or altogether avoided the ship.

The Coast Guard commissioned its first African American officer in 1942, one year before the navy did so. Ensign Joseph C. Jenkins (1914-1959) had enlisted as a boatswain’s mate first class and in short order was promoted to chief petty officer. After graduation from Officer Candidate School, he joined the crew of the *Sea Cloud* as navigation officer.

Jenkins was the only black officer on the vessel until joined in 1944 by two others. Lieutenant Junior Grade Clarence Samuels, assigned as damage control officer, had received a direct commission in September 1943. Samuels, a career Coastguardsman, had commanded a patrol boat in 1928 and made history of his own as the Coast Guard’s first black ship captain during wartime in the twentieth century. After Clarence Samuels left *Sea Cloud*, he commanded two other vessels.

The other African American officer assigned to *Sea Cloud* in 1944 was Ensign Harvey C. Russell, who became the ship’s training officer. Jenkins and Russell later served together again, on the USS Hoquiam (PF-5), the only other integrated vessel during the war, a patrol frigate serving in the Aleutian Islands.

The most famous of *Sea Cloud*’s African American crew was not an officer, but an enlisted man who also broke barriers. When the family of Jacob A. Lawrence (1917-2000) moved to New York during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s), he had become interested in art. He attended workshops offered by the Works Progress Administration and produced some his first important artwork. Before the war, Lawrence’s series “The Migration of the American Negro” made him the most famous African American artist in America. Lawrence was drafted into the Coast
Guard in 1943. After training he was transferred to St. Augustine as a steward's mate, where a supportive commander enabled him to continue to paint. When Lawrence was reassigned to Sea Cloud, Lieutenant Commander Skinner helped him obtain a rating of public relations specialist and petty officer third class. This position gave him the opportunity to chronicle life on board Sea Cloud.

Post-War

When the war ended and the military demobilized, the Coast Guard revoked Clarence Samuels' officer rank and returned him to chief boatswain's mate. He was serving in the Philippines when he retired in 1947. Just after the war in 1945, Russell commanded a racially mixed crew on a cutter in the Pacific with a Coast Guard crew. Back in civilian life, Jenkins returned to his former job with the Michigan State Highway Department, and died in 1959 from a kidney condition.

After his honorable discharge at the end of the war, Lawrence received a Guggenheim Post-Service Award, which enabled him to produce a series about emotional reactions to the war, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Among his commissions were murals for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games and the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration. His style made Lawrence one of the twentieth century's renowned artists, displayed at the Smithsonian Institution, the Vatican, and the White House. Lawrence was

**USS Sea Cloud Characteristics**

- Built by Krupp, Kiel, Germany
- Length: 316 feet
- Beam: 49 feet 2 inches
- Draft: 19 feet
- Displacement: 3,077 tons (1942)
- Cost: $318,101 for conversion (1942)
- Launched: 1939 Commissioned: Chartered by USN on a bareboat charter for $1.00 from Joseph E. Davies on January 2, 1942; commissioned USCG on April 4, 1942; USN April 9, 1943.
- Decommissioned: November 4, 1944
- Disposition: Returned to her owner
- Machinery: Diesel-electric, twin shafts
- Top Speed: 14 knots
- Complement: 21 officers, 1 warrant officer, 13 chief petty officers, 160 enlisted men
- Radar: 1 x ET80198-2-22MC; 1 x ET8010C 375-500 KC; 1 x et 8012B 2100-3000 KC
- Other Sonar, echo ranging equipment, range recorder, Sub-Sig Fathometer
- Armament: 2 x 3”/50: 8 x 20mm/80; 4 x K-guns; 1 x “Mark X” Hedgehog; 2 x depth charge tracks; 44 total depth charges carried on board.

Below: Lieutenant Commander Carleton Skinner, former commanding officer of the Sea Cloud, presents Marjorie Merriweather Post and Ambassador Joseph Davies with a plaque in conjunction with the presentation of a naval pennant for the war service of the Sea Cloud, June 1948. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.
Besides Jacob Lawrence, executive officer Lieutenant Commander Wallace (Wally) B. Bishop (1905-1982) was another artist serving on the Sea Cloud. Creator of the famous "Muggs and Skeeter" comic strip, Bishop entered the Coast Guard at the air station in St. Petersburg, Florida, as a lieutenant junior grade. During his forty-four months of service, Bishop served in all theaters of war, including eleven months as the executive officer of the USS Sea Cloud. After his release from active duty, Bishop revived the Muggs comic strip.


Petty Officer 3rd Class Jacob Lawrence. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.
a professor at the University of Washington when he died of illness.

Carlton Skinner, the man behind the integration experiment, served as Guam’s first governor, where he established the island country’s first university and wrote its first constitution. Later he established Air Micronesia and served as chairman of its board, was vice president of Fairbanks Whitney Corporation, and owned a financial service company in San Francisco.

As requested in Skinner’s proposal, the Coast Guard never sought publicity for the Sea Cloud experiment, which ended when it was decommissioned. Skinner had succeeded in showing that white and black sailors could work together and perform just as well as any all-white crew. Skinner also saw integration as sound military policy that he hoped the navy would continue. Though it did not, it did allow blacks to hold ten percent of the general ratings on non-combat ships. They only amounted to 2.1 percent of the Coast Guard during the war, much less than other branches of service. It is likely that Sea Cloud’s success influenced the navy’s integration in 1945.

On July 26, 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ordering integration of the U.S. Armed Forces. While this officially ended segregation in the American military, the Coast Guard had already done so on its own on Sea Cloud.

On November 4, 1944, the navy decommissioned USS Sea Cloud (IX-99), receiving the American Campaign Medal and World War II Victory Medal for its service. Owners Post and Davies received $175,000 from the government towards conversion from warship back to private luxury yacht, though the actual cost was much higher. It later sat at port in Jacksonville until sold to a shipping firm. The yacht was then bought by Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo, the head of the Dominican Republic. Renamed Angelita, it was Trujillo’s presidential yacht. Following Trujillo’s assassination in 1961, Angelita became the property of the government of the Dominican Republic and was renamed Patria. The Sea Cloud changed hands a few more times before it was rechristened Sea Cloud by a group of German investors and took its first voyage as a commercial cruise ship in 1979. Sea Cloud Cruises of Hansa Treuhand Schiffsbeteiligungen GmbH & Co., KG, in Hamburg, Germany, had the yacht fully restored and turned it into a cruise ship with a capacity of sixty-four passengers and sixty crew members. Palm Beach’s most famous yacht still sails the ocean blue in 2016 as a grand yacht, as it once did for her most famous owner, Marjorie Merriweather Post.

Richard A. Marconi, Curator of Education, was on staff with the Historical Society 2002-2016. In 2001 he graduated summa cum laude from Florida Atlantic University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. Marconi is co-author of three books in Arcadia Publishing’s Images of America series: West Palm Beach 1893-1950 (2006), Palm Beach (2009), and Palm Beach County During World War II (2015); co-author of Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home (The Palm Beach Post, 2009); author of Arcadia Publishing’s Then and Now Series: Palm Beach (2013), and producer and co-writer of the Historical Society’s documentary Puddle
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This oral history of Jim Ponce is part of an ongoing oral history project of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County. HSPBC Chief Curator Debi Murray conducted the interview on July 11, 2011, at his West Palm Beach residence. Sharon Freidheim, volunteer at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, transcribed the recording. HSPBC staff member Lise Steinhauer edited the oral history for publication.

Please note: An oral history cannot be depended on for complete accuracy, as it is based on (1) the fascinating and complex human memory, and (2) communication of that memory, which varies due to genetics, social experience, gender, or education. While oral history is a valuable tool in the study of history, its content is not guaranteed to be correct.
DEBI MURRAY: This is July the 11th, 2011. This is Debi Murray from the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, and I am with Jim Ponce at his home at 828 35th Street, West Palm Beach, Florida. Good afternoon, Jim.

JIM PONCE: Good afternoon.

MURRAY: Would you please spell your last name for the transcriptionist?

PONCE: P-O-N-C-E.

MURRAY: And say your full, formal name.

PONCE: James Augustan Ponce.

MURRAY: Augustan Ponce. Wow.

PONCE: Named after the city.

MURRAY: Saint Augustine.

PONCE: Yeah.

MURRAY: Your hometown.

PONCE: Yeah.

MURRAY: Is that where you were born?

PONCE: Yes.

MURRAY: Can you tell me about your parents?

PONCE: Well, my father was Raymond A. Ponce and from the oldest documented family in the United States. And he was an undertaker at that time. I guess the crowning achievement of his career was conducting Henry Flagler’s funeral in St. Augustine, where he was interred there in the Memorial Church. My mother was an Evans—Mary Louise Evans—and her father had come over from Wales to raise oranges on the upper part of the St. Johns River, where the original orange industry started out. You know what’s interesting? Just up the river from him, a man named Fatio come over from Switzerland, and I believe his nephew was our famed artist-architect.

MURRAY: I don’t know.

PONCE: They still call that area north of where my grandfather’s property was “Little Switzerland.”

MURRAY: Interesting.

PONCE: But it is definitely the family of our famous—

MURRAY: —of Maurice Fatio.
PONCE: I’m not sure if he was a nephew or what, and of course the great freeze of [18]95 wiped out our groves, and when they replanted them they planted them further south. A lot of it was Mr. Flagler insisting that the oranges along the Indian River were the best anyway, so he encouraged them to go further south. I was born and raised in St. Augustine, and you know it was quite an asset if you are going to be an historian, because so much of the history of Florida radiated in and out of there, you know. And then of course Flagler started his hotel-building there and the headquarters for all his companies—his early companies were there in St. Augustine. So it was a Flagler town. But [when] I went to high school, to give you an idea, half the graduating class were sons and daughters of Flagler employees.

MURRAY: How interesting. One thing you didn’t tell me was the date of your birth.

PONCE: Oh, July the 19th, 1917.

MURRAY: 1917. So you would have been in high school about—

PONCE: In the thirties.

MURRAY: In the thirties. And Flagler interests were still going strong?

PONCE: Oh yes, still very much. We still had the shops. He even had gone ahead and built a hospital for his employees; in fact, I was born there.

MURRAY: What was the name of the hospital?

PONCE: The Florida East Coast Hospital. Just like the railroad company and the hotel in those days was all called the Florida East Coast, and that was the hotel. And sometimes talking about [it] I used to say it was the yellowest hospital you ever laid your eyes on, ‘cause all wooden buildings, Henry Flagler painted them yellow. He had a thing about a brightish shade of yellow.

MURRAY: Did he also have a green trim on it?

PONCE: I think that part of the time. You know I forget which was first; I think the brown trim was first and then the green or vice versa.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: For some reason they switched over somewhere along the line, but the railroad stations, everything, was, you know, in the Flagler colors you know.

MURRAY: Recently I’ve been asked, “What color was Flagler yellow?” You mention it as a brilliant yellow.

PONCE: Yes, brilliant yellow, almost butter-colored yellow.

MURRAY: Butter-colored yellow.

PONCE: It was a yellow. But I remember so well, reading in one of the earlier Palm Beach Life—oh no, I take it back, it was one of the last editions of the Tattler, that the people were so pleased that they had repainted the Royal Poinciana a slightly lighter shade of yellow. You can imagine that huge building painted that brilliant color, how that big thing must have loomed up there on the shores of Lake Worth.

MURRAY: It must have, it must have. Would you call it buttercup yellow? Because when I think of butter today, it’s sort of pale, but buttercups to me are bright.
Henry Flagler’s Ponce de Leon Hotel, St. Augustine, Florida, 1940. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
Jim Ponce with his mother, father, and sisters. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
PONCE: Well.

MURRAY: But I know immediately before, butter was fresher, it was yellow.

PONCE: Yeah, yeah, that’s the yellow.

MURRAY: Okay. So you went to school in St. Augustine.

PONCE: St. Joseph’s Academy. And we lived close enough that you walked home for lunch, you know small town, and so that was not a problem. We were talking about the connection with the Flagler System. The valedictorian of our class, his father worked for the railroad and his mother worked for the hotel company; and the salutatorian, Gard Oliveros, his father worked for the railroad. So you can see how completely Flagler dominated.

MURRAY: Yes.

PONCE: We would look forward in December to when they put the lights on the Ponce de Leon Hotel, ‘cause he went all around the building. They had the globe lights on fixtures. And those were the first electric lights in the state of Florida.

MURRAY: At the Ponce de Leon Hotel?

PONCE: Edison himself designed the power plant.

MURRAY: Really?

PONCE: And Daddy tells the story that everyone in town turned out to see the electricity turned on.

MURRAY: Do you have any idea when that might have been?

PONCE: That would have been 1888—Ponce de Leon opened in 1888?

MURRAY: Eighty-eight [‘88] or ‘89.

PONCE: Eighty-eight [‘88].

MURRAY: I know when he built the Royal Poinciana Hotel, he had a power plant then.

PONCE: Oh, yeah, even The Breakers. That’s why we have a chimney at The Breakers. That’s because it was left over from when they had the steam boiler to run the generator, you know. And of course when the Royal Poinciana opened, it was the southernmost building in America with electricity. But then when he got to Miami, instead of building a power plant for the hotel, he built a power plant for the little town, and it was called the Miami Power and Light Company, which now is the Florida Power and Light Company, you see.

MURRAY: Interesting. Is it correct to say that Joe Jefferson started the power company in West Palm Beach?

PONCE: Yes, he was one of the important ones that were involved, so finally I think that Flagler took it over and, uh, it would become part of the Florida Power and Light. ‘Cause when he spread out, he just changed the Miami to Florida on the, um, [name]. Joe Jefferson was also involved in the St. Augustine. Our theater building was called the Jefferson Theater.

MURRAY: Okay, did he build that?

PONCE: Yeah.

MURRAY: Aha.

PONCE: And it was unique. It was the only theater around that had a balcony in it for the black folks.

MURRAY: Oh, really?

PONCE: ‘Cause they had to go up the outside of the building up there. But they had the third—the second—balcony were for those nice black folks, and they got nicknamed the “peanut gallery” because they used to eat peanuts and bombard the white folks with peanut shells [laughter]. So you can see so much of Flagler connection. I’ve always considered St. Augustine the mother, you know, and Palm Beach the daughter, you know, ‘cause so much was reflected in Palm Beach. When he was on his honeymoon, he thought the walk on the seawall up and down the lakefront—of course there it was the bayfront—was one of the greatest things. And it was. One of the first things he did was to pave the path that ran between the houses along the lakefront in the vicinity of the hotel as a promenade. And of course today it is one of our most beautiful assets, and ninety percent of it is on private property.

MURRAY: I didn’t realize that. I thought it was public access.

PONCE: No, they gave credit for how many square feet were taken up by the bike paths.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: I think there was a slight reduction, but nearly all of it is right on those pieces of private property.

MURRAY: Interesting. So, we were talking about you. What year did you graduate high school?

PONCE: Nineteen thirty-six.

MURRAY: Nineteen thirty-six. And you mentioned to me earlier that you had two sisters. What were their names?

PONCE: My oldest was Raymondine and she lived here in Palm Beach until she died about eight years ago. She lived on Seabreeze.

MURRAY: Palm Beach?

PONCE: Mm hm. Her daughter still lives in West Palm Beach, somewhere at the south end of Flagler Drive.

MURRAY: What was her last name?
PONCE: My sister’s name was Free F-R-double E.

MURRAY: And your other sister?

PONCE: And my other, Mary Louise, still lives in St. Augustine, and she is just a year younger than I am.

MURRAY: Wow. And how about your other sister, was she older or younger?

PONCE: She was a year older.

MURRAY: Wow. One right after the other.

PONCE: My parents were old enough to be—my god, I mean my grandparents, because of my father had been married once before and my mother twice, and in those days you buried your spouse before you moved on, you know.

MURRAY: Right.

PONCE: So he was fifty, and she was forty.

MURRAY: Wow.

PONCE: So they had a family in a hurry.

MURRAY: They sure did, high-risk pregnancies. Did you tell me what your mom’s first name was?

PONCE: Mary Louise.

MURRAY: And her maiden name was Evans?

PONCE: Evans, that’s about as Welsh as you can get.

MURRAY: She had a daughter named Mary Louise as well. So, when did you first come to Palm Beach?

PONCE: Oddly enough, the year I graduated, that fall there was some sort of youth convention in Miami. And a car full of us, we arrived here early morning. We left late evening out of St. Augustine and so, they were anxious to get to Miami. I says, “No.” I wanted to see Mr. Flagler’s hotel, The Breakers. And so, “Will we have to pay admission to get to Palm Beach?” I said. “No, we’re going to go look at it.” So we drove over, and we did have a big drive up the driveway and you—what is so interesting is that the girl at the, what we call the “pig stand,” where you bought hamburgers in those days—breakfast, we’re having hamburgers—told us what we should see in the Palm Beaches, besides being sure to see the two big hotels, or the three big hotels, because the Whitehall was up there in those days—“But be sure that you go over the north bridge.” It was brand new, and it was the only four-lane bridge over the Intracoastal.

MURRAY: Really?

PONCE: And in those days it was called the “Inland Waterway” in the state of Florida, you see.

MURRAY: Mm hm.

PONCE: And it was built with what they call them money today, that they put into?

MURRAY: WPA? [Works Progress Administration]

PONCE: It was a WPA project, which was the stimulus program during the other, the Great Depression. And, of course, apparently I’m going to get to see them tear it down, from going over it when it was almost brand new.

MURRAY: Yes, that is incredible.

PONCE: You know a lot can happen in one lifetime.

MURRAY: Yes, absolutely.

PONCE: And so.

MURRAY: And the Biltmore would have been there in 1936.

PONCE: The Biltmore and the Flagler—I mean The Whitehall, the eleven-story addition hotel that was on the—

MURRAY: Right. Well, three of those hotels had all been built from 1925 on.

PONCE: Well they—

MURRAY: Nineteen twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven [1925, ’26, ’27]).

PONCE: Whitehall was the first high-rise, Whitehall Hotel.

MURRAY: Okay, so what did your friends say? Did they understand why you wanted to come by here?

PONCE: Well, they all were partly interested because they were all from St. Augustine, and I guess half of them, some part of their relations worked for the Flagler System, you know.

MURRAY: Aha.

PONCE: And talking about—of course the hotel was fairly new then.

MURRAY: Yes.

PONCE: I remembered so well, and at that time that when Daddy came home for lunch and said that Mr. Flagler’s Breakers Hotel is burning down.

MURRAY: You remember that, 1925.

PONCE: I remember that well, because I said, “Daddy, how could it burn down?” ‘Cause I just assumed since it was a Flagler Hotel, it would be poured concrete like his three hotels in St. Augustine, and they’ll outlast the pyramids, he built them so strong. Then he explained that the hotels in south Florida, first of all they hadn’t found any agate to go into the cement, and it was much faster construction using lumber, so that’s how it burned down.
down, ‘cause a good deal of the business area went with it and they say that the Royal Poinciana caught fire nine times but they had crews up on the roof with fire hoses, you know. And that wasn’t in the direct line of the cinders. You know those buildings were made out of Dade County pine. And Dade County pine had the highest pitch content of any kind of lumber. And that house next door to mine is made of the salvaged lumber—

MURRAY: Really.

PONCE: —out of the Royal Poinciana, and right now you can’t drive a nail into those 2x4s.

MURRAY: Aha.

PONCE: When I put the air conditioner through, I had to drill a hole first, slightly smaller than the nail, cause that lumber is—

MURRAY: That’s incredible.

PONCE: But with that high pitch content, you can light a 2x4 with a match, you know.

MURRAY: Sure.

PONCE: Once that started, the fact is a couple of pictures of the burning of it has great black smoke hanging almost, like a petroleum fire. And with that strong southeast breeze, because the pictures after it, I mean the ashes are right down to ground level. There are a few pipes sticking up. The only

Jim Ponce and his dog on Worth Avenue, Palm Beach. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
husband was camps manager for the Bell telephone system for all the military installations in this area.

MURRAY: Oh, really.

PONCE: And he was transferred here for that, you know. And that’s how I got started coming up here. In the early days of the war, I was stationed in Hollywood, Florida.

MURRAY: What branch of the service were you in?

PONCE: The navy. It was the Naval Aerial Gunnery School.

MURRAY: And what did you do in the gunnery school?

PONCE: I was a medical corpsman. And we had lots of kids, you know. To learn how to hit a target, someone presented the navy with the idea that it would be much cheaper to have someone shoot shotgun shells at clay pigeons. And so that’s what it would start out, and every so often the trap arm wouldn’t go off and they’d bend over to check them, and about that time it would crack them in the head. And it got to where I could sew people up pretty quick. [Laughter]

MURRAY: When did you join the service?

PONCE: I didn’t join until the August after the war started.

MURRAY: August [19]42?

PONCE: I had a contract where I had taken over my father’s business and took a part in it, ‘cause I wasn’t licensed and both mother and father were dying, so they gave me an extension on my draft call. So I buried my mother on Friday and I joined the navy on Monday.

MURRAY: Oh, my goodness.

PONCE: I had a contract where I had taken over my father’s business and took a part in it, ‘cause I wasn’t licensed and both mother and father were dying, so they gave me an extension on my draft call. So I buried my mother on Friday and I joined the navy on Monday.

MURRAY: Oh, my goodness.

PONCE: And came home six months later to bury my father. So.

MURRAY: Oh my.

PONCE: I literally had a home with my parents when the war started, but I was lucky to spend the first eighteen months in south Florida—

MURRAY: Yes, you were.
PONCE: But occasionally we were working seven days a week.

MURRAY: What did you do between the time you graduated high school and the time you went into the service? Were you helping your dad?

PONCE: We were in the funeral business, but after the war, I actually had shipmates that died in my arms, you know, in the South Pacific, and I just couldn’t go back to it. And the only other thing I had done was between my junior and senior year in high school I worked at the old St. George Hotel in St. Augustine. And so I had the nerve to head to New York after the war and tell them I was an experienced hotel man. [Laughter] I had just a few months. My boss up there, after a while he said, “How much experience did you have before you got up here?” I said, “Oh, just a few months.” He said, “Well, I’ll tell you, with that southern accent you can get away with a lot, you know.” ‘Cause everyone up there talks fast. So then I stayed with the hotel business in New York until I was called back during the Korean War. And since there wasn’t much navy involved, but the Marine Corps has no navy, no medical department, so I was transferred to the Marines. But I ran the classrooms at the Naval Aerial Gun—no, it was the Field Medical School there in Camp Le Jeune, North Carolina, for the war.

MURRAY: Okay. We are going to back up a little bit again, back into early 1942. There was a submarine war going on close to Florida. Did you ever have to deal with any of that?

PONCE: On two occasions I saw as many as two ships on fire out in the ocean.

MURRAY: Did your company, the funeral home, ever have to handle any?

PONCE: We buried any number of merchant marines and sailors that washed up on the beach.

MURRAY: And got them sent home.

PONCE: And just before I went in, they told us they were sending us five sailors, navy personnel, in one casket. It was a fueling plane that crashed. There was just so little left, of course they didn’t have DNA, so they put what was left in one coffin. And since they were from all over the country, they decided just to put them in the National Cemetery in St. Augustine. That was something to remember, because they went through five times as they were folding five flags. People were dropping and passing out.

MURRAY: It was summer, right?

PONCE: It was shortly before I went in. And things like that, that was why I decided not to stay with the funeral business. And I never regretted it, didn’t you know. And when I got out of the Korean War, I had a good job waiting for me in New York, but in February, I decided, they didn’t know I was out, and I had a sister in Palm Beach and one in St. Augustine, so I’d go down and visit and in the spring I’d go back.

MURRAY: Go back [to New York].

PONCE: But the hostess at the little hotel Palm Beach Plaza—it’s now called the Bradley House—she talked me into going to Fred Waring’s Shawnee Inn for the summer [on the Delaware River in Pennsylvania]. And the cashier from there talked me into going where she worked in the winter, which was The Breakers, and it started my association with The Breakers, you see.

MURRAY: Wow, okay.

PONCE: But in the summer you still had to go up north, because everything was seasonal, you know, in those days.

MURRAY: Exactly, exactly, I remember that, yes.

PONCE: So everything was pretty much closed down, and some people find it hard to believe that even the traffic lights down, it was so—

MURRAY: So dead there in the summertime, yes. Now, you said you were eighteen months in Hollywood. Did you come up and visit your sister? What did you do for fun? What was Palm Beach like during World War II?

PONCE: Well, uh, I guess while I was here I spent a good deal of time with the family, although I went bicycle riding in Palm Beach. But it wasn’t the season, so my sister in St. Augustine wanted to know what Worth Avenue looked like, I said, “Two picket fences.” ‘Cause all the shops were boarded up, you know.

MURRAY: So the V for Victory canteen would have been closed in the summer?

PONCE: No, no, no, there on Worth Avenue, at the corner of County Road and Worth Avenue on the northwest corner, there was a canteen, and it was run by the local folks. It wasn’t a USO. The USO was over in West Palm. Ah, but I tell you, they’d make the biggest sandwiches for you, and pile up the ice cream, and occasionally they’d fight over who was going to take you home to dinner, have you in for dinner that time. You know, they were nice. And you know, it was surprising there were that many people here to even run the canteen. But maybe some of the folks from West Palm Beach helped. Like, you could still rent bicycles to go around Palm Beach, right there towards the Biltmore. I rode, did the bike path, you know. It was all nice, seeing all of it.

MURRAY: Of course. Did you by any chance—you said it was summertime. Do you remember The Breakers as the Ream General Army [Hospital]?
PONCE: Very much so, because one of my best buddies from high school was stationed at Morrison Field and I was going to come up to see him. And when I got to the apartment there on Hibiscus, his wife says, “Kenny is in the hospital over at Ream’s, and why don’t you go see him?” Well he was ambulatory. So I remember walking in The Breakers and, oh my god, I’m finally going to get to see what this looks like. And the, uh, as Kenny says, it’s all very beautiful as long as you look up. Because all the furniture has been removed and everything was khaki desk, you know, and even in the lobby between the columns there on the east side of the lobby, there would be desks with people typing away, you know, and the—so uh, it was Sunday and, um, so uh, I was about to leave and Kenny said, “Why don’t you hang around since we’ve got a VIP of some kind coming as a, to visit, and I first said, “Well, who is it?” and he says, “Oh, for their protection they can’t tell us till they get here.” I thought, well maybe they’d do that for Betty Grable, but it turned out to be Eleanor Roosevelt.

MURRAY: Really, that same period of time.

PONSE: I remember the pictures of it, which I saw later. She came in through the oceanfront [entrance], you know. The Mediterranean Ballroom was like an activities area, you know, ping-pong tables and whatnot. And they left the setup of Mass with the chairs and tack, so Eleanor could say a few words in—it was so funny.

MURRAY: So did you get to see her?

PONSE: Oh, yeah.

MURRAY: Oh, how incredible is that! You got to hear her speech. And what was wrong with your friend that he was in the hospital?

PONSE: You know, I haven’t the slightest idea. I don’t remember.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONSE: But I was so busy I kept saying, “Let’s go to this side,”’ you know, then they said, “You can’t go in there, that’s the maternity ward.” The south loggia they had blocked at the lobby level and go running down there was the maternity ward.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONSE: And the, uh, so, uh.

MURRAY: How many babies would you say were born there? Do you know?

PONSE: You know, I think I got up to about twenty-two or twenty-four or something names, and since then we even picked up some more.

MURRAY: Aha.

PONSE: And so, the secretary that was there, I got to know her, ’cause she was, later she was secretary to Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

MURRAY: Oh, really.

PONSE: And the book that he wrote, she was actually the ghostwriter of it, you know.

MURRAY: Aha.

PONSE: And I got a hold of her and so she wrote—the account we have of it is what she wrote up on that occasion. And then also she told me things that were not written down. And I don’t remember what they were, they were so important, but the, uh, and the—it was rather interesting. I found out through her that they couldn’t tell people that it was going to be a hospital until they were almost ready to open it. Because in those days, Morrison Field here was the Army Air Force Transportation Command and people would leave here for South Africa. They’d go by the islands, Ascension Island and on to Africa. And of course if they’d have announced they were opening an evacuation hospital, then the Germans would have known we were ready to commit troops in North Africa.

MURRAY: Right, right.

PONSE: So they, unfortunately the hotel had only been open two weeks [that season] before the people were told they had to get out immediately. All the beds and everything were all stashed away in a warehouse. And, you know, the equipment, so they could quickly reassemble it. Of course, we didn’t
have that many casualties, then it was turned into a general hospital. The Reams that it was named for, he was the first doctor—Army Air Force doctor—that was killed during the war.

MURRAY: Do you remember the SPARs training and living at the Biltmore?

PONCE: At the Biltmore, I remember, and why I didn’t stay at my sister’s, my sister, or maybe she hadn’t gotten here yet. I stayed at the [Palm Beach] Plaza, which is now the Bradley House.

MURRAY: Right across the street.

PONCE: I’m gonna be able to sleep in in the morning! Sleep in till seven o’clock! Shout: “One, two, three, four,” these high-pitched girls’ voices. I said, “What in god’s name is this?” And there on the—where the Royal Poinciana had been—they had an obstacle course and whatnot built, and they’d go over there to troop and stomp and carry on. And so naturally, my room was right there on Bradley Place.

MURRAY: Obviously you were getting all of the noise.

PONCE: Yes, I remember the SPARs very well from that visit.

MURRAY: Why did the SPARs leave? Because the hotel was turned into a navy hospital, if I recall?

PONCE: Just as soon as the war was over, they didn’t need them, so they stopped training them right away. And then they took it over as a naval medical. I think the navy was running it, but it was for people that had been injured, to bring them in and evaluate them and then discharge them.

MURRAY: Oh, okay.

PONCE: To determine—in other words, if you were perfectly well, you just got discharged at the nearest discharge center. But if you had any medical claims, anything, they would process you, finish up on your treatments, you know. I’m sure they were doing very little operating or major medical there. It was most like just sort of the processing center.

MURRAY: Right, an evaluation.

PONCE: And since it was already set up for medical use, it would be, ah, and I think also that The Breakers was closed as a hospital because the last winter of the war, it had already been turned over. Because once all the action went to Europe, there was no one coming in.

MURRAY: From the south.

PONCE: And from North Africa. And there was, we had plenty of naval hospitals and army hospitals in south Florida. I know that there was some talk that the Kenans sort of took the hospital away from them, but believe me, in those days, as long as the military wanted your buildings, you know, if you didn’t lease it to them, they would condemn it and take it, like the Boca Raton Club. That’s how they lost ownership of it. ‘Cause after the war somebody else bought it. And you know, they just wouldn’t wuss around, like the Army Air Force took over all of Miami Beach. And of course, a lot of those people wanted to hold onto their little hotels. But, if they wanted your hotel, you had, you had recourse, but they’d make a final offer, and if people didn’t take it, they immediately condemned it and took it over, you know.

MURRAY: Right, they had their ways. Did you have anybody special in your life during this period that you were visiting back and forth with? Beside your sister?

PONCE: Oh, I don’t know, I had a few girlfriends, and, well, I had one little extended encounter. Let’s not go into it.

MURRAY: We don’t have to do that. Just wondering if you had people writing you letters.

PONCE: The letters, I have an unbelievable collection of letters, but they are unfortunately not from here.

MURRAY: Oh.

PONCE: This lady, that I was the [Boy] Scoutmaster and she was the wife of the Scout committee head, and she, I think she wrote me every week.

MURRAY: Oh.

PONCE: This lady, that I was the [Boy] Scoutmaster and she was the wife of the Scout committee head, and she, I think she wrote me every week.

MURRAY: Did she? Lovely.

PONCE: And I saved those letters, and they’ve already had one reading from her letters, because there is so much about life, like “We had an air raid drill today” and all this stuff. In St. Augustine. And she wrote, she wrote huge letters, everything that was going on. In fact I just discovered the other day that I’ve got about a dozen and a half. And I’m going to, when my nephew is down here, I’m going to have him take them up.

MURRAY: To St. Augustine.

PONCE: ‘Cause if they were here, that would be wonderful. All kinds of things were going on.

MURRAY: Yes, I mean, the next exhibit that we’re doing is World War II right here in Palm Beach County, the home front and the military. So any of that kind of detail would have been great. So you went off to war after eighteen months. You got shipped to the South Pacific?

PONCE: I got to the amphibious forces and landed just up the beach, Leyte Gulf, about 150 yards from where General MacArthur came ashore.

MURRAY: Wow.

PONCE: Saw the old boy come in. Then, of course, taking up reinforcements several trips later, our ship was torpedoed and sunk.
MURRAY: Were you on board when she was torpedoed?

PONCE: Oh, yes.

MURRAY: And how did you get off the ship?

PONCE: I guess I went, even though I was badly hurt, I had a broken shoulder and hit in both legs, but somehow I got to a life raft; someone may have helped me. But I already had a couple of curettes of morphine at that point. So I swam around in the China Sea for a while.

MURRAY: What was the name of your boat?

PONCE: It was the landing craft, an LST.

MURRAY: And what ship did she come from?

PONCE: They’re a ship. Three hundred and twenty-eight feet long.

MURRAY: Wow! And she didn’t have a name?

PONCE: Just a number.

MURRAY: Do you remember what her number was?

PONCE: Seven fifty [750]. I have a DVD made of the reunions of the crew. They finally were so sick or dead that we stopped having them. So the pictures I’d taken, I had them all put on the tape and sent to the rest of the widows and families.

MURRAY: I bet they loved it. When did they get you off the life raft?

PONCE: Well, it’s amazing how picky you can be in a situation like that. When this ship threw a line to us, we hollered up at them, asked what their cargo was, because two days before that, we’d had an ammunition ship very close to us go up. And when they said they were carrying airplane gasoline, we said we’re not coming aboard. But the captain was up on the bridge, and he was talking to an officer on the deck; it was a big ship. And he says, “What is the matter down there?” He says, “Sir, they don’t want to come aboard on account of the cargo.” He says, “Well, leave them there!” [Laughter] Then another little landing craft picked us up, and the next morning it got hit.

MURRAY: Oh no.

PONCE: And then I ended up in the water again and, you know, for someone who can’t swim, that was kind of rough.

MURRAY: Yes! I didn’t know you couldn't swim. You grew up in Florida and never learned to swim?

PONCE: And I was in the navy, a sailor who couldn’t swim. And then I was aboard the Bountiful, which was a hospital ship. And I was pretty well by that time. Oh, when I had got off the ship, the naval hospital in New Guinea, it was full, so I ended up in the army hospital, out there in the coontie grass.

MURRAY: Sounds like the army hospital may not have been as nice as the navy hospital?

PONCE: No, the navy hospital was right down by Hollandia. But of course, I didn’t smoke, and it was quite dry, but the coontie grass was eight or ten feet high. Guards were supposed to have orders to shoot to kill anyone that lit a match. They had a barbed wire enclosed space that you had to go into to smoke, you know. But fortunately I didn’t have to smoke, so by the time I got back to San Francisco, I was in fairly good shape. And then they gave you thirty days off when you lose your ship; they give you survivor’s leave.

MURRAY: Did you get sixty days since you lost two ships?

PONCE: No, oh no, no, no.

MURRAY: No? Well that would have only been fair.
PONCE: Well, like I got hit, I got injured in the second sinking, but they considered it one military action. So I only got one Purple Heart. I didn’t contest that.

MURRAY: Right. Now, when was that? What action was that?

PONCE: Well, the first action was when MacArthur landed in the Philippines, and retook the Philippines. And that campaign was still going on with them moving up towards north when we lost the ship.

MURRAY: So you ended up back in San Francisco. Did you spend your leave there?

PONCE: Oh, no. I came right back both to St. Augustine and to Palm Beach.

MURRAY: Okay, that was in 1945? I’m unclear as to when MacArthur landed back.

PONCE: 1944. I don’t remember how long I stayed down here. I went down to the gunnery school to see some of the kids that were still there. But I spent some time here with my sister.

MURRAY: Aha, R&R.

PONCE: The nicest nightspot—club—was the Rainbow Room at the Pennsylvania Hotel. Now First Street, which they renamed back to Banyan—it was, I think, from the railroad tracks to the George Washington Hotel—there was either twenty-three or twenty-four bars there.

MURRAY: My goodness.

PONCE: And those soldiers by the thousands would come from Camp Murphy, you know, where Jonathan Dickinson State Park is now? Then a train would come in. They’d just get on the train and stand in the aisles, you know. And the train would be full, the vestibules, they’d all get on.

MURRAY: That’s right. As you were coming south from St. Augustine riding the train, it would stop at Camp Murphy, is that correct?

PONCE: Yeah, and then they’d put them on, as much as they could.

MURRAY: And they used to make a beeline from the FEC [Florida East Coast Railroad] station to Banyan Street.

PONCE: Banyan Street. And of course, you know why all the bars were on Banyan Street. Remember, in West Palm Beach, Flagler didn’t think the working man could handle alcohol very well, and of course, you know, later in life he was a teetotaler himself. And so McGuire and McCormick, the contractors that worked with him all the time, said, “Mr. Flagler, the men have got to have some place to drink.” West Palm Beach started out as a dry town, and so he said, “Well, make one street.” And that’s why Banyan had all the bars on it. And still through World War II there was this line. There were just one line, you’d just go back and forth. There was actually one bar I went into had a sand floor. And the gals that hung out at the bar, they had a drink, Blue something. It most likely wasn’t even a dollar.

MURRAY: Wow, that was a lot.

PONCE: But that’s what they would always order, that Blue something.

MURRAY: Blue Sapphire?

PONCE: I don’t know what that was. But I tell you, they had to have a lot of military police patrolling Banyan Avenue in those days. You know places. And of course the Hut was there.

MURRAY: Was the Hut there during the war, and open?

PONCE: Open.

MURRAY: And that would have been another popular hangout to have fun and meet girls.

PONCE: Hamburgers and whatnot. And right alongside of it, facing the lake, there was a bar. So people sort of overflowed into each direction. But West Palm Beach was lively. You know they had the Army Air Force there. I remember my brother-in-law came into dinner one night, and he was so excited, so I had to swear that I wouldn’t repeat what he was going to tell me. He said, “Do you know why Southern Boulevard and”—what’s the one that’s next street down?

MURRAY: Belvedere?

PONCE: “—Belvedere were closed to the public today?” I said, “I didn’t know they were closed to the public today.” Because the first B-29s had landed on the airstrip here and they cut traffic off that passed on any side of it, to be refueled and whatnot, and the crews rest up for something. ‘Cause they came from Washington State where they were billeted, and then they were leaving. Of course they left immediately, but during that time they closed off.

MURRAY: The B-29s, were they being used in the Indo-Chinese, across The Hump there from India to China?

PONCE: I don’t think they were being used. Those were strictly for bombing. They were the super bombers, and the passenger plane [Lockheed] made from that was the Constellation, after the war, that first real snazzy plane.

MURRAY: I’m not into aviation stuff.

PONCE: Neither am I. But I remember so well, it was, fact is, he knew something.

MURRAY: Absolutely, absolutely. That would have been exciting. They were big planes. I want to talk now about, you
went off to Korea, and then we are going to get into your hotel business. When you came back from World War II, where were you on V-J Day [August 15, 1945]?

PONCE: San Francisco. Where they had the “peace riots.” Several people were killed. They went hog wild. Worst thing was, most places they restricted the military to the bases. But the navy didn’t restrict the navy and of course, Market Street was just unbelievable. There was one building that had metal scaffolding up the front, and so many people climbed on it that it fell over like an arch. And the windows in things like liquor stores didn’t last fifteen minutes. All smashed in, but not the USO. Nobody touched the USO. But finally they rounded us up and sent us back to our bases.

MURRAY: That was a big relief. Why were you in San Francisco?

PONCE: Well, when I got out and came back on survivor’s leave, they sent me to what was called the Market Street Annex, which was right downtown San Francisco, right across the street from the Wells Fargo building. Oh, the Crocker National Bank was across the street, ‘cause I remember so well, I was laying in my bunk, and one of the sailors came in and said, “Well, your buddy’s gone.” And I said, “Who?” And he said, “Roosevelt is dead.” And I said, “Don’t be kidding.” And I looked out the window and I could see the American flag on the dome of the Crocker National Bank building coming down. You know what I said? I said, “Oh my God, Truman is President.” I didn’t know what a wonderful president he was going to be, you know.

MURRAY: Right.

PONCE: And he was the only president I ever had a cup of coffee with. That was when he was on the Truman Committee checking to be sure that people weren’t wasting manpower. When he got into the sick bay, my secretary had made up the coffee early because the Truman Committee was getting ready to inspect us. And he said, “The rest of you boys look around, I’m going to have some of this coffee.” So my secretary and Harry and I had a nice, long conversation.

MURRAY: Really, what did you talk about?

PONCE: I guess he asked her where she was from, and then where I was from. He was very pleasant.

MURRAY: Aha. That’s where you were stationed after Florida?

PONCE: Mm hm. And of course one of his remarks is, “This isn’t as fancy as the last place I was,” and I said, “Where were you, Senator Truman?” He says “Oh, The Breakers in Palm Beach.” He’d inspected them. And so it was kind of fun.

MURRAY: Yes, I bet it was.

PONCE: But I remember that I was there. And then I stayed there through the Peace Conference. I was medical aide to the Russian delegation. Each of the big delegations to the Peace Conference had a corpsman assigned to them. You’d go there and find out in the morning whether they needed doctors, medicine, aspirin—whatever they needed, we’d take care of for them. So that was a real cushy job. At the beginning the Russian soldiers went out with me, but about halfway through, he told me it was kaput, no more. They were enjoying capitalism too much, I guess. [Laughter] But, you know, I think one of the most interesting things that happened with the Russian soldiers was that we ordered beer, and of course I’m pouring my drink and they said, “No, no, no,” and so they took the bottle and poured in everybody’s glass. And I’m trying to figure out what this is all about, and my best translation of it was, “If one died, all died.” You see?

MURRAY: Okay. [Laughter]

PONCE: And then they’d take the next bottle and go all the way around.

MURRAY: That’s a different way to do it.

PONCE: Oh, and they had loads of American money. A couple of bars where I knew the waitresses, I saw that they got well tipped from the Russian folks. Well, I can say that the last half of it, they didn’t go out anymore.

MURRAY: Where were you when you heard about the war in Europe ending, V-E Day [May 8, 1945]?

PONCE: I guess I was in San Francisco, and it had to be on the west coast. Of course, it wasn’t as big a deal there, because we very much had a war going on in our front yard. It wasn’t like New York or the east coast.

MURRAY: Exactly. But the army obviously learned from V-E Day that there could be problems on V-J Day.

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MURRAY: Exactly. But the army obviously learned from V-E Day that there could be problems on V-J Day.

PONCE: Isn’t that funny, I remember where I was when they invaded Europe, when we landed there in Normandy [June 6, 1944].

MURRAY: Where were you?

PONCE: We were rehearsing landings on Chesapeake Bay at a place called Cornfield Point. It was just down from Annapolis, you know; that’s where they practiced amphibious landings. They were using it to practice landing. It wasn’t out in the ocean, but it had a nice gradual beach. In the ocean there was too much wind, you couldn’t practice landing, it was too windy. In the Chesapeake Bay, you could be sure you could practice as much as you wanted without having to worry about wind and waves.

MURRAY: Were you down by the Patuxent River? The base down there?

PONCE: I know that just above us was Annapolis. And it was the Maryland side.
MURRAY: Maryland side of the bay.

PONCE: I’m pretty sure they called it Cornfield Point. Because they called us out to quarters early, and of course we assumed we were training for the invasion of Europe.

MURRAY: Oh, did you?

PONCE: And then when President Roosevelt announced that our troops had gone ashore at Normandy and whatnot and prayed for them and all that, whatever he said on that occasion, then we knew that unless the invasion failed, that we wouldn’t be needed over there. And so we picked up our ship in Pittsburgh. Of course the camouflage were shades of blue and gray and whatnot, on the way down the Mississippi yellow and green over the grey and the dark shades, you know, to the South Pacific. And we stopped in New Orleans long enough to extend the conning tower and do some other alterations for it to be used. So then I got, fifty-seven days it took, through a hurricane to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. From there we went through the Panama Canal. And it took us that long to get to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, which is off of Australia.

MURRAY: Oh my goodness.

PONCE: And before we went north to get in the fight itself.

MURRAY: When you crossed the Equator, did they have any special ceremonies?

PONCE: We were all dressed and going to do the thing, and then we were called to quarters, “Japanese ship,” so we stood at our gun mounts and whatnot, so the Captain finally called the whole thing off. Some of the people who were doing some of the ceremonies and the dresses! There were some rather strange men manning the guns. That was war.

MURRAY: Yes, exactly right. Were you travelling in convoy?

PONCE: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

MURRAY: All LSTs? Or was there a mixture of your ships?

PONCE: No, just LSTs. First of all they were fairly slow, so a couple of times, we had like a DE; the small destroyer would join us.

MURRAY: Destroyer Escort.

PONCE: I guess we were passing a small island where actually the Japanese might be operating, ‘cause I know we went by Christmas Island. You know, during the war you had a curfew, and everything shut down at twelve o’clock. That was so the people, the factory workers, got to bed and whatnot. The bars and everything would close immediately at twelve. And I was next in line to get a tattoo in the Canal Zone. And two or three other kids had already got one. And the other day I was thinking, what in the world would I have gotten put on my body? [Laughter] And I have no idea what kind of a tattoo I was going to get.

MURRAY: Aren’t you glad you didn’t?

PONCE: Saved by the bell. In talking about it this afternoon, it’s almost like something happened in another life, you know. Things were so different then. You can’t believe how the people here in south Florida were. There was gasoline rationing and very little traffic. I actually had people stop and pick me up and make the kids sit in each other’s laps so they had room enough for a sailor to get in the car. I’d go downtown Hollywood, and we’d go down by the bus station, and if the bus came first, we’d get on it. But we’d stand there and we’d usually get a ride into Miami. And coming in the morning, sometimes I’d stay over in Miami. For after all, in those days you could get a hotel for three-fifty [$3.50], four dollars [$4.00]. I never was late getting in. Just go down U.S. One and the other people would pick you up. Hollywood still had a number of tourists who came down. A place like Miami Beach had been taken over by the Air Force and downtown Miami was taken over by the navy. But if there were civilians, you could pretty well be sure they were going to send you a beer or two when you sat there, you know.

MURRAY: Everybody seemed to be fighting this war.

PONCE: Oh, yeah. It would never, never be that way again, so. It hasn’t been since. But [it was then] wherever you went, it didn’t make any difference whether it was Pittsburgh, you know. While we were waiting to pick up our ship, we were there a week, and they opened the amusement park early—where the roller coasters and whatnot were—for the two or three crews of LSTs. Of course, someone in management forgot to tell the other folks that they had granted an early opening that day for the nuns of the Archdiocese of Pittsburgh. But you talk about a lot of fun. I’m sure those nuns never forgot when those sailors and them shared that park and that was all it was. “Come on Sister, get on the roller coaster,” and they would be screaming and the habits would be flying.

MURRAY: Oh, my. That sounded like a good time.

PONCE: So they just decided that there was plenty of room, and of course they didn’t object and the sailors didn’t object. And you know, today it’s so funny, the army is a bunch of old men compared to us. The majority of the men on my ship, all the sailors, they were all under twenty years of age.

MURRAY: My goodness.

PONCE: And I got to pick up a plane last summer in Shannon and there was an army group there, you know, with their laptops, and I said these are old enough to be the fathers of the military of World War II.

MURRAY: Right, it seems that it goes on a curve. They say that the average age for World War II was twenty-five, but the average age for Vietnam was lower, you know, so it’s going back up again.
PONCE: I don’t know where they got the average age was twenty-five.

MURRAY: Because you had really old officers.

PONCE: Yes, that’s true, and the retired chief that lived next to me in St. Augustine, he ended up down in Miami there—you know, he went back in. So you got a bunch of fifty-year-olds. And they most likely didn’t leave the states, but on the ship itself, they were like a bunch of kids. And we had one kid that celebrated his seventeenth birthday. But another one they shipped home because he wasn’t even sixteen. He volunteered and there he was, navy. You didn’t have the draft. I knew that my extension on my draft would be up in a few weeks and I decided that I’d rather have a clean bed to sleep in, so I was going to join the navy. And the fact that I could not swim would not make much difference.

MURRAY: And they did not give you any training.

PONCE: Oh, I went swimming every week for weeks, never could learn to swim. I could as far as I could hold my breath.

MURRAY: Oh, goodness. That’s a little scary. So were you released from the service out in San Francisco?

PONCE: Yes.

MURRAY: And then you headed for—

PONCE: What I did was that I hitchhiked from San Francisco to, and ended up in, New Orleans, the first Mardi Gras after the war.


PONCE: And the forty-some rides went into Mexico and Juarez, and part of the trip, I was in a black hearse. This fellow says, “Is you scared of dead folks?” “No, I was raised in a funeral home.” Says, “Well, come along with me, ’cause I’m kind of scared.” [Laughter] So I arrived in New Orleans in a hearse.

MURRAY: Oh, no.

PONCE: I thought, where in the world? Even though the war was over yet, people just flocked there for the first Mardi Gras. I didn’t know where I was going to stay, but hadn’t gotten two or three blocks down the street and these fellows are hollering at me. They were from a Canadian patrol boat that I’d been sipping beer [with] in San Francisco just a couple of weeks before. And says, “Oh, we got a couple of rooms up here.” I think the last night we had about thirty people staying in that apartment. It was great. Parades went by right under our windows, you know.

MURRAY: I bet that was a real celebration that year.

PONCE: Actually everyone wanted to, you know, they were in the mood to celebrate for sure. New Orleans is a very naval town, too, so they would have been more excited about it maybe than some of the inland cities.

MURRAY: I doubt that they wouldn’t have had parades during the war.

PONCE: Oh no, there was no Mardi Gras during the war. No, those kind of things were called off.

MURRAY: Mm hm. That would have helped with morale. So where did you go after New Orleans?

PONCE: Well, on to[wards] St. Augustine, and I arrived late in the night in Tallahassee and everything looked so deserted. For some reason traffic didn’t pick up very fast. Oh, I’m stuck in Tallahassee.

MURRAY: And you were hitchhiking it all this time?

PONCE: I hitchhiked. Went to White Sands where the atomic bomb had gone off. Went to Mexico. Wherever they [the Canadians] were going. I got back and forth. Took me a month to get from San Francisco to St. Augustine. So I looked down the street and I see this fellow with a great big “K” on him, and the high school in St. Augustine was Ketterlinus High. I said, “You from Ketterlinus?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “What in the world are you doing here?” He says, “We’re playing basketball.” I says, “When are you going home?” He says, “In about an hour.” And I says, “Is the bus crowded?” He says, “No, we’d put a sailor aboard.” So at the end of my trip I came home with the Ketterlinus High School basketball team.

MURRAY: Well, that was a pretty good deal.

PONCE: It is amazing what you could do in a lifetime.

MURRAY: Yes, it is. So how long did you stay in St. Augustine? When you got out, that must have been a huge time to make some decisions.

PONCE: And I couldn’t believe—I think halfway up on the train, what are you doing heading for New York, you small town boy? And very little money. So I was going to sell myself as a hotel man, but I made it.

MURRAY: What was the name of the first hotel you worked in after the war?

PONCE: The Fifth Avenue, which is at 9th Street and Fifth Avenue. It’s still there. The last hotel, the one I spent the most time with, [was] The Mayflower. When I went up for my ninetieth birthday, I was looking forward to seeing it, and I got there and it was a hole in the ground. It was on Central Park West right alongside the Trump Tower there, Central Park. Now there’s a huge city block of condominium buildings there. So when I turned the corner, I expected to see my Mayflower Hotel.

MURRAY: What did you do at those hotels?

PONCE: Well I started out as a room clerk. But I always
got promoted. When I went back in during the Korean [War] I was assistant manager in charge of sales. Because, like so many hotels in New York, they had a lot of permanent guests, people who lived out on Long Island or up in Connecticut or whatnot, and they would spend the weekday nights. Of course they could always take the train home in the evening or out on Long Island. But so many people had a room downtown. And so I know at the Mayflower, a lot of our units had just a single unit where there was a small refrigerator and two burners up on top. Of course, we didn’t have microwaves yet. But they could, you know, fix a sandwich and some whatnot. The Fifth Avenue Hotel was more than half permanent guests. Of course, today there is not as much of that, because I guess it costs them more money.

MURRAY: Right. And the Flagler Bridge was built.

PONCE: And the Flagler Bridge was new. Then they put in, it didn’t end up on Little Main Street, it ended up on the big boulevard. And it’s surprising that they left that much room in the middle. I never was quite sure why.

MURRAY: It’s a beautiful entry into town.

PONCE: But the fact that they—of course, I’m sure that in the [19]30s they would have sold it and you’d get a good deal if you took it for tax money. If you could get the tax bill you could sell a hunk of property.

MURRAY: Right. You mentioned that you were re-upped in the Korean War. Did you have to serve in Korea?

PONCE: No, since it wasn’t very much of a naval war, I got transferred to the Marine Corps, ‘cause the Marines have no medical department. My first assignment when I was called back in, being First Class Petty Officer, I had my own room and everything.

MURRAY: Mm, nice.

PONCE: But that only lasted a few weeks. Instead I was going to Camp Lejeune to join the Marines. [Laughter] So we went through amphibious training; we practiced landing with the Marines and all that kind of stuff. Setting up first-aid stations, evacuating the injured and all that. So, graduation day, they were calling up names, assigning up to the First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, North Carolina, sending them different places. And after it was all over, I went to Chief Sibley who was in charge of us and said, “Either I’m deaf or you didn’t call my name.” And he says, “Oh, they didn’t tell you?” And I said, “Did I fail?” And he says, “No, they decided to keep you as ship’s company.” I said, “I guess I talk too much.” And he said, “Yes, I think you did.” And they put me in charge.

MURRAY: What does “ship’s company” mean?

PONCE: You’re stationed there. Like when I was in Hollywood, Florida, we were the people who ran the base and trained the people who were going through it as a school. So, if you are aboard ship, you are permanent staff of the ship. You may be taking other people somewhere or you may have temporary people aboard the ship, but you are the permanent staff. That’s what ship’s company is.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: And it doesn’t make any difference, it can be on land as well. So they put me in charge of running the classroom. I thought that this is so poorly run, so I just kept changing things around and then they never stopped me. So I just got away with movies in and all sort of things, training films. So then they got to where they’d come to me and ask me about changes in the program and whatnot, and we used to have a little landing practice up this little creek. Have four or five Marines shooting guns in the woods. And I says, “They got
records of artillery fire and everything else.” And they said, “Well, we could borrow, we could draw a field generator, but the generator would be almost as noisy.” And I said, “Well, don’t they have any earth movers?” And they says, “What for?” I said, “All we have to do is scoop down and you don’t bury it, just so it is down below ground level. Then you won’t hear it.” So the next amphibious landing, I had machine guns firing, cannons going off, and everything else. At my end of it, I thought it was fun. But the silly thing is, after I left, my time was up, because depending on how much service you had during World War II, how old you were, whether you were married, had any kids, all these were points, you see. So I would only have to spend the minimum of eighteen months with my points. And how many months overseas, all that— injured, Purple Heart, that was several points. But anyway, so they sent me home. Then I get a letter wanting to hire me back as a civilian employee.

MURRAY: Wow.

PONCE: I don’t think they realized how much I was doing. They suddenly realized that they had a school to run. We even met in what had been a theater in Camp Murphy. Montrect Point. At the back of it under the balcony, I built a model of hills and beach and all of this and had the Marine cut out aircraft carriers, battleships, and landing things. They would get up on the balcony and move the carriers in, and then the battleships to soften up. And then they could do the whole thing. And the first thing you know, they had officer’s training of some sort on that single Montrect Point so they were barring our amphibious landing, you know.

MURRAY: Sure.

PONCE: And so, I doubt it was more than one class, they want me to come back! [Laughter] I got two letters: “Please reconsider.” And the second one, the pay was fairly good, ‘cause I was a First Class Petty Officer so I got apparently decent pay. But the civilian pay would have been more. They threw in housing. The silly people they could have offered me Chief, you know. Which would have given me a little more dignity and more pay. But I think I finally threw the letters away. But then two letters: “Please reconsider.” They were having a hard time running that classroom.

MURRAY: Yes, yes. Didn’t have anyone else trained for it.

PONCE: But I brought my player down from my office from my apartment in New York and I hooked it up to my P.A. system, so if they were coming in we’d have music and all that kind of stuff.

MURRAY: What years was this for Korea?

PONCE: When was Korea?

PONCE: You know, the funny thing is he walked behind her; it should have been the reverse order. And she was the one that came up and asked for things. So Joe Tank, who used to own the Colony, he was a little nervous. Even though they had negotiated the cost of the penthouse, people would say they had no intention of paying, they never paid for anything! So they were debating what should we do, what should we do? So at the end of seven days I pulled the account like you normally would do and slid it into the box. So the Duke comes in and I handed him the thing and said, “the weekly statement.” I didn’t say, “bill.” And twenty-five minutes later he was standing there with a check.

MURRAY: Wow.

PONCE: Oh, I tell you, when word spread to the management, they were all “Uh-oh, call Mr. Tank in New York”; they’d paid the bill. [Laughter.] So the next morning we were getting ready, the comptroller’s going off to the bank. I says, “You’re not going to deposit that check without photographing it, are you?” And he said, “Oh, I hadn’t thought about that.” So Mort Kaye was our photographer. “Come over right away, Mort.” And in the lobby there, the door going in, on the right there is a photograph of the check.

MURRAY: How long did they stay? Was it a whole week or the season?

PONCE: I think they were there at least two weeks. Oh, yes, I’m sure they were there for two weeks. And she and I got to know each other, and they always stayed with Mary Sanford and Ambassador [Arthur] Gardener. The different people. And the people fought. It wasn’t a matter of them not wanting to pay for anything, people just wanted to have them as their guest. I can imagine if you are someone’s houseguest and they can have all sorts of parties and you got to take part in it.

MURRAY: Sure.

PONCE: So she said that this was like a season, and they could do what they wanted to do. And I remember that when they were here, that Winston Churchill visited here aboard the Christina. And as far as we know, Jackie [Kennedy] met Aristotle Onassis right off of Peanut Island in a reception for Churchill.

MURRAY: Really. So that would have been in the late [19]70s.

PONCE: And he was running around with her sister. What was her sister?

MURRAY: Lee Radziwell.

PONCE: Yes, and that was why they were not very friendly later on. I remembered because we were speculating because, you know, he was the one who insisted they had to leave England and all that.

MURRAY: Who was?

PONCE: Churchill. His [Windsor’s] leanings towards—he seemed to admire Adolf Hitler’s abilities. And so that’s why they sent them to the Bahamas, to get them on the other side of the ocean. So they [the Windsors] thought maybe they would call on him, but it didn’t happen.

MURRAY: Was Churchill staying with Madame [Consuelo Vanderbilt] Balzan at the time down in Manalapan?

PONCE: No, no, no, that was earlier in life.

MURRAY: In the [19]40s?

PONCE: That was much earlier, the house down there in Manalapan?

MURRAY: Yes, Yes.

PONCE: One kind of interesting thing, when King Hussein of Jordan stayed with us, and things you have to do at a hotel. One early Sunday morning with a slight hangover, they called me at home and says, “Jim, where can we buy a bathing suit for King Hussein?” I said the Palm Beach Mall would be open at noon. “Oh no, they’re supposed to be at Cypress Gardens, he’s going to learn how to water ski.”

MURRAY: Oh my goodness.

PONCE: I says, “There’s nothing open Sunday morning.” I knew the manager of Saks Fifth Avenue and they used to be down there where Polo Ralph Lauren is now. I called him, I think he was hung over too, and I says, “Can you open the store this morning?” He said, “Jim Ponce, what in the world are you talking about?” I says, “Well, King Hussein and his party want to buy a few bathing suits.” And he says, “You got to be kidding.” And I said, I knew Tom, the radio announcer on Channel 5. “Suppose I get you television coverage of them pulling up in their limousines?” Tom said, “Okay, I’ll come.” So they went there and they just scooped them up off the rack. And they figured up the bill and it was practically nothing. He said, “I took the price off of one and multiplied by the number.” [Laughter.] And the other thing was, they needed money. So I called on Jesse Newman, vice president of the Worth Avenue Bank and I said, “Jesse, could you open the bank this morning?” He said, “What are you talking about, Jim?” I said, “Well, King Hussein needs some money, and we don’t have that much money left.” So he said, “Oh yeah, okay.” Jesse loved P.R. [public relations]. So he opened the bank for him so they were able to—

MURRAY: Cash a check.

PONCE: Oh yeah. But we had so many interesting people stay there. I went to Miami to pick up Phyllis Diller when she was first starting. And I thought this was going to be easy. You still went to the plane, the steps, to get on it. You’d just go there. And of course I asked where that plane was, and [they] says, “Just follow the people” and gave me the number. I said, “What do you mean, ‘just follow the people’?” Well, when I
got to the door where you went down, it was a wall of people.

MURRAY: Really.

PONCE: The famous boxer, what was his name?

MURRAY: Which one, Cassius Clay [later known as Muhammad Ali]?

PONCE: Cassius Clay was arriving on the same plane. But I finally spotted Phyllis, you know. She was so funny, she came out of the plane and said, “Oh dear, all my friends are here.” [Laughter.] And so I drove her in and escorted her up to her suite. And while I was there they arrived with the welcome tray, which was a little pony [375 ml] of champagne and a champagne glass and I don’t know what else was on it. So she picks up the bottle and says, “Oh isn’t that sweet; for god’s sake, send for its mother!” [Laughter.] She and I killed mother and child. We got to be great, great buddies at the time. I think when the Princess of Siam or something arrived, the State Department people were overseeing everything and they says, “Now the proper welcome drink for her would be pink champagne.” Now the manager belongs to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], and he’s got to drink along with them. But they would have to put a little grenadine in and the waiter would be sure that he got the right glass. And after the whole thing was over, I said that I thought it had went very well. And he says, “It certainly did, I don’t know who got the ginger ale, but that champagne certainly tasted good.”

MURRAY: Oh no, oh no.

PONCE: I don’t think he drank very much of it once he tasted it. But in those days, The Breakers, the Biltmore, and those hotels were all Full American [Plan]. So people who were just popping into town for a short stay, the stars that were going to be playing at the [Royal Poinciana] Playhouse, you know they would all stay there. It was so interesting. Next Saturday I am going to a party at Brownie McLean’s.

MURRAY: Are you?

PONCE: But of course, Brownie was young, and her and Jock were there all the time. The other day we were talking and she says, “Oh I remember the nightcaps at The Breakers.” After the Playhouse and different things they would stop by the Colony. The Colony was—

MURRAY: a pretty night place.

PONCE: I was trying to think of who was there. I don’t know if it was the president or head of Saudi Arabia, he was the Crown Prince [first in line to the throne] when he stayed with us. His father had come over and been operated on in Boston and he came down here to recuperate.

MURRAY: Oh really, at the Colony.

PONCE: Oh no, he had Mrs. Matthews’ house.

MURRAY: Really.

PONCE: Flagler’s granddaughter. They took it over. And to be properly entertained, they took one of the walls out. Of course, they would pay for having it put back in. Naturally, she never had it put back in. And so they would bring out nightclub acts from all over south Florida to entertain him. And if he didn’t like it, [Mr. Ponce makes the sound CLAP CLAP].

MURRAY: Uh huh. They were gone.

PONCE: They were gone, you know. And the people who really suffered, because we had the entire government here, were the ones that were ensconced at the Towers, which had cooking. And cooking was pretty lively with the garlic whatnot.

MURRAY: The spices, yes.

PONCE: So the other places they couldn’t, and they couldn’t have them all in one place, ‘cause that would be too dangerous. They couldn’t have one sleeping over the other. One prince couldn’t be sleeping over the other in the two suites. They don’t trust each other too well.

MURRAY: Uh huh.

PONCE: There was so many interesting people, even in the summertime. It was the only place to stay in the summer. We got down to where it was just one room. Never empty.

MURRAY: That’s incredible. How long were you at the Colony?

PONCE: Ten years.

MURRAY: When did you leave there?

PONCE: You know, I am not sure.

MURRAY: Okay. What did you do after you left the Colony?

PONCE: I managed the Holiday Inn, I became the innkeeper of the Holiday Inn, where Four Seasons is now [2800 South Ocean Boulevard/A1A, Palm Beach]. And it was very interesting, too. We had a lot of seasonal guests and we had a lot of units with kitchens, you know, people stayed with us for a while. Not that either one of them was staying with us, but they used to walk the beach at night, was [bodybuilder] Charles Atlas and—who sang “God Bless America”?

MURRAY: Smith?

PONCE: Kate Smith. They used to walk the beach together. They used to say he was the only one strong enough to lift her over the threshold. They stayed at what was then the Ambassador Hotel [2730 South Ocean Boulevard/A1A].

MURRAY: Condo, right?
PONCE: Long since become a condo.

MURRAY: Were they married?

PONCE: No, no, no. But they were very good friends. And they used to stroll the beach together all the time.

MURRAY: How long were you down at the Holiday Inn?

PONCE: About ten years.

MURRAY: About ten years. Ten years seems to be about your limit, huh? Movin’ on.

PONCE: Well, I don’t know, I was just shy of twenty-eight years duty doing the tour. And I had been there about five years before that when I returned as assistant manager.

MURRAY: Returned to where?

PONCE: To The Breakers.

MURRAY: Did you return to The Breakers after the Holiday Inn?

PONCE: Oh, no! We left out in-between those two, I managed The Brazilian Court. And that was so nice.

MURRAY: I’ll bet.

PONCE: There’s one of their cocktail tables. [points]

MURRAY: Oh really, the one the dog is laying underneath.

PONCE: Yeah. Well they were selling off and refurbishing the place.

MURRAY: Do you think that is a Mizner Industries top?

PONCE: No, when they, um—

MURRAY: Because the Brazilian was built when Mizner was there.

PONCE: Well, I know. The Brazilian Court bought them when they tore down the Leach home. The oceanfront at Royal Palm Way. You know, there is a big condominium there. Mrs. [Willaford] Leach is the one who put up so much of the money to start Bascom-Palmer. You see, her father was a poor boy that invested in some of that silly old Coca Cola stock.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: Oh you talk of that, when I went through that thing when they were selling off things, I thought, they can’t be tearing this thing down, you know. I guess you’ve seen pictures. The courtyard that faced south, you know the building was like this. Then there’s a bridge you could walk across. The gothic arches across here and the courtyard. Oh and then down in the building line it has a basement and it had bowling alleys in it. ‘Cause that’s where that nice condominium is on the corner. Oh, but that house was so fabulous. Actually from the outside, it wasn’t one of Mizner’s best, I didn’t think.

MURRAY: No?

PONCE: But inside it was. And how I would tie it into the story, one of the rooms, I don’t know what room it was, was lined with this wonderful carved Spanish tile paneling. And they bought it to line the bar. At the Colony, the Brazilian Court. Over the bar and then all up on this side there was a whole section of that paneling. I hate to think that it was destroyed.

MURRAY: Isn’t some of that wood still there?

PONCE: No, ‘cause they ripped out that bar then they had a wall. The bar had all that paneling and then at the end of it, going towards that door, they had concrete, I mean stone, with bottles like a stained glass window. Different sizes of glass jugs and bottles that went up. And I don’t know, why tear something down that was as pretty as that? I’m almost sure that all that paneling was sold. But they were auctioning, were selling off the cocktail tables, ‘cause originally it was at this house. So they wanted $125 dollars for that. I said, “Uhhhhhh.”

MURRAY: Yeah, that was a lot.

PONCE: So later on when the sale was about over and there was one with real wobbly legs, I said, “I’ll give you 35.” So, they said to get the thing off the property. Because the legs were falling off of that one.

MURRAY: Uh huh. Do you remember when the Flagler Museum opened?

PONCE: I was there.

MURRAY: Were you? Were you at the opening? Had you even thought about being the historian you are about Flagler at that point? ‘Cause now you are considered a Flagler historian, wouldn’t you say? I would say, Palm Beach, Flagler. At that time did you have an interest in it?

PONCE: Yes, because being raised in St. Augustine, you know, Flagler was quite a personality to us and the fact that my father had buried him, and put him in the vault and all in St. Augustine, he was sort of personal to us, and so. Because I got in it [Whitehall] before they tore it down, before they converted it back to the home. You remember when they first left the hotel up, the thing on the back for several years? She [Jean Matthews] even thought of converting it into condominiums, but the worse thing was where they would park and how would they get people in and out. They finally decided it would take away too much from the house itself.

MURRAY: So you went to the opening of the museum. Tell me about that. Was it fun, was it a party?

PONCE: A lot of speeches. It was interesting.
MURRAY: It's changed quite a bit in the years since, actually fifty years since. I interrupted your flow, sorry.

PONCE: Which way were we flowing?

MURRAY: Which way were we flowing, exactly. We were getting ready to go back to The Breakers. How you got back to The Breakers to work. We were talking about The Brazilian Court.

PONCE: Oh, The Brazilian Court, and then from the Brazilian Court, that is when I get angina and had to go to the Miami Heart Institute, and I got one of the oldest stents in America in my body. They followed me for twenty years. They used to call me their poster boy.

MURRAY: Well, you should still be.

PONCE: Well, after twenty years, I think they decided—

MURRAY: The surgeon probably died. [Laughter.]

PONCE: Actually one time they asked me if I would donate it to the medical research after I died. But we didn't hear anything more of it, so I guess they wanted to check one that had been in a body of a person for that long.

MURRAY: Was that your only problem with your heart?

PONCE: Yep, and after that, I was in the Miami Heart Institute twice. My local doctor, he just said, “You really, really should go to the Miami Heart Institute.” And they said, “You really should have a stent put in.” Oh the first time, they just did the angioplasty. And it opened up one blood vessel, but not the other one, and so then they said, “You are definitely a good candidate for this new thing called a stent.” That was when I got the stent put it.

MURRAY: Do you remember what year that was?

PONCE: About thirty years ago. And the doctor told me right after that, that I couldn’t go back to management.

MURRAY: Really.

PONCE: For the time being you have got to have a job that you don’t take to bed with you. Well they didn’t know how successful the stent or the angioplasty was, ‘cause at that time the only place that you could have it done was the Miami Heart Institute. So, I went to the Hotel Association annual dinner and cocktail party, and the manager from there asked me what I was doing. And I said, “I’m not doing anything. They won’t let me manage.” And he says, “Would you be insulted if I offered you the assistant manager’s job at The Breakers?” And I said, “I think that would be wonderful.” I must have been about sixty, ‘cause when I was sixty-five, which was about five years later, I was retired by The Breakers. But about two days before I left, the activities gal came in and said, “Jim, you know I am going to go off on a sabbatical for several weeks and I’ve got everything covered except the tour. You know it’s about a thirty-minute thing to show people, point out the names of the rooms and whatnot.” I said, “No, I could come over and do that.” And I thought since I was born and raised in St. Augustine, I should give them a little of the background story. I didn’t even know the manager found out what I was telling these people, but apparently a couple of people had gone to him. And so when she got back, he called me in and said, “Jim if you’re going to be around town, I don’t know what you are going to do with your retirement, but we sure would like it if you would come in every Tuesday and do the tour.” And then of course it wasn’t long before someone coming down, planning a convention, went on the tour and said, “Couldn’t you do this for our group?” And about that time someone asked me if I could come, I’ll never forget, [to] Melaleuca’s school. Could I possibly come to tell Flagler’s story to the kids? I wished that I had kept track of all the schools I went to. I went as far down as Addison Mizner in Boca Raton. I even spoke at St. Thomas Aquinas, the little Catholic college where the Dolphins used to practice, down in Miami. I spoke to them. I spoke to a stage full of kids from that school in Ft. Pierce, but they televised it to every other fourth grade in the county. I took—what was the great gal who just died recently that worked at the Historical Society after she left The Flagler [Museum]?

MURRAY: Oh, Kay Graham.

PONCE: Kay Graham, she went as Mrs. Flagler. And when I’d get to the part about building The Flagler Museum I’d say, “Why don’t you tell them about the house?” And of course, then she would carry on for a while. She went real quick.

MURRAY: Yes she did.

PONCE: Which is God’s blessing.

MURRAY: Yes it is.

PONCE: I don’t know how you arrange for that. And she was such a lovely person.

MURRAY: Yes she was, yes she was. I am really glad that I got to know her.

PONCE: Someone said, “If you had to describe her in one word,” and I said, “enthusiastic.” You could go in and tell her that you suddenly found out some big or little history point, she was that enthused. And I was so looking forward to seeing her again, but that’s the way things go.

MURRAY: That is the way things go and it gives us a little lesson. Well you’ve had a wonderful life. Would you say you have had a wonderful life?

PONCE: Yes, it’s rather unique.

MURRAY: Yes, absolutely. You travelled the world.

PONCE: I’ve been into the north-most capital in the world, which is Reykjavik, Iceland, and I’ve been into the south-
most city in the world, which I forget. What’s down there before you leave to go to Antarctica?

MURRAY: From our conversations, you travelled a lot in Europe since the war.

PONSE: I did a couple of Mediterranean cruises. I did an automobile, which was the best. But you know I went around South America on the ship.

MURRAY: And you’ve been almost all the way to Australia. You’ve been to the Philippines. Courtesy of the government.

PONSE: Esperitu Santo is here and Australia is there. But we never got past the Philippines, sort of bordered it, in the corner. Only two places in recent years that I really wanted to go. One was a combination Australia-New Zealand, and the other was to take that boat trip up the Rhine, you know. ‘Cause I’d driven down part of the way to Cologne and across and back up part of the way on the other side. To see those boats gliding down, I thought, oh that would be heavenly.

MURRAY: Right. So who do you think is going to be the next “Mr. Flagler”?

PONSE: I don’t know.

MURRAY: Do you think there will be one?

PONSE: I don’t know.

MURRAY: I can’t imagine it.

PONSE: I never intended, you know, to get so involved. Jesse Newman was kind of responsible for it.

MURRAY: He was?

PONSE: I ended up on the board of the Chamber of Commerce when he took over because he wanted the owner of the Holiday Inn to be on the board, who says no. He says, “Give it to Jim Ponce.” So, I think he reluctantly took me. After a number of years, I don’t [what] what the occasion was, I said, “You realize that this is the anniversary of so and so” at the board meeting. And a couple of weeks later I had to tell him what happened ninety years ago that day. So at the next Chamber board meeting Jesse said, “Oh, you’re on the head table.” I said, “What am I doing up there?” He says, “You’re going to give a vignette of history.” I said, “You got to be kidding.” So, he said, “Well, think of something.” And then I started doing the little vignettes, as he called them, of history.

MURRAY: Is that when you became a member of the Historical Society?

PONSE: Oh no, I had already been the president of the Historical Society.

MURRAY: Had you by that time? Do you remember what years you were president of the Historical Society?

MURRAY: There is a plaque over there, but I don’t know.

MURRAY: Okay. If you were president of the Historical Society, you must have known James Knott.

PONSE: He’s the one who inspired me a great deal. He came to the Brazilian Court to put on his slide presentation of Palm Beach homes to, I think it was the Garden Club group; they were staying there. So he says, “Oh, I’m not sure about—” And I whispered over to him what it was, and after doing that a couple of times, I thought, well, I can do that! [Laughter.] Even when he published those little books from his “Brown Wrappers,” several times he called me up and he says, “As we go along, we uncover more information and we found out what we thought was gospel up to last week isn’t gospel this week.” So several times he ran incidents that was there and wanted my opinion, and I was very flattered, you know. And I get no credit for it, but I created the Knott Award.

MURRAY: You did? I didn’t know that.

PONSE: Well, the board never did anything until I was president. And then I thought we should have an annual luncheon or something.

MURRAY: Yes.

PONSE: In fact, when they let us know that Peanut Island had the bomb shelter on it, I called up the Coast Guard and said, “Can some group from the Historical Society go over?” and they arranged for the boat. They never had been on a boat trip. I took my whole busload to St. Augustine. But when I suggested a luncheon, what’s her name, the architect’s wife—she just died recently.

MURRAY: Volk, Jane Volk.

PONSE: She said, “What are we having a lunch for?” And then I thought, “Well, we can give out an award.” They did nothing other than take care of the club.

MURRAY: Take care of materials.

PONSE: But I thought they should get out and move around a little. And so after they agreed they should give out an award, it didn’t take us long to realize to call it The Knott Award. In fact, I think he gave some money. I don’t know what the money was for—to pay for the award, to go to the people, I guess.

MURRAY: Well, part of the money he gave us, I think, was for a permanent home, which was even then wanted to be the Court House. You know, that’s not what we owned but we are there.

PONSE: He and I both. And that’s where I realized—from him—that the written word, what you hear, is not always true history, you know.

MURRAY: Right.
PONCE: It’s like coming here. When I first got here I thought the story about Flagler burning down the Styx was so great, you know. And I was on the Commission, including Judge Knott and the president from the Black Preservation Board and whatnot. They were going to nail him to the cross for their hundredth anniversary of that church that was opened.

MURRAY: Oh, Payne A.M.E.?

PONCE: They were going to move it over. The first meeting we discovered, when did it happen? Ten years, different date. But the one that put the kibosh on it was the Afrimobile pilot that died at age of one hundred and nine. Remember?

MURRAY: [Haley] Mickens?

PONCE: And he was saying he remembers seeing it. He said, “We were too tired after pushing the tourists. And all the folks already moved over there to Pleasant Town [City], but we’d go bunk up there during the season. Then I don’t exactly remember at the end when the hotel closed down, I’d have to put everything on my chair so I’d just have to pay one ten cents to get back over to town”. And he said, “Oh no, they were building,” he said he remembers seeing it, they had pulled down the buildings and trees and stacked them up and they were creating streets. Back in there I’ve got the book that that church put out thanking Mr. Flagler and the other well-to-do of Palm Beach that at the end of the season would get up a little purse and have a cookout and whatnot. And that’s where the cookout came from.

MURRAY: Where the circus came from.

PONCE: Most likely they had a circus and different things for them.

MURRAY: Right. Hotel workers.

PONCE: But, oh I thought that was a wonderful story when I first got here.

MURRAY: So, Mr. Mickens is the one said, “Oh no, that didn’t happen,” that people had already left. Yeah.

PONCE: He said the only people who was living there then was maybe a possible few exceptions, they called them squatters or something, would have been the wheelchair pilots when they got off work, especially if they had a late customer at Bradley’s. And maybe if they made good, they’d say, “Pick me up at such and such a time.” And Mick says, “You’d stay because if they hit it big, you got a good tip.” He was so much fun.

MURRAY: Yeah, I’ll bet he was.

PONCE: I think he was a hundred years old when he appeared on that thing. Wasn’t he a hundred and nine when he died?

MURRAY: I don’t know, it was before I got involved in all of this.

PONCE: Yeah, ’cause they buried him from the Leaky Teepee.

MURRAY: Really, wow. Did they really?

PONCE: His funeral was in the Leaky Teepee. He squared away some of them.

MURRAY: He squared away some of them, but some of them still believe.

PONCE: Oh, I know. Well it’s always easy to believe ill of people. Because when I was growing up there were people in St. Augustine and I remember I couldn’t understand why there were people who didn’t like Flagler. But I guess he stepped on some toes and whatnot.

MURRAY: He transformed St. Augustine.

PONCE: And there were some here in town.

MURRAY: West Palm?

PONCE: That last mayor we had.

MURRAY: Joel Daves?

PONCE: His wife’s a pioneer.

MURRAY: Yes, yes.

PONCE: And she had no use for Flagler for some reason. I remember when we had the anniversary of the founding of the city of West Palm Beach.

MURRAY: Right, in 1994.

PONCE: And she wanted to know why they had to fool with Flagler. But at home there were people too. Of course my mother was very much a Flagler person naturally. But I can hear some of those “old biddies,” as I called them, who would say, “You know perfectly well he had that lovely woman put in an asylum so he could marry that young whippersnapper.” There were people that were convinced that that was the story. I once arranged to have tea with Clarissa Anderson. Now that was the wife of Dr. Andrew Anderson, his closest confederate in St. Augustine, and a lot of the land that the hotel properties are on and all the church land was Anderson land.

MURRAY: Talking about Anderson, you got to have lunch with his niece or his daughter.

PONCE: Oh, oh his niece. After we drank the last, third martini, we never got around to tea. I think if she had told me a little bit more of some of the family secrets, but I learned a lot from her—you know, little things that don’t mean a lot to anybody. I know that the son stayed at their house when he came up for his father’s funeral. And that it was his father that sent for him when he realized Flagler was dying ’cause he arrived the same day that Flagler died.

MURRAY: Did he?
PONCE: Dr. Anderson, my father took me in to see him a couple of weeks before he died. He held my hand and says, “Now you be a good boy.” Said, “You’ve got a good father” and so forth. See, my father was a master cabinetmaker and the paneling in the dining room in the Anderson mansion in St. Augustine is just beautiful. And to find out that my father did all that stuff.

MURRAY: Oh did he, really?

PONCE: The way it worked, he went to work for a funeral store and they built the caskets and then when Flagler opened the hotel and wealthy people were dying here, the section of the church didn’t take care of people, but picked the casket up at the furniture store. You’d have to send to Jacksonville for an embalmer. So he says he bought the furniture store. Said, “I decided to sell the couches and chairs and go to Cincinnati to the embalming school. It’s Flagler put me into business you know.” Because naturally during the course of the season there would always be several people who would die.

MURRAY: Sure. And the town itself grew.

PONCE: One of those funerals would be better than a dozen of the local ones.

MURRAY: Right, right.

PONCE: ’Cause they would buy expensive metal caskets. And you know another interesting thing?

MURRAY: What’s that?

PONCE: His funeral home burnt down when the Florida Hotel burnt and you know where he moved the funeral home? Into Bradley’s gambling casino.

MURRAY: Oh, really. The old Bacchus Club?

PONCE: Yeah.

MURRAY: Oh, I’ll be darned.

PONCE: You know, right there. So I spent the first years of my life upstairs in the Bacchus Club. Isn’t that something?

MURRAY: Yes that’s something. That’s someone else I’d like to talk about. You may remember him though because of the time.

PONCE: Who?

MURRAY: Mr. Bradley.

PONCE: If there was one person there was I knew, it was Bradley. And the reason I knew Bradley was the love of his life he met in St. Augustine when he opened the Bacchus Club. Now you know the significance of the names. What are the initials?

MURRAY: Bacchus is the god of wine.

PONCE: Think of the initials.[points]

MURRAY: Okay, B. C.

PONCE: This is the Beach Club and it had over it these big initials, B. C. Everyone knew it stood for Bradley’s Casino, you see. And the strange thing was that when my father opened, there was twin doors. And when my father put his name on he put his initials on one side and the rest of the name here, Funeral Director. And you know how it turned out when open? R A P O N C E. And until that man died, there were still people who would call him “Rap Once.”

MURRAY: Oh really. [Laughter]. That’s funny.

PONCE: From the funeral home. So the high rollers moved down here. Then he didn’t open the Bacchus Club anymore. And so the big gaming room there on the dock, on the northwest corner, that would become his little chapel and place to lay out bodies. But it doesn’t end with us living in his gambling casino. We had this couple move into our rental house next door. Sometime in the early winter my mother asks me to mow the lawn; we had quite a nice garden. “Mow the lawn and fix everything up real nice and be sure the umbrella is upright.” And I says, “What, are we going to have a tea or something?” “No, Mrs. Avis[??] is entertaining Colonel Bradley.” And I says, “Why can’t she entertain him in her living room?” And my mother says, “That wouldn’t be proper.” Because she was the love of his life, and even though both were Catholics, her family said absolutely she couldn’t marry a gambling man. But for the rest of his life when he was on his way to Miami or to here in Palm Beach in the fall, he dropped off his private railroad car, the Flower and took a limousine over. Mrs. [??] told me to hang around, when he’d be coming, and “I’ll call you over.” So apparently she told him that I had fixed the yard up. So out comes a nice crispy dollar bill. And believe me a dollar bill went a long ways there before World War II. And this was repeated in the [spring] on his way north, they’d drop his private car off here and then he’d make this pilgrimage. Never went in the house. Always in the yard.

MURRAY: Now I don’t know who the lady is you are referring to. She was married to another person?

PONCE: Yes.

MURRAY: How did they know one another? Apparently from before she was married?

PONCE: Oh yes, he met her and they were courting I’m sure, when her family refused. She absolutely could not marry a gambling man. And the last year, just before the war, he got up to a five-dollar bill.

MURRAY: Oh really.

PONCE: Yeah. And I tell you he was so tall and straight. He walked straight like a rod. He had a big, long neck with starched collar, you know. Then came the war. In Palm Beach,
one of my little trips—it must have been when I was staying at the Bradley House, so it was before my sister’s husband got moved here—I ran into Colonel Scruggs, who later was General Scruggs, a good buddy of my half-brother from Jacksonville. We said hello and he says, “Can’t you come to dinner with us tonight?” I says, “Fine.” He says, “We’ll go to Bradley’s.” I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.

MURRAY: Yes!
PONCE: And so we went in and they were very cordial. And part of the way through the meal the captain or someone came over and said, “Now you know that neither of you can approach the gambling tables.” And my first thought was, how does he know that both of us are Floridians? But he says, “The Colonel doesn’t allow people in military uniform to approach the gambling table.”

MURRAY: Okay, so he was there.
PONCE: When we got ready to leave we asked for the tab and he says “Oh, no, it’s on the Colonel. Tell Augustan”—that’s what they used to call me in St. Augustine—”I’m sorry we didn’t have time to visit.”

MURRAY: Oh my.
PONCE: And that was just a few years before he died.

MURRAY: Very soon before he died [1946]. Can you describe the interior of the Beach Club?
PONCE: You know Pat asked me about that.

MURRAY: That would be Pat Crowley?
PONCE: Yeah. It’s so funny that I don’t remember that much. The two things that I remember about it are nothing. They had a lot of beautiful palms and plants in there. ‘Cause you know it was only open for about five weeks, maybe six, I don’t know. But it wasn’t open all winter. And then I remembered there was lots of glass latticework, you know.

MURRAY: Uh huh. On the second story? (Conversation interrupted by phone call.)
PONCE: I didn’t hesitate talking too long, did I?

MURRAY: If you’re wondering about your mental acuity, I don’t think there is any problem there at all.
PONCE: There’s somebody that goes back to Flagler’s time and you never hear anything about him and that was Frank, is it Frank Hennessey?

MURRAY: I am not familiar with him.
PONCE: He was Flagler’s last office boy. You know the big offices had to have a boy because they’d bring a letter and they’d look at it and say no, this is wrong and rewrite it and all of that. But office boys were very important. And he went on to become, when I went to work at The Breakers, he was the receptionist there.

MURRAY: Really. He was still there, my goodness.
PONCE: He died there. He was the last person to live there.

MURRAY: When they still had a place for staff.
PONCE: The Kenans gave him a room. I used to love it when he’d tell me about the old days. He knew everyone. I never forget, I was there at the front desk and this lady came back and says, “Surely you have a room with a better location than that.” And he says, “Madam that’s the best we can do.” And she’s arguing away and he’s saying absolutely no to her. And then finally she gave up and left. And then he turns to me and says, “Who in the world does she think she is? She’s nobody, she’s absolutely nobody.”

MURRAY: Who was she?
PONCE: I don’t know.

MURRAY: Oh no, “nobody”! [Laughter]
PONCE: But he’d get out there and talk about Consuelo Vanderbilt down in Manalapan. He knew everybody. People would call, making the reservations through him and whatnot. His thing was that he would go there to work in the fall. In the summer he went visiting people. In earlier days. His pride was he could go all winter without cashing a check.

MURRAY: Cash tips?
PONCE: As a receptionist. And believe me it didn’t make any difference what time of day it was, ’cause we knew what trains people were coming on. And Frank would be there to greet them. I learned an awful lot about Palm Beach and I remember in later years taking him over to a couple of functions at the Flagler Museum. But it’s a funny thing, I’ve never heard anyone even mention him.

MURRAY: That is funny, I’m not familiar with him.
PONCE: Frank Hennessey, that’s his name. There must be something on him. You know as far as history went, he wasn’t very good. But did he ever know the people that had been here. And so a lot of times in the evening he’d stop and chat with people. He was the only person behind the desk that ate in the main dining room. The rest of us ate in what they called the second officers’ dining room. We were waited on and everything.

MURRAY: Oh, really.
PONCE: Oh, yeah. In other words, the general manager,
the comptroller, and I don’t know, the reservation manager, whatever, they would be eating off in their dining room. But Frank Hennessey ate in the dining room. And then, of course, he planned his summer: go to Mrs. So and So’s in Penobscot: He’d tell some place, “I’ll be able to get [to] you in [the] second week of June.”

MURRAY: I’ll be darned.

PONCE: He’d just go from house to house.

MURRAY: Why was he so popular around these folks?

PONCE: Well, the fact that he’d been there so long.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: He could get you locations you wanted in the hotel.

MURRAY: Okay.

PONCE: They called him the receptionist. He didn’t take the reservations.

MURRAY: He met the guests.

PONCE: But Frank could get you moved in a hurry.

MURRAY: So obviously he went from the Flagler. When Flagler died, the hotels went with his wife, Mrs. Flagler. When she died in [19]17, the Kenan family took over. Do I have that right?

PONCE: Well the Kenans would have inherited it, but one third of it went to Lawrence Lewis and his sister.

MURRAY: Who was Lawrence Lewis?

PONCE: Well, Mrs. Flagler’s sister married a Wise. And Lawrence Lewis’ mother was a Wise. And she married two men, both named Lewis. Very considerate, didn’t have to change her name.

MURRAY: Easy on the monogramming.

PONCE: In fact, when they put the addition on the front of the hotel, they built the new Beach Club, which has been since torn down, Breakers West, that was when Lawrence Lewis was president of Flagler Systems.

MURRAY: Oh okay. So the Kenans bought out Mr. Lewis.

PONCE: Yes, after he was president, then the older. You know James Kenan is now CEO. His father was the older James Kenan and Frank Kenan and his son Owen was the chairman of the board ’cause he’s dead ’cause James is running it, the top banana now, and then they took over from there.

MURRAY: Right. And Mr. Lewis got a hotel up in St. Augustine.

PONCE: St. Augustine, and he got the hotel in Gainesville and the golf course in St. Augustine. I’m not sure about the Flagler Inn in the Bahamas, but anyway, the rest of that was a cash transaction.

MURRAY: And the Kenans kept The Breakers and are still running it.

PONCE: And then just as soon as the young Kenans took over and started spending money that was the beginning of the end. ’Cause they’ve done such a wonderful job in maintaining and upgrading it. This summer I bet we were one of the only hotels in America that is spending millions upgrading.

MURRAY: I saw that in the paper, that they had a new renovation going on. I think that’s terrific.

PONCE: We dragged it out so but I tell you that if anywhere along the line if there is anything you want to have a little bit more of.

MURRAY: Yes, I’ll give you a ring. How will I end this interview? I want to say, “Thank you, thank you, number one. Because it has been a delightful afternoon. I am amazed at everything you have done in your ninety-plus years. Is there anything you regret? Besides not being able to see Kay Graham?

PONCE: I enjoyed my life. I don’t know what regrets there might have been. I never allowed myself to work anywhere where I dreaded getting up in the morning and going to work.

MURRAY: That’s good, that’s a good piece of advice, too.

PONCE: Not that I was always too enthusiastic about getting up. But I know there are people that dread having to get up in the morning and go to work whatever it is.

MURRAY: That’s a good point.

PONCE: More than once I left, I took a lesser paying job just to get away from the climate, what was going on with the people. But you know all and all it went pretty good.

In February 1923, Municipal Judge Joe L. Earman and Mayor Lorenzo Garland Biggers were tried, found guilty, and sentenced to ten days in jail by Circuit Judge Edwin C. Davis for contempt of court. This led to a feeding frenzy for the newspapers and the public, with the newspapers providing a platform for open warfare between the parties.

The conflict with Judge Davis began when Joe Earman wrote a letter on January 25, 1923, to Davis complaining about Davis' action on an appeal from his court. The “offending letter was published in The Palm Beach Post on February fourth. Lorenzo Garland Biggers joined the fray when he made a speech at a meeting of the Florida League of Municipalities in Miami on February first was printed in the Miami Metropolis.”

He had said that, “in our town we have a circuit judge who is as weak as water,” and asked if it were possible for legislative action “making possible appeals for his decisions, especially in cases appealed to the [West Palm Beach] municipal court.”

Earman had convicted Edwin Antelo of “lewd and lascivious conduct.” Antelo appealed to the circuit court and Judge Davis released him until a hearing could be held. Earman sent a letter to Davis about the decision to hear Antelo’s appeal under a writ of habeas corpus. Davis believed there was enough evidence to hear the appeal. Earman thought that “influential friends” would help secure Antelo’s release.

A furious Davis responded to both the letter and other statements by issuing citations for Biggers and Earman for contempt of court, ordering them to appear in circuit court on Tuesday, February sixth. Davis took the letter as “a reflection upon the court or judge thereof and was written for the purpose of embarrassing him and influencing him in the disposition of said case” [yet to be heard]. As for Biggers, Davis thought that the remarks “reflected upon and impugn the integrity of the circuit court” and of himself and that they “created a distrust…in the minds of the citizens of Palm Beach County.”

Representing the defendants were Frank A. Pettibone of West Palm Beach and Lakeland attorney T.J. Hodges. For the prosecution, Davis selected a group of local attorneys and judges as “Friends of the Court.” The Friends included former state attorney Edgar C. Thompson and attorneys George R. Klein, H.J. Quincy, Hollis T. Page, C.D. Blackwell, and former circuit court judge E. B. Donnell.

The trial of Joe Earman and Lorenzo Biggers for contempt of court was held at the circuit court in West Palm Beach and began at 8:05 am, February 6, 1923, but was postponed until 3:00 pm. Attorney T.J. Hodges had been delayed in his train trip from Lakeland by the wreck of another train.

Court resumed at 3:05 pm. Davis heard motions by Pettibone to quash the contempt charges, which he overruled. Davis then adjourned court until 8:00 pm that evening because some of the witnesses had been released for dinner.

The trial finally got underway at 8:14 pm. Although Earman and Biggers were tried separately, they argued their cases together. After several hours of testimony the trial ended at 11:30 pm. Davis recessed court while he retired to his chamber to consult with the Friends of the Court and to determine his ruling. At 12:15 am February 7, court reconvened.

In short order, Davis read his opinion. He found Earman guilty of contempt of court for (1) “writing a veiled threat to this court, in attempting to influence its decision in a case then pending.” and (2) for his threatening remarks about the court. Davis almost found Biggers not guilty because of his “ignorance of the law...” But decided that Biggers “could have easily obtained both the law and the facts had he so desired.” Both defendants were sentenced to ten days in jail and ordered to pay court costs.

Davis also handed down guilty verdicts for contempt of court against the defense attorneys, Pettibone and Hodges, for “filing an answer in the Biggers case.” His opinion concluded that the “alleged statements of respondent [Biggers] were a fair criticism of the judge of this circuit court who was and is a candidate for the office of judge of the United States district court.”
court in the Southern District of Florida.” Davis fined them a dollar each.

Judge Davis ordered Sheriff Robert C. Baker to confine the defendants in the county jail starting at 1:00 am, February 7, until 1:00 pm, February 17, 1923. Since the new county jail had not yet been accepted for occupancy, the defendants were provided accommodations in the jury room for the night.

When the prisoners were finally escorted to the new facility, they were its first inmates. Their third-floor cell had two bunks and their meals were provided by the Hotel Poinciana. The sheriff issued strict orders to the jailer that the prisoners could only receive visitors between 3:00 and 5:00 pm.

The jailing of the two city officials quickly made sensational fodder for the local papers as word of their imprisonment spread. On their first day in jail, they received 133 visitors. And they kept coming, including former New York governor Nathan L. Miller and New York City Mayor John F. Hylan.

Over the next several days, the jailbirds also received numerous telegrams from well-wishers congratulating them for taking a stand against the judge and in defense of free speech. The support came from as far away as Atlanta, including Florida Senator Turner Butler of Duval County. The men were showered with flowers, cigars, and other gifts and were quickly elevated to celebrity status.

Though confined, Biggers and Earman were allowed to continue to conduct business in their roles as mayor and municipal judge, signing documents and such, as best they could from their jail cell. City Commissioner W.E. Magers oversaw commission meetings for the mayor, and Earman appointed Harry Hauck as judge ad litem to preside at court. But the men had other ideas. They were determined not to sit in jail for ten days over a contempt of court charge (and a violation of free speech), so attorney T.J. Hodges traveled to Tallahassee seeking their release by the Florida Supreme Court.

Reporters wrote that both men were “in jovial moods.” Biggers explained during one interview, “There are two great points we are seeking to accomplish…. First is the preservation of the right of free speech in America guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights of the state of Florida, that liberty will not pass from the face of the earth, and the maintenance of law and order in Palm Beach County and the state of Florida.”

Hodges was able to obtain an order of release for writ of habeas corpus from the state supreme court on February 9. Bigger and Earman were freed on a $500 bond each that was good until February 27, when the high court would hear arguments by Hodges and the attorneys for Judge Davis. The high court would then decide if the men were in contempt of court.

On March 15, 1923, the Florida Supreme Court issued its opinion: Biggers and Earman were not in criminal contempt of court and were to be discharged from custody. The court overruled the guilty verdict issued by the lower court because the justices questioned whether the men’s acts constituted criminal contempt, whether the court was in session when the acts were committed, and, if not, whether it was necessary for the court to be in session to have jurisdiction.

The Supreme Court, knowing that a judge must have the power to maintain order in the court, nonetheless wrote that
a judge “is expected to have sufficient character to withstand criticism.” They their opinion continued that contempt “is not to avenge a personal affront, but to punish for assault or an aspersions upon the authority and dignity of the judge.” The court overturned the contempt charge even though the opinion did not state that Davis had violated the First Amendment right of free speech.

Earman was well acquainted with controversy even before these events. In 1920, as publisher of the Palm Beach Post, he had traded verbal shots with then Florida Governor Sidney J. Catts. The spat started over State Attorney Edgar Thompson after Catts had reinstated him. Thompson had been removed from office because of a predicament with evidence involving ten cases of Scotch whiskey and public drunkenness. Both men had been upset with Earman, and Thompson even went so far as to blame him for his removal.

Following Earman’s attack, Catts fired back that if Earman did not stop the verbal abuses, he would go to West Palm Beach with his shotgun loaded with buckshot. This did not phase Earman at all. Despite the ongoing feud, in December 1920, under executive order, Catts reinstated Thompson as state attorney for the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit. The following year, Catts left the governorship.

Controversy followed Biggers after the contempt trial. A month after the high court’s ruling in favor of the defendants, Biggers was once again front-page news. On the afternoon of April 23, 1923, Biggers was observed rolling around in the middle of Clematis Street fighting with former city attorney C.D. Blackwell. Blackwell had attacked Biggers because the mayor had been “bad mouthing” him in public, including a commission meeting. Biggers had said Blackwell was “[b] eing incompetent and careless, subverting the profession of law, charging the city excessively for his services, and acting disloyal by serving as prosecuting attorney in the contempt proceedings [against Biggers and Earman]”

After the altercation, Biggers swore out two warrants on the assailant, one for disturbing the peace and the other for assault and battery. Blackwell reportedly said he would not offer any defense when he appeared before the municipal court. Following a short trial on April 25, 1923, in the municipal court, Blackwell was fined ten dollars for disturbing the peace of Biggers. Two months later, Thomas R. Martin succeeded Biggers as mayor who was “legislated out of office by provisions of the new charter,” which changed the number of commissioners from the North, South, and Central Boroughs. Biggers made a bid for the Central borough seat on the City Commission but lost to Ed A. Stephenson during the city’s election primary.

Richard A. Marconi, Curator of Education, was on staff with the Historical Society 2002-2016. In 2001 he graduated summa cum laude from Florida Atlantic University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. Marconi is co-author of three book in Arcadia Publishing’s Images of America series: West Palm Beach 1893-1950 (2006), Palm Beach (2009), and Palm Beach County During World War II (2013); co-author of Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home (The Palm Beach Post, 2009); author of Arcadia Publishing’s Then and Now Series: Palm Beach (2013), and producer and co-writer of the Historical Society’s documentary Jumpers of Lantana: The History of the Civil Air Patrol’s Coastal Patrol 3 (2007).

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At right: Judge Joe Earman’s letter to Judge Edwin Davis, published in *The Palm Beach Post* on February 4, 1923.
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Wright Field
After opening in 1924, West Palm Beach’s first primary baseball venue underwent a number of changes over the decades and was at various times known as Municipal Field, Wright Field, and Connie Mack Field. This image from the 1930s shows a full house and the streets lined with automobiles. Clear Lake is visible in the background; its proximity to the Seaboard Air Line Railroad tracks (now Tri-Rail) is a good indication of just how much fill has since been added to the lake. The stadium was razed in 1992 to make way for the Kravis Center’s parking structure. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.
Robert Yost is seen here standing on the bumper of his father’s car with an advertisement for lots being sold by the Dollar Land and Home Company in the late 1920s. Robert’s father, Ralph, brought his family to Palm Beach County in 1926 to make his fortune in the area’s booming real estate market. He purchased 320 acres in west Boynton Beach but hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 coupled with economic collapse in 1929 doomed the venture, a fate shared by countless speculators of the era. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.