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Gary Mormino introduces the Ybor City oral history project

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Gary Mormino

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Ybor City Oral History Project
Oral History Program
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Mark Greenberg: Hi, I'm Mark Greenberg, the director of the Special and Digital Collection Department and the Florida Studies Center in the USF Libraries. It's my pleasure today to introduce Gary Mormino, award-winning Florida historian and co-founder of the Florida Studies Program at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg. Dr. Mormino's oral histories constitute an important part of the Ybor City Oral History Project.

Gary Mormino: I was an oral historian when that term was kind of vaguely known, and probably between 1978 and 1982, I must have done a hundred to two hundred interviews in Ybor City. I would often try to go down once or twice a week. I would go to the Italian Club or Centro Español or Centro Asturiano and would look for old people. I don't think anyone ever denied me an interview.

I think a hundred years from now—actually, I think two years from now—people will look back in kind of amazement. First of all, it had nothing to do with the brilliance of the interviews or my insights. Rather, I came at probably the last possible moment you could interview many of the immigrants of Ybor City. If you were doing a history of Ybor City now, it would by necessity have to be a very different history. But when I was here—and it wasn't because there was a lack of written sources, the problem I encountered in St. Louis. In fact, Ybor City was a remarkably literate community. But I thought it added a great sense of social history of humanity.

And the other legacy will be—there weren't many people preceding me who were doing interviews, so this is about it. I mean, this is kind of like the slave narratives. If you want to listen to first generation accounts of Ybor City, you don't have many options but to go to these interviews. I'd probably do them differently today, I would ask different questions, but that's the nature of interviews.

Just some of the more memorable interviews: Jose Vega Diaz was perhaps the most colorful person I interviewed. He was, I think, ninety-five years old in 1980. I interviewed him at the V.M. Ybor Apartments, one of the few promises kept by the government when they displaced people. He had come to Tampa in the 1890s, as a teenager. Jose Vega Diaz remembered the Rough Riders in Tampa. He remembered the streetcar conductor disliked their boisterous behavior, and the Rough Riders, when they exited the streetcar, lifted the car off the tracks, just as a gesture of ill—impunity, I guess. He told me that on the evening before he and his wife, his beloved wife Blanca, were to be displaced by urban renewal, his wife died. I mean, she was just so heartbroken having to be left.

I interviewed Danny Alvarez. Danny Alvarez was the bagman for Curtis Hixon. He told me—I wasn't aware of this—but what a dramatic beginning. His day of growing up, I think, was in 1938 or 1939—thirty-eight [1938], when Franco won the Spanish Civil War. He remembered his father coming home and was very agitated, left quickly. The father went back to the cigar factory, killed his foreman, who was gloating about Franco. And then, Mr. Alvarez's father killed himself, and he was essentially adopted by a druggist on Nebraska Avenue, Curtis Hixon. And I remember asking him about how much money he would take in from the gambling lords in a typical election in the 1930s, and forties [1940s], and I think he said, "Two hundred." And I said, "Two hundred dollars?" He said, "Two hundred thousand dollars."

And Manny Garcia was the lawyer to the mob, arguably the most informed insider/outsider of Tampa politics and Tampa bribes and the lineups of the mobs, and he gave us a two or three hour interview. Unfortunately much of it was bleeped out, but what's left there [are] some timeless stories about as a law student coming back and observing firsthand the corruption in the 1934-1935 primaries that cost Claude Pepper a Senate seat and his association with B.B. Rebozo. He was also a masterful storyteller.

I remember interviewing—well, I can now tell his name, I suppose—Sam Ferlita. I think I gave him my grandfather's name of Phil Stasi in the book. But he told me he was very involved in the bootleg business with his father. He began the interview saying, "Gary, I've been arrested sixty times, but do you realize I have no arrest record?" I said, "I don't understand the riddle." He said, "Well, the way the police used to do it, they'd call me in about once every two months and tell me, 'Sam, come down to the police headquarters. We're going to arrest you again.'"

He'd go, he'd pay his fifty dollar fine, and they'd ask him, "What name do you want us to put down?" So he'd give them a phony name, but the next day in the newspapers it would appear, "Twenty-five Italians arrested for bootlegging." So the Tampans would read their newspapers and say, "About time they cracked down on these bootleggers!" And the point of this is—it's a funny story and kind of an interesting story, but importantly, what it means is if you're writing a history of bootlegging today simply from the *Tampa Tribune*, it's all baloney in a lot of ways. In fact, I'm not sure how you would do that. There aren't many Sam Ferlitas on tape.

And by the way, I tried desperately, with Tony Pizzo's help, to interview Santo Trafficante. I did not, but I remember trying to interview one of the—he was the Jewish city councilman, whose name I've forgotten, from the 1930s. I remember calling him, and he said, "Son, if I told you what I knew, we'd both be dead." (laughs) So, I mean, I look back, and I mean—wow. I was very lucky, and also very persistent.

End of recording