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Gary Ratliff (GR): Uh, my name is Gary Ratliff; Middle initial “H”. R-A-T-L-I-F-F. Um, and you wanted the starting date?

Laura Landry (LL): Um, what was your title when you worked here?

GR: Uh, well, I was a maintenance man uh, when I started for a company called ABC Florida State Theatres. And they were showing, you know, commercial movies on screen here. So, I was doing, you know, plumbing, electrical, concession equipment repair, replacement, and that sort of thing. Painting when needed. Just general maintenance.

LL: General Maintenance.

GR: And had nothing to do with stage work or anything like, was later on in, in my working career here.

LL: Okay. So, when you left, when you retired here, what was your official title?

GR: Uh Stage Manager.

LL: Stage manager?

GR: Yeah.

LL: Okay, perfect. All right. Um so, we'll just start with a little bit of personal history, personal background about you as an individual.

GR: Okay.

LL: Um, so where are you from?

GR: I'm from Tampa, I was born and raised. I lived most of my life in Seminole Heights, about four blocks north of the Hillsborough Avenue Bridge, right by Henry and Ola playground where I would stay all day and half the night. (Gary Ratliff and Laura Landry laugh).

LL: It's a pretty place over there. Uh, what was Tampa like when you're growing up?

GR: Uh, it was kind of small and sleepy, you know, compared to say, Jacksonville, or Orlando, or Miami. Um, and downtown was, was very quiet for the most part but we used to get paid our quarter and get on the bus and come downtown and go over and try to catch pigeons at Tampa U¹ or see what other kind of trouble we could get into you know, my neighborhood friends, we'd just hop on a bus and come downtown. There wasn't anybody to worry about back then.

LL: That sounds fun. Um so, did you ever visit the theatre as a guest before you started working here?

GR: I came in here a few times as a child of you know, with my parents or something to see a movie that maybe just got released and they had to go see Clark Gable² or whatever. So, I would come down with them, but uh, I didn't pay that much attention to it at the time. I mean, there was a whole bunch of neighborhood theatres that I would go to, like the old Seminole Theatre on Florida Avenue or the Springs³ in Sulphur Springs, and there's another one over, I don't remember if it's the North town or something on Nebraska Avenue, they were everywhere. You had all kinds of neighborhood theatres; you know to go to. So, we seldom came down here and mostly my parents would rather go to a drive in.

LL: Um, so when you did, when you do think about those memories of coming here, what was it like um, here as a kid? What were the concessions like? Were there ushers?

GR: You mean when I first started? In six—

LL: No, not when you start working here but when you came here as a kid those few times.

GR: Oh, um. Just, you know, normal, walk in the door, smell popcorn popping, and uh, people buying Coca-colas and candy bars at the concession stand. It would, you know you, your, to me it was just your average movie theater except it was a little bit more ornate than my neighborhood places that I would go to for thirty-five cents or whatever to go see a movie.

LL: Yeah. All right um. So, then we'll now move into sort of your time here working. So, when did you start working here and how did that happen?

GR: I started in October of 1969. I had gotten out of the Navy in the summer of that year. So, I kind of freelanced a little bit because I was a member of the stagehands and projectionists' union IATSE local 321⁴ here in Tampa. Um and even while I was in the service, I was a member, but I got, got a draft notice so it was go to the army or enlist in the Navy. So, I figured I'd enlist. And it was, ended up being a good idea. (Gary Ratliff laughs).

¹ Referring to the University of Tampa.

² Clark Gable (1901-1960) was an American film actor. Often referred to as the "King of Hollywood."

³ Referring to Springs Theater Tampa.

⁴ IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) Local 321 is the primary source in Tampa for supplying production-related skills labor.

But um so, when I got out, I just, you know, worked here and there. Concerts, business conventions at the old Curtis Hixon Convention Center⁵, whatever. And, uh, the union had negotiated a contract with ABC Florida State Theatres for their projectionists and they also added a maintenance man onto the list. And so, my friend Sid Morris over at the convention center said “Hey, that's a job you might want to check in to.” So, I came over and, you know, applied for it, got it, and that was my full-time job. And then, you know, nights or weekends, or if I could go to the manager here and say, “They want me to work something over the weekend. I'm gonna have somebody come in and replace me” and I go do other shows and other venues at the time.

So uh, anyway, Sid kind of lined me up and got me the job here and so I worked for them for six years. And then uh, during that six years, they owned, Florida State Theatres had this theater, right directly across the street they had the Florida Theatre, and one block over they had the Palace Theatre. And during the second half of that six years the Florida Theatre was taken back by the woman that owned the lease on it or owned the property, and she rented it to the theatre. And the Palace Theater a block away closed because Tampa Electric Company wanted that property for, for their use. So, the only one left was the Tampa, so the management of Florida State Theatres started negotiating with the city to take it over to protect it. And they did. And that was a good thing. So, I had six years with them six or seven months off, and then came back again with the, for the city through the convention center.

LL: And can you um, let us know what decade was that? What year?

GR: Um, well that would have been 1969 or '70. Oh no, I'm sorry. It's '70, around '75 that the, you know, when the city took it over, it was '76, along in there. And was basically still doing maintenance for the city. But then when the programming started, you know, then also was responsible for lighting and stage, you know, became kind of the stage manager without being called the stage manager. But anyway, I was like the house electrician. And I would, I was also the shop steward for any time we had a crew in here doing a concert, or a ballet, or a play or whatever we could fit on the stage. So that's what I did for the city for about fifteen years. And then the Arts Council⁶ talked the city into letting me become their employee. And they started programming the theatre and everything and then I worked for them until I retired.

LL: Um so just want to make sure the audience knows how old you were when you first started working here and then what year it was. So, if we could just get one line about that.

GR: Okay. Uh well, it started in October '69. So, I would have been twenty-five, twenty- four years and eleven months old. (Gary Ratliff laughs). My birthday is in November. So, I started in October. So, right at twenty-five years old.

⁵ Curtis Hixon Hall, indoor sports arena, convention center, concert venue, and special events center.

⁶ Referring to the Florida Council on Arts and Culture which is a fifteen-member advisory council appointed to advise the Secretary of State on cultural grant funding and matters regarding arts and culture in Florida.

LL: That's awesome thank you. Um, okay, so you talked about transitioning to full time here, after the city took over. Um what changes did you, did you witness in the theatre, um from when it was privately owned to city owned?

GR: Uh well, when it was privately owned, it was strictly a movie theatre. That's all they did. And, of course, when the city took it over, they opened it up, as it was still primarily movies. But they also started doing small concerts. You know, one man shows, three-piece bands, that sort of thing. I don't remember if the city was running it at the time, or if it was the Arts Council, but groups like Spyro Gyra came here, Ray Charles, sometime just him and a piano sometimes him and a small band. He was here several times, and also Spyro Gyra, but and they did have jazz groups and things like that. And uh, we had two primary promoters that did a lot of shows in here. Fantasma Production run by John Stoll and Stuckey Productions run by David Stuckrath. And they were the, the main people for booking shows. The city didn't actually book unless somebody came to them and said, "No, can we rent the theatre on such and such a date?" And they'd said "Oh! Yeah. That's available." But you know, promoters ended up doing most of the programming in here for live events.

LL: Okay, so it became a lot more active.

GR: Yeah, yeah, it was uh, and more diversified entertainment too. It, you know, had a little bit everything in there from rock and roll to country, to jazz, to ballet, (Gary Ratliff laughs), opera, you know. And so it was, it was interesting.

LL: Cool. Um, so, you talked about this a little bit earlier about the different uh, neighborhood uh cinemas that you had up in Seminole Heights. And then there were a few theatres down here in the sixties.

GR: Yeah.

LL: Can you talk a little bit more about what the theatre scene was like in the sixties before they sort of all closed down.

GR: I mean, downtown or just,

LL: Yeah.

GR: throughout Tampa? I mean, the neighborhood.

LL: I would say both.

GR: The neighborhood houses were probably more well attended than what was downtown because most people that were downtown were here to work. And when they got off work, they went home, and they didn't usually come back in the evening or weekends to go to a movie unless it was a very special film, and it wasn't available anywhere else. But, so, the, the theatre business in downtown was very slow. In the, in the mid, or you know early to mid-sixties, and even into the late sixties. With Florida State Theatres, uh it had gotten, they had gotten so financially behind, they started changing their program from basically, you know, mainstream Hollywood films, to films that would appeal to the Black neighborhoods that are down, you know, close to downtown here. So, they were attracting uh the African American audience into

the theatre. Uh and that worked out a lot better for them. They had more people, you know, walking up to the box office when they started showing those, those type of films. So that's how they changed their business plan before the city took it over.

LL: Mmmm. <Affirmative>. Interesting. Um, so, you talked a little bit about your role here, and all the different responsibilities you've had. So, can you share about how that changed over time? Give us some examples?

GR: It didn't change that much over time as far as when it became a film and live event venue. Um, before, when it was just film, it was just strictly maintenance. And when there was audience in and something on the screen, whatever maintenance I did, I'd have to do in the basement or somewhere where the, where the public wasn't at. So, you know, if I was painting something or repairing seats, or doing whatever, I would do that, where I was out of sight out of mind. Um, because I had my shop and office down in the basement and then there was nothing down there but the air conditioning system and a couple of dressing rooms that never got used except for storage. And we would, I would just work the afternoons down there doing whatever I was doing; seat repair, mostly, because there was a lot of seats and a lot of them didn't have upholstery on them. (Gary Ratliff laughs).

LL: So that was mostly.

GR: Yeah, that was it mainly did and, and if there was somebody, you know the manager call and say, "The light's not working in my office." And I'd have to go up and find out if the electrical system was bad or if the wire burned in half or whatever and repair that kind of stuff you know. Or the popcorn machine's not popping. "Okay, let me go check it." You know just any anything like that. Emergency repairs and general maintenance.

LL: Okay. So um, to, to that question, when you first started working here, what was the sort of state of the theatre? Would you say it was in good condition or?

GR: Uh it, it had been neglected, for a long time, because they really didn't, didn't have a whole lot of full-time maintenance people in here. I think over the years, they just kind of downsized to where they had the projectionist. They still had two projectionists in the booth and on every shift, because they would uh, I don't know the reason why. I know they had one who was doing uh, like slide projection and it's like, you know, put the thing in here and say, "Starts Thursday!" and then the other guy would, would be running the trailers on the projector.

I mean, as far as doing change overs from, because they had twenty-minute reels, and every twenty minutes the bell would ding. And you'd stand there, when the cue marks come up, you'd start that one and get up to speed the second cue marks, hit the switches, and, (Gary Ratliff makes a click sound), move over to the projector that had film in it. And the other one would, you know they'd turn the light off and everything on it and they'd go pull the reel off and rewind it and stick it back in the bin and put the next reel on, you know. But they uh, most, most movie theatres only had one projectionist because they didn't do the, the special effects or the slides or have a spotlight or anything like that because— I think they also did the organ specials from up there too. I think that was, you know. But that, that's why they had two in this booth, and that was in the contract. So eventually that, that went away too. So.

LL: (Laura Landry clears throat). Yeah, so it's different, with film.

GR: Yeah. Oh yeah.

LL: What kind of repairs over the years did you have to make to, that were film related or to the projection.

GR: Uh, I didn't do much in the booth. That was up to them and if it was something that was so unique, they would call up somebody that, you know, that a company that did projection equipment repairs and have them come in and work on it, whether it be a new photocell for the sound or a new motor for the take up reel or whatever it is. You know they had, they had to do that through whatever company that they hired. Mine was just general building maintenance more than anything else.

LL: So, when we were talking on the phone the other day you mentioned that um, like different spaces, like when you first start working here the balcony was used for storage. And um, can you talk about how things have transformed in that way?

GR: Well, there was, you know, they, they had such small crowd they just had everybody sit downstairs and they'd rope off the stairways going up here. And if they needed to store anything extra, especially if it's big and bulky, if they had cases of cups with a concession stand or something, they'd put a lot of that up here. They also had storage down in the basement uh, where the restrooms are into the lobby. You'd go to the other way and down a hallway, and they had a little room back there. But they'd use this up here just to put stuff because they didn't have any people up here.

LL: When did that start to change?

GR: I'm sorry?

LL: When did that start to change, when did more people—?

GR: Um, well when the city took it over, basically. Yeah, after that first six years because then they were getting big enough crowds, they had to have the seating up here, too. That, that's when they went back to storing things in the storeroom, (Gary Ratliff laughs), instead of in the seats in the balcony.

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. I see. Um, so, can you talk about—so this building is obviously so ornate, there's so many, there's so many lights, there's so many things that you probably had to repair?

GR: Yeah.

LL: Can you talk about some of the more unique ones, like if you ever had to go into the ceiling to change a lightbulb?

GR: Oh, I, I re-lamp the stars regularly. Uh, but you can walk on that ceiling up there. I mean, generally, you have to kind of step where the reinforcement framing is for the wire lath that holds the plaster. Like you don't stand right in the middle of it because you're not going to fall through but you might knock a chunk of the plaster out, and you'll have a permanent cloud up

here, (Gary Ratliff laughs), with a gray plaster and the rest of its blue ceiling. But yeah, they're just uh, they're canisters, and they take them, take the bad bulb out, put the new bulb in, and it had—they'd set them over the hole and then they put plaster around them to hold them in place and then they'd break that loose and let the plaster harden.

And that's the way they were, and you just put a new bulb in it, stick it back in its own little hexagon shape, space in the, you know, in the ceiling and go on to the next one. Because you could look at the fixture, there was places where light would bleed through, so you knew which ones you're looking at. "Oh, that one's burn out", you'd go over and grab it, fix it. You had a little tray full of light bulbs you know, and hand-carry, and go one to the other, to the other, and get them all done and go down and dump the bad ones in the garbage can and restock. But uh, yeah and there's, most of the decorative stuff is neon. So, generally, it was either if it was bad, you'd have to go to a neon place and have them make a new one or get a new ballast transformer for it if that went bad. Wasn't like re-lamping but there, a lot of the niches and stuff had rows of light with reflectors on them, you know, to shine on the statues and things. So those were like blue bulbs or whatever, and the rest of the stuff was neon.

LL: So many intricacies. How long did it take you to, to learn the building?

GR: Uh well, (Gary Ratliff laughs), that's a unique question because years after working here I'd be doing something I'd say, "My goodness, I've never seen that before, where did that come from?" You know, and you're, you're forever discovering something new and unique about the building, because it, it's got just so many nooks and crannies in it that you know you turn a corner and go, "Oh my goodness, where is that from?" You know, and so I, I would say, probably a good half a dozen years just a really get used and, and too and knowing how to get to and from each place that I need to work on. Because a lot of this stuff, you'd have to get an extension ladder and go up—like you're in a balcony and there's, there a couple of little walkways that you get onto off a ladder, but they, you can't go from one to the next because you're on, you know it runs along and then it drops down ten feet and then it's, so, you know. Places like that you had to use a ladder to get to and that was kind of a pain in the neck sometime that dragging one all the way up here at the top of the balcony to change a light bulb. But you know, hey, that's what they paid me for. (Gary Ratliff laughs).

LL: Um, yeah, I think it's so fascinating in getting, um because people see the walls, but they don't see what's behind everything.

GR: Right, yeah. They just walk in and go "Wow, look. Oh, look at all the pretty lights."

LL: Yeah. Uh, is there anything else interesting that you think the public would be curious about behind the scenes, like behind the walls and the ceiling?

GR: Uh, I, nothing I can think of, Like I said this, the ceiling is all just a dome plaster form and it's got suspension wires coming down from the concrete roof slabs, because that's all, you know, it's like sections of you know, angles of concrete that are fastened together up here on top of, you know, I-beam frame. That's what the whole roof is made out of. And then the guide wires come down and they hold the ceiling up. So, it, it's pretty safe to walk around out there, you just have to be careful, you don't damage something, you know. It's kind of, kind of hard to fix plaster in

this place from the bottom, you know, thirty, forty feet of scaffolding and taking out seats to get the thing in there. So, got to be careful.

LL: So, what was technology like here at Tampa Theatre when you started working here?

GR: Um, it was everything was analog. I mean uh, I had uh, music, you know, from like a stereo receiver that I could play for the audience during walk in time prior to movies. I do that from downstairs or had intercom going to the booth. So, when it's, say it's two o'clock and it's time to start the movie put on a headset. You know, hit the cue light, get the guy on, on the intercom in the booth and say, "Okay, you ready?" "Yeah, sure." "All right, I'm turning the music off." "Okay, here goes the house lights." Now I'd be talking to him. And I'd fade them out. And he'd say, "Okay, we're rolling and picture." And then I'd open the curtain up because they had just a manual, you know, like a gold lamé⁷ curtain, and you'd pull it open to the masking flaps that were there. And then, whether it was a flat picture or a cinema scope, you know, you'd have, you'd preset that cause there were marks on the stage. And uh, I'd just, you know, we just communicate that way. And I say, "Okay, I'll be back in an hour and forty-six minutes when the movie is over." "Okay, bye." Then I'd go do something else, you know, while the movie was running, and then come back, prior to intermission or prior to the end of the film and the break between the two screenings, or three or four screenings. And, you know, and depending on what kind of schedule they had here. But uh it, it was analog, everything, you know. Um like right now, I wouldn't know how to turn the house lights out. The old board's still back there but everything's on computer and I'm going, "What the?" (Gary Ratliff laughs).

LL: So, you were kind of like the *Wizard of Oz*.

GR: Yeah. (Laura Landry and Gary Ratliff laugh). Really.

LL: Um so, it was a lot of levers?

GR: Yeah, there was all resistance dimmers and stuff, you know. You just, you had the, the ceiling lights under the balcony and then you had all these wall bracket lights on a different dimmer, and you'd just take those two out, turn the power switches off, go over to the curtain and I'd say "Okay, picture." (Gary Ratliff imitates projector rolling). Then you're done, you know. Least I was. They, they were still running the movies up there but like I said they had, they didn't have platters, they didn't have huge sixty-minute reels or any of that kind of stuff. It was all every eighteen, twenty minutes. It'd have a change, had little alarm on them that ran on the film and when the film got down low enough, it would drop off and it'd go "ding, ding, ding" and then they'd go over and start up the other projector and wait. And then when the cue marks came up on the screen, which I'm sure you, or maybe the audiences watching this has seen it before. You'd see the little dots in the upper corner of the film. And so many frames later, like six seconds later, you have a second set and that's when you do the changeover. The first one, you start the second projector running, but it's not projecting yet, and then when the second set comes up, you've got a transfer lever and a footswitch. For you know, like for sound and for a shutter. And when you hit that it would close the shutter on the film, the, the projector that was

⁷ Lamé is a type of fabric woven or knit with threads of metallic fiber wrapped around natural or synthetic fibers. Lamé is classically gold, silver, or copper in color.

running out of film, and open the shutter on the one that you're going to—so it looked almost, looked like it was all, it had never changed it was all the same picture. But once in a while somebody would mess up and you'd say “Uh-oh what happened? It went from outdoor to indoor.” (Gary Ratliff laughs). You know? But you know those, those kinds of things happened, or sometime the film had been cut, damaged, and cut out and they didn't replace it and then you'd have missing footage but anyway, that's, that's why, why the, what the cue dots are for, for changing over from one small reel of film to the next small reel of film. So.

LL: So, you talked about sort of what you did before the movies played and you know, when they were done. Um how did, how did uh, what kind of tasks were you responsible for with the live productions with like the music acts?

GR: Uh generally, if it was a concert, they had their own sound company.

LL: Okay.

GR: They'd pull up, we'd open the freight doors, ran all their sound equipment, stack the speakers up, hook up the amplifiers, all that stuff, and then they'd set up a mixing station out in the auditorium somewhere. And they did all their own sound you know, for the, the instruments for the vocalist, for whoever. Uh so, never had to do that. We just would, we were the back, strong back, weak mind people to bring it in and stack it up for them. And then they, then they would run the show. Um, same thing with lighting, sometimes they would bring in their own, called light trees. They'd have, you know, poles and heavy bases and stuff. And they'd put six or eight or ten stage lights on each side of the stage. And, or if they used ours sometimes, they would re-plug it and cable it into their dimmers. And then, you know, you'd focus one of the ones here in the auditorium for a special or whatever, and then they would run it. And then when the show was over, we had to go back up, hook it back into your system and refocus it back to what you had it for. So. But yeah, uh, shows usually ran their own sound and lighting, unless they came in and they said, “Well, we'll use your lights.” And we don't not do anything special we'll just keep the featured person lit up. Maybe change from pink to blue, something like, you know, something simple. But if it was a, you know, a big-name concert group, they'd, they'd want to do their own.

LL: So that, I mean to since we're talking about shows, are there any performers, you mentioned Ray Charles. Um any of them that you particularly remember, good or bad?

GR: Well, him for one. Um, had Spyro Gyra, the jazz group, they were very good. Um. There was so many. Uh, and it's been so many years since I've been here. I've, I'm sure there were some that I went “Wow, really enjoy that show.” But I can't remember at this point in my life, who they were. But there was, there were some good individuals, some good groups in here. Um, I don't, I'm trying to think we had the Kingston Trio in here one time. They were, they were always one of my favorites as far as buying their records and stuff at home. And same thing with Ray Charles, and uh, uh he was one of my favorites when I was in high school and stuff. I just I liked his music. So, I was kind of happy he was here. So, I'd say him would be at the top of the list.

LL: Um, do you have a favorite memory, um, from being here? Maybe the work that you did or the people you met?

GR: Not a favorite, uh individually. But uh, yeah, there was, I met some interesting, nice people. I have also met some interesting people that were a pain in the neck, (Gary Ratliff laughs), and you kind of remember them too, but not as fondly as the other ones. But uh, yeah, uh been fortunate after the city took it over had good managers here, had Bob Holtzman for a long time. Um and then now John Bell. And they were, they were good to work for and, and good to be, you know, an associate of. And, so, I, I would say just good management after Florida State Theatres was no longer in the picture. It was, they had some good people running the building.

LL: So, there's been a lot of cast of characters um around. Do you have any memories or stories about Blondelle⁸?

GR: Uh, she was the box office person for Florida State Theatres. Very nice lady, very nice. Uh, enjoyed knowing her when she was here. She was, she was retirement age when I started working here in the sixties. So, and she, she didn't stay all that long, but I did get to meet her. Uh, Fink, Foster Fenley⁹, think I remember seeing him in the booth when I was like eight or nine years old. Because I came in here with my friend whose grandfather was a business agent for the projection local that I'm in. And he was also the projectionist here at the uh, at the uh, at the Tampa Theatre. So, he and Fink were in the booth. But I didn't really know him. I just, you know, went up there with Bill Carleton and, and uh, say hi, it is his granddaddy, Bill Sullivan, and "Oh, this is Foster", "Oh hi!" (Gary Ratliff laughs). You know, and it didn't mean anything to me at the time. I mentioned that I did know his brother very well because his brother was the manager of a Florida Theatre across the street up until the time it, it closed and went back to the owner of the property. So, I did know him, but I did not know Fink. And I never had any run ins with the ghost. He supposedly haunts his place, but I guess he left me alone. He said, "Oh I remember him as a kid I'm not going to mess with him." (Gary Ratliff and Laura Landry laugh).

LL: What about mayor Bill Poe?¹⁰

GR: Um. Met him, you know, just shake hands and stuff, but I mean it wasn't like we go out to dinner together or anything. I didn't know him on a social level, I just, you know, he was, the mayor.

LL: Um, Rosa Rio¹¹?

GR: Yeah. She was another very nice lady. She, she was the organist here when they finally got it reinstalled. I think they; they bought the pipework and everything back from, I think Bayshore Baptist Church, and then they found a console somewhere. So, they got that all installed, and she became the feature organist, you know, for pre-show stuff. Uh, very nice, very nice lady. And

⁸ Blondelle Gladney, box office attendant for the Florida State theaters.

⁹ Foster "Fink" Fenley worked as a projectionist for 35 years from 1930 to 1965, before he passed away from a heart attack.

¹⁰ Referring to William "Bill" F. Poe, the who served as Mayor of Tampa from 1974-1979.

¹¹ Rosa Rio (1902-2010) was the stage name for Elizabeth Raub, an American theatre organist who played organ intermissions and accompanied silent movies.

she, she'd been a featured organist, back in the heyday, you know, back in twenties, and thirties. So, it was, you know, she had retired here to Florida, but she came down here, was playing that organ for us, and she was very good at it.

LL: Mm-hmm, yeah. Uh and then Sid Morris.

GR: Sid Morris, my best friend, forever and ever. He passed away a few years ago, but he, he was the electrician and stage manager at the old Curtis Hixon Convention Center, three blocks west of here, it's a park now over by the Glazer Museum.¹² But he, he was a great guy, and I worked with him for years, prior to going into service, and after I got out, and then he got me the job here. And he was, he was at the convention center until he retired, and I was in this place until I retired. So, I guess you just not, not good at embracing change. (Gary Ratliff laughs). So, anyway, yeah, he's, he's, I love the guy. He was absolutely—and he was the best man at my wedding. I got a great picture of him um at, after the ceremony. He didn't, he was mostly bald, and I'm kissing him on top of his head. (Gary Ratliff laughs). And I still got that picture at home. Great guy, best, best friend of my life. I'll always love him.

LL: Did you guys, when you were working, swap stories about.

GR: Oh, you know, we might go where the old hub bar across the street and have a cold one and tell sea stories. He was in the Navy too. I think during Korea. Uh. He uh. Yeah, we'd, but always got along great. I, (Gary Ratliff laughs), funny story though, I, I did tell Sid several times. I said, I said "Sid if I was you, I would have fired me at least a half a dozen times." Because I was, I was always messing something up. And he'd just go "No, look, let's, let me show you, do it this way." And he, he'd put up with me I don't know why. He had a lot more patience than I would have had. (Gary Ratliff laughs).

LL: So, he helped you figure this place out a little bit.

GR: Yeah, yeah. Not just this, but I mean, even working with him, you know, for concerts or whatever over there. And would do something really dumb. And he'd go, "Come here." (Gary Ratliff laughs) I'd said if it had been me, I'd say "Get out of here!" But anyway. Yeah. Great guy.

LL: He sounds like it. Um, all right. And then Colonel Tom Parker¹³.

GR: Um, I didn't know him that well. The assistant manager here at the Tampa Theatre when I started was Frank Connors¹⁴. And he was an, he was an Irish tenor when he was in that line of business before he started working here when he retired from showbiz. Um, but he, he was an opening act for Presley¹⁵ a number of times. So, I think Colonel Parker came by here once or twice just to say hi to him, but I really didn't know him that well. I mean, I just I laid eyes on him, but that was it. But yeah, Frankie was uh, you know, of course, he said it was a terrible

¹² Referring to the Glazer Children's Museum in Tampa, FL.

¹³ Thomas Andrew Parker (1909-1997), known as Colonel Parker was a musical entrepreneur as well as Elvis Presley's manager.

¹⁴ Frank Connors (1911-2014) was a popular Irish tenor until the 1950s. He had two shows in the NBC radio. In the 1950s after he had retired from singing, he became manager of the Tampa Theatre.

¹⁵ Referring to Elvis Presley

thing to be an opening act for Elvis because he'd go out there and he'd do like four songs then they're going "Boo get off the stage! We want Elvis! We want Elvis!" And he said, you know, you didn't, you really get appreciated a lot when you were doing what he was doing and opening for the Rock and Roll legend so. But it was, it was interesting.

LL: Yeah, that's a tough gig. (Laura Landry and Gary Ratliff laugh). Um, so, what do you—what would you say you love most about this building?

GR: It's just so unique. Um, I mean, I've been in the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. And it's, it's similar but different. It's just so enormous and this is so compact. All the beauty in this place is put into a smaller area and it's, it's all just I, from day one I thought "Wow, this place is really, really put together the right way." Eberson¹⁶ knew what he was doing when he designed this place. So yeah, and it's uh, it's still, I think, when I walk in here, it, it, it's impressing to me. Yeah.

LL: Yeah, people kind of talk about how it's almost like a person? Like, did you feel like you belonged here from the beginning? Or were you accepted from the beginning?

GR: Well, um. It was, it was just a job in the beginning. But over the years, I got, it became, not a personal relationship with the building but I mean I've gotten to where I appreciated it more and more as the years went on because of just the detail. And, and it's well constructed too. You consider it's going on a hundred years old and it's still in pretty good shape. You know, a little paint here, little plaster repair there, things like that and you, and it's right back to what it was in 1926. So, it uh, it's beautiful.

LL: Um, when you were off the clock, when you told people in sort of your neighborhood, your everyday life, that you worked here, what was their reaction?

GR: Well, it would depend, some people had never been here. And a lot of times I'd describe it to them and what it was like and everything and next thing I know, they're coming down here for shows or movies or whatever. And then next time I'd see them say, "Oh, went to the Tampa Theatre last week to see so and so." "Wow, that place? How long have you been working there? That place is gorgeous!" You know and get that kind of reaction then. Um, and others that were familiar with it would say, "Wow, that's got to be a really cool place to work." I said, "Yeah, it is."

LL: Um so, can you talk about how long you worked here? And then, um, when did you know it was time to retire and move on?

GR: Well, um I just decided it was time to retire because I'm in my mid, mid—well sixty-eight I think I was when I retired, because it's been eleven years, I'm seventy-nine now. So, I thought okay, it's, it's been a good ride, it's been fun, now I want to go do something else. You know, at that point, I was drawing social security and that sort of thing. And I thought, "Well, I don't need a job." And by then Tampa had grown to the point where traffic was getting kind of heavy and commuting from North Brandon to here on the interstate got to be kind of a pain. So, between

¹⁶ Referring to John Eberson the architect of the Tampa Theatre.

those, those things, it wasn't that I was unhappy here, I just said, "Eh, been forty-three years, I think it's time to let somebody else have the job."

And I kind of helped pick out my replacement here, Lloyd¹⁷. Because he has a home in Hyde Park, a very old house, somewhere like the very old movie theatre, and he's really into that sort of thing. He loves the neighborhood. He loves his home. And he, when I talked to him about this place, he said, "Man, I'd love to work there." And I said, "Okay well, come on over and I'll introduce you to the manager." So, he uh, he ended up getting the job. And he's been doing, doing good here. And he's a little more modern than I am. So, he, he's now in the process, or he's been in the process for the last ten years of converting this over to, you know, digital technology for the lighting, for the sound system, for everything like that. And even the lighting has gone to LED instead of incandescent bulbs, and some, you know, all that kind of stuff. That's why I said earlier that I probably couldn't even dim the house lights now because you'd have to have a degree in computer technology to, (Gary Ratliff laughs), to turn the lights out. So anyway, I think he's happy here and I'm happy he's here. And I think he'll continue on the tradition of taking good care of this place.

LL: And you still come back to visit?

GR: Um, I'm downtown every three weeks I have an appointment over on the west side of town. So, I usually stop by here for half an hour or so and visit with uh Patt¹⁸ in the box office or John Bell if I see him and, that sort of thing. Just say hi to everybody and you know, hang out for half an hour and then go pick up my wife at her appointment and we go back to Brandon. So, every three weeks I'm usually in the building here.

LL: Yeah. Um and can then, can we get a line of I started working here this year and I retired this year. Just so the audience knows the, the timeline.

GR: Oh okay. Okay, I started to work here in October of 1969. And I, like I mentioned earlier, six years Florida State Theatres, about fifteen or sixteen years with the city, and then the rest of the time up until um 2013 with the Arts Council. Uh. Let's see. Um, 2013, okay, October of '69 I decided to retire on the Fourth of July of 2013. I figured if I'm going to celebrate retirement, I want the whole country to have a party. So, I picked the Fourth of July to retire from here figured it was appropriate. (Gary Ratliff and Laura Landry laugh).

LL: That's a great idea. What do you think when you, you've obviously seen so many uh, movie goers, and music goers um, come in, and visitors what do you think they appreciate most about the?

GR: I, I think just the beauty of the place, then the uniqueness. I mean, it's not like walking into a modern building where you got four walls and fluorescent lighting and that sort of thing, you know, and sitting down in a, in a big room and watching a movie on a roll up screen somewhere. It's really uh, an amazing place and a beautiful venue to, to sit back, relax and watch a show or watch a, or listen to a concert or whatever you're here for. It's just a good place to do that in.

¹⁷ Referring to Lloyd Pearson current Stage Manager and Technical Director at the Tampa Theatre.

¹⁸ Referring to Patt Vida, Box Office Receptionist for Tampa Theatre.

LL: Mmhmm. <Affirmative>. So, can you sort of reflect a little bit about how impressive it is that the Tampa Theatre has lasted for a hundred years. So, we are going to be showing this when it hits the hundred-year mark.

GR: I think it's lasted a hundred years, because it's been fortunate to have been of value to somebody, different people, over that course of that time. The bulk of its life, it was a commercial movie theatre. Like with Florida State Theatres. I don't know if they were the original programmer for, if they, you know, I'm sure it evolved over the years, but I wasn't here in 1926, so I don't know. But, and then, like we've mentioned, they, they talked the city into taking it over and preserving it and programming it and that been going on for a long time. And they still own it. Uh, but the Arts Council is now the programming arm of it and everything and the managing part of it. So, it's, it's just been with people that appreciate it, and don't want to see it, you know, erode, and evolve into something that they want to sell and put up an apartment building, you know. So, it, I think it's just it's been a, a lot of it's a matter of luck. But it's also, it's been a value to different people. And they've made money off of it and it's been successful, so they kept it.

LL: Mmhmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah. And um, then what would you wish for the next hundred years?

GR: Uh, that it continues on the same path that it's on. Um, I guess structurally and physically, it could last another hundred years. I think it's well built, and I understand they, they've got some maintenance money for doing roof repair and this that and the other. And anywhere there's been a water leak, they're going to fix it. So, with that kind of maintenance and that kind of attention to detail I think it'll make it another hundred years, as long as they just keep finding a use for it, to program whatever events in it, you know.

LL: And then if you could describe Tampa Theatre in one sentence?

GR: Beautiful. Beautiful and unique. Um its, there's just nothing else like it around, at least not for five hundred miles. I've never been in the Olympia in Miami. I don't know what kind of shape it's in but, like I said, I've been in the Fox, and it's gorgeous. But it's a five-thousand seat auditorium and it's ginormous. This compact the same amount of beauty into smaller space. (Gary Ratliff laughs).

LL: Yeah, I think it's really cool that you can say that, because you've been behind the scenes too. So, and I think it's—

GR: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I've been in the cobwebs and the dust and all that other stuff, too. But it's, it's all part and parcel of this building and it's, it's, beautiful. To describe the Tampa Theatre, I would have to say that it's unique, and it's beautiful. And there's nothing else like it. Close by anyway. You're going to have to go a long way to find something as pretty as this.

LL: Perfect, thank you. Um, and then since you are born and raised in Tampa, how would you describe Tampa in one sentence?

GR: (Gary Ratliff sighs). I've always enjoyed it, but it's a, it's gotten a lot busier lately. Um it's not this sleepy little bird of two hundred and sixty thousand people anymore. Uh, I mean, like I

said I lived in Seminole Heights. I went to Seminole Elementary, Memorial Junior High School, and graduated from Hillsborough High School. So, everything was close by. And the movie theatre I went to most often was right down the street from Hillsborough High School on Wilder and Florida Avenue. So. It's, it's, it went from a sleepy medium size city to a metropolis in the last fifty years.

LL: Did you maintain just the theatre itself or the additional like office buildings?

GR: Uh and the office buildings because of course you had the manager's office out on that mezzanine, you had the assistant manager's office right here, thirty feet from where we're sitting. The district manager for Florida State Theatre was up on the, I don't remember, second or third floor. But it was out here on the Florida Avenue three story building. So, if they had an issue in any of the business offices, you know, I'd have to go in and see what I could do to fix that. You know, electrical. Or, you know, a hinge was coming off a door, you know, whatever, a lock wasn't working, at least take it off and carry it down to the locksmith and have them redo it and put it back on the door. That sort of thing. Yeah. So, I did. It wasn't just the auditorium. It was anything in the building was uh, was mine to maintain.

LL: And were you doing that all by yourself?

GR: Yeah. It was—there was just one person crew. Um, (Gary Ratliff laughs), yeah, there was times I wish there was three I mean, but uh, that wouldn't happen.

Andy Huse (AH): Does that include, just to clarify, the leased office space because there was other tenants here in the building, right?

LL: Up in the tower there were, yeah.

AH: Right up at the tower. So, did you work up here in there too?

LL: Did you work in the tower?

GR: Uh I know we had some, some people that were renting. We had Anderson Jewelry store, um, where the BOMO is now, going out to Florida Avenue exit on the right-hand side and it was, Anderson Jewelry. The other side of that exit they had a, um, laundry dry cleaning shop. I think Flora's Cleaners or something like that in there. And I'm trying to remember what was on the corner. Um. That was pretty much vacant most of the time that Florida State Theatres had about I think that one point there was something in there, but I cannot remember what it was. But yeah, they would rent those down, downstairs spaces. And out front, where they're putting in a screening room was um, a flower shop and a gift store. That was the only rental space that they owned it at the, on the Franklin Street side of the theatre. The, the other side of it is the entrance into the Tampa Theatre office building. So, you had at least four rental spaces. One on Franklin and three on Florida Avenue that, that they would rent if they had people that were you know, willing to rent them.

LL: Okay.

GR: The second, third floor, I think second floor was mostly just storage for furniture and whatever. And then uh, the corporate offices were up on the third floor.

LL: Does that answer your question?

AH: Yeah, I guess I was interested in the office space, not the retail space downstairs. But the, you know, didn't you have tenants? There was offices and?

GR: No. They didn't, no, they weren't renting out office space. The only offices were Florida State Theatres up on the third floor. Everything else is retail.

LL: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you want to share?

GR: No, just uh, I'm glad to be here for this interview. And um, I hope it's well received. Um. I hope anybody that has never been to the Tampa Theatre gets a chance to come down here and see a show, or take the tour when they have a tour, because it's time well spent. Thank you very much.

End of recording.