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***Carlton-Anthony Tampa Oral History Project***

Oral History Program

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**Peter Klingman:** Good morning. I'm Peter Klingman. I'm the Doyle Carlton Curator for the University of South Florida's Resource Center for Florida History in Politics. And we are in a beautiful building this morning on June 1, 1999, owned by the Fermans. And it is both our privilege and our pleasure to conduct this oral history interview this morning with James Ferman, Senior, the founder of this company and a lifelong Tampa resident. Good morning, Mr. Ferman.

**James Ferman:** Good morning. You've already made one mistake.

PK: Go ahead, sir.

JF: I'm not the founder. My father was the founder.

PK: Your father was the founder. That's correct.

JF: Over a hundred years ago.

PK: Yes, sir. And we will go back over all that ground.

JF: (laughs) Forgive me.

PK: That's okay. Let me start by suggesting that we talk first about your grandfather and your family backgrounds. I read that your maternal grandparents, on your mother's side, came to Tampa before the American Civil War. Do you remember them?

JF: I never knew them. They passed on before I was born. In the early 1900s, I think it was, a flu epidemic got both of them. No, but I remember well the question that you asked about my other grandparents. The weather up north was a little bit too strong for them. My grandmother was a very weak little lady. The doctor said, "You've got to go south where it's warm or you won't last another year." So, they packed up and came to Tampa.

But I'm a little ahead of myself. Before that, there was a group of our family—distant family, I cannot raise the connection—but they came down from a health standpoint and settled in 1840, I think it was, after having spent a month or so alongside of the spring, Palma Ceia spring, living in tents to see if his rheumatism would be helped by the water. It was, and they decided to stay and they stayed. At that time, they said that there were a few fishermen's huts in Tampa, but the rest of it was just plain wild, wild land.

PK: When I think of Tampa, and I think of this part of Florida in the 1840s, when these folks from your family background came here, gosh, there were probably still Indians, Seminoles from the wars, and Fort Brooke was still in business and so on.

JF: The Indians go even longer still than that. I remember down in Fort Myers going into a drugstore and buying ice cream for a couple of little Seminole boys and girls. They were most appreciative and very colorful little characters, very intelligent; very, very nice to be around.

PK: Where did these early ancestors of yours come from, when they came south to Florida? Where were they coming from?

JF: Well, my great-grandfather—my grandfather came from Michigan, where it was cold, and the others came down the East Coast from Georgia, and they came over, some of them, from England. And they settled there and made a home where there wasn't a home. And they were very much in evidence in creating the towns and in helping them to build. They were people of strength and people of ability and people of generosity.

PK: I guess they probably were farmers. They had to feed themselves and trap and hunt and do all of that before the war.

JF: Well—

PK: Or did they have a particular trade?

JF: Could be. My grandfather on my paternal side was a seafaring man. He had sailed the clipper ships to China, and he came back—that was when my grandmother was quite ill—and he moved here. He opened a shop where they did sailmaking and worked on sails and provisions for ships that were going out, and that was what he did until he and my brother, who died quite young, got in the bicycle business. And that was a long, long time ago.

PK: Yes, sir. And we'll get to the bicycle business. But let's see if we can talk a little more about that first coming to Tampa of the Ferman family. Was there—any favorite stories you heard growing up as a kid about your grandparents that your dad may have told you, or things of that sort?

JF: Oh, doesn't come to me right momentarily.

PK: That's okay.

JF: The Civil War came and created an awful lot of stories. My grandfather, as I said, was a seafaring man, and before he sailed the clippers he was a cabin boy on one of [Admiral David] Farragut's warships in the Great Lakes area. The other side of the equation was my great-grandfather, who was a

drummer boy in the Confederacy. He was captured and he stayed for two and a half years in prison in Carolina. They all seemed to have survived it, but it was not a very pleasant time.

PK: No, it certainly wasn't. It's interesting because Florida, during the American Civil War when your grandfather was serving on the Confederate side, was an important place in terms of all the food and grain and cattle that needed to be fed to the Confederacy, but it was short on people. There weren't a whole lot of people living in Florida, compared to the other states of the South at that time.

JF: But when I came here to Tampa—not when I came; I was born in 1915, which makes me eighty-four now, but I remember that—the first thing that I remember of the size of Tampa was Tampa had 40,000 people. When I came back from service in World War II, there were 100,000 people.

PK: That's a lot of growth.

JF: And now, I have no idea whether we've got 300,000 or what we've got in Tampa. But Tampa is destined to be, I believe, eventually, bigger than Miami.

PK: Oh, I think that's entirely possible. When your dad was getting started—and I understand from what I read that your dad came here in the 1880s.

JF: Mm-hm.

PK: In that period of time, at least by the turn of the century, and through the period of time when you were born, the Tampa Bay Hotel was (clears throat) underway, under construction, and serving as a popular tourist environment for Tampa. Did your dad ever talk to you about the Spanish-American War and all those folks being in Tampa?

JF: Well, let me—before that, he served as what they called a luggage carrier. They used to—they call them now baggage, what do you call them—?

PK: Bellhops.

JF: Bellhops, bellhops. And he was about, I think, eleven or twelve and he carried luggage over there at the hotel. And also pulled a rickshaw, because the building was so long—the first floor—that to go from one end to the other would tire some of the old people out, and they had rickshaws and the luggage carriers would put them in and pull them to where they wanted to go. We have a very fond memory of the hotel as it was, and we have an even fonder memory now, as the University of Tampa's headquarters.

PK: Well, I know you've been involved with the growth of the university, but that hotel as hotel—you have a privileged position in this society because you remember when it was, in fact, a hotel.

JF: Yes, I do.

PK: Do you remember the railroad coming to the hotel?

JF: No, no.

PK: Did your dad ever talk to you about that?

JF: Yeah, we'd—they used to talk, but I didn't, but I do not remember that. That's before my time.

PK: Okay. Good. So your dad got into the bicycle business and started the first cycle shop, I guess.

JF: Mm-hm.

PK: How did he come to that decision? Did he ever tell you what made him do that?

JF: He used to race bicycles. I can remember talking about a race that he was in somewhere in the state, and the people would line the sides and somebody pushed somebody in front of him. He was in the lead, and he went head over foot and lost the race. But I think that was—he had a desire for speed, and that was the fastest thing around. And then he went from that to automobiles. He used to drive racecars, as did my brother over in Plant Field, over there on the race track. I've got a picture of him in 1907, I think it was, at the wheel of a Cadillac with that old horn that they would squeeze to blow, and he had goggles on and it was right hand drive. He had just finished a race.

PK: When I was a kid, I remember seeing pictures of bicycles at the turn of the century that had the big front wheel and the little back wheel. Is that the kind of bike your dad was building?

JF: I don't think so, no. I think his was the normal two-wheel bike.

PK: Normal two-wheel bike and one gear?

JF: Pardon?

PK: One gear.

JF: One gear, no shifting.

PK: (laughs) My kids would not understand that today, with twenty-speed bikes. The process of—do you know how many he started building and who he was selling them to and things like that?

JF: He was not building the bicycles. He was an agent.

PK: Oh.

JF: He was also an agent for cameras, and eventually for Oldsmobile. But in 1895 he built two automobiles using bicycle parts, with which he was familiar, using buggies for the body of the vehicle. One engine was a gasoline engine and one was powered with a steam engine. And he put them together and made them run, and the two of them he sold. And he said, "This is going to be a good business." And that was his entry into the automobile business. And he signed his first franchise, official franchise, with Oldsmobile at that time, in 1895.

PK: Wow. What's your most favorite memory of your father?

JF: He and I used to fish a lot.

PK: Where'd you go?

JF: Everywhere, saltwater, lakes, creeks. The opportunity to fish was unlimited. And he taught me how to cast, and we used to fish for tarpon, saltwater, and we used to go to football games together, and the like. I worked with him and for him all the time that he was alive. When he died in forty-nine [1949], I was still going to see [him], "Boss, what do you think I ought to do about such and such," and now I can go see Jim and ask him what should I do about such and such.

PK: And what about your mother?

JF: My mother was a frail little lady. She had a heart problem, and she was a homebody. She loved the house and to cook and to entertain friends. And she was a very devout Christian, and a very loving family member of a large family that spread all over the eastern—I mean, the western—part of Florida here.

PK: How many brothers and sisters?

JF: I had one brother. And he died at forty-two, I think, or something like that.

PK: And lots of extended family in aunts and uncles and cousins and things of that sort?

JF: The whole passel of kinfolks.

PK: You were born in 1915—or 1913. Fifteen [1915]?

JF: Fifteen [1915].

PK: Fifteen [1915]. Where in Tampa were you born? Where was your first house?

JF: I was born on the corner of Florida and Estelle, at home—where everybody was born in those days—which in later years became one of our largest and most successful used car lots. But with the changing of the downtown complex, it became less and less desirable, and we eventually have made it available to the Junior League of Tampa for storage of their articles that they're going to have at their annual sale, the Chiseler Sale.

PK: How big a house was it? What do you remember about the house?

JF: Well, it was two stories, wood frame. I think it had a sleeping porch.

PK: What was the kitchen like?

JF: My first memory was that we burned wood in it. It was a big old iron stove. Either wood or coal, and I think it was basically wood that we used.

PK: That was one of your chores was go get the wood?

JF: That I don't remember—

PK: Okay. That's fair.

JF: —cause that may have been a little bit too easy. Too young to pick out the right size and the like out of the wood pile.

PK: And where did you go from there?

JF: We left there in twenty-three [1923], when my dad built the home that we now have on Bayshore [Boulevard], which we're now in the process of completely restoring. It's going to take a year to do all that's got to be done. This one interesting fact is that the house was built with brick on the outside. Then inside of the brick was interlocking hollow tile made of the same material as clay pots are, and then plaster on the inside of that. No one thought of air-conditioning, because there wasn't any.

PK: Right.

JR: So when summertime came and it got hot, we just got hot. But now, summertime has come. Over the years it's been air-conditioned for, I guess, twenty-odd years, and the heat from the outside comes in through the wall and meets the air on the inside and it's just moisture, moisture, moisture. All the plaster is coming down and has got to be—every bit of plaster has got to be replaced. And now, because of its age, you've got to do all the electrical work, and also all the plumbing. And we're installing—we've had an elevator, an old elevator, but we're installing another elevator so that when it's finished in a year from now, if we're not broke trying to do it—

PK: (laughs) Old houses and restoring them can take a lot of money, that's for sure.

JF: Yes, they do. He built it, I said, in twenty-three [1923].

PK: In 1923. The 1920s in Florida were often—have been called a boom period. There were lots of people coming in to buy land and to see what living in Florida was about. Do you remember any of those times with people coming into Tampa? They were called Tin Can Tourists in the twenties [1920s].

JF: No, no, no. That's a different group. The Tin Can Tourists used to come in to spend the winter and they would—there was a big area up in the northern end of the bay, up along where Seddon Island and now where we have all of the shipping. This was on a little bay on the other side; the name I can't remember—this is McKay Bay. And the area was palm trees and some oaks and it was acres and acres and acres, and they used to come down and drive down, and many of them would just have a shelter to put on the side that they slept under. And the stay of them was during the wintertime up north. And they called them Tin Can Tourists, because they had most of their food in tin cans, and when they left there were tin cans all over everywhere. And that was where they got the name.

But the real boom, that was—the real boom came separate from that, and it was a boom and a bust.

PK: Yes, it was, and it promoted a lot of growth in a lot of different places in Florida very rapidly, which then equally rapidly kind of just stopped with the Great Depression. Speaking of food and that

sort of thing, what kinds of things did your mom cook, did you eat? What was your favorite food when you were a kid growing up? Stuff like that.

JF: I was a finicky eater, so it's kind of hard to do justice to her cooking. I was not a vegetable person. And I used to—for instance, for breakfast, sometimes I would have a piece of cake.

PK: And your mom would let you do that?

JF: Let me do it, because—

PK: I like your mother.

JF: (laughs) But we would have what we used to call floating island custard, and we'd have chicken and steak and a lot of grits and a lot of potatoes. And occasionally we would freeze—take a can of pears or peaches and put them in a container—in the can—a bucket or something and put ice on top of it, and salt, rock salt, and leave it for about six hours and it would freeze.

PK: Mmm.

JF: And then you would cut the end out of the can, slide the frozen fruit and the liquid that had frozen and slice it off and serve it. It was—oh, it was—us Cracker kids thought that was about the best thing that there was.

PK: And who were your friends? Who did you grow up with?

JF: I didn't have many friends up on where we were for a couple of years up there on Florida and Estelle, basically church and kinfolk. They—all of them lived on the other side of the river and we eventually moved over, and then I became friendly with my cousins, and I also picked up an awful lot of fine friends, most of them who are already dead.

PK: Can you name some of them? Do you remember?

JF: John Hedrick, and Jackson, and Logan and his brothers. The Trice boys, and my cousin, the Spencers, and—oh, the old mind's not as good as it used to be.

PK: No. That's quite all right. Don't worry about it. Were there games that you guys and girls played that were different or interesting?

JF: Well, I'll give you an example of it.

PK: Good.

JF: Next to—after we moved, next to the house, there was a vacant lot that ran all the way through from the Bayshore to Richardson Place. And we used to play war games out there and everything else. And we'd have horses running up and down. We used to play some baseball, and one of our most liked was throwing a baseball up in the air as high as we could and the other guy catching it. Nobody had told me how you're supposed to use a glove to catch a baseball that's coming down.



PK: (laughs)

JF: You're supposed to catch it flat, like that. And I would catch them this way, and I would get hit—

PK: Oh, my.

JF: —on the tip of the fingers, and they would swell. And I just want you to look at those fingers on that hand, compared to this hand.

PK: (gasps) Goodness. That's from the baseball?

JF: That's from baseball.

PK: My goodness.

JF: From baseballs hitting and driving the joints together.

PK: And nobody told you how to do that?

JF: Nobody told me, but I found out myself.

PK: The hard way.

JF: The hard way.

PK: And that's a lifelong lesson, to be sure.

JF: That's right.

PK: My goodness, that's interesting.

JF: And we used to play a little bit with a basketball and skate some, bike, but there never was a time like—one of our old timers here was attending a luncheon, an Exchange Club National Convention, and they asked him, they said, "What did you used to play?" He said—no, no, it had to do with paying someone to teach children to play. And he said, "That didn't happen with me. All I needed to have was an opportunity and time to play, and I didn't need anybody to tell me what to do." It was a funding deal that they were putting together to teach them how. But [there were] a lot of wonderful people in my life, a lot of them.

PK: I know you have. I know you have. How about school?

JF: School?

PK: Where did you go to school?

JF: I started at W.B. Henderson School.

PK: Where was that?

JF: On the Heights. Then I went to, for a short period of time, to Miss White's English Classical School, which was on this side of the river. And—

PK: That's an imposing name, Miss White's English Classical School.

JF: It was a dear little lady that had this school with about thirty or forty kids in it, a private school.

PK: And what did you study, do you remember? What kinds of things did you learn?

JF: The same thing that anybody else learned: mathematics, English, and how to read and how to talk and things like that. But that lasted—the reason that I went there was, I went to a public school and my mother—I was kind of a mother's boy. Mother took me to school and stayed there for the day. And during that day, the teacher who was going to teach the class—a youngster got together in an argument and she shook him, if I remember correctly, and I started crying and I cried all the rest of the day. And so they didn't make me go back to that school.

PK: Ah.

JF: Now, that's a long time ago and I remember it just like it was yesterday.

But, then I went to Gorrie [Elementary School], to Wilson [Woodrow Wilson Middle School], to Plant High School, and then I went to Emory [University] for two years. I knew I was going to come back home and go to work with my dad, so that was not a problem with what are you going to study for. It was during the Depression, in the thirties [1930s], and the dean of the business school said, "It's very unusual. We've never had anything like this before, but if you want to you can take whatever courses you want to take. But unless you graduate, you won't get any credit for it." And I said, "That's fine." So, my first and second year there, the two years, I was taking senior and junior classes, business, finance, money and banking and business law, and accounting and things like that. All of which I've put to good use since then.

PK: Oh, absolutely.

JF: But I did not study—I had one course in English, because I didn't do too well in high school. But history and the various odds and ends of scientific, I didn't take.

PK: Why did you go off to Emory? I mean, there were closer schools. Did you know that you were going to do that?

JF: I had a dear friend here, who's dead now—he ended up as an Episcopal minister—Chester Weems was his name—whose mother and father and he lived in Atlanta, and they had moved to Tampa. Then they moved back to Atlanta, and when he went up there, I went up to school and went over the school with him, and in those days, you could get in most any school you wanted to if you could pay the tuition. But I was pleased and my family was pleased with the real serene, classic appearance of Emory and of the people we met connected with the college.

PK: And it's still today a very good school.

JF: It's a fine school. My son went there, and his wife, my daughter-in-law, both went there. My two granddaughters, one went to Washington and Lee [University], and the other went to University of Maryland, no problem.

PK: Right. When you made up your mind that you were going to work with your dad, was there ever a thought you might do something different?

JF: They had me checked, and the doctor said—I don't think I'm talking about my son now—that I could—that's not I. I considered medicine, a doctor, because I was always doctoring myself and paid attention to what was being done in the medical fields. And I still think that I would have made a good doctor, but I'm glad that I didn't and that I let somebody else do the doctoring.

PK: Well, you certainly were a success at what you did. So it was a very good reason to leave. I mean, you would have been a success at that as well.

JF: My son, Jim—we had him evaluated, as you might say, and the psychiatrist said he could excel in five fields, and I can't remember what they were, but one was medicine, and law, and education and the like. They didn't mention automobiles, I don't think, but he's doing great there. (laughs)

PK: Yeah. That's an understatement to say he didn't excel at that, because he certainly did. Let me get this for you.

JF: Oh, thank you.

PK: You're very welcome. The Depression, 1920s, you're a teenager, you're getting ready to go off to Emory in the early thirties [1930s]. What do you remember about the Depression here in Tampa, your dad or your mom or the business or other people?

JF: You were conscious of everything that you did that utilized anything, that used it up, or that was expensive, or that you had to buy. And if you could get along without it, you didn't buy it. For example, my dad, when he built the house there in twenty-three [1923] and then the Depression hit, he had—things were down so low, he had—My mother had a cook, a wash person and a yard man. And my brother—I think maybe he might have been working and making a few bucks, and my mother—we had about six or seven people, and he [his father] himself was making \$300 a month and paying taxes and everything.

I remember one time I was going on a date and Mother gave me \$5.00 to treat the crowd with. Coca-Colas were a nickel, milkshakes were fifteen cents, a pair of shoes \$10. I came back from the Navy and still prices were down. I bought a suit, a double-breasted blue suit, for \$35. And it was a gradual return to normalcy—if we knew what normalcy was—from absolute—I can remember seeing the people lined up in soup kitchens along Franklin Street and in the churches.

And my dad had sold cars, and people would come back and say, "Fred, we can't pay for it." And one man told me, he said, "Your dad said, 'What are you going to do with the car?' and he said, 'I'm going to give it back to you. I don't need it.' 'Keep it, use it, pay for it when you can.'" And he made—he

saved a lot of people jobs and health and homes and everything else, because he was in a position where he could help people.

PK: Sure.

JF: And he did.

PK: Ybor City, cigar industry, and all of that was a part of the twenties [1920s] and the thirties [1930s]. Did you have any contact with that world of Tampa?

JF: People, people—I knew quite a few of the people that were in the management of the factories, and we had a nice relationship because they were involved in the community and every facet of it, and were just great, great citizens. The loss of the cigar factories in Tampa was a huge, huge blow to us when they moved and went to Jacksonville and the like.

Now, it's amazing to me. I used to smoke cigars. Gosh, I smoked four, five cigars a day, and a pack of cigarettes and a couple of pipes. I used to smoke cigarettes—I mean cigars—that cost fifteen cents apiece, the best ones. The others I smoked cost about—oh, eight or nine or ten cents apiece. They were good. And I'll never forget when I quit smoking about thirty years ago. My wife got stung on the neck by a bee or something, and in Georgia and in Florida you do that—you get a piece of tobacco and wet it and put it on it. So I took one of the cigars I had and cut it open, and I said, "My goodness, it's just a little tiny bit of wrapper on the outside, and this looks like cut-up straw inside." And that's what I'd been smoking, and I haven't smoked any since then.

And cigars now, I can smell them. There's one place that I shop in—I go by a place where the guy is always smoking a great cigar and I'll (inhales and sighs) and it's been a long, long time. But cigars now—I saw some advertised the other day, these cigars are under ten dollars apiece.

PK: Oh, there's big changes in prices for everything.

JF: For everything, yeah. We've got on the walls of our Chevrolet out there—we've got an ad that we ran along with Sharp & Smith Chevrolet, who we eventually bought out, for a Chevrolet two-door sedan for \$400.

PK: Wow. That's—I wish I could buy a car like that today for \$400.

JF: I can't believe an automobile for 45,000, 50,000, 75,000 dollars for an automobile.

PK: That must come as a big shock to you.

JF: Oh, it does. It's a good thing I'm not appraising now.

PK: Yeah. I would think when you look back over where your father started and what the price of an automobile is today—and, indeed even the size of the Ferman business, cause it's—

JF: It's huge. You could get a good automobile, a new one, for 3,000, 3,500 dollars, and that same car now is \$30,000.

PK: What do you remember about your social life before you married? Did you date? Did you have girlfriends?

JF: Yeah. I had—I was always enamored of some pretty girl.

PK: Well, that makes you normal.

JF: But I was shy, and a kiss on the cheek was about the greatest thrill that I ever had. Because I was, as I say, shy.

PK: Where did you go if you went out on a date? What kinds of things did kids do back then?

JF: Go by and get a milkshake somewhere and go to the movies. And that was about it. There wasn't anything else. No Ice Palace or football games or the like to speak of. Just had to enjoy each other's company and go to the movies.

PK: That's—

JF: And we—sometimes we'd meet at somebody's house. We used to do that quite a bit on Sunday night. Somebody would play the piano and sing, and we'd have refreshments at the house. We used to do that at our house quite a lot, mostly on Sundays.

PK: Did you travel when you were a kid? Did your parents wander through Florida or other places?

JF: The folks traveled quite a bit. I can remember them taking us, me and my brother, up to Lake Champlain. We were on a boat, cruise from one part to the other, and it was windy on deck, and Mother wouldn't let me go out because she didn't want me to catch pneumonia. And we would go to Atlanta, and occasionally to North Carolina.

PK: Did you do that traveling all the way up to Lake Champlain by car?

JF: I don't really remember. I do remember that we had made some pretty long trips in cars, and I've got somewhere at home a picture of an open touring car in water, where half of the wheels were in water and it had stalled out and we were waiting for a mule to come and pull them out.

PK: (laughs)

JF: That was a road we had to go across, a dirt road.

PK: This is not interstate highways.

JF: And my father was not one to stop and ask. It kind of irked him to ask somebody how to get somewhere. And I'm afraid I inherited that. But he—

PK: I'll get these.

JF: He and Mother—I think it was before I was born—made a trip somewhere up through the mountains, and Mother said, “Did you see that sign back there?” and he said, “No, I didn’t, but I think —” But anyhow, he turned off and he got off on the side road, went up in the hills and the mountains. He said that the chickens would run from him, and the road was nothing but just plain tracks and rocks and everything else. And the children would run screaming to the house. And he got—he finally stopped. There was someone on a porch of a house and he said, “Does anybody ever come over here with an automobile?” and the Cracker said, “Well, ain’t nary seen one, but I hear tell one passed over here last spring.”

PK: Wow.

JF: That’s maybe how he got up to Massachusetts, maybe. (laughs)

PK: Yeah, that’s planning it the hard way. You have to get directions. This may sound like a silly question and it really isn’t. Did you love cars all along? I mean, once cars—do you know what I mean?

JF: Yeah, yeah.

PK: Did you really just like cars or love them, or did you work on them; did you help build them? What fascinated you about the early automobile?

JF: I started—I don’t think I really knew anything about anything else. But I went—I would go down and pump gas. The gas tank was on the sidewalk right in front of the building on Jackson Street, and I would pump gas (inaudible). Then when I was in high school, on vacation times, I would work. One year I’d work in the parts department, and the next one, maybe I’d work in the office.

As a consequence, I had experience in the various and sundry facets of the automobile business. And although I wasn’t proficient in any of them, I had a good idea of how they were supposed to be done. And when I came back from college, I was kind of the treasurer and used to run the cash—I acted as cashier. I can remember when we’d get a \$50 or a \$100 bill, I’d call everybody in and say, “Look, haven’t seen one of these in a long, long time.” And, I mean, it would be six months between seeing a \$50 bill and a \$100 bill.

And, as I told you, I went to Emory and went into the business management in depth, and I’ve not regretted the early start. Almost lived through the various phases of the business, so that I would have an idea of what the people that were doing that were faced with and how they solved it. And I’ve developed a personal feeling and attitude towards the people I’ve worked with, is that no one ever worked for me. They always worked with me. And that’s it today. Nobody works for me.

*Tape 1 ends; tape 2 begins*

PK: Back then, when the automobile industry was growing so rapidly as the car was catching on nationally and changing people’s everything—I mean, it certainly altered American history and American society—the business of a car dealership, for lack of a way to phrase it; maybe that word wasn’t used back then. What was the business about? I mean, today you go in and you can lease a car and finance a car, and there are parts departments and service. For example, something as simple as, did people pay cash for cars? Did you finance cars back then? I mean, what—how did it work?

JF: We used—back in the thirties [1930s], I guess you might say during the Depression, my dad used to finance a large percentage of the cars that we sold. And the majority of them we sold were \$200 down and \$25 a month. And it would stretch out over thirty-six months or something like that.

PK: Well, were there credit corporations—or banks, I mean—or did the Oldsmobile Company—?

JF: CIT. CIT was there. We used to do some financing with them. But the ones—my dad knew so many people that, if he could, he would finance them himself.

PK: Do you have any idea or memory of how many cars you sold during the twenties [1920s] and thirties [1930s] on a year basis? What was a good number here in Tampa?

JF: I would have to guess somewhere between 500 to 600 a year.

PK: Who were your competitors? Were there any?

JF: Oh, we had Sharp & Smith, who were the other Chevrolet dealers. And they decided to sell out and we bought them out, and Chevrolet closed that agency. And Ford was always the Holsingers—bless their hearts and bless their souls—were our major contenders in trucks and in cars.

PK: Where were they located?

JF: They were located on Florida Avenue. I don't know what the cross street was, but it was not too far from our used car lot, which was Florida and Estelle [Street].

PK: Okay.

JF: I mean, it was Florida and—yeah. Florida and Estelle.

PK: Florida and Estelle. Okay. That's good. Well, let's talk about World War I. What do you remember about World War I?

JF: I remember some people that we knew going off to war. None of our immediate family went. They all had dependents and illnesses or whatever. I was the first one to go in the service after my grandfather, who was in the Navy, and I went in the Navy. But they worked hard at anything the community needed because of the war, and provided protection, additional protection of the docks and things like that. And everybody was willing and wanting to help, particularly the families where the male was off in the war. They tried mighty hard to be good citizens and good friends.

PK: Did you— Were there people who opposed the war, here in Tampa? Did you ever meet anybody who was not in favor of it?

JF: I can't say that I remember any. I don't remember. It seems like that there was—see, I was, you know, World War I, and I was—

PK: Pretty young.

JF: Young. And all I remember, as I say, is the flags and the meetings and the like. And I had in my little notes there—I don't think I've mentioned it—every time a plane would fly over, everybody would run out and look up and say, "Hey, that's an airplane." And everybody was mighty happy to see it over and the boys come back—those that came back.

PK: And in 1937, you married. How did you meet your wife?

JF: Her brother—they came from South Georgia, and one of Martha's kinfolks in South Georgia, and they were down here. They came down here and went over to the beach with my other kinfolks. And I —

PK: They went to the beach. What beach did they—

JF: Indian Rocks.

PK: Indian Rocks Beach.

JF: My uncle had rented a place over there. And they came down and visited. We met, and a year and a half later we married.

PK: What did she look like when you were kids in 1937 when you got married?

JF: She was slim, beautiful, intelligent, wonderful person. And she's the same wonderful person, but she's got a few more years.

PK: And she thought you were slim, wonderful and intelligent, too, I'll bet.

JF: Well, I'm not too sure about that. (both laugh)

PK: In 1942, I read that you—and I'm going to quote this directly, cause it's new to me, so you need to help me with this. You were the chairman of something called the Division of Transportation and Communication for the Hillsborough County Defense Council.

JF: That's correct.

PK: What is and what was that?

JF: A wonderful old gentleman, Hugh MacFarlane, an attorney, was the county chairman. This was actually preparation for the war. And my—we had training cooperation with the 116<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery that we would—we had a group that trained with them at the fairgrounds.

PK: Where the fairgrounds are today? Is that where you mean?

JF: No, no. It was down on the river. And my job—I was appointed head of the division that you mentioned there, which consisted of all forms of transportation and communication. I had a motorcycle unit and a truck unit, and a short wave radio, and we would hold tests. We'd go to Lakeland in convoy, a group to Lakeland so that the drivers of the motorcycle and the drivers could know what to expect



from the other. And I think we did a very fine job. The only problem was that gasoline was so short that it cut down severely on our ability to do things. And the lack of doing things made it a little difficult sometimes to keep your crowd together and happy and doing something that would be beneficial to the war efforts, if it ever came.

PK: Was the point of the Defense Council to be prepared in case there was an invasion of Tampa, or were you training to send folks overseas or what?

JF: No, just—we were training in shooting and convoying. I don't think there was any direct area where you could point and say this is over there or this is over here. It was for whatever occurred; you would have some special ability.

PK: When did it get established?

JF: Pardon?

PK: When did it get established? Do you know?

JF: Oh, about six or eight months before the war.

PK: Before the war. So everybody sort of saw it coming.

I need to back up for a minute. I left off something really important when we were talking about your marriage, and that is your wedding. Do you remember your wedding day?

JF: Oh, we were married in Shellman, Georgia, in a little Methodist church. We had driven up from Tampa, my mother, father and I, and had a beautiful wedding, small. Shellman, where she was raised, was twelve hundred people, and they are a wonderful, wonderful bunch of intelligent Georgia Crackers. And we were married, and my best man was a dear, dear friend who served in the Army in Europe during the war and is now dead, Ed Keefe. He was my best man. And when we went out the door after the preacher called the ceremony over, he spread out across the doors at the back of the church and said, "Let 'em get away." (laughs) And we got away, but they had put some rocks at the—backed the car somewhere up against the tree and put some rocks in front of the tires, and it took a little maneuvering to get it loose. We spent the night in Jacksonville, and then we went down the coast and went to Cuba and to Nassau and then came back home.

PK: Oh, very nice, very nice. Okay—

JF: But before that, let me give you an example—

PK: Please.

JF: Before that we were going to get married, and my mother said, "Martha, Jim's so miserable when you're gone; you've just got to marry him. Y'all just go away and we won't (inaudible) either, so your mother and father won't feel slighted." And so I came home from work and she was still telling, and Martha said, "Okay." We started to Clearwater to get married, and she stopped by to tell her brother what we were going to do and he said, "No, you gotta go back to Georgia and get married in the church."

But I had \$15 in my pocket to start on my honeymoon.

PK: Goodness.

JF: And probably that would have given us a couple of nights and enough food to eat to keep us alive.  
(laughs)

PK: And to get you back. Wow.

JF: Fifteen bucks for a honeymoon.

PK: Wow. And you made it to Cuba and—when did you say?

JF: It was thirty-seven [1937].

PK: Thirty-seven [1937]. \$15 went a lot further than it would today.

JF: Yes, sir.

PK: That's for sure. Well, let's go back to World War II for a minute. You went and enlisted in the Navy as an intelligence officer, and also sea duty. What do you remember about that?

JF: Well, I—this is the one place that I have missed not having a degree. I was going off and I wanted Martha to have some income to take care of her while I was gone, and I wanted a commission. (coughs) The only thing that I could get a commission in was the Naval Intelligence, which is maybe a misnomer, but I finished the course there and went on duty in Miami. I then spoke Spanish fluently; I don't speak it as well now. But I spent a couple of months there interviewing people coming up from South America and the like out at the airport, and making ship calls and the like.

A note came through from Bureau of Ships and the Bureau of Personnel that they were looking for people who had had experience, and I was able to convince—the fact that I had been in business for five years and had been extending credit and collecting and evaluating people, that that would help me in my Naval Intelligence interrogation—which was the case, but they were filled up on Naval Intelligence. And if anyone had had any experience with small boats, to volunteer. And I had—my dad had always had a boat and I had run it for years. So I sent them a picture and volunteered, and I was in Miami and said, “I'll be here another month, probably, or two months.” I was there about—I think a week and a half—and I got my orders and I went through a couple of Navy schools.

PK: Where did you do that?

JF: I went to Cornell Indoctrination School. Then I went to intelligence school in Washington. And then I went on duty in Miami. Then when I was chosen to get a commission in seafaring, I went up and started out in what they call small boat school in Boston. I was there for a couple of months, and then I came down to Miami and went through Subchaser [Submarine Chaser] Training School and then I went to New Orleans to wait for a ship to come down. I was exec [executive officer] on a 110 foot subchaser

and we came—we ran convoy at the Panama [Canal] and so forth. And then they sent us on out to the Pacific Coast, and we ran up and down there.

Then I went from there—I came home when Jim was born for ten days, and then I took over another subchaser as commanding officer and we went to Hawaii and had some work done on the ship, radar and so forth. And the subchaser was 110-foot wooden hull with two diesels, had a crew of three officers and twenty-five men. I left Hawaii and went to Johnson Island, from Johnson to Kwajalein in the Marshalls and Eniwetok, and then to the Caroline Islands and to Palau, which is further and further out. I think I went within two hundred miles of the Philippines, but I never got there. It was all basically convoy and patrol duty.

It was a strange thing, the island of Palau, which is not too far from the big island of Truk, where Japan had their big fleet, they found out afterwards that they had miscalculated the island. It was rather mountainous at one end; at the southern end was Peleliu, which was known as Bloody Nose Ridge, Peleliu. I used to swim over at night from the mainland to the little island and fight and I was at the other end in (inaudible) passage. And strangely, I went through a typhoon there and almost lost the ship.

But you could look at the shore and see the Japs walking on the beach. Not a shot was fired by either side. The Japs, they said, didn't want to. They found out later that they didn't—they had not taken all of their heavy artillery out for the Philippines—to the Philippines. The island was just ablaze with high-powered, large caliber cannon. And we were sitting there under that for two or three days.

PK: Wow.

JF: You could see them, you could see them walking, but nobody shot at anybody. Nobody wanted to make the first shot.

So we got out of there, and I came back through the Carolines and spent some time there getting the ship fixed up, because in the typhoon I had some damage done. And then, when I got back to the Marshalls, Kwajalein, orders were waiting for me and I came back to the States and turned the ship over to another officer that they sent out. I went to Miami for a refresher, and spent a few days at home. Then I picked up a 173-foot steel hull PC patrol chaser, picked her up in Savannah and took her down in the Caribbean. I went through—not with her, but with one of the other ships—through the [Panama] Canal and up the Pacific Coast. But this one I ran basically little convoy duty, a little patrol and air/sea rescue for the planes that were coming back from Europe with troops being redeployed to Europe.

PK: Sure.

JF: I hunted for one for a week that had went down, but we never could find anything. But I got home and I wanted to get home real bad, but I didn't want to fly back. So I went with a flashlight and found out who was in the harbor going back to the States, and I spent two mid-watches going back and got home about four o'clock in the morning by train. "Come get me," and it was all over. I am glad I served. I'm glad I did not knowingly kill anybody or anybody didn't kill me. But I went where they told me to go and did the best I could where they sent me.

PK: Couple questions. One of the first is, you may be one of the few people and certainly the only person I know who has lived through a hurricane and lived through a typhoon. What's the difference?

JF: This is what I'm asking myself now.

PK: Well, what did it feel like, differently than a hurricane?

JF: The hurricane—when I told you I was going to Palau with a convoy of reinforcements for the Philippines, the day before we landed at Palau, the skies were bad and there were three at the same time, three waterspouts. One of them was over here coming down, one here, but they looked like they were small things coming down. What we've seen so far—and I saw one the other day—that the typhoon is more massive in its size and maybe in strength. But this one I saw, there was a small thing that looked like a waterspout, and there was also this great big thing that was a typhoon. That's the only thing I know. I have fought better than a hundred mile an hour winds for a day and a night. Some of the ships broke loose, and I got rammed by a landing ship and lost my anchor and had to stay underway inside of this lagoon with ships; couldn't get out because the wind.

And the one that I caught a hurricane down in the Caribbean, I was in one of the Bahamas and had a rather bad way to get in, rocks and the like and you could look down and see the water on the bottom and it looked like it was clear as glass. And the report—of course we had reports in that it was coming. There were three of them, and I sweated two of them out, and I tried to sweat the third one out. They would turn north and pass us, but the third one came right across where—We got up black dirt, dark, started the engines and warmed them up a bit and at the first crack of dawn we started out. And we went through Eleuthera and out and around and came back in the back.

I was having a cup of coffee while we were steaming out at twenty knots in the rain, figuring radar was operating. But the radar was not functioning as it should, because it hadn't been started quick enough and I was about twenty degrees off of where I thought I was going. A guy calls down and says, "Skipper, you got to come up here. I know it can't be, but this water looks like it's shallow." Flipped the fathometer on, we were running twenty knots in about fifteen feet of water.

PK: Oh, my.

JF: And I took the con and said, "Back her down," and we got out of there. It lifted just in time, or I would have—

PK: Run aground.

JF: Would have run aground, and that would have finished my career.

PK: (laughs) So after the war, you came back to Tampa, back in the car business. That postwar period, was it a big adjustment to come home? Easy? You and millions of other men had to do it—and women.

JF: No. I think mine was probably a very simple transition. I had a place to live. I had a home. And I had a job waiting for me, and I had enough resources to get by a while.

PK: Who was running the car business during the war?

JF: My dad and my brother. My brother was helping him. He died in forty-six [1946]—at forty-six—but he died after the war. He had helped my dad all through the war.

PK: Was business good during the war? Did they do business with the military, provide other kinds of things, or was it still just a car business at that point?

JF: Oh, everything was rationed. You had to have permission to sell. We had—my father had bought up a bunch of tires and he couldn't get enough people to get— Anyhow, he ended up the war with the tires still, and they were—I think he threw most of them away, because they were dried out from being kept. But the transition for me was very, very easy.

PK: Good. When you returned to Tampa and the end of war, and returning to the business, returning to your family and returning to a community, it's not a very long period of time before you are going to be—in my opinion, it's not a very long period of time—that you were named Tampa's Outstanding Young Man by the chamber of commerce in 1948. What did you do between end of war and 1948 that earned you that award? What kinds of things were you involved in?

JF: Son Jim got it two years ago, same award.

PK: Mm hm. I'm aware of that.

JF: I was active in the military affairs of the chamber of commerce, if I remember correctly, and then I worked with the Navy on establishing the Naval Reserve Units here. I worked on numerous fundraising campaigns, and did what any dedicated citizen would do. Do everything you can as well as you can for your community.

PK: The Ferman name—and that specifically talks about your son when I say that, but it also addresses you—have been more than just typical about doing everything you can for the community. Your family is legendary in Tampa for its philanthropy, its community spirit, its contributions, its desire to see this community be the best it can be. Where did all that come from? How did that value of community become so important to you? Because if it wasn't important to you, it wouldn't be important to your son, and it's something I know you've passed on. Where did you develop that sense?

JF: I think it came from being poor, and having the opportunity. (coughs) God gave us health and enough brains to come through the Depression and realize and appreciate what had happened and how fortunate we were from health standpoint and everything else. And as a result of that, we looked with desire to help those less fortunate.

I don't know whether you transfer things by genes or the like, but I think the same thing has happened now with Jim's girls. They are working night and day, although they've got little kids and little kids, the Junior League and everything that's good—practically everything that's good, because you can't work for everything. But they are involved in the community. Celia's involved in the community. Jim [is] terribly involved. And I'm—Martha is still involved, and I'm sort of—I say not retired, just tired. I've got a little ticker problem, and I'm not as alert and fast as I used to be. And I get tired. So I'm making excuses for not being as contributing as I used to be.

PK: Well, I suspect that if you took the contributions of the family in the total respect, there's probably not another family in Tampa that's contributed hours and time and money and effort and personal concern and whatever that the Fermans have.

JF: I wouldn't venture a guess on that, but I would say that I think we've done pretty well.

PK: Yes, sir. I think it's something you should have a great measure of pride in, how your family has carried that out. Tell me about your first interest in the University of Tampa, because I know that goes back a ways.

JF: I can't remember when it started or how it started. But I remember Jim Warren, who lived next door, was on the board and we had football and kind of had a good team. One of them, I can remember when the University of South Florida—no, FSU, Florida State—got a football team. They came down and played the University of Tampa, and University of Tampa beat them. But then we soon—financial problems and the like, we divested the university of football. Jim Warren and I were the two—I think that there were one or two others that voted—we didn't want to do it. We wanted to keep the football, but they passed it.

That interested Dr. Dave Delo, and I and Martha and Sunny [Mrs. Delo], just the four of us, hit it off beautifully and we worked together for the University. The major thing, I guess, that we did was to let Martha and Sunny—not let them because those were two that you didn't let do things. They did good things on their own, formed The Chiselers. Sunny said she and Dave had come from another college up north that we had an organization up there. The women of the university elected a board of directors and so forth, and we had an organization that did good work.

And The Chiselers—they had taken all the tile off of the fireplaces over at the hotel. They found them, so they brought them back out and decided what they would do is they would scrape the mortar off of it, chisel it off, so that they could use it and put it back on the fireplaces. And they got through and they formed an organization. What are we going to name it? So, well, we chiseled that stuff; why don't we call it The Chiselers? And that's the way it was born.

PK: That's neat.

JF: And it has raised several million dollars for the university.

PK: Yes, absolutely.

JF: (inaudible) Every year. They work hard and Dave Delo—I'll have to quote Dave. When the University of South Florida opened, it did take all the freshman class from the University of Tampa, and it had been suggested that maybe this might be part of the University of South Florida, the downtown campus or something. And Dave Delo said, "This reminds me [of] offering someone else's child for adoption." And Dave—we were in a position where Jim is married and had his home, and we moved in where he is now and the university had the house on Bayshore for ten years as a gift to the university for use standpoint. The only thing was the city forgave some taxes.

PK: You must be very proud, looking back at how the University of Tampa has thrived and done well.

JF: Oh, and it's great now. It's great. It's where everyone that's been there has been working. And maybe you don't reach perfection, ever, and you should probably never stop trying to grow and get better, but that university right now is tiptop, number one. It's great. And that president is a real, sure enough ball of fire, and a field of knowledge.

PK: Yes, I have met Ron Vaughn. He's a good, good man.

JF: Ron's a great guy, and that sweet wife of his, too, is a great help.

PK: This may surprise you as a question, but it's based on a reality, and the reality is that—there's really two things. One you said, and one (sound of something hitting the microphone). The thing you said is this is going to be your last interview. And the second thing is I know at some point in time, somebody at the University of South Florida or at UT is going to want to do a master's thesis on James Ferman, Senior. And they're going to want to know, decades from now, or however long it takes, some things about you as a person that would be important to help them understand what you accomplished and what you did. And through this interview, we've stayed away from the car business a lot, except for the early parts. And that's good. But looking at Tampa from your perspective of a lifetime, what do you think the three or four most significant changes that you've seen here are?

JF: There has been three or four. I think people are more concerned now with Tampa as a home—even those of us who have not come here recently—that Tampa has a warm, friendly, attractive, useful general attitude. People I talk to say, "Tampa's a friendly place."

PK: Friendlier than it was?

JF: I think so, yeah. Cause we used to have—if you didn't live up on the Heights, you didn't hardly talk to anybody else. Not quite that bad, and I don't want to sound that way, but there was strict, strict social levels.

PK: Sure.

JR: And then, too, I'm proud of the way that the city has embraced the improvement and development of our—I always say colored race, National American—Afro-Americans. Tampa is a place, and I've seen so many that would leave here and go to Chicago or Detroit or somewhere and then come back and say, "This is the kind of place I want to stay." And I think we've daily and weekly and monthly and yearly—are developing a finer relationship with our Hispanic and multicultural groups. We're all Americans, and we're all Tampans now.

PK: That's good. And finally, last question—and then there will be a follow-up to that one, I'm sure. But my last big question is, if you were going to sum up your life for some nameless, faceless, future student who wants to know who you were and what you were about, what would you want them to know about you?

JF: About me?

PK: Mm hm.

JF: I'd want them to know that I love people, that I have high moral standards, which I've kept, that I enjoy working with people—and as I told you earlier, no one ever works for me, they work with me. And I'm a forgiving person. I don't really hold grudges. I try—if I find myself holding one, I try to get rid of it. Life is too short, and there are too many wonderful things that God's given us to miss any of it because of trifles.

PK: Okay. And is there anything that you want to say? Is there anything that you'd like to sum up, not as reference to a question from me, but just on your own? Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

JF: I would say look out for your health. It's most important, second only to your faith. And then, I would suggest that your family, you teach them the type of conduct, the type of evaluation that existed some time later. I don't think it's necessary, just because the country and the city have grown, that it's all right for anyone to neglect their children and the things that they could do to make their lives more fulfilling, more happy, and more meaningful—and more like, I think, the good Lord would like for them to do. We blame the young ones for lots of the things that are going on, but I think a lot of them could have been prevented had the families been closer together. That is, the family is, I think, created by God for his purpose and to do the best for mankind and to set examples for others to follow. If we do this, America and the world will be great.

And I would like to close with one prayer. I'm horribly concerned now about the international situation, the danger of World War III. It will take just one more little spark, and all of the A-bombs and horrible death and destruction will be turned loose on the world, and God's creatures will be just about wiped out. It's there staring us in the face, and I pray with all of my heart, soul, body, and being that some way God will get through, and he will stop this before it becomes a worldwide destruction of humankind. This I say, Amen.

PK: Amen. And I certainly think there isn't a soul in the world who wouldn't agree with what you just said, and hope that—we all hope that it ends soon enough, the current crisis.

JF: What I'm afraid of, I'm afraid— We're through?

PK: Well, we will be in just a minute. We're going to edit out a piece of this conversation we're having right now, but I do want to close, and then we can turn it off.

Mr. Ferman, I want to thank you so much for the opportunity to come here this morning and talk with you. I don't know that I've ever met anybody who seemed less aware of all the things in this community that you really have accomplished, and that your family has accomplished. I'm proud that you are allowing us to come here and do this today. The Ferman name is a critically important part of Tampa history, and your contribution to it this morning will certainly go a long way to understanding how things happened here in your day and time. And I really thank you for the opportunity, sir.

JF: I thank you for the opportunity, Pete.

PK: Have a good day.

JF: And you, too.



*End of interview*