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Nick Nuccio oral history interview by Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta, June 10, 1979

Nick Nuccio (Interviewee)
Gary Ross Mormino (Interviewer)
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Gary Mormino: Great. Today is June 10, 1979 and George Pozzetta and myself, Gary Mormino, are talking to Mr.— is it Anthony or Nicholas?

Nick Nuccio: Nick.

GM: —Nick Nuccio at his lovely home in Tampa, and Mr. Nuccio, why don’t we begin. Could you tell us something about your family’s background? Maybe your father or where he came from and uh—

NN: My father came from Palermo at the age of fifteen. My mother came from Santo Stefano Quisquina, Sicily at the age of ten. They got married in Tampa.

GM: What did your father do in the old country?

NN: In the old country?

GM: Uh-huh.

NN: Well he was treated like [a] child. At seventeen years old, he didn’t do anything.

GM: How about his family?

NN: His family were farmers.

GM: *Contadini?*

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1 Italian peasant farmers
Yeah, farmers. And when my father came to Tampa at the age of sixteen he started working for the railroad a little bit. And then after that he came back to Tampa and St. Cloud—and then he came back to Tampa and he started working at the cigar factory. The cigar industry was booming. My mother at the age of sixteen started working also in a cigar factory.

George Pozzetta: Do you know what type of job your father did in the cigar factories?

Oh, my mother was a roller and my father was picking up bunches to a routine. He did this for many, many years and my father eventually went into business. He got into the filling station business from about 1922 to 1923. And he stayed in that business for about thirty years and then he retired. He didn’t do anything until he passed away at the age of ninety-two, my father. My mother passed away at the age of ninety-five here in Tampa.

GM: Wow. You feel pretty confident then. (laughs)

I am going to live until I am ninety-five.

GM: Yes. You have said a lot there. Let’s maybe break it down a little bit. Now, was your father from Palermo or was it one of the [surrounding] towns?

NN: He was from Palermo.

GM: How did he hear about Tampa? Why did he come to Tampa and not New York or Chicago?

Well he had some family here. His father was here. Do you understand his father worked in a mill and then he sent for him. Just the same thing as [with] my mother, my father sent for her. One came and then he sent for one of the family and then sent for two. And then you had the whole family here.

GM: Right, right. What was he expecting when he came? Did he ever tell you? Well, what did he expect Tampa would be like or what had he heard about America or Tampa?

Well he knew that he was going to live a little better here than in Italy, you understand? Matter of fact, my father, living here when he retired, also wanted him to go to Italy and visit his old country, you know, where he was born. And he said, “No, I’ll never go there. Once I left there I decided that I would never go there again with the misery and the suffering that I had.” See if he was around that’s what he would say and I think it is true. He said, “With a piece of bread in my pocket. I had to find water whenever I wanted [it]. Tending sheep you know in the mountains from morning till night. Every day of the week.” It was a hard life for him.

GM: Right. Now what year did he come to Tampa, your father? Do you remember?
NN: Oh—

GM: If you had to guess.

NN: No, I have no idea when he came to Tampa.

GM: You mentioned that he came to St. Cloud first.

NN: St. Cloud, yeah.

GM: Tell us why he came to St. Cloud and what he did there?

NN: Because everybody, all the Italian people were working on the railroad at that time. And naturally some of his friends invited him to work over there. So he went to St. Cloud. He was a youngster. And when he got married, then he started working in the cigar factory. Worked there for about maybe four or five years. And then he started working over there in the cigar industry and got into making.

GP: Did he ever talk about what the early cigar factories were like, what conditions were like?

NN: The same as they are today, the same as they are today. Yeah. The only difference today is that you got machines to make cigars. At that time you didn’t have no machines. They all made hand-made cigars. That’s the only difference there was. As far as the atmosphere it was the same thing it is today.

GM: Uh-huh. What about at St. Cloud? Did he ever tell you what life was like there? What kind of job he did?

NN: He enjoyed it. He said that he enjoyed it. Said that he had a good living there.

GM: What did he do?

NN: Working on the railroad. Getting up early and putting down the tracks.

GM: Right. And then he came from St. Cloud to Tampa. Any idea what year this might have been if you had to take a guess?

NN: [No.]

GM: Okay. What were his first impressions of Tampa?

NN: He really liked it. He liked it very much. As a matter of fact, he made his home here. He could have gone anywhere else you know what I mean? But he didn’t. He wanted to stay in Tampa.
GM: Why did he get a job in the cigar factory? Why not—

NN: Because it paid a little better.

GM: How did he learn the trade?

NN: It was easier work. Somebody said at that time they had people that trained these workers. They didn’t have so many. So some old timers that [were] making cigars in Cuba for example, they came, immigrated here, to Tampa. They taught all these newcomers how to make cigars.

GM: Right, right.

NN: My mother [was] the same way.

GM: Uh-huh. What did he tell you about conditions in the factory?

NN: They were very good. Very good. He enjoyed it very much. He never had a problem there.

GP: Did he ever talk about how the different ethnic groups in Tampa got along? The Cubans, Spaniards, [Italians] —

NN: Very, very close.

GP: All three?

NN: Very, very close. As a matter of fact it was closer then than they are today.

GM: Why do you think that was?

NN: Well at that time they used to live all in one section for example. Like in Ybor City. And West Tampa. West Tampa was home to the Spanish and Cuban element and Ybor City was the Cubans and the Italians. Mostly Italians over there. Only a few Italians were in West Tampa. See my area here is supposed to be West Tampa’s section. Everybody from Ybor City came in this section here now. They are all living in this area. Ybor City is not anymore. (clears throat)

GM: Right.

GM: What main difference if you had to pick the differences when you were a young kid growing up, how would you classify the differences between the Italians and the Spaniards and the Cubans? How is each group the same and how are they different?

NN: Well, they’re still close, you know, I mean together. There’s no question about that but the only difference today is that the young element, after they got an education and
mortgage, today they are better educated than their family. Now they are getting away
from these sections here and they are moving away scattered all over the city. Palma Ceia
area, the Hyde Park area, Seminole Heights, Sulphur Springs, Town ‘n Country. They are
spread all over now because young people naturally, they have an education and they got
good jobs and they are able to live better, buy homes. And eventually then, some of them
brought their families over there, from Ybor City to live over there.

When Ybor City started getting to be mostly black, naturally it was a poorer area. It was
all decaying. All that was slum area. And then I was the one that started the urban
renewal in Ybor City. At first they wouldn’t move because there were 50 percent black
and 50 percent Latins in Ybor City. The county didn’t want to approve that project. So I
started a project named the Maryland Avenue Upper Club, the Maryland Avenue right off
of Nebraska that was predominantly black. So I started that project there. By the time that
they got through with that one, Ybor City was ready to be picked up as an urban renewal
section. I started at the riverfront, which was completely black you know vacant houses
and slum area. We did the Ashley Street section and passed through to Seventh Avenue.

GM: So the Antonio factory was down there in that area?

NN: Yeah, in that section. On Fortieth Street.

GM: Let’s talk about how you got started and everything. First of all, what year were you
born in?

NN: I was born October 24, 1901.

GM: Nineteen-aught-one. In Ybor City?

NN: In Ybor City.

GM: Do you remember the address?

NN: I lived all my life in Ybor City, practically if I say. I lived there for about fifty years.
I am seventy-seven. So for fifty years I lived there. I lived on Eighth Avenue and
Seventeenth Street. I was born there. Lived there till I was twenty-two years old.

GM: That’s right across from the Ybor Factory, isn’t it? Eighth and Seventeenth.

NN: No, no, no. Do you know where the telephone company is? In Ybor City on
Seventeenth Street and Eighth Avenue?

GM: Oh, right, okay.

NN: (inaudible) We lived on Eighth Avenue just back-to-back with the telephone
company. My father bought about three rows of houses there at that time and we rented
and lived in one, on one side.
GP: Was that fairly common among the Italians to buy up units and rent them out?

NN: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah. The Italian people owned practically all of Ybor City.

GP: The housing?

NN: The housing, yeah.

GM: Why do you think that was?

NN: Because they were more interested in building something for themselves. The Spanish people they were—at that time it made no difference, they came here just to make a little money and then go back to Spain. The Italian people naturally wanted to use the moment, live for the rest of their life and raise a family, especially when you get married you know?

GM: Uh-huh.

NN: I lived in the same house on Eleventh Street in Ybor City for thirty-eight years. And about fifteen years ago I moved on the river, all the way out here in Temple Crest. And it was a beautiful home there, a villa. But it was a little bit too far for me. So ten years ago, I bought this property and built this home. It’s close to everything, close to downtown, close to—

GM: What was it like to grow up in Ybor City in 1901?

NN: I don’t know that!

GM: What are your first memories?

NN: Sand streets. Street cars. Trolley cars.

GP: What was life in the streets like?

NN: Very good. We had a nice home. All the homes had porches in Ybor City. We used to, at night, at twelve o’clock midnight, sit on the porch. Nobody [would] bother us. Today, we ain’t got no more porches. What we had we could sit there at that time of the night, you know what I mean. If you go to Ybor City today from nine to twelve o’clock you won’t see a soul on the streets because of vandalism and mugging, what naturally goes on. It’s pitiful. Not only here but all over the country the same thing exists.

GM: Right, right. Where did you go to school?

NN: I went to school at— First I went to the Catholic school at the convent. And then when I was in the fourth grade I went to public school. It was Ybor City’s school at that
time. Then I went to George Washington School and then I went to Hillsborough High School.

GM: What was school like in those days? Your classmates and everything?

NN: Same. Very friendly, very calming, and very nice. Very, very nice. I enjoyed it very much although I didn’t have much school, you remember, because I quit when I was in the tenth grade. I was a dropout, you know?

GP: Were your classmates other Italians and Cubans and Spaniards, you remember?

NN: No, it was mixed. [There were] all Anglo-Saxons everywhere.

GP: Anglo-Saxons as well?

NN: Oh, yeah. Anglos and Cubans.

GP: Any blacks in those days?

NN: At that time? No.

GM: Tell us a typical scene if you could go back to Ybor City, say you’re twenty years old. What would it be like on Seventh Avenue in Ybor City? Saturday night?

NN: On Saturday night all the stores would be open till nine-ten o’clock at night. In fact you could walk on the sidewalk. People were just promenading, just walking up and down, doing their shopping, meeting friends, saying hello to friends. It was very, very pleasant in those days. Wonderful. It used to be very liberal in that time. Today you don’t see nobody out on Seventh Avenue. Or even on Franklin Street as far as it goes. You don’t see nobody on Franklin Street after five-thirty, six o’clock in the evening.

GP: Do you remember anything in those early days happening with the workers, with the unions?

NN: Well, cigar makers have always had union trouble you know? Always had trouble. If this picture wasn’t cleaned right, why all they had to do was snap their fingers (snaps finger)— Somebody would say, “Let’s go out [and have a strike].” And they’d all walk out. Any little excuse you know, that’s just the Latin system that they had. But it didn’t last long. The only time that a strike lasted long was about ten months, the cigar factory strike of 1910, I believe it was.

GP: Do you remember anything about the 1910 strike?

NN: No, no.

GP: You were too small of a boy then?
GM: How about the twenty-one [1921] strike, the 1921 strike?

NN: Oh, that wasn’t bad.

GM: Right. What did you think about the life of a cigar maker from Cuba—or in Ybor City?

NN: Very pleasant, very good. Everybody was happy, everybody raised a family everybody [was] happy. No problems. They were happy.

GP: You mentioned that for a time you went to a church school—

NN: Catholic.

GP: Yeah, a Catholic school. What kind of a role did the church play in the community? Was it a very important institution?

NN: No, not at all. Not to my knowledge anyhow.

GM: Why not?

NN: I don’t know.

GM: Can you think of any specific incidents or anything?

NN: No incidents at all. Just the church didn’t take no interest in the people.

GM: Now is that uniformly? Like what about your mother? Did she go to church? Did the Italian women go to church? The Spanish women go to church?

NN: Some of them did but my mother never did at that time. But in later years she changed from a Catholic to a Presbyterian. And she went regularly to church. Just in my case I went to a Catholic church and then I changed to a Presbyterian.

GM: Uh-huh. Right.

GP: Was that fairly common among the Italian people you know?

NN: No, not particularly common. No. Most of the Latins, most of the Italians that I can speak of are Catholics. They are Catholics, still Catholic. It was just one here and there for some reason. My particular reason was that a minister came from out of town, Reverend [Walter] Passiglia—I don’t know whether you might have heard of him. He died about a year ago. He came to Tampa as a Presbyterian minister and he settled in Ybor City on Eleventh Avenue and Fourth Street.
GP: And his name was Passiglia?

NN: Passiglia. Walter Passiglia.

GP: Walter Passiglia. *Italiano*?

NN: *Italiano*, yeah. And naturally he wasn’t doing too good because he was not going to get no Latin to go to that church, the Presbyterian Church. So somebody mentioned to him to come and see me, and he came over to see me. I was a member of the city council then. He came to see me and he says, “Only you can help me out. Why don’t you come to my church?” I was in politics, you know what I mean? I was born a Catholic. I didn’t go to church, but I am a Catholic. He said, “No, no, no. It makes no difference. The church is not the Catholic Church. It’s not the Presbyterian Church. It’s the church of God. It’s open to everybody.” So I liked his position. I said, “Okay, I’ll come over.” So I went there that Sunday with my wife. I met a few people that were there, just maybe a handful. Then I took some friends to go to church with me and I talked to some more. The next thing you know we start building the church up.

Twenty years ago, because the church was small and because a lot of Latin people were moving away from that section and there were new black folks coming in, you didn’t have much attendance. So he built the St. John Presbyterian Church over on MacDill Avenue. [It was] a beautiful church. He built that church. Today that church is big. They’ve got a beautiful attendance. They got a kindergarten school. They’ve got a building there where they take care of invalid children. They got a building there where they take care of mothers that are not being well cared for. And that’s the reason that I wanted to build the church. And because of him, we eventually joined the church.

GM: Were you conscious as a young man of being Italian?

NN: Oh, yes, always. I still am.

GM: Any incidents that—

NN: They would never let me forget that.

GM: Did people ever let you forget that?

NN: Unh-uh.

GM: Do you remember any incidents where that might be amplified or anything like that?

NN: No, no, no. Because I am in politics I can see it more than anybody else, you understand?
GM: Summarize what you think [are] the contributions of Italian-Americans in Tampa. If you had to summarize it.

NN: The Italian people—Let’s put it this way, the Latin people—Spanish and Italians—were the ones who started building Tampa. If it wasn’t for them there wouldn’t be a Tampa today. All these other people that came from Georgia and South Carolina and North Carolina were many years afterward. Then they start building the downtown, start building a bank there and naturally people need to travel to go to better stores or what not you know. But the Italian people, mostly, were the ones that built Tampa. They were the biggest property owners. And the reason that they were in this industry is [because] Ybor City was the best part of the city of Tampa. Franklin Street was nothing but a swamp.

But it was the only way that these people that came from out of town with money for them to build something and to make money out of it, they had to go in an area where they could buy a large tract of land, which they did. The McKays, the Walls, the Knights. Those are the ones that came in and started building, then homes they started building. But the cigar-making industry was the big next real shot at Tampa, and 100 percent of those were Latin people working in cigar factories.

GP: What were relations like between the Latins and the Anglos in the early days?

NN: No connection. No intimacy between them.

GP: No intimacy?

NN: Not that I could see anyhow, outside of the big people in Ybor City like the cigar manufacturers, the building people—

GP: Right, right. Any hostility? Were there any—

NN: No, no hostility at all. Matter of fact there was a mayor that we had here about sixty years ago was D.B. McKay.

GM: Right.

NN: Who owned the *Tampa Daily Times* at that time. He married a cigar manufacturer’s daughter, a Latin from Temple Terrace. Naturally, being that he was married to an Italian—I mean a Spanish, a Latin—there was more friendliness between the mayor and the Latins in the Bay. Today you see, for example, the *Tampa Times* is subscribed to by most of the Italians because they started years back.

GM: Right.

NN: They don’t receive the [*Tampa* Tribune] but they receive the [*Tampa* Times].
GP: How about politics in those early days—How did the Latins begin to break into politics? You mentioned that Mr. McKay was mayor in those early days.

NN: Well, we had a representative from a (inaudible) here and every section of the city had to have a representative. For example, Ybor City had one. Seminole Heights had one. Hyde Park had one. We had twelve representatives. The city was divided into twelve sections. Imagine there always was two Latins. One in West Tampa and one in Ybor City as a member of the board.

How I got into politics was through my brother. He ran for county commissioner in 1926, twenty-seven [1927], twenty-six [1926]. And he won the election. But the general election, which had to be voted countywide, and the primary was supposed to be voted in the district and then it would go countywide. There was an Anglo-Saxon that ran against him as an independent. G.W. Lester, his name was. And by write-in he defeated my brother.

But we took it to court, because we could check the voting book, and we find out that all those names [that voted for Lester] were written in the same pencil and the same handwriting. So by the time that we took him to court and then the Supreme Court in Tallahassee—At that time the term of office was two years for county commissioner. So by the time that we won the Supreme Court there was another election held.

So my brother, naturally, wanted to run again for county commissioner. I came into the picture now. So I told him, “No, run for city representative,” because the man that was there by the name Santoria, he had gone to Spain because he had throat problems or cancer of the throat. He had gone to Spain and he never came back. So there was a vacancy there. So I wanted my brother to run for that office because he was so well known in Ybor City in that section particularly that I knew he would get elected. He said, “No. I’m not going to run for city council. I am going to run for county commissioner again next year.”

So I dared him and I said, “If you don’t run, I will run.” I was a youngster—twenty-six years old, twenty-seven years old. He said, “How do you plan to do something like that?” But I had to make my threat good. So within the run for the three days that I gave him to make the decision whether he was going to run or not, I announced it. Well I didn’t have any opposition. And he wasn’t going to have any opposition. I knew that I could run without any trouble. You know what I mean? Not that I wouldn’t have any opposition, but I knew that I could win. So I didn’t have any opposition.

Anyhow—Four years afterward I ran again for the same city office. I won again but I was without opposition. Then some friends of mine came to me that were dissatisfied with the county commissioner they had. At that time it was district only. There was a large case for taking in about six or seven little communities outside of the city limits like Valrico, Wimauma, Brandon, Thonotosassa, Orient Park, you know, the outlying areas. And when I—they wanted me to run for that office. Well, anything outside of Thirtieth Street, you know, we couldn’t consider a city job but they insisted. So I said, “Okay, I’ll
run.” I ran and I won [the position] of county commissioner. Well, I stayed in the county commissioner’s job for about twenty-two years.

GM: Twenty-two years?

NN: I [spent] seven years on the city council and twenty-two years as county commissioner. Then they came to me about running for mayor.

GM: What year was this?

NN: Nineteen fifty-six, fifty-seven. I said, “Well I don’t know. I am happy where I’m at you know.” But they insisted so much, so I said, “Okay, I’ll take a chance.” I wasn’t going to lose my job. At that time, you didn’t lose your job. Today it’s different you have to resign [in order to run]. So I said, “Okay, I’ll get into it.” I got into it and I lost.

GP: This was in fifty-six [1956] that you lost?

GM: Who did you run against?

NN: Hixon.


NN: Yeah. He had the people that had the money, illegal businesses, you understand?

GM: Rough campaign?

NN: Not on my part, no. But they spent a lot of money though. They used to employ three or four hundred women to canvass house to house. Each woman had a family, in-laws, neighbors, you know what I mean. So I lost. In about a year, [Curtis Hixon] passed away. So I decided I would try again. So in fifty-eight [1958], fifty-seven [1957], I tried again. And I won.

I was in office for only about three years. Then I ran again for the same office. I imagine the newspapers were not very pleased with me because I had an attitude that they didn’t like. They didn’t like my name, they didn’t like where I lived in Ybor City. So they defeated me with Julian Lane at that time.

GM: Julian Lane, huh?

NN: And naturally he didn’t do anything [in office]. He was a good man. He is still a good man, but he was surrounded by people that didn’t advise him right. So when I was defeated as mayor, I ran again for county commissioner and I got elected again. I stayed two more years in the county commission. Then I ran for mayor again. Julian Lane’s term expired in—
GM: Sixty-four [1964]?

NN: Sixty-five [1965]. And I won. So I stayed there four years.

GM: Uh-huh. Right.

NN: And then again, like I said, because my name, because I lived in Ybor City they didn’t like it for their mayor to live in Ybor City.

GM: They actually said that in print or they were just implying that?

NN: No. The last editorial they wrote against me was because I had an operation— an appendix operation— and I didn’t know that I had needed it. This was in sixty-four [1964] or sixty-five [1965]. And they said, “Because his ill health and because of his age he would be a sacrifice for the taxpayers,” because they didn’t know what was going to happen to me. The people would have to go pay for an election to go back and vote again for mayor. So they didn’t think of me very well.

Everything you see here in Tampa [was built] under my administration. Everything. There’s nothing you couldn’t imagine: Public libraries— all the libraries in the surrounding areas; the convention center; the stadium; the University of South Florida— I had everything to do with [it] because I was county commissioner and it was in my area. It was nothing but a pasture of land, but this county owned it. It was supposed to be Henderson Air Field at that time you know? And I knew that it was available so I offered it for an industrial site and also for the university, when the time came.

As a matter of fact, when the Presbyterian College on First Avenue came from Deland, because I had the connections with my ministry, they came to me to help them out in establishing the school here. And that was with the Chamber of Commerce. And they told me that with their involvement with the University of South Florida it was barely acceptable to build that; we could not go ahead and build another college. We don’t need a new college. I said, “Okay, so then I am free to do anything I want.” They said, “Yeah.” So I had St. Petersburg build it. In fact I got a resolution from the City Council of St. Petersburg.

It’s like the bridges: the Buffalo Avenue Bridge³, the Davis Island Bridge, the North Boulevard Bridge, the Sligh Avenue Bridge. I built those under my administration, those five bridges. That’s in the city now. In the county, when I was county commissioner, everything in my district was all completely built. Bridges and everything else. As a matter of fact they’ve got a bridge in Temple Terrace named after me.

GM: That’s not far from my home.

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² Julian Lane left office in October 1963.
³ Now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard
NN: Oh, really? Nick Nuccio Bridge? (laughs)

GM: Right, right.

GP: And you have driven over it.

GM: Let’s go back, you have given us a lot to listen—

NN: You know what I want to do?

GM: What?

NN: I am going to give you— and I’ll tell you why I did it— not because of an invitation or anything like that. I am proud of it because I did it, [also] because I had a lot of people ask me for it in the first year. I made it last night. (shuffling paper) And you’ve heard about it—

GM: What’s that?

NN: I have got a brochure of all my activities, everything I accomplished as county commissioner and as mayor.

GM: Let’s see the accomplishments. Tony Pizzo, he had one too?

NN: I am going to give you one each.

GM: Grazie, thank you.

NN: And if you’re reading this down— Now what I would suggest to you is this: If you read it and you’re interested in what that says. You read it and then come back and ask me questions about it.

GM: Uh-huh.

NN: For example, I donated the land for the MacDonald Training Center. I donated the land under my administration. I donated the land for the Children’s Home. I donated the land for the Shrine building.

Why did I do that? I donated land under my administration for a lot of garden clubs, for example. Why did I do that— Give city property to private individuals? The garden clubs for example, I was interested in beautifying the city. These people, these women that belonged to the garden club gave a lot of time and money to make the city beautiful. So a little encouragement didn’t hurt. And that’s the reason that I facilitated the land so they could have a building where they could meet in a nice atmosphere. For example, I don’t know how long you have been here but when I took office in fifty-seven [1957],
Bayshore Boulevard was nothing but a patch of sandspurs. Now I built up Bayshore Boulevard from one end to the other. I built Safety Village. I built the Fairyland\(^4\).

Those are the things here that I accomplished and which I’m proud of you know? But the reason that I did that, put it in a brochure, was because my granddaughter went to the convention center— No, the library. At that time she was only eight years old, that was four years ago. And she said to me, she said, “Grandpa, I see your name over there. Why is your name up there?” I said, “Because when I was mayor I built that.” [She said] “Oh, you did. Good. What else did you do?” I said, “Oh, well, let me put it down in writing.”

So I started writing down what I did so I could give it to her, you know. And when I did that I said, “Let me put that in a better form,” which I did.

GM: I would like to see it.

GP: Yes.

NN: I am going to give it you.

GM: Okay.

NN: Now if you find anything there that you might be interested in you can come back and ask me questions about it. I would be glad to answer it for you.

GM: Okay, good. Well.

*Pause in interview*

GM: Oh my, great. We’ll sure take a look at this.

GP: Yes.

GM: Just briefly, the obvious question is how— to have done so much— what kind of preparations did you have for your job? How did you— you mentioned that when you were first—?

NN: Experience.

GM: But you mentioned that in twenty-seven [1927] when you first were elected—

NN: Experience.

GM: How did you get the experience?

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\(^4\) Fairyland was part of the original Lowry Park complex, which was built in the 1950s. It was demolished in the 1980s when Lowry Park Zoo was expanded and remodeled.
NN: From being involved in public life.

GM: But how did you get in public life?

NN: I told you I was there with my brother.

GM: But I mean did people just vote for you because of your name or had you done anything in Ybor City?

NN: I ran for Ybor City and everybody knew me in Ybor City.

GM: How did they know you? What had you done before that? You were twenty-six years old—

NN: I was in the insurance business and real estate.

GM: Right.

NN: I worked for the post office for five years. And I knew—Everybody knew each other there. There was no question about that. Naturally that experience was gained in the city council, then I went back to the county commissioners [office]. The city council is legislative, the county commissioner is administrative. So when I went to county commissioner for twenty-two years, naturally, I had knowledge of the legislation and also the administration.

GM: Were you the first Latin as county commissioner?

NN: Unh-uh. [I was] the first Latin as mayor in the city of Tampa. As county commissioner there was a Latin before me. Four years before me.

GP: Who was that? Do you recall?

NN: Jimmy Fernandez.

GP: Jimmy Fernandez.

GM: Was this ever brought up as an issue in the election, by your opponent, that you were Latin?

NN: No.

GM: But was that definitely an issue? It simply wasn’t something you brought out in the open?
NN: I had a fellow that was running for an office—I don’t remember what it was. And he had a black man running against him. This black man was telling people not to vote. So what did this fellow do, it was politics you know? He makes a leaflet with his picture and the other fellow’s picture. And he put his qualifications and the qualifications of the other fellow just like it actually was but the people were going to see that. They would say, “We’re not going to vote for this because he’s black.” Which is wrong. But at the same time—in my case—you see a Mayor Jones or Nuccio—naturally people are going to know me. (inaudible)

In the mayor’s office they know me so well. In the county commissioner’s they knew me. I was there for twenty-two years! And I served everybody. I didn’t serve only people in my district. I served the people of Hillsborough County. When I was mayor I didn’t serve the people of the City of Tampa only, I served everybody in Hillsborough County. And I was proud to do it. And they knew that was so and that was why they came to me. They didn’t go to anybody else, other commissioners for example. They used to come to me.

I had a schedule. In the mornings I used—I still do—get up at four o’clock in the morning. Why today I don’t know. Today I don’t know why, but I get up at four o’clock in the morning. At that time, when I was county commissioner, at four-thirty I would leave the house, at five o’clock I would be at my barn. The foreman would be there. Tell the men what to do for the day. The next day I would go and check on all the work that they did [and] give some new orders. Some of the people, I was in personal contact with and nothing at all was ignored. I said, “Did they do the work right?” They’d say, “Oh, yeah, Mr. Nick. They came right away. How thankful we are.”

Then we had the crash in 1928 and in thirty-two [1932], you know. In my district we had—not that we had charge of this—but we handled the men from the CWA [Civil Works Administration] and the government projects. And I had about twenty-five hundred people working under me.

GM: Is that right?

NN: Yeah, beside my crew, [which] was thirty, forty, fifty. But these people there, what did they do? Ordinarily, in the rest of the county, they used to put them on ditches. And they started one from Thonotosassa to Mango for example. By the time they got to Mango they had to go over again because the weeds had grown. They weren’t too ambitious to go and work fast you know what I mean.

So my crew, having the sea borderline, had dredged the Bay all the way to Palmetto Beach. I used to go by there all the time. I’ve seen all that rock there, you know lime rock, and I said whose going to move that rock. So they came to me and I said, “Okay, I know what I’m going to do. I am going to build sidewalks.” I bought a rock crusher. The federal government gave me the men, gave me the cement, all I had to do was furnish the rock and the trucks to haul it. And the sand, which I got out of a sand pit but the county owned it. Once the sand was approved by the government I built the sidewalks. So I built
sidewalks all over town! I mean not all over town, all over my district. I built bridges, everything. Everything in my district was concrete, whatever it was.

I put those men in good use. I taught them trade; I had experienced men working with them. They learned how to lay sidewalk and how to make benches. In every school in Hillsborough County you see all kinds of concrete benches and tables. I went to a school, one time, and the children were sitting on the grass eating their lunch – Depression age. So I went to the principal and I said, “Now why would the children do that?” They had no cafeterias at that time in schools. I said, “They have no place to eat?” So I got the idea of building concrete benches and concrete tables. And once I put it [in] one school, every other school asked for it.

Another example, I’ll tell you this. At the blind school on Thirtieth Street and Hillsborough Avenue, one day I went to visit. And Ms. McDonald was her name, I’m pretty sure it was, and I seen in the hallway a group of children waiting in line. So I said, “What are the children doing over there in the hallway?” [She said] “Oh, Dr. Snow is over there examining them.” And I knew Dr. Snow well.

So I went to the office and said, “Dr. Snow, what are you doing over here?” [He said] “Losing my time. Because I examine their throat, tell them they have tonsillitis, they need that and this, you know what I mean. But the next day I’ll tell them the same thing, but they are poor and cannot afford it, you know? So what am I going to do now?” I said to the principal, “Send to me all children that cannot afford hospitalization to take out their tonsils and their adenoids.” So she did, she had about eight of them. I got a doctor from the county medical hospital on Adamo [Drive] for exams and to operate on them. So I operated on those needy children. Oak Park School hears about it. Another school hears about it. The next thing you know, I operated on about eight hundred children—

After I started, I started wondering that. If there was one mishap, you know what I mean, it would have been the end of my career. Matter of fact it was in my budget, the countywide budget was going so high because of all these operations in such a short time. The budget board at that time called me, they wanted a vote for all that. I said, “You don’t have to vote for sir. I am responsible for it I’ll go.” So I went and I told them, I said, “The health and the welfare of that child is worth more than that money you are talking about.” Well they laughed and said, “How much more of that is going to happen.” I said, “I don’t know. (laughs) I think that was the whole thing. I don’t think there was anymore.” So that was the end of it. They said nothing about it.

Of all the things that I did, how did the people know me? Those were the things that I did. As far as my experience it was because of my legislative work on the city council—when I was a city representative at that time—and also the many years of being a county commissioner.

*End of interview*