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John Grimaldi oral history interview by Gary Mormino, November 9, 1978

John Grimaldi (Interviewee)

Gary Ross Mormino (Interviewer)

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Gary Mormino: Today is November 9, and I'm talking to John Grimaldi at Columbia Bank. You're president of Columbia Bank, I believe.

John Grimaldi: Yes, I am.

GM: Right. Mr. Grimaldi, why don't we begin? Maybe you could tell me something about your family's background, your family's connection in Tampa, preferably beginning in the old country. What do you remember about your father telling you about the old country?

JG: Well, my father was born in Tampa, Florida.

GM: Oh, he was born in Tampa?

JG: He's seventy-four years of age. My grandfather and grandmother on his side of the family came from Naples in Italy.

GM: Mm-hm.

JG: Most of the people in Tampa are Sicilian.

GM: Right, right.

JG: There are very few people who are not Sicilian. He's one. My family is one of the few that are not Sicilian, we’re Napolitano.

GM: What did he do in the old country?
JG: My grandfather was a student; and he was an engineering student. He got himself into a lot of hot water, and he left the old country and he came to Boston.

GM: Any stories you can tell, that you can expose on tape? (laughs)

JG: No, no. No. And from Boston he migrated down to Tampa just before the turn of the century, around 1890.

GM: Okay, just a few questions to paint in the background. He was an engineering student, you say?

JG: Right.

GM: So, your family obviously was not contadini [farmers]. They were fairly well off.

JG: No, they were not peasants. Most of the people that came to Tampa, the Italian immigrants, were really peasants. They were agricultural workers. They were non-skilled. And when they originally came to Tampa, they really were not headed for Tampa; they were headed out to the rural areas to work and pick beans and work out in the agricultural fields. They found an opportunity to work in the cigar factories, and rather than go out into the field, they elected to stay in the city and work in the cigar factories. And many of the Italians started working in the cigar factories. They don't have a great history of staying with the factories, because the owners were all Spanish and Cubans.

GM: Right.

JG: And so, they were really suppressed in the opportunity to promote themselves, so they very quickly left the cigar factories and went into private business. And today in Tampa, you'll find that it's not the Spanish or the Cubans who are in private industry, banking, and all the other businesses; it's the Italians of the Cubans, Spanish and Italians.

GM: Yeah, Greco’s would be a perfect example of that.

JG: The hardware store. But almost every one of them, the original people that came over, you'll find that almost every one of them worked in a cigar factory, the Guagliardos.

GM: What do you attribute this to? Why did Italians gravitate to [become] merchants?

JG: Left the factories?

GM: Yes.

JG: Because the factories were owned by Spaniards and Cubans.

GM: Right.
JG: And the Italians had to learn first the Spanish language. You’ll find in my generation and in any generation that is older than I am—nothing has been learned by my children. They can’t even speak Spanish or Italian. But if you take my generation and the older generation, every single Italian can speak Spanish and no Spaniard can speak Italian, and that was out of necessity. Spaniards controlled the cigar factories. They read all the stories in the newspapers and all the books that they used to read to the factory workers as they worked in Spanish. And all the orders came out in Spanish, and the Italians had to learn it. And their opportunities for advancement within the factories—they just couldn't crack it, because the Spaniards got the preference. I mean, you know.

GM: Mm-hm.

JG: Not that they were prejudiced as such, it was just the opportunities were not available to the Italians to get ahead.

GM: Sure.

JG: And they did, and moved out of the cigar factories. But you'll find that, like I said—the Guagliardos, Mrs. Guagliardo, she worked as a cigar factory worker. The Costas, who have their own grocery store, they worked in the cigar factories originally. Almost everybody did.

GM: Right. Well, when your grandfather—well, first of all, why did he choose Tampa? Most Italians chose New York or Philadelphia, one of the major urban areas.

JG: I don't know. You know, I've always meant to find out, and I've never found out. But he had an advantage when he came to Tampa among the Italian people, in that he could read and write Italian and he could read and write in English. All of the immigrants that came over were really, for the most part, illiterates. There were a few people, like the Licatas; they were not illiterate. Filippo Licata was a bright man. He could read and write English. He didn't write Italian.

So, they immediately advanced in the colony. They're the ones that all the Italians come to see, to help them bring—'cause everybody brought—you know, the first one that arrived, they brought the rest of the family over. And my grandfather—in his case, (inaudible), was very instrumental because he immediately saw the opportunity and he became like an agent. And he would—if you were here and you want to bring your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, whatever it was, he would arrange all the passes to—

GM: Steamship agent, yeah.

JM: —to Staten Island in New York, and then he would provide the tickets and everything, name tags—you know, you came with a name tag—with the name “Grimaldi” on a name tag as you arrived off the boat, and they would put you on a train
and bring you down to Tampa. And he was a Seaboard ticket agent, and he was also a steamship agent. He immediately saw the opportunity, and he went into that field.

GM: How old was he when he arrived in Tampa and began this enterprise?

JG: Oh, gosh. Grandpa died around the age of seventy-six in 1932. (laughs) You know, I don't know. Nineteen thirty-two, he was—let's say seventy-six—he must've been, give or take, thirty or thirty-five years of age.

GM: What were his first memories of Tampa, as you recollect or your father told you, when he arrived to Tampa? And what year did he arrive, by the way?

JG: Well, Tampa was—you know, there was a railroad train that ran from here to downtown Tampa. The streets were made out of sand. This was really a village with a cigar factory and all the individual small homes with sidewalks.

GM: What year are we talking about now?

JG: We're talking about 1890, ninety-five [1895].

GM: Eighteen ninety sounds right.

JG: Turn of the century, 1900. (phone rings) Tampa was a village until 1885 or so.

(answers phone) Hello?

Pause in recording

GM: You were relating your grandfather's early experiences in Tampa, and he went into the—became a travel agent, in effect. What are his memories about his relations with the other ethnic groups in Tampa, Spaniards and Cubans, the stories you have heard?

JG: Well, not just necessarily from my grandfather but from all the people. The Italians, first of all, held the Cubans back in those days—the Cubans, not the Spaniards, now. The Cubans were sort of disreputable. They were fun-loving, irresponsible people. The girls were of low moral character, and went out with no chaperones—you know, wild group, very happy.

If an Italian girl was even to go with an Italian boy, the father would disown her, to the point where I can give you example after example, specific people I know who are still alive today. The father's dead now, but the daughters are still alive who have married Cubans—you know, from Cuba, not the Spaniards from Spain. And the Italians wanted nothing to do with the Cubans, and sort of rolled over to the Spaniards. Sort of like the Jewish clan, you know; they don't want to intermarry, because of their faith and because of their heritage. They didn't want their—
GM: Italians did interact with Spaniards though—the Spanish—didn’t they?

JG: Not in marriages (inaudible), 'cause it happened in my own family. My mother is Spanish, and there was a tremendous amount of bitterness in my own family that my father would marry my mother with so many Italian girls. My grandfather arranged the marriage—not my grandfather, my uncle; with the help of my grandfather, I'm sure. But he was responsible, because he was so much older. My daddy is one of thirteen children. (GM laughs) My grandfather married a really young girl, and he had thirteen children. And my uncle was—if he was alive today, he'd be—he died two years ago—he'd be eighty-seven.

He arranged a marriage of two of my aunts. He picked out the husband, he arranged it, he talked to both families from each home, and furnished them completely and gave them the wedding presents. They were very proud. When their daughters got married, they—the ones who could afford it, and many of them could—they set them up with a complete household. My wife, for example: Her mother is one of four daughters, and their grandfather, as each of them got married, built them each a home around his own home, one next to the other. All four homes are together. When I met my wife, she was living there.

GM: Uh-huh.

JG: There was very—the old men wanted to arrange for their daughters and wanted to arrange for their security, and these daughters did not go work at the factories. Their mothers and fathers did, but by then they were out. Like, the ones that I'm talking about would not work in the factory.

GM: Right. So, you're saying very few second generation Italian girls worked at cigar factories?

JG: A very few second generation.

GM: That's interesting.

JG: Third generation, it's all over.

GM: Right, right.

JG: Forget it. No such thing.

GM: Did your grandfather or father ever have any direct contact with cigar factories?

JG: No, they were never, ever involved, neither owners nor anything. We were in the clothing business, we were in the shoe business, and then we went into the insurance business in 1911, I think. My grandfather and my uncle went into the insurance business.
GM: Right, right.

JG: And we were in the insurance business until my dad got out of it in 1967, and he turned it over to my brother-in-law, who continued, and he is now merging to form associates.

GM: Now as businessmen, how were your family affected by the strikes?

JG: Strikes?

GM: The cigar strikes in Tampa? Do you recall any specific incidents that might've affected their family, debts or anything like that?

JG: No.

GM: No?

JG: I never remember any—of course, I had to have been very young, because we're talking about now in the thirties [1930s], I think.

GM: Right, right.

JG: And I was a very young man. I was born in 1926. And they had some real toughies in the early thirties [1930s], strikes.

GM: Right.

JG: But I could not appreciate, at that age, the economic impact.

GM: Sure. Right.

JG: And I never remember it being discussed at home. We fortunately always had plenty to eat, and always had good employment and made a good living.

GM: Right, yeah. Tell me something about your father. Your father is a renowned character in Ybor City. He was born in 1903, 1904?

JG: Nineteen aught-four.

GM: Nineteen aught-four.

JG: He married a Spanish lady, my mother, who was born in Veracruz, Mexico.

GM: What's her maiden name?
JG: Sanchez. My grandmother—they migrated to Mexico. My mother was born there. My grandfather died at the age of twenty-one. He was shot and killed in an accident—hunting accident, I’ve been told—and my grandmother brought my mother to Tampa. My grandmother was a businesswoman. She had been a businesswoman in her family in the dry goods business, and when she came to Tampa she opened up a dry goods store immediately. And she used to import from Spain and Mexico all kinds of dry goods and things and cans of goods that you couldn’t buy locally, and would sell it. She had several stores.

So, consequently, once my daddy married my mother, he became very involved with the Spaniards. Not the Cuban people, now, but with the Spaniards. And his involvement with the Spaniards, he was a member of the Centro Asturiano. They had a very active youth club—you know, young married people—and went to all the picnics. They were officers and were in all the plays and all the dances. And Daddy was one of the few Italians who was really, deeply involved with the Spaniards. Not many people have that, to this point. I'm on the board of directors of the Centro Asturiano Hospital, very much involved with the hospital. They still bank with us. We've just loaned them a million dollars to build a new wing.

GM: Right.

JG: The Spanish people have been very involved with my family—both of my grandmothers (inaudible) my father has banked with us here at the bank—probably more so than the Italians. So, probably my father gives the Spaniards a great deal of credit for what they did for his economic success, in that they patronized his businesses: the insurance and the banking business.

GM: The Cubans did not?

JG: Again, not like the Spaniards. He was also involved with the Cubans, because there's no bigotry or prejudices.

GM: Right.

JG: You wouldn't know the Spanish girl (inaudible).

GM: Sure.

JG: And my grandmother lived with us all her life, until the day my grandmother died in 1942. She raised me and my brother and my sister.

GM: Right.

JG: And he got along with the Cubans. He was very much involved with El Circulo Cubano, which is strictly a Cuban organization. He was an officer. He helped bail them out back in the thirties [1930s] when they had a lot of financial trouble, (inaudible)
allowed them to raise money to build a clubhouse and what have you. So he was also involved with them. He has never had any problem with either the Spanish, Italians, or Cubans. But the Spaniards are really the ones who have patronized our businesses. But that's not to say that the Italians haven't, okay?

GM: Did the Spaniards have an image of being sort of the aristocrats? Or was that merely a few who had a tremendous amount of money?

JG: You've got to understand the history of Spain. The Moors conquered, Spain just about, until they got to the province of Asturias. And as I understand Spanish history, the Moors were not able to conquer all of Asturias, and the Asturianos are the Spaniards who came to Tampa.

GM: Right.

JG: But for the most part, they were all peons. My sister's married to a Spanish boy. His father had never seen plumbing in his life until he arrived here as a young man of sixteen, never seen a toilet or tub, running water, or a faucet or the pipes that carry the water. And for the most part, they were all peasants. But they were very, very, very, proud, proud, proud people. Very proud, but hard-headed as a devil. And they were not innovators, just like they're not innovators until maybe recently in Spain, either. They never have been. They get caught up in a particular culture and they've stayed dominant, and they're strong creatures of habit, and they just won't change. They stick to it.

But they had tremendous family bonds. They brought their family over from Spain and they would stay with their kids, but they were not as outgoing as Italians. Maybe the Italians did out of necessity. The Spaniards were very happy in the cigar factories: they got the jobs, they got the promotions, and they were very happy. And they thought that was, you know, forever. They just didn't realize the economic system; for the most part, they were uneducated.

GM: Right.

JG: And they—as the Italians were, too, but the Italians had to move out because they just had to.

GM: Right, right.

JG: Not that anybody intentionally hurt anyone. It just happened that way.

GM: Right. Let's deal with your life, now. I'll talk to your father at a later date. I'm sure he'd take a couple days.

JG: Oh, he can talk a lot. Oh, he'll talk your ears off, 'cause he's seventy-four.

GM: Yeah. You're fifty-two, you said? So, you're born in 1926?
JG: Twenty-six [1926].

GM: Twenty-six [1926]. What are your—first of all, where was your family living then?

JG: When I was born?

GM: Were they still living in Ybor City?

JG: Yes. My family has lived in Ybor. I was born in Ybor City. I was born—in fact, I was born in a house, not a hospital. My godfather delivered me, who is Dr. Joseph Spoto—I'm sorry, not my godfather. Dr. Bottari delivered me.

Unknown Man: Sir?

JG: (to man) Okay, tiger.

*Pause in recording*

GM: So, your family was living in Ybor City at the time.

JG: I was born on Eleventh Avenue and Fourth Street. The house is still there.

GM: Right. If you had to classify your parents’ status, how would you have classified them in relation to other people in Ybor City? Were you well off, not so well off?

JG: My dad—yes, my grandfather was well off. He was a director of a bank; he helped the Bank of Ybor City. My uncle was one of the founders of this bank. He was vice president from the day it was chartered until the day that he retired, which was just two years ago. He died right afterwards.

GM: Yeah.

JG: He lived in a fine home. My grandfather lived in a fine home and was able to give—he sent my uncle to medical school at Cornell. He sent my aunt to FSU, sent my other aunt to Pratt. Everybody had—Dad didn’t want to go to school. He wanted to work and make a living. He got married at nineteen, twenty years old.

GM: Yeah.

JG: They were financially well off. They made money, compared to the fifteen, twenty dollars you could make doing something else.

GM: Right. What are your first memories of Ybor City, of any event in Ybor City?
JG: Of Ybor City? Really, when I was probably eight years old. When I was eight to age ten, I used to catch a trolley, come down Columbus Drive and get off at Twenty-Second Street and Seventh Avenue, and walk to our insurance offices on Nineteenth Street, up by the bank. I would sit after school and do chores such as stamp envelopes with our return address, insurance policies, and a little later I would sweep all the floors, the sidewalk, empty all the trash cans, and Mother and Dad would take me home. And that’s really when I started to see Seventh Avenue, which was a business district. I was eight or ten years of age when I started doing that, and I did that until I was about thirteen.

GM: What was Seventh Avenue like in 1935, 1940?

JG: Flourishing, happy, all the—you did business in Ybor City, or you went downtown; there was no place else to do business. In Ybor City, all the people who lived in Seffner, Plant City, Riverview, Ruskin—all the surrounding rural areas south and east of Tampa—all came to Ybor City shopping. They would not go downtown, no more than the Latins would, because when you went downtown, you had to dress. You know, it was a prestigious thing. I guess they carry like the blacks have. Let's say, you know—before 1950, a black walking by Walgreens didn't dare go in Walgreens, sort of an idea that that was the Anglo part of Tampa. And I'm sure that they felt very uncomfortable because everybody—as I said, in Ybor City all the merchants were either Jewish or Italian or Spanish.

GM: This was in Ybor City?

JG: Ybor City.

GM: Right.

JG: All Jewish, Spanish, or Italian, and they all catered to each other. The families continued to grow and they all prospered. I remember all the merchants prospered.

GM: Describe a typical walk down Ybor City Saturday night, what you might find.

JG: Okay, that was an adventure. We would walk from home—this was when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old; by then the war broke out and it stopped, so I think it was 1941. I started when I was eight to ten to eleven years old. Every Saturday night, I would come to Ybor City and we would walk down Seventh Avenue to Fifteenth Street, cross the street, cut back to Seventeenth Street, cross, and back. The girls walked in the opposite direction.

GM: (laughs)

JG: Okay, so we would get to see the girls constantly every time we walked a few blocks, back and forth; you’d get to see the girls, and this was it. All we did was walk and they would walk. I never, ever remember seeing anyone smooching—you know, get a girl and walk arm in arm. The boys never walked with the girls, never went off and smooched
with the girls. It was just an opportunity to see them, and if you liked a girl and she liked you from school, you got (inaudible) back and forth.

Then, we’d walk home. Around 9:30, 10:00 the shops closed, and we would walk on home. We’d stop and have ice cream, or we’d stop someplace and get some kind of pastry to eat many times. Right in front of the Centro Español on Sixteenth Street there’s a place called the (inaudible) Café, and we would go in there, get ice cream and ladyfingers. I remember I used to love those ladyfingers.

GM: (laughs) What were the hot spots on Seventh Avenue: any particular restaurants, nightclubs?

JG: There were no nightclubs, that I remember, of any kind.

GM: Right.

JG: No nightclubs of any kind, and we never went to the restaurants, you know.

GM: Right.

JG: We went to walk around Seventh Avenue. I guess it takes up from the old customs that every town in Italy or in Spain had squares, and apparently on Saturday nights all the people from the town and around in the rural area would walk around the fountain or the park in one direction and the girls in the other; it apparently picked up here. And so far as I remember, it happened all of my life until the war broke out in 1941.

GM: Yeah. Were most of the restaurants tiny affairs? I mean, were there any elegant restaurants like the Columbia then?

JG: The Columbia was there.

GM: Or were most of them family style?

JG: That was very elegant.

GM: It was?

JG: The kids—none of us—you just didn't walk into the place. It was an elegant restaurant. Las Novedades was another elegant restaurant. When I was a kid, it was upstairs, and was not on the corner. It was in a little block upstairs over where Molly’s Music Store is. There was a bowling alley where Molly’s is at, and then a furniture store afterwards. But there were tons of tiny little restaurants, way more than there is now. (inaudible) was a place where you went in to get sherbets—not ice cream, but sherbets—and it was packed all the time.

GM: A lot of people still lived around, in the area?
JG: Well, the whole area was—yeah.

GM: Right.

JG: It's hard to believe, but we never locked our doors. We had a very friendly neighborhood. I was raised on Twelfth Avenue between Tenth Street and Nebraska [Avenue], and we never locked our house. It was a mixed neighborhood of Spanish, Italian, and Cuban; there wasn't one in particular. And we lived in—tons of kids, and we lived in each others' house constantly. I could go running into the front door of anybody's home to the kitchen, get a glass of water, run outside and play.

We played out in the streets constantly, because we had a paved street, a mixture of, like, asphalt and something that made it look like concrete; it wasn't bricks. We could play games on it: we could roller skate on it; we could do all kinds of stuff on it. And we had a street—there were the kids from the other street, where they had bricks and you couldn't play out there. You could roller skate out the sidewalks, but not in the streets. They would come down and play with us. We had an army troop. We had games at night, all kind of wild games.

GM: Right.

JG: Then when I tell my kids, they don't believe it. I mean, we really—you won't believe the games that we used to have.

GM: Yeah.

JG: And all the kids were outside, and all the parents were sitting out on the porch.

GM: Speaking of games, what was the role of sports in Ybor City?

JG: The what?

GM: The role of sports. I mean, what did sports represent to young kids?

JG: Until they built Cuscaden Park, there was really no place for kids to play sports, except when you went to the high school and you participated in high school activities: football and baseball. They built Robles Park—I mean, not Robles Park, Cuscaden Park—in the thirties [1930s]. It was a WPA [Works Progress Administration] project when I was seven, eight years old. And so, I belonged. I played every summer softball there; I was on the team every summer. My God, I wore out that pool swimming in the summer there.

GM: How were teams organized?
JG: I've got to guess now, but I've got to assume that the city recreation department—or county recreation department—had people at all the playgrounds. For example, not only did I—you could go also to Cuscaden Park, but at Robert E. Lee you had that big double court for basketball. In the daytime they had counselors, either the teachers or something, and then we had checker games and crafts. This is in the thirties [1930s], now. They entertained us. You know, all of us would go down and we'd play softball, we played football without—

GM: But were they organized by—did the Cubans tend to play on one team and the Italian kids who—

JG: No.

GM: —by the time of your generation?

JG: No. When I was growing up, it didn't make a particle of difference. When I was growing up, my parents never told me, “You can't marry a Cuban girl,” and I don't know of any other parents that did.

GM: Right.

JG: This stuff all happened prior to 1930. By the 1930s, I think that all this bigotry between the Italian people and the Spanish (inaudible).

GM: Right.

JG: The resentment of intermarriage had all disappeared. By the thirties [1930s], it had gone.

GM: Were sports kind of a way out? I mean, like today, we typically think of sports as a ladder of upward mobility for blacks out of the ghetto. Was it like that in Ybor City?

JG: No.

GM: I'm not saying it was a ghetto, but you get the idea that—

JG: No, sports wasn't a way of getting out of anything. Like, let's say, New York and boxing. The poor Irish boys—the poor Irish-Italians went to fighting as a way of getting up in New York, Chicago, and the big cities. That wasn't really true in Tampa and others, I remember. I used to go to the fights at the Cuban Club and the fights at the American Legion.

GM: Were those big events then?

JG: Yeah, they were huge. Oh, God, it was just fantastic! I had a babysitter, Spanish babysitter since my grandmother died in the daytime; my mother and dad, they both
worked. And a block away was a very dear friend of my grandmother's from Spain and they had the name Castor. They had a lot of children and one was a son, Max who, when I was six years old, was seventeen. He used to drag me everywhere. He'd take me swimming at Robles Park; he'd take me swimming at Cuscaden Park; he'd take me to football games at Plant Field. He'd take me everywhere, take me to the fights. He was like my babysitter.

GM: Right.

JG: And he could drive and I loved him to death, and he took me everywhere. Big fellow, took me everywhere.

GM: You were born in twenty-six [1926]. Prohibition ended in thirty-three [1933]. What stories do you remember about bootlegging in Ybor City?

JG: The only thing that I remember is when I was very young, and this has got to be in the early thirties [1930s], during the election time. We had a precinct a block away, and none of the kids were ever allowed out of the house, 'cause they felt like there were so many problems with fights.

GM: During the election?

JG: During Election Day. They had the precinct a block away. It was held at Anthony (inaudible), the tax collector’s father; he was the dog catcher. That was his home, and the booths were in the garage in back. There was so much of problem with fighting that the kids were not permitted out. That's the only event that I ever remembered I was ever restricted. I was never prohibited from walking.

GM: Right.

JG: My sister, all the kids walked from home to Seventh Avenue and back, which ended up in the (inaudible). I never remember a rape or even a mugging in my life, never.

GM: How do you react when people tell you, “Well, Ybor City was crime infested,” with the bolita racket and all these other things? How would you respond to that?

JG: Well, the danger never spilled over to the population. The bad part, as I see it now, looking back and I try to see what they’re looking at, is the fact that the Spanish, Italians and Cubans were the participants in playing bolita. And as a result of their playing, they've permitted certain people to make a profit. And these people who made a profit were able to get enough money that—at that time the economy, in the twenties [1920s] and the thirties [1930s], especially in the thirties [1930s] (inaudible). Politicians couldn't build roads and build buildings, so they got their money out of the illegal activities, such as, let's say, bolita. They were able to enter politics and manipulate the politicians, and they had a great deal of power. There were so many people that sold it that they could get their family to vote for a particular politician.
And so, there were very powerful political organizations. And in that sense, I can well understand now how that would be so detrimental to a society. But the killings—you know, the twenty murders—population they are, fifteen, twenty murders that we had—that's never spilled over into the houses. I know of no event where an innocent bystander was ever shot except for, let's say, for the wife or the chauffeur of one of the guys that was being shot that was a target. I remember one lady, Angela (inaudible), got shot when they killed her husband. She was shot with buckshot.

GM: Right.

JG: But no—you know, never was there a shoot-out in the middle of the street with people running around. They never bothered anyone. We didn't have an extortion racket in Tampa—you know, protection, extortion, we never had any of that. There was never organized prostitution where they take the girls out of the homes and enslave them.

But the narcotics traffic, I never remember it. You heard that some person who smoked marijuana, you thought that he was, you know, he was like filth. When I was a kid and you heard about a guy who smokes marijuana, you heard he was arrested for it or something. I never remember any trafficking, never saw any.

GM: Right.

JG: You never saw it, ever. Don't know of anyone who used it, didn't know anyone that bought it, know anyone that sold it. I wouldn't know where to go buy it, as a teenager or an older person.

GM: Right. This was—

JG: It did not affect—it just did not corrupt the people. They gambled, like in Las Vegas. Tampa is like Las Vegas is now, except that it's illegal here and legal there. Well, I'm sure that the casino is, to a certain extent, controlled. The government of Nevada (inaudible), and these bolita people controlled our city government and county government. Now, whether that was good or bad, I don't know.

GM: Right, right.

JG: (inaudible)

GM: You were still a young boy when the Depression—

JG: Hit.

GM: —hit. Most people regard it as ending in 1941. How did the Depression affect your family and, more generally, Ybor City? Were you aware there was a depression?
JG: Only cause the people were saying it. Let's say 1936, I'd be ten years old. I didn't get any more than any other kid in the neighborhood, although I feel like maybe Dad could've afforded it. But we went to the movies. Every kid got either a nickel or dime, something to drink. That would get them in the movies. All of us had our dime. There were no empty houses in our area. There were no houses that were foreclosed. All the fathers were working and we had people in every walk of life. We had the cigar factory worker, people that worked in stores, that owned stores, that had grocery stores, that worked in grocery stores.

I think that our neighborhood represented just about every person you know, just all walks of life of our community. And no one was hungry. Very few people had cars. Kids got good toys. No one had holes in their shoes. We weren't ragged, and no one talked bad about how poor anyone was. Everybody ate well. I don't remember any bread lines. I don't remember any soup lines in Ybor City.

GM: Right.

JG: I'm sure there was unemployment. I'm sure there were people that were having financial trouble, just like they're having now and I'm not aware of it.

GM: Right, right.

JG: And they were big families, maybe make fifteen dollars a week and support five or six people in the family. But they didn't go anywhere. They didn't do anything.

GM: Right.

JG: They'd sit on their porch. They didn't need it, and lived better than we do now.

GM: Yeah. December 7, forty-one [1941], what do you remember?

JG: I was at the Columbia Restaurant having dinner with my family in December, and another family, Dr. Dominguez, who's still alive.

GM: Doctor who?

JG: Dominguez.

GM: Uh-huh.

JG: Dr. José Dominguez. He's retired now. And the two families and all the kids were at the gate, and one of the waiters came running in saying that war had broken out, we'd been attacked. And all of us ran out to the car and turned on the car radio, and we sat out in the car listening to the news.
GM: Well, do you remember what your father said then? What were your own reactions, being fifteen?

JG: I was hoping that the war would last long enough so I could go into the service and be a flyer. I was all excited to go to war, and I was all excited that—I was just hoping, “Please, don’t let this war end before I could enlist and become a flyer.” I used to ride my bicycle all the way down to MacDill Air Field to see the planes on the field.

GM: Right, yeah.

JG: All the time. And I enlisted in the Army Air Corps division.

GM: You did enlist?

JG: I did.

GM: Yeah.

JG: My dad was on the draft board, and I was going to let him draft me anyway.

GM: (laughs) How did the war affect Ybor City?

JG: I was gone.

GM: You were in school?

JG: I went to college, and I was just gone.

GM: Oh, right. Right.

JG: Well, I went to military school.

GM: Oh, uh-huh.

JG: Sixteen and seventeen. I graduated from high school. I went to military school in Atlanta, Georgia, so I was gone. And then I went into the service, and then I came out and I went—before I went (inaudible), I went to (inaudible). I went in the service and came out of the service and went to University of Florida, and I didn't come home till 1961.

GM: It must have seemed worlds apart, being in a structured military environment with all men. Looking back, how do you see Ybor City having shaped your early life?

JG: Well—

GM: Compared, maybe, with the other military—.
JG: It wasn't the military environment of the service; it was my prior education in military school. I went off to military school and we had breakfast at 6:30 in the morning, and I had never had in all my life—I had never even had a pork chop in my life. I'd never even seen one. I'd never seen fried ham, I had never seen bacon, I had never eaten an egg for breakfast ever, never had cereal. I'd had coffee and milk, and usually a piece of long Cuban bread, toasted and buttered, and I'd dunk it and I'd eat it. That was my breakfast every day of my life.

And all of a sudden, then, having breakfast at 6:30 with grits—I didn't even know [grits] existed—with chopped bacon, eggs, and what I called American coffee and I was shocked. I almost starved to death. First of all, my grandmother told me that if I ever ate a pork chop, I was going to get sick.

GM: Why was that?

JG: Trichinosis in the pork, which—you know it's a health—you know, for health reasons, like most of the Jewish laws about being kosher. They're really hell.

GM: Yeah.

JG: And I had never in my life even seen a pork chop. That rocked me, but I survived that for two years, and so of course when I went to the service, I had already outlived it. But I suffered the first few months that I went to military school because these kids—you know how they eat bacon and eggs, and good God, I couldn't. I used to get milk and try to color it with American coffee and dunk the toast in it, and that's what I would eat for breakfast and all the other kids were eating grits and bacon and ham.

GM: Well, most of them must've been Anglos, surely.

JG: Almost all of them.

GM: Yeah. Did you see yourself as different?

JG: About 99 [percent of them]. No. You know, I could speak English well. There were some kids from Cuba, for example, and a couple from South American countries who spoke English very poorly, and they caught hell. Some of them were little fat boys; they'd been pampered to death all their life, and they used to get picked on. I was never picked on.

GM: They perceived you as being a dago or anything like that?

JG: Yeah. No. No, I never had any slurs. I never have a problem in my life.

GM: Okay, well—okay. You came back to Ybor City in fifty-one [1951]. What difference did you see in the Tampa you left, or the Ybor City you left, and the Ybor City you returned to?
JG: The area had deteriorated tremendously. People started—like, we moved out in 1950, out of Ybor City, my family did, and then moved over to Parkland Estates. The area just started—the houses weren't being kept up. It was deteriorating real, real fast. And the people that were living in Ybor City were the real old folks, because all the young kids had gone in the service and had gone to college with me. And if you wanted to take advantage of the G.I. Bill, you could get a tremendous blessing. They all had the opportunity to get an education real quick, very inexpensive. And we all came home, and none of us came to live in Ybor City—or, as I saw it, West Tampa, which is just like Ybor City.

GM: Right, right.

JG: And the area just deteriorated, and the blacks started moving in real quick. Houses were being sold real cheap, and the people were just stuffing tons of families into them. (inaudible) just seeing the houses fall apart. Then urban renewal came in the early sixties [1960s] and just cleaned out the place. They had no plans for redevelopment of Ybor City. I called it an abortion. (inaudible)

GM: Could it have been saved? Could Ybor City have been saved?

JG: Yeah, a lot of the people, like you take my aunts, or my wife's aunts, who wanted to stay where they're at. They knew where the store was at, the cleaning, they had everything right around them; drugstore. And they would've stayed there; it was just a matter of the government had to put together a plan where they'd taken one block at a time and figured out a proper way to redevelop it, giving them (inaudible). They're pulling away now like mad. (inaudible) redevelopment. They're just throwing money away. But they could have bought these people's home and bought the lot, given them four-year financing to rebuild a small house.

GM: Right.

JG: They couldn't afford—you know, they can't—they give you six thousand dollars for the house, and a new house is gonna cost you fifteen thousand. Ain’t no way, you know, [if you’re] living on Social Security.

GM: Do you see any villains in this drama that ruined Ybor City?

JG: Politicians are idiots. They get carried away. Some people profited, but they displaced hundreds of people who wouldn’t have left. All four aunts would've been just—in fact, they used to scream and yell. I used to discuss it with them how it was impossible for them. You know, they were going to stay there. And they wanted little houses. “Oh, no, you got to have a 200 foot lot, you know, and a 1,200 square foot house, and you have to have new zoning.”
GM: Is there any key factors, I mean, in this deterioration of Ybor City? Any one factor that you could put your finger on, or any one factor that might have saved Ybor City?

JG: Well, first of all, like when the government does everything and they're building so many safeguards into the laws to try to prevent corruption, trying to keep people from profiting and getting money. There was so much fantastic bureaucracy, so much fantastic red tape, that it was almost impossible to do anything without going through tremendous amounts of channels and a lot of planning and a lot of procrastination. Everyone was constantly coming up with—you know, some people envision things that were unrealistic: a walled city, a trademark. You know, just tons of things, and they would have enough power to screw up everything so that real simple projects just couldn't get off the ground.

I can give an example. I drive in right here on Eighth Avenue. It took us four and a half years to get urban renewal to sell us that little piece of land. And we were dying, because there was no way for us to expand our driving facilities and we had one drive-in. On Friday nights, the cars used to back up all the way past Twentieth Street. People had to wait thirty minutes in line and it was killing my customers, just killing us business-wise. Four and a half years to get urban renewal to allow it, to sell it, because that property had been zoned for entertainment and tourists, part of the walled city that was originally going to go there. Just wild things. People come up with ideas and they have enough political pull in getting the zoning put in, and then no one can do anything with the land.

GM: When you look around Ybor City today, what do you think?

JG: It's a tragedy, for sure.

GM: And what about the future? Where does Ybor City go?

JG: It'll never come back. The days of this being a Spanish area anymore than a French Quarter is ever going to be a French Quarter with French people in it. Forget it.

GM: Right.

JG: It's a honky-tonk. It's a tourist trap, you know. And Ybor City cannot make it as long as Ybor City is situated where it's predominantly black surrounding it. And some of the highest crime area is the Nebraska Avenue projects. I don’t know if you’ve read about it in the paper. The Twenty-Second Street projects down around Lake Avenue; these are the highest crime areas.

GM: Sure.

JG: I mean, it's really bad news.

GM: Right.
JG: I'm not scared of it, but I can understand why so many people are scared. So, you cannot get into Ybor City unless you come in from the north, and no one can use Twenty-Second Street. No one will use Nebraska and Tampa Heights, which is now solid black. No one can come in from downtown to the Nebraska area and to Fourteenth Street, because it's all solid black. And you can't come off of Adamo [Drive] and make a left hand turn eastbound, because it's prohibited all the way. You'd have to do loopity-loops, go down towards Palmetto Beach, when you finally get to Nineteenth or Twenty-First and you come back down another street. There's only three streets available, Nineteenth, Twenty-First and Twenty-Second, or one of those streets. It's only really Twenty-First—

*Side 1 ends; side 2 begins*

JG: This is not to be derogatory about the blacks, don't misunderstand me. I'm sure that the Anglos were just as scared of the Italians and the Cubans and the Spaniards when they first arrived. You know, when you have something that you're not used to and not comfortable with, you're just scared of it. It's a natural instinct.

We opened up Adamo; we have a branch on Adamo and Twenty-First, four blocks from here. And just to give an example, we've had the largest growth in the history of this bank in the last two years. Just surpassed anything we've ever had, amounted because we opened that facility. Ninety-nine people. The first year and a half we had a profile sheet of every new account we opened. Ninety-nine out of a hundred people—'cause I hate to say a hundred of a hundred, but really I should say that—never have been to Ybor City.

GM: Is that right?

JG: Never. Have never been to Ybor City. Have never crossed Adamo northbound on either Seventeenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-First, or Twenty-Second. Never drove in Ybor City. Never had driven into the area just to see what the hell was in it. Never.

GM: So, you're pessimistic whether Ybor City can ever come back. Can it deteriorate any further? I guess that's the question.

JG: It can't. It cannot deteriorate any further, but it can never be a Spanish, Italian, or Cuban residential colony. It's gone. The zoning did that. The zoning prohibits—from single family dwellings, it prohibits multifamily dwellings to go in. Again, I believe that the reason that was put into those laws eventually in one way or the other and why those prohibitions are there is to keep probably white people from building rinky-dink concrete block two-story buildings and moving tons of blacks into the area, and then really losing Ybor City forever. At least, that was their feeling and their thoughts, that they would lose it forever. Whether it's true or not, I don't know.

GM: Right.

JG: And so, you can only have commercial stuff going through Ybor City now.
GM: Right.

JG: And eventually—they have the junior college, they now have the sheriff complex, we have the environmental protection place. I, personally, believe that there is nowhere in the city that you could buy land, vacant land, for the price that you could buy this land to be so perfectly, totally centrally situated to everything.

GM: Right.

JG: I've got to think it's the most valuable thing there is for private industry. We bought the whole two blocks behind us. We’ll develop it into a new bank and close this one down. We just bought it so we could control it. When the county was thinking about the sheriff complex two and a half years later, we submitted it, and we agreed to sell it back to the county for exactly what we paid for it and absorb the interest and tax investment, everything. So to encourage it, we sold them that whole thing for $103,000, four and a half acres. You cannot buy four and a half acres nowhere for less than $25,000 an acre. You can't buy a lot for $25,000.

GM: Right, right.

JG: And that's the only opportunity that's available. And again, you've got to get people to deliver the idea that you've got to go through the black areas. Tampa Heights is all black, and you have (inaudible). Blacks and it's black everywhere and all this is black. This is going to have a hard time developing for anything, although it's perfect in idea.

GM: Yeah. What do you think historians will remember? Or, if you had a great-grandson listen to this in fifty years, just a capsule summary? What was Ybor City, when you were a young man and when your father was a young man?

JG: It was crime-free, except for the gangland killings; it never spilled over to the population. There was absolutely no extortion. It was a happy, happy, happy place where people lived outdoors. People walked up and down the streets. The people were always out on the porch every evening watching the kids play on the sidewalks and in the streets. These kids were happy. I never knew of rapes or muggings. The doors to their homes were open. They were totally and absolutely—there was no fear, I mean, absolutely no fear that you were going to get hurt out in the streets at any hour of the day. Parents were totally—they just didn't worry that anything was going to happen to their daughters or their sons.

And it was a very happy, happy place. We didn't have the affluence that we have now. Everybody didn't have cars. You know, going to the beach was a huge, exciting thing. Going shopping was a great thing.

GM: Right. One question I forgot to ask you: How much influence did churches have, the Catholic Church in Ybor City?
JG: Church? At the beginning, it was very influential because it was a parochial school, and all the parents who could afford it would send their children to the parochial schools. OLPH [Our Lady of Perpetual Help] was a well-run school by the nuns.

[Transcriber’s note: The audio ends at this point. The rest of the transcript is taken from the original draft used by Mormino in writing The Immigrant World of Ybor City.]

JG: I think it was a very good influence on the children, and it kept the families together, and mothers and fathers liked all their kids (inaudible). It was a very, very, good—

GM: Would men go to church?

JG: Yes.

GM: Immigrant men went to church, right.

JG: Not like they did today. Women went to church every night.

GM: Okay. (laughs)

JG: You know, they lived—at lunch time, they lit a candle for every time they sneezed and a little misfortune. You know, the women lived in church. The men did not live in church.

GM: Right.

JG: (inaudible) church. My daddy was an altar boy.

GM: Right. Have I missed any major points, any that you can think of?

JG: No.

GM: Anything else to add?

JG: They'll never come back, neither in this city or any place else in this country, and they're probably being lost all over the world because of the elevation of standard of living for everybody.

GM: Right.

JG: And people think that that's where happiness is at, by elevating the standard of living. They don't know how good it is down, to be down playing with the earth.

GM: Right. Thank you very much, Mr. Grimaldi. I appreciate it.

End of interview