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Al Lopez oral history interview by Gary Mormino, April 24, 1980

Al Lopez (Interviewee)

Gary Ross Mormino (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber’s note: This interview begins in mid-sentence.]

**Gary Mormino:** —real pleasure to be talking with Al Lopez, in a lovely beachfront home in Palma Ceia in Tampa. Al, let's start. I assume your parents were immigrants, right, or your father?

**Al Lopez:** Yes, yes.

**GM:** Could you tell me something about your family's background?

**AL:** Yes, sure. I'll be glad to. My parents both were born in Spain. My mother was what they call a *Gallega*—she was from the province of Galicia—and my dad was an Asturian; *Asturiano*, they call them in Spanish. And they met in Madrid. They were both working in Madrid as youngsters. I think she was working as a helper's cook in one of the big families there. My dad was working in one of the hotels, I think as a doorman. And they met and got married, and went to Cuba after they got married.

**GM:** Right. What did their families do in the old country?

**AL:** Well, my dad's folks had a farm—I forget what they call it in Spanish; it was more a family thing. And my mother—or I think her mother, her folks—her mother mostly was—they were working a farm for somebody else. I forgot exactly what the term was that they call that.

**GM:** Right. Tenant farmers, something like that.

**AL:** Yeah, something like that.

**GM:** Right. How would you classify them, in economic terms?
AL: They were very poor. Not my dad so much, because I think they owned their own place, and they raised their own pigs and cows and food to eat, and stuff like that, in a small town in Spain. But anyway, they got married and went to Cuba, and from Cuba they had seven kids there. And then they decided—when the cigar industry started moving into Tampa, I imagine that they asked him if he wanted to come over. He left my mother there with seven kids, and decided to come over by himself to look around and see whether he was going to like the place or not. And after he was here for, oh, I imagine six or eight months, he decided he'd send for the family.

GM: Now, what year did they go to Cuba, do you know?

AL: Well, Havana.

GM: Do you know what year, though? Roughly what year would you guess?

AL: This was before the Spanish-American War, in 1890.

GM: Oh, the 1890s.

AL: Yeah, my sister was born—my older sister was born under the Spanish flag.

GM: Is that right?

AL: Yeah, it was still the Spanish flag.

GM: Why did they decide to leave Spain? Did they ever tell you the exact reason?

AL: I think it was on account of the compulsory military thing that they had, and they had been fighting those Moors for a hundred years, and they was compulsory military.

GM: Your dad was a draft dodger, then, right?

AL: Yeah, he was trying to get away from that military. I think there was a lot of Spanish boys at that time that were trying to get away from that army.

GM: There were, right.

AL: Although you could buy yourself—in those days, you could buy somebody else to serve for you. But I guess my parents—I mean, my folks’s parents didn't have that much money, or something like that, so he decided he was going to get married and go to Cuba; and then, of course, if not, he was going to be taken into the army, I think.

GM: Right. Have you ever been back to that area in Spain, Galicia?
AL: I went to Spain twice, and I'm sorry to say that I didn't get a chance to go out to that area. I wanted to, because my younger sister has been there, and she says that I missed the prettiest part of Spain.

GM: Very rugged, I understand, but very, very pretty.

AL: Yes. My dad's town is a fishing village.

GM: You know the name of it?

AL: I forgot the name of it.

GM: Oh, that’s okay.

AL: Cudillero, I think it is. Cudillero, yeah.

GM: Cudillero, uh-huh.

AL: And my mother's town was more inland, in Galicia in the northeast part. Galicia is pretty close to Portugal. They have their own language, by the way, the Galicians do. I know that she used to speak once in a while to her sister here in Tampa, and I tried to listen to catch on and see what they were talking about. They didn't know what—they didn't want us to know what they were talking about, so they’d speak a dialect.

GM: (laughs) A dialect, right. She’d fix a great caldo gallego?

AL: Oh, yes, beautiful, very good, the very best. You know, when you're a kid, you don't appreciate what your mother cooks for you, because you get tired of the same food. But after you go around traveling around for a while, when you get back home, this is the best food that there ever was.

GM: (laughs) I bet they didn't serve caldo gallego on the road. You never had it when you were traveling.

AL: No, no, we didn't get it anyplace else, except here in town. Another thing you don't get anyplace else—and it's amazing, because we're so close to Miami and places like that—is in Cuba, what they call Cuban bread. It's actually not Cuban bread; it's Tampa bread. Because I've been to Cuba many times, and what they serve mostly there is French bread.

GM: Hmm. How would you describe the difference?

AL: It's quite a difference, the taste of it. I worked in a bakery here as a kid, as a youngster. I worked as a delivery boy, and I saw how they make it. They get plain dough, and I guess they put lard and the ingredients in the flour. And then what they do is they take a palmetto leaf, one of those wild palmettos that grow, and they split it in half and they put a half on one side, and a half on top of the—after they roll the bread, cause they
roll it by hand—or they did in those days. I don't know, I haven't been in a bakery for quite a while. And they put it in the oven, and it seems like this big palmetto leaf gives it a kind of a taste to it, and also makes the bread open up. You notice that Cuban bread is opened up in the center of the loaf? It's done by that palmetto leaf.

GM: What bakery was that?

AL: We called it La Joven Francesa. It used to be Ferlita's bakery.

GM: Oh, is that right?

AL: The one that they’re trying to make—the one they’re trying to, uh—which they ought to. They’re making a—

GM: Right, right. Rejuvenate into a museum.

AL: Yeah. Still, it's not the same way it was when I was working there. When I was working there, it was a wooden building and we had stables, because in those days, we delivered with horse and wagon. We had stables right next to it, and there was a grocery store, the Gonzales grocery store on the corner, and next to it was a macaroni factory, right next door.

GM: Which factory was that? Mortellaro, was it?

AL: No, it wasn't Mortellaro; it was, I think, Scaglione.

GM: Scallione, uh-huh.

AL: Yeah, they had a macaroni factory over here.

GM: (inaudible) Scaglione or something like that.

AL: I think it was Scaglione, those boys; they're still around, a lot of those boys. And the Ferlita boys are still around.

GM: Right. Go back just a second here. You had mentioned your folks went to Cuba. What did they do in Cuba? What type of business did they take up?

AL: Well, it's an amazing thing. He wanted to learn a trade, because naturally he had worked in a hotel as a doorman, I think, in Madrid, and he wanted to learn a trade. He went into the factory, the cigar factory, to learn a trade, and in those days you could go in as an apprentice, but they didn't want you to be married. They wanted you to be single and live in the factory. In other words, they gave you room and board, and you had to get up real early. I guess they swept the factory and kept everything clean, and did all the work; and besides that, they would try to learn the trade.
He learned the trade of what they call a selector. He selects the leaves to give to the cigar makers. In those days, it was all handmade cigars. And actually, the most expensive part of the cigar was the leaf itself, the wrapper. And he selected—of course, actually if you were a worker that was making—a cigar maker that was working small cigars—he would give you the smaller leaf so that you wouldn’t waste much of the leaf. And the better cigars were made with a bigger wrapper, bigger leaf. And it saved a lot of money that way. That's what my dad learned how to do. They had to select by size, and also color.

GM: Highly skilled job.

AL: Yes, it was very skilled. I think that one and the—actually, the cigar packers were, I think, a little more selective than the—

GM: Would you remember the factory in Cuba? Do you remember the name of it?

AL: I think it was La Primadora, which was a very excellent factory, and existed for years. I don't know if it's still there or not. But when he came here, I think he went to work for Corral & Wodiska, which is a (inaudible) factory. He worked there for about twenty-five years.

GM: Why did he decide to leave Cuba, and—well, first of all, what did your mother do in Cuba?

AL: She just raised kids, I imagine, she had seven kids.

GM: Right. Were they ever involved in any of the political turmoil?

AL: No, no. My dad, again, decided that they were going to start bringing the cigar industry into Tampa, and imagine he was offered job. He wanted to come to Tampa, and he probably decided, “Well, let's take a chance. I'll take a chance, and go over there.”

GM: He come before or after the revolution?

AL: The war?

GM: The war, right.

AL: It was after the war.

GM: Okay. So he came right at the turn of the century, probably, to Tampa.

AL: Yeah, 1906.

GM: Nineteen aught-six. He came to Tampa, right. Did he ever tell you what Tampa was like in 1906?
AL: Oh, I can tell you myself.

GM: Now, you were born in what year, Al?

AL: I was born in eight, 1908.

GM: Nineteen aught-eight. What were your first memories of Ybor City? And, first of all, where were you born in Ybor City?

AL: I was born on Thirteenth Avenue between Twentieth [Street] and Twenty-First [Street]. Let me tell you, in those days, what I can remember of, was—well, naturally, Seventh Avenue was the business district, and as far as we were concerned, we never went uptown. We did our shopping in Ybor City. Most of the merchants were Jewish people, and they could speak Spanish, Italian, and Jewish, and English, all four languages very well. They were very good at adapting languages, the Jewish people are. My mother used to shop and she knew all of them. And those people were very nice; they treated my mother real well. And, naturally, she had to kind of bargain with them a lot, because she always felt that they were overpricing us, and she felt she could get it cheaper.

But, in those days, I remember that the streets, like between Twentieth—we lived between Twentieth and Twenty-First. The streets had pavement on it, but the avenues very seldom had pavement on them. The only one that was paved was Eleventh Avenue because there was a streetcar line there, (inaudible) streetcar line. And that was about the one of those streets that was paved; the rest of them was sand, dirt. We used to, with the horse and buggy—it wasn't—not a horse and buggy, but a horse and wagon, that we delivered bread [with]. We used to kind of have to use that horse pretty good, you know, to go through that sand, because I think a lot of times that maybe a car would have got stuck. But then I could see that the city started progressing, and then they started paving some of those streets, and it improved the city an awful lot.

GM: Right. Now, Thirteenth, is that—that's about where the interstate [Interstate 4] is today, right? Thirteenth Avenue and Twenty-First Street?

AL: It's pretty close to it, yeah.

GM: Right, yeah. Urban renewal did away with most of those.

AL: Yeah, yeah, most of those streets.

GM: What do remember about roaming? What would you have seen as a young boy if you had walked down Seventh Avenue, you know, as an eight or nine year old kid? What kind of sights and sounds would you have noticed?

AL: Well, it was a funny thing at the end of the car lines, which there was a car line on Seventh Avenue, and there was one on Eleventh Avenue, and then there was one on Michigan Avenue, which is Columbus Drive now. They all used to meet at Twenty-
Second Street. And at that end of the car line, there looks like there was always a café or a restaurant, or a small restaurant. Seems like everybody would buy sandwiches or coffee, waiting for the car or something like that, it looked like it was good business.

Now, the car line, the one that came on Seventh Avenue, kept going and went to—I think it's Thirty-Sixth Street, where the Spanish Park is, Spanish Park Restaurant. That used to be a small café and small restaurant in there at one time. And I think that they called that Gary at one time, I'm not sure. And then the one that came—one of them came, I think from Columbus Drive, used to go all the way to Palmetto Beach, and there was also a small restaurant at the end of that car line. It seemed like there was always a small restaurant, café for people just to have sandwiches, or bread and butter, and café solo—café con leche, they call it. And it seemed like they did pretty well.

Well, it was a very—let me tell you, I wish I could have been born again in the same conditions. I think that we enjoyed our boyhood an awful lot, 'cause you could do most anything. You could go not too far from where you were and you could build up your own baseball diamond. We used to build our own baseball diamond, put the bases down, and make our own baseball diamond in any couple of open field that we had—or lots, a few lots—and we could play ball there. Or if you wanted to go, we used to go sometimes, out past Buffalo Avenue, in that area there. The oaks and—

GM: What was that like then?

AL: It was just plain oaks, oak trees, and a lot of trees and stuff like that, and we could start—in those days, there was an abundance of flying squirrels, what they call flying squirrels. It was much smaller than the squirrel that you see now here, but it had kind of a—they'd sail. They wouldn't fly; it was just like a sail. And they would jump from the top of a tree all the way to the bottom, just sail like, and try to escape whatever noise was going on. And we used to catch those things by hand. They bite; they'd bite pretty good sometimes. But we used to get a big kick out of doing that.

And you could go into the woods most anyplace, and the river, or you could go not too far away, and there would be watermelon fields that they used to—we used to go in there and probably pick a watermelon once in a while, put it in the river to kind of cool it off, and it'd taste delicious the way it was, with the cold water, and it was a lot of fun. Orange trees. I remember when the—where Cuscaden Park is, right across the street from where I went to school then, Ybor Grammar School.

GM: Is that where you went to school?

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1 Gary was a town east of Ybor City, which was incorporated in 1915. In 1919, the state legislature dissolved the town, and in 1923 it became part of Tampa.
AL: Yeah. There was an orange grove there; Cuscaden had an orange grove there. And we used to try to sneak in there once in a while to pick a few oranges. The man was kind of a mean guy. He was getting tired of those kids stealing his oranges, so he finally got himself an air gun, and would pack it with salt. And he wouldn't shoot you in the face or nothing like that, but he'd shoot you around the back, or in your buttocks, and it would burn to beat the band.

I remember one kid, I saw one kid one day running from the orange grove on Fourteenth [Street] and Columbus Drive all the way to the (inaudible), which was on Ninth [Avenue] and Fourteenth, just screaming. He thought he was shot with a bullet. And they finally had to kind of get that salt out of there before the kid finally quit screaming. But it was a lot of fun in those days.

GM: How would your playmates get along? They were mainly Cuban and Spanish and Italian. How did the groups get along, the ethnic groups?

AL: Well, we got along all right. Once in a while you'd have a battle: you know, you'd have a fight, or you start throwing stones or rocks at each other, one group against the other, but nothing vicious, you know. Most of the Italian neighborhoods ran from around Fifteenth [Street] or Sixteenth Street all the way up to Twenty-Third Street, and between Eighth Avenue and all the way maybe to about Fifteenth Street, in that area there. And then there was some that went on the other side, in back of the Columbia Restaurant, over around Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue, up in through there; there was a little Italian village in through there, like. And then there was some on the other side of Twenty-Second Street, but they were all mostly congregated around there.

And the Cuban people were from Sixteenth [Street] over to—I'd say maybe around Twelfth [Street], and up in through there. And then the Spanish people, there was a few. There wasn't quite as many Spaniards in that area; there was some around on the boarding houses. In those days, the guys used to come from Cuba to work in the cigar factories, and they were single. They weren't married, so they all lived in boarding houses around between, I'd say, Twelfth Avenue and I'd say between Sixteenth [Street] and Eighteenth [Street], and up in through there, there was three or four, and there was two or three factories, cigar factories up in that area. But they were living—a lot of them were living in boarding houses at that time, in that area.

GM: Right, right. What kind of games would you play as kids?

AL: We had all kinds of games. We made our own kites, we had marbles, we had tops. We had all kinds of games that we used to play that kids now, for some reason or another—I guess they got away from it; they got too much TV or something. They don't play

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2. Arthur Weston Cuscaden, who came to Tampa in 1878 and planted one of the first orange groves in the city. He served several terms on the City Council and School Board, and was mayor pro tem during James McKay's administration (1902-1904). Cuscaden’s family donated the land where Cuscaden Park was built in 1937.
those games any more. And we played baseball, mostly. We didn't play football, Latin
kids, for some reason; others didn't go for the football.

GM: No basketball, then, right?

AL: Basketball we played.

GM: Really?

AL: Yeah, we played. We had a playground about a block from where I lived on Twelfth
[Avenue] and Twelfth [Street]. And we played basketball there, and they had what they
called at that time—they had a great big ball. I didn't know whether they called it
diamond ball or softball, whatever it was. We used to play at night; they had lights there,
and we used to play there at night.

GM: Yeah. How about boxing?

AL: Boxing, there was some boxing. I remember after I grew up a little bit, not when I
was real young, there was no boxing, but after I grew up a little bit, they finally started
some real boxing shows at Benjamin Field, and also at the Cuban Club. The Cuban Club
arena had a good arena, and there was some real good young fighters. There were—at
one time, it seemed like everybody caught on, and there was some real good fighters that
came out of Tampa at that time. Mario Pontero was a great fighter, and Chino Alvarez
was a great fighter. Gomez was a good fighter. There was a lot of good fighters that came
out of this area at that time. It kind of died down after that.

GM: As a young boy, would you ever go to any of the mutual clubs? Would you go to the
Centro Español, or Centro Asturiano?

AL: Well, this is after—they wouldn't allow you in there as a young boy, but after, as
soon as I was of age—I think I was fifteen or maybe fourteen—my dad made me a
member of Centro Asturiano. Of course, we had hospitalizations. And that's what the
thing that made it so, you know, that you wanted to join. But it wasn't so much that we
used the clubs.

But then, as a younger boy, when I started playing ball—and most of the boys were
Cubans, because there was very few Spanish boys that played baseball—our group, most
of us hung around the Cuban Club all the time. Which is a—you know, it was a real nice
club. It was practically new; I think the old one had burned down or something like that.
And then after that, after we got—I got to using the Centro Asturiano. I played dominoes
and cards at the Centro Asturiano for years and years. Most of my manhood was spent
over there.

GM: Did you ever go to the Italian Club?

AL: Oh, yes. I used to go—
GM: Do you remember them building the new, the (inaudible) 1918?

AL: Yeah, I remember when the Italian Club was built. It was a nice club. They did the same thing: they had their own membership and we used to go to dances there quite a lot as a young boy, the Italian Club, the Centro Español or Spanish Casino, or the Centro Asturiano and the Cuban Club. It was a perfect setup for a young boy, because you know, you could go there—you didn't have to take a date, you could go there by yourself, and you could always find some girls there that were chaperoned. But in those days, they—

GM: Tell us about chaperoning, an interesting institution.

AL: Well, it was nice. It was the times, you know, and the mothers didn't like for the daughters to go to a dance without having a chaperone. It was either one of the older sister, or an older brother, or the mother or the father used to go with them, and they didn't have dates. You'd go there, and you finally go—well, at one time, they had a little booklet that you would put your name down on whatever dance you wanted, which was real nice.

GM: (laughs) Is that right? Yeah.

AL: If you wanted to dance a waltz or a foxtrot, or whatever, you know, you'd put your name down on whatever you want, and you'd dance with her.

(talking about something in the background) I think she's got the light on. Should we stop?

GM: No, no, that's okay.

AL: But, for me, it was perfect, because I'd just look around, and if I knew this girl, and she was a pretty nice girl, or a pretty good dancer, I would go over and ask her if she'd like to dance. And if she did, she'd get up and dance, and it was perfect for us.

At intermission—it was cheap, because at intermission you just take them out. In those days, it was Prohibition, and we'd take them over to Las Novedades or at the Boulevard there; across the street from the Centro Asturiano, there was some cafes around the Italian Club. And we used to take them out and buy them a Coke, or some sweets of some kind, and the chaperone would go with us. And, you know, it cost you maybe—a Coke at that time you could get for a nickel and candies for a nickel or a dime, and it was fun. It was a lot of fun.

GM: What did you figure you—as a young boy, what did you figure, what did you think you'd wind up doing? Did you ever have any desire to go into the cigar industry?

AL: No.
GM: Why not? Why not?

AL: Well, my ambition—not my ambition, I was—you know, I wanted to be a baseball player, first of all. I wanted to play sports. I loved it. And I didn't feel like—I drove a truck for a while as a sixteen year old, fifteen year old, and I delivered bread as a young boy.

GM: Did you drop out of school early, I take it? Or did you—

AL: Yes. Yes, I signed a baseball contract when I was sixteen, to play with Tampa, and I was playing with the Tampa Smokers. In those days, there wasn't a Tampa Tarpons; it was a Tampa Smokers. And I was lucky enough that they gave me—they wanted to sign me, and they signed me to a contract. Got paid a hundred and fifty dollars a month, which, I felt like it was stealing. They're paying you to play ball. And I was lucky enough to stay with the Tampa Club.

I didn't catch too much at the beginning because, again, I was just a youngster, and they had a fellow there that had been playing in a higher classification, by the name of—I forgot his name right now. But anyway, he was an experienced catcher, and a good catcher, a pretty good hitter. And we had a good club. We finally ended up winning the pennant here in Tampa, and won the championship.

GM: What league would that have been in?

AL: Florida State League.

GM: Florida State League. What classification then?

AL: It was "D," at that time. But it was a good fast class D league. We had players there that had played class "B" ball, which is a good rating at that time.

GM: Nineteen twenty-four, then?

AL: Nineteen twenty-five.

GM: Twenty-five [1925]. Were there any other Latins playing ball then?

AL: Let me see. They did bring some, not that year—I don't—yeah, we had one Cuban boy that they brought from Cuba—boy that played the outfield, and pitched and played first base; he was a good ballplayer; he was sold to the Boston Braves after the season—

3 The Tampa Smokers were a member of the Florida State League from 1919 to 1927.

4 The first Florida State League was a Class "D" circuit, which ran from 1919 to 1928. In 1963 the minor leagues were reorganized and the Florida State League now holds the single "A" classification.

5 Now known as the National League’s Atlanta Braves. The Boston Braves were the name of the organization from 1912 to 1936 and then from 1940 to 1953.
by the name of (inaudible) and myself were the only—no, there was another Cuban boy, there was a Tampa native—not native; he was born in Cuba, but was living here in Tampa—by the name of Alvarez, Cesar Alvarez. We were the three Spanish speaking boys on that club.

GM: When you went on the road to some of these cracker towns in the state, did they give you a rough time?

AL: Well, yeah, at first. But nobody took it personally; they were trying to rile us. They do that in baseball all over, you know, they try to see if they can get under your skin or something like that. They start calling you names. As long as they didn't get personal—they'd call you a Cuban or something like that, which is all right.

GM: Did you think that being Latin was—was it an asset or a hindrance, do you think, in your career?

AL: I didn't. I guess that maybe I was too young, I didn't feel either way. I felt that I treated everybody all right, and everybody treated me all right. Since I was a youngsters, I always felt that way about it. And if a guy didn't like me for some reason or another, I just didn't bother with him; or, if he liked me, I treated him nice, and he treated me nice. I don't know. They bring in this minority thing a lot, and I never did have anything handicap me in that way. I guess I was lucky.

I moved out of Tampa to play ball, I'm talking about, 'cause I always came back to Tampa. Went to Jacksonville in twenty-seven [1927], and they treated me royally over there. I played pretty good ball for them. And then I went to Macon, Georgia, and geez, I was one of the favorites over there. And I went to Atlanta, the same thing, and then I went up to Brooklyn [Robins]. It's true that I just got started on the right foot right away. But I was treated real, real nice every place I went in baseball.

GM: What did your mother think, and your father think, of deciding on a baseball career?

AL: Well, my dad liked baseball. My mother thought it was a waste of time, you know, that I should go get a job instead of playing baseball. Well, after I signed, and my brothers tried to explain to her, you know, that I guess I must have been pretty good to have signed with a pro club, she kind of start feeling, “Well, maybe let him go; maybe he might become a ballplayer.”

GM: Right, right. So, okay, you signed in twenty-four [1924]? Twenty-five [1925]?

AL: Twenty-five [1925].

GM: Twenty-five [1925]. How many years did it take you to get to the majors?
AL: Well, I played at Tampa the first year. Like I said, I didn't catch too much. I finally ended up catching towards the end of the season. The next year I was a regular catcher, I was drafted—what they call drafted—by the Jacksonville club, which was a higher classification; it was "B." So, I went to Jacksonville. At Jacksonville, we had a pitcher by the name of Ben Cantwell.⁶

GM: Cantwell?

AL: Cantwell, who was having a great year, a real great year, you know. He was twenty-five [wins] and five [losses] by the latter part of July, which was—you know, he'd have won forty games if he'd have pitched all year.

And then all the scouts, at that time, were big league scouts. Right now, they have what they call birddogs, you know, to watch all the kids, all over. Now, in those days, they only had a few scouts, and they would send those scouts in to wherever a ballplayer was hot, you know, if he was having a good season, to see if they like him or not, if they could make a deal for him. And every time we played a ball game, there must have been at least anywhere from six to eight scouts in the stands watching, watching our club playing, on account of Ben Cantwell, especially when he was pitching.

And, for some reason or other, the Brooklyn scout—fellow by the name of Net Brook that was a pitcher on the club, lived outside of Atlanta, Georgia—took a liking to me. He wrote back, or called on the phone, back to the front office, that he liked the catcher better than he did the pitcher. So they told him, “If you like the catcher, go ahead and buy him.” So, they made a deal for me for ten thousand dollars. And I was sold to Brooklyn in 1927.

GM: Did you get any of that money?

AL: No. The guys, now that you bring that up, the guy at Jacksonville at the time, the president of the club told me, "If you make good," cause they only gave him a thousand dollars down and nine thousand dollars if they kept me. And he says, "If you make good, if you can stay with them, I get the extra nine thousand. I'll give you a tenth of it, a thousand dollars." I said, “That's fine,” but I never did get anything.

But anyway, Brooklyn, the following year, sent me to Macon, Georgia, one year to experience. Then they sent me to Atlanta, Georgia, for another year, and then after that I was—

GM: Atlanta like Triple-A, then, or—?

AL: No, I was Double-A.

GM: Was that Dixie League?

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⁶Cantwell played eleven seasons, mostly with the Boston Braves.
AL: It was called the Southern League.  

GM: Southern League?

AL: Yeah. There was the Southern League and the Texas League, they were both in parallel; and then there was Triple-A, the ones up in Indianapolis and Minneapolis. And those clubs, they were Triple-A. We were next to a Triple-A. And I had a good year, and the following year, I went up to Brooklyn, and stayed with Brooklyn, 1930.

GM: What kind of money were you making, then, by that time?

AL: Atlanta, I was making—I think I was making five hundred dollars a month in Atlanta, which was good money.

GM: Oh, yeah, big money.

AL: Although I found out some of the guys were making—the older guys were making as high as a thousand dollars a month. Funny thing is, we were playing all day baseball, no night games in those days, and we traveled by train, good transportation. We lived good, and we survived. The clubs made a little money, but then the Depression hit, you know, and a lot of those clubs went busted.

The Atlanta club was owned by a man called Colonel Spiller. He owned the ball club and the ballpark, and he had swimming pools and a soda fountain next to the ballpark. Across the street was Sears Roebuck in Atlanta. And I remember this little girl, Louise Suggs, who turned out to be one of the great golfers of all time. She was a little girl. She was Colonel Spiller's granddaughter, and she used to hang around the soda fountain all the time.

We'd come out of the ballpark to get a refreshment, 'cause, again, we played all the games and it was hot. Atlanta can get hot in the summertime. And in those days we used knickers, and I was always—I didn't even fasten my knickers up, I would just let them flop, 'cause I was hot. Just a T-shirt was warm. And I would come over there, and this little girl would always come over and kind of give me a hug and kiss every time she'd see me, and then she'd come down there and she'd fix my knickers up for me all the time. And I finally saw her here at Palma Ceia playing when they first started the tour. She reminded me of that, what she used to do.

GM: What were some of these small towns like, let's say in Florida? Traveling, what kind of—which cities would you hit? What were conditions like?

7 This is a Double-A organization that began in 1964 with teams all across the Southeastern United States.

8 Won eleven majors and one of the co-founders of the LPGA.
AL: Our longest trip was Orlando—no, Sanford.

GM: Sanford.

AL: Yeah, Sanford was the longest trip, and Orlando; that was the longest trip that we had. We had Orlando, but I remember very well that if you could go, we used to travel by car in this league, in private cars. Or we'd rent; we'd take rental cars. And we, if you could make that trip in less than four hours from here to Orlando, you would really had to really rush. You had to go—well, you had—it was what they called Broadway, now it's Seventh Avenue—and you'd have to go through all the way through those small little towns into Plant City, and then Lakeland. And then you'd have to go Haines City, Kissimmee, and there was some other small town in between, and then Orlando. There was narrow roads, and it was very difficult to travel in those days.

St. Petersburg—well, St. Pete, when we were over there, the Gandy Bridge was just opened. Gandy Bridge was opened in twenty-four [1924], I think. And we thought this was great, because if not, we'd have had to go all the way around, around Clearwater, Dunedin, Clearwater, Largo, in through there, and it must—it could have taken you a good hour, hour and a half to get to St. Pete. This other way, it might take us about a half hour to get there, which was a great help to us.

GM: What kind of crowds would they get in places like Sanford, Orlando?

AL: Sanford would draw, I imagine, anywhere from 600 to maybe 1500 people a game. The people used to come out to watch us during day games. Orlando was not too bad, especially if they were up in the race. Most of those clubs, if they were up in the race, they would come out. Tampa was a good draw. It was mostly—I'm not being prejudiced, but I think that it was mostly the cigar makers, that they used to get off early sometimes from the factory to come out to see the ball game. They were great baseball fans.

GM: Is that right?

AL: Great fans.

GM: I'd be curious, what kind of bargaining power did you have in those days? How would you manage your contract?

AL: (laughs)

GM: I assume you did not have an agent?

AL: Nope. To tell you the truth, when they—Doc (inaudible) was the one that signed me, of course; he used to be an old catcher himself. And he says, "Al, what do you have in mind for a contract?" and I says, "I don't know anything about contracts." And he says, "How about 150 dollars?" Well, I took it; I thought maybe he might change his mind. So,
I took the 150 dollars, and the following year they gave me $175, which I thought was great, because I hadn't fought that much.

Then I went to Jacksonville, and I think I was in Jacksonville, I think I made $250 or $275, or something like that. Again, I thought it was great. And afterwards, when the Brooklyn club bought me, I think they gave me a contract of—I think it was 500 dollars. I went to Macon, and the following year they gave me $550 or something like that. I thought it was great.

GM: How did the Depression affect your career or the players, of the players?

AL: Well, it eventually hurt us, hurt the players’ salaries, because, as you know—well, you don't know. (inaudible) It was really, really rough in the Depression. And especially when [President Franklin Delano] Roosevelt came in and closed all the banks, your bargaining power went out the door, because the argument the ball clubs had is, “We don't know how far we can go, 'cause if the banks are not open, we won't be able to operate.” And nobody would come out here, 'cause they don’t have any money to come to the park.

But I was making pretty good money at that time. I was making $10,000 on my second year at Brooklyn, 1931. And I was fortunate. Personally, I didn't feel the Depression at all, since I was making pretty good money, but when I'd come home and see all these families that were friends of ours, around Ybor City there, and some of them were going to bed without any food. It was really a real serious bad thing, and I felt real bad.

pause in recording

AL: —all great, you know, everybody they just, well there was nobody from the whole state that ever played, had played any baseball at all, you know, major league ball.

GM: Were you the first pro baseball player in Ybor City?

AL: Oh, yes, by far. There was nobody from this area had any. I don't know whether there was any at that time. Yeah, there was one boy that played some that I played with in school by the name of Mike Boza. We played together in school. He was a good hitter. He should have been a pretty good ballplayer, but he just never did make it. He was slow of foot, you know; he couldn’t run too well. He wanted to be a shortstop, and he should have been either a first baseman or a third baseman. But he was a good hitter. I wish I could have hit like he hit, 'cause he was a fine hitter.

But no, there was—in fact, when I went to the major league, it was only two Spanish-speaking ballplayers at that time. It was myself and a fellow by the name of Adolph Luchey, who had been in the big leagues quite a while; a Cuban pitcher, very fine pitcher from Cuba. Real, real good pitcher. He won twenty-five games one year.
GM: A lot of Italians had been playing ball at that time, yeah. And (inaudible) and [Joe] DiMaggio.

AL: Well, they came after; they came way after that.

GM: Crocetti.

AL: Crocetti. There was a few Italians from the coast, mostly from around the San Francisco area, that came, and then Los Angeles came into the picture. At one time North Carolina was the biggest producer of major league ballplayers, and then it moved to Texas. And then the last—I’d say the last twenty or thirty years, California has been responsible, where they get most of the ballplayers. But there was a lot of—around the San Francisco area, there’s a lot of good Italian ballplayers came from around that area. There was a few from around St. Louis, east, around St. Louis, where [Joe] Garagiola, Yogi Berra, and those boys came from. A lot of good ballplayers came from that area, that same neighborhood.

GM: Who were some of your more memorable teammates in those early years in the thirties [1930s] in Brooklyn?

AL: Oh, we had a great pitcher by the name of Dazzy Vance. Great pitcher. We had a great shortstop by the name of Glenn Wright, and I think he should be in the Hall of Fame. He was a great shortstop. We had at first base a fellow by the name of (inaudible). Dave Herman was a great ballplayer for us. You know—

GM: He’s a catcher, right?

AL: No, Dave was an outfielder.

GM: Outfield, right.

AL: He hit .393 one year and he hit .387 another year, never led the league. He finished second both years.

GM: Is that right?

AL: Yeah. He was tremendous.

GM: What was your best hitting year?

AL: I hit .309 for Brooklyn my first year, and I hit .301 in 1932 or three [1933], I think it was, and then I hit .300 at Pittsburgh. I didn't play that many games.

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9 Also know as Charles Arthur Vance; he played from 1915 to 1935, mainly for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and is a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame. Dazzy also was in later life an hotelier in Homosassa, Florida.
GM: What do you attribute your durability to? Isn't it right that you still hold the record for most games caught?²⁰

AL: Yes.

GM: Right. And may not be broken, you know. Do you—I’m curious if you think Bench will break it?

AL: Yeah, Bench has got a good chance.

GM: Right. Why were you so durable, do you think?

AL: I guess it's the individual himself, the way you're built, you know. And the reason Bench—I like Bench because he catches easy, what we call easy; he don't have to put too much effort into what he's doing. I think that you—and I caught that way. I like to play. You got to love to play. And I think it's you, individually. I think that if I hadn't have had my fingers broken as many times as I did, that I could have maybe caught 2500 games.

GM: You caught how many, now?

AL: Nineteen eighteen [1,918].

GM: Nineteen eighteen [1,918], yeah.

AL: I think I could have caught easily 2500. I must have caught another—oh, I'd say 600 or 700 games in the minor leagues.

GM: Minors, yeah, right. That's the thing; too, it used to take a lot more time to break in, in the old days.

AL: Oh, yeah. They would check you out.

GM: Now, they’d send you, don’t wait more than a year or two.

AL: No, they try to bring you up as soon as they can.

GM: Right. Do you have knee problems today? I always thought that catching that many games, bending that much—

AL: No, you'd be surprised; that was my best part of my body was my legs. I had real fine legs. I could run when I was younger, run pretty good; then I got older, and I kind of slowed up a little bit. But I could run pretty good when I was young.

GM: Right. What's your high watermark in the big leagues, as a player?

²⁰This record stood until 1987, when Bob Boone broke it; Ivan Rodriguez holds it, as of 2009.
AL: As a player? Well, I guess the first year I played at Brooklyn, I had a great year. I had a real good year. Then, after that, I got to where they considered me more of a handler of pitchers and a smart catcher than they considered me as a hitter. But I played eighteen years in the major leagues, and I finally ended up hitting .261, which is, I think, a pretty good average. I was not a long ball hitter.

I think that the thing that hurt me the most—especially me, 'cause I wasn't that big; I weighed about 165 pounds—was that they changed the ball. My first year, there was a real good ball, like, I think this ball was even (inaudible) than the ball that we used in 1930. They started changing the ball, they [started] denting it a little bit because they claim that the ball—you know, that they couldn't play what they called baseball, you know, inside baseball, hitting, running, and the squeeze, and all that. Everybody was swinging for fences, trying to hit the home runs, the same thing that's happening today. And they started changing the ball; they [were] denting it up a little bit.

Then, when the war years came in, they were using wool that was already been used, which bends a lot. You got to have virgin wool in that ball to make it springy, to make it go. And that hurt everybody—not only me, but you know, it hurt all the averages at that time, using that thick wool, that dead ball. I wish I'd have been playing with this ball here, because I could reach fences with this ball. I could hit the fence, or maybe hit one over once in a while.

But when they put the other ball in, the balls that might have hit the fence or gone over, it's just a lazy fly ball, it's an easy out. And it'd hurt your averages. The year from 1930 to 1931, when they started changing balls—in 1930, Bill Terry was a great first baseman when the New York Giants, finally ended up being their manager. He hit .401. The following year, he and Chick Haffy and Barnaby were the runner-ups for the batting average for the batting title, and they were both around .343 or something like that. So, that dropped from .401 all the way down to .343.

GM: That's rather dramatic. Did you think you think you would go on as a coach?

AL: Well, in my latter years, I was a captain on the team, on every team that I played. And in my latter years, every once in a while I would have to run the club when a manager got thrown out. I played with Casey Stengel, and he got thrown out a few times and I would have to run the club. In my later years, I figured, geez, I'd like to try it to see if I could manage. I didn't know whether I could or not. Or even coach.

And I know my last year at Pittsburgh [Pirates]—well at Pittsburgh I told them that I was going to try to get a coaching job or a managing job, and they sent me to Cleveland. And at the end of the year I told Bill Veeck, who was the owner, that I felt that I was about through, and I said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd give me my release, because I'd like to get a manager's job in the minor leagues or a coaching job in the majors, if I could." And he says, "Consider yourself released." He was very nice about it. And I did. I went to the
World Series in New York that year, and finally ended up getting a job with Indianapolis, managing Indianapolis.

GM: What year was that?

AL: Nineteen forty-eight, forty-nine [1949], and fifty [1950]. We had three real good ball clubs. The first year I managed, we had, we won a hundred ball games, and won the pennant that year. The next year we finished second by a half a game, and the third year we won the—we finished second again. But one year, we won the Little World Series. Played Montreal, and in the Little World Series. But we had—I had three great years. I really enjoyed those three years in Indianapolis.

GM: And you broke into the big league coaching when?

AL: Fifty-one [1951].

GM: Fifty-one [1951]. Was it Cleveland, or—?

AL: Cleveland. Greenburg talked to McKinney. I had a year to go on my contract at Indianapolis, and Greenburg talked to McKinney; they were real good friends. McKinney was the owner of the Indianapolis club, and asked him if he could talk to me, that he would like to get me for the—we’d come up to the Cleveland Club.

GM: Those were the great pitching years of Cleveland, wasn’t it? You had [Bob] Feller and [Mike] Garcia, and [Early] Wynn.

AL: [Bob] Lemon.

GM: And Lemon. Wow.

AL: We had four great pitchers.

GM: What did you think of Feller? Is he the greatest pitcher you ever coached?

AL: No, he was great, but I’ve seen some great ones. I saw, well, I hit against Dizzy Dean a lot. But Dazzy Vance was great stuff, and a great pitcher. Paul Hubbell was a great pitcher. He was one of the greatest I ever saw. Feller was great. Lefty Gould; I hit against him in exhibition games. He was a great pitcher. There were a lot of great pitchers. But it’s harder; they’re so close together that it’s hard. (inaudible) Walter Johnson here in Tampa.

GM: Is that right?

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11 Also known as the Junior World Series; this was a postseason series between the champions from two of the high-minor leagues.
AL: When I was sixteen, he was pitching batting practice for the Washington [Senators] (inaudible). They came through here in the fall of twenty-five [1925], March of twenty-five [1925] and they asked me if I would catch it, and I didn’t know if I could catch it or not. It was quite a thrill for me. So, I said, "I'll try to catch it." They wanted to see if they could draw the Latin people from Ybor City to come for the game. They were (inaudible) here. And I did. I caught that ball game; I caught him good.

The only thing he said to me, he says, "Hey, kid, don't fall for too many curve balls."

And I said, "Mr. Johnson, you throw what you want to do. I put down the signs, and if you don't want it, just shake your glove or shake your head, and I'll change it."

He says, "And I'm not really going to let out except with a couple of the hitters."

And I said, "Who are they?" 'cause I wanted, you know, I wanted to be ready when he let out.

And he says, “One of them was a guy by the name of Ike (inaudible),” an outfielder, he said. He hit him pretty good, and (inaudible) bear down on him. He says the other guy was a guy by the name of Jack (inaudible)—French first baseman, played the big league for quite a while; left-hand hitter also—and he struck him out both, twice. He only pitched five innings that day, but he pitched—it was a great experience for me to catch. And then after that, I caught for a bat practice for him.

GM: Did you ever play against any of the black traveling teams in the summer, or with the traveling shows?

AL: No.

GM: No. No exhibition game?

AL: You mean in those days?

GM: Yeah, right. Anything.

AL: No. They used to travel mostly in the big cities, and they used to go out to the coast. They used to go out to Los Angeles, San Francisco area, and play mostly out there to make a little money.

GM: Right. Were you coaching, or playing? You would’ve been coaching when blacks finally broke in, right, in the big Leagues in forty-seven [1947] with [Jackie] Robinson?

AL: No, I was at Indianapolis when Robinson [came]. It was just right after I left the Major Leagues that Robinson came in.

GM: Did he have any blacks in the Cleveland game?
AL: Oh, yeah.

GM: Larry Doby, was he playing then?

AL: We had a lot of blacks. We had Luke Easter, Larry Doby, [Harry Leon] Simpson, we had—

GM: Doby was the second black to break in, wasn't he? First in the American League?

AL: Yeah, first in the American League. Yeah.

GM: That was really something.

AL: I think the press made more of a thing out of that thing than anything else, that they were trying to create a lot of—between the players, I never saw any resentment of any kind, I think, Larry fitted in real good right away with us in Cleveland. And I think Robinson—well, Robinson was—and Doby too—they were all great competitors, you know, guys that had been around. And they weren't going to let—we had to go through some of that. You know, they'd call you your first so-and-so sometimes, and names, but they called everybody that, and they'd throw at you.

When I broke in, the pitchers would throw at you to knock you down to see if you could take it. If they'd get you scared up at the plate, then you were through. You had to battle back. And that goes for the same thing practically as that, you know; if they holler names at you, what's the difference? To me, it was no difference if I was a minority or not. I am what I am, and I'm proud of it.

GM: What, how would you describe your experiences in fifty-nine [1959] with the White Sox?

AL: Great. We had a—you know, we had—I enjoyed managing that club, because it took managing. You know, it took a lot of time to squeeze a run here and get a run here; we didn't have any power, you know. The Cleveland Club was more of a powerful club; it was a great pitching, and some guys that could get up there, and [Al] Rosen and Doby and guys like that could hit the ball out of the ballpark, and you'd finally win, five to four or six to two or something, whatever, you know. But in Chicago, it looked like every game you had to struggle to try to win it, you had to really play, and you would maneuver around all you could to try to win it.

You had at Cleveland that year—I thought we had the best all-around pitching staff I ever saw on any club, of all the years that I was there, because we had a fellow, Feller and [Ray] Narleski mostly in the bullpen. We had [Hal] Newhouser in the bullpen, we had

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12Doby was signed to the Cleveland Indians in 1947, and was the first African American in the American League and the second African American in Major League Baseball.
Lemon, we had Wynn, we had a fellow by the name of Art Houtteman, [and] Garcia. Houtteman won fifteen games for us, you know, and nobody mentions him. He pitched good ball for us that year.

GM: Right. Did you find, like, with the White Sox—being Latin, did that help you handle guys like [Luis] Aparicio and [Jim] Rivera?

AL: No, we didn't have no—we didn’t have—

GM: No problems?

AL: Again, I think it's they respected me and I respected them. I spoke Spanish once in a while to Aparicio; I spoke Spanish to [Bobby] Avila at Cleveland, when he was with us at Cleveland. Once in a while—you know, if we were by ourselves or something like that—he'd come over and speak Spanish to me, and I'd speak Spanish to him. He spoke very, very good Spanish. So did Aparicio; Rivera, not so much. He was mostly brought up in New York. I don't know if he was born in New York or Puerto Rico.

GM: Rudy Arias on that team, too?

AL: Yeah.

GM: No one ever hears of him.

AL: Yeah. On all four avenues.

GM: I know that team, every player on that team.

AL: Is that right?

GM: Yeah.

AL: That’s funny that you would bring that name up.

GM: He was one of the obscure relievers with [Jerry] Staley and, uh—what was the—

AL: He was a nice boy.

GM: Turk Lown.

AL: A real nice boy. I remember one incident that happened now that you brought his name up. We used to play the Yankees, and they had this guy by the name of Duren.

GM: Ryne Duren.
AL: He wore glasses, real thick glasses, and he said he couldn't see too well. But he could see pretty good, you know. And for some reason or another, every time [Jim] Landis would come up—Landis was a skinny kid, you know—he would just let one fly right by his neck, or he'd throw one open screen or something like that. And he finally hit Landis here in St. Petersburg in an exhibition game. And I kept looking at this guy. For some reason or another, he wants to scare Landis or something like that, intimidate him, you know. And he hit Landis right on the skullcap. Luckily, he had a skullcap on.

I went up to home plate to see if he was all right, and finally I told Yogi, cause Yogi and I had been friends for a while. "Yogi, I want you to do something for me,” I said. “I want you to tell that guy that if he ever throws at this guy again, he better be ready when he comes up, 'cause we're going to low-bridge him. I don't care if he's got glasses or not.”

Sure enough, he must have forgot. We were playing in Chicago, and Landis is the hitter. And here comes Duren, and the first pitch he threw, one went right behind his head. I called the bullpen and I called Ray Berry and I says, “Ray, I want somebody to volunteer, ’cause I really want to really knock this guy down. But I want him to volunteer. I don't want him, to—you know, if he don't want to do it, I don't want him to hurt him, 'cause he wears glasses, you got to be careful. But I want to let him know that he can't keep doing this thing, same thing to Landis, 'cause I got to protect him.”

So finally, this boy, Arias, says, "I want to volunteer." But I didn't want a left-hander. He was a left-hander; I wanted a right hander. And he volunteered, and sure enough, he lowered him good, I mean really good. And that Duren looked at him, you know, like saying, "What are you throwing at me for?" He was a pitcher. Well, we didn't care; we just wanted to let him know that he just couldn't keep abusing this poor Landis the way he was doing.

GM: That’s great. Well, listen, I'd really like to thank you. It's really been most enjoyable, most enjoyable.

AL: Good. I hope you get some good out of it.

GM: Hey, thanks again. Great.

End of interview