Capturing the history of the Panama Canal through oral history interviews with the individuals and families that lived and worked there has been an important part of the Panama Canal Museum Collection’s (PCMC) mission since 2012 when the collection came to the University of Florida. These firsthand accounts serve an important role in preserving the past as well as in the enrichment of present-day exhibits, research, and instruction. It is a labor-intensive process that includes scheduling, research and question customization, conducting interviews, transcribing, and of course paperwork—we calculated that it takes about 15-20 hours per one-hour interview. To reduce staff time, we often utilize apps or work in tandem with students on the transcriptions which introduces them to the history of the Panama Canal and to the peculiarities of oral history as a form of documentation.

Fig. 1: The ship *Ever Goods* transiting the Panama Canal. *Ever Goods* is the sister ship of the *Ever Given*, the ship that got stuck in the Suez Canal in March 2021. Panama Canal Museum Collection, 2003.043.001
The first significant oral history campaign coincided with the 2014 centennial celebration of the Canal’s opening, and was in partnership with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP). In 2019, after a brief pause to prioritize other collection needs, PCMC began preparing to restart the program and a new campaign. Months of planning created the necessary framework, and we started conducting interviews again in early 2020. But after only seven interviews, our work, along with most of the world’s, dramatically changed with the arrival of COVID-19.

Finding our new path forward led us down numerous dead ends. We explored established services like StoryCorps but there were often issues with copyright, so we decided to design our own solutions. We spent a few weeks creating online portals in Google and Qualtrics for people to submit written narratives, thinking that individuals at home would have time to reminisce and record extended stories, but only got a few submissions. We also started doing interviews over the telephone and Zoom.

Conducting an interview over the phone comes with its own unique challenges. The person being interviewed can’t see any visual cues to indicate that the interviewer is listening and engaged with their story, and the interviewer can’t always tell when the interviewee is done with a thought. Early recordings are full of “are you still there” and “sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, go ahead,” but we got the hang of it, eventually striking a balance where the interviewer is giving more frequent verbal acknowledgements that don’t interfere with the overall story. Many of the interviews were conducted when the University was closed or had reduced hours and employees were working from home due to the pandemic, so there are also interviews with the grass being cut or my dog, Ripley, barking in the background. I learned to schedule interviews around the lawn maintenance of the houses nearby and my husband’s Zoom meetings, and to put Ripley on the other side of the house.

Fig. 2: Lou Womack and I [Elizabeth] spoke for two hours about her family’s amazing history in October 2021. Her father, Lyle Womack was a member of the first Antarctic expedition and owned the famous El Rancho Beer Garden in Panama City, Panama. He met her mother Louise Tucker, a silent film actress, while employed at Gay’s Lion Farm in California, a business that supplied animals for the film industry. We are still working with Lou to preserve her extensive autobiographical writing and to scan her family materials. https://ufdc.ufl.edu/aa00087674/00001
The technology barrier of conducting an oral history interview at a distance is also not insignificant. The plan had been to start by interviewing the oldest members of the community, and many were unfamiliar with the process of signing and returning documents via email. For our interviewees in the United States, we sent paper forms through the mail, but our international participants provided a whole new set of hurdles—Panama does not have door-to-door mail service. Left with few options, we created DocuSign versions of all our forms (Permission Forms, Life History Forms), and had many phone conversations with people, walking them through the process so that we didn’t lose the opportunity to capture their stories.

We established an amazing community partnership with Pan Caribbean Sankofa, a group interviewing people of Caribbean descent who had once lived or worked at the Panama Canal. We communicated with them almost daily, sharing the lessons we had learned and providing support by helping set up training and documentation. They didn’t skip a beat, and took full advantage of the wonderful ways that Zoom was able to enrich the process. Individuals from across multiple states and countries could get together to share and learn from each other’s histories. Some interviews had as many as twelve people, often times “seeing” each other for the first time in years or decades. We are honored to preserve those recordings here at UF.
Despite the new challenges, we have added 92 interviews to the collection since 2020. The Executive Council of the PCMC Friends Group has been a critical part of our success by participating in interviews, suggesting others to be interviewed, and leading fundraising efforts. With their help and guidance, we have raised over $150,000 in the past two years, specifically for the oral history program.

I spoke with amazing people along the way who graciously took the leap of faith with us and rolled with the tides of the evolving process. I heard beautiful stories of multi-generational connections to Panama, playing in bomb shelters during World War II, taking part in a monkey census, a court case involving Ruth Bader Ginsburg, tales of adventures and hardships, the deep bonds of community and lifelong friends, and tearful yet joyful musings on a place that no longer exists. I forged meaningful bonds with my colleagues in Pan Caribbean Sankofa that have taken deep roots and are unlikely to be let go, even long after our work partnership has ended. Although the past few years of conducting oral history interviews have not been at all what we planned for, I am, and the collection is, forever enriched by what we were able to achieve.

A few individuals wanted to wait and do their interviews face to face, and I am happy to say we are working our way down that list of patient storytellers.