

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
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**EASTERN NATIONAL
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
“AFTER THE LAST GENERATION:
LOWELL’S TEXTILE WORKERS, 1958-1998, PART I”**

**INFORMANT: JOHN LEITE
INTERVIEWER: GRAY FITZSIMONS
DATE: AUGUST 10, 1999**

**G = GRAY
J = JOHN**

Tape 99.12

Tape begins with interviewer in mid-sentence:

G: Carroll Parkway. It is morning, late morning, August 10th. I'm here with John Leite. And John we're going to do an interview for about an hour this morning and talk to you about your growing up in Lowell, your family background, your work experience, and then your work as a musician. So John let's start out with some personal stuff. What year were you born?

J: 1933.

G: And you were born where?

J: Manchester, New Hampshire.

G: Okay. And what do you remember about Manchester, New Hampshire?

J: Well I remember I had a lot of relatives, and I still do have a lot of relatives up there. As I mentioned to you in previous talks, you know my parents were very fluid in their movement for seeking work because they had to. They had to earn money, and money was very low, you know the pays were very small. So my oldest sister who's eighty-five was born in Manchester. My next two sisters were born in Lowell. And I was born in Manchester you know, several years later. And then when I was three, we moved back to Lowell to Swede Village, (G: Umhm) what they used to call Swede Village. Upper Gorham Street, near the cemeteries, up that way. (G: Um. Umhm) And you know

that's, that's the way the work went back in those days, you know. The mills were a good work source, but they weren't very reliable for longevity (G: Umhm) even back then (G: Umhm. Umhm) you know, because management changed a lot.

G: Umhm. Umhm. Where were your parents from?

J: The Azores, Graciosa. It's one of the small islands, one of the smaller of the Azores Islands.

G: And when did they come to the United States?

J: Oh God. I don't know. They were about eighteen years old, you know. And uh (--)

G: Do you know what decade that would have been roughly?

J: Probably uh, 19, early 1900's. I'm trying to think. I think my Dad was born in 1895, or something around there. So you add eighteen years to that. So it's probably within 1918, or 19 uh? No, that would be what? 1913, something like that. Some where around that.

G: And how did they wind up in Massachusetts?

J: Well relatives. It's like you know the Hispanics do now, and Cubans. They always go wherever the other families went, you know, the people that they knew from before. And so a lot of the families coming back then either went to Lowell, Fall River, New Bedford, you know. And those were the main, three main cities in Massachusetts that they went to.

G: Umhm. And do you know where they first settled in New England?

J: Well it was in Manchester. Well? It was in Lowell first, because my parents lived in a boarding house on Back Central Street. My mother, there was separate you know, men and women were not allowed to live together. They had a boarding house for women, a boarding house for the guys. And there was in the Back Central Street area, some where near Back Central and Chapel Street these huge blocks, you know, housing blocks. And uh, then they would have dances like you know they did then. And that's how the guys met the women, although my father already knew my mother. They weren't married or anything, but they knew them from the island, because the Azores is a small place, you know. So they already knew them. And they had a lot of relatives that would come over prior to that.

G: Did they get married in Lowell?

J: They got married in uh, let me think. Yeah, it was Lowell. And as I said earlier, my sister Wilhelmina was born shortly thereafter, but she was born up in Manchester because of the mill thing you know, that I told you about. You had to keep on going up and down

the Merrimack River (G: Umhm) for work. So um, she, she worked in the mills. Actually all of my, my whole family worked in the mills. My oldest sister worked in the mills. My next two sisters worked in the mills, although they didn't work in the factory, they were office workers. United Elastic, which is behind where Grace Shoe used to be, off Market Street in the back. I think they have condos down there now. That was United Elastic. They used to make elastic, and make spandex kind of stuff. And that's where my sister Helen met her husband Roger, because he had gone to Lowell Tech and he got an Engineering Degree. And he got a job there at United Elastic. You know he was an Engineer, and she was in the office. And you know, that's how that came about, you know. But they, Mary and Helen both worked at United Elastic in the office. I don't remember what specific job it was, it was a secretarial type thing.

G: When would they have been working there John? Do you know off hand?

J: Probably the 40's I think, 50's? [Unclear]

G: And your parents obviously started working in the mills what? Maybe in the 1920's?

J: As soon as they came here. As soon as they came here. Yup. They started as soon as they came here. That was the only work there was.

G: Do you know what your parents did when they initially came working in the mills?

J: Well my mother was, started off as a bobbin girl. I guess they used to wind the bobbins, or separate them, or something. Then she became a weaver. And then my Dad started off as a weaver and then he became a loom fixer, because he was really good with his hands, and very mechanically oriented, you know. He could make parts and all that kind of stuff. As a matter of fact, he designed a part for one of the looms to make it run better and he got zip for it. And management never came down and said, "Hey Mr. Leite, thanks, thanks a lot!" You know, but they felt the bulge in their pocket, because they didn't give one good crap about the workers, all they wanted was production. More production, more production, more production, you know. And so I saw that it was happening, but they had to work you know, to provide for their family. And that's the way it worked. And we all worked.

G: When did you start working?

J: Eight years old.

G: And what did you do?

J: My father said, "Well you're eight now, it's about time to go to work in the summer. You got the whole summer off. You're not going to (--). Where everybody else is working, you have to work. So he put me in the car, drove me to where Chelmsford High School is now, it was a farm, Avila's Farm. And he went to Mr. Avila who was one son of a gun, and he said, "I'm going to leave him here for the summer. You're going to

work everyday. I don't care, you don't have to pay him. I just want him to be working, to learn something." So myself and Sonny his youngest son, this was a stepfather to the kids, we both worked on the farm driving tractors at eight years old. Pulling up weeds, doing all of the garden kind of stuff. Taking care of the cows, the bulls. There's a funny story there, which I probably can't put on this tape, but we had a good time. We worked hard, but we found a way to have a good time, sort of like kids do. There used to be a sandpit and there was water at the bottom. We'd go sliding down that sandpit, and they'd be, you could hear his father screaming "Where the hell are the boys!" We were back in there in the little water hole. And then we'd come out all dripping wet. "Where were you?" "We were chasing the cows! One of the cows got lose." And here we are standing there dripping wet. And of course like he didn't notice it. But he was tough. He used to go after his son with the broom and all that stuff. He never hit me because my father would deck him, but he also, he always would tell on me. So when I got home I got it anyway. So it didn't make any difference. But back to the mill thing.

G: Yeah, what year were you born by the way John?

J: 1933.

G: '33. So you were eight years old in 41. And you started working that early age. (J: Yeah) And uh, so (--)

J: Then after the farm deal, when I got to be around ten, well eleven or twelve, something like that, and uh, he went to Tommy Spinney's garage, which is still there, the son is running it. His son's running it, actually the grandson. And he went to Tommy, old Tommy, and he said uh, "I want him to work here in the summer. You don't have to pay him." My father was very nice with me, right!. You don't have to pay him, just make him work. [Chuckles] So I worked there six days a week, you know. And I was starting to crank out some jobs after a year or two. So I went to Tommy, "I said, hey, you know, I'm turning out some work here. I should get paid." "Your father said I didn't have to pay you." I said, "Yeah, bull." You know, "I mean I should get something" So anyhow he gave me a buck for nine hours a day. I was getting a buck a day for six days a week.

G: But that was the first time you spoke up for yourself right, and said "I should get paid?"

J: Yeah. Yeah. I said, "For Christ sake, you know, I'm turning out work. I'm doing brake jobs, right?" I mean I'm doing valve jobs and I'm getting zero. I started off cleaning this crap off the pans, you know, in the corner of the garage. You know, all the grease and like cleaning them up and stuff. But then I eventually I got to do some work. And he finally gave me a bucket you know. And they used to pay you in the little brown envelopes, bank envelopes. And there was a store on the corner, it was only two streets from my house. And there was a little store there. And do you think on Saturday when I come home I dare open that envelope and buy some candy or a coke? No way. That envelope would go home Friday night, or Saturday rather. And my sister's envelopes

would come home. Everybody paid in envelopes, in cash envelopes. And my mother and my father, all five of us. My oldest sister owned the house we lived in by this time. And everybody had opened the envelopes and put down all the money out on the table. And my father would say, "Okay, this is for the ice man, this is for the coal man, right? This is for this, this is for the bills, right? Pay all the bills. And if there's anything left over he'd say, "Okay, who needs shoes?" And we'd all lift up our shoes. And the one that had the biggest holes you know, and the biggest hi-ho cracker box tops in there covering the holes, that one person, one of us would get a pair of shoes. And that was it. And that's the way we worked. But we learned responsibility.

G: So the whole, the whole family was working to support, support the family?

J: Exactly. Right.

G: Yeah. Yeah. Now you mentioned that your parents moved quite a bit depending on where the millwork was?

J: Over the span of twenty years or so.

G: Twenty years. Yeah. Yeah. But they spent the longest amount of time in Lowell it sounds like.

J: Most of it was Lowell, yeah. (G: Yeah. Yeah) Between my oldest sister and myself, there was that span in there. And then since that time, since I was three, it was always Lowell.

G: Umhm. And where did they work in Lowell, in that (--)

J: My dad worked in most of the mills in Lowell at one time or another, but mostly, they used to call it the Silk Mills, which is right on Market Street there. You know, it's now part of a Historical Park.

G: What do you remember about Market Mills when it was actually running?

J: Well occasionally I used to go in there to either bring a sandwich, or whatever that they might have forgotten of that day. I remember it was loud as hell. It was really loud and they had all those looms whacking away the whole time. And when you came out it was like you were deaf for about five minutes. And those workers, you know, they just had to put up with it because they needed the work, you know? So, but that's what I remembered about those mills. I never worked in that mill. Later on I worked in the Merrimack Mills, the corduroy mill, which is where the Tsongas Arena is now, down in that area. But that was college, I was in college by that time.

G: Were there a lot of other Portuguese employed in the Silk Mill?

J: Oh yeah, yeah.

G: Did you know any?

J: There were a lot of Irishmen too. My father's name was Belarmino, his first name. And uh, you know, they never called him Belarmino. So they called him Bell. Bell became Bill. We used to get Christmas cards, "Mr. & Mrs. William Leite and Family". You know, he says, "where's this William come from?" And it was Bell because Bill. Bill must be William. What the hell do they know? You know Irishmen didn't know anything about Portuguese. You know how to spell their names.

G: What other kind of ethnic folks worked in the mills?

J: Greek, a lot of Greeks. I worked with a Greek man in college when I was at the Merrimack Mills on a machine. A little Greek gentleman, a wonderful person, very nice guy.

G: When did the Silk Mill close? Do you remember?

J: Jeeze, I don't. No I don't. I know that it went down south and uh, they just put the padlock on the door.

G: How was your father told about the closing of the mill?

J: Told?

G: Was he given any notice?

J: You mean there was a notice? You mean you know. No, there were no two-week notices, none of that kind of stuff. Padlock one day, you're there you know, and the place is closed.

G: So what did your father and mother do after the mill closed?

J: Well it was, it was difficult to try to find work obviously, because by now they're getting older. You know my Dad wound up driving to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania with my older sister's brother-in-law. And they used to drive. They work all, down in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in some kind of a mill down there, and they work there and they come home on weekends. You know, drive home from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania every weekend back and forth.

G: So they rented a place down there?

J: So they rented an apartment down there.

G: Umhm. Umhm.

J: And so they had to go wherever the work was. You know you have to provide for your family.

G: Yeah. This was after World War II this happened, right?

J: Yeah.

G: Yeah, and um, well John let's turn to you. And now you were, you went to school in Lowell. What, what schools?

J: I went to, I went to, well I started out, when I came from Manchester I went to the Weed-Street School.

G: So you were born in Manchester.

J: I was born in Manchester. (G: Came here) I came down here when I was three (G: three) approximately. And I, when I was old enough to go to school I went to the Weed-Street School, which was on Gorham Street. I think there's a package store there now. It used to be one of those typical wooden buildings, had four classrooms, one, two, three, four. And uh, because I was living on, my first time on Bowden Street in Swede Village. 58 Bowden Street down near the end. Another Portuguese guy owned that, and he was a casket maker. And uh, he was a carpenter, you know, cabinetmaker, but he made caskets for some company in Somerville I think, or Cambridge. And uh, so I, when I was ready to go to school I walked to school, you know. Back then you walked to school. You didn't have buses to take you anyplace. So you walked. And then when I was in fourth grade, half way through the fourth grade we moved to A Street, lower A Street where my sister, older sister purchased a two-tenement house. And so I went to the Lincoln School, not the one that's there now, not the pretty one. It used to be a huge building with a huge roof on the top. And I went there in the fourth grade. My teacher was Miss Keegan, beautiful blonde. I was in love with her. My whole life I was in love with Miss Keegan. And I finally saw her, I was well out of college. And I was in one of the stores here, I think it was DeMoulas or something. And she says, "John." And I turn around, it's this, still beautiful, you know, gray hair lady. "Remember me?" I said, "Miss Keegan." She said, "How did you remember?" And I said, "I loved you, and I still love you," you know. She was the one probably that made the biggest impression on me until high school, you know, I mean for schooling and you know, that kind of stuff. And uh, to get into eventually to the music thing, fourth grade they decided, they had a band, they were going to start a band. And they World War I helmets that were painted silver, and crossing guard belts like the cops used to wear. The white belts, right. And I said, "Woe, I got to get into this thing." I went home, I signed the sheet. I went home, I brought it home to my father. Now my father was a musician too. He played with Mal Hallett, the Pennsylvanians, and all that kind of stuff, besides working in the mills. His weekend gigs, you know. And uh, he played trombone. So I come home with the sheet for him to sign. I figured, of course he's going to sign it he's a musician. He looked at the sheet and he said, "No!" I said, "Why not?" "No drums!" I had signed up for drums. Every kid wants to whack a drum. He said, "No drums! Anything else, but no drums." I said,

“oh yeah, well then I won’t be in band.” He said, “okay.” Then I started thinking that didn’t work. So I was going to punish my father, right? I was not going to be in the band. So I wasn’t in the band. I was stubborn until the eighth grade. Now I’m in Morey Junior High, which now is an elementary school.

G: Are you still living in the same house on A Street?

J: Yeah, same house. (G: Yeah) Same house. I used to walk. What busing? You know you’d walked to school. You know if it’s a long way you got up earlier, that’s all. Right? So we walked to school. Anyway I was going to junior high and the eighth grade band was starting to take little day trips. And I’m saying, “Woe, I’m missing out on these little day trips out of school.” So I went back to him, my tail between my legs, and I said, “I’ll join the band now. What instruments should I play Dad?” And he said, “Well the only extra one I have is an old trumpet. So I’m going to start you on trumpet.” I said, “Okay.” I was ready to do whatever he wanted by this time. I took me four years to get in, [laughing] but he never gave in, which I respected him for later on. You know you don’t realize how good your parents are until you grow up and become a parent.

G: Now in the neighborhood where you grew up, were there other Portuguese families too, or was it pretty mixed with Portuguese nat...(--)

J: Of course. The mix on lower A street, Irish, French, there were three Portuguese families right near us. A lot of Irish, and some French kind of dabbled around. Like a spice, a little mixture of spices in there, you know?

G: Did you pal around with other kids, not just Portuguese kids?

J: Oh yeah! Oh yeah, yeah, although my two best friends were Portuguese. Frannie Furtado, and Eddie Silva were because we’re all altar boys at St. Anthony’s Church, which was Back Central Street. And we walked from the Highlands to Mass. When we got older we would serve the five o’clock Mass every day, and then going to school. We walked. I used to come down from my house on A Street, and down over Waite Street where Frannie lived, wrap on his door. His house was built on a side of a hill. So his windowsill was almost even with the ground. So I’d pound the thing and say, “Fran get up.” “Oh, okay.” So we’d go walk to church, walk down to Back Central Street. Serve the five o’clock mass. Father Grillo usually gave us a snack.

G: Who was the Father?

J: Father Grillo.

G: What was he? Portuguese?

J: Oh yeah. (G: Yeah) He was a great, great old guy. (G: Umhm) And he would give us a snack, and we’d go, walk downtown to Lowell High. So I mean everybody walked every place. So those are the schools basically that I went to. That’s the way I went up.

G: Now you were in high school at, where did you go? Lowell High?

J: Lowell High.

G: Yeah. Yeah. And were your parents still working when you were at Lowell High?

J: Yup. Yup.

G: What year did you graduate?

J: 1950.

G: 1950.

J: Our 50th Anniversary comes up next year!

G: All right.

J: And I'm on the committee with some of the people from my year. We've already had, we had a meeting at Cobblestones a month ago. There were a bunch of us. I've got a picture around here someplace. Four wom...(--). Three guys and three women we saw at Cobblestones, you know, talking about the party we're going to have. We had the 45th at the Doubletree. Well it used to be the Sheraton, now it's the Doubletree. Who knows what it will be by the time we get to next year. I might be some, it might be a Hilton again the way it started. But uh (--)

G: Now John, when you were in High School you were working summers in the Merrimack Mill. Is that right?

J: No, that was in college.

G: In college, okay. (J: In college) Did you decide that you did not want to work in the mills at some point?

J: Yeah, from the first time I walked into one. [Laughing] Yeah, from the first time that I had to take my Dad's lunch. That was day one I decided this. I'm not going to do this gig. (G: How old were you when you took his lunch?)

G: How old were you when you took his lunch?

J: Oh I probably was an early teenager, maybe thirteen, something like that, fourteen.

G: So you had no interest working in the mill?

J: None whatsoever. None whatsoever. No, it was dirty, it was loud, right? And they really, the ownership really didn't respect the workers. You know, maybe the foreman did, you know, the guys who really worked closely with them, right, but the other, the owners and the managers, they could give one rat for the workers. They really didn't care.

G: Umhm. So as you were in high school did it seem to you then that you might want to orient your studies to go somewhere else besides the mills?

J: No, I was in high school. All I wanted to do was play my horn. I had no vision in high school except to play my trumpet. Remember he started me on trumpet. And I eventually went to Mr. Giblin who was the band director through the forties. He's a great looking guy. He was a typical bandmaster who wore a uniform, a white uniform with the gold braids. Beautiful shock of white hair, and as he got older it got kind of yellowy, how it gets in the back. And he was kind of modest. It was kind of long. It wasn't long to your shoulders, but longish, you know. It wasn't a neat little b-flat haircut. But he was a great guy. He was a great teacher and I used to limp out of there sometimes. Because we'd sit down and play, and he used to be to my left. And if I played a wrong note, or didn't tongue something right, he'd give me a noogy on the top of my knee with his knuckle, his middle knuckle. He'd whack it! Every time I played wrong he'd whack! So if I came out limping my father would say, "Uh hah! Bad lesson? You got to practice more now." I wound up, I was practicing two and a half-hours a night. And if I didn't practice one night, this is in a tenement now on lower A Street, if I didn't practice one night the neighbors would call up and ask if I was sick.

G: So you played a lot.

J: They didn't complain. They didn't complain. (G: Yeah) You know, they were just saying, "Hey what happened to him? We don't hear him and he must be sick," you know? So I played a lot in high school. I became Captain of the band. Back then we had the military thing, and everybody had to take military training for gym. I wasn't interested in sports, but I had to take something. So I took military training. I liked that, that part I liked, the regiment. I always liked the regiment stuff, because my life was always regimented for me.

G: Your parents were pretty strict it seems?

J: They were very strict on all of us, not just me. You know. But that was good training actually. So I liked the military type-training thing. And then I had to do the drills with the guns and all that stuff. And then uh, I became Captain of the band. They had officers in these bands. So I was Captain of the band. I have a certificate around here somewhere of that. And then got out of high school. You know it was, I didn't know what to do. I wanted no more school. Thirteen years straight! That's enough! Right, I'm out of prison now. What are you going to do now? Der, right? Didn't want to go to college, right? Certainly not in the mills! That was not a possibility. So eventually I got to work somewhere. So I went down to Jay's Radio, it used to be on Bridge Street at the corner

of French Street, right close to the end. And sitting there right on the call corner there used to be a florist, and the next door was Jay's Radio, and the back of the door was actually on the other street. And so anyhow I worked there with a kid from Lawrence. As two young, we were seventeen years old. And we used to put up antennas, TV antennas. That's back in the days in order to get reception you had to have a 40 foot massive pipe, you know, four ten-footers plus those butterfly looking things, those X looking antennas. Then carry them out to the roof and then walk up to the roof and put it on the chimney, up on a roof mount or a wall mount. Because when you're seventeen you don't fear anything anyway. We used to run up the roofs like rats, you know. Today I wouldn't go near it.

G: So you were doing that all around Lowell then, installing these antennas?

J: Lowell, Lawrence, because they had another store in Lawrence. Actually the main store was in Lawrence. And George Ayotte who became one of the Mayors in Lowell had a piece of that action, in that Jay's Radio somehow. I don't know, you know, I'm not [unclear].

G: So this is a full time job you got right out of high school it sounds like?

J: Oh yeah. Yeah.

G: And what was Lowell like back at that time, you know, the downtown?

J: It was fun! It was fun! I was a great place to be. (G: Umhm) You know, Page's clock, even through high school Page's clock, that's where all the chicks used to go. They'd stand around Page's clock. And the guys that had a car would drive around and beep the horn, you know, ooh ooh! You know, that kind of stuff. You know, and sometimes you'd pick up a chick and sometimes you wouldn't. Arthur Zantuhos, a wonderful guy, great friend of mine from [unclear], had a big black hearse. It was an old crap box you know. And uh, he used to wear this big black cape. He was tall, very handsome with pitch-black hair, Greek guy, you know. I had friends, back then you had friends of every nationality, because there were so many different nationalities, you know. And uh, you know, he used to drive and he'd go to Page's clock and all the girls would be wondering who's in there. He'd come out with this black cape, and he had these false teeth, you know, like Dracula teeth. He'd run out and say, "I want to suck your blood!" And all the girls would run all over the thing. And after awhile they got to know him and they'd say, "yeah, there's Arthur, I'll see you later. Bye." So anyhow downtown Lowell was a great place to be. (G: Yeah) A lot of clubs, lot of musicians working. The union was very strong then, very strong, and it was large. I don't remember how many members. Probably close to five hundred members. Five hundred members.

G: Now were you playing in the Portuguese Colonial Band at that time?

J: I, no I started when I was twelve. That's when I started trumpet, right? I had been playing it uh, (G: and your father?) when I was twelve or thirteen. Thirteen.

G: And your father was playing in that band too.

J: My father was a trombonist and manager of the band. And they used to do all the feasts in Lowell, Gloucester, Cambridge, New Bedford, Fall River. We used to travel a lot with the band, you know.

G: John, what can you tell me about the history of the Portuguese Colonial Band?

J: Well before me, before, when I was a child, a small child, what was his name? Ferreira used to, was a band director, very skinny guy. We're related somehow, cousins or something very very distant cousins. And he was a bandleader, very frail man. Played clarinet, played a great clarinet. And he, they used to wear we used to call ice cream suits. You saw the picture of the ice cream suits. (G: Umhm. Umhm) That's like the second generation of ice cream suits that you saw. And uh, anyhow I grew up through that. And they stuck me in between the two first trumpet players and then say, you say "sink or swim." And it's all manuscript. You know, the stems are on the wrong side, you know, they don't know. You put ledger lines on the top, they didn't bother putting notes, because they figured if they put two ledger lines you're suppose to know it's the top ledger line and the note you have to play. You know, that's just the way they did it, you know? They wrote fast and stuff, kind of sloppily, but you'd get used to reading it. So they stuck me in between the two lead players and they say, "Go kid." And I wound up eventually playing the solos and stuff like that.

G: And what kind of music did you guys play?

J: It was all the Portuguese songs. We played some march, Souza marches, but of course he is Portuguese.

G: Umhm. So these are all traditional Portuguese?

J: I still have some of the manuscripts, some of the scores and band parts. Because when my dad died, and Fat Silva, who was the band manager at that time, uh, the rest of the stuff came to me. There was room for me. [Cannot transcribe comment] Helycon Tuba. That's the one that looks like a cannon coming over your shoulder. Um, all that, Augie Silva used to play that. Augie Silva was an interesting person. He was probably the age that I am now, in his sixties. And he'd come back there every once in awhile and say, "Hey Augie, how come you're not playing? Or he would say, "I got four measures, shut up!" You know, I mean his four measures rest. He called four measures shut up. He wasn't a school musician, you know, but he was a wonderful person and a great model as a person. You know, and he always looked after us young guys, you know, took care of us. You know, when we got to be teenagers he'd slip us a beer now and then, you know. And my father would close one eye. [Laughs]

G: Now were you guys paid for playing in the Portuguese band?

J: Not when I was a kid. No.

G: Was the band though?

J: The band was paid for maybe like \$300 for you know, thirty-five, forty-guys, you know. And nobody, the conductor got paid. You know, on occasion if they brought in lead player, you know, something like that, they'd pay you know, that person. We did it for fun. It was fun to do.

G: And what sort of events did you guys play at?

J: All Portuguese feasts mostly. We used to do the parades in Lowell too. The city would pay the band, you know, and that went into the kitty.

G: What sort of parades? Fourth of July?

J: Memorial Day, that's when Lowell had parades. You know, they were five deep from the sidewalk from St. Peter's, where St. Peter's church used to be and where McDonough's Funeral Home is up there on Highland, from there all the way down, straight down Gorham Street, right down where, and then Central Street. And then bang a left when you hit the your wall at, Woolworths, and down past City Hall, down to Cabot Street. Turn around, you know. Now we, after awhile our, the Portuguese band became the band that would peeled off at Cardinal O'Connor Parkway, turn around and face the parade group, and play for all non-musical groups. We played marches for all non-musical groups coming by. Because the union band then wasn't that great, it's the one they had in Lowell. They were kind of a ragtag outfit, you know. The guy would tie a snare drum to his belt, and that kind of thing. They had good bands prior to that, but you know, as, as it went on it was diminishing and the quality was not as good. And our band was really strong.

G: Now you worked at Jay's radio and you were also playing in the Portuguese Colonial Band. Did you start playing other gigs on the side then?

J: I started actually in the clubs when I was fifteen. The old Cosmo on Market Street. Now it's closed up and what, ten years ago you wouldn't want to go in there. They were all guys with the chains around their necks and leather jackets. But it used to be a nice little place, not a great place, nice little place to trio. I was playing trumpet then. I was working two nights a week, Friday and Saturday, we got three bucks a night each. My sister Mary, God bless her, she's my second sister, because we weren't old enough to drive, I was only fifteen, she used to take me, go over to Pawtucketville, pick up the drummer Ray Robey, and go over to Sidney Richardson. What a name, he was the piano player. And I think he, I forget where he lived. Centralville, or something. She'd go around, leave early enough, pick every, you know, pick all the other two guys up, bring us there. And she'd come back at 1:00, pick us up, you know. And that's when you

didn't have to worry about people being on the streets. You know, nobody is going to mug you or any of that kind of stuff, you know. Although I will say that there were a lot of cops and MP's, because Fort Devens was loaded with guys, and you know, the ladies of the evening used to come up from Boston and they were on every corner. So there were cops and military police on every corner also. So they kept you know, the city pretty even keel.

G: Was this during the war, or just after the war?

J: This, no this was in uh, after the war. Well I remember it after the war, I don't remember it before. But uh, this was in the late 40's. (G: Umhm, umhm) Every club in the city. The reason the union allowed us to play non-union, because every union band was working. You know, the supper clubs, the Laurier Club. All right, they had so many places that were beautiful places, you know, to play. So all the union guys, the older guys were playing in the nice places, and we played in the kind of not so nice places. Now that was a good training ground.

G: Now when did you first join the Musicians Union?

J: When I came back out of the service. (G: Umhm, okay) It wasn't until I think it was '55 we resurged.

G: John when did you go into the service?

Tape 1, side a ends
Tape 1, side b begins

G: Okay, so you joined the service in what? '50?

J: '52. (G: '52) Yeah, after I did about a year of Jay's Radio thing. Now I was studying in Boston with Mr. Coffey, who was the bass trombonist in the Boston Symphony (G: Umhm) under Kousevitzky, Charles Munch and so forth. And uh, (G: so these) my Dad used to drive me in to Boston.

G: So these were very formal kind of lessons you were taking for the (--)

J: Oh yeah. But even with Mr. Giblin, that was very formal.

G: But was this with the trumpet or the trombone?

J: It was with the trumpet. Still with trumpet. (G: Umhm. Umhm) And I took lessons with him while I was working at Jay's Radio, took lessons. And uh, Mr. Coffey said to me, "Hey kid, it's about time to get rid of those pimples and go in the service." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You know there's an opening at Fort Devens on Baritone Horn." I said, "I never played one of those." He said, "Look kid, it's the same thing. Last three valves. It's the same as the trumpet. Mouthpiece is a little different.

He said, go up and take an audition, get in the service and you know, get some playing under your belt.” So you know, I did that, you know?

G: Um. So you saw the service as a way of moving on in your musical career?

J: Oh yeah, to play. Yeah. (G: Umhm) That’s the way he, he saw me putting up TV aerials. He said, “You know, you got more talent than that. So you ought to give to the service and get started.” So I did. And I went up. Back in those days you’d audition. And if you pass the audition you still had to do basic training, Fort Dix, the hellhole of the United States I’m going to tell you. I’ve never been to Paris Island, but I would say that Fort Dix was as bad. All right, and I went in there three months, December, January and February, three coldest months of the year. And I, there’s too many stories to go into there. It was so cold literally we had these old yellowy looking wool overcoats. [Phone rings] You want to hold on a second? (G: Yeah)

G: Was less than enjoyable.

J: Well I started to tell you, the overcoat, the big wool overcoats that were kind of greenish yellowy, thick thick wool, and it had these brass buttons. We were on a firing line with M1’s, and laying on the ground. Of course it was cold, it was wintertime. The ground was frozen and we finished our rounds, right? And he says, “All right, get up, next squad.” And we couldn’t get up. We were actually, literally frozen to the ground. The buttons froze to the ground. So of course the sergeant is mad. “All right you! Get up!” He comes on kicking everybody. “We can’t get up.” “Why can’t you get up?” “We’re stuck to the ground.” “Yeah, you’re stuck.” He went to pull one of us up, he couldn’t pull us up. So they got two sergeants pulling us off and all the buttons are popping. All right, so that was a great time. But anyhow I went back to Devens. And those were the days if you passed the audition you went back to the band where you were auditioned. So when I finished Fort Dix, you know everybody is going to Oklahoma, Tennessee. John Leite, Massachusetts, Fort Devens. Everybody, “You son of a!” I said “Hey, you got talent, you know it pays off.” So I went back there and I played Baritone horn.

G: And where, where did you guys play?

J: Well you know, in parades and stuff you know, in the Northeast area we use to do concerts and parades.

G: Did you play in Lowell as well?

J: Oh yeah! (G: Yeah) Yeah.

G: In the military band.

J: In the military, yeah. And uh, well I was only there like about three months. And then that was when Korea was starting to blow up. And so they sent out a levy, FECOM. Ten

guys out of the band. FECOM was Far East Command. And we all went “oh Jesus!” you know? But then they came back the next day and it was an error. It’s EUCOM, European Command. Thank God, we’re going the other way! So anyhow, I told Mr. Coffey, right? And he gave me, he said, “You can’t go to Europe with a baritone horn kid. So he sold me a Holten Trombone, a little six in bell, gave me one lesson. He says, pat me on the ass, he says, “I’ll see you in three years.” So I went to Europe with a trombone. And on the ship on the way over Ronny Klonel from North Chelmsford, who was one of these operators, you know he could make a deal for anything. He went up to the Captain of the ship. Hey, we’re pee-ons in the hole. He said, “Look, we’ll work a deal. We’ll do two shows a day, right, if you let us use the showers where you guys are and eat up here.” The Captain says, “well we’ll keep the guys you know, involved anyhow. It’s five days over.” So that’s what we did. Now I had one lesson on the trombone. I mean I could play trumpet and baritone, but I didn’t, you know, I had seven positions, and I had one lesson in the scuffle with him. But we made out, you know, you’re playing tunes, right. And he was a jokester, and he used to tell some jokes. So we, it was a good ride going over for us.

G: Did you know this guy from North Chelmsford before you went out and shipped out from Fort Devens? (J: No. No.) Were there any other Lowell guys who were with you uh, in the band?

J: No, no. Not that, no up there? Oh yeah, well Bob Skinner was a horn player. He was an older man. He used to pick me up. By now I live on Sayles Street in the Lower Highland, on the other side of the Highlands, near Middlesex Street.

G: Your family moved to Sayles Street?

J: Yeah, during high school, while I was in high school. And uh, he used to pick me up and we’d drive to Fort Devens. It was like a day gig, an eight to five gig, unless we did a concert at night, or a parade on weekends. Basically it was an eight to five gig, you know. So it was a good gig. Then when I got overseas they sent us to a music school in Dachau where the, one of the concentration camps where they unfortunately used to you know, just like Auschwitz. It’s not a good memory. But we’d look out the back of our building, you could see the blood ditches still there. Because this was only in 1952. It was only seven years after the war. Half of the buildings were still bombed out when we got there, you know, half of the cities. And so anyhow, we went through band training school. Then I became the first white guy in an all black band, because in Second World War all, well actually from the beginning through Second World War all the units were segregated. Blacks were segregated from the whites. And so then in ’52 they were going to start integration. And I was the first white kid, the little white kid with the pimples being transfer to an all black band, you know.

G: Umhm. Umhm. Now what kind of music did you guys play with this all, with this military?

J: Well the drumbeat was very interesting. I had to learn some fancy steps, [Laughs] because we had a football team. Wurtzburg, I could transfer to Wurtzburg. And there was a football, Wurtsburg Warriors, and we used to play for the football games. It was like doing a high school gig again. I said what did I, you know, I got out of high school and I'm still doing football games.

G: This was army football?

J: Army football, yeah. Army football teams. And uh, so anyhow I was there for a few months, something like that, and more whites starting coming. My first experience to the CO was obviously, the CO was white but everybody else was black. And he, the CO, the White guy was the dumbest person in the whole band, right? I can say that now because he's probably dead. Uh, but he was the worst musician of all. And there were a lot of bad ones in that band, but he was the worst. And of course the CQ, the big Sergeant, "Oh, you the only white boy here!" That's me! "Okay white boy, go up the room 247." That's cool, I had the room 247. So I opened it up, and they had German war lockers and big wooden war lockers. And a knife came across my face on my right side as soon as they opened the door. I'm standing there right, oh okay, took it out and I flipped it back the other way. And thank God it was a balanced knife and it stuck on the other side. And I said some words that can't be repeated here, and nobody ever bothered me again. They were testing, (G: Umhm) you know? It's like a dog. Goes to a new area, he makes his perimeter, right? I made my perimeter right away and I never got bothered after that. Once they heard you play, and they knew you could play all right, then they respected you.

G: Yeah, how many guys were in the band?

J: About thirty-five, thirty-six. (G: Yeah) There was one old guy Mandy, he made the best spare ribs. He used to go to these little streams you know, on our off time, and he'd take the grate, he'd lift the grate off one of the cellar windows. And he'd used that, put it over rocks, and he'd cook spare ribs and stuff like that.

G: Now when did you meet Dave Amram from New York City?

J: Well that's, he uh, the Seventh Army Symphony started with Sam Alder who was a violinist. And all string players, when they get thrown in the army, they put them in a band and they figure it's music. And they wound up playing bass, drum and symbols. So these guys got sick of playing bass, drum and cymbals, so they started their own little violin group. You know, little chamber groups. You know, one guy knew another one from another place. And so they started a little chamber orchestra. And then it got a little bigger, and a little bigger. Then they started looking for wind players. And uh, by now there are more whites in this black band that I'm in. That's where I met my brother-in-law John Foley, who was from Chelmsford, who married my sister Mary. Anyway, we uh, they had auditions. And this trumpet player from Philadelphia said, "Hey, why don't we audition and get the hell out of here," you know? I said, "I can't stand classical music. It's boring." He said, "Would you rather do this for the rest of the three years?" I

said, "Well you've got a good point." And I had been studying bass trombone with the German bass trombonist at the Wurtzburg Symphony. He used to come on his bicycle with a little jing jing bell, right, with the horn strapped over. This is before gig bags were invented. He had a gig bag, right? [Chuckles] And he strapped it to his back and he wasn't a very good player, but he was a nice guy. Anyhow I was playing base trombone and they needed a bass trombonist. So I took the audition. And because John Coffey and my father were all the same, tongue and blow, if you're going to make a mistake, make a good one. Don't be a sneak. So I just blew the hell out of the thing and they said, "we want you." And the trumpet player got in too. So I had somebody that I knew. Then once, once we got together we were still not a formed unit. It said Seventh Army Symphony. That's what we were known as. That's what we get all the concerts as, right, but the government didn't know who we were, United States Government. So my discharge today says, "Three Hundred and Seventeenth Engineering Pontoon Bridge Building Company." That's what my discharge says. I spent three years playing with the Seventh Army Symphony, and my discharge said I was an engineer building bridges. [Chuckles] This is the truth. This is how much the government knew about what was going on, right?

G: What sort of music did you guys play as the Seventh Symphony Orchestra?

J: Well it was, you know, it was chamber kind of stuff in the beginning. And then the state department got involved, and they started sending opera singers, young opera singers, you know, over. And we were doing small operas like Menotti's, Menotti Operas and stuff. The Telephone. The Medium and those kind of things. We're still pretty small, you know? And then word got (--) Then people started hearing us said, "Jeeze, these guys are pretty good." And so we started using it as a propaganda tool for the Europeans to say, "Look, not every GI comes here and breaks bottles over you head. Right, beer bottles, right? We have some culture in the United States. So then more attraction, more attention got attracted to a degree. And then they, then they started actually a pipe line of sending guys who were classically trained maybe from college, or a high school, and then studying with a classical player. Then they started a pipeline, you know. And then they got bigger. Now Amram, I met him from day one. He had hair down past his shoulders. And I have a poster over there, which I am going to give you a copy. You'll be the first one. Amram doesn't have one yet either. I'm going to give you one of the poster when you leave here. All the guys signed it. And he signed it "Long hair Amram." And he put a little drawing of himself with this long hair in my thing.

G: Now you got discharged then when, in '55?

J: '54.

G: '54. And what did you do when you got out of the Army?

J: Well my brother-in-law who I met in the black band, who is white from Chelmsford, was the one that when I came back, he, he had been visiting my folks you know, saying how he was doing. And of course he was visiting my sister Mary and then they wound up

getting married. He's the one, he was the teacher before he went into the service. He got drafted. He was not an army guy at all. He was an excellent clarinetist, but he was not an army type guy, right? So he came back and he said, you know, "You should really go to college now, you know? You did all of your stuff over there you know, and you need to get a day gig that's pretty reliable." So he's the one who talked me in to going to Lowell. (G: Umhm. So you went.) And I went to Lowell in 1955. Freshman, and I'm standing in line waiting to sign up, right? And I hear, "Hey John!" I turn around, there's Frank Page. I went to high school with him, right? He was a couple of years younger than I was, but I went to high school at the same time. He had gone to the Army Band in Devens and he spent his whole three years there. (G: Umhm) Frank Hickey, who graduated in '49, a year before I did. Went into the Navy and was on ships all over the world somewhere. Bob LeClair, he graduated in '49 also. He was a singer with Rickie Dee after college. Um, so we meet all these guys, we all come back. We left high school within three years of one another, '49, '50, '51, '52. That's four years, right? Yeah. Uh, and we all wound up as freshmen at the same time. Now what are the odds of that happening? It wasn't planned. We all did some different things, (G: umhm) right, but we all wound up as freshmen. So it was, it was a fun thing. We had, this was the first time that Lowell State ever saw so many men in the class, because it used to be Normal School, right? It was all women then mostly back in the 40's, when they first opened up it was mostly women.

G: Now what did you study at ULowell?

J: It was music. Music Ed, but back then you know, we went to school for the whole day. It's not like college now. Kids some days don't have to go in to school. We went in from eight to five, and then did the music stuff at night. You know, rehearsals and stuff. Uh, so my degree said, Bachelor of Science in Music Education, but I had certificates, three certificates. Supervisor in Music, Special Subject Music Teacher K-12, and Elementary Education K-8. Because we actually had to take Elementary Ed like the Elementary Ed people did, right, and we had to go through the teacher. I practiced out at the Bartlett School, 5th Grade. I did a project on the Arctic Tern. I still remember that.

G: Now when did you first join the union?

J: It was when I came back from the service. It was '50? I was in college. When I went to college. Around '55, '56 something like that. (G: Umhm. Umhm.) When I got involved. Then I started doing gigs with the union around here.

G: Yeah. What do you remember about those early days when you were with the union back in the 50's?

J: The union was strong then, remember I told you. The union was very strong. And probably by then they had around 350-400 members. Something like that.

G: And that was Local?

J: Local 83, Lowell, Mass. We used to have a lot of locals, Lowell, Lawrence, Haverhill, Newburyport. You know they still have a lot, but you know the history. In 1994 we took over Lawrence and Newburyport and a little bump over Haverhill. But the union back then was very very strong, because bartenders were union. Waitresses were union, right. If somebody through out a waitress, everybody would walk out. The bartender, the band, everybody. It doesn't happen now man, because people are me, me, me, I, I, I. You know they don't give one crap about you. As long as they have their gig and they're getting paid, you get fired well they'll put somebody else there.

G: Now who was the Union President at that time?

J: Oh gees! I'm trying to think of who it was before Notini.

G: Well that's okay. Let's talk. Somebody (--)

J: I can't remember who it was before Notini.

G: You got to know Notini pretty well.

J: Well he, he became Lowell High Band Director. Mr. Giblin died in 1949, my trumpet teacher, he was a clarinetist. Uh, then when Notini came in my senior year. So he came in September of '49 to high school. And uh, that was his first year. And he had a big band, Billy Note's big band. He had a good band. Billy was a good player, a good sax player, good clarinet player. He had a hell of a tough attitude. (G: What was that attitude?) A lot of kids, most kids didn't like him.

G: What was that attitude like?

J: Because he was domineering you know, and it was his way or no way. His way, or the highway as they would say, you know.

G: Was he also a Lowell boy? Was he born and raised?

J: He was Lowell, yeah. Notini's, you know the Notini cigar people on uh, you know, I can't think of what you call that business. Tobacco. (G: And when did?) It's still in Lowell down near the Aiken Bridge.

G: When did he become the Union President?

J: I ran against him in uh, I was in college. And uh, the union was big then. I missed by seven votes. And we called for a recount. And they still come up with the seven. And I found out later all right, that they allowed absentee ballots from people who were in nursing homes who couldn't even speak, and half of them were comatose. So I got beaten by the nursing home contingent who didn't know what the hell they were, or who they were. And that's the truth. That's the truth.

G: Now Okay. So, but it sounds like it was a pretty close election. And here you are young upstart running against an older guy, and it was close. But anyway, so did you become an officer in the union, or?

J: Not right a way. Not for awhile. I became an officer later. I got on the executive board in the sixties and that's when the rock thing was big, you know. And I brought in a rock group to join the union, and the kids were out in the car. Bill had his meetings in the house, downstairs. He had a round end counter, like a kitchen thing

G: So his union business was conducted out of his house.

J: Out of, yeah, downstairs in his house. And so I brought this group with us and they were waiting in the car. In the old days everything is very strict. You just don't walk in to wherever the union meeting is. Just stay outside, right. And uh, so anyway the kids were in the car and I had their checks and their applications made out and stuff. And so it came to that point, any new members? I said, I had four young guys out in the car who want to join, right? And one of the Executive Board members, "You got the money? You got the money? Make sure you get the money first!" I said, "I have the checks." "How do you know the checks are good?" I said, "Look, I have the checks, you know, I'll own up to it. If they're not good I'll pay, but I know these kids, they're good kids," you know? "All right, bring them around here!" They didn't care about who they were or anything, right? They were only, did they have the money right, and is the money going to be good. That's all they cared about. Not what do they play? You know what instrument? What kind of music? They didn't care about that. They wanted the money! So I bring the four guys down. Of course they had tank tops on, hair down past their shoulders, you know. And they were guys who were old farts, and I'm going to say that word, all right? Looked at them and said, "Yeah, look at the way they're dressed!" And Notini pounded his fist on the round end counter, he said, "We don't want no goddamn hippies in the union!" So the four guys said something which I won't repeat on this tape, but I'm sure you can figure out what it was, and I gave them their checks back and they went out. And I said to Bill, I said look, "I've always respected you, but that was wrong. Where the hell do you think the future is? You know it's not in you guys. Future is in these guys, the young guys." "We don't want no damn hippies in here!" I said, "Fine." And that happened across the United States, (G: Umhm. Umhm) because I've talked, I've been to the conventions now to talk to, everybody, all the old farts did the same thing back then. You know? They didn't want these knew kids playing that rock stuff. (G: Do you think?) And these are the guys now who are in the goddamn fifties right, making a lot of money, playing the rock clubs, and they're non-union. How smart was that back then? It was stupid because of the shortsightedness of a lot of union musician back then.

G: Do you think it was both generational as well as cultural difference in music?

J: It was both!

G: Yeah

J: It was more cultural than it was generational. (G: Umhm., umhm) You know, because I mean I wasn't that old. But of course by now I'm twenty-one, or twenty-two. So I'm still young, but I wasn't as young as these kids, you know, but so what!

G: What year was that when these guys would have been?

J: It was in the sixties.

G: Umhm. Umhm. So Notini obviously was from the old school and?

J: The whole Executive Board, everybody.

G: And how long did he stay in as union president?

J: Until he died.

G: Which was, do you know roughly when he?

J: Uh, Eddie Cotter was vice-president and he took interim until reelection came up.

G: So in the 1970's he would have died, maybe early 80's?

J: I should know that, but I just don't remember.

G: That's all right. Well the reason why I asked you (--)

J: And then uh, because Angie Bergamini was Secretary/Treasurer. And then Eddie Cotter became President, because he was Vice-President. And then uh, we stayed that way until we had elections again. And then Angie wanted out of the Secretary/Treasurer thing. So he asked me if I would do it. I said, "Well you know, I'll give it a try." Because I had been on the board, but not you know, an officer, you know an upper officer. And so I said, "Yeah, I'll take it over." So I took that over, and then uh, then I eventually you know, ran for president and I've been president since.

G: Um. When did you become president?

J: 1995, after the merger. The year after the merger because we needed a President right away and they didn't want me to get out of the Secretary/Treasurer's job, because back then the Secretary/Treasurer ran the whole union. The President was just a figurehead. Ritchie DeFreitas was president for a little bit, one year, two? One term I think. And then we needed a President for a year to get you know, the records. And so Bruce Drew became President for one, half a term actually. No, it's a term. And then I became President.

G: But it sounds like the 19, (J: 1994) the 1960's, 70's were not good time for the union. They were getting grayer and the younger musicians weren't joining. (J: No) So it was a tough time.

J: It was bad because of the stupidity of the older guys. You know that's really what it was. And that's in black and white, and that's not, was not just in Lowell it was across the country. Because you know, I've talked to enough of the guys at the Convention and everybody, it was the same thing. Except for the big Locals like New York and LA, you know. But all of the other smaller, midsize Locals things were the same.

G: Now did you start your own band back in the 1960's? Did you have your own band?

J: Well I played with uh, from College I started with Dick Madison's Band. And uh, I worked with Dick, I worked with Chris Powers who was out of Dracut. I worked with uh, I did some subbing with Ted Herbert in Manchester, New Hampshire. He had a great band. So I subbed with a lot of people. I did a lot of we used to call freelancing and stuff with different bands, but I was mostly with Madison and Powers over those years, and freelancing some other things, fill in with some other guys.

G: Did you guys play mostly in the Merrimack Valley, or?

J: No, the whole Northeast. With Madison's band we got to doing the air bases, and the used to fly us all over the place. We were seen in New York man in the Limestone Air Base. I mean there's a hellhole. They put us in the cavernous plane, a C 130. It's a cargo plane, right? Then they bolted a few seats to the thing. [Chuckling] And we went up to Limestone, Maine in that one, you know. We used to fly around in smaller planes too. They used to hire our horn section a lot. We backed up the Temptations, Herb Reed and the Platters. [[JL ed. Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, etc. Lots of Rhythm & Blues Groups. Also Johnny Mathis, Della Reese, Wayne Newton, Suzanne Somers, Rita Moreno, Robert Goulet, Dyanne Carroll, Myron Floren, Mitzi Gaynor, Anthony Newley, Paul Anka, Dionne Warwick, Bobby Vinton and many more.]] And they'd fly us to Burlington, Vermont and Maine, you know, all over the place just to back up these acts.

G: Yeah. What was it like then John? Describe the system as far as coming in from Lowell and playing at another place like Boston, where you're coming into another Local's jurisdiction?

J: It was done all the time. We had to file contracts, you know.

G: So you filed, you played, you had a contract?

J: Yeah, we had to file a contract. Back then they had traveling dues. You had to pay traveling dues and stuff. And then the work dues, some of the agents, this guy, big guy named Barbosa usually wore a big black trench coat and he weighed about 270 pounds and about 6'1, or 6'2. He looked like a tank coming through the door. And when you played down on the Cape, we used to play Hyannis a lot. Dunfeys who were from

Lowell had a hotel chain. They got one and then another one. They had five or six anyway. And we used to go down Dunfey's with Madison. Now this was the jazz work. This was not the big band.

G: So this is late 60's?

J: We kind of transformed, you know fitting ourselves to the music of the time. So we had the two girls with the mini skirts, and the white boots, the high boots. You know, um (--)

G: Is this late 1960's then?

J: Yeah. Four horns and that kind of stuff. And so we went down to, and Barbosa walks in while we're setting up. [Says something in an odd voice, cannot comprehend]. Go see the leader, right? Where's the leader? Over there. But Dick was, Dick Madison had the greatest way with people. He could tell you to go take a flying whatever, and you didn't even know he said that. He had just his, he was so fluid and mellifluous with his words right, word structure. You didn't know he was telling you to go take a sweet one right? And they're, "oh high there! And Dick was a big guy too. Oh hi there! How are you doing?" "Dick Madison here. How are you doing? Oh you must be the business agent." "Sure! Now what are the work dues? Right? Okay, no problem." "You got a check?" "Take a check?" "Yeah I'll take a check?" Write out this check, right? And he wouldn't date it, or he'd leave the signature off. And the guy never looked at it. [Laughing] "Thanks a lot. Okay. Good to working with you." "All right". Eventually they had to pay it, but just because the guy was such an ass, right, he'd leave something off the check so they wouldn't take. Right, they got to the bank they wouldn't take it, they send him back. But uh, Dick just had a great way. They come up and they ask you for the only tune you didn't know, right? And Dick would say, "gees you know the next song has a lot of the same notes. And the people would generally say, "Oh okay." Right, or "how about playing Strangers in the Night?" "Didn't you ask for the last set?" "Yeah" "Well you must have gone to the bathroom, we just finished playing it." "Oh I'm sorry." "We'll try to get it in later." "Okay, thank you." He never ever, never did anybody walk away mad with this guy, right? He just had a way of pacifying them, right, by sticking a little pacifier in the mouth and walking away. "Good little boy" and he'd walk away. Half of these guys were sauced anyway.

G: You go back a long way with Dick Madison?

J: Oh yeah, I go back to 1955. And Dick just passed away a year ago last May.

G: Did you guys do other business things as well?

J: We were in business together, yeah. I went to college and I taught two years down in Milton, lived in West Quincy. Then I moved back. The singer Bob LeClair's father had a printing business. Went into that business with him. That lasted for a little while. But anyhow I started working with Dick in 1955, when I went to college in '55. And uh, he

was from Somerville I think. And there were a couple of other guys from Somerville and we met each other there anyway. But it was a good band. But Dick and I were together for a long time. And then when I left the printing thing Dick and I went into business in Boston. We had an office in Charles River Park. If you lived here you'd be home now. Used to be blue buildings. I noticed the last time I was down there now they painted them brown porches, right? But that was a fifteen floor. You know, we had, we weren't suppose to have any offices. That was our residential. But we had a friend who knew some guys, he took care of us, all right? "You want that one over there you got it. No problem." We wound up getting another one on the other side when we starting running Junkets too. So we did advertising, PR, we did commercials for all the major stations, Channel 4, Channel 5, Channel 7, 38, 56. You know Dick used to write the commercials, we used to produce them.

G: And you played music for the commercials as well?

J: No. No. No. We would, we would hire the people to put it together. You know we'd put the whole package together for them. (G: Yeah, yeah) I had the artist, right? The graphic artist, the models you know, and that kind of stuff. So it was kind of neat, it was fun.

G: So actually, but you did, you taught a couple of years out of U Lowell. You said down in Milton.

J: I taught in Milton for two years.

G: Yeah, and then you got back into private, other business.

J: Right, you know, within (--) I did a lot of stuff until 1971 and then we parted ways, not musically but business wise. And I actually came to Lowell and I worked for CETA Program, Lowell City Fair. It was a CETA Program for artists. And we had a building on Dutton Street. I forget, I think it says St. Joseph's on the front of the building. Had a bay window, right? And uh (--)

G: What did you do for the CETA Program?

J: Well I, I was in charge of a bunch of artists and half of them were druggies right, drunks. They were very good at what they did when they were sober, you know. But anyhow I had to organize them together, and do concerts, and send the artists out to do art work and stuff like that. There were a couple that were not uh, drugged up and drunk, but only two out of the whole group.

G: What was Lowell like during that time in the early 70's?

J: Very depressing in the early 70's. Everything was, had gone down. You said downtown was depressed and so, so it was not a good time. And we were trying to get, Lowell City Fair was a way of getting musicians working and off the corners and stuff,

and artists, you know. So I ran that program for awhile. Then I got involved with Human Services, which used to be where Enterprise Bank has the empty lot, it used to be Solomon's. It was a fabric store or something. It was a one-story thing.

G: You worked out of that building?

J: We worked out of that building after Solomon's went out of business, it was then occupied by Human Services.

G: And what, what did you, what did you do there for Human Services?

J: More programs. Karen Carpenter was in charge of the thing. So we did stuff in schools. It was all the schools, different schools. And bring in more artwork, bring in, getting the kids together to do their artwork. And we had the windows, because it used to be a store, we used to fill the windows with you know, the artwork and stuff like that.

G: And in the meantime you (--)

J: I did that for about a year or so.

G: In the meantime you were paying still.

**Tape 1, side B ends
Tape 2, side A begins.**

G: Okay. So you were working for Human Services then in the early, or late 1970's?

J: Yeah, in the 70's somewhere.

G: Yeah. And then did you, you went back to teaching then?

J: Yeah. And Frank Page, who I went to college with and I went to high school with and stuff, was the Director of Music in Chelmsford. And the Band Director there was moving out of the high school. He had had it you know after ten years at the high school. And he moved down to the lower grades and Frank asked me if I wanted the gig. I went and I auditioned. I didn't audition, I went for the interview and I got the gig. And I became Band Director there at Chelmsford High. Band Director, I did a marching band. Now they, there's a guy up there and he's got like six assistants, right, and they're doing the same amount of work, the same amount of kids. But anyway I did that and I liked it a lot. Then 2 ½ came out and they started making cuts. Where are they going to make cuts? Art and music of course. Cut the arts before you can cut anything else. So well we started getting bumped around all over the place. So I've taught every grade level K through 12 in Chelmsford. I taught in every building except the Byam and I'm not

looking to go there in this stage of my life, but I've taught in every other building not counting the Center, which is just going to open up this September. But all the other, but I taught every level.

G: Now you became Union President in '90 what? '92? (J: '94) '94. Yeah. And as Union President then what, what did you see were some of the major challenges you were having to deal with?

J: Membership. You know, new membership. Trying to get new members in. Trying to educate some of the older ones, you know, do more with newsletters and stuff, because prior to that (--) Well Richie DeFreitas did when he was President for one term, did the newsletter and stuff, but before that there was basically almost nothing. It's a mimeograph sheet, you know.

G: But you were also faced with dealing with a much larger region now because of the mergers, right?

J: Well yeah, the merger, yeah the merger happened just before I took over. Before I took over. Um, so you got a greater, a greater space of people to deal with, you know, people you don't know, right? So it was more difficult when communicating, but, and the best way we could do that was through the newsletter. So I developed the newsletter that we use now, you know, to get the message. And I did as much personal contact as I could. We used to have the meetings in Lawrence first. And (--)

G: Kind of a mid-point between them?

J: Yeah, sort of. It wasn't really mid-point but it's fifteen minutes from here and to Newburyport it's probably a half an hour, you know.

G: Yeah, because your Local now extends all the way up into New Hampshire, to Newburyport.

J: To Hampton Beach, you know, up, all the way up to there. Portsmouth, Boston, Lowell Local, we go up to Hampton Beach, Salisbury Beach all the way to Plaistow.

G: Portsmouth belongs to which Local?

J: Manchester.

G: Manchester, yeah. So.

J: New Hampshire. Manchester, NewHampshire.

G: Yeah, New Hampshire. Now as the President of this very large region for the Union you um, communication was very important and just getting to know the different members as well.

J: Trying to get to know them was the hardest thing, because when we had the meetings in Lawrence we'd get a couple from Newburyport and we got a lot from Lawrence obviously, right, and a few from Lowell. And uh, the original plan was to have an office in that state building there on 1 Jackson Street, the Heritage Park Building. Because uh, we thought that would be convenient and they were going to give us enough space, and we were going to arrange for some kind of payment if we had to have an office [unclear]. But the Secretary that we had then really didn't want to. When he realized he was going to have to go there and answer the phone at least four days a week he was not [unclear] with that. So anyhow we did it for two years. We were there for a couple of years in a nice room, nice big room upstairs, top of the building. Um, but then we decided we're going to have to come back to Lowell because we're not really getting that many people, you know, and the Secretary really didn't want to have to be there with a phone, although he has no day gig. And so we moved back to Lowell. That's when I met you basically, you know, and we started going to the Mogan Center. (G: Umhm) And it made it easier for me obviously because its local, and the local guys. We occasionally get guys from Lawrence, you know, almost never from Newburyport. That was the smallest Local of all three anyway. You know it only had like forty members or something, and a lot of them were a lot, quite a bit older you know, the President and the Secretary and Treasurer and all those guys.

G: Was there any hard feelings as far as the merger goes with the other Presidents?

J: Actually, actually wasn't because we had a lot of meetings. I engineered, I actually invited, and in the beginning we had a lot of Locals that came to the first few meetings. Uh, Lynn which I belong to, uh North Shore Musicians, [unclear] 126, 393 Framingham/Marlboro, Fitchburg 173, Haverhill 302, Lawrence and Newburyport. I invited Manchester, New Hampshire, Concord, New Hampshire. Um, I think that was it. And we had meetings at the Sheriton in Lowell just talking you know, how are we going to do this week? You know and the Federation is going to make you regionalize at some point or another, because the unions were decreasing in size, you know. And there was a lot of duplication of effort. So um, some of the guys were amiable to it. I even went to a meeting at North Shore and I was offended there. And they said, "well how many members do you have?" At the time we had 200 and something, right. And they said, "well we got more than you do. So we should take over." I said, "oh, fine", you know. I remained friendly with you know, the officers there. It wasn't like the President or the Secretary. It was always somebody else who doesn't do anything in their own Local anyway, who's just a big mouth, right. So that wasn't going to happen. Fitchburg, the guy there wanted to run his own thing. Even Haverhill, which is the smallest one right, and they don't send any newsletters, they don't have meetings, and how they're getting away with it I have no idea, through the Federation.

G: What's the role of the International in as far as working with the Locals?

J: The role of the International is suppose to be, they're supposed to go by the by-laws. And Haverhill should have been out of business a long time ago. But now they have a

new attitude right, they want to bring back all the old people, right? Bring them out of the nursing homes, bring them out of wherever they are, right? Try to make everything work nice and stuff like that. And we all know that that really doesn't work. But anyhow, the event of the web site and stuff is making it easier for communication like it is for everybody all over the world. One of my officers who's pretty savvy with computers helped me set up our web site, you know, but since the Convention now we had our own web site, right? Since the Convention the guys in New York decided to make a generic web site. So now you're looking up, you can go to anybody. You could go to the American Federation of Musicians and look them up and put, click on lists of Locals, and it will give you the run down from Canada, because it was Canada and the United States. And it will say you're looking for the Merrimack Valley right, before they did this generic and unisex thing you would see which ones had a web site. Boston and Lowell, that was it. We were the only two that had a web site in Massachusetts, because it would be highlighted so you could click on those. Now you can click on anybody's, even some that don't even have computers, and it comes up with this generic web site. (G: Umhm) They all look the same. The information is different obviously, but the AFM logo in the middle, the gold one and the other on the bottom with the reddish stuff, everything, the pages look the same. Only the names are different, right? Uh, but so I complained and I said, "I want my web site on there." Well why spend all that time doing this, you know? Because I've actually been bugging, one of the young guys there was really good, you know. I made some suggestions, he said, "hey, we're getting a lot of good suggestions out of your Local, you know, keep it coming." Well anyway now we can change our information on their unisex page. We can't change the logos and stuff, but we can change, you know, add stuff to it. So I added our email address and our web site address. So now you can go into the generic unisex one, and if you actually want to get to us right, and see our web site, you can click on that and our web site comes us now. So that's made, it's made it easy to communicate with New York, because half the time you can't get these guys on the phone. The Fax work sometimes you know, but this is so much quicker, you know? So that's helped as far as contacting. And more and more people are getting computers and getting on line and stuff like that. So hopefully it will be nice someday to think wow, we can send out a newsletter on email, you know, (G: Umhm) to all of our members. But that's never going to happen to our members because we have a lot of elderly people. You know, and I'm getting old too. So I don't have anything against them, but it's just that we know that that's not going to happen.

G: What do you hope to do John toward the end of your term as President of the Union?

J: Well hopefully you know, we're looking for, always looking for new members. And the web site that we developed we put bands that are non-union in there, those that we know are in the area, right? And we told them if you generate some business from our web site, then you have to join, right? So that at least, and it's good for us too, because it gives us more of a variety other than the Leite Concert Winds, Branco/Stamas Big Band, Main Street Brass, you know, the Continentals. Now we got a lot of them on there. There are only about three that are non-union on there, you know, but if we generate the work they said they would absolutely join. And we did a recording session a while back. I was Secretary/Treasurer then. And we invited people. We went to all the music stores

in the Merrimack Valley and dropped leaflets off. And we had people from the recording industry come from New York to talk about the recording industry itself and how you get started and stuff like that. So we need to start doing stuff like that again, and getting out the retirement thing, retirement fund, you know, because now any Local can start up their own fund. And of course everybody has to do contracts. Not everybody does contracts, you know. So that you put on your contract, let's say for the National Park Service we're going to do a gig for you, right? And our Local decides ours is going to be 4%, right? So the cost of the gig let's say is \$3,000.00, right? We have to add an additional 4% to that, okay. Now that 4% goes right to New York to the retirement fund, that money, okay. So now everybody who's involved, right, has a retirement fund started. And it's important for the younger people. Young people think they're never going to die, you know? You know, you're in your twenties, life insurance, what the hell do I need that for? I'm twenty-three years old, I'm going to live forever, right? Older people realize that you, you know, you get older you're going to die. Everyone is going to die somewhere along the line. Some die young, some die old, right? We're all going to die. So the retirement fund is what I'm hoping once we, this Fall I'm going to propose that we start one and then go out for these non-union guys and say, "look man, you can be a part of this thing for yourself. This is for you." So every time you make out a contract you have to tell the people, because they have to make out a check to the AFM EP Fund, you know? Pension Fund, directly, because that money goes directly to the New York. But it's really going for them, the individual. So I'm hoping that we can do something like that to try to get some of those other groups in, into the Local to further diversify plus get the numbers, plus get the numbers up. That's probably the main thing.

G: Right. On the one hand you want to work and recruit musicians, but on the other hand you have to deal with the owners of these establishments right, that are looking to probably get around hiring musician, union musicians.

J: Well that's always the case.

G: Yeah. Has it always been the case?

J: Yeah. I mean people say DJ's, DJ's. For Christ sake there were DJ's when I was in high school, you know, but they were more working musicians, because back then (--) It's like Las Vegas, right? There is a turnaround happening you know. I saw that this year, right? Las Vegas for years you know, when these guys all ran it right, they love musicians, right? They wanted, every hotel had a twenty-piece orchestra. Then Corporate America takes over, right, and they look at every square foot. Wow! Look at all those square feet of space over there in that lounge. That's not full twenty-four hours a day. Let's put up some more slot machines, you know. So Corporate America takes over, ITT, Sheriton and all these other huge conglomerates, right, take over. They fill them all up with slot machines. Now they allow kids into the casinos. You know, it's Disney World, right? And so a lot of great musicians out there were driving UPS trucks, mail trucks, because there was no work, you know? Some of them were able to go to other parts, you know, to get some work, New York, LA, but a lot of them had families and they see why they had to stay. But at this last convention in July the guys out there

said there is a turnaround, you know, although the new Venetian that went up in a non-union hotel. (G: Um, yeah) They put it up union, because they couldn't get skilled workers all right, to put it up that were non-union. So that was built union, but now it's non-union. So we were told you don't go into Venetian. The RIO, which is a big hotel off the strip, it's huge, all right, that's non-union. But David Cassidy, remember little David Cassidy, the teenage idol? He's running the show at the Desert Inn called the Rat Pack. And he told the union officials at the convention that he's going to take over the Rio Showroom. He's going to actually lease the room at the Rio, the big room, which is non-union now right, and make that a union room, (G: Umhm) and put union musicians to hire, to work. So it is turning around.

G: What about in Lowell though, as far as dealing with the various owners of the establishments where music is played?

J: They don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear union. When they hear union you know, they think, oh no, I'm going to have strikes and you know, all that kind of stuff. It's just, they're as stupid as the officers, union officers were in the '60's about hiring rock musicians, or having rock musicians in with their tank tops and long hair, right? These people here hear the word union, right, and it scares the hell out of them, right? So they, there are enough of, and there are a lot of union musicians, not just here all right, Boston, New York, LA, are working non-union too. They're going wherever the work is and saying screw it, right, because they want the work. Uh, but if they weren't stupid and they all said "no we're not going to work", then they'd have to hire them. But I mean progress is being made globally, nationally rather. You know, the Provident Group, which is in Nashville, Christian Recording Group there, they just signed on as a signatory, a union signatory. And that was a lot of work for these recording guys at AFofM, to get them to sign, you know, because they wanted to stay non-union. So around here um, I don't think they care if it's union or not. If the price is right, you know, will you do it for one hundred bucks kid, you know, like they did thirty years ago! Well then it's okay.

G: Well John let me conclude by going back briefly to your family. What's um, what became of, what happened to your mom and dad, and uh?

J: Well they obviously eventually passed on. My dad died in 1970. Uh, I believe it was '70,

G: So he had retired for some years and was able to (--)

J: He retired and went back to work three or four times. He could stand not working. That was his whole make-up, his body wouldn't allow him to just hand around, you know? He had to work, you know. That's why he wound up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

G: And what did your mom wind up doing?

J: She got sickly when she got older. She was not able to do much.

G: Did she out live your father?

J: Yeah, she did by nine years. But I mean she had gone into, she just kind of regressed into.

G: What about your siblings?

J: Well out of the four kids, three sisters and myself, I'm the man of the family you know. All the husbands have died. All three sisters lost their husbands. Our oldest sister got married a second time. She asked my permission. This is like two years ago. She called me right, she's twenty-something years older than I am right? Twenty years, she's about twenty years older than I am. And she called me and she said, I'm think about you know, she said just for companionship. I'm just very lonely. She's a very gregarious person. She needs to have something going on all the time. And I said, "geese, you know, you're a lot older than I am", you know. And she said, "no, but I respect you, you know, and you're the man of the family."

G: It sounds like it's an old tradition within the Portuguese community.

J: It's the Godfather thing. It's the same thing.

G: Yeah.

J: So I mean yeah, as far as that's concerned she's eighty-five, she's volunteer in the schools in Dracut. She goes in and talks to kids, helps kids you know, with the class. I don't know exactly what it is, but she goes in two days a week I think or something with them. And my sister Mary is retired now. She's living with her son in Westford. My brother-in-law John dropped dead. He taught for thirty-eight years, retired one year and dropped dead. Never sick a day in his life. So how do we know when it's going to end. My sister Helen's, the one from Lowell Tech, went to Lowell Tech and they met at United Elastic. He died when he was young too. He was only like 48 or 49, heart and cancer. So, but she's, she's in North Carolina near her daughter, who got married and has a child. And her son lives in Richmond, Virginia. He was married with a couple of kids. So she's nearer them. She's the only one that's not living around here.

G: And John, when did you get married?

J: This October it will be forty years ago. (G: Very good) 1959, the year we graduated. I met my wife, Melba MacLeod, in college and we got married the year we graduated. October 10th of 1959. We graduated in '59. She went to teach in Stoughton, I went to Milton and we were living in West Quincy. I was living by myself until we got married, because in those days you know, there's no cohabitation unless you were married. Today it doesn't make any difference, right. It doesn't even matter what sex they are anymore, right? But back then it was a nah ah, right? So I rented a house, a little white cottage

with a white picket fence for \$90 bucks a month. And then we got married down there and then we come up.

G: And then you've got how many kids?

J: One child, John, and I have a grandson now Jonathan. And my daughter-in-law Carolyn is a wonderful, young woman. She's a music teacher also. She teaches in Litchfield, New Hampshire. Carolyn Stohl Leite. Her family is Stohl. I think it's Swedish originally. And her father was a custodian for Wakefield Public Schools. And he retired, he's living down in Ormum Beach, Florida. The year they got married her parents moved down to Florida.

G: Was your wife from a Portuguese family?

J: No, she's Scottish (--) [Knock on door] Is that Sarah?

S: Yes!

J: She's a music teacher. My son is Manager for Chadwick BaRoss, that's a company that sells the skidders, and these huge things that pull trees out of ground and all that you know, for the forest industry.

G: And is your son also a musician?

J: He was, he played trombone, but he hasn't played in the last few years. He became a father and a worker. He went to work. And uh, so no, he hasn't played, but he's very well schooled. He worked in Strawberries as District Manager. He loved music. He still does, you know, but he had to work. It's the old work ethic, right? Like I told you about my parents and myself, right? Got to work to support the family. You go to work and you find work wherever it is. Strawberries you know, retail pays lousy. So he had to get a job that was steadier, where he wasn't working 90 hours a week and being called at three in the morning, "hey somebody just broke in to the Nashua store." So he had to get away from that.

G: So John do you see yourself retiring in Lowell, or are you going to move south?

J: No. South? You mean like Florida? Ha Ha! My wife told me many years ago, you want to retire to Florida you're going by yourself. [Laughs] She hates the oppressive heat. No. Although I did take her to Vegas once and she admitted, finally admitted all those years I went out there, I've been going to Vegas since 1955, right? Since when these guys owned everything and there were six hotels in the strip. She finally admitted that dry heat is not as bad as Florida. She didn't say she'd still like to go there, to retire there. So no, it's going to be a four-season retirement, you know. (G: All right) I'll just put on more clothes, because I get cold in the winter. I'll go to bed with my sweat suit on.

G: Well John, thank you very much. This has been a very enjoyable morning, and thanks a lot for your time.

J: My pleasure Gray.

Interview ends