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Oral History Interview with Francisco Pratts
Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.051

Interview conducted by John D. Vasquez on October 14, 1974 in Brooklyn, New York

VAZQUEZ: You can start by telling me your early life experiences when you came to New York City in 1921 and moved to Brooklyn--

PRATTS: 45 Prince Street.

VAZQUEZ: What kind of a house--family house--?

PRATTS: Three family house.

VAZQUEZ: You came alone?

PRATTS: No, I came with a friend of mine through his cousin--I lived with his cousin.

VAZQUEZ: What were their names?

PRATTS: I can't tell you now. And the fellow where I went to live, he's the one that helped me really.

VAZQUEZ: He was Puerto Rican?

PRATTS: Yes, Puerto Rican--we used to call him Peewee only--I only knew him by Peewee only. I know his proper name but--my family in New York know his name, but I can't remember--I only know him by Peewee.

VAZQUEZ: You went to work with Peewee or--?

PRATTS: No I came--the--it was hard then. There was a depression, Great Depression. It was hard to get a job. So then we used to go to the bowling alleys down in Hall Street and Fulton--There used to be a bowling alley in the cellar and we used to go and work one day or two days a week. Just to get along. Because that was a job nobody wanted, we used to do it.

VAZQUEZ: Setting up pins?

PRATTS: Yes, setting up pins. And from there I went to sea with a friend of mine who was a seaman, and he introduced me; took me to the ship and I went on the ship, as a

merchant marine. That was a big hard day. You can't take it because it was too much.

VAZQUEZ: Were you married yet?

PRATTS: No, I married in '43. I used to live with a women, 15 years, but I never married her.

So then after I came out of the sea, I went to work on the docks; maybe one day, sometimes one day, sometimes a month you didn't get it.

VAZQUEZ: How many years were you at sea?

PRATTS: As a merchant marine -- I went in -- in '21 and came back in '24 and I stood around and came back and started working in Bush Terminal in New York docks. It was hard to get it because they didn't want to give us Puerto Ricans a job.

VAZQUEZ: In the docks?

PRATTS: In no place--those days, forget it--you were against the wall.

VAZQUEZ: Why didn't they want to give the Puerto Ricans a job?

PRATTS: They didn't want--They didn't like the Puerto Ricans those days. There were factories in Jay Street, way down by Robert Gair--all those big factories over there. In many places they had signs on the wall, "no Puerto Ricans allowed" in those days. And if you got on line over there to get a job, forget it--you were going to get beat up. And when the cops would come and knew that you were a Puerto Rican that's good enough--you were put in jail in those days. That is why I always talk to many people, in those days that were talking about Democratic Party, and the powerful party was the Democratic. They didn't even want to recognize Puerto Ricans, even for a job.

VAZQUEZ: That was in the early '20s?

PRATTS: Around '20 up to '27, it was very hard. Very, very hard to get a job.

VAZQUEZ: Didn't you know any Puerto Ricans in the community?

PRATTS: In those days I knew Carlos Tapia, and Carlos Tapia was in the corner that you had to be fighting mostly every day.

VAZQUEZ: Where did Carlos Tapia live?

PRATTS: In 40 Union Street. He used to have a restaurant over there.

VAZQUEZ: When did you meet Carlos Tapia?

PRATTS: In '23 or something like that.

VAZQUEZ: You met him on the docks or--?

PRATTS: No, I used to go down there and look for a job and somebody told me that there is a Puerto Rican here that has a restaurant. So we used to go and work a day or so--Then we'd would work in there and eat.

VAZQUEZ: In the restaurant?

PRATTS: It was his restaurant and the house, too, belong to him.

VAZQUEZ: Where?

PRATTS: 40 Union Street, and there he got a big trouble. Carlos have plenty trouble.

VAZQUEZ: He had a lot of trouble there?

PRATTS: Uh, forget it. The cops and the Italians, they don't want him in there. He was "a real nigger, a funny looking nigger," and they didn't want him and he got into fights with them, cops up there. One day he fought 3 cops, and he would grab them by the hair like that--he was a strong man. He had a little connection; he was a Mason, you see. That saved him; that he was a Mason. Another way, they would put him away for good. And then they started--this other fellow used to be called Cubano Loco--el Gallego--a lot of bookies in those days--Puerto Rican and Spanish and then, there was--

VAZQUEZ: Viruet?

PRATTS: Viruet also, and this other fellow that went to jail too--with Moran. He is from Mayaguez too. Then he got a connection. Then that's what saved Carlos, because Carlos got a lawyer, too. Then the lawyer was supposed to be O'Dwyer, the ex-Mayor. See O'Dwyer cannot come because--I don't know, he got in trouble, too--so he put O'Ryan and then O'Ryan went to court and he proved that the cop used the brutality on him. So he got to protect himself. Although he did up the cop.

VAZQUEZ: How old were you at this time?

PRATTS: About 22 or 23 years I was then, already. It was a hard time really. Nobody knows how hard it is-- to get a job, forget it. I remember one day, and I will never forget this, but: I came out against the Democrats. When there was a big snow, I believe in '20--

about '35 or '37 still. It was a big snow, it was a hard time for us yet. Work in the docks one or two days, sometimes, and they need us. They would take us, but if they got other kinds, they'd go, then we would stay. Anyway, there was a big snow, and they were picking people in York and Adams Street, picking people for the snow--

VAZQUEZ: To clean up the streets?

PRATTS: They grabbed every Italian, every Irish, everyone, and they leave us in the corner; about ten of us waiting to get a job. So finally we just walked away--somebody--sorry-- They are looking for a job. One says, "Well, give him a job; put 'em in the middle of the bridge and let them freeze their balls out," and that was Parisi. Fernando Parisi; he used to be the big shot in there, he was supposed to be the leader of Democrats.

VAZQUEZ: Fernando Parisi?

PRATTS: Yes, Parisi--

VAZQUEZ: Parisi? He was Italian?

PRATTS: Yes, real Italian--he used to be the big boss around those days--and we were hard to get at least one day in the snow. I'll never forget that in my life. We just walked out of there, then they used to beat Puerto Rican for nothing. Then we started fighting. "Fuck 'em," I said, "Let's go kill each other," and that's all. Then, after they saw that we put up a fight, there were fights here and there. Then they started to cool off. Still, the cops--everytime there was a fight with a Puerto Rican--the cops would come and beat us. [unintelligible] They used to speak, "Why don't you go back to Puerto Rico?"

VAZQUEZ: Then you organized? Did you get any other groups?

PRATTS: Yes, we had to make a group because, in those days, we had to make a group. We come ourselves and a group that didn't care for anything; they just want to kill, too.

VAZQUEZ: What was the name of the group?

PRATTS: All friends; they used to be Felix Ramos, Agosto Arroyo, one that used to work in the docks that is blind--I call him Rana--another that, they used to call him Diablito--he comes from New York--Riverita, that went to Puerto Rico, me--There was about 25 altogether, all dead anyhow. We decide to put up a fight, no matter what happened.

VAZQUEZ: Did your group have a name?

PRATTS: No, no name--just friends that got together, that's all. When anything happened to one, we would all go because that is the way they operate. That New York was hard in 1926. Puerto Ricans couldn't even go in the park over there. They beat them up, forget it. Then they go on the inside of the houses, the Puerto Ricans, and beat them up inside--nobody did nothing. The cops come. "Puerto Ricans, fuck 'em," they would say. We went from here to New York because it was easy for us to get them, because the only thing you had to do was speak Spanish and they are going to jump on you anyhow--haul away--see. Manolin Lopez; I think he is in Puerto Rico now, a young fellow, but small like me. We would walk, like two little shrimps, around. So the other gang had all rough people too. It was; two walk here, two walk here, two walk behind, two in the front, and we were in the middle. Because nobody talked; only me and him would talk in Spanish and that was good enough. They would jump, haul away on us. As soon as they jumped on us, the other bunch jump and--goodbye, forget it, to the hospital. So that is the way el Barrio is, the way it is now. We put up some fights there. So then after we put up the fight, they started to cool off, because there was a pool room on 115 Street and Madison that no Puerto Rican can walk around there.

VAZQUEZ: That is in Manhattan in el Barrio?

PRATTS: Yes, en el Barrio, no Puerto Rican can go through there. Irish and Italians in there--goodbye--forget it. Any Puerto Ricans go through there, go to the hospital. And if he happened to be by a cop--goodbye, too--in jail, too.

VAZQUEZ: Here in Brooklyn there was no one helping the Puerto Ricans?

PRATTS: No, nobody helped.

VAZQUEZ: Nobody assisted for you to get a job?

PRATTS: Nobody, in those days, forget it. And if you happened to get a job, you gotta quit or else they beat you up in the job.

VAZQUEZ: What about in the '30s?

PRATTS: Well, in the '30s there was another hard depression. The '30s--in the '30s it was

changing around already, a little bit. Until now; they can walk in the streets and nobody says anything to us. Because we just don't care about either. In the '30s there was--but not like this, because we got control in the city. The only man that gave us a break and that I will never forget; that was Jimmy Walker.

VAZQUEZ: Jimmy Walker?

PRATTS: Yes, Jimmy Walker was a good mayor. He gave everybody a job. He didn't care about your color or if you were Puerto Rican and it took a little power from the Italians and the Irish. And he was an Irish man.

VAZQUEZ: You lived where all this time?

PRATTS: Oh, here in Brooklyn.

VAZQUEZ: You lived here in Brooklyn the 53 years, all this time in Brooklyn?

PRATTS: Most at sea, but the rest in Brooklyn.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever hear of a man called Jaime Kelly?

PRATTS: Jimmy Kelly, yes, I remember him. He was the leader in Borough Hall, of District 1--I know it was in, in Concourse and Bedford they used to have a big club.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever go to him?

PRATTS: He started to give us a break, Jimmy Kelly.

VAZQUEZ: What year was this?

PRATTS: It was about '33, something like that. He started giving us a break and then came another man. McCann, too, he also--because they didn't want us in the clubs also, but he started to let us come in--big club. And I will never forget this man either, Georgie McCooey.

VAZQUEZ: Georgie McQ?

PRATTS: Georgie McCooey--he became nice too, became a very nice man.

VAZQUEZ: Did he help Puerto Ricans get a job?

PRATTS: No, but at least he stopped the abuses they had with us, because every time after we fight, the cops come. He would get into it and say, "No, they're protecting themselves, too." The job started--I'll never forget either, LaGuardia started opening up

for the Puerto Ricans.

VAZQUEZ: LaGuardia?

PRATTS: LaGuardia and this other, Marcantonio, those are the only ones that opened up and ever since, we got a break. But the rest they were a bunch of criminals, another way. They hate. I believe they hate their own selves.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever join any clubs in the community, la Vanguardia Puertorriqueña?

PRATTS: No, we used to go to the LaGuardia Club in New York, 110 Street.

VAZQUEZ: You didn't belong to anything here in Brooklyn?

PRATTS: No, because I really didn't feel like going no place with the way it was. I feel like: the hell with everybody. I didn't want to be bothered with it. They figured after they got a hard time, they want to use us. And I said the hell with it-- we don't need it anyhow. You have to work hard to get along.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever meet or speak with Jesus Colon or Joaquin Colon?

PRATTS: Oh, Joaquin was a nice fellow and the other that used to be his friend; I can't remember the name. He used to have a club up in the corner of Washington & Sands. I can't remember his name--we used to go to that club... It was Puerto Rican.

VAZQUEZ: Sergio Vazquez? Ramon Rodriguez?

PRATTS: Silvio? No, I don't remember that name. Rodriguez, I remember him--It was Alonso. Alonso used to have a club there. That is the first club we put up. Then we put a club--a Puerto Rican, but it was a Republican club--on the corner of Heights and Washington. We put a club over there; el Partido Progresista Puertorriqueño.

VAZQUEZ: Who was in there?

PRATTS: The leader was Velez; and those, everybody--when they get in--to be high and nobody cared-- everybody want to grab this... and be in a high place and they wanted to be too independent, but--and the club went out because we don't take that either. I was the one that started. We got about 200 members. Right away the fellow tried to get smart and the President--My brother is going to be the secretary and the other one, this. No, no. You got elected by the people, so they started arguing, and we broke up.

VAZQUEZ: Are you active now on any clubs; political or social or anything?

PRATTS: No, I don't go for nothing. No, I just helped Colon on election days, but we used to go in the club; Republican club, Lafayette, around there. 6 District? But I stopped, too old to go to meetings. I take it easy in my house. I don't have to long. I don't want to go back no more. I am retired and I take it easy in my house. If anything, I advise my children to get a wife and settle--because I don't want whatever happened to us--don't happen to them. To try hard to be a good citizen. They are all born here; they have better rights than we do. That's the only thing; I worry. I don't worry about clubs no more. I retired from my work this year. We are going to move to Puerto Rico anyhow.

VAZQUEZ: You are going to retire in Puerto Rico?

PRATTS: Yes, I'm retiring. I'm working for it. When I retire, we will go together--leave the kids over here. We are old people. We don't need to be here anymore. They need it.

VAZQUEZ: You have been here 53 years.

PRATTS: Yes, but, a chance to take it easy. The only way I can take it easy is in my island.

VAZQUEZ: What do you think is the future of the Puerto Rican here in Brooklyn? Do you know any Puerto Ricans that are outstanding in Brooklyn, that are helping the Puerto Rican grow or move along?

PRATTS: I tell you the truth. The only one that I trust is Roman.

VAZQUEZ: Roman Ruben?

PRATTS: Ruben Roman is the only one I trust, the way that I see this and that. I know Roman is with the people and the other people are not. I run a club during the election days; we had a hard time because is controlled by the big shots and in here they--you have no ways to vote and they give you a runaround. I went to the club to find out--and what happens, I run into a Democratic club, all Puerto Ricans--no one gave me information. Then I came back and I started fighting until we go to Adams Street and we got big trouble over there. To vote--that was last election--when Badillo runs, that was cutthroat against Badillo, even Puerto Ricans. Si. So I see that, I say, "Well, it don't pay to do anything. He is only a clique. In the clique is all he wants to be, nobody else."

VAZQUEZ: You don't think the Puerto Rican community will ever get politically educated?

PRATTS: Oh, yes, the new generation are doing it now. They know because you get, now; Assemblyman ... Puerto Rican... Congressman... Puerto Rican. There was no judges. There was none before and you can see that they have gone up. Lawyers, doctors; we had nothing before, not one lawyer. Now you have lawyers like Badillo, you have Zapata, many, Gonzales Suarez--see, people that are really in favor of the community, the Puerto Rican community. But the other ones; they are just trying to get a proficient job and forget the rest. That is what they are looking for. So we don't bother. We vote and that's all, and we know how we're gonna vote, and forget about the rest.

VAZQUEZ: How many children do you have?

PRATTS: Four.

VAZQUEZ: Who are all adult and married?

PRATTS: All, yeah, they're all married.

VAZQUEZ: You live here, alone with your wife?

PRATTS: No, they all live here, all my children, with me. Only one lives in Greenpoint. The rest are in here.

VAZQUEZ: Is there anything else you might want to say about the Puerto Rican community, or politics? Anything that happened to you here, besides the negative? Not being able to get a job here in the '20s and '30s; you said it was very hard then.

PRATTS: Oh, yes in fact, there were places that put the sign: "No Puerto Ricans allowed."

VAZQUEZ: How about a place to live? Did you always have a place to live?

PRATTS: In those days, do you know what the landlords used to do? They would give you 6 month rent free, just so that you would move to the apartment, because there was no rent coming from the people. We used to have a man in Front Street, called him Mr. Pizzi; Italian fellow. He used to be a Marshall in the court, a very fine man. A Puerto Rican would move in the house, he would say, "Alright, you live in the house 3 or 4 months for free and then you pay me. That's what he used to do. Then he used to have a club in the cellar, belonged to McCann and Kelly. He was a very nice man. I think his

son works in the court there. He was very nice to Puerto Ricans. He stopped many fights. He would get in the fights when Italians would jump all over the people. He, one time, got in the middle and said, "You stop that shit. Why don't you fight like a man?" and he was Italian. That was a big shot, when he talked, all cooled off. Then there was Italian Puerto Rican; Gerhard Lombert. That gave us a push and besides, he was a man that talked like a human being. But the others, like criminals most of them.

VAZQUEZ: You said that Jimmy Kelly and McCann were also very helpful.

PRATTS: --McCann. Oh, yes they were very good.

VAZQUEZ: Do you know anything about Mr. Kelly helping Puerto Rican girls?

PRATTS: Anytime that you were in need--because I went to him one time with a friend of mine. The friend of mine got a job--and he is the only one that can recommend us--and I went to him, and he picked up the phone, and my friend got the job. And McCann was the same way. McCooey was the big man in the club. He was a judge, a Supreme Court Justice. He was a very good man too, Mr. McCooey. I think he is alive too. I didn't bother much with politics. The cops, forget it; the cops went after Puerto Ricans only. Any time there's a fight with any other kind, the Puerto Rican fighting; the cop is against him 100% and if they can hang it, they hang it.

VAZQUEZ: Tell me, you said that you worked for Carlos Tapia in the restaurant?

PRATTS: No, I used to go in there only. Sometimes when I came from the ship I would take my friends eat and go. I never stayed. He was a good man, that man. Every time there came a Puerto Rican and he had no place to sleep, he kept them in there until he would get a job. And feed them and everything. But he was a rough man. Carlos Tapia would not take baloney from a cop, from anybody. He fought those guys that are still in the corner of--down Van Brunt & Hamilton, those big--Sessa, they call him Sessa. They had detectives, and racketeers. He fought them like hell and he told them, "You kill me, is the only way you can get rid of me, because I take a chance with any one of you." And everybody will hear no more. Then we had a big trouble in there; that this friend of mine put a little restaurant and he got a couple of guys, waiters, and a fellow

came, and those Cesar brothers come over, break up the restaurant. There was a big fight and there was going to be a dead body in each side. But when they saw that we put up a fight, that we were ready, right away they called the cops. The cops came and caught a fellow with a gun, caught the other with a gun. So we told him, "You rat. You want to be a tough guy, when you saw a gun, you called the cops." And Caesar, the old man, told them, "Don't bother with them--keep them over there." They give us our gun back. They never bother with us, no more, either. Then we put restaurants and business, and Carlos was never bothered anymore.

VAZQUEZ: Was Carlos the first Puerto Rican restaurant in the community?

PRATTS: Yes, in those days. Then another, Luis Prieto, had a pool room on the corner of Sackett and Van Brunt, too, and they used to go and wreck up his place; the Italians-- Nobody knows [unintelligible] the niggers--the Italians did this. The Negroes are mad today because they were pushed. Right now, they are pushed a lot, too. One day, come two Puerto Ricans; they had just got off the ship, and they are standing right on the corner of Luis Prieto's pool room, and these Italians came over with a gun and they shot the two for no reason at all. They just came in; only 3 days here and they got killed on that corner. Italian people come over and shot them from across the street.

VAZQUEZ: There was a lot of fighting all the time?

PRATTS: Oh, yes. That's the time we went in to their own club and we would bust each club. We'd get in there and would have a big fight and they all jumped through the windows. Three went to the hospital and, goodbye, that was a free-for-all that day, because they did that for no reason at all, just for fun, because they wanted to have fun killing the Puerto Ricans. I'll never forget that either in my life. We went to the club from Van Brunt and Sackett, and next block on DeGraw, used to be their own club, right on the second floor. We went in there one night, we knocked the door down and right away that was a free-for-all. They stopped, they stopped. Now the Puerto Ricans are not scared. They look for the fights themselves. That is when they cooled off.

VAZQUEZ: Mr. Pratts, is there anything else you want to tell me?

PRATTS: Well, that's all that I know, really.