



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Alexandria Legacies*

Title: *Interview with Martin Adem*

Date of Interview: *September 27, 2005*

Location of Interview: *Interviewee's Office on Duke Street, Alexandria, Va.*

Interviewer: *JoAnn LaFon*

Transcriber: *JoAnn LaFon*

Abstract: Mr. Adem is a semi-retired self-made businessman who came to Alexandria when he was six years old. He was born in 1933. As a child and then a rising businessman, he was aware of the socio-economic changes, which have taken place in Alexandria in the past seventy years. During this interview, he is asked to compare life in Alexandria as he was building his business to everyday life as it exists in Alexandria today.

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INTRODUCTIONS/FAMILY BACKGROUND	
JoAnn LaFon:	Today is September 27, 2005. My name is JoAnn LaFon and I am interviewing Martin Lawrence Adem, known as Marty. He owned Marty's Floor Coverings for many, many years and is now retired. This interview is taking place in his office on Duke St. Marty, how long did your family live in Alexandria, Virginia?
Martin Adem:	They came in 1933-34.
JL:	1933, 1934?
Martin Adem:	Probably [19]34 or [19]35.
JL:	And where were they born?
Martin Adem:	My father was born in Europe and my mother was born in Russia, but my stepmother came here with my father. My real mother and father were divorced.
JL:	What type of work did your parents do?
Martin Adem:	My father and stepmother owned a grocery store on the corner of Princess and Royal.
JL:	Princess and Royal?
Martin Adem:	Right. The southwest corner also known as 330 N. Royal St.
JL:	Oh, does the tax record show both?
Martin Adem:	I don't know what the tax records show, but the store was 330 N. Royal.
JL:	And how long did they own that grocery store?
Martin Adem:	Well, I came down from New York in [19]39.
JL:	You were six years old?
Martin Adem:	Right. And they owned the store until [19]45 or [19]46 when they sold it.
JL:	Did they retire?
Martin Adem:	They moved out to Groveton, which is in Fairfax County and he purchased a big house—a couple of houses there—and he made apartments out of them and leased them out.
JL:	Did you live near the grocery store?
Martin Adem:	We lived on top of the grocery store.
JL:	Oh, well, that explains—I was going to ask you what games you played and where....
Martin Adem:	We generally played in the streets when we had a chance to play, but most of the time when I came home from school, I changed clothes and I worked in the grocery store.
SCHOOLING	
JL:	What school did you go to?
Martin Adem:	When I first came here, I went to Washington School, which was on Washington Street. That was in the 400-block of South Washington St. The building is still there; they use it for the Campagne Center.
JL:	Oh yes, that's a very nice building. And that was elementary school?
Martin Adem:	Right.

JL:	Did you go to middle school? Did they have middle school then?
Martin Adem:	I skipped a grade when I came here from New York.
JL:	Because you were so smart.
Martin Adem:	Exactly. {laughter} I think I started in third grade. And, I remember my teacher's name was Mrs. Britt.
JL:	Britt?
Martin Adem:	Correct.
JL:	Pretty good memory for the third grade.
Martin Adem:	Yeah, as you get older, the past becomes clear and the present becomes confused. [laughter]
JL:	Did you go there until...what grade?
Martin Adem:	Well, you went there until—I think it was like the 6 th grade or 7 th —and then we went to Jefferson School, which was in the middle of the block of West Street. It was on the west side of West St. and they used to sit on a slight promontory, which they've eliminated all the dirt and flattened it out and made a playground there. But the school used to be there. It was the Jefferson School and you went there I think from the sixth grade on until you went to high school, which was at G.W. [George Washington] High School.
JL:	GW High School that...
Martin Adem:	That exists now.
JL:	I didn't realize it was that old.
Martin Adem:	Well, I think it's a junior high school now. I'm not sure.
JL:	Yeah, T.C. Williams is the high school.
Martin Adem:	But it was THE high school at the time.
JL:	And then you went on to college? You were continuing to work in your father's store?
Martin Adem:	No, actually, you see my father had sold his store in[19]45 and we lived in Groveton and to go to school, I had to take a bus from Groveton to Alexandria and from Alexandria to Washington and change..
JL:	You were allowed to do that? You didn't have to go to school in Groveton.
Martin Adem:	You mean college?
JL:	No, in high school.
Martin Adem:	No, in high school I went... [Phone rings in office. Taped paused while he answers.]
FAMILIAL LIFE IN THE 1930s	
JL:	You were going to tell me what it was like growing up as a boy in Alexandria. You could walk down the street....
Martin Adem:	Everybody was polite. Most everybody was polite. You didn't have to lock your door. You didn't lock your door, you know. I'm serious; you didn't lock the door. If somebody stole a bicycle, it was a big event. Yeah and stealing a car was a big crime. Stealing a car now is like stealing a stick of gum. [laughter]

JL:	That's only in what? Fifty years?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, fifty years.
JL:	Well, fifty-five I guess.
Martin Adem:	Yeah, fifty-five. And now people just stare straight at you and lie. I don't recall that then—probably lied then too.
JL:	You were pretty astute. I mean you are now and I would think as a child, you were. Things have changed—morals, ethics...
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah, a child out of wedlock was, oh my God.
JL:	What was your relationship with your father? Were you close?
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah, he came close to me to beat the hell out of me all the time [laughter]
JL:	Oh, so you weren't close?
Martin Adem:	Well, if you do something wrong, you know, that was for nothing. Wait 'til you do something.
JL:	And you didn't get along well with your stepmother.
Martin Adem:	No, she didn't like me.
JL:	She had children also?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, she had two girls; she didn't produce any boys, which is a great problem for Jewish women at that time [laughter] if you didn't produce boys.
JL:	That's why she didn't like you?
Martin Adem:	I assume, you know, she never said so.
JL:	Did your real mother live here?
Martin Adem:	No, she lived in New York.
JL:	You remained close to her?
Martin Adem:	Yes.
JL:	So, you and your father weren't close you don't think?
Martin Adem:	No.
JL:	Did he give you any goals—did he set any goals for you or was that pretty much what you wanted to do in life?
Martin Adem:	I gathered you'd better make a living for yourself since nobody else is going to make it for you. I think that's the goal he set for me.
JL:	So, in other words your half-sisters had different rules than you.
Martin Adem:	Yeah, in those days, they treated girls much differently than they treated boys.
JL:	Kinder?
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah. Girls and women were treated with a whole lot more respect than they are today. The movement of equality, free love, the pill, abortion whatever. I don't think it has given women freedom. I guess the other way was sort of a benevolent dictatorship that they lived in.
JL:	They were treated like princesses.
Martin Adem:	The nearest thing I can say is they were treated under the patriarch system of a benevolent dictator. Does that make sense?
JL:	Well, do you think that was just in a Jewish family or do you think that was prevalent?

Martin Adem:	Perhaps more so in ethnic families like Jewish and Italian, you know. And Polish families but, to some extent, it spilled over in other families too. The Irish—the male was the leader. I think it was – perhaps it was more pronounced in ethnic than it was in Anglo-Saxon, you know, fourth generation American.
JL:	Did the City of Alexandria—was it a mix of ethnic families or was it primarily Anglo-Saxon?
Martin Adem:	Anglo-Saxon.
JL:	Primarily.
Martin Adem:	It was a Southern city.
JL:	It was?
Martin Adem:	It was a Southern city with a sprinkling of ethnic groups like, I remember, one of the first city managers was a man by the name of Nick Colasanto, whose brother became a judge in town.
JL:	I have to get the spelling for that: C-O-L-A-S-A-N-T-O. Were the streets more or less all brick or were they cobblestones?
Martin Adem:	They were a mixture of cobblestones—there were several more streets that were cobblestones—some parts of King Street were brick—yellow brick I remember.
JL:	Really?
Martin Adem:	Yeah. And then there were asphalt—it was a mixture. They had a lot of old granite curbs which you still see around town.
JL:	On Prince Street?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, practically indestructible, but I guess they're very expensive. Because concrete, you know, ages and chips and everything, but it is easy to put in and pour but the granite, it will last forever. Because it's granite [laughter]
START AND SUCCESS OF ADEM'S BUSINESS	
JL:	When you opened your business, did you do most of your business in the City of Alexandria?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, my first store was 1318 King Street and—
JL:	Was it a storefront?
Martin Adem:	It was a little storefront. It hadn't been occupied for years and I opened it up in [19]55.
JL:	And then later, you did mainly commercial?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, I started there and I got into commercial in about two or three years. Then I moved to 900-block of Duke Street. Had a friend of mine build me a store there. And built the warehouse there. It was step-by-step-by-step. You look back, it looks like a big deal, but at the time it was just step-by-step, you just did this and then you did this and you saved your money and then you did that and it—it may appear to be hard now when you look back at it—but it wasn't hard at all. [laughter]
JL:	You were very prosperous and very successful.
Martin Adem:	Well, you know, you had to work at it. I remember after about six or seven years, we were going to take a vacation. So we went to

	Wildwood, New Jersey...was it Wildwood? No, we went to Ocean City. We went to Ocean City and I rented a motel by the week because it is cheaper that way. Well, as soon as we got there, it started to rain and it rained the whole damn week. And I said, "well, let's stay here another couple more days," and it continued to rain. And I said, "This is a sign that we are supposed to be back to work." [laughter] "A sign from God telling us to get the hell back to work." [laughter] As we drove out of the city, the sun came out. [laughter]
JL:	Was that you and your family?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, I said, "If that isn't an omen to get back to work..."
JL:	That was your first vacation. Did your wife help you in the business?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, she worked in it.
JL:	So you worked for six or seven years before you took a vacation?
Martin Adem:	Right.
JL:	That's why you are successful.
Martin Adem:	But it was [laughter] can you believe this sun? I mean the sun came out...
THE ALEXANDRIA WATERFRONT	
JL:	Can you tell me anything else about the city of Alexandria back then? You talk about Taylor Burke, so you knew him.
Martin Adem:	All the waterfront was just ...old Robinson cement plant was there and they had a fertilizer plant all along the north side of town was a fertilizer plant and there was a Norton rendering plant where they render dead animals. And in my father's grocery store at the time, there was an old colored man named Uncle Willie and he lived in a houseboat—they had these flat-bottom houseboats—right beyond the rendering plant—right on the water there. And he took me down there and we went fishing off of there. And he would come into the store—he carved canes—you know canes with these snakes on them and everything—he carved all these fancy canes—and he'd come in my father's store and my father would let him sweep the floor and sweep the sidewalk and he'd get a can of beans and loaf of bread and some baloney and cheese and stuff like that. That's the way he paid him for cleaning the store. But I remember, it was Uncle Willie—this is in the early [19]40s—the man had to be 80 years old if he was a day.
JL:	Nowadays, so many of the expensive homes are along the waterfront and that was where all the slums were.
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah, why would you want to live there? It was all stinky and smelly you know.
JL:	The rendering plant must have been pretty smelly.
Martin Adem:	You can't imagine. [laughter] When they got to cooking up a bunch of dead animals, you can't imagine.
JL:	And when did [it] close?
Martin Adem:	They were in business probably until the early '60s. And the fertilizer plant was owned by Herbert Bryan.
JL:	Herbert Bryan.

Martin Adem:	Bryant B-R-Y-A-N-T. If you look at some of the steel, some of the brick storefronts on King Street—the lower part—the one and two hundred block—you will see some portions that are made out of steel. And you'll see his name imprinted there. Cast. You'll see Herbert Bryant. He was a big fertilizer salesman, hay, feed, fertilizer.
JL:	Why was his name imprinted on the building?
Martin Adem:	Because he owned the building.
JL:	Oh, that's where the fertilizer plant was.
Martin Adem:	That's where their offices were. The plant was all the way down there. The 300-block on. They had a big wharf there. 'Agrico' was the —you probably still see it—it's a big plant. But they produced fertilizer and black guys would work in there and when they came out, all that dust was completely all over them. Probably, to put it mildly, a gross violation of the environmental safety laws today.
JL:	The fertilizer plant must have created odor also.
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah, and dust all over the place.
JL:	And that was there until the '60s.
Martin Adem:	You could go straight down—my father's grocery store was the 300-block of N. Royal—you could walk straight down Princess Street towards the river and that's where the plant was. And they had docks there. I guess for the ships to come and take it away or bring in the raw materials... Plus it wasn't a neat, clean river the way you see it today. It was a river with marshlands as most rivers have. If you look down below Alexandria—in new Alexandria and all along the water there—you'll see there are marshlands and then the river starts? Well, that's the way it was there...all the way up to. I remember that plant—that Mirant plant they're talking about now. I remember when that was being built.
JL:	Oh, it's that old?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, it was built in the early [19]40s. My father used to make up a bunch of sandwiches and bring them out there at lunchtime to sell to the workmen.
JL:	And it's still there and still spewing out coal dust.
Martin Adem:	Right. Yeah that was built in the [19]40s —in the early [19]40s. I remember the Jefferson Memorial being built—National Airport being built. Jefferson Memorial was built in the early [19]40s. I remember them building it. I remember National Airport being built and the road —that road that's nice and smooth now?—at that time when they first built it, the damn thing sunk in all the time and...[laughter]
JL:	Built improperly you mean?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, by the airport. You'd go loop-de-loop [laughter] 'til enough of it sunk that they could make it solid, I guess. They were filling it in for years.
JL:	Because of the high water table?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, well they built the road and the thing kept sinking I guess—

JL:	Was the noise of the airplanes still a big issue at that time?
Martin Adem:	No, they liked having the airport there.
JL:	Oh, so they liked it. And the noise didn't matter because there were no people who lived down there. You said the southeast quadrant was poor whites and then up from the—southeast quadrant—Yates Gardens.
Martin Adem:	Well, Yates Gardens was white people already.
JL:	...blue collar.
Martin Adem:	Well, they were mixed—a few blacks in there. I guess you could call them genteel poverty. I think that's a phrase that describes it...genteel poverty.
JL:	And then up from the factories?
Martin Adem:	Well, that was black and white mixed... You know where they are building Chatham Square now? My father's grocery store was right on the corner there. And I remember them building the low cost housing there.
JL:	Isn't there a grocery store —oh no, that's Pitt [Street].
Martin Adem:	Across the street but that was a little garage at the time. But that existed there. That was there when my father's store was there. My father's store was here, that existing grocery store is there, and across the street, they were building the public housing that they tore down to build Chatham Square.
JL:	Well, there is still one big—two big blocks of it.
Martin Adem:	Yeah.
CHANGES	
JL:	Well, you certainly have seen a lot of changes in the city.
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah. Up here there was Herbie's Ford. You remember Santullo's market, don't you?
JL:	No.
Martin Adem:	Let's see, there were...
JL:	Just before the Carlyle House condominiums?
Martin Adem:	Oh, I know where you mean. Yes, this city has changed so. It's ah—I never thought I'd live to see the day when I am an elderly person reminiscing about used to be blah, blah blah!
JL:	Well, look at the changes. How do you spell that market—S-A-N-T-U-L-L-O?
Martin Adem:	Yeah, something like that.
JL:	And that was where Track Auto used to be?
Martin Adem:	No, it was right up the street here—the 1700-block. You know where that creek is? Huff's Creek I think they call it. It was on the east side of Huff's Creek and before that was Herbie's Ford.
JL:	Was that as big as most auto places are? I mean did it take up a block?
Martin Adem:	No auto place, at that time, was as big as auto places are today [laughter] period.

JL:	Well, you didn't have as much traffic so you didn't have to worry about that.
Martin Adem:	You know, in those days, the family had one car. It was only the very rich who had two cars...the wife had a car. I mean, if you had a car, it was one step removed from the house.
JL:	And there was quite a bit of public transportation still?
Martin Adem:	Oh yeah.
JL:	So you'd say most people used public transportation?
Martin Adem:	Yes, I remember women getting on a bus or in D.C., getting on a trolley and wearing a hat and white gloves. A man felt naked without a hat and a woman if she went out in the street, she always wore a hat and gloves. Do you recall your mother doing that?
JL:	Actually, when I started with IBM, we wore gloves. Only in New York City though. It was starting to stop just about that time. Did you get into D.C. much? Was that a part of your regular life?
Martin Adem:	We would occasionally go into D.C. and visit friends, go to restaurants and such. We went to movie houses there. That's another thing—when you went to the movies, you always dressed up. You wore a suit.
JL:	And nowadays, they go to the ballet in jeans.
Martin Adem:	I <i>know</i> [laughter]. I remember a lot of kids wore jeans and I wanted to wear jeans and my father said, "No son of mine is wearing jeans. I can afford to put pants on you." You see, jeans were a sign of a working man. So he wasn't going to allow his son to wear jeans.
JL:	You have a wonderful memory of the city of Alexandria and you have been a marvelous person to interview. Do you have anything you would like to add about those days? About the changes. About life as it was and life as it is now?
Martin Adem:	[Pause.] I think people mingled more when you didn't have air conditioning and you had to sit out on the porch and you had to get out. And they mingled more when you didn't have television.
JL:	More socialization?
Martin Adem:	And the people knew each other and they knew what the hell was going on. Perhaps that's what made people [today] more accepting of crime because they don't really know the people it happened to. You know, if you knew that two-blocks up the street that Mrs. Jones had been robbed at gun point, "Can you imagine that? We'll have to find this culprit." You see, now everybody goes home, it's air conditioned; turn on the TV. "I am immune from my neighbor. I don't even know him." If I know his name, what the hell he does, it's a big deal. I think that's how we immunize ourselves from crime because unless you know the person it happened to, you are not really involved. What do you think?
JL:	I agree. Well, thank you very much, Marty. I've taken up over an hour of your time and I certainly appreciate it.
Martin Adem:	Okay. [Tape ends]

