

## **Journeys South**

A Project of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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### **Sam Blyweiss**

Interview Date: 1/22/10

Location of interview: Stiffel Center, 6<sup>th</sup> and Porter, Philadelphia

Interview conducted by Thomas Carroll with RA Friedman

Sam Blyweiss: Camera's are rolling, all right.

Interviewer: So, Sam, we can just talk, I think. RA, is that correct?

RA: Yeah, you don't need to look at the camera.

Interviewer: You don't have to look at the camera.

RA: Yeah, you can just engage with Tom is fine.

Interviewer: Well, first of all, we'll start with your name, so we have your name on the –

Sam Blyweiss: My name, Samuel Blyweiss.

Interviewer: Blyweiss, how do you spell that?

Sam Blyweiss: B-L-Y-W-E-I-S-S.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sam Blyweiss: 93.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Where were you born?

Sam Blyweiss: South Philadelphia.

Interviewer: Where in South Philadelphia?

Sam Blyweiss: Where? 1936 on 10th and McKean.

Interviewer: In this neighborhood, roughly, just a few blocks from here.

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, we moved around a little.

Interviewer: Can we talk a little bit about your family, your parents, where are they from?

Sam Blyweiss: Russia, both of my parents are Russian.

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Interviewer: Did they ever say what village or what town or what part of Russia?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, **[inaudible]** they were in – my mother came from **[inaudible]**, I can't pronounce it, that's a long one. They both come from Russia, small town in Russia.

Interviewer: Were they married there, or did they meet here?

Sam Blyweiss: They were married there. He came first and then they sent for her.

Interviewer: When, what year, roughly? Roughly, it doesn't –

Sam Blyweiss: 1910. They were married – well, I was born – 1910. I was born 1916.

Interviewer: Did they ever say why they left? Did they talk about Russia?

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, my father had some trouble over there. He had trouble with some Cossacks. He left there.

Interviewer: How did he get to Philadelphia? What that his destination to begin with, or did he –

Sam Blyweiss: Well, he came on the boat. A lot of them come on the boat **[inaudible]** silent and he **[inaudible]**. He's very religious, my father.

Interviewer: Sam, I don't wanna pry. I don't wanna pry into personal questions, but I do wanna ask you about the trouble with the Cossacks. What was the major event? Did he ever talk about it?

Sam Blyweiss: No, not too much about it. He just, I don't know, he was having trouble, he didn't like it, but whatever it was, you know, they used to come around with horses and beat up **[inaudible]**, so he left.

Interviewer: And so he got on a boat and came to Philadelphia?

Sam Blyweiss: He came to Philly by himself, or with a group, Ellis Island.

Interviewer: Did he know anyone already in the neighborhood that he could connect with, or was he really just alone, on his own?

Sam Blyweiss: Then his brother come down with him later on.

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- Interviewer: What was your father's name, your dad's name?
- Sam Blyweiss: Well, he changed it to Blyweiss. I don't know his – I don't think I know it. No, it was something like Blyweiss.
- Interviewer: Yeah, and his first name?
- Sam Blyweiss: Hyman.
- Interviewer: Hyman.
- Sam Blyweiss: H-Y-M-A-N.
- Interviewer: So like so many people, he changed his name when he got to **[inaudible]**. All right. So where did he settle in South Philadelphia? Did he find –
- Sam Blyweiss: In Philadelphia.
- Interviewer: Did he find a room like in a boarding house, or what did he do? He never talked about settling here?
- Sam Blyweiss: Yeah. Well, he settled here **[inaudible]** we don't know.
- Interviewer: What kind of work did he do?
- Sam Blyweiss: Paper hanger, he started out at the paper hanger. He scrapped his work with someone and he learned the trade and I followed.
- Interviewer: He learned that trade here?
- Sam Blyweiss: Here, yeah.
- Interviewer: So you were born in 1916?
- Sam Blyweiss: Yes.
- Interviewer: In South Philadelphia. Were you both at 10th and McKean or were you born in another place?
- Sam Blyweiss: I was born in South Philadelphia.
- Interviewer: Yeah, but at 10th and McKean or at another location?
- Sam Blyweiss: I'm not sure it was 10th and McKean. I'm not sure.

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Interviewer: It's a long time. Were you born in the house, do you know, or were you born in a hospital?

Sam Blyweiss: In the house, yeah.

Interviewer: With probably a midwife coming to the birth?

Sam Blyweiss: Yes, most of us were.

Interviewer: What was your mother's name?

Sam Blyweiss: Esther.

Interviewer: And again, I wanna talk about you, but I wanna get the family background. So at 10th and McKean, coming up in that neighborhood, what was it like? Were there other Jews around?

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, yeah, like one side was all Jew businesses. I fought that a little bit, but I **[inaudible]** working at a store. We lived somewhere – I don't know where we lived before that, but wasn't **[inaudible]** this one. He rented it, I mean that was it. Never bought, but it was really –

Interviewer: Rented the house or the stores?

Sam Blyweiss: The house.

Interviewer: And the shop he also rented?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, it was a store front.

Interviewer: Oh, and your family lived in the back or upstairs?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, upstairs was the bedroom. Downstairs there was a kitchen and all that.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. And so customers would come into the shop –

**[Crosstalk]**

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, if they wanted to **[inaudible]** would keep his tools in there, keep a stock.

Interviewer: All right. So he could sell paper and stuff out of the shop?

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Sam Blyweiss: Very little, very little. Mostly **[inaudible]**. There was a lot of wallpaper stores around so you could get what you want. We had a little bit, that was it.

Interviewer: And who were his clientele? Were they neighbors, were they –

Sam Blyweiss: Neighbors or –

Interviewer: – Jewish community?

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: Everybody?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, we had a good neighborhood, Italians and Jews.

Interviewer: Italians and Jews?

Sam Blyweiss: That's it.

Interviewer: And how did people get along?

Sam Blyweiss: Very good. We got along good. Wasn't no **[inaudible]** or nothing like that.

Interviewer: And in terms of home life?

Sam Blyweiss: It was good. Well, we struggled, you know. It was hard making a living. There was seven of us, seven children. But we managed, you know.

Interviewer: Seven children. How many bedrooms upstairs? A couple of bedrooms? Three maybe?

Sam Blyweiss: Three it was, yeah. Three beds. We used to double up. Sometimes we had four in a bed, two in a bed, three. I had two sisters and five brothers.

Interviewer: You stayed in the neighborhood. Are you still living right here?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, we're living in South Philly, but not there. My father's been moving around a little bit and I bought a house at 4th and Morris, that's been 50 years.

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Interviewer: And that's where you are now?

Sam Blyweiss: No, I'm at 5<sup>th</sup> and Jackson now, senior center. I'm at a senior center now **[inaudible]**. I lost my wife and I moved here. I've been here like over four years.

Interviewer: So do you have any – believe me, I know that we're talking way back, right, and I wanna get onto more of your history. But going back to life in the home, what are your early memories of growing up? Was it a Jewish household? Did your mother keep **[inaudible]**?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, we kept Jewish. **[Inaudible]** two my brothers went to Hebrew school. I started and then stopped and went to work with my father. I learned a trade.

Interviewer: Right. Were you the oldest?

Sam Blyweiss: No, no, I was the third. I have a sister and a brother that were older.

Interviewer: I wonder why it was that the oldest didn't also follow your father in the profession. Did he have other interests?

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, he went to work. He got himself a job, and job in **[inaudible]** yard. It was all right.

Interviewer: And so your father taught you the trade?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, my father taught me the trade.

Interviewer: And were you interested? Did you grow up interested in that, or did you just get kind of –

Sam Blyweiss: I liked it.

Interviewer: What was it about it that you liked?

Sam Blyweiss: Hanging wallpaper and you know, dealing with the customers, and learning all about it. I went to the wallpaper store and buying stuff.

Interviewer: And looking at patterns and designs?

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Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, well, we had books, wallpaper books they gave us, and showed it to the customer, and get them what they wanted. I just hung it. I hung the wallpaper.

Interviewer: Right. Yeah. So you would go to somebody's house or business and hang it?

Sam Blyweiss: Go to their house, size their room to condition, give them a price, and do the job if they agreed.

Interviewer: Right. Did you also have to worry about the surface, like patching the walls and getting everything smooth?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** they used to do that.

Interviewer: They did?

Sam Blyweiss: We had a scraper. If they wanted it to, we just paper one on top of the other. It was a poor neighborhood and **[inaudible]**. Some of them did, they scraped it off and **[inaudible]**, then I paper it. But if they don't, we paper over the top of it.

Interviewer: You know I grew up with wallpaper in the Bronx, and they weren't painted walls, they were all papered.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, usually **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: You don't see that much anymore, do you?

Sam Blyweiss: No more.

Interviewer: What happened?

Sam Blyweiss: It's a dying business. Most of the wallpaper stores closed. We used to have a lot of **[inaudible]** most of them, and one by one, I think there's only maybe two left, one or two out of we used to have like **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: In the South Philly neighborhood?

Sam Blyweiss: South Philly.

Interviewer: Were they Jewish owned stores?

Sam Blyweiss: Jewish owned.

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Interviewer: It's interesting, the fabric stores were Jewish owned, you know. On 4<sup>th</sup> Street there's still some of them.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: I didn't know that it was a wallpaper community or shop owners who had wallpaper.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: In the South Philly neighborhood?

Sam Blyweiss: South Philly.

Interviewer: Were they Jewish owned stores?

Sam Blyweiss: Jewish owned.

Interviewer: It's interesting, the fabric stores were Jewish owned, you know. On 4<sup>th</sup> Street there's still some of them.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: I didn't know that it was a wallpaper community or shop owners who had wallpaper.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: For the trade. Where were the stores located?

Sam Blyweiss: 6th and **[inaudible]** was one. 5th and **[inaudible]**. 8th and South. 15<sup>th</sup> and **[Inaudible]**. I know there was a few more. 5th and Fitzwater.

Interviewer: What was it about the Jewish community that there was an affinity for that? Why was it Jews? Just because they were good merchants, or was there something else?

Sam Blyweiss: It's a business. They put up a wallpaper store and that's it. They sell it and **[inaudible]**. It's a nice business. Well, people were paper those days. Everybody was paper. No paint, all they had was paper.

Interviewer: And now, we almost never see wallpaper.



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Sam Blyweiss: You don't see it. They're all closed up.

Interviewer: And again, I asked you this, but why do you think? What happened? Did you notice when you were working a transition where there was less interest?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** everything was all right when I was working. When I retired, it's – I'm '93. I started retiring about 75 or 73, it started to die out.

Interviewer: Around that time, but you didn't perceive it at that time? When you were working, even in the 70s, it was still an active **[inaudible]**?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, very active.

Interviewer: Did you hand the business along, or just shut it down?

Sam Blyweiss: What business? I was independent. I was by myself. I was a paper hanger worker on my own, doing a job, and that was it. What I'd make was profit and I'd make enough.

Interviewer: Did you have a shop like your father had? Did you have a shop?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I had a store front.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Sam Blyweiss: 4th and Morris, that's where I lived for the last 50 years.

Interviewer: So again, you lived in the same building where the business was?

Sam Blyweiss: Same building, a three story building. I had three daughters who took over, two on the third floor, one on the second. It was a nice living. I had three nice daughters. Each one graduated college **[inaudible]**, it was nice.

Interviewer: Let's go back. All right. Can we go back? I'd like to go back and forth a little bit and ask you, again, about growing up. Okay. So you were born in 1916. You were the third born in your family. You were number three?

Sam Blyweiss: Number three.

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Interviewer: You had a sister and a brother, and then there were four after you. Did the family have a backyard, a garden, was there anything – like in your mother’s cooking, did she grow things in the back that she –

Sam Blyweiss: We had a yard, it’s all we had. We had a yard there.

Interviewer: And you didn’t use that for any gardening, or chickens, or anything like that?

Sam Blyweiss: It was a small yard.

Interviewer: And in terms of the Jewish calendar or the holidays and celebrations, did you celebrate –

Sam Blyweiss: Every one of them. My father was the religious one. Went to Synagogue at 6<sup>th</sup> and Morris, was a big synagogue there. I had to go there – well, I’d sit here a while when I was young.

Interviewer: Right. Were you bar mitzvahed?

Sam Blyweiss: I was bar mitzvahed just now. This year I was bar mitzvahed.

Interviewer: Oh, you were?

Sam Blyweiss: 93. I had a bar mitzvah, but that’s common.

Interviewer: Right. So you had said that you didn’t continue with Hebrew school because you had to go to work.

Sam Blyweiss: I had to go to work.

Interviewer: Yeah, and so that disrupted that, so you just got back to that now. You now have been bar mitzvahed?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah. Well, they added here something different.

Interviewer: Is it appropriate to say “mazel tov”?

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, yeah. We **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: You’re speaking about singing. RA likes to ask about any songs that were sung in household growing up. Do you remember any of the old songs? RA, help you with this if you want to.

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RA: Well, I don't wanna coach you too much, but I was just curious if you made music in the house? Did you have a piano? Did your parents sing?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** I can't hear you.

RA: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm listening through headphones, so I have to take them off so I can actually hear what I'm saying. Did your parents sing? Did you play music in the house?

Sam Blyweiss: What?

RA: Did you play music in the house as a family?

Sam Blyweiss: We all spoke Jewish.

RA: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: And did you sing? Were there songs?

Sam Blyweiss: I don't remember.

Interviewer: Did anyone play an instrument, the piano?

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: None of –

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]**. Jewish songs.

Interviewer: Jewish songs. Do you remember any of the songs?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]**.

Interviewer: I know, I know, it's a long time.

Sam Blyweiss: If I hear them, I know them, yeah.

RA: I work in an archive, so we have a lot of vintage Jewish recordings, so I deal with this on a daily basis. So I could probably rattle off some titles, but I don't know things that were popular around probably the time that you were growing up.

Sam Blyweiss: Well, we do all the Jewish those days.

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I had a tough life, my family did, you know. They struggled all the time. My father had to go borrow \$1.00 so they could have food on the table, you know, borrow from somebody. Sometimes there's no work, [inaudible].

Interviewer: Did the community pitch in and help each other?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, if you needed anything. We tried not to, you know. My mother used to get \$1.00 and go to 7<sup>th</sup> Street, the market, and that would buy a lot of stuff with it. Things were cheap in those days, not like it is today. Three pounds of ground meat for quarter or something like that.

Interviewer: You could feed a big family with that.

Sam Blyweiss: Big family, yeah. Well, my mother was the cook. She was the cook and she done all that. She was Jewish. She talked very little English.

Interviewer: Right. You parents did?

Sam Blyweiss: My father talked good.

Interviewer: Yeah, but your mother never –

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, the only one she'd do is something [inaudible]. She [inaudible] the family.

Interviewer: She didn't work; she didn't work outside the house?

Sam Blyweiss: No. Always raising children. She died young.

Interviewer: When you were young – oh, I'm sorry. You said she died young? When? How old?

Sam Blyweiss: About 42, 43. My father died at 55.

Interviewer: So you were pretty young when your parents died? You were a young man?

Sam Blyweiss: I was maybe about 20. I remember that. I just got a good job. I was working for the Navy department making ammunition there, and I just come home with the first [inaudible]. She got sick, and that was it. I remember I gave her my first paycheck.

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Interviewer: You handed it over to her?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, I gave it to her. Well, most of it.

Interviewer: Yes. Well, you were contributing to the household. Can we talk about that? How about early work that you did? That was a good job at the Navy Yard, but what did you do early on as a kid? Was there any way that you could make money and bring money into the house?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I worked making paper since I was about 17, \$6.00 a week, so whatever I made **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Right.

Sam Blyweiss: And then I worked as a card walking around checking **[inaudible]** factory. I worked there; it was just a short while. They don't pay that much, just like \$6000.00, but whatever I made, I would help out.

Interviewer: Making paintbrushes. Was that a factory job?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, was at a factory. Making steel barrels. I was like a card walking around **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Oh, I see, **[inaudible]**, I see.

Sam Blyweiss: It's like a card walking around checking.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** time cards.

Interviewer: Yeah, right, yeah. Where was that located?

Sam Blyweiss: Front and Mifflin. It's United Steel Barrel.

Interviewer: Oh, United Steel Barrel.

Sam Blyweiss: I knew what they **[inaudible]** and I would **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: What about the paintbrush factory? You were making paintbrushes?

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Sam Blyweiss: No, that was **[inaudible]** they had me making, stamping the paintbrushes or puts nail on the hole. Just a **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: You didn't really, really like that – you didn't like that work, particularly?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, anything to make a living. I was young. I wanted \$6.00 a week. I remember I asked for a raise of \$1.00. I was happy. I went back to my father.

Interviewer: Yeah, right, right. You were gonna say something?

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: What about younger, going back, maybe informal jobs. Did you have any way that you could work for one of the merchants or –

Sam Blyweiss: Before 16, I went to school.

Interviewer: Did you?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, I went to school. 14 I graduated South Worth Public School, and then after that I started looking for a job.

Interviewer: You didn't think about high school?

Sam Blyweiss: I started there, but then I went to work. I was a young kid then. I'd rather stay home and play ball.

Interviewer: Yes, yeah. Let's talk about playing. Can we talk about playing, growing up? Well, what did you do in the neighborhood to –

Sam Blyweiss: We used to play baseball up the little street there. There was no cars around those days, so we used that little street to play baseball, you know, hand ball against the wall there.

Interviewer: Hand ball against the wall of the building?

Sam Blyweiss: No, we played regular baseball with a bat.

Interviewer: And a hard ball?

Sam Blyweiss: And half ball.

Interviewer: Half ball, yeah, right, so it couldn't really break anything.

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Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: And these were rubber balls?

Sam Blyweiss: Rubber.

Interviewer: Like the pink rubber balls?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, something like that.

Interviewer: What did you use for a bat?

Sam Blyweiss: Some sort of bat they have. I think they had **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: A broomstick maybe?

Sam Blyweiss: Could be, could be. I think you're right.

Interviewer: And so you call that baseball?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: And you played, you said, in a street near the house?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, it was a little street, Dudley Street. There was no cars around, so we used to play there.

Interviewer: What's the name of the street?

Sam Blyweiss: Dudley.

Interviewer: Dudley.

**[Crosstalk]**

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, there was no cars around those days. Nobody had a car.

Interviewer: Oh, that's hard to imagine, isn't it? You know I never thought about that. But how about on McKean, on your block where you lived, were there cars parked or no?

Sam Blyweiss: Very few. Might've been one or two.

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Interviewer: That's amazing. You know I never thought of that. So the streets were open?

Sam Blyweiss: The streets were mostly – every few had a car.

Interviewer: And were there a lot of cars driving down the bigger streets?

Sam Blyweiss: Very little.

Interviewer: So how did people get around?

Sam Blyweiss: Trolley car. Everyone used the trolley car. Even my father, when we went to work, we got on the trolley, carried wallpaper, and tools with us to get from one place to another.

Interviewer: Oh. Boy, that's hard.

Sam Blyweiss: It was really reasonable, it was .08 for a trolley, 2 for .15, 2 tokens.

Interviewer: And where did you get the trolley? Were the trolleys all over?

Sam Blyweiss: They had all over, every street they had, 10<sup>th</sup> Street and 9<sup>th</sup> Street, all over.

Interviewer: No busses?

Sam Blyweiss: No busses those days, no. Everything was trolley. We had a conductor those days, we had a conductor. **[Inaudible]** operator and a conductor.

Interviewer: Right.

Sam Blyweiss: You don't see that no more.

Interviewer: And so you were on with your tools, you and your father?

Sam Blyweiss: We used to **[inaudible]** carry wallpaper, the boards, trusses, and the tools, paste brush and all that stuff.

Interviewer: What did your father do before you started helping him? Did he have somebody else to help him?

Sam Blyweiss: No, he managed himself.

**[Crosstalk]**



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- Sam Blyweiss: Until he got me. I didn't like school, so I went to work with him.
- Interviewer: Right. And did your older brother like school, is that it, did he stay in school?
- Sam Blyweiss: Graduated high school. **[Inaudible]** jobs. **[Inaudible]** worked for a report shop. My younger brother, he worked, too. The younger brother we're talking about?
- Interviewer: Yes.
- Sam Blyweiss: My younger brother and my sister went to work. It was tough times.
- Interviewer: And talking, again, about the games. Did you go outside the neighborhood to play, into the parks, anything like that? Did you play any other games that you could remember besides baseball?
- Sam Blyweiss: No, not outside. No, we used to play the school yard baseball.
- Interviewer: At Southwark Public School. I guess I wanna ask you again about the paper hanging.
- Sam Blyweiss: Okay.
- Interviewer: You know you started helping your father. You quite school. You went to school a little bit. High school, you didn't really like it. I guess you went to Southern.
- Sam Blyweiss: Southern was right.
- Interviewer: And you decided that wasn't for you?
- Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, I went to ninth grade, and wanted to work.
- Interviewer: You wanted to work? That was your decision?
- Sam Blyweiss: I wanted to work with my father, yeah. He was **[inaudible]** and all that stuff.
- Interviewer: Right. And you said you'd always been interested, too, right?
- Sam Blyweiss: I used to paste and I started doing it all.

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- Interviewer: Because it's not easy to do; it's a skill.
- Sam Blyweiss: It's a skill. I mean a lot of women used to do it, too, years ago, but it was a skill. You gotta know what you're doing. Later on there was all different types of wallpaper, flocks of foils and all that stuff.
- Interviewer: Right. You had to match everything.
- Sam Blyweiss: Match it all.
- Interviewer: But yet, you went to the Navy Yard. How did that happen?
- Sam Blyweiss: I put in an application. I got a job through the war time. This was war time, 1940 I think it was, I got a job there.
- Interviewer: So you left your father, the business for a while, and went on –
- Sam Blyweiss: Things were quiet so there wasn't that much.
- Interviewer: Oh, sure. What did he do during the war? Did he keep with the business, your father?
- Sam Blyweiss: Well, he'd still paper out here, yeah. Did a little bit, not as much. He was getting up in the years, you know.
- Interviewer: Right. And so you got the job at the Navy. How long did you stay there?
- Sam Blyweiss: 4 1/2 years.
- Interviewer: For the war period, from '40 until the war ended.
- Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.
- Interviewer: And then you left and came back into the business?
- Sam Blyweiss: I was laid off. They laid everybody off. Then I went back, but not with my father [inaudible]. Then we moved, and then I lost my mother then, and everything changed. I was going same time I got married '45, and that was it. Once I got married, I lived with my in-laws for a while, about six years, and I bought my own business. I went back to paper.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: You know, it's interesting; I've talked to a lot of people about the war, before the war, and after the war. A lot of people have said that it was different after the war. They had a different idea about things; they had a different kind of work. They moved to a different location. I mean whatever. They got married, started raising a family. You said things changed. What do you mean?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, when I got married, everything changed. I lived with my wife, we had a baby, it was a nice life. I enjoyed it. I lived with my in-laws. I was able to live there when my wife had the baby, and then I put my own village, one house and then I [inaudible] then when I got laid off, I went right back into paper hanging. I always do the trade, you know. [Inaudible]. My father wasn't around then.

Interviewer: Right. He died right after the war?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: And so you aren't saying that after the war things were different like in a general sense. You were just saying you had grown up a little bit, and you got married, and life changed for you in a personal way?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, well, I had to make a living and that was it.

Interviewer: Would you have stayed at the Navy Yard if they didn't lay you off? I mean –

Sam Blyweiss: I was thinking of it. They wanted to change [inaudible], I wanted to go back to work in my trade because I got married. I thought I'd go back to paper hanging, I did.

Interviewer: Yeah. And as you say, it was something you knew?

Sam Blyweiss: I knew it, and it was something different, yeah.

Interviewer: So let's go back again and talk about the neighborhood because we're at, what, 6<sup>th</sup> and Porter here. How do you say this place anyway? Is it Stiffel?

Sam Blyweiss: Stiffel.

Interviewer: You say Stiffel.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Sam Blyweiss: Stiffel.

Interviewer: Is that how the family said the name, Stiffel? Did the Stiffel family call themselves Stiffel, or did they pronounce it different?

Sam Blyweiss: Stiffel.

Interviewer: Stiffel. So what are your memories of the neighborhood growing up? Were you on 7<sup>th</sup> Street?

Sam Blyweiss: No, I lived on 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

Interviewer: Right. But did you come here growing up – as a kid, did you come out to 7<sup>th</sup> Street?

Sam Blyweiss: Not as a kid, no. When I got married, I joined it. My wife was at it and I joined it.

Interviewer: Meaning this Stiffel center?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Sam Blyweiss: And I enjoyed it, it was nice, you know. There was people, and it was nice.

Interviewer: What do people come here for? Why did they come?

Sam Blyweiss: A lot of them come to eat, and drink. Not to eat – they had their lunches here, and they got music, amusements in those days, trips, go on trips. It was nice.

Interviewer: Even back then. When did you join? What year would you say?

Sam Blyweiss: 1998.

Interviewer: Oh, I see, right. You didn't come here as a kid?

Sam Blyweiss: No, never heard of it.

Interviewer: So I was asking about the neighborhood, 7<sup>th</sup> Street, the business corridor, there were Jewish merchants. What do you remember about that place?

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Sam Blyweiss: It was beautiful then. All beautiful, and big Fishers Wall Grocery Store, 7<sup>th</sup> and McKean, we had everything here. I [inaudible] you know, we were well known. And you could walk around 7<sup>th</sup> Street and get anything you want. They had push carts [inaudible].

Interviewer: Meaning push carts to buy –

Sam Blyweiss: Bananas, fruit, yeah, they had a few there.

Interviewer: And did people come around with their carts to the neighborhoods, or did they stay mainly on 7<sup>th</sup>? Well, in other words, sometimes the hucksters come around to the neighborhood, though, maybe they'd come to the neighborhood.

Sam Blyweiss: Visit?

Interviewer: Yeah, and sell their stuff up and down the streets.

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: Did they do that?

Sam Blyweiss: Very few. They [inaudible] used to go around the streets selling bananas, he was there for years.

Interviewer: How about people like sharpening knives, or selling door to door, that sort of thing?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I think they had one guy who used to go around and sharpen knives, but [inaudible].

Interviewer: Right. So you could take your things in?

Sam Blyweiss: If you needed, yeah. We don't shop that much.

Interviewer: What about cultural events and activity, movies, plays, theater, music?

Sam Blyweiss: Movies galore. 7<sup>th</sup> Street. 7<sup>th</sup> and Moore was the movies, the Grand, and Jackson, [inaudible] all downtown. Where I'm living that used to be the ideal thing, 5<sup>th</sup> and Jackson. I used to go to it when I was a kid. Now I'm living in it.

Interviewer: It was that actual building?

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, that building. It's a senior center.

Interviewer: Did you say 5<sup>th</sup> and Jackson?

Sam Blyweiss: 5<sup>th</sup> and Jackson. We've got like 63 apartments in there.

Interviewer: Wow.

Sam Blyweiss: I got one of them.

Interviewer: So that was a movie theater?

Sam Blyweiss: Movie theater.

Interviewer: Were there live performances there, too?

Sam Blyweiss: No live. Movies.

Interviewer: So you'd go into the movie. How about music? Did they have music there, or was it just strictly movies?

Sam Blyweiss: No music. Movies.

Interviewer: Did you –

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]**.

Interviewer: And so that was your entertainment. It wasn't going to concerts or –

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: – you didn't –

Sam Blyweiss: I was a kid anyways, you don't go to concert.

Interviewer: Yeah. Or live like theater, shows, any of that stuff?

Sam Blyweiss: I went later on in life. I went to theaters.

Interviewer: Were there any street performers? Any people on the street performing? Like on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, could you hear music playing, could you hear any of that?

Sam Blyweiss: Not that I remember. No, we didn't have that.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: You know I'm so interested in this image of the street without cars. You were saying before –

Sam Blyweiss: It was going back to the 30s.

Interviewer: I mean it's – now, everything is cluttered with cars. There are cars everywhere.

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** you can't find a parking space.

Interviewer: You can't find a parking space. So I'm just wondering – like your friends played baseball on the street.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, **[inaudible]** until **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Then you moved, then you went to the parks, or did you –

Sam Blyweiss: No, well, I mean it was a good while then. We moved out.

Interviewer: Yeah, I see what you mean, yeah, right.

Sam Blyweiss: We had a fire and everything.

Interviewer: But I'm just wondering how else – what other ways people filled up that space, right, so there were no cars parked there. Were the girls playing hopscotch or jump rope?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, sure, we had hopscotch. Yeah, everything, we did that. Play marbles, shoot craps.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** watch them. We had all that downtown.

Interviewer: So marbles, though.

Sam Blyweiss: We had that. When I was a kid, we used to shoot marbles. We'd save beer tops, milk tops, they all worked for that.

Interviewer: What were the beer tops and milk tops for?

Sam Blyweiss: You save them and then you get so many, if you wanna you sell them, anything, accumulate them.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: Right. And you could sell them, make a little cash?

Sam Blyweiss: No, I mean sell them to one another.

Interviewer: Oh, oh, I see.

Sam Blyweiss: Sometimes, sometimes you don't.

Interviewer: So it was a collection really?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, for kids.

Interviewer: How old were you then?

Sam Blyweiss: About 12, 13, 14, about that, not too old.

Interviewer: And shooting craps, like what was that?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I was watching the grownups you know, we didn't do it. For money, they used to play for money, grownups, nickels and dimes, yeah.

Interviewer: Where would they go, just on the street?

Sam Blyweiss: On the street, right.

**[Crosstalk]**

Sam Blyweiss: On the side, on the steps, somebody's steps.

Interviewer: Right. And they'd be shooting craps?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, until a cop comes around and breaks it up.

Interviewer: Did money change hands?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, sure, nickels and dimes, yeah.

Interviewer: And these were friends who played?

Sam Blyweiss: Friends. Well, I didn't play very much. I didn't have that kind of money. The grownups used to do it. All streets had craps games.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. So if you were to imagine looking out on the street back in the 20s, say, the time you're talking about, you'd see maybe



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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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some kids playing ball, maybe in another place people shooting craps, maybe kids shooting marbles?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, you always had something to do.

Interviewer: There'd be people out on the street?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, sure. The summertime they just **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: As you said before, it was a nice neighborhood and people got along.

Sam Blyweiss: Beautiful neighborhood. Still is I guess. I've been away from it for a long time.

Interviewer: Meaning 10<sup>th</sup> and McKean?

Sam Blyweiss: 10<sup>th</sup> and McKean, yeah. Most of them go on, most of the people stores – there used to be stores on every corner, they're all closed now. Used to have an **[inaudible]** there.

Interviewer: So everything was in the neighborhood?

Sam Blyweiss: It's all in the neighborhood. Anything you needed was in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: Right. So you would walk, or if you needed to go further, take the trolley?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, if you wanted to go anywhere, you'd take the trolley. If you wanted to go uptown, mostly you walked.

Interviewer: And by in town, you mean into Center City?

Sam Blyweiss: Not in town, no, a couple blocks.

Interviewer: Oh, right. To go to the store or whatever?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Interesting. Now, people just get in their car wherever they go.

Sam Blyweiss: That's the truth.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: I wanna ask you a general question. What else do you remember? Like what are we missing here in this story? What else can you tell me about growing up? What do you wanna say about your childhood, about your adolescence, about any part of your life in South Philadelphia?

Sam Blyweiss: Everyone was happy. We all had good times. We were all young. We **[inaudible]**. And that's it. Everything was nice. That's' all I can think of. I mean that's it, all I can think of.

Interviewer: You know – do you know the Pepper brothers, Nate and Joe?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, sure.

Interviewer: I think it was Nate – was it Nate, RA, who was a pool player?

RA: Joe was the pool shark.

Sam Blyweiss: Joe was the pool player, sure.

Interviewer: Yeah, and he described himself as a pool shark.

**[Crosstalk]**

Sam Blyweiss: He probably did.

Interviewer: Did you ever shoot pool? There were pool halls around.

Sam Blyweiss: I shot pool, but I don't play it **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Right. So you went into the pool halls locally?

Sam Blyweiss: Oh, yeah, we had one right across the street where I lived for a while. I used to go there, and one of my brothers used to be a good shooter, good pool shooter. I used to go in and watch him.

Interviewer: Right. And did you play for money there or no?

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** sometimes.

Interviewer: You're really just playing –

Sam Blyweiss: Playing socially.

Interviewer: Right.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: Were they places that people gathered socially, to socialize? Like people come here to the Stiffel Center, right. Did people do that at the pool halls?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, at the pool hall, they all used to go over there and watch them shoot pool. That's it, that's the only thing.

Interviewer: I'm trying to get at where people might have gotten together to socialize. The pool hall, where else?

Sam Blyweiss: Unless they were dancing or something like that **[inaudible]** the hall. People who like to dance used to go there.

Interviewer: The Stanton Hall?

Sam Blyweiss: 7<sup>th</sup> and Snyder.

Interviewer: Is the building still there?

Sam Blyweiss: Building might be there. I'm not sure.

Interviewer: Which side of Snyder was it on? Was it on the north side or the south side?

Sam Blyweiss: South side. **[Inaudible]** north side.

Interviewer: Between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>?

Sam Blyweiss: 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>.

Interviewer: Because I think I know the building. Was it a big –

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, a big one. I used to have dances.

Interviewer: And ballroom dancing?

Sam Blyweiss: All kind of dancing I guess.

Interviewer: Live music do you know?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, live music.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: A band. Were there bands in the neighborhood? I think you've got the Stiffel Swingers now, right, who play here?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, that's [inaudible] every Friday [inaudible] music every Friday.

Interviewer: Right. Did you go to the dance halls growing up?

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: Oh. So when you were growing up, by the time you got old enough, it wasn't there anymore?

Sam Blyweiss: No. [Inaudible] start to travel.

Interviewer: Oh, right.

Sam Blyweiss: Everything was different.

Interviewer: Sam, anything else you wanna say?

Sam Blyweiss: What else could I say? I had a good life. I mean a sad life [inaudible], you lose your parents, and you lose your brothers. Out of four brothers and two sisters, I'm the only one left.

Interviewer: Oh, of all the seven, you're the last?

Sam Blyweiss: Seven, and I'm the last one. I [inaudible] family circle and everything.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Sam Blyweiss: We all used to get together, the whole family, bring their wives and get together. It was nice.

Interviewer: Meaning your wife, your brother's wife, you sister's husband, everybody would have a big –

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: For holidays or just –

Sam Blyweiss: Just like once a month we used to do that. Her house, his house – then most of them moved up to Northeast [inaudible].

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: Right.

Sam Blyweiss: It was nice. But then two moved to Florida, you know, passed away and everything changed, people die.

Interviewer: Why did you stay here? You stayed in the neighborhood, more or less.

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I got married in the neighborhood, then that was it.

Interviewer: Was your wife from the neighborhood, too?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, we worked together at the Navy Yard. Where we worked, that's where I met her, and then met her, and **[inaudible]**. And then my father, he moved away, you know, and I lived by myself so I married and **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: I was gonna ask you where you met your wife, you told me.

Sam Blyweiss: We were making **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Had you known her when you were growing up from school?

Sam Blyweiss: No, I never knew her. I met her at work. It was a good life. We had a good life together **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: Anything else you wanna say, Sam, before we shut that?

Sam Blyweiss: No, I don't think so. I think we said it all, didn't we?

Interviewer: Well, I don't know. You wanna tell me a story or something? I mean if you could tell me a story.

Sam Blyweiss: No stories. Not the same. Can't bring back what happened. **[Inaudible]**.

Interviewer: But your feeling is you had a good life, right?

Sam Blyweiss: I had a good life so far.

Interviewer: And when you say those days are over –

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I mean, you know, what I had. I've still got a good life, I got three daughters, I keep in touch with them all the time, got a lady friend in here that keeps me busy. That's it.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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Interviewer: Do you come here twice a week, or once a week?

Sam Blyweiss: Five days a week. I come every day, usually every day.

Interviewer: Where do you go to synagogue?

Sam Blyweiss: 8<sup>th</sup> and **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: And you're regular there every –

Sam Blyweiss: Well, I go every Saturday. **[Inaudible]** they call me up for the tour. My father was a **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: What's that?

Sam Blyweiss: I don't know.

**[Crosstalk]**

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** so he was a **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: But he was a learner. Was he scholarly?

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did he study?

Sam Blyweiss: Huh?

Interviewer: Did he study the tour?

Sam Blyweiss: Well, he knew it from Russia. **[Inaudible]** he knew what he was doing **[inaudible]**.

Interviewer: And how about you, how about you? Did you learn to read –

Sam Blyweiss: No.

Interviewer: So you didn't follow him in that way? You followed him into the business, but not –

Sam Blyweiss: That's it, just the business. **[Inaudible]**. So far everything is working out. Been by myself for over four years in this building,

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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and before that in the old house, but now I'm more happier here. Instead of worrying about all kinds of bills for a big house.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Sam Blyweiss: I sold the house.

Interviewer: And then you pay for the apartment and you come here for social life?

Sam Blyweiss: Right, right. That's my social life is in here.

Interviewer: And you have your lunch here?

Sam Blyweiss: Have my lunch here, then we go out to eat, **[inaudible]**, and that's it.

Interviewer: Go out to eat with the group here?

Sam Blyweiss: No, not with the group. I go with my lady friend. We go out to dinner.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Sam Blyweiss: **[Inaudible]** everything is nice. I'm 93 years old, what could I ask for. Right?

Interviewer: Right.

Sam Blyweiss: And that's it. Nothing else.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sam Blyweiss: I can leave?

Interviewer: Sure.

Sam Blyweiss: Ready?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sam Blyweiss: All done?

Interviewer: Yeah, thank you.

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Interview with Sam Blyweiss

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**[Crosstalk]**

Interviewer: You gotta keep getting up and moving, that's the trick.

Sam Blyweiss: Yeah, I'm in good shape.

Interviewer: Thank you, Sam.

Female Speaker: Everything you told them was a lie. I'm gonna tell them that you lied.

**[End of interview]**