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Oral History Interview

with

Tom Rowen

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Tom Rowen*

Location of Interview:

1225 Martha Custis Drive, Alexandria, VA 22302

Date of Interview: *10/03/2022*

Transcriber: *Bridget Nakamura*

Summary:

Tom Rowen reflects on his childhood in Northern Virginia. He describes his time in the Navy and Korean War. He also describes his career in engineering.

Notes:

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General	Great Depression, Korean War, farm, military, GI bill, childhood, parents, work, steamboat
People	John Reece Rowen, William Barnard Rowen, Gillies Farm.
Places	Franconia, VA, Woodlawn Elementary, MIT, VMI, George Washington University, Ethiopia, University of Chicago, Hume Street, Han River

Introduction

Tom Rowen [00:00:05] My name is Thomas H. Rowen. I'm 92 years old. It's October the third, 2022. We're recording from 1125. Martha Custis Drive, apartment 1210. Alexandria, Virginia.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:37] Great. My name is Francesco. Today's October 3rd, 2022. And we are in Tom's apartment on, uh, Martha Custis Drive. Great. So why don't we start from the beginning, and maybe you can tell us a little bit about where you were born?

Growing Up

Tom Rowen [00:00:56] I was born on a farm on Franconia Road. We raised pigs and cattle. Family lore is- I was born in 1930. And just as the Great Depression was hitting. The lore is that my mother begged my father take a load of pigs to the Baltimore slaughterhouse. Pigs at that time were selling for something like \$0.98 a pound on the hoof. My father did not do that. He waited. Unfortunately, the market fell from 90 something a pound to less than \$0.02 a pound, and the family went bankrupt and lost the farm and lost our livelihood. My mother had managed to secrete away enough money that we bought a house. At least I think we bought it. I'm not sure because I was about 3 years old. On what became Vine Street that was our driveway at the time was, as I recall, right off on Van Dorn Street, which was the connecting road for Vine. There's nothing but a dirt road as was, I think Edsel and Van Dorn and all the roads. The only paved road was Duke Street, I think at the time. But from there. My father found a job as a mechanic or a mechanical engineer for Fruit Growers Express, which was a rather large manufacturer of refrigerated freight cars. Their headquarters is, I believe, where like Carlisle apartments are now and a section of Alexandria. But anyway. Since we lost everything with the bankruptcy and what have you. We're starting a new. And we stayed there on Vine Street until I was about five years old. Yeah. Then we bought a number of acres. I'm not sure, but there are several hundred acres down near Fort Belvoir. Some of the anecdotal stories about what I'm quite sure of because I was standing there when it happened. Our farm was the last farm the government took when they expanded Fort Belvoir. So, the north side of the U.S. 1, our driveway was lined with honey locust, which I remember very clearly because in the springtime, the smell was just almost overpowering. But anyway, the government had a squad of soldiers to cut the locust trees down. Unfortunate for them my mother loved those locust trees. And I remember her standing there with a shotgun telling a poor lieutenant. 'Lieutenant, I don't care what the government says. They're not your trees until we go to a settlement'. 'But, ma'am, you know the government owns'. 'I know. They don't own it until we get to the settlement. If one man touches one of those trees, I'm not going to shoot him. I'm going to shoot you'. Well, the government eventually took, you know, took title to the farm, and we moved to a smaller farm down near Woodbridge, which stayed in the family until I was off to college and things like that. My mother decided the farm was just too much for us, so she sold it and moved to a smaller place south of Woodbridge.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:06:03] And so let me go back a little bit. So, do you have any memories of your first home in Franconia?

Tom Rowen [00:06:14] Very little, because from the time I was born until about 2. You don't have many memories. And there's very slight memories of the house on Vine Street. Mm hmm. Except for things like we had a large front porch. I remember that, uh, this time we had a maid. I hate to call her Rose the maid, but she was because she was part of the family. But she cooked and cleaned for my mother. She had a son. Her name was Rose. At that time, there was a settlement on along the Southern Railway, there were Van Dorn crosses. The rail tracks, the Southern Rail tracks, Southern Railway tracks. There were not a lot of railroad houses there. And that's where Rose lives. But anyway, when we moved to Woodbridge from Fort Belvoir. I'm sorry. Rosie and her son Charlie

came with us. My mother used to joke with me and say, I remember listening to you and Charlie under the porch in the summertime when it was nice and cool under there. And I promised him when I got to be president of the United States. He would be my chauffeur. Those are just a few anecdotes of the life of a young boy. Young kid, really?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:08:19] What was Rose's full name?

Tom Rowen [00:08:21] I have no idea.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:08:25] That's great. And so, when you move, so what are other memories you have from when you lived in the Fort Belvoir area?

Tom Rowen [00:08:32] Belvoir. I remember it was a rather large farm and stretch to what is now Huntley Meadows I guess from Paul Road back to Huntley Meadows. We raised cattle on that farm. Plus, crops like corn and wheat. But these are mainly just to feed the stock.

Speaker 3 [00:09:12] How about going down to the foot of King Street?

Memories of the Norfolk Steamer with Grandpa

Tom Rowen [00:09:16] Oh, look. My father and I would go with my mother and into Alexandria to go shopping on a weekend. Dad and I would go down to the wharf, down on the foot of King Street. And buy a pack of clams or oysters, whatever they had and sit there in the pier and chuck them right there on the pier. The Potomac in those days was crystal clear. The old pier stuck out, you'll go on it and you can see the bottom about ten feet down. One of my favorite memories was in the summertime. My grandfather, who was an engineer for the Southern Railway, would take me to Virginia Beach, and we'd catch the Norfolk steamer. Which right at Alexandria at the end of the pier there. All the way down-

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:33] Can you explain what that is?

Tom Rowen [00:10:37] The Norfolk steamer? It was a steamboat. Uh huh. And I don't favor the paddlewheel. It was a motorized boat rather large. You know, when you're 6 or 7, you don't. Yeah, I do remember that there were slot machines aboard and my grandfather used to go to bed very early, and he would give me a dollar or so and I would cash it in for nickels and play the slot machines all night long.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:11:27] And so this boat went from Alexandria to Virginia Beach? To Norfolk.

Tom Rowen [00:11:35] We had a rental car. From Norfolk to Virginia Beach. And we always stayed at the Cavalier Hotel there. That was one of my memories of traveling [with] my grandfather when we lived there on Vine Street. On the weekend, as I said, my grandfather was an engineer for the Southern Railway. On Sunday morning, he would toss out from his cab a roll of rolled up newspaper and a bag of candy for me. In the meantime, my kid brother was not born there. He was born on the Belvoir farm, but my mother had a miscarriage in the meantime. Brothers John Reece Rowan, who died at birth. Hmm. My youngest brother. William. William Barnard Rowan was born in Belvoir. These are all in-home births and not no hospitals were involved in this situation.

Speaker 3 [00:13:23] And you said you walked from school on Vine Street.

Early Memories from School

Tom Rowen [00:13:27] Yeah, at the Belvoir house. I went to a two-room schoolhouse. Uh, uh, Doe Creek goes under U.S. 1. And even though it was about a mile away, we had to walk. I think there were busses running. But since I lived too close to the school considering a mile away. And I remember crossing a large farm, Gillingham's farm. It had dairy. He raised dairy cattle. But I was always a little shy because he had several bulls, and they were prone to chase you. But. The two-room schoolhouse was unique thing. It had six grades, no running water for. We had a well on the property. A hallway separated the 2 rooms 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, 5th, and 6th in the other. But in the hallway, there was always a bucket. And if you were thirsty just take the ladle out and drink with this ladle. So, if one kid got chicken pox, the whole school got it. Mm hmm. And about the 3rd grade? My third grade, which would make it 1939. They built Woodlawn Elementary School, Thank God they built it. And this had running water, everything. It was a real modern school for that time.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:15:45] I want to just backtrack a little bit, because I know your grandparents lived in Rosemont.

Tom Rowen [00:15:51] They lived in Rosemont, the corner of Oak and Russell Road.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:15:56] Great. And so, do you have any memories of that neighborhood? Like, what did it look like?

Describes Grandparents Neighborhood

Tom Rowen [00:16:03] Well, it looks it looks much today as it did then. To be honest with you, it was if I recall correctly, it was rather sparsely. I wouldn't say sparsely resolve, but the houses were like they are today. Not that many to the block.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:29] For those who've never been there. Like what? Like what are those homes look like?

Tom Rowen [00:16:33] Well, John was about a block and a half from where my grandfather lived.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:42] What did your grandfather's home look? Do you remember?

Tom Rowen [00:16:43] It was a typical brick house. I guess it sits on about a quarter of an acre. Family legend is that the family home used to be on Prince Street in downtown Alexandria. Someone built across the street from my great grandfather, and my grandmother wanted to raise chickens. So, they bought a plot of land in what is now Rosemont and built this house.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:17:30] Were they raising chickens there? Or?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:17:34] Were they raising chickens there?

Tom Rowen [00:17:35] I assume my great grandmother did. Yes. Well, otherwise they wouldn't have moved to Rosemont. Rosemont was far out.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:17:48] That's great. That's right. Um, no, I mean, you've mentioned your grandparents a little bit, like maybe tell us a little bit about. Well, let's start with your father's side of the family. Like, what's their history?

Tom Rowen [00:18:02] When I talk about my grandparents, it will always be my father's side. So yeah. Because my mother grandparents died of. I think, typhoid back at almost the turn of the century. I mean, 1900s to the 2000s.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:18:29] So, yeah. Yeah. Can you maybe describe your father's parents? Like. Like whom? Who were they?

Tom Rowen [00:18:37] Well, as I said, my father was an engineer, a locomotive engineer on a Southern railway. And that's where he retired. He retired from that job.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:18:54] Is this your father?

Tom Rowen [00:18:54] My grandfather.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:18:55] Grandfather.

Tom Rowen [00:18:56] My mother's family who died of typhoid. Right. My mother's maiden name was Cora Bell Johns.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:09] Uh. Okay.

Tom Rowen [00:19:15] My father's full name was John Howard Rowan. My mother was married before she married my father. Her first husband died of the typhoid plague. It left her with four children with no means to support her. She was a college graduate. Unfortunately, she used to joke and say, I spent four years in college at Bryn Mawr, and all they taught me was sewing and what have you. But it came in very handy when she had no other income but her sewing skills. And she would sew shirt collars. And I think there was a shirt factory here in Alexandria down where the torpedo factory is now.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:23] That's great. So, you talked about going back to your schooling, but you went you went to a two, two room schoolhouse. And then you mentioned Woodlawn Elementary opened-

Describes his time at Woodlawn Elementary School

Tom Rowen [00:20:35] That's right. A six-room schoolhouse, one for each grade.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:42] And then when did you move to Woodbridge? Was that shortly after?

Tom Rowen [00:20:48] Had to be. I was in the Navy, so it had to be.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:56] Oh, you're in the Navy already, when you moved to Woodbridge?

Tom Rowen [00:21:01] Let me back up here. When we moved to Woodbridge, that was in 1941. That's when the government took by eminent domain, where they expanded Belvoir to the north side of the road. We bought the Woodbridge property, and we must have bought the Woodbridge property in 1940. Because I remember on Pearl Harbor Day, I was out in the front yard playing with some neighboring kids. A neighbor, some neighbors came over, believe it or not, for cocktails with my parents. And the first thing they said when they got in the car. Have you heard the news? The

Japanese just attacked Pearl Harbor. Well. My father, having been in World War One, immediately, tried to re-enlist. And they [said] No, you're too valuable for us at the Navy Yard where he was working then.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:17] And how did it feel? I'm just curious. I mean, I know you were young, but how did it feel to have your home taken through eminent domain?

Tom Rowen [00:22:26] I don't have much feeling for it. You know, I remember liking the place because we had horses as well as the other animals. And my mother was a very good equestrian and she taught me how to ride at a very early age. Other than that, that's you know, it was a peaceful life. Really.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:55] How about your parents? You have memories of what your parents were, you know, during that time when they when it was being taken. What was the stress in the house?

Tom Rowen [00:23:04] Well, there was some stress, but they saw it coming and the war coming and all like that. There wasn't much they could do about it. Yeah, very practical people. Uh. There was no battle with the government over a price to the house or anything like that. They bought the property in Woodbridge. From the sale of the house at Belvoir.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:23:44] Can you describe your memories from Woodbridge?

Recalls living in Woodbridge

Tom Rowen [00:23:49] Uh, let's see we moved to Woodbridge about 1940. Yeah. Before we enter the war. I went to high school at one high school. Four years there. I had a very good time. I was president of the student body and my senior year played on the basketball and baseball teams. Now, this is tremendously large school. We had a total of less than 200 kids in the entire school. That was a pleasant time. I really enjoyed the school.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:24:59] Do you recall any friends or peers from school that?

Tom Rowen [00:25:04] That are alive and able? I'm probably the oldest one there. Well, I'm really the only one in my class, I guess is still surviving. We had a very charming. Principal, Elizabeth Von. Ms. Von. Von was about six foot tall, and she weighed 100 pounds, soaking wet shoes. But she was rather strict disciplinarian, and the school was set up. So, there was an elementary school under the high school. It was built on a hillside. The lower level was elementary and upper level was high school. My kid brother, who was in elementary school, would get in trouble. Singing in the hallway. Things like this. And the announcer on the phone. Tom Rowan, will you please come to my office? She [Ms. Von] would merit punishment, shall we say. There's always something very simple or he had to stand in front of the class and sing to them and stuff like that. Yeah, but he was supposed to do this for several days, but Bill was very shrewd. If there were apples on the tree, he would take the teacher an apple. And Ms. Von, would always go, 'I can't keep him like that, when he does that, you know'. And that was the way it was. It was a pleasant school, so to say. I have very fond memories of just. There really wasn't much that we didn't cover in school. My graduating class, I think, had 19 people at. And since it was during the war, the Second World War. The only teachers we could get were retired college professors. And they had agreed that if three kids in a high school wanted a class taught. They would try to teach it. Which worked out well when I applied for admission to colleges. Surprise at credits you can pile up. Those days, you know, advanced algebra and calculus and all these that normally would not be taught in high school in

those days. It was amazing to just be able to show them on your resume. But we were able to do that, and it worked well for us. Getting into any college we wanted.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:28:35] And where did you end up going to college?

Tom Rowen [00:28:37] I'm sorry?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:28:38] Where? Where did you end up going to college?

Describes his time at VMI

Tom Rowen [00:28:40] Well, I was always wanting to go to M.I.T. I always wanted to be a civil engineer. And my father led me to believe that if I picked a school, he would pay for it and that would be it. I would be on my own when I graduated. Well, of course I picked out M.I.T. and was admitted. And about a month before I was to leave for Boston, my father takes me aside, said, 'Son, I decided you need some discipline. I'm sending you to VMI'. Well, I had no idea where VMI was or what it was. I found out soon enough, being Virginia Military Institute, my rat year, my first year, it was sheer torture. That's all there was to it. I mean, there were four of us to our dorm room. We had a large dorm room. And to say my roommates were tortured, just to make it an understatement.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:29:54] Why were they tortured?

Tom Rowen [00:29:56] Just a thing to do. Discipline. Yeah. The freshmen at VMI had to walk in a rat line. There's a railing, four tiers and they have to walk on the inside facing the courtyard. And if one of the upperclassmen wants something done or is just for the hell of it, just tease or. If you're their inclination is toward torture. And believe me, some of them are. I mean, I think the only reason VMI does not have the rat line now was George Marshall's son. General Marshall's son. His testicles were, shall we say, damaged? He was spanked. So., I hated the place, but to show my father that I could do it, I finished the freshman year. Well, my father died in the beginning of my second year at VMI. And as an excuse that it was a monetary strain on my mother. I quit.

Talks about his father's passing

Francesco De Salvatore [00:31:24] And how did your father pass?

Tom Rowen [00:31:28] He had been in the First World War, and he died as a result from being in gas. The mustard gasses. Uh, cerebral hemorrhage is what they call it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:31:45] Can you recall the day he passed? How did you find out?

Tom Rowen [00:31:49] It was a weekend I will never forget. I was of course, at VMI. And my mother and father we're going to visit an aunt who lived in Charlottesville, Aunt Sally and Uncle Cy. We were not supposed to leave the post at VMI, but I took absently and took a bus and went to visit my parents. You only see them at Christmas when you're there. And as I was just getting back on campus in the evening, over the loudspeaker, Cadet Rowen report to the main office. Oh, God. I've been caught. The Lieutenant there, says, I'm sorry to tell you, but we just received notice that your father died. If you want to go home, we'll certainly make arrangements for it. And I did. And while I was home buried my father in Arlington, and I decided I had enough of VMI. And I finished out the semester and that was enough then. And this is 1950 now.

Joining the Navy

I happened to be walking down Pennsylvania Avenue one day, and the Navy recruiting office was there on Pennsylvania Avenue and the spur of the moment. Why the hell not? At your age, you're certainly eligible for the draft. The Korean War was just beginning, and so I walked in and joined the Navy. I was not going to sleep in the mud of like the soldiers, or at least in the Navy, you sleep between cleans sheets. And four years in the Navy. Uh. Boot camp was in San Diego. And I was assigned to an LST. LST 855 had no name, just number. LST stands for Landing, Ship, Tanks. Flat bottomed. If you've ever been seasick, you're going to get seasick on an LST, that's all there is. My first bout of seasickness was we put this LST commission in Astoria. And we were sailing down the Columbia River. Astoria about 100 miles from the sea. Everything was fine. We had steak for lunch and cherry pie. Everything was fine until we reached the bar. The sand bar at the entrance to the Columbia River, The Pacific Ocean. The ship began this [shows rocking motion with hands] Constantly. Everybody aboard ship got sick. And to this day I do not like steak, and I do not like cherry pie [laughs]. But once you get over it, everything is fine.

Speaker 3 [00:36:06] And your job on the boat. Your job on the ship?

Tom Rowen [00:36:09] Oh, I was a quartermaster. A quartermaster's navigation. And in those days, communications, flashing light. Those kind of thing. We had nothing to do with radio.

Speaker 3 [00:36:30] Yeah. You want to go back? Just for a moment. When you were a little at the movie theater.

Going to the theater as a little boy.

Tom Rowen [00:36:36] Oh. They're in Alexandria on King Street. There was a theater called the Anchor Bar, which on the weekends used to play. Westerns. Occasionally they would have a guest star like Tom Mix or Roy Rogers or making guest appearances, you know, rich kids. My parents would go shopping and gave me a quarter. I remember that for kids, I think admission was ten or \$0.15 for me. \$0.10 for candy or popcorn or what have you. Well, the rule was. If I got out of the movies before my parents had finished the shopping and everything, I was to go to the George Mason Hotel. Which is on the corner of Washington and Prince Street. Yeah. It's an island office building. And I was to wait in the lobby and sitting in the lobby being very quiet until my parents came and would have dinner in the dining room of the hotel.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:38:08] Do you have any other memories from serving in the Navy and any other memories that stick out to you?

Serving during the Korean War

Tom Rowen [00:38:17] Just things like, sailing down the Han River in the Battle of Inchon. LST, normally their top speed is 10 knots. We were doing something like 18 to 25 knots in a break because the Han River is a peculiar. It has a sandbar at the entrance to the river. Where the river meets the South China Sea. You get a tidal more. Well, the river's relatively shallow at the entrance and the water backs up at the mouth of the river. And all of a sudden it begins coming and releases. And that's when you pick up these tremendous speeds. Same thing coming out. When there becomes an ebb tide. The water is trying to get out of the river. And you're riding that high. Riding a horse. But. During the Inchon invasion. When we leapfrogged from Seoul, South Korea, to an area near where the North Korean border is now. It was. Shall we say, murky. We had a lot of Marines, tanks, and things like that. We offloaded. And then we spent the evening on the mudflats stranded. Had to wait till the tide came in to get off the mudflats and be able to sail back down the river. There were a number of other instances were we're involved in some skirmishes. I wouldn't

say skirmishes because we only fired one time in anger. In anger because, we had been stationed once on harbor for about a month and a half, and we were given rest and recreation back to Pusan, Korea-no Sasebo, Japan. Well, we set half the crew offshore on recreation on Sasebo. And since I was the ranking petty officer in the division at the time, I was one that stayed aboard ship. My men go and I would take the second one. Well, it didn't quite work out that way. They had no center to go on and boarded busses to get to where the recreation parks had been set up for us. Then we were ordered to get under way. Well, we had to go to a supply depot and pick-up high-octane gasoline and ammunition. And we were ordered to take it up to where the Han River meets the Red Sea and the sewage supplies for Air Force. The small station on the island. On an island off the coast. Well, the problem was that we were undermanned with the crew and our division for navigation are only three of us able to do it. Captain was aboard. One of the officers. We only had six officers, so we had two officers. And Captain taps me on the shoulder and said, 'I guess I have to promote you right quick, you'll need to take the third shift'. Which I did. It worked out well, let's put that way. We got there. Okay. Those are the memories that you really want to forget. They're not pleasant ones.

Speaker 3 [00:43:45] You rose in rank quickly.

Tom Rowen [00:43:47] Oh, yes. You could do it in those days, there was a minimal time you had to spend in the rank. For instance, I think from Seaman recruit to Seaman it was six months or something like that and six months to third class petty officer. Maybe a year to first class. Oh, yeah. You could do it in four years. Which I did.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:44:26] What was it like transitioning back to civilian life?

Transition back to civilian life

Tom Rowen [00:44:31] Rather simple. I knew I had to finish my degree, which I did at George Washington University. But I found a job at the Sheridan Park Hotel as a night auditor, it was simply running the guest's accounts. And you know when you get the bill from the hotel, you know it's the night auditor, who runs it up for you. I found a job and I had the GI Bill, so I did pretty well. Yeah, I had an apartment, and my mother was doing well, so she didn't need help for me or anything like that. Life went along smoothly.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:45:35] What was your degree at GW?

Tom Rowen [00:45:39] Engineering.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:45:42] And so what happened after you graduated?

Tom Rowen [00:45:46] Oh, well, you try and find jobs.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:45:48] Exactly. Yeah.

First job in the engineering field

Tom Rowen [00:45:49] Well, my first job I got was with the actuarial life insurance company. Things were tightened in the late fifties. This is about 1955-56. And you took what you could get. I applied for this job and the lady that was a personnel officer. She looks at my application. She looked at me and she goes, 'oh, you don't want this job', she says. 'Why don't you go home? I'll see what I can do and I'll call you'. Well, I no sooner had gotten home, and the phone rang. It was her. And she said, 'can you get over here? The president of the company wants to see you. I go, 'The

president of the company wants to see me?' Well, make it a long story short. I was hired as assistant to the president. They were building their new headquarters on Wisconsin Avenue. You know, were the replica of the Colonial Williamsburg palace there on Wisconsin Avenue. My sole job was to go with the president in the limousine every Friday afternoon and check on the construction or how the construction was going on that building. You talk about jealousy, I mean, all the vice presidents, what have you. Here's a young, real young kid being inserted here between them and the president. Well, after about eight or nine months of that. One of the jobs that I applied for opened up. Off I was with this company to do what I was trained to do as an engineer.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:20] What are some of your fondest memories from that time, from working with that company? I know you traveled the world.

Tom Rowen [00:48:25] Yes, I did.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:26] All kinds of things.

Tom Rowen [00:48:27] I wouldn't say life was sweet because a lot of rough times when you're sitting in let's say Nairobi, Kenya. And you go how the hell did I get here? You know? Well, I spent a lot of time in Africa during that period of time. One of my fondest memories is meeting the emperor, Haile Selassie, of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was hoping to build a highway from their capital, Addis Ababa, to Asmara on the Red Sea there through what is now Eritrea. Never, never came to fruition.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:49:31] Okay. Are there any other memories?

Tom Rowen [00:49:33] Well. Some good, some bad. Flying in airplanes with pigs and things like that.

Speaker 3 [00:49:45] You were in and out of the country.

Tom Rowen [00:49:47] In and out of the country a lot. Uh. Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:49:52] Your job was to help your company.

Tom Rowen [00:49:54] Yeah, let's say, uh, one of my projects was a highway in Morocco. From Rabat to Marrakech. And it was pleasant working- hot but pleasant working.

Speaker 3 [00:50:18] And you were in Egypt several times.

Tom Rowen [00:50:20] I was in Egypt. Very few countries in Africa that we didn't at least attempt to get a foothold in. It was fun working there. It really was.

Speaker 3 [00:50:38] Did you touch on your degrees?

Tom Rowen [00:50:46] I'm sorry?

Speaker 3 [00:50:52] Your degrees?

Tom Rowen [00:50:53] My company had had a plan, let's put it that way, if you want to go back to school, they would pay for it. And as such, I went back and took the degree that I had hoped to take when VMI interfered there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:51:29] What was your degree?

Tom Rowen [00:51:31] I have two Ph.D. One's in civil engineering. The other's in Nordic studies.

Speaker 3 [00:51:43] From the University of Chicago.

Tom Rowen [00:51:46] Nordic studies from Chicago and the others, civil engineering is from M.I.T.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:51:54] Why Nordic studies?

Tom Rowen [00:51:58] Something I was always interested in. So, I had the time and the company paid for it. Why not?

Speaker 3 [00:52:09] Underwater archeology.

Tom Rowen [00:52:11] I was always wanted to study underwater archeology, but never came to fruition.

Speaker 3 [00:52:24] How about Hill Street?

House restoration project on Hume Avenue

Tom Rowen [00:52:26] I'm sorry. Yeah. Who had the-. You had the pictures? Yeah. You showed me the pictures of the house I restored on Hume Avenue.

Speaker 3 [00:52:42] And the racetrack.

Tom Rowen [00:52:43] Were the racetrack used to be.

Speaker 3 [00:52:44] But did you know about the racetracks?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:52:47] We were talking about it before you came. So, this is a home that you purchased?

Tom Rowen [00:52:52] Yeah, this is the home I purchased for \$40,000.

Speaker 3 [00:53:02] In 19-.

Tom Rowen [00:53:03] Oh, God It had to be? I've been here 22 years, so it had to have been the seventies. Story of that house. I had come back here for the Mixing Bowl Project by the Pentagon building.

Speaker 3 [00:53:31] I'm sorry, forgive me, which project?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:53:33] Mixing Bowl Project.

Tom Rowen [00:53:34] Mixing Bowl Project. I decided, you know, rather than rent, probably wise to buy a place. Well, I didn't have much money for a down payment. And this real estate agent, he was, shall we say, a little weird. But he goes, 'well, let's go look at this place, you know. You're an engineer. You know, you might like it, nice project for you'. Well, John has pictures of the house now. Somewhere buried all my memorabilia that flooded out and things like that over time. The

house was a wreck is the best way to describe it. It had been rental property for 50 years. Well, I remember opening the door, and the stench would overwhelm you. But you walked in, and I could see part of an old carpet. Exposed. Beautiful wood floors underneath. And part of the wallpaper was peeling off. Very beautiful plaster. Rather than tear the house down and start all over, this could stand restoration. Well, I got the house. I will say one thing. This house kept me out of the bars.

Speaker 3 [00:55:35] Tell about your mom, when she would do [inaudible].

Tom Rowen [00:55:42] Oh, the pies. It was mom's pies.

Speaker 3 [00:55:49] Yeah, that. And the ladies who would walk up and down.

Tom Rowen [00:55:55] Well, there was a lady in the evening that tried to walk up and down to work the neighborhood, she would always say. And-

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:07] Was this growing up?

Tom Rowen [00:56:08] No. This is-

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:10] Many years later. Okay.

Tom Rowen [00:56:11] When I was at Hume Avenue restoring-.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:12] When you were at Hume Avenue.

Memories from living on Hume Avenue

Tom Rowen [00:56:13] Mrs. Gilbert, who lived down the corner, Montrose, and Hume, her husband did some work for plumbing and electrical work or stuff like that. But this woman tried to work the corner. The ruckus in the neighborhood was amazing because, Mrs. Gilbert chased this woman off the corner with a broom and you could hear her walks away. Get off here. You're not working this corner.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:53] Who is Mrs. Gilbert?

Tom Rowen [00:56:54] This is Mrs. Gilbert.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:56] She was a neighbor?

Tom Rowen [00:56:57] She was a neighbor. I shouldn't say this, but when I moved in, I was the only white person in the neighborhood.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:57:08] And so when was this? When did you have the house?

Tom Rowen [00:57:11] That's been 40 years ago. Uh huh. Okay. 40 some years ago.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:57:17] So 1980s?

Tom Rowen [00:57:18] Yeah, it was in the 80s, I guess.

Speaker 3 [00:57:22] I'm looking for that landmark on Oxford Street, a landmark on Oxford Street from the racetrack.

Tom Rowen [00:57:28] There were no signs of the racetrack when I was there.

Speaker 3 [00:57:40] But this was a landmark that's there now.

Tom Rowen [00:57:42] Okay.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:57:43] The photo.

Tom Rowen [00:57:44] The little park that runs where the Old Dominion Railroad used to be.

Speaker 3 [00:57:55] You said there used to be in the late 1800s, there was a racetrack. The St Asaph Racetrack was just south of your house. Somewhere in the neighborhood.

Tom Rowen [00:58:07] Somewhere in that neighborhood. I don't know exactly were.

Speaker 3 [00:58:18] That's what this marker supposes to-.

Closing remarks

Francesco De Salvatore [00:58:21] So we're nearing the end of time and I do have some more general questions for you, I would maybe ask the first one being, you know, like if there's, if there's a memory, you'll hold on for the rest of your life. What is that memory?

Tom Rowen [00:58:36] Oh, boy. Hmm. So many. I think, the first memories that really sticks with me was when I was in the Navy. And the first time I set foot on foreign soil. It was just like; is this the way your life is going to be from now on? You know? Uh. I can remember stepping off the ship. And. [thinking]. Not bad. I'm in a foreign country. First one I've ever been in.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:59:43] How did you feel?

Tom Rowen [00:59:44] It was a strange feeling. If I had known then what I was going to be doing, then maybe a totally different feeling. But there's just a feeling of awakening. I guess I was 21-22 something like that.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:12] And what are some of the most important lesson you learned in your life?

Tom Rowen [01:00:23] Huh? Don't drink too much because in the Navy you tend to do that. And always keep a few good friends. I mean, good friends close by.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:55] If there is something you could tell a younger self, what would it be?

Tom Rowen [01:01:03] Hmm. Don't repeat any of the mistakes that you have made. Learn from what you've done. Other than that, I wouldn't change my life very little. I've had a full life. Done mostly what I wanted to do. Uh, been through hard times. Been through good times.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:01:46] All right. Well, thanks so much for sitting with me-

Tom Rowen [01:01:51] It's been fun.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:01:52] And sharing all this. It's really been an honor. It really has.