

Name of Interviewee: Harry D. Mayo, III

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Interviewer: Jane Eliasof

Location: Clark House and Library

Introduction:

Harry D. Mayo, III was born in Brooklyn and moved to Montclair when he was 4 years old. His parents were divorced and he lived with his mother, although his father remained a part of his life. Mr. Mayo attended Nishuane School, Hillside School and Montclair High School. After graduating from high school in 1957, he commuted to Pace College and majored in accounting. He lived in Montclair until he got married at moved elsewhere at age 28.

His maternal grandmother's catering business figured prominently into his memories. As a very young child he helped spread butter on the Parker House rolls and as a young adult, as his grandmother was winding down her catering business, he even considered taking it on. He recalls Montclair in the 1950s and always appreciated the differences and the benefits of having grown up in Montclair. "...to be from Montclair was a big thing... it is held in higher regard than surrounding communities."

Although he did not directly experience discrimination extensively, the few times he was subject to it were impactful and he recalls them vividly.

He provides interesting details about his involvement as an escort in 60-70 glamorous cotillions, or debutante balls. His skill as a dancer certainly contributed, and most likely also his polished manners. He notes how attention to details such as manners and proper behavior were prioritized in his family and very important to him personally in business and personal settings.

He also shares information about his success in business and the love of luxury travel he shares with his wife, Joan.

He end the interview by noting, "There is just something special about Montclair. I can't really define it."

Timestamps:

[0:00]: Harry D. Mayo, III grew up, primarily, at 18 Madison Avenue in Montclair. His family had rented in several different homes in town prior to that: 375 Orange Road, Elm Street, 35 North Willow Street.

[1:20]: He was born in Brooklyn and moved to Montclair when he was four. His grandmother lived in Verona and moved to Montclair. She was involved in catering work. He remembers as a child helping her with the Parker House rolls, brushing the top with butter. She did the catering out of her Linden Avenue, Montclair home. His grandmother's family originally came from Henderson, North Carolina although he's not sure when they moved north.

[2:50]: He went to Nishuane School, Hillside School, then Montclair High School.

[3:10]: His mother and he bought a house on Grey Street when he was around 17. He commuted to Pace University in New York City and majored in accounting but moved to finance. He worked for Sparing Hutchinson (S&H Greenstamps) until 1968. He worked for a subsidiary of JP Morgan but left in 1970. Then he went to Bortons (sp?) and then later moved to Arthur Young and Company.

[5:10]: He had lived in Montclair for his formative years, from the time he was four until he was approximately 28 years old, at which time he married and moved out of Montclair.

[5:58]: Recalling Montclair in the 1950s, he describes it as "always a little bit different than the places around it." He only recently appreciated the differences and the benefits of having grown up in Montclair. "...to be from Montclair was a big thing... it is held in higher regard than surrounding communities."

He remembers dating girls from East Orange or Jersey City and it was different. He mentions that Montclair regards itself as quite progressive and maybe more than it really is, but it holds itself to a higher standard including in terms of racial diversity. He had Black and white friends. He did not live in Montclair's Fourth Ward, which the majority of African Americans lived, so he acknowledges that his experiences may differ from others'. For example, he only experienced discrimination a couple of times.

[8:50]: He had a Polish friend, Ernie Lankowski (sp?), they both lived on the South End, and both worked as cashiers at the Acme on Grove Street [near Walnut]. He remembers that one lunch time they went to get haircuts at the barber next door to the Acme. His friend got his hair cut normally, but when Harry was asked and explained to one of the barbers that he was also there for a haircut, the barber replied, "Well, we don't know how to cut your hair, you get my meaning?" And Harry notes, "Obviously, that stuck with me all these years."

[10:10]: Another incident occurred during high school, when it was time for senior prom. A committee was formed to plan events around the prom, including a party at the Montclair Swim Club [Grove Street in Clifton], which the Black students knew was not a venue that would welcome them. Ultimately, that event was cancelled. He graduated in 1957.

[11:30]: The biggest change in his life, where he moved forward and beyond those discriminatory experiences, was working where he travelled. He mentions that. "It's a funny thing. When you grow up in a community, you know all the do's and the don'ts. They're not spoken out loud, but you learn where you can go and where you can't go. When you go to another community, you don't know. No one tells you. This is in the north, obviously. So, I pushed the envelope." He forced people to tell him if they had any problems with him or his presence, although he didn't have too many problems.

[12:20]: In Milwaukee, he was with two white people when they went to a roadside bar outside the city. They walked in and it got very quiet, which was an indication that the presence of a Black man was not common. His first trip to the south was as an executive, to Mobile, Alabama to visit staff that were working for him there and he was alert for signs of racism and discrimination. He and a white colleague were picked up at the airport and transported in separate cars to the hotel. His car was behind the other. They went straight and Harry's car went to the left, which made him concerned. He thought they took him to a different hotel, but the other car had just taken a different route. There were still restricted places in Alabama – such as social clubs - where minorities, Blacks, Jews were not welcome, but he didn't personally experience it. When his client International Paper, whose headquarters was in Mobile, Alabama at the time, he befriended the executive secretary, even helping her daughter find a job in New York.

[16:10]: He was not involved in any sports at Montclair High School. He went to Union Baptist Church on Midland Avenue. He remembers as a child that adults would preach "do unto others," "turn the other cheek," in church and then he would hear the adults speak disparagingly of their neighbors while just outside church. Eventually, he got tired of that hypocrisy and stopped attending church. It took many years into adulthood for him to return to church. He switched over to St. Luke's Episcopal Church in 1990, after visiting deciding to attend church with his elderly grandmother who still lived in Montclair at 6 Lexington Avenue as a way to remain close to her as she aged and needed assistance; they were church "shopping" and visited St. Luke's first, never feeling the need to investigate another congregation because they thought it was a good fit.

[19:30]: His father passed away in the 1960s, and he also lived in Montclair. His father and mother were divorced, and he lived with his mother. His father remained a part of his life. His mother worked as a seamstress and helped his grandmother in catering. She did a lot of hard' oeuvres. His grandmother was close with Hilda Lockett (her husband was Levi; her sons were Arthur and Lowell; they also went to St. Luke's).

[21:10]: Her grandmother's catering business continued for most of her life, offering a full line of menu items early on. Later in life, she specialized in hor d' oeuvres, or what she referred to as "tea sandwiches." He describes them as very unique, made with fresh ingredients (not frozen). He repeatedly describes them as "very distinctive." At that point, she supplied other catering companies and directly to customers. She used to make little cornucopias, little horn shapes, with tuna or chicken salad. They were always fresh ingredients and never frozen. He mentions that the taste of fillings and bread is totally different when frozen. Harry realized that it was very labor intensive. While Harry's grandmother made a living with such catering, Harry did not see it as a viable business for himself to continue.

[24:40]: During high school, he did not play any sports, and liked more cerebral activities, like chess. Harry described himself as a "loner" but because he had a good friend who was more social, Harry got invited to the activities. He had aspirational career goals and was not ready to settle for mundane jobs that some of his friends were taking in high school. He describes himself as a decent study but thinks that high school was too easy, so he never applied himself the way he might have. He never had straight As, but he got by. He considers himself as "very observant and detail oriented" in all aspects of his personality, extending to relationship with girls he dated, observing how she conducted herself and her manners, which were important to him. He notes, "I had read Emily Post," and continued, "you can't break the rules unless you know them."

[28:40]: As an extension of his awareness of proper behavior, he notes that because his mother and his grandmother were involved in service [catering], he also knew how to properly set a table. His mother also held him to high standards for proper behavior and manners; she was a stickler for not using slang and made him more conscious of his use of it. There was a time in the 1960s when everyone spoke like Jack Kennedy, "say this about that" and he never adopted it as a way of speaking while many kids did.

[30:00]: Harry's mother took him to the YMCA on Washington Street to learn how to swim there, but he did not want to. He knew a few of the women in the YWCA, like Ms. [Elberta] Stone.

[31:15]: His paternal grandfather lived in Brooklyn while his paternal grandmother lived in Harlem. They did not get a divorce but did not live together. There was a falling out on his father's side of the family which resulted in parts of the family not talking to each other. When he was younger, his father would take him around to pop in on relatives and friends on Sundays – often to the Bronx. There was one woman who was a sort of family historian and knew about where everyone was and what they were doing. He knows a lot more about the mother's side of the family, who hailed from Henderson, North Carolina.

[33:16]: His maternal grandmother was part of two of the three major families in Henderson, North Carolina, being born in one and married into another.

[33:50]: His father was secretary of an import-export firm in New York. He got into it when he was in his teens. His father talked about accounting, which led Harry in that direction. Harry was an office boy for his father's company and did deliveries across the city. They got a lot of imports from Japan, and Harry was able to keep some samples of things like jewelry. He even had a replica of a Japanese sword. This job took him around New York and he learned how to get around easily.

[36:20]: He had a few part time jobs during high school. He mentioned the Acme earlier in this interview, he'd had a paper route at one point. He also worked as a photographer's assistant for a photographer working out of the Sterington House [now the Greek Taverna on Bloomfield Avenue] -- for a photographer named Oliver (can't recall his last name). He was taught how to develop photos and the process involved. The Sterington House was a nightclub/catering establishment, but he was working for a separate business upstairs from the nightclub. He was 11 at the time!

[38:55]: One thing that had a major impact on his life happened when he was 20. He became an escort for a cotillion, "The International Debutantes Ball," sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women, to be held in New York, after his mother talked him into it; it was for the daughter of one of his mother's friends in Montclair who was "coming out" at age 18. He acquiesced to his mother and came to learn that cotillions were a good place to meet women! Although he did not meet his wife at a cotillion, he credits the cotillion-attending "crowd" with ultimately meeting his wife.

He explains that a choreographer would be hired to organize dancing rehearsals for the cotillion prior to the event. During these rehearsals, the young men would ask the girls out that they'd like to escort. After being too shy to ask a girl to be his partner the first time he was involved in a cotillion, he learned not to delay! He was such a good dancer, he was asked back by the choreographer. He even went to a cotillion in Washington once. Asked to elaborate more on cotillions, or debutante balls, he describes women in beautiful ball gowns and the men in white tie, "twirling around to the waltz...it's very glamorous. Well, all of that is choreographed. We did the minuet, the waltz..." Choreographers recruited a core group of men who were good dancers to be escorts at multiple cotillions. Each cotillion required eight to ten rehearsals for the groups to learn the choreography.

[44:37]: The best man at his wedding was another escort for those cotillions. They both learned that guys were afraid to approach really gorgeous women, likely Harry surmises, "for fear of rejection." He and his friend overcame that shyness and hesitation and asked the prettiest women

to dance. They were doing an event for a fraternity and were asked to invite women to the dance. There was a table of really gorgeous women who were never asked to dance except by Harry and his friend. He was an escort for around 60-70 cotillions.

[46:32]: These cotillions, also known as debutante balls, were really old and traditional. They are not really held anymore, except perhaps in the South. The premise is that a young girl is formally introduced into society around her eighteenth birthday. It is held for a group of women who all have a formal dance together. They were held by several organizations: International Debutantes Ball (mentioned earlier), The Utility Club (Harlem), The Girlfriends (Brooklyn and Manhattan clubs). These organizations would introduce their members' daughters. The International Debutantes Ball was a bit different in that they introduced daughters of diplomats and other important figures – and the balls were organized by some of the world's most high profile party planners, including Baron Theo Von Roff (sp?). The International Debutantes Ball was integrated, but not all the cotillions were.

[50:00]: He met his wife, [Joan], when his fraternity and her sorority were hosting a party in New York. She was invited by someone that he knew who was part of the same social circle. He met her the first week she was in New York, but they did not really get together until three years later. They got married in Brooklyn in 1967.

[51:20]: He and his wife travel a lot. They started travelling early on, with their first to Copenhagen. That was their first time across the sea. As they got older, they stayed away for longer. They went to Hawaii initially for around 10 days with another couple. They visited Maui and three days in Honolulu. He recalls in Maui it used to rain for five minutes, see a rainbow and it would be over. Honolulu was like a warm New York, it was very crowded, and he didn't enjoy it as much although they had great accommodations. They visited several more times, and usually stayed for one week. Then it became two weeks. Now it is a month. They own beautiful timeshares there.

[54:35]: The couple that they went to Hawaii with met them after they were on a cruise together on the QE2. They decided to both take out the top suite on the ship. They were split level and slept four. They are usually sold out long before the ship goes, but they were all sold out. They ultimately got two penthouse suites accessible only through the Queen's Grill Lounge. There is a sign that says Queen's Grill Passengers only. You have to walk through that lounge to get into the penthouse and up the stairs. People on that suite level would host parties there every night. That Queen's Grill is also exclusive to those upper level suites, and the service and experience was extraordinary. His wife's club had a cruise on the QE2 a few years later and he refused to go because their first class accommodations would be nothing like the first, extraordinary time they went when they'd stayed in the suites. From that point on, they almost always reserved exclusive suites on their cruise vacations.

[59:30]: He has grown to appreciate growing up in Montclair looking back. He describes it as the same feeling as when one says they graduated from Harvard, noting that he graduated from an executive education program at Harvard. He notes, “There is just something special about Montclair. I can’t really define it.” As an example, he mentions that talking to people and noting you grew up in towns nearby does not produce the same positive reaction as saying you grew up in Montclair.

He continues, that he read Emily Post when he was 17/18 and knew the proper way to do things and even knew the type of women he wanted to marry: “someone who could be with me where I was as well as where I wanted to be.” He didn’t want to be in a situation where he and his wife outgrew each other. He has been married for 51 years now, so he thinks they were successful in finding a good match in each other!

He mentions that “pushing the envelope” served him well in business; although you can be told “no” you shouldn’t “shut the door on yourself” and assume something isn’t within your reach. Again, attentive to details like manners, Harry notes that even in business setting he was surprised that colleagues were not educated on proper manners, such as the correct fork to use, how to hold your silverware when cutting meat – things that were “drummed into” him growing up.

[1:05:55]: As he is leaving, his wife Joan reminds him of an incident when he was younger and his parents had separated. His mother lived on North Willow, his father lived on Madison Avenue. One Friday, he went with a group of a dozen friends to go to the movies. He was walking back home towards his father’s Madison Avenue home. He was the only Black kid. Some kids at the end were firing off firecrackers in that quiet neighborhood, and the police were called. He was singled out and questioned; he was “petrified.” Ultimately, instead of taking him to the police station, the police officers drove him to his mother, who “gives them hell!” As he stated earlier, although he didn’t experience discrimination frequently, the times he did were very impactful on him.