Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Telephone Interview with Juanita Gooch Giovenco
Daughter and wife of Fort Hancock soldiers, 1933-1946
By Susan Douglass, Monmouth University
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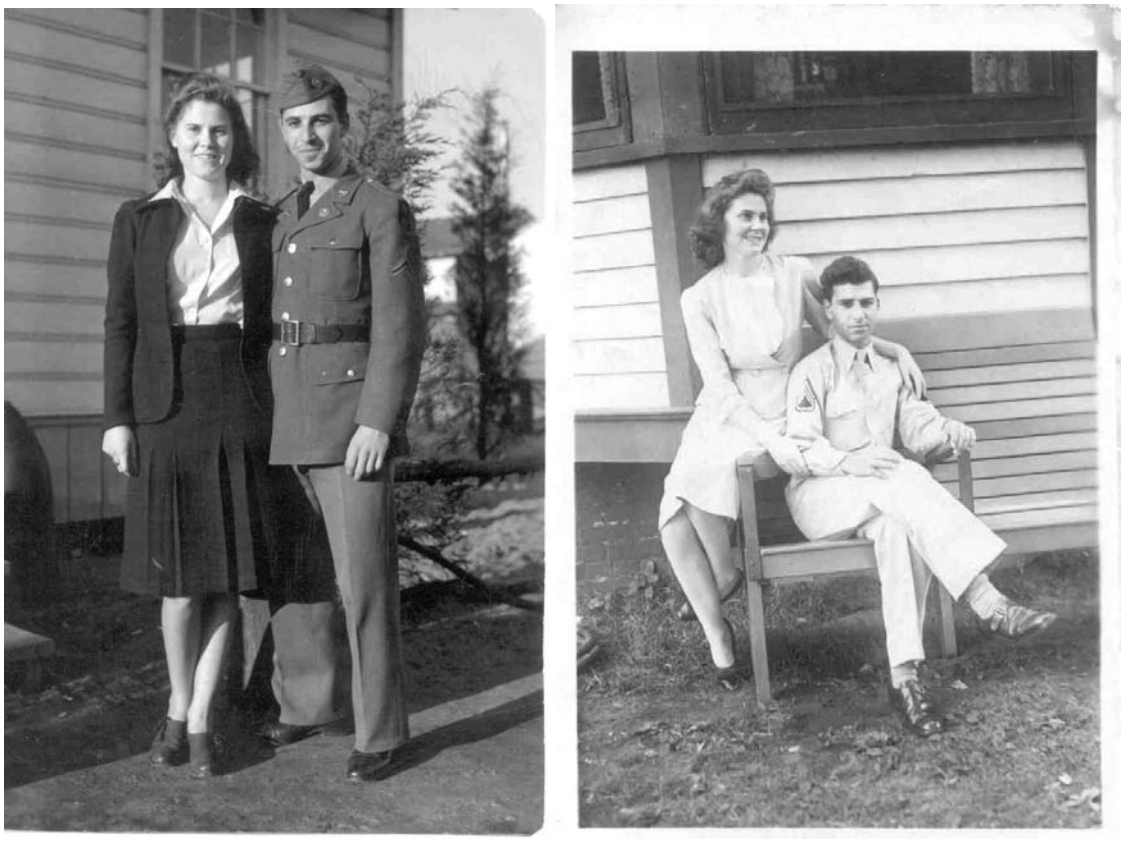

Snapshots of Sal and Juanita Giovenco at Fort Hancock.
Left photo is c. 1942, right is c. 1945.

Photos courtesy: NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

SD: This oral history interview of Juanita Gooch is taking place on August 3, 2004 at National Park Service, Gateway National Recreation Area, at Sandy Hook Unit at Fort Hancock, New Jersey. I am Susan Douglass, special Professor of Public History at Monmouth University and I will be conducting this interview.

Juanita, what was your starting and ending date of the time you spent at Fort Hancock?

JG: From 1933 to 1946.

SD: All right. How old were you went you came to Fort Hancock?

JG: 10 years old.

SD: And what were your first reactions to the Fort?

JG: Well, we got there on a very, very extremely hot July night. There was no one to greet us when we got to our quarters. The mosquitoes were very bad. We had taken a taxi from the Battery of New York to Sandy Hook. And the driver had never heard of the place. And when he let us off he said, "Now that's the last time I am ever going to make that trip." You know, that was our first night. It was dark. It was lonely. We had our Mother and Father and the four, five of us. It was quite an experience.

SD: Could you please list the names of the members of your family and give the rank of your father?

JG: I think at that time he was probably at Tech Sergeant or a Master Sergeant. There was my mother, Ida Mae and myself, Juanita, my brother James, my brother Ralph and my twin brothers Billy and George.

SD: What was your father's job at Fort Hancock?

JG: He was a communications man in the artillery engineers.

SD: Okay, so what were some of the things that were his responsibilities?

JG: When they set up maps and different things where all the communications that were on the post and the telephone lines and all that. That was one of his jobs. He was always with the other group coordinating everything.

SD: How long did he serve at Fort Hancock?

JG: From 1933 until he died in 1946.

SD: Okay, how did living at Fort Hancock compare to previous military posts you lived on?

JG: Well, my first military base was at Fort Randolph in Panama. And of course the climate, everything was different. They furnished us with house health and it was, you know, as child I really enjoyed it. And we always lived near the ocean. We had fun going to the ocean. And different games and going to school there. And once moving into Fort Hancock, it was just living in a different atmosphere all together. But, you know being a ten year old at least I felt that I was fitting in right away. I found a lot of new friends. It was just another experience to me.

SD: Great. Now where did you live at Fort Hancock? The various buildings.

JG: The first building we lived in was Quarters 105. I'm not sure, if it was like an A and a B. It was a duplex building. And when you are looking at it from the front we lived on the left side.

SD: And did your family live there at that location all the time that they were out at Fort Hancock?

JG: No, since we were a large group, I think it was only two bedrooms there, they soon moved us into another quarters. It was 108, which is now the post lodging building (This building was formerly short term housing for the National Park Service).

SD: And how large was that?

JG: That had four bedrooms, a large size living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a butler's pantry, a basement, a nice yard. It was much…a screened in porch, front and back.

SD: Did your mother have any help?

JG: No. No.

SD: Okay. Where did you attend school?

JG: Up until the 6th grade I went to the school (Fort Hancock Public School, part of Middletown Township). It was in one of the old barracks facing the bay (Building 102). Later on I think it became Headquarters of I think 7th Coast Artillery. And after that we moved to the smaller school house. It was a yellow brick building right across the street from where we lived in Quarters 108 (Building 109 inside today's Coast Guard fence). I was there until the 6th grade.

SD: And after the 6th grade?

JG: They transferred us to up to Middletown. The grammar school, the 7th and 8th grade and then we went to the high school. Leonardo.

SD: And then you went to Middletown High School?

JG: Yes.

SD: Okay, and what stands out in your mind about your education? At the Fort and at Middletown.

JG: Right now, I would say probably excellent. We had wonderful teachers. There was several that was always there. Miss Pearl Murray, who later became Mrs. Masciale, a Mrs. Moller, Mrs. Conover, and then from Middletown, they sent Physical Education

teacher, Miss Cisco and an art teacher. And even though we were in these small rooms, I don't believe we could have asked for any better education. It was excellent.

SD: What did you do after graduation?

JG: I was going to nursing school, but instead I met this wonderful boy and sort of changed my direction. I was doing little jobs on the base. I was working at the Service Club. I was working at the YMCA. And a lot of times I would baby sit for some of the Officers' families that had children. I would help with dinner parties and things like that.

SD: Okay, what did you do for recreation at the Fort before you met your husband?

JG: Oh goodness, there was always something to do. We used to get together and have beach parties. We would get together with our families and we would go out, I think it was at Camp Lowe (Horseshoe Cove). We used to go out there. There was a pond out there. We would have ice skating parties in the winter. Hot chocolate, marshmallows and all that fun stuff. And then I always remember going out and picking beach plums so that my mother could make jelly. Picking wild asparagus with my brothers, fishing… My father was a fisherman and we would go out a lot of times with him. And we had a dear friend a Mrs. Connett. Her husband had something to do with the Coast Guard. She was a pianist and we had a piano in our home and she would come over a lot of times and we would gather groups and just have fun singing and having fun together like that. I remember with my parents sometimes we would play game cards. Everything was more or less was around the home as far as a lot of entertaining was going on. But I always had friends that came in from off the post to spend the weekend with us for the night. For them to know what a military base was something I enjoyed seeing it. They really knew that it was different from what they were used to living off post.

SD: I'm sure. Did you ever go on any excursions to New York City?

JG: Oh, yes, yes, we did. We had friends that lived over in Governors' Island and we would visit them. Then before we got married and I was with my husband we would go over to Brooklyn, New York a lot to visit with his family.

SD: How did you travel to New York City?

JG: By the boat.

SD: Boat. Would you describe that?

JG: At that time I remember, I think it was the *ORD* and the *CHAUNCEY*. At that time there was really was a rank difference. They had special bathrooms for the ladies and special bathrooms for women. It was at that time the caste system.

SD: Okay. When did you get into Manhattan? When you were traveling into New York City did you travel into Manhattan?

JG: We would usually go by subway when we were going to Brooklyn. (The boat docked in Manhattan)

SD: What was religious life like at Fort Hancock?

JG: We had, my family was Protestant, and we used to have Sunday School and I remember that was usually in the YMCA. Later on, when I became, I was married to Sal and I turned Catholic. Our wedding was in the Post Chapel, the one that was near the Bay (Building 35). Later on we had our marriage blessed at St. Mary's which was the Post Chapel, Catholic Chapel I think that later became the Rod and Gun Club out there and then finally it was torn down. (Building 123 still stands today inside the Coast Guard station). But the Post Chapel is probably still standing and a lot of programs go on there. But in 1946, my father was buried from the same church that Sal and I were married from. I must say both times it was almost like standing room only.

SD: I can imagine. So you had a military wedding with all the uniforms etc?

JG: Yes.

SD: That must have been very exciting.

JG: It was. It was beautiful. And we had our reception at the NCO Club (Building 112), which has now, I think it has burned down.

SD: About how many people attended your wedding?

JG: It was several hundred. All of our Fort Hancock friends, and my husband's, you know, that he was in Headquarters Battery with, and all of my outside friends that lived off the base and all of Sal's relatives that came in from New York and the city, from Brooklyn and New York. And at that time with gasoline rationing and what not instead of coming individually, they hired a big bus. And when we left to go back we had a reservation at the Hotel Taft in New York for our honeymoon. Instead of driving they had a seat fixed up in the bus for us with a (inaudible) over the top. A big sign on the bus, "Just Married" and that's the way we went back to New York.

SD: Oh. Is that great! That is really memorable. I just want to go back a moment in the course of our interview to look at the specific jobs that you had. Oh, what year were you married?

JG: 1942. July the 12th.

SD: Okay, 1942, July the 12th. You mentioned that you met your husband and that changed your career plan. Okay, what year did you meet your husband?

JG: December of 1940. He had just come in from with the 245th National Guard from Brooklyn and I was in a Christmas play at the Post Theater. And we had a mutual friend that asked Sal, "Now why don't you go sign up and be in it too." So, Sal was one of the Sheppard's in this Christmas play and that's when we really met each other and I think it was love at first sight for both of us.

SD: Okay, that's great.

JG: So in December of 1940.

SD: Now, so that's when you met. And when you graduated from Middletown High School what was the first job that you held at Fort Hancock?

JG: I would say it was working at the YMCA (Building 40).

SD: And where was that located at Fort Hancock?

JG: If you are situated with the Post Exchange (Building 53), it would be right in front of the Post Exchange. Across the street.

SD: And what did you do at the YMCA?

JG: I worked as a counter clerk. They sold different objects there. Candy bars and little odds and ends and I did a little bit of office work.

SD: Okay, how long did you work at the YMCA?

JG: I would say maybe not quite a year.

SD: And what was the next job that you held?

JG: At worked behind the soda fountain at the Post Exchange.

SD: Okay and how did you like being a soda jerk as you had used the phrase?

JG: It was a lotta fun. Meeting a lot of new people and getting acquainted with people there.

SD: How long did you work there?

JG: I would say several months there.

SD: And what was the next job that you had?

JG: The next job was at the Post Service Club. I also worked behind the counter. But when I first got married I got a job at Western Union as a teletype operator. I had taken

stenography in High School. And I worked there until our first child was born. That was in ’43.

SD: Now, you have talked about your interesting wedding and your honeymoon. When you returned to the fort, where did you live?

JG: We lived with my Mother and Father in Quarters 108 and I lived there until and in the meantime Sal went overseas during the war. And when he got back, he was a Staff Sergeant at the time. We were able to get our own quarters and that was 29A, one of the duplex buildings.

SD: And how long did you live at 29 A?

JG: We lived there until my father died. That was in 1946. And we went back to Quarters 108 for a while and then because of my father’s death we had to move off the post after a certain period of time. And we moved from Fort Hancock out to Highlands, New Jersey.

SD: Okay, now, where were you when you first heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor? Do you recall? On December 7, 1941.

JG: We were over at Sal’s building in the day room and we were playing pool and we heard it on the radio.

SD: How would you say life changed at Fort Hancock after that attack?

JG: A lot. It was a complete blackout. Several times we had to go to I think it was Battery Potter (As a bomb shelter). We took blankets and things like that and stayed there for a time. In our homes we always had to make sure the light was out. You know the curtains, you know, the blinds weren’t open. Have everything as dark as possible. I would say for myself that was the only big notice, you know, that I could see. But I imagine, but overall with the Post itself it was probably more serious.

SD: When was your husband sent overseas?

JG: December of ’44.

SD: Okay, and while he was overseas, you were still living at Fort Hancock. Would you describe what life was like for you then?

JG: Well, I think it would have been very, very bad. I had one child at the time. But being with my Mother and Father and my other brothers and my sister at that time, I think that helped me a lot. To be able to not always feel lonely but it makes a difference in your life when you are separated. We were two young people just starting out in a marriage and being separated. It’s not easy to bear. But as I said, seeing that I did come from a military family I knew what to expect and that made it a big difference.

SD: Were there other women with children in your situation at Fort Hancock? Other women with children whose husbands were overseas.

JG: I am quite sure there was, but at that time I was more friendly with my mother and father's friends. They were older people, still together husband and wife. They didn't have to go overseas.

SD: I see. What was your major source of information at the fort about news about the war?

JG: Well, with my father working at Post Headquarters, he was able to bring home different details and I think from newspapers and then from radio.

SD: Okay. Were you ever aware of any enemy action off the coast of Fort Hancock?

JG: Yes. In fact, coming back from our honeymoon, we were coming back by the boat again. And we were just starting out in the harbor and the boat stopped. And we were told that they had closed the metal gates because there was suspicion that there was a German sub in the harbor. We had to turn around and went back and took a train to Red Bank and had my father meet us.

SD: Was that ever confirmed to your knowledge?

JG: Well, I am quite sure there was because there was several times that they said there was explosions and there was bodies that used to wash up on the ocean and different things like debris. Big metal tubs of butter and different things that were out there. And at one time they even said that they suspected a spy got into Fort Hancock. That I don't know if there was any truth to that.

SD: Do you remember what year that was?

JG: That was during the war, but I'm not sure of what date it was.

SD: Alright. What contacts did you have with your husband while he was in serving abroad?

JG: Just letters and I used to make up little recordings, little plastic tapes and send them to him. And he would play them on a phonograph or whatever they had over there. And let them know the sounds of our children and keep in touch from that respect.

SD: Okay, when did your husband return home from war?

JG: October of '45

SD: And once he returned home, you were still at Fort Hancock. Did you continue to live at Fort Hancock?

JG: Yes, until 1946.

SD: And in 1946, where did you go from there?

JG: Highlands, New Jersey. Our address was 151 Highlands Avenue. We bought a nice big house right behind the Catholic Church that was on the highway in Highlands. We kept that home until 1982 even thought our family went to Korea. We went to Germany. We went to France. We always kept that as our home base. In 1982, we sold it and then we moved to Florida and lived there for the next 20 years.

SD: Now your husband remained in the military after World War II.

JG: Yes.

SD: Am I right? What was his job in the military?

JG: He was with the personnel when he retired. In the beginning he was a meteorological man at Fort Hancock. And then he went into personnel later on.

SD: Are you in contact with any people you knew while you were at Fort Hancock?

JG: Oh yes. Quite a lot of them.

SD: Is there an association or just through friendly contacts?

JG: Well, I have made several of my class reunions at Middletown High School and a lot of other graduates that lived at Fort Hancock have been able to be there. Every year I keep in contact with just about everybody that I knew there.

SD: That's great. Are there any humorous events that occur to you while you were at the Fort?

JG: Humorous?

SD: Yes.

JG: Well, it didn't happen to me, but there was a time, I think it was in '38 when the King and Queen (of England) were coming through our Post and meeting up with President Roosevelt and of course everything had to be tidy. You couldn't have any clothes hanging on the clotheslines. Anything and they had just painted cannonballs out where they had this cannon (Rodman Gun). It was more or less near the bay area. And of course my dear brother Ralphie, he had to be caught playing on that right after they had painted it. And my dear Father really got reprimanded.

SD: Ah, that's funny. Did you see the King and Queen?

JG: Well, we saw them, yes in their limousine as they were driving through.

SD: Did they meet with President Roosevelt at the Fort?

JG: They were taken to the docks at Fort Hancock and then I understand his yacht was out, you know, in the bay someplace wherever it could have been. You know because there was so much security going on.

SD: Do you remember what year that could be?

JG: I think that was in 1938. They came into the Red Bank railroad station. And from there, you know, they were brought into Fort Hancock.

SD: Okay, what do you feel has been the strongest influence, your experiences at Fort Hancock, have had on your life?

(Brief interruption/conversation during taping)

JG: I just think being on a military base. Learning so many values there. Meeting all the people. Knowing, I mean today, that as a youngster seeing all those young men coming in that is still happening today. The patriotism that comes from being in the military and living on a military base. I wouldn't have changed that. I think my life was wonderful. I would never change that part of being at Fort Hancock.

SD: Juanita, that's great. I want to thank you for taking part in this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW