What was your first big trip?

We went on many car trips each summer of my youth with my father behind the wheel and my brother and I roaming around the back seat in the era before seat belts. We traveled all around the northeast riding north to Montreal, south to Washington D.C., and east to Cape Cod. But we did not take a really “big” trip until the summer after my father died.

I was 15 and had just started working as a caddy at Arcola Country Club a few months earlier. My mother had become friends with Grace Bombace, wife of Lodi Councilman John Bombace, because Grace and John’s son, Anthony, played on the same Little League baseball team as my brother John. This friendship started while my father was alive, and when he died, the Bombaces were extremely supportive of my mother, and John took my brother and me under his wing as almost additional sons.

We saw them all the time during baseball season and in the off-season we went bowling together. We went to a number of political events in support of John Bombace. My mother even took care of dyeing Grace’s hair blonde on a regular basis.

John Bombace was an avid golfer and since I was now working as a caddy, he took me along with him from time to time as his personal caddy – and he paid me!! Bombace also liked to travel to play golf. He took frequent trips to Bermuda and to Hilton Head, South Carolina to play the best courses. And so it was that in early August 1968, my mother, my brother and I were invited by the Bombaces to join them on a trip to Dorado Beach, Puerto Rico, which had a fabulous seaside golf course. The golf pro there was the famous Chi Chi Rodriguez, then one of the top golfers in the world. The idea was that my mother would be company for Grace, my brother would be company for Anthony, and I would caddy for John Bombace and have time for myself as well.

Neither my mother, my brother nor I had ever been on an airplane before, so this was a really big deal. We boarded a PanAm jet at Newark Airport and I took a seat next to the window with my Kodak Instamatic camera. This was in the age when air travel was special. Most people we knew still took trains and steamships. The flight to San Juan was luxurious. There were lots of stewardesses to make you as comfortable as possible. The soft drinks were continuous. The food was delicious. There was a movie that was projected on a screen up in the front of the plane. I remember reading Time magazine on the flight with reporting about the murder of actress Sharon Tate by the Charles Manson gang.

I had been fearing air sickness, but that fear proved to be unfounded. The flight was smooth and we arrived in Puerto Rico in just a few hours. I remember getting off the plane and immediately noticing the coconut palm trees. I had never seen one before. There was about an hour’s drive from San Juan to Dorado Beach. I remember passing extreme poverty on the way. People were living in shacks. I felt a bit guilty that we were headed for a luxurious resort.

Dorado Beach at that time was a fairly new resort complex. It had all sorts of entertainment in addition to two 18-hole golf courses. There were tennis courts, shuffleboard courts, swimming pools and movies every night. Every evening we all dined together in the massive dining room. Jackets were required of all the men and boys. I was designated the chaperone for my brother and Anthony. So I accompanied them most of the time. Being a resort, everyone (including the kids) had the ability to get food, drink and snacks just by signing our name and room number. We took full advantage of this privilege. That was quite a kick. While I played chaperone a lot of the time (in order to keep the kids out of the adults’ hair) I did get to walk the spectacular Dorado golf course with John Bombace, and I got some time in the ocean.

One day I signed up for a day trip to St. Thomas. There was a tiny airstrip on the resort property and there I boarded an eight-seater plane for the short hop over to the Virgin Islands. It was only my second air flight, but this one was so different. For one, I could see the pilot and all the controls and I could see out the front window. Also, this was a propeller plane, not a jet. And when I looked out the windows, I could see that we were flying very low, probably less than 500 feet. The water seemed right below us.

Coming into the St. Thomas airport was amazing. The runway began at the shoreline and ended in front of a large mountain. So the pilot had to begin the landing almost in the water and then apply the brakes to stop the plane quickly before we ran into the mountain. I have since flown into St. Thomas and the airport in use now has much longer runways suitable for jets, but in 1968 their airport was fit only for small propeller planes like the one I was on.

I enjoyed touring the town of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas where all the shopping was and still is today. But I especially enjoyed a tour I joined that took us up to the top of the island for a wonderful view. The roads going up were winding and narrow. The driver had to continually blow his horn as we went around corners to warn oncoming traffic.

We stayed a week in Dorado Beach. One day we all went to tour Old San Juan and had dinner there. It was my first extended experience in a country where all the people spoke a foreign language. I had studied French in school, had no knowledge of Spanish, and so was unable to read the road signs. That made me feel like I was somewhere exotic. In fact, since both Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are U.S. possessions, I never left the United States. I didn’t even get to have a passport. That would not come until four years later when another PanAm jet took me across the Atlantic to Munich. But that’s a story (or stories) for another day.