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Raul Villamía oral history interview by Maura Barrios, November 8, 2006

Raul Villamía (Interviewee)
Maura Barrios (Interviewer)

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Maura Barrios: Hello, I’m Maura Barrios. I’m a community historian and I’m here with a very special friend today, Raul Villamia. Today is November 8, 2006. We are at the University of South Florida Special Collections. And we’ve invited Mr. Villamia here to tell his story about a very special chapter of Tampa history in which he played a major role. And we are very fortunate to have Mr. Villamia here to tell that story.

Just a little bit of background that I’ve learned—Raul Villamia’s father Miguel was born in Pontevedra, Galicia, Espana. His mother Balbina Lagos was born in Lugo, also from Galicia, Espana. Miguel, his father, immigrated to Cuba at the age of thirteen with his brothers, and his mother Balbina immigrated to Cuba with a cousin and a sister to meet their uncle in Havana who was a friend of Miguel’s. So that is how the parents met each other and married in Havana. They married in 1912. The father had a tren de coches, which would be like a stage coach company. He also did manual labor, but he lost his fortune during the Depression of 1929. And they had seven children, and Raul was born on November 30, 1925. So, Raul is today eighty years old. They lived in Cuba in Vedado, and they also lived in El Cerro, neighborhoods of Havana.

Raul told me the story of early childhood memories of political turmoil in Cuba, especially during the 1930s during the Machado dictatorship and resistance, and he actually witnessed people taking a policeman and killing him because he had assassinated many people. So there was lots of violence—lots of assassinations during that 1930s Machado dictatorship which led to a mini-revolution in Cuba in 1933.
Raul as a young man delivered milk and then he discovered baseball and became a baseball player who was traveling especially during the [World War] WWII era. He came to the United States for the first time in 1947 to play baseball in Big Spring, Texas, in a class C league. So that’s what I know about Raul, to introduce this interview, and I would like to have Raul take the story from there and tell us about your life after you came to play baseball in the United States. Was that your first trip to the United States?

Raul Villamia: Yeah, that was my first time in the United States. I come, I was sited by a baseball scout that was in Cuba, watching a baseball game. At that time I used to play in an amateur league, it was not professional. After one game that I was playing, he come to me and he asked me if I wanted to play professional baseball in the United States. I told him, “Yeah, I’d be glad to do that, but I have to talk to my family first to see what their opinion was.” I talked to my relatives and they say, “Okay, why not?”

And I signed a contract to play baseball, and like you referred in the introduction, I went to Big Spring, Texas, and that was my first year. I play until the end of the season and then returned to Cuba and come in 1948, 1949, 1950, until 1955—that was my—1954 was my last year I played professional. And the reason I retire, I got married and got a family, so baseball was insecure at that time. I got me a job, then I got me a job with the city and I work with the city for thirty years.

MB: The city of Tampa?

RV: The city of Tampa. I worked in the Department of Transportation. First I was a painter, and then I was a Supervisor of Operations, installing the signs and making the signs for the city. And in 1953 I married and got two daughters and live a life! And then in 1955 the problems in Cuba continued, [Fulgencio Batista y Zaldivar] Batista have a coup d'état. I don’t know how you call it.

MB: Coup d'état.

RV: He took power by force and got in two months before the elections. He do that—he did that. And that made me mad, you know, because I got—I like freedom, liberty. And I was against Batista.

And then I started hearing about Fidel Castro. He was a lawyer recently graduated from law school. He was a politician, too, belonging to the Partido Ortodoxo [a Cuban political party also known as Partido del Pueblo Cubano]. He supposed to be—he run for a congressman—to be a congressman. And that is when Batista had the coup d’etat. So Castro was against Batista from the beginning. And he start making—talking against Batista and made declarations against Batista—writing in the paper against Batista. And then he start to organize a force with the el fin [with the goal of] to make a revolution against Batista by force. Throw Batista out of power by force. And that is how the Twenty-sixth of July [Twenty-sixth of July movement, Cuba] start.
After he attack and—let me come back. The Twenty-sixth of July, on July twenty-sixth he [Castro] attacked a barrack in Santiago de Cuba and a lot of people died there. They captured a lot people there and then they kill them. They murder after they were captured and they say they died in combat. So [that's] how did the Twenty-sixth of July come to be. And Fidel Castro run, got lucky, and he got away with other people and he was trying to go to the Sierra Maestra [mountain range]. So in the meantime, Batista was following him. You know the Batista forces were following him to capture and murder him—kill him.

So anyway, through the Cuban Archbishop—the Catholic Archbishop—cast Batista from—and the Archbishop, they got Batista people—the Archbishop tried to ask Fidel Castro to give in. You know, so they don’t kill him. So the Archbishop got a, they—

MB: Negotiated?

RV: —negotiated with Batista government to help to catch Castro without killing him. So finally the Archbishop find Castro. I’ve got a story I want to tell you.

Finally, they capture Castro, and in the presence of the Archbishop, he was taken to prison and then he was put on trial. And in the trial he defend himself and he was found guilty. He was sentenced to fifteen years in jail. So he went to jail and about a year and a half after that was about [the] time Batista was to celebrate elections so he wanted to look good to the world that he give freedom to everybody and he released Castro from jail. And also he was pressed by, you know, many international figures, you know, to release Castro.

So Castro was released from jail. And while he was traveling through—he was in jail in the Islas de Pinos which was a prison and was an island near the Cuban mainland. So in the ferry that he was traveling from the Islas de Pinos to Cuba they were thinking about forming an organization. And it come out the idea to form the Twenty-sixth of July. So they got to Cuba and in June, sometime in June, the Twenty-sixth of July was created—whatever it was. So the things in Havana was very bad. Batista keep persecuting his enemies and a lot of people were put in jail and killed and Castro thought that was too much danger for him. So he decided to go away from Cuba.

So he went to Mexico in early 1955. I think it was in June 1955. He went to Mexico and there he start to organize a force with the meaning to go to Cuba and fight. You know with the arms against Batista because there was no other way to get Batista out of power. So there he organized the Twenty-sixth of July and they start training the people and that’s when he decide that he needs money to do all that. To buy weapons, to train, you know, to give the people—feed the people. So, he went to New York with the—Como se dice, el fin? [How do you say the goal?] With the idea of—

MB: The goal.
RV: —of organizing Twenty-sixth of July clubs in the United States where lots of Cubans live like New York, Miami, Tampa, Key West and all other places. So that is how the Twenty-sixth of July started in The United States. First in New York, he stay in New York and they got a meeting there—then he speak in New York City and Bridgeport, Connecticut. From there he come to Miami around June—no, I’m sorry—around October, and he organize the Twenty-sixth of July in Miami. And on November twenty-third [1955] he come to Tampa.

First he sent here one of his trusted men named Juan Manuel Marquez, who later died in the Sierra Maestra fighting against Batista. So Juan Manuel Marquez come to Tampa to make plans for the Castro visit. So we got to get a place to hold a meeting so Castro can make a speech there and state to people his ideas. And after, we went to Centro Asturiano, Circulo Cubano, and Centro Espanol, they deny us renting a hall to hold our meetings. So we went to the L’Unione Italiana [Italian Club, in Ybor City] and they rent the theater for us to hold the meeting. So, Marquez went back to Miami, and on November twenty-third, Fidel Castro arrived in Tampa.

He arrived and he went to La Gaceta [trilingual weekly newspaper in Tampa] and I wasn't there, but Manteiga was there [to] talk to him. Manteiga later called me and told me that Castro was here in Tampa, and he asked for me because he knew me from my brother in New York. My brother told Castro that he had a brother here and that I could help him. So Castro went to live in a house located in Fourteenth Avenue between Sixteenth Street and Seventeenth Street. And I went there to meet Castro because I didn’t know Castro personally—I did not know Castro. I knew him from his activities. So there he explained a little bit that we got to have a meeting to organize the Twenty-sixth of July and to make plans for the meetings. So the next day we meet there and he explained to about forty to fifty people that were there his plan and the need to organize the Twenty-sixth of July to help with money to help the revolution. The cause was to make the revolution.

So—can I pause?

MB: Yes, take a break.

RV: Let me rewind. I'm going too fast.

MB: Yeah, you can relax.

RV: I’m going too fast.

MB: We have plenty of time.

pause in recording

MB: Okay, one of the issues—questions—we had here was you were living in Tampa, and yet you’re very well informed of what was happening in Cuba during those years—
the Batista years, and then Fidel’s movement, the early beginning. How did that information come to you?

RV: Well, we get well-informed because we listen to the Cuban radio stations that we can hear clearly here in Tampa from Cuba. Also we got the Bohemia magazine that was a weekly magazine that come delivered in Tampa. And we knew the situation because people that come and go from Cuba to Tampa or Miami, you know, people talking.

MB: Were you a member of any of the clubs—social clubs, Circulo Cubano, or anything, so you had a circle of Cuban friends?

RV: No, I wasn’t a member of any club, including the Cuban club.

MB: You were not a member.

RV: No, I was not a member.

MB: Okay. So then take us back to when—how you got involved. It was through your brothers, when Fidel meets them in New York?

RV: I got involved because I was following what Fidel Castro was doing. Then I got very interested. I was following Castro’s activities, you know, that he went to Mexico, all the activity. Then I followed that he went to New York to organize the Twenty-sixth of July there in New York and talked to the people in New York. And through my brother Mario that helped organize the Twenty-sixth of July of New York, and he was a member of the directive of the Twenty-sixth of July. So he called me and he told me that Castro was going to come to Tampa—to Miami and Tampa. So I was aware, you know, of Castro.

MB: So your whole family was interested in this anti-Batista movement?

RV: Yes, yes.

MB: You were anti-Batista.

RV: Yes, yes, yes.

MB: Okay. And here comes this young man who was ready to fight Batista—

RV: Right.

MB: And that’s what appealed to you. Is that what appealed to you?

RV: With a good attitude and with desire (laughter), Castro—and very smart—so we notice all that things on him, you know? That he was a leader. He was a leader. And
we knew we can trust him, you know, what he was doing. So I got interested and I was aware. So when Castro come to Tampa, I meet him here and I didn’t know him personally before, but I knew him and that’s how I met Castro and I helped to organize the—As a matter of fact, in the first reunion we had to organize the Twenty-sixth of July, he said, “Well, tomorrow we are going to have another reunion and we want to talk about the organization of the Twenty-sixth of July.”

So the next day we got a reunion and right there he give a little speech first and then he say that he wants to name Victoriano Manteiga Presidente of the Twenty-sixth of July, and he named me the Secretary of the Twenty-sixth of July, and he asked the people there if they approved and everybody say, Yes; and so it was approved.

MB: Where did that meeting take place?

RV: That meeting take place in a local—where it was, it used to be a restaurant because it got tables and chairs. It was located in Twenty-first Street between Columbus Drive and Fifteenth Street. Twenty-first Street, and we’ll say Columbus Drive.

MB: Okay, so in a restaurant.

RV: But it was off Twenty-first Street. And in that meeting we organized to have the meeting, and what we’re going to do.

MB: How did you all—how did [you] decide who to invite to these meetings?

RV: Well, we went around and everybody that was Cuban or, not a Cuban, whatever—we, by voice, we tell we want to have a meeting. Fidel Castro is here and we are going to organize the Twenty-sixth of July and we got to listen to Fidel Castro to see what he is going to say, you know?

MB: Yeah.

RV: And that is how the people got interested.

MB: Did you feel that a lot of people were supporting the idea?

RV: Well, at that time, not too many people.

MB: Not too many.

RV: Not too many people. Maybe they were not aware or were not interested in politics. I don’t know what the reason was. But we got about forty people there the first time we got the meeting with Castro. And about forty, fifty the next day when he say, “Well, this is what I’m going to do. I want to organize. Manteiga is the president. You are the Secretary. And we give you the authority to name the rest of la directiva, [the officers].”
MB: And then he gave a public speech that was not held at the Italian club because they cancelled, right?

RV: Well, they cancel. We rent the Italian Club, but two days before the twenty-seventh of November was supposed to be a meeting where Fidel Castro was to give a speech to everybody that wants to go, the L’Unione Italiana canceled and they say they cannot rent us the theater because they don’t want any political act there, nobody talking about politics in there. So that was the reason they gave us.

So we gotta rush to look for another place to hold the meeting. And we got lucky enough that this man that Victoriano Manteiga knew come to the La Gaceta office. I was there and he told us that he knew what was happening with the trouble we had to find a place to hold the meeting and he was a president of the union, labor union, tied with the C.I.O. [Congress of Industrialized Organizations]. And they got an office and they got a locale in Seventh Avenue and he told us that he [was] going to give us, if we wanted, the locale to have our meeting there. And he also told us that there will be no charge for that. It was free. So where today is Marti-Maceo Society, that is where Fidel Castro gave his speech in Tampa. And I think there was about three hundred people there in that meeting.

MB: So, you got the word out again through just voice, or did radio—

RV: So, yeah, so more people knew about what the Twenty-sixth of July—

MB: What about the local radio station?

RV: The local radio station—the Latin—because the North American radio station, they do not want to get involved in that. They don’t say nothing about that. In other words, they got a write-in that Fidel Castro was in Tampa to give a speech, but they don’t want—and the local radio station—

MB: The Spanish one?

RV: The Spanish local radio station—there was one only at that time—they were not interested in our activity, because I think they got some connection with the Cuban government, social connections. They want to go to Cuba and, you know, party with the Cubans (laughter) they know that belong to the government. Anyway, we don’t have too much back up by the radio station here. At the last moment, the day when Fidel Castro—

MB: But I imagine La Gaceta announced these meetings.

RV: Oh, yeah, La Gaceta was very much involved in everything about the Twenty-sixth of July.

MB: So maybe they got the word out to the people?
RV: Oh, yeah, *La Gaceta*—every week write about something about the Twenty-sixth of July activities, and we got a full cooperation of Victoriano Manteiga, was very involved in the Twenty-sixth of July.

MB: Was there more than one Twenty-sixth of July club in Tampa?

RV: No, it was only one. Then later on, people start make forming organizations—two more organizations—because they accuse some people, accused us that we were Communists (laughter). So, they form their organizations. But there was only one Twenty-sixth of July in Tampa.

MB: And tell us what you did in the Twenty-sixth of July. So you organized in November 1955, after Castro’s visit.

RV: Yes. Yeah.

MB: You organized your group. And what kinds of activities did you do in that?

RV: Well, first we start to [get] new members, you know, get new members. We try to—

MB: Recruit.

RV: —recruit new members.

MB: Yes.

RV: Because you know more members more better. So we started going around by mouth, by voice of mouth you know about Twenty-sixth of July and the writing in *La Gaceta* and we start getting new members and start collecting money and we start our work which was to collect money.

MB: Did you distribute information about what was going on with Castro and Mexico and—

RV: Yes, we made protests. We got write in *La Gaceta* about the organization, the activities that we were involved that we were doing. And we got—our activity was to collect money, to make protests about the Batista government—

MB: Anti-Batista—

RV: Anti-Batista and talk about Fidel Castro, and talk about everything about the dictatorship—how bad it was, how he was killing a lot of people there. You know, about the situation in Cuba, you know, we explained it to the people of Tampa that what was our main activities—collect money and do propaganda if you want to call it that way, but you know, what was going on in Cuba. Mainly, the Cuban people, or the Latin people
that were here, if they want to help and that’s what the activity was. And then after Fidel Castro—in invade Cuba.

MB: Let me stop you there. Collecting money—and where would this money go?

RV: The money was sent to Mexico.

MB: Sent to Mexico.

RV: Yes.

MB: Would you send it with a person?

RV: Well, Manteiga was the one that was more involved in sending the money to Mexico and we trust—everybody trusted Manteiga. We know the money was received in Mexico.

MB: And that was to help the training and the arms?

RV: Yes. Right.

MB: What about sending arms? Did any arms go—

RV: No, we not involved in that (laughter). We leave that to other people.

MB: Okay.

RV: We knew who the other people was, but we don’t want to get involved in that because that was not our job.

MB: Because I’ve heard stories about Tampa people sneaking arms into Cuba.

RV: Well, you listen to a lot of stories that were not true—

MB: Yeah—

RV: —because no Twenty-sixth of July official sent weapons to anyplace.

MB: So, money to buy the weapons—

RV: Yes, the money. Not saying that to buy the weapon (laughter). Just to help the Twenty-sixth of July movement.

MB: Okay. And so, you’re active in 1955, fifty-six [1956], fifty-seven [1957]. When does the *Granma* [Cuban Revolution transport yacht] land in—
RV: The *Granma* land in 1956; in December the second they got trouble. He want to land on November thirtieth, because on November thirtieth they going to have an uprising in Cuba the thirtieth—some other group. They want to attack Bayamo by the same time Fidel Castro land in Cuba. But they have a lot of problems with the ship.

MB: There’s a storm, and they—

RV: They have a lot of problem with *el barco*, [the ship], because there were too many people on the ship. The ship was only made for twenty people and there were eighty-two. So they had a lot of mechanical problems and they were late. And they arrived in Cuba on December the second.

MB: And they arrived in Oriente, no?

RV: In Oriente. And in a place called La Playa Coloradas. But they don’t get to the coast, they got to—*el barco se branco*. Como se dice? [The ship ran aground. How do you say it?]

MB: They shipwrecked. Well, not shipwrecked, but they landed on land.

RV: Yeah, shipwrecked there, because they were about a thousand feet from the coast. So everybody had to jump. They lost a lot of weapons there. Jump from the ship and swim to the coast. And the coast wasn’t okay—it was like a pantano—un pantano como [a mangrove like—] the Okeechobee?

MB: Mangrove.

RV: Mangroves and all of that stuff, and they lost a lot of weapons and—

MB: A lot people, right?

RV: Not yet. They lost the people when they got to the land. Batista knew because they saw the ship and the airplane were all around and they bombarded them, and they—everybody’s gotta run, you know, like a salvese el que pueda [every man for himself, save what you can].

MB: Save yourself.

RV: Yeah, and they killed not many people in that. Fidel Castro went with three people and Raul Castro went to another place and Che Guevara [Ernesto Guevara, revolutionary leader] to another place with the group. And the people they captured, the Cuban troops, government, the Batista troop, they killed right there and shoot them right there. And one of them was Juan Manuel Marquez, the guy who came to Tampa.

MB: Oh, right there he was killed.
RV: So from there, everybody say before they disembark from the Granma they say, “We got to go to the Sierra Maestra. Whatever happens everybody go to the Sierra Maestra.” That was where they got to go. So everybody for himself. So, Castro has his own story, but I don’t remember now. The group of Raul has his own story and the group of Che Guevara has their own story.

MB: All right now, but you’re back in Tampa for the Twenty-sixth of July. Do you know what’s going on?

RV: Oh, yes.

MB: There is news coming to you all about what’s happening with these folks with the Granma landing?

RV: Yes. Yes. We were aware that when that happened with Fidel Castro. The first notice that Batista go over and say that Fidel Castro was killed. Como se dice banditos? [How do you say bandits?] Bandits—

MB: Bandits.

RV: —were invading Cuba and most of them were shot to death and Fidel Castro was killed.

MB: Right.

RV: That what they say.

MB: Yeah.

RV: But later on we find out that he wasn’t killed (laughter). So we were aware in Tampa what was happening because it was on the radio.

MB: The guerilla movement was organized in the mountains.

RV: Yeah, we were aware that the thirtieth of November, when Fidel Castro was supposed to be in Cuba. They attack a barrack in Bayamo City, and a lot of people were killed there.

MB: Yeah, that was the urban uprising.

RV: One of the main people in Cuba for the Twenty-sixth of July was killed there. I don’t remember his name, but it was the head of the Twenty-sixth of July.

MB: Was it Haydee, Santa Maria’s brother?
RV: Well, Haydee, Santa Maria’s brother, was killed in the barrack in the attack on Moncada.

MB: Oh, okay.

RV: Was murdered, was murdered. So everybody—

MB: So at what point—you are back in Tampa—at what point do you start receiving news about the Twenty-sixth of July? Guerillas—

RV: Right at the moment! Right at the moment that Fidel Castro got to Cuba we knew about it here in Tampa through the radio station.

MB: The Cuban radio station?

RV: Yeah, it was all over the radio station. But the government was giving that information that Castro was killed.

MB: And do you remember when they start their own radio station, Radio Rebelde? [Rebellious Radio] Did you get to hear that in Tampa?

RV: Yeah, sometime we get it through the short-wave radio. Sometimes we can get it, Radio Rebelde from the short-wave radio and that’s how we get also news. And also they got a magazine. They make a magazine that they send to the United States. The Twenty-sixth July movement in Cuba sent information to Miami because Miami became the headquarters of the exiles. You know the Cuban exiles?

MB: Yes.

RV: Miami was the headquarters. More important people were there and they received more information and we get the information from them, too, through the radio and to Miami—

MB: So they have their newspaper arriving in Miami?

RV: Yeah, they got the little magazine that arrives.

MB: What was the name of that magazine?

RV: Sierra Maestra.

MB: Okay, you have copies of those.

RV: Yeah, I showed it to you.

MB: So, and then, so those magazines would make it to Tampa?
RV: Yeah, they would make it to Tampa.

MB: So you would have direct news about the movement?

RV: Yeah, we got news. Also we got news by word of mouth.

MB: People coming—

RV: Yes, people coming and talking to us, and—

MB: Okay. And Radio Rebelde was very important for news, right?

RV: Radio Rebelde. You only listen if you have a shortwave radio because it was in shortwave.

MB: Yeah. Okay. Then the United States journalists got involved with the New York Times?

RV: Yeah, and then the United States—What's his name? Drew Pearson; no, not Drew Pearson. The famous writer from The New York Times¹. He went to Cuba and interviewed Fidel Castro.

MB: And that first pictures come out and he was very favorable and impressed—

RV: I don’t remember. He was a famous writer.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

RV: A very famous writer.

MB: Yeah, we’ll remember in a minute.

RV: Drew Pearson was his assistant. And he interviewed Castro there and everybody knew that Castro was alive (laughter).

MB: Yes.

RV: Vivito y coleando [alive and kicking] (laughter).

MB: And then—

RV: So then, other newspapermen went there to interview Castro.

MB: Do you remember a book that was circulating? It was called, *Listen, Yankee* by C. Wright Mills? I remember that was another way the American public started to join and sympathize with the guerilla movement in Cuba.

RV: Yeah, we got a—

MB: Did you all work to get the American public informed?

RV: We tried to get everybody involved no matter what nationality, you know? We got some people—some Americans that joined us. Not as a member, but they helped us financially, you know.

MB: And did the Twenty-sixth of July movement send people to Tampa to speak to you all, in terms of helping organize information?

RV: Yeah, from the time the Twenty-sixth of July was created to the time that we finished, because we finished when the United States break relations with Cuba in 1960\(^2\). I think it was 1960. So, through that time they sent here a few different people to help us to be in charge of the Twenty-sixth of July, but I was still involved as the Secretary or as a member or whatever.

MB: And was Mr. Gil [Gabriel Gil], was he one of those?

RV: I'm sorry?

MB: And Senor Gil was a person sent from Cuba?

RV: At one time—Gil was here in the first of January 1959 when Batista fled the country.

MB: Okay. And he was somebody that was sent from Cuba to Tampa?

RV: He was sent from Miami because first he lived in Miami for a few months, and from there he was sent to Tampa. Because we got a lot of trouble in the Twenty-sixth of July in Tampa because different personality, you know, peoples’ ambitions and clash between ideas.

MB: Okay (laughter). That's every organization I've been a member of!

RV: We got a lot of problems! (laughter) So the Twenty-sixth of July was interested that we keep working, so he send somebody outside Tampa to make peace.

\(^2\) United States embargo of Cuba occurred on October 1960, and end broke diplomatic relations in January 1961.
MB: Okay, I see.

RV: Yeah, that was—there was about two or three different people at different times.

MB: I have an understanding that there were a lot of exiles in Tampa and in Miami from the Batista government. They had left Cuba because they were afraid of the Batista government. So that those people naturally became involved.

RV: You mean after Castro took over?

MB: No, no, no, before. In the 1950s when Batista was in power, people were terrorized or terrified.

RV: Oh yeah, yeah, they come here.

MB: So they would send their children to the United States so there were exiles.

RV: True. They were exiled from Batista.

MB: Exiled from Batista, who then joined the movement.

RV: Right. They come to Miami, and they come from Cuba, because they were youths. Most of them students—

MB: Yes.

RV: —and their family were afraid that they were going to be shot.

MB: Right, I had read of this—

RV: And they send them here and those also participated in the activities of the Twenty-sixth of July. And you got doctors and lawyers and people like that working as a cashier in the Columbia. We got one man who was a cashier in the Columbia, he was a professional, and we had of lot of doctors who were exiled here during Batista. Because they got to go, because they were Batista’s enemy.

MB: Intellectuals and students—

RV: They could be shot anytime.

MB: Yeah, I heard those stories often. And okay. So now, let’s talk about when the revolution triumphed 1959. January 1, 1959. What was your memory of that day?

RV: Well (laughter)—that wasn't the—

*pause in recording*
MB: Okay, so you’re working really hard during those years from fifty-five [1955], fifty-six [1956], fifty-seven [1957], fifty-eight [1958]. You’re keeping informed, you’re getting information, you’re organizing people, you’re collecting money.

RV: Si. Yes.

MB: And then finally, January 1, 1959.

RV: January first (laughter). It was early in the morning that somebody called me and he told me, “Batista fled the country!” It was about six in the morning. So I got all excited!

MB: Where were you for New Year’s Day?

RV: I was in my house. You know, after the New Year celebration I was (laughter) dumb. So I was so excited the first idea was to dress up and go to Ybor City (laughter). By that time, seven o’clock, Ybor city was full of people already!

MB: Yeah.

RV: *La Gaceta* was a lot of people in there crazy, yelling! Everybody was happy.

MB: Yeah.

RV: It was a happy day. Everybody got excited with the news. Seventh Avenue was full of people for a couple of blocks—full of people. And later on we got a—Cómo se dice la maquina? [How do you say caravan?]

MB: A caravan.

RV: A caravan that was the longest caravan I have ever seen in my life.

MB: Yeah, cars—

RV: Everybody was for Castro at that time. And everybody was happy because no more Batista. We celebrate the triumph of the revolution.

MB: What about the Circulo Cubano? I heard the people were gathering there also?

RV: No. Circulo Cubano was kind of off of all of our activities. Many members were in sympathy with our cause, but many others, no. The Circulo Cubano was not involved.

MB: Would you say the people celebrating on Seventh Avenue were Cubans, or Italians, or Spaniards, or—
RV: Well, most of them were Cuban, but yes, it’s possible—lot of Tampa natives, Italians, [but] maybe some Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, whatever. There were not too many Mexicans at that time.

MB: Yeah.

RV: Mostly Cubans, Spaniards, some Puerto Ricans. And we had a big celebration. Everybody was happy. And then, we say, well, we got to work now, harder to keep the revolution working. So Gabriel Gil went back to Cuba and he told me that I was head of the Twenty-sixth of July now with title of delegate. Delegato? Delegate. And that’s when the next day we went to the—because that was—I don't remember what day it was. The next day we went to the Cuban Consulate. We received orders from Miami to take over the Cuban Consulate and I took off from my work—a little vacation (laughter) to help with that activity.

MB: To take over the Consulate office! (laughter)

RV: Yeah, so we went to the Consulate. The Counsel, he didn’t give us a hard time, but he said he won’t leave. He said he won’t leave until he received orders from Cuba that he had to leave. So we got connection again with Miami because Miami was the one that was giving this order. And they said, “Be in the Consulate with him from the beginning to the end. Don’t be hostile and wait for orders.” So the next day an order comes and they told me to take charge of the Consulate. So I was in charge of the Consulate for maybe two or three days, it actually was for about a month. I don’t remember (laughter). Until I got another order that told me to let Vice Counsel in charge. Because he got more experience in charge and until they name a regular Counsel, which they did a few days later, it actually was weeks, not days.

MB: And you mean the Twenty-sixth of July movement revolutionary government named a new Counsel for Tampa?

RV: Yes, the Twenty-sixth of July revolution for the Tampa Consulate and all the Consulates all over the U.S. or wherever there is a Cuban Consulate.

MB: Where was that Counsel office?

RV: The Counsel office was in Tampa Street. I think it was 207 North Tampa.

MB: Downtown?

RV: Yes, it was in downtown. Downtown in a building that was called Flagler Building. It was about two or three story building, and we were in the second story.

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3 Inserted at the request of the interviewee.
4 Inserted at the request of the interviewee.
MB: And that Consulate had been there for many years?

RV: Yeah, that Consulate was in there for many years until the United States and Cuba break relations—diplomatic relations.

MB: And that was around 1961?

RV: That was in 1959.\(^5\)

MV: When they break relations?\(^6\)

RV: Oh, that was in 1960—at the beginning of 1960.  I think it was in January 1960.

MB: So, you are all still active supporting the new government and the revolution?

RV: We supported the new government. We got the activities for the Twenty-sixth of July in Tampa. The activities at that time, after the revolution, after Fidel Castro took power and we were collecting money, clothes, everything we could collect to send to Cuba—to help Cuba.  And do propaganda, you know, attack anybody who attacked Castro until the diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States broke which is the first of January, we ceased all the activities.  Because we do not want to be doing that in a country where we live that do not have diplomatic relations.

MB: Why did they break relations with Cuba?

RV: I think mainly it was for two or three reasons.  One reason was there was one explosion on a Cuban ship in the Havana Harbor.  The ship’s name was The Coubre which had a lot of weapons that Cuba bought from Belgium.  Well, I don’t have any proof, but they say the C.I.A. [U.S. Central Intelligence Agency] plant a bomb there.  The other thing was, no, the Bay of Pigs didn’t happen yet [April 1961].

MB: No, no—the oil refineries—

RV: It was because Cuba government, Fidel government started nationalizing Cuban companies, business and expropriating American business.  And it got so bad that they break relations, and Eisenhower was the one—

MB: And did you all have any trouble in your Twenty-sixth of July movement?  Did you have any people protesting you or attacking you?

RV: Let me see how I remember.  Some Batistianos themselves that got exiled from Cuba to the United States come to Tampa, and they were giving us a little problem.  Not too much, but a little problem.  We even had a physical fight with them.

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\(^5\) Inserted at the request of the interviewee.

\(^6\) Inserted at the request of the interviewee.
MB: At your office?

RV: Near the office.

MB: And tell us where your office was, the Twenty-sixth of July movement office.

RV: The Twenty-sixth of July office in Tampa was located in the old El Pasaje building that we got the office there until we had to close it because what I said the relations were broken.

MB: Did they attack that office? They had come in and attacked or disrupted the office?

RV: Well, they attacked the office only the day after the Cuban relations break with American relation. Before nobody attacked because we fight. They know we fight, you know.

MB: And you had support from the community?

RV: Yeah, we got support through the community, but after the relations were bad, we got problems; we were not anymore involved in any activities for the Twenty-sixth of July. So, for that reason because we weren’t going to be working for something, doing something in favor with a government that had no relations with us.

MB: So that was the end of the Twenty-sixth of July?

RV: That was the end of the Twenty-sixth of July in Tampa.

MB: 1960?

RV: In 1961.

MB: And you closed the office?

RV: We closed the office because also the office was attacked on the first of January of 1961. The office was attacked and half destroyed.

MB: And you rescued all the documents?

RV: I rescued some of the documents and pictures because we knew that that was going to happen. Not only the Batistianos, but there was another group that was against us that did that.

7 Changed at the request of the interviewee
8 Changed at the request of the interviewee
MB: Who was that group?

RV: They were called Movimiento. I don’t know. I don’t remember the name. I got it written down someplace, but at this moment I don’t recall the name. They didn’t have too much power here.

MB: I’ve interviewed a lot of people who talk about repression—being attacked. Their houses were painted red. They were hounded by the F.B.I.; visited by the F.B.I. and maybe harassed. Did you hear those stories?

RV: Well, I’m part of the story. I was harassed by the F.B.I.

MB: You were?

RV: Yes. They were after me. They were around where I live, my neighbor asking for me. Even one of my friend that live in New York told me one day that two guys identified as F.B.I. they show him a picture of me and told him if he knew me. And he said, “Yeah, I know him.” And they said, “Where do you know him from?” And he said, “He used to play baseball with me” (laughter). So they started asking him questions, if I was a Communist, all of that. You know that stuff.

MB: And when did that happen? When did the F.B.I. start asking about you?

RV: The year exactly, I don’t know, but it was after 1960 sometime.

MB: After you were no longer in the—

RV: Yeah, after we were no longer in the Twenty-sixth of July.

MB: Okay. What about the people in Tampa? Did you know people that had their houses were painted red?

RV: Their houses were—they throw paint on the houses. Even La Gaceta was painted red.

MB: La Gaceta?

RV: I was lucky that my house wasn’t attacked. I don’t know why.

MB: A lot of houses were painted red.

RV: Yeah, and they knew I’d fight, because I fought with a six-foot guy—strong. So they know I fight (laughter). So anyway, the F.B.I. were after us, you know, harassing us. Even the immigration called me one time that I went, and I had to go to immigration for a matter very important to the United States government. And there I went, and a guy interrogated me and asked me a lot of questions, including if I took weapons to Cuba or
Miami or if involved with the weapons. And I said, “No, I wasn’t involved in the weapons. I was involved with collecting money, talking with people.” He asked me a lot of question.

Also, another time an F.B.I. agent called me and said he wanted to talk to me. He said, “Okay, we’re going to go to your house.” And I said, “Okay, what day are you going to come?” And he said, “I’m going to come that day.” So I was waiting for them that day in the house. So he knocked on the door, and I go to the door and he said, “Come with us.” They changed their mind. And he took me in his car for a ride—took me for a ride.

One of them asked me a lot of questions. The other was quiet. He had an attaché case and I imagine he might have had a tape recorder there. They asked me a lot of questions. Foolish questions, you know, inclusive; they asked me if Raul was effeminate. I swear I told them, “I don’t know that Raul was effeminate”—I don’t know if I should say this—“I don’t know if Raul is effeminate. Why did you hear rumors that Raul is effeminate? I never heard that Raul is effeminate, but I hear rumors that your boss Mr. Hoover is effeminate. Is that true?” (laughter). And he got like this (makes face; laughter).

I swear I did that because I wasn’t afraid, because I knew my rights. I knew that they could do nothing to me, you know, they got to prove something and arrest me. So I wasn’t afraid talking to them. But they harass a lot of people, including me.

MB: Did that silence you? Did that make you afraid? Did you decide to be more careful?

RV: I was kind of silent because that was after they break relations with Cuba.

MB: So you were not active anymore.

RV: Yeah, I was not active anymore. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I think that was between the time that Fidel Castro took power of Cuba and the time the relations were broken. Because I remember that a guy that was here who I thought was a spy for the C.I.A., he was with us—he went to Cuba and made some film and we got a meeting in a building near Bayshore [Boulevard] someplace and we were showing this film and there were two F.B.I. guys sitting there. And when the meeting was over we saw them in the parking lot taking the tag number writing the tag number of the people.

MB: So somebody went to Cuba and got films, and you all went to see the films.

RV: Yeah. We went to show it to the people, but the relations were there—they weren’t broken yet. And it was the time when they harass people because after the relations were broken, no more activities about Castro. We let somebody else, whatever it was, if Castro is good, good. If Castro is bad, bad, you know.

MB: So you didn’t continue to defend, or—
RV: We don’t continue any opinion, collecting money; do any activities because at that time Cuba was our enemy, the U.S. enemy.

MB: And it gets really, really tricky later on in sixty-one [1961].

*Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins.*

Andrew Huse: I was just curious as to when you found out about Castro’s, I guess, conversion to Communism. When did you find out and how did you react? Was it a surprise to you?

RV: Well, we found out slowly, after maybe the first problem with the United States come about. Because the United States was cutting trade with Cuba, especially oil, and Cuba had no way to get oil into the country, and Fidel Castro talk to Russian people and Russia offer oil to Cuba and Cuba offered to pay for the oil with sugar and tobacco and whatever Cuba produced. No money involved. And from there Castro looks like he got mad at the United States—that is my opinion—that he got mad at the United States and he probably say, “Well, who is the enemy of the United States? Russia, the Communist. So I want to be a part of that.”

And then little by little people that were not Communist in the Castro government started leaving the country, and people that belong to the Communist Party started joining the government. And Castro started making more Socialist and Communist decisions like taking people’s property who had too many properties. You got one house, we won’t take it, but if you had twenty or five or whatever he started becoming what the Communist are accused of doing. But that was a slow process; I think it took two or three years.

It was a surprise in a way. Because we didn’t think Cuba would ever become Communist. We thought Cuba and Castro wanted to have a government with honesty that have education, create work, jobs, do something for the Cuban people that were victims of corrupt government that Cuba had through the time they were becoming Republic in 1902 to the time that Batista was in power and Fidel took over the government. All the government was corrupt. They were corrupt. They become politics to be rich. And that happened in Cuba, and Fidel Castro went the other way.

He went against the people that got all the companies and rich people and the other people were starving to death so he started helping making laws for La Reforma Agraria, La Agrarian Reform. The people that rented houses, you are the owner of the house, the owners don’t own it no more. You are the owner of the house, you pay a little bit, but they don’t pay too much (laughter)—and he start making laws and he opened relations with Russia and Communists come to Cuba.

AH: Okay, so you didn’t react negatively to the—
RV: No, I don’t react negatively. I was here, but I say whatever they are going to do, they do. The people in Cuba are the ones that have to do something about it, if they wanted to do it, you know? Yeah, it surprised me—many people—we thought, like I say, that Cuba was going to have a nice government, a good government, an honest government and elections, you know. And then he suspended the elections and no more elections. He said, “Elections? No.” He said, “Elections for what?” (laughter). People you elect me just!

AH: I guess that is other side of the coin. On the one side, you know, there is Communism. On the other it isn’t the free, democratic government that you might have envisioned.

RV: Right.

AH: Was that a disappointment to you?

RV: Yes, a little bit. Yes. A little bit, because in Cuba most of the people were anti-Communist. Okay? Because in Cuba they say the people that were Communists in Cuba they got the fama [reputation] that they don’t work. They were all talking about Communism, but they were people that they don’t do anything for anybody. In other words the Communists, you know in Cuba what happened in Russia, the people were aware of what was happening with Russia now that after the Communists took power in 1917 with Lenin and they knew the system can’t work. The system writing is pretty good, but in practice it don’t work not because the system is no good, but because the people don’t make it work. That’s my opinion.

And so people were not Communists. The Communist Party was a small fraction in the Cuban politics. So that was a surprise. But the poor people in Cuba saw what Fidel Castro was doing for them so he don’t object for Cuba to have a Communist system. Call it whatever you call it, but help us. So I didn’t know too much because I wasn’t in Cuba, but what I hear, you know, my opinion. Yes, I envision Fidel Castro doing a model government. Communist not needed, capitalist not needed, in between. I don’t know what you call that. I don’t know if it is possible to have that, because there are too many interests.

MB: Socialism, maybe?

AH: China is kind of dealing with that right now.

RV: Yeah, too many.

MB: Well, tell us, so you were so active. I mean, you were a leader in this movement in exile in Tampa, and then did you feel that you were silenced after that, after you decide to no longer be there and the F.B.I. interviews you, and you have these incidents? Did you decide to be silent on the Cuba issue like many people in Tampa?
RV: Well, I took the decision to be silent because I don’t want to cause trouble for me or my family.

MB: To protect your family.

RV: Right, because I knew if I were open, defending the Cuban government—which at that time becomes the Communist government and in the United States nobody believe in—well, some people believe in Communism, but Communists were our enemy here, so it was too much. And I also, I don’t see the reason why I should continue to be involved. What can I be doing to help the government here, because I cannot go to the street and collect money to send to Cuba or talk about how good the government in Cuba was. But I never talk against Castro. I never got involved with the new Castro enemies in the United States. I don’t join any group or organization that do something against Castro. I was neutral (laughter). If you want to say that.

MB: It is not easy to be neutral in this country.

RV: I was neutral outside.

MB: Did you travel to Cuba? Did you stay in touch with family?

RV: Yeah, after 1959 I didn’t go to Cuba, because nobody from here was allowed to go to Cuba for both government, the Cuban government and the American government. Well, the Cuban government probably let people go to Cuba, but mostly the United States government did not give you permission to go at that time. But then after Jimmy Carter become president, he got a little warmed up to Cuba and they opened a Cuba United States Interests Section in Havana and Cuba [U.S. Citizen Services Unit], opened a section in Washington [D.C.]. So they let the people—they let the Cubans travel to Cuba at that time.

So in 1980 I went to Cuba, in April in 1980, and it was the first time since 1953 when I come to Tampa that I went to Cuba. No, I went to Cuba in 1954 for a honeymoon (laughter), and since that time I did not go back to Cuba until 1980. I took Rhonda, my oldest daughter. And we went to Cuba and visited people that we know. I don’t have a chance to see Fidel Castro, but I see him at one time in a Hilton hotel far away, but I don’t get close to him. That was the only time I saw him, and I went to Cuba only that time.

MB: Did you see family? You had family in Cuba?

RV: Yeah, I saw my family. They live in the same house where I was born. And I see my friend, I see Gabriel Gil, I saw Gabriel Gil, and I see a lot of places. And people were enthusiastic, yet in Cuba at that time.

MB: Yes, it was still the good years.
RV: And (laughter).

MB: Were you happy to see the country?

RV: Well, I was very happy to come back to Cuba, because it was many years that I didn’t go to Cuba. My daughter love what she saw, the country, the people, we’re a warm people, and we don’t get involved in any activity. We see Gabriel Gil that he was working for the government and a few other people, and he showed me the new construction that the government were doing for people, and things like that. He took me to Parque Lenin. I don’t know, you went to Parque Lenin.

MB: Parque Lenin, si, yes.

RV: And it was pretty good.

MB: And was that your last visit to Cuba?

RV: That was my last time I have been to Cuba. I didn’t go anymore. And then my two sisters that were still there. They were the only family, so they decided to come.

MB: They are here now?

RV: They are here now.

MB: In Tampa?

RV: No, in Fort Lauderdale. So they were my last two relatives that were in there. So I got no reason to go down to Cuba, unless, you know, I want to see Cuba again. I would probably do it, but now it’s hard because Mr. Bush [George W. Bush] laws that he don’t let people go to Cuba.

MB: Every three years.

RV: Every three years. So I didn’t go anymore, but I want to go to Cuba again. My grandson went to Cuba about three years ago, no more than three years before Bush come with his law. He went in connection with the university he was going.

MB: Oh, wonderful.

RV: Yes. Some work over there. He loved Cuba.

MB: Everybody loves Cuba who gets to travel there.

RV: Yeah.
MB: Well, that was great. Thank you so much for your memories, your life story. It is a very important chapter in our history.

RV: Well, you are welcome. I am sorry I cannot explain in a better way because my mind is not as clear as when I was twenty or thirty.

MB: It’s very sharp. I know it is not easy to translate to—

RV: I write down a lot of things that I can remember. So I write it down not to forget.

MB: And we’re glad that you stole all those documents from the office (laughter) which we’re now going to copy and have here.

RV: I am pleased that you had me to do this. Very pleased to be a part of this.

MB: It was really our pleasure.

RV: And any time you need me, I’m ready.

MB: The Center is the study of Florida history and people’s history and Tampa’s history, and so your story is a wonderful addition to the studies collection.

RV: I am glad to be a part of this story.

MB: Yes, it is great to have you and thank you so much.

RV: Okay. You’re welcome.

*end of interview*