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Eugenio Rodriguez oral history interview by Gary Mormino and Gayla Jamison, July 6, 1984

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Gary Mormino: Today is the sixth of July, 1984, and I’m talking to Mr. Francisco Rodriguez at his home in West Tampa, Mr. Rodriguez—

Eugenio Rodriguez: Francisco was my father.

GM: Okay. Your name is—I’m sorry—

ER: My name is Eugene.

GM: Eugene. Okay. Mr. Rodriguez, could you tell me something about your grandparents?

ER: My what?

GM: Your grandparents?

ER: My grandparents. Well, the one that I really knew well was my mother's mother. She died when she was ninety-six years old.

GM: Oh, my.

ER: She was from the Canary Islands.

GM: Uh huh. She was Isleño.

ER: But my grandfather on my mother's side died when she was a kid. Well, on my father's side, my grandmother—of course I was there when I was seventeen, and I met her, but I didn't meet my grandfather because he had already died.
GM: Um-hm. Right.

ER: He was seventy years old and my grandmother from Spain, she died of (inaudible) and this one that was my mother's mother, she died at ninety-six.

GM: What kind of work did they do in Spain? What occupation?

ER: The fields.

GM: They were farmers?

ER: Farmers. They live in the—well, they have a pretty big farm because of work. See, when it comes to knowing all the dates and places up there in the mountains, you calculate you know, how much you're going to get when the old man dies. Well, my father got a thousand dollars and there were nine kids. They were pretty healthy. They have several fields, about thirteen or fourteen head of cattle.

But my grandmother left that little village, I believe since she married my grandfather, and the same happened with my uncle. The only one that left the area were two other brothers, you know, and three of them, but the rest of them, they were born and died in the same little village.

GM: What was the name of that village?

ER: Las Villas.

GM: Las Villas. Okay, and was that in Asturias or Galicia?

ER: Was a real small village. What?

GM: Asturias or Galicia?

ER: Asturias, no. Asturias.

GM: Asturias.

ER: Galicia is farther west, you know, because Asturias you know—and Galicia is another province. You know, we have forty-nine provinces in Spain.

GM: And they all speak—

ER: They speak a different dialect. Course the main language is Spanish, but they talk their own dialect and the Asturiano is the more intelligent, you see, cause the Gallegos, they have the (inaudible). I couldn’t understand a word.

GM: Uh-huh.
ER: And the Catalonians and Biscays. In the southern part of Spain is where they speak better language, you know. In Valencia and Seville, they have more, better Spanish. Of course in the school they speak Spanish, in all the schools—but everybody, they speak their own dialect in the little towns. Sometimes from one province to another you don't know what they are talking about. The Catalonians, they have a kind of dialect that is hard to understand and the Galicians are the same. Or *Gallegos*, they call them. They are really, you know—

GM: Tell me something about Las Villas, what kind of town it was. Was it a village or a town, or how many people lived there?

ER: I don't believe there were four hundred people, and the (inaudible) of being a (inaudible) the people leave off their work. Once in a while they may sell a young cow or something—you know, for the clothes—but outside in those days, they live out of the work, working in the field you know. Raising corn and wheat and all the things that are, and wool. It was a very simple life. Of course I remember that well, although it was a long time ago, when I came from there; that was in 1916. I came in 1917. That's quite a few years ago.

GM: Well, we'll talk about that in just a second. In Las Villas, were there any churches?

ER: Churches? Yeah, there was the main church because there were three small towns, one on each side.

GM: What were the names of the towns?

ER: Oh, one of the towns was Noceda.

GM: No—?

ER: N-o-c-e-d-a.

GM: Noceda, okay.

ER: Noceda. And the other one, Tolinas.

GM: Tolinas.

ER: Tolinas. (inaudible) Tolinas. That was—well, those two small towns, they used to come to us, because that's where there was a church.

PS: What was the name of the church?

ER: I don't know. You know, every of those little towns in Asturias, they have what is called a patron. Well, in the little town next to—to the east, that is Noceda—it was St.
Anthony, and the place where I was it was Corpus Christi. In Las Villas it was Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi, they have a feast for about a week, you know. All those little towns, when the patron come, they have a feast for at least a week.

GM: Right, right.

ER: I enjoy pretty well until they told me that I had to work. I didn't like the idea of working in the fields over there.

GM: How old were you when they told you that?

ER: In the summer—in the winter time it's all right because you start about eight o'clock in the morning, and later after three in the afternoon it's almost dark. But in the summertime (inaudible) ten o'clock is, and in the morning, three o'clock, it's already daylight. You know, you come to look at geography, Spain is parallel with the state of New York. But I think it's a little farther north than New York, so naturally, the summers are very long and the winters are very short. And—

GM: Where was—

ER: —and just working the field, I—

GM: Was Las Villas in the mountains?

ER: What's that?

GM: Was Las Villas in the mountains?

ER. They had very nice stretches of wood earth and—

GM: Blue earth?

ER: They had the best wheat in the world in there. The wheat, they raised the wheat and they raised the corn. They farmed the potatoes and the greens, you know. We had a little garden there that is always—we planted with vegetables, see, and had the potatoes and the collard greens and believe me, that is what we ate. There was not much meat.

GM: How about sidra? Sidra?

ER: Cómo?

GM: The cider, the apple wine, the apple cider?

ER: Oh, well, every one of them is very (inaudible) they have several apple trees and believe me, they make a quite a few gallons of—bottles of cider, and not sweet, our cider. You can (inaudible) Yeah. Believe me, I used to go at night and have two or three bottles
of that cider, and it was just very strong because they don't (inaudible). Just as soon as it is made, they let it ferment, and when a certain time of the year comes in the fall, then it has fermented enough. And then they start to drink, play cards at night and drink. Drink beer.

GM: What about the *gaita*, the bagpipes?

ER: Oh, the *gaita*. Well, the *gaita* is the main instrument when they dance the *jota* or the (inaudible), whatever they call it, and use tambourines, you know. Usually the girls play the tambourine and sing and dance and dancing in a square. And the main dances were what they called the *jotas*. Or there's another one that goes round and you know, everybody goes round. And then that one, they call him—

GM: *Zarzuela*?

ER: No, no, no, no. I just mentioned the name right now and then I forgot it. Well, I hope that it (inaudible) and the girls are the music. They sing and they play the tambourine.

GM: The tambourine?

ER: Yes, and they dance. And they have a very good time.

GM: What about the history of the village in terms of Spanish history? What about the Moors and Asturias?

ER: Oh, well, let me tell you. I think they did much damage with Franco than they did before that. And then you know, the Moors, you get so far as Asturias. You know, Asturias is a very, very mountainous country. You hardly find a level space and you go up or down—unless in the mountains there are valleys, where they have the grass for the stock. Where they graze and then in the summertime, you know, they cut the grass and they clear the reeds and that's where—that's the way of living.

In other words, you take my grandmother. I think that when she got in that house—and you know the houses there, they are like fortresses. The walls are about that thick.

GM: What are they made of?

ER: Oh, the bricks, they are made about that big, and I think a cannon can hardly blow down one of those old houses—but of course, I am talking about seventy years ago or more. In a way, you know—if I came back here to Tampa right away, I went to Chicago. I am never wanting to (inaudible) about going back there, and then my father married another woman and we didn't like the idea because we were (inaudible).

GM: Why?

ER: No matter how nice the other woman may be, but there is always the stepmother
idea. Once I was not here when she came back—cause they went back to Spain in 1920—was already fifty-two or fifty-three, and then he met this other woman and he married her and he have four little kids with her. When he die, the youngest one was twenty-four and already have children.

GM: Um hm. Right.

ER: He live a long life.

GM: When did—how old were you when you first heard of Cuba or Tampa? Was there a long history in your village of people—

ER: When I came over here, I was—they brought me when I was six months old.

GM: Six months old.

ER: In 1900.

GM: You came to Cuba or Tampa?

ER: Tampa.

GM: From Las Villas.

ER: Yes, and my father married in Havana, Cuba, see? And he was here in Tampa the first time in 1893 or something like that.

GM: Uh huh. And his name was Francisco?

ER: And you know, it meant you almost had to go to Port Tampa, get the boat and go there, the same as if you went to another part of town. And naturally—and when he got married, it was the Spanish-American War in those days. See, ninety-seven [1897] he got married, ninety-eight [1898] was the war, and I was born in ninety-nine [1899]. And—

GM: You were born in 1899?

ER: Eighteen ninety-nine. October.

GM: Where?

ER: What?

GM: Where were you born?

ER: I was born in Havana, Cuba, but they brought me here when I was six months old. I have a picture that was taken on Franklin Street when the sidewalks were made of boards.
My father could have bought a half a dozen lots on Franklin Street for fifty dollars, but he didn't have intelligence enough to, or you know—Not exactly; they were not thinking, you know, about money. But if they would have thought about money, they would have owned half of Franklin Street. Fifty dollars for the lot.

GM: What'd your father do in Tampa? As far as—well, let's get first, what did your father do in Havana?

ER: My father went to Havana in 1889. He left Spain when he was twenty years old. And he came to Havana in 1889. And then as I said, you know, he came here in 1901, by tugboat. And we live here ever since. Outside from me going to Chicago, but the rest of the family, they live here most of their lives.

GM: Now, how do you know so much about Las Villas?

ER: Eh?

GM: How do you know about Las Villas?

ER: Garcia?

GM: No, Las Villas in Asturias.

ER: What do I know about it?

GM: Yeah, I mean, but how? Did you live there as a young boy?

ER: I live there in my grandmother's house.

GM: Okay, but you were born in Havana.

ER: I was born in Havana. See, my father got married in Havana and my mother was born there. But my grandmother was born in the Canary Islands.

GM: Right, right, right. But when did you live in Spain?

ER: In Spain?

GM: Yeah.

ER: When did I live in—wait. Now, I went to Spain in 1915, and we live there for two years in that little town. In that little town, as I said, if there were thirty houses there were too many. There was about four hundred people.

GM: Okay, I've got my chronology. Was your father a cigar maker?
ER: Oh, yeah.

GM: How did he learn the trade?

ER: That was the main way of making your living right here in this town up to about 1920. Right here in West Tampa alone there was about ten or twelve cigar factories. Some of them used to employ—oh, five hundred people. Everything was handmade. And in Ybor City, the same. There was hardly no other kind of trade in this town. They used to call it the cigar city. Tampa was called the cigar city because it was known all over for that.

GM: Didn't he make cigars in Havana?

ER: No.

G: No. What did he do in Havana?

ER: No. When I went to Spain, I was about fifteen. I was learning the trade and my father, I got a kind of a (inaudible). He got a notion to send me to the mountains, so I went to Havana because there I had my grandmother and my grandmother's two sister, and they (inaudible).

GM: In Havana.

ER: They'd have a dry goods store. Another one, they had what they called a bazaar. Another one have a (inaudible). Spanish, how you call that, what the Spanish—small, small bank of Spain in Havana. And they were all three well off. My father used to go there almost every year, because in those days you only have to go to Port Tampa, get in the boat, go over there, come back next day or next week. There was no red tape of going or coming out of these towns. Now you have to have passports, and—well, I don't know. I don't know about now because I have been living steady here since 1917. Who can tell that easy because I go by the year. Eighty-four [1984], I’m eighty-four; eighty-five [1985], I’m eighty-five, only a couple of months early. You know, I was born in October, you see.

Gayla Jamison: October what?

ER: Sixteenth.

GJ: Sixteenth. My son was born on October sixteenth!

ER: Really?

GJ: Yes. Johnny, yes.

GM: What kind of work did your father do? Cigar maker?
ER: That's all.

GM: How did he learn the trade?

ER: He learn it in Havana.

GM: How?

ER: Well, how, in the cigar factory. And you know, in those days, you have to—the apprenticeship was three years and they didn't used to pay you a cent. They only give you room and board. In Havana. Well, that's where he learned the trade. As I said—and then you take, for instance, in 1900 cigar factories tried to come to Tampa. And for, oh, for about twenty years, he was known all over the United States. Tampa make cigars world-famous, cause in those days it was all handmade. It was no machine, no nothing.

GM: Um hm. And what type of work did he do with cigars?

ER: Well, as you know, when you do it by hand, you do all—the whole thing, you do it by hand.

GM: He never became a selector?

ER: There is no machine, there is no molds, there is nothing. Now, of course they don't; there is no handmade now. Everything is made by machine.

GM: Did he ever become a selector or a buncher?

ER: Well, yes. He proceeded to take the packers. They are the ones that find the cigars and select it, you know, by color and by braids and then, that is (inaudible) and then the selectors select. This outside wrapper is done by a selector. But now everything is done mechanically, you see. And cigars, you have to learn to take piece by piece and mold it in your hand until—it was kind of—don't think that it took—it took pretty long to learn the trade. For that very reason they used to—three years right here.

The manufacturers were Spanish and they were the cheapest businessmen there is. They never give out presents or nothing free. They were not that kind of people took over the trade and they were more generous. They used to do the New Year’s or Christmas, but the Spaniards, the only thing they used to do is fire you, maybe when you need it most. But they were really—they were very bad employers, very bad.

GM: Did your father belong to Centro Asturiano de Havana?

ER: Well, he belonged here into Centro Asturiano because he belonged to the Centro in Havana, cause you know those Centros in Havana, they are very well—you know, they are what you call mutual—
GM: Mutual aid?

ER: Mutual societies. Just to help the ones who need it. Just imagine, for the dollar a month you used to get hospital and the doctor, everything. Even here forty years ago. A dollar and a half a month, you used to get medical care, hospital, if you were there two months or one day. And you need an operation, anything. Only for one dollar and a half a month. Well, right now through the Centro Español, cause I belong to the Centro Español, I pay nine dollars a month, and I get sick and I go there and it don't cost me a cent.

GM: Right, yeah.

ER: And then of course you know they are under Medicare, you see. And they are even better off than before, because now they charge Medicare for my staying there, so—

GM: What do you remember about growing up in Tampa? Where did you live?

ER: Well, the only thing I remember when I went to school and we would play ball all the time, when I could. You see, we go to school. First I went to Spanish school.

GM: Which one?

ER: Oh, that don't exist for the last hundred years. (laughs) And you know, and then when we learned the Spanish—that was about eight years old—we were—my father sent us to the convent. To the Catholic school. But there the nuns try to get too finicky—

GM: What was that, the nuns what?

ER: Too finicky.

GM: Too finicky?

ER: He took us from the convent and send to what we used to call the free school.

GM: The free school. The Ybor school.

ER: Used to call it in those days free school, cause we didn't pay nothing and the convent, my father used to pay fifty cents for each kids. And that was plenty in those days, in 1908 and 1909. That was plenty.

GM: Where did you live in Ybor City? What was your address? Your first home?

ER: The first home was right in West Tampa.

GM: West Tampa. So you came to West Tampa.
ER: When I—what I remember only since I was three years old, something like that, that there was a big fire, and it burned half of it down from Howard [Avenue] up to the woods and then to the woods right around there. It was very unpopulated. They were building what they called Santaella Factory. They were building the factory then. I remember it so well that if I close my eyes I could see the smoke. And it was in 1903\(^1\).

GM: Nineteen aught-three, wow.

ER: Well, that's the reason one of my sisters died. Cause she was the baby; my mother was breast-feeding her and maybe her milk went bad or something. Anyway, she got sick and died.

GJ: She was the twin?

ER: No. No, they ones that are twins are the two first ones. And then I was the third, and then was this one, my sister—

GJ: What was her name?

ER: Elena. And then this other baby that died. And my father got kind of sick, and there were seven of us and he have that—he didn't have it. His father had that house in Spain, you know, for the last two or three hundred years, I imagine. And he was—the doctor say, "Well, Frank, I don't believe you'd live six months," and he got scared with seven in the family, cause there was my mother, my grandmother and four kids and himself, so they took us to Spain in 1904 or five [1905].

GJ: All of you?

ER: All of us. Seven of us. And then it was there—we got there in April and we came back in September. He got well and he told his father that he was coming back to Tampa. And his father—my grandfather—he didn't want him to come because you know, my father didn't like the idea to raise those kids in that little town. Town was a village—I guess there might have been thirty or forty houses, you know, and then he was—in 1905; that was a long time ago, and I remember it pretty well. I remember pretty well when I went, because you know, your mind is very present when you are young. And you remember things like they happened last week. Cause they stay in your mind like a photograph.

GM: And when did you return to Tampa? Did you return to Cuba, or Tampa?

ER: No, no. We came back—well, we arrived, you know, when you go from here to Spain, you go to Cuba, to Havana, to take the boat to get to Spain. When you come back, come back to Cuba and then you come back here. We went up there in 1904 and we came back here in 1906.

\(^1\) The fire actually took place on April 4, 1904.
GM: Um hm. To West Tampa?

ER: Yeah, the whole family. We bought a house right here on Chestnut Street. We bought a house on Chestnut Street; that was where my brother Joe was born. And Eloina. Those two were born there, and there's where my mother died.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins

GM: When—do you remember some of the strikes? Do you remember the 1910 strike in West Tampa? La Huelga de—

ER: The one that I remember well is the 1910. Used to call it the seven-month strike. And then when I left here in 1919, then there was another strike in the twenties [1920s], and that strike was ten months old. It was a question, and if it wasn't for those strikes, I think most of the industry would still be here. Cause you know, they could not make enough cigars. There was the strike breakers—and you know in those days, to call a person strike worker was the worst thing you can call, and you watch out for the recognition of the union. For now they have the union because the government let them have it, see. Otherwise there would be no union, and if they won't have been those strikes, I think the industry would still be well established here.

GM: What was West Tampa like during the 1910 strike?

ER: (inaudible) were paid. I think the only—the best paid was usually on Main Street. Then the other ones, they were not even paid. I remember a kid, eight, nine, ten years old, the cars used to pass in front of the house of the boy. It was Mormon, they were Mormons and they used to go to Blue Field when Blue Field was a big forest. They used to go ahead and shoot deers in there, and they used to come and pass the Sunday afternoon with a deer on the side of the car and you know—

GM: During that 1910 strike, two people were hanged during the strike. Do you remember that? During a disturbance.

ER: Yeah, that was [Angelo] Albano.


ER: Ficarrotta, yes.

GM: Do you remember that?

ER: Well, of course I remember that. They—you know there was what they called a citizen's committee. They used to go with (inaudible) separate cars they used to have. Each one of them have a big rifle in their hand to scare the peoples, and they said that they were the instigator of that strike, Ficarrotta and Albano. They were two nice persons.
And they shoot them and then they hang them, the bodies. Of course, they shoot them and then they hang them. It appeared that they were hanged, but they were really shot.

GM: Did your father take part in the strike?

ER: No, my father was neutral. No, my father stayed home for seven months. (inaudible) in those days. And most of the grocery stores, they were owned, you know, by Cubans or nice families, and they used to give credit to the people all (inaudible) and there was no way of getting the money from the place. The only thing that I was lucky that my father bought that house, although in those days they had no use or reason for that one or that one. They used to pay three dollars a week rent. In those days, 1910, my father already owned a house so we didn't have to pay no rent. But we used to eat a lot of beans, and then the beans were pretty cheap in those days.

GM: When did you—what was your first job?

ER: My what?

GM: Your first job.

ER: My first job? The cigar factory.

GM: How old were you?

ER: Well, about thirteen.

GM: Thirteen, uh huh. How'd you get a job?

ER: Well, I got the job through my father knew a foreman and they give me the job. They didn't have to pay me anyhow. And we kids used to do all the cleaning after everybody went away. There were four, five hundred people working. We used to use the broom, clean the place for nothing and then when we start to make the cigars, it was possible that he used to pay us nothing. They didn't have to pay the kids.

GM: What factory did you apprentice at?

ER: I first went to Santaella.

GM: Santaella, just up the street, yeah.

ER: You know, that was one of the biggest factories here once upon a time. That was one of the biggest factories. And then there was Garcia y Vega—there was about ten of them.

GM: Bustillo? What was your first paycheck? How much do you remember you made?

ER: How much when they start to pay me? They used to pay me four dollars for one
GM: Yeah, and how many could you make a week?

ER: Well, I used to make about two dollars or something.

GM: Uh huh, were you a cigar maker—

ER: Four dollars for a thousand, forty cents for a hundred. As I say, they were very cheap employers.

GM: Were you a good cigar maker?

ER: What?

GM: Were you a fast cigar maker? Were you a fast cigar maker?

ER: Fast? Well, when I wanted to, I used to work pretty fast. I would make around fifty dollars a week in the twenties [1920s]. I was bringing in good money in those days, a pretty good salary. Then I was in Chicago till 1941. Nineteen nineteen [1919], the end of the last war—I mean the first, World War I, I went there. You know, I like to be independent (inaudible) and live by myself.

GM: Why Chicago? Why did you go to Chicago?

ER: Well, it just happened that I knew—my father knew a fellow, an Italian fellow that he used to live in Chicago. Then he came home to Tampa to visit his family. But this Italian fellow used to live there with his wife, and in those days, 1919 in April, came one of these little strikes, cause there were many strikes in those days. Some of them used to last a month or so, others two months, others one week. And this fellow said, "Listen, how you like to go to Chicago?" Sure, I liked, but I didn't have the money.

So I play bolita—you know what bolita is—and it happened that I got a number three and number thirteen. And number three came out. I have seventy-five cents, suddenly I got sixty-seven dollars. If it wasn't for that, I would have never come to Chicago. My father would have never given me the money to go there, and then I was making around twenty dollars a week. You know you save twenty, it doesn't look (inaudible) but you knew you have to (inaudible).

In those days you could buy a good pound of filet, you know, for twenty cents a pound. The Spanish steak was fifteen cents, a pound of rice was five cents, and a pound of beans was five cents or four cents. Gee, I remember we used to make what they called the list every week, and they used to bring two baskets full of groceries for three or four dollars. Now you go to the store with a twenty dollar bill, and you hardly buy anything and you don't hardly have enough to pay. Things are terribly, terribly high. People don't realize that because they (inaudible) in those days. Just (inaudible) a pound of good steak or
chops, fifteen cents a pound.

GM: When you were working at the factory, do you remember los lectores? Un lector. The reader.

GJ: The readers, the lectores. The readers.

GM: Un lector.

ER: Un lector, yes, yes. We had lectores. We used to have lectores in every factory here. And they used to read from half past ten—no, from ten o'clock to three o'clock. First they give what you might call the world news, and I remember reading the First World War in 1914, and (inaudible).

GM: Uh huh.

ER: I (inaudible).

GM: What else would they read?

ER: Anyway, you know. What was I saying?

GM: About what he would read, the world news in the morning—

ER: Yeah, the world news. Then they used to have a translator that used to translate from the English paper to Spanish. And that was about for forty-five minutes, and then in the afternoon, they have three turns of novels. You know, any kind of novel. You don't notice, in (inaudible) hundred percent of their novels were in Spanish. Well, got those and most every part; they used to read Cervantes, you know. Don Quixote.

GJ: Oh, really?

ER: Yes.

GM: What was your favorite?

ER: Well, let me tell you. They were a good many—many good Spanish authors in those days. There was one by the name of Galdós.

GM: [Benito] Pérez Galdós.

ER: That was very good writing. And of course, Cervantes was known, Don Quixote, you know. I would have read many more novels by him. And then they would translate for French writers. That was the main—(inaudible), Les Misérables, you know. Like Victor Hugo and [Guy de] Maupassant and this other one, The Songs of the People—Eugène Sue, he was a very good writer. The Songs of the People, they used to call that, you
know, you have a novel that goes back to three thousand before Christ and—

GM: Did they also read radical literature? You know, [Mikhail] Bakunin and [Karl] Marx? A lot of people think the readers were socialists, anarchists.

ER: Well, you know, they were sometimes— They were kind of socialistic, but that doesn't mean the reader have to read what the people like. And they used to read for a quarter a week, each. Well, if there were a hundred people in the shop, there were a hundred quarters. Well, there was one that used to read in Santaella where there were seven hundred people; that fellow used to make—

GM: What was his name?

ER: (inaudible).

GM: Do you remember his name?

ER: Escobar.

GM: Escolar?

ER: E-s-c-o-b-a-r. Escobar.

GM: Do you remember Oparicio?

ER: Oparicio, sure, I remember him. He was an amateur actor. He was a pretty—and you know the best part of those lectores, when they read a novel and it was a woman talking, an old man, they used to imitate everyone.

You take (inaudible), it was a Spanish writer that the cigar makers used to like his way of writing. He came to Tampa in 1904, and they were reading one of his novels in the factory, and he was surprised how well that reader interpreted his writing. He was raised in Spain, but he was born in Cuba. They had—I wish I, (inaudible) read any of them you know, and you will know his name. I forgot his name at this moment. But he was really prolific writer. And then there was a Spanish writer born in Asturias, and most of the things he writes, you know, was about the little towns—oh, and the way, real good, you know, the way they used to kneel and (inaudible) and everything.

There was hardly a feast over there in Asturias that didn't end with sticks. It was how they won: half a dozen came out with a big head the next day, fighting. And that was all right, before they start to introduce the gun. And that was worse. Cause before they go, and there was a knife or the stick, but when the gun—the gun was different. The gun was more dangerous. Yeah, I remember every feast always end in a fight. You know, wine, (inaudible) pour the wine, drink it, and they used to get pretty high.

GM: Do you remember the opening in 1912 of Centro Español on Howard Avenue?
ER: Of course I remember it.

GM: Did you go to it?

ER: Sure. And I went to dances in there. And I remember when the Cuesta school was opened. That the first school, the biggest one that used to be in those days in West Tampa. The school is what I mean. I remember Cuesta school. I think they tore it down.

GM: Yes.

ER: They tore it down. I don't see why, cause it was not so old.

GM: What was the opening of—?

ER: I don't know; it was opened in 1912.

GM: What was the Centro Español like here? On Howard Avenue?

ER: The Centro Español, they build that about the same time they build the one in Ybor City.

GM: Right, 1912.

ER: And you take the Centro Asturiano in Ybor City, the old Centro Asturiano was burned, burned down. That was in 1906 or seven [1907], and they build this one building they have now. That building is there now.

GM: Did you go to a lot of dances there?

ER: Oh, I used to go to the dances there. Now I don't. Before I went to Spain, I didn't go much to them, because I was only a kid, and then I learned to dance and used to go there. And then every Sunday they used to have a stage show. Every Sunday. And my father used to take all four kids to the stage show. Well, we used to love—and especially the comedians, you know. Well, the comedians came out, you know, you're ten, eleven, twelve years old, and my father, just because they were what they call "social functions," you know, and that didn't cost nothing. You just have to show your receipt.

Then the theatre used to get full and the people used to like stage shows, but you know, in those days, the moving pictures were really not so hot and we'd rather go to the stage show than see a moving picture. And then when the movies start to come here, I remember we were ten, eleven years old. My father used to give a dime: a nickel for the show, a nickel for peanuts. And we kids used to go there at six o'clock and the pictures used to last maybe a half hour. We used to see the picture two or three times before they'd shoo us out. They'd tell us to get the heck out of there. That was—they didn't have moving pictures here in West Tampa. Real men. And then when West Tampa burned
down in 1917, started hitting the corner of Howard and Main [Street], a fellow have a drugstore and next to the drugstore there was a moving picture. Now there is none. But you know, now people have more money, they don’t even pay to go to the movies. You can stay home and watch television.

GM: What about *Buenas Noches*?

ER: What?

GM: *Buenas Noches*.

ER: *Buenas Noches*?

GM: Uh huh. When you were a young boy, what was it like?

ER: *Buenas Noches? Buenas noches* means "good night."

GM: What?

ER: *Buenas noches* means "good night."

GM: No, the Christmas Eve—I'm sorry, the Christmas Eve celebration.

ER: Oh, Christmas Eve?

GM: What do you call that?

ER: No, that is *felices* backwards. That is Merry Christmas. *Felices* backwards. And *Año Nuevo*. Merry Christmas and *Feliz Año Nuevo* is—

GM: What would your family do Christmas Eve for celebration?

ER: That was the best night of the whole damn year. We stay for the midnight dinner, you see. And we kids would drop in the chair, on the chair asleep, you know, but gee, we wait till eleven o'clock and finally, then wait till twelve and then start to put down the chickens and the *lechón*. Do you know what the *lechón* is?

GM: Pork, uh-huh.

ER: Yeah, suckling pig. That was the main dish for the Spanish and Cubans. Even now, *Noche Buena*—we didn't know what Christmas was. We didn't celebrate Christmas. It was *Noche Buena*.

GM: Where would it be held? At your house?

ER: *Buenas noches. Noche Buena*. 
GM: *Noche Buena*.

ER: But *Noche Buena* is one thing and *buenas noches* is another. *Noche Buena* is the right evening or the good evening or the good night. You know, on account of his birth, the birth of Christ or something. Or what I call it.

GM: Was your family religious?

ER: Well, not so much. Although we went to the convent and we take communion and all that kind of monkey business, but after we grow up—and in the factory especially, they didn't believe in that monkey business.

GM: Why?

ER: Because not—you take Émile Zola, you know he always wrote against religion.

GM: Who is this?

ER: Émile Zola.

GM: Okay, Zola, okay.

ER: Émile Zola. And he was a very good writer, but you know, he was anti-religious. You know, he have a novel by the name of *Fecundity*.

GM: What was the name of it?

ER: *Fecundity*.

GM: *Fecundity*, okay.

ER: Well, the name of that is because there was a fellow that was a priest and when he realized what religion meant, he got out and got married. And he had—I don't know, he had ten or twelve or fourteen kids. That's the reason the novel's name is *Fecundity*. Or we used to read *Tierra*. You know, that's another novel. *Earth* is the name of it. Oh, he had many good novels. I know more about French authors than I know about English. And I like to read; you take many of those French authors were very good, very popular in Spain.

GM: What about the church in Ybor City in West Tampa. Did it have much influence?

ER: They have I think a convent; the convent is right here somewhere like this. My (inaudible) is a convent and a church. You know, I think of people here, they are not so religious. Like me, I have never been in a church since I left Spain. And then I go to hell because my grandmother pushed us. She watch over us. You know, I remember she say,
"How you people can get along if you don’t pray?” and I said, "Well, Grandmother, I know how to pray. You know I pray. I don't know how to pray in Spanish. I know how to pray in English. Our Father, who art in heaven." And when I finish, she said, "I cannot understand how God can understand that kind of lingo." (laughs) For her, the only language God could understand was her language, and Asturiano about that. (inaudible)

GM: When you were growing up as a young man, did you consider yourself Spanish or Cuban?

ER: You know, let me tell you, we kids used to grow up in the kind of atmosphere that we didn't believe much in those things. We didn't believe in being Cuban or being Spanish. Although, you know, when Italiano we used to call, "Hey, hey, you macaronis." Call each other names, see, but when it comes to being subject towards any kind of nationality, we never worried about it, because you know.

GM: If someone had asked you—

ER: Somehow you know even now, I don't give a damn about it because I believe that the (inaudible) the miracle or a happening that just happened, that's all. You are not for us, you are not (inaudible) to come or nothing. They just preach it, and that is a reason. And then we used to read a lot of these how you call open-minded writers, see, that didn't believe much in religion or tradition, cause for them had to be (inaudible) have the best way to making more money, see. And the more patriotic they are, sometime the more crooked they are. Otherwise they would find no crooked patriots. Let me tell you, find a congressman, somebody that is deep in politics (inaudible) the only reason.

GM: When you were growing up, how did the different groups get along? First of all, what were the major groups who were living in West Tampa when you were growing up? Ethnic groups.

ER: The library—

GM: No, no, who lived in West Tampa? Italians and Cubans and Spaniards?

ER: Oh, well, the majority of them, once upon a time, they were Cubans and Spaniards. Then when that thing happened in New Orleans that—I don't know if you remembered it or not—that the Italian got too strong in there and they went ahead and they (inaudible) there and they start to come to Tampa. Italians who were here in 1914, they used to come from Louisiana.

GM: From where?

ER: From Louisiana.

GM: Louisiana.
ER: They used to call it Lousy-anna. Yeah. (laughs)

GM: So there were a lot of Italians in West Tampa?

ER: As I said, they used to come by bunches. When they went ahead and got rid of—you know, like what happened in New York that they got so strong that they kill the chief of police and they (inaudible) plenty of them. Well, the same thing happened in New Orleans. The chief of police (inaudible) got murdered because the Italians were pretty strong, you know, when it comes to—

GM: Yeah.

ER: You know. And they went ahead and they start to lynch a few of them and they start to come by the bunches.

GM: How did the Cubans and Spaniards and Italians get along here?

ER: Well, let me tell—you take the Italians and you take the Spanish. They are more intelligent than the Spaniards, because there was hardly an Italian that came here that didn't know how to speak Spanish. Well, it's because the factories were owned by Spaniards and they'd learn their language quick, and then it's easier for an Italian to learn Spanish—just the same as it would be for the Spaniard to, but we were used to speak Spanish just as good as Spanish. (inaudible) then you know in Spanish, you take I was in Chicago for twenty-two years and there is a hundred Spanish. They have a place to meet and they don't speak any other language but Spanish. Spanish. That's the only thing they speak. You take all the nationalities like the Polish and the (inaudible), they come and right away, they are anxious learned the language. But the Spaniards, there were Spaniards here for forty years they (inaudible), and the only word my father knew was "go to hell," or something like that.

GJ: Your father didn't speak English?

ER: Huh?

GJ: Your father didn't speak English?

ER: No, not a word.

GJ: Oh, my goodness.

ER: When we kids started to go to school and learn English, we used to speak English at the table. . .

end of interview