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Wilfredo Rodriguez oral history interview by Gary Mormino and Gayla Jamison, May 23, 1984

Wilfredo Rodriguez (Interviewee)
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Gary Mormino: My name is Gary Mormino, and today is May 23, 1984. Gayla Jamison and I have the pleasure of talking to Mr. Wilfredo Rodriguez. Mr. Rodriguez, can you tell me something about your family background? Who your father and grandfather were.

WR: Well, I have to give names.

GM: Oh, certainly, uh huh.

WR: The name of my father was Francisco. Do you know how to spell it?

GM: Sí.

WR: F-r-a-n-c-i-s-c-o.

GM: Right.

WR: Francisco Rodriguez. My mother's name was Maria Luisa Rodriguez. My father was a reader in the cigar factory.

GM: He was a lector, uh huh.

WR: Yeah, and we came to this country when I was a year young.

GM: Uh huh, and what year were you born, then?

WR: I was born in Havana, Cuba.

GM: Uh huh, in what year?

WR: You must ask me a question that's more easy for me to answer your question.
GM: Okay, what year were you born?

WR: In Havana, Cuba.

GM: Yes, okay.

**Gayla Jamison:** ¿En que año?

WR: Yeah, yeah.

GJ: ¿En que año?

WR: In 1901.

GM: In 1901, uh huh.

WR: July 5th, 1901. One day after the fourth of July.

GM: Okay, tell me something you remember about Havana. What district you lived in, in Havana. Your neighborhood, growing up in Cuba.

WR: In Cuba—well, I can't remember very much. I was too young, you see.

GM: Yes. What factory did your father work in in Havana, do you remember?

WR: In Havana? One was the name by Henry Clay.

GM: Henry Clay Factory.

WR: Cigar factory, that was one. The other one was Partagás. P-a-r-t-a-g-a-s. Partagás Cigar Factory, and the other one was Romeo and Julieta. Romeo and Julieta.

GM: Uh huh. Yes. Very good. What street?

WR: That I couldn't remember.

GM: Was your father a cigar maker then, or was he a lector there?

WR: No, no. He wasn't a cigar maker. He was—he worked reader in the cigar factory.

GM: How did he become a reader?

WR: How he become a reader?

GM: Um hm.
WR: Well, when he started out in the old country—

GM: Yes.

WR: Yeah. He went to the cigar factory, and you know how they used to be?

GM: No.

WR: Fellow reads something from the paper or story or something, and if the cigar maker like the way he read it, they make a votation and he was elected the cigar reader. The cigar factory reader.

GM: He must have had an education.

WR: Well, of course; he had to know how to read, how to write.

GM: You know how far he went in school?

WR: My father?

GM: Uh huh.

WR: I don't know.

GM: Yeah, right. Did you ever, as a young boy, go and hear him read?

WR: Who?

GM: When you were a young boy growing up, did you go watch your father read and listen to him?

WR: No, I never did, for he taught me how to do that at home. You know? I mean, how to read in the cigar factory, because I went to school here.

GM: Okay, okay. Was he involved in the revolution?

WR: No, no, no.

GM: The ten years war or the—

WR: No, nothing of that kind.

GM: How about José Martí and Antonio Maceo? Did he know them, or work with them?

WR: Well, he know like many other Cubans, knew them by name more than by picture or person. No relationship between them.
GM: Right. Why did he leave Cuba and come to Tampa?

WR: Well, there was a big strike of cigar maker in Cuba, and somebody from here write to him why he didn't come to Tampa. There was a good place here where he can develop his ability as a reader, you know? So he did that. He came out first, and then a few months later, we came. My mother and my brother and myself.

GM: Do you remember the voyage on the steamship?

WR: Yeah.

GM: And what was it like?

WR: Steamship Olivette.

GM: Olivette. Oh, yes. Very famous. What was it like leaving Cuba? Do you remember the voyage, anything about it?

WR: About my wife?

GM: About the voyage, the trip by ship. The Olivette.

WR: Yes, she came with me. I came with her.

GM: Yes, right, right. What were your—what'd you think of Tampa when you first saw it? Ybor City?

WR: Well, wasn't very—[it was in] very poor condition in those days, you know? But I think kid, I can't tell you much about that, you know. Well, I was reared in here and seems developing different way over the year. I went to school.

GM: What school?

WR: I went to the public school first.

GM: The public school, the free school

WR: And then I went to the Sacred Heart [Academy].

GM: Sacred Heart, yes.

WR: When Sacred Heart was located on First Avenue and Twiggs [Street], close to the cathedral.

GM: Yeah. How much schooling did you get? When did you quit school? What age?
WR: Well, you know, Sacred Heart stage, that was the last time I went to school. I stayed about two years.

GM: And when did you get your first job? How old were you?

WR: My first job, I was—well about—let's see—I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, with the Western Union, delivering telegrams.

GM: Oh, really?

WR: That was my first job. And after that, I became a reader, too. Cigar factory reader, and that's what I did for years, and when the reader—there was a big strike here, and the cigar manufacturer refused to have any more readers on the factories, so then I went to New York. I stay in New York for a few years.

GM: Let's go back just a little bit. How did you get a job as a reader? Did you first make cigars or roll cigars?

WR: No, no. As I told you before. You went to this factory, if—not only me; if you're a reader, make a—

GM: An audition?

WR: An audition, that's right, that's the right way. An audition at the cigar factory, and the cigar maker make a votation and choose the reader they want.

GM: Do you remember what you read to audition, what story?

WR: Oh, no. I can't remember that. (laughs)

GM: What factory was it?

WR: The one where—what's that?—factory in West Tampa by the name of Bustillo.

GM: Bustillo, uh huh.

WR: Bustillo Cigar Company.

GJ: When your father was teaching you how to be a lector, what did he tell you? How did he teach you? What kinds of things did he teach you?

WR: Well, he write before a piece of paper or book or something and I try to imitate him while he do it. You see? Like the way he told me, and not because I say to myself when I was pretty fair.
GJ: Did you—when you were reading a novela, did you—

WR: Novela, periódicos.

GM: Periódicos.

WR: Periódicos.

GM: Revistas.

WR: Local paper in those days; we had a paper here by the name of La Traducción. It make a traducción from the English—

GM: Translations.

WR: —paper, American paper, to the Spanish language, you see?

GJ: When you were reading the novelas, did you change your voice to become different characters?

WR: Oh, yeah, we had to do that. Of course, anybody can do that, see? Or we were supposed to—if there was a lady speaking, we were supposed to speak like a lady, or an old man, or children, a baby or a kid.

GM: Your father was a pretty famous lector, wasn't he?

WR: Yeah, he was.

GM: Wasn't he called El Mexicano?

WR: El Mexicano. Exactly. How do you know that?

GM: I think we talked once before. I don't know if you remember, but I've heard about your father, also. He was—

WR: My father was—my older brother, he was as good as my father, and I was not so good that they (inaudible) what I did.

GJ: Was it hard to—

WR: The last factory I read was in Carrera y Wodiska.

GM: What year was that?

WR: When they making the strike and the manufacturer refused to have any more readers.
GJ: What happened? Did the manufacturer come and tell you not to read any more?

WR: No, no, no, no.

GJ: What happened?

WR: When they make an arrangement with the people that we present the cigar maker, they put a (inaudible). "All right," I said, "what you want from him?" More, more money to labor? "No, we don't want any more readers in the factory," and the cigar maker accepted.

GJ: He accepted?

WR: He accepted.

GJ: Oh. They didn't go on strike?

WR: Because the strike—the last strike last about a month. It's a big time when people were separated to go to work.

GJ: Well, how did you know that you weren't supposed to read anymore? Who came and told you that you weren't supposed to read anymore?

WR: Nothing.

GJ: Nobody came to tell you?

WR: No. There weren't going to have any more reading, no lectores in the factory. No one at all. Because you know, the cigar maker has a union, you see, and the cigar factory owner has a union, too. So the union of the factory, they don't want any more readers in the factory.

GM: Some people have said that the lectores were radicals, that they—

WR: No. No, no, no. That was not right.

GM: No?

WR: That was not—What happened was this: the cigar maker had what we called a president.

GM: A presidente, um hm.

WR: That president chose the material we were supposed to read to the cigar maker. So we were not responsible. We had to do what he say.
GM: Right. Right. What kind of literature did the workers like? What were their favorites?

WR: Well, they have the first opinions—you know, there was too many cigar maker. One like the novel, novela. Another one like the news and another one like what they call a label, literature.

GM: Literature, uh huh. Give me some examples. What were some favorite books and authors?

WR: Let's see if I remember. (pause) I don't remember the name.

GM: Let me just throw out some and you can respond. Benito Pérez Galdós?

WR: Well, some—was some paper from out of town. I know that.

GM: Uh huh. Right.

WR: Like I would read New York or in Chicago, one of those places.

GM: Yeah. How about Benito Pérez Galdós?

WR: That was a novela.

GM: Novela, uh huh. Did they like him?

WR: Yeah, they loved it.

GM: How about Cervantes? Miguel de Cervantes?

WR: Oh, my father (inaudible) read from Don Quixote.

GM: That was his specialty, huh?

WR: He was famous for that.

GM: Uh huh. Yeah. How about Kropotkin?

WR: Who is that?

GM: Peter Kropotkin. Russian anarchist.

WR: I don't know.

GM: Mikhail Bakunin?
WR: I don't remember reading anything of that kind.

GJ: Zola?

GM: Okay. Victor Hugo? Hugo?


GM: Yes.

WR: Victor Hugo. Pedro Mata, that was another one, and [Eduardo] Zamacois was another one. Well, they was nothing that—just novels, like of any kind.

GM: What was the—was there one particular novel that was the most liked?

WR: Among cigar makers?

GM: Um hm.

WR: *Don Quixote*.

GM: *Don Quixote*, uh huh.

GJ: How many times—do you remember how many times you read *Don Quixote* to the workers?

WR: I never read it.

GJ: You never read it?

GM: No, no. You're kidding.

WR: I never read it, because when I was a reader, there was years and years that you are used to hear the *Quixote*, and they changed to another thing.

GJ: They were tired of it by then.

GM: What year now—we haven't pinned this down—what year did you become a *lector*? How old were you when you became a *lector*?

WR: When I became what?

GM: A reader.

WR: Nineteen twenty-eight.
GM: Nineteen— How old were you in—

WR: No, no. Yes, 1928. Because I was married on 1930.

GM: So the tail end, right—

WR: Nineteen twenty-eight.

GM: Was Señor Aparicio reading then?

WR: Yeah. I remember.

GM: What do you remember about him, Manuel Aparicio?

WR: Aparicio was a good reader. There was a few of them were pretty good.

GM: Victoriano Manteiga?

WR: Well, before he had La Gaceta, when he was young man, he was a reader, too. Was pretty good, too.

GM: Onofrio Palermo?

WR: Which one?

GM: Onofrio Palermo?

WR: I didn't knew that one.

GM: How about [Cesar Marcos] Medina?

WR: No, I didn't knew that one either.

GM: Uh huh. Right. We never have explained. How did you father get the nickname El Mexicano?

WR: Well, it happened this way. My father was born at the end of the Cuban island, Santiago de Cuba, you see. That's where my father was born. And in those days, the transportation from Santiago de Cuba to Havana was very hard. There was not many people from Santiago de Cuba that came to Havana. And Santiago de Cuba has a way to talk that is pretty—like the Mexicans, you see? Now he was like me, brunet, a dark brunet, and they called him Mexicano. Mexican. Because they said they wanted Mexicans. He was born in Santiago de Cuba.

GM: Did they call you that, too?
WR: (inaudible) Santiago de Cuba is a province; he was born in Manzanillo. That was a town in Santiago de Cuba.

GM: How do you spell that?

WR: M-a-n-z-a-n-i-l-l-o.

GM: Okay, right, right. What did his father do there—your grandfather—in Manzanillo?

WR: You mean by my mother or by my father?

GM: Both, both.

WR: Well, about my grandfather by my father, I never knew him. I don't know. But about my mother, he was a bookkeeper.

GM: Bookkeeper, uh huh, yes. Right. Right.

WR: I believe, I don't—I'm pretty sure—I believe that my grandfather by—my father's father—that he die in the revolution against Spain. Now what I remember—

GM: Ah, yes.

WR: What I knew then, even I don't remember his name.

GM: Uh huh. Right. Right. What—do you have any memory of the great strikes, *la huelga de diez meses*?

WR: Well, that was the one I told you when I went to New York.

GM: Tell us about it. Can you elaborate?

WR: No, I don't know much about that strike. I mean, I don't know why they say I make what they're asking for; all I know they were asking for a high on the salaries, and that's all I remember.

GM: This was 1920?

WR: Nineteen twenty.

GM: *La huelga de meses diez*?

GJ: *Diez meses*.

GM: *Diez meses*. 
WR: No, the one that last ten months. Yeah, yeah, that was it, because there was just two big strikes here. Once was when I was a kid; that last seven months.

GM: What did you do as a child? Do you remember the strike in the streets? In 19—this was the one in 1910.

WR: What they do?

GM: What happened during that strike?

WR: Well, all I know is you can make it the work, to work (inaudible) to work. Oh, there was nothing, no revolution, no nothing, fighting nor nothing like that on the street.

GM: Do you remember when it was used to be called cocinas economicas, the soup kitchens?

WR: I hear about that but I never know much about that. I hear about that cocina economica, yeah.

GM: Um hm. Right. Why did you go to New York during that other strike?

WR: Well, because my brother—my two brothers was living in New York, and all I know is how to read. I couldn't do that here, and then I went to New York.

GM: In the factory? To work in the factories there?

WR: No, no. I work in different jobs.

GM: Um hm. Right.

WR: I was elevator operator over there.

GM: A what?

WR: Elevator operator. I work in a radio factory.

GM: Oh, radio factory, uh huh. Right, right.

WR: And I work in hotels, and I work in different jobs.

GM: Did you ever go back—

WR: And then I work on a national biscuit.

GM: National biscuit, huh.
WR: That was my first job in New York.

GM: Did you ever return to Cuba?

WR: No.

GM: Never went back to Cuba?

WR: I remember when I was a kid, with my mother. I stayed over there about six months and then come back again.

GM: Um hm. Right.

WR: But I was a kid.

GM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WR: Two brothers. No sisters.

GM: Uh huh. Did they ever come to Tampa?

WR: Yeah, they were here with us.

GM: And then you all left. What did they do in Tampa, what kind of work?

WR: One of my brothers was a reader, and the other one was a cigar maker.

GM: Then you left for New York during the 1920 strike. Did they return?

WR: Yeah, they returned.

GM: Um hm. Yeah, and then they—

WR: In fact, they died here in Tampa.

GM: Um hm. Right. They continued to work in the cigar industry?

WR: Huh?

GM: They continued to work in the cigar industry?

WR: Yeah, yeah, they did after the strike was over.

GM: Right, right. How about—did you belong to El Circulo Cubano?
WR: Yes, yes, I do, only in a way. I pay so much a month and then I have a right to see a doctor. Because they have three different scale, you know? That's one. The other one is higher. And the other one—no, there's only two.

GM: Um hm.

WR: One pays more or less to see the doctor only, and the other one that you have all the rights that a member has at the Cuban Club.

GM: What do you remember about going to the Cuban Club?

WR: Let me turn the light on. That's much better. (long pause) You see? That's only to see (inaudible).

GM: Uh huh. Yes. Do you remember dances there? Did you go to many dances as a young man? ¿No va a verbenas?

WR: Not many, no.

GM: No, no. How did you meet your wife?

WR: My wife?

GM: Uh huh.

WR: Elena! Yes, I remember that. Elena? Memory.

GM: Uh huh.

WR: You know, I forgot to tell you that before. I was a cab driver here in Tampa for eleven years.

GM: After you were a reader?

WR: Yeah, after the years that reading finished, was all over. I was a cab driver, (laughs) and I pick her up downtown and took to the cemetery because her first husband die, you know. And she went to the cemetery to take some flowers and I waited. And I liked my passenger so much I said I was going to find out where she lives.

GM: Was she Cuban?

WR: Eh?

GM: Was she Cuban?

WR: No, she was born in Tampa.
GM: Uh huh.

WR: Yeah. Oh, by the way, I am a citizen. I became a citizen in 1938. So when I drove her home, you know, I see where she lived and I start to—and I was free through during the day to come back and get spurned, passed by until we get acquainted, you see. And then we married.

GJ: Oh, what year was that?

WR: Let’s see—Nineteen sixty-two. Met in sixty-two [1962].

GJ: How did you meet your first wife?


GJ: How did you meet your first wife? Do you remember that?

WR: How what?

GJ: How did you meet your first wife?

WR: Oh, yeah. I meet her in the neighborhood; she used to live close to where we were living, you see.

GM: And where was that? Where did you live in Ybor City?

WR: Right here on Thirteenth Avenue.

M: Thirteenth Avenue, uh huh. Okay. And was she Cuban? Or Spanish?

WR: No, no. She was born in Tampa.

GM: Uh huh, what, what—okay. What was her name?

WR: Edelmira.

GM: Edelmira?

WR: E-d-e-l-m-i-r-a, and the same last name that I got—Rodriguez.

GM: Rodriguez, uh huh.

WR: We were both Rodriguez. That was a common thing, you know. Her sister was Rodriguez and she married a man named Rodriguez.
GJ: There were a lot of—

WR: So there were four Rodriguez in the family.

GM: How many children did you have?

WR: I had three.

GM: Uh huh.

WR: My daughter and my son that's living here in Tampa, and my first daughter—there is that one, that picture you see over there. She died in Miami.

GJ: Um hm. Yes. When did you move out of Ybor City?

WR: I move out of Ybor City? No, I always be living in Ybor City.

GJ: Oh, I see. So you weren't moved away by urban renewal, when they tore down all the houses?

WR: Yeah, I was living in Ybor City. We were living in (inaudible).

GM: When you were a lector, before you would go to work in the morning, would you go to a special restaurante or cafe?

WR: No, no, no, no.

GM: No?

WR: We used to do that. We used to have a very light breakfast, you see? We had a very light breakfast, and then we would in the morning read La Traducción. Then when we finished reading La Traducción, we go back home, and then we have a light lunch. Very light lunch, and then we go back to reading again the rest of the day until three o'clock.

GM: How much did you make a week?

WR: Well, it was different. Don't always make the same salary because, you know, there was depending on how many cigar makers were working.

GM: Yeah. What's the most you made?

WR: Forty dollars.

GM: Forty dollars. That was pretty good money, wasn't it?

WR: Well, yeah; in those days you could get along pretty good.
GJ: Who is the woman in the picture on the wall?

WR: No.

GJ: Is that your relative?

WR: No, that—no.

GJ: Who is that?

WR: Oh, you mean this one here?

GJ: Yes.

WR: Oh, that's my wife's mother. I thought you were referring to that one.

GJ: Oh, no. No, the photograph.

GM: Mr. Rodriguez, are you the last lector still alive, as far as you know?

WR: In Tampa?

GM: Yeah. Well, anywhere.

WR: Let me think it over.

GM: Okay.

WR: (long pause) That's right, I am the last one. Because there was my brother and me. My brother die, so I was the last one.

GM: Did you know Mr. Dominguez, who lived here?

WR: Oh, yeah.

GM: He was a reader also, wasn't he?

WR: Yeah. Yeah, he was.

GM: Honorato Dominguez.

WR: Honorato Dominguez.

GM: Uh huh. Yes.
WR: Father and son both were readers.

GM: Oh, also? Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, we appreciate you talking with us. Thank you very much for taking time out.

WR: Well, sorry I couldn't do much better, you know.

GM: No, no, very interesting. Thank you.

WR: In beginning with I talk English very, very—to say, not too often, you know. Not because I don't want to, but because other people that live around the neighborhood—

GJ: Everyone speaks Spanish.

GM: How do you like this, by the way? Hacienda Ybor.

WR: Oh, I like that very much. I wish it be—Ybor is not what it used to be. That's a fact. Ybor was a pretty nice town in every way. Now (inaudible) nice town that when I was a young man, about seventeen or eighteen years, young man—I was a young man—I used to live with my father and mother and brothers on Fourth Avenue between Nineteenth [Street] and Twentieth Street, and in summertime it was the time was so hot, we used to live with the windows and the door open to let some air, you know. You can't do that anymore. Look what we got in these windows. So that's happened. There has been a big, big change in the way we knew it. Ybor City used to be (inaudible) what it is right now. But I love Ybor City just the same.

GM: Thank you.

end of interview