May 1984

Cesar Marcos Medina oral history interview by Gary Mormino and Gayla Jamison, May 22, 1984

Cesar Marcos Medina (Interviewee)

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Gary Mormino: Was your father a lector in Havana?

Cesar Marcos Medina: No.

GM: No. Okay. He was a cigar maker. Give me some idea what he did in Havana.

CM: In Havana he was a cigar maker.

GM: A roller, a buncher, a—?

CM: No, no. Of course in those days, cigar makers made everything. They were handmade. That was before the event of the so-called machinery in the cigar business. Everything was done by hand. Like they say, from the bottom up. And of course, he was also manager later on of a very large cigar factory here, when I was up in my teens.

GM: What factory did he work in in Havana?

CM: In Havana?

GM: Uh huh.

CM: That I couldn't tell you. I don't know. Here, of course, he worked at Martinez Ybor and Stachenberg, where he eventually became one of the managers. And of course, he was a reader principally at Martinez Ybor, which is now Ybor Square. Are you familiar with Tampa?

GM: Comía chenta.

CM: ¿Habla español?
Gayla Jamison: Muy poquito. Estoy estudiándolo.

GM: What about your mother?

CM: My mother, her name was Angela and she was not—she was a housewife.

GM: Her maiden name?

CM: Very strong woman. Angela Castillo. She learned how to type the touch system at eighty-six, and she was blind.

GM: Yeah.

CM: Lots of determination.

GM: What about your grandparents? Do you remember your grandparents in Cuba?

CM: Grandparents, I never knew because I was very young. And they lived outside of Havana, in San Antonio de los Baños. San Antonio de los Baños, which is about fifty miles away from Havana.

GM: What did they do, do you know? Any idea what—

CM: Mostly farming, I imagine.

GM: Campesinos, campesinos. You remember Havana at all as a young boy?

CM: Oh, yes. Yes. And not as a young man. I learned Havana because after my family came here and my father died when I was very young—around sixteen—then my mother became very ill. She went to Havana for an operation, and it developed that she had to stay there. I used to go to Havana every year for many years, so I became very—and I had a lot of relatives there, and I traveled in Cuba and saw some of the different areas of the island. Beautiful country. Very nice.

GM: Do you ever visit your homestead? Where you were born, the neighborhood?

CM: Yes, yes.

GM: What was that like?

CM: Well, of course it is like the old cities of Europe, very narrow, streets of brick, stone homes with a big patio—like we see at Columbia [Restaurant], you know, in the center—very formal living there, especially among the middle classes, you know. The families are very close; the children are very close to their parents and grandparents. I had a visitor, an attorney from the United States. I had done business with him, and I took him over there
and we spent some time. And I said, "What is the thing that impressed you most about Cuba?"

He says, "You may not believe it, but I have been amazed at how close the families are here."

I said, "How close the mothers and their children and their grandparents are with the grandchildren?"

He says, "We've lost that in the United States. Different cultural background."

GJ: And what year was this that he visited you in Cuba?

CM: In—I remember distinctly because I had just bought his bakery. In 1946.

GJ: (inaudible)

CM: That was when I operated Wholesome Bakeries here in Tampa, and of course, I had just moved—that was just the time I had moved to Wholesome Bakeries that he had the second largest bakery in Tampa at that time, which we bought.

GM: Yeah, we'll get into that. Was your father involved with the revolution in the 1890s?

CM: No. No.

GM: No? Did he ever talk about his attitude toward José Martí or [Antonio] Maceo?

CM: Well, José—the Cubans, they were great admirers of [him]—they were opposed to the Spanish domination of the—See, my father had been here—I hadn't told you that, but my father had been here in the United States back in the early 1890s at Thomasville; at that time Thomasville was also a cigar center, believe it or not.

GM: Thomasville, Georgia? Really?

CM: Thomasville, Georgia. He was very young.

GM: Could you elaborate on that, how he was recruited and his experiences and—

CM: Well, of course these men that lived in Havana, they were always looking for places where life would be better and where there would be more freedom. The reason, of course, why the United States got to be what it is is that the people of Europe were seeking freedom and ability to develop an opportunity, and of course we have a country that has no equal in the world in that respect. People don't—we sometimes don't appreciate it, but a young person can be most anything he wants here if he makes up his mind. Got to work.
GM: Which *patrón* moved his factory to Thomasville, Georgia; do you remember?

CM: To Georgia?

GM: No—okay. How long was he in Georgia?

CM: Oh, two or three years, I imagine.

GM: How about—was he ever in Key West?

CM: No.

GM: Or Tampa before he immigrated?

CM: No. No, cause he would go through Tampa. Tampa was the center where you went from here to Thomasville.

GM: Did he ever tell you what he was doing when Cuba won its independence? What his attitude was toward independence?

CM: Oh, he was in favor of independence. We were in Cuba at the time that the American forces were there. That is—I was a baby, but in 1899 is when the Americans actually took over. That's how I happened to be born under the American flag, even though I was not an American citizen, which I found out soon when I got to be twenty-one. Just because you are born under the American flag, you are not necessarily an American citizen. Especially if you are born under the American flag when they are occupying a foreign country. You are still a native of that country. So I had to wait five years to become an American citizen.

GM: What made your father move to Tampa, immigrate to Tampa? And your parents—

CM: Envy, and the opportunity that Tampa offered, and the fact that Tampa at that time was already becoming a big cigar center and that there were more opportunities here, better living conditions.

GM: Were conditions getting worse in Cuba under the American flag?

CM: No, I wouldn't say that. But I think that the cigar industry here offered more opportunity. The wages were higher.

GM: Right. And when did he move—immigrate?

CM: In 1903.

GM: In 1903, uh huh. Did he come by himself or with family?
CM: No, he—we three. My mother, my father and myself. My brother had not been born yet. He was born here.

GM: Do you remember moving as a young boy?

CM: No, no.

GM: So you arrived in Tampa in 1903, then, and you moved to Ybor City.

CM: Tampa was about that big.

GM: And where was your first residence in Tampa?

CM: Right there in Ybor City around Ninth Avenue, between Fourteenth [Street] and Fifteenth Street.

GM: Um hm. Right. What are your very first memories of Ybor City?

CM: Well, lots of old buildings, wooden sidewalks, wooden block streets that they used to use instead of bricks; they would have—the streets were paved with wooden blocks. Very small homes, hundreds of them. People—mostly everybody working at cigar factories. Already many women getting involved in that. Young children going to work when they were very young: thirteen, twelve, fourteen. Going to the factories. Fortunately, I never had to do that, but it was quite common.

GJ: How did your father become a lector? Did he ever talk about that?

CM: Well, my father, of course, always liked to read, and he had a very strong voice and quite a strong personality and he—you know, to be a lector in those days, not only did you have to read, but you had to kind of improvise the voices of the different parts of the novels, you know, if it's a woman, a man, a weak man, an old man. So you had to be more or less like an actor, similar to an actor, and he was very good at that. Of course, if you read in that factory, you had to be good, because that was one of the largest in the city and you had to have it—like I was talking to this young man. They had no sound system. You had to have a voice that could carry to the extreme end, see, because if they didn't hear you, they wouldn't pay you.

GJ: (laughs) Sounds fair.

GM: Merit, merit pay. That's what it is.

CM: Right, and of course the cigar makers themselves paid. The lector was not an employee of the factory. The lector was an employee of the workers there. They could throw him out, and they would have to tell him what they wanted him to read in the literature. They would send a bunch of suggestions, and then they would run an election, and you say, "Well, I wanted him to read Edison's biography," or, "I want to read The
"Life of Napoleon," or whatever. And they used to read some very deep material, so they were very well informed. So then they would meet in these coffee shops at night and they would argue about everything under the sun.

Then they got to be so smart that the cigar manufacturers got concerned, and they said, "No more reading. These people are getting too smart, and they are getting ready to have a union and they are going to make trouble for us. No more readers." That's how the reading stopped.

GJ: Well, what did your father think about that, having to give up his job?

CM: Well, of course, that's when he became involved as manager to one of these factories.

GM: He went into management.

CM: Yes.

GM: Let's—how many years did he work in Tampa before he became a lector? You said his first job was at the Martinez Ybor factory.

CM: Not too many. No, because like I tell you, we came here in 1903, and as I was telling you before, when I lived in that immediate neighborhood, I must have been about ten or eleven, so he must have been here six or seven years then. He was already reading at that time, so he read for quite a while. And of course when the reading stopped, then he went into management, which made it—

GM: Right. What were his favorite stories and favorite novelas? Things like that.

CM: Novelas? Of course, most novels that were read basically were by Spanish authors. And some French was translated and of course a lot of—some of it was historical in background. And this was an advantage to me as a child, because when I was very small, instead of telling me about fairy tales, when I want to go to sleep, see, he would always tell me, relate historical background of Rome and Greece and Napoleon. So I learned a lot of the foreign history of the world from my father in bed when I was trying to go sleep, see. Which was an unusual thing.

GJ: Did he ever read newspapers?

CM: Oh, yes. At that time they used to read La Traducción, which was a summary of all the local newspapers and New York Times and Chicago Tribune and what have you. There used to be a man here that in the evening he would compile that and type it and mimeograph it, and it would have summaries of the Tampa Tribune, so and so in Spain, so and so in Paris, so they were very well informed. Much better informed than I am, because I haven't got that much time to read that many newspapers. (laughs)
GJ: Well, most of the people that he read to, could they read and write?

CM: Oh, yes. A great many of them did. Of course, some of them didn't.

GJ: So for some people, this was their only source of—

CM: Absolutely. It was just like going to school.

GM: Um hm. What about some of the other newspapers of the era? La Gaceta?

CM: La Gaceta. By the way, I save you a copy, because there's an article there by a young man who was formerly a Tampa boy, who achieved a lot of recognition nationally, Baltasar. Baltasar was his father. [Ferdie] Pacheco¹, I don’t know if you have heard of him?

GM: Right. (inaudible)

CM: He had an article.

GM: Cafe Solo.

CM: Huh?

GM: Cafe Solo.

CM: Cafe Solo? Did you read that?

GM: Yeah, very encouraging.

CM: I thought that was cute.

GM: Very nice. I appreciated it.

CM: I knew his father and I knew him.

GM: What are your memories of your father at night, what was a typical evening? Give me an idea of you coming home from school, and just tell me your family memories.

CM: Typical evening of the average man in Ybor City was that soon as he had dinner, he wanted go to the coffee shop and have coffee and talk to his friends, or go and meet with somebody. My father generally would take me, as I got a little bit older, with him. And his main interest was medicine, so his contact was mainly with doctors, and we would go to a drugstore that was called Franco on Seventh Avenue, where a lot of doctors would meet there and just chat and discuss a lot of things. Conversation was a big thing in those days. People talked a lot. They didn't have television, they didn't have radio, so your way

¹ Dr. Ferdie Pacheco is a writer and artist who was also Muhammad Ali’s personal physician.
of communication was conversation. And we'd go there, and I got to meet a lot of the
doctors. And that's how my interest developed in medicine, see, which of course later on
is how I've been in the hospital business for many years, which I've enjoyed.

GM: Right. And did your father associate with fellow *lector* in the evening?

CM: Oh, yes. Some.

GM: Where would they generally hang out in the evenings?

CM: Well, I don't know where they hang out—well, they used to hang out all the time;
that was in the morning between eight-thirty and nine, because they generally would start
reading around ten, and they would get there together, you know, and they would have
coffee and discuss things in general.

GM: Kind of describe—that must have been interesting, seeing—like, how many would
be there at one time?

CM: Oh, fifteen or twenty, or more.

GM: Really? Is that right?

CM: Because every factory worker, I tell you, had his own *lector*.

GM: A lot of talent.

CM: Yeah.

GM: (inaudible)

CM: And most of them—one, of course, [Manuel] Aparicio—he became an actor in New
York. And his background as a *lector* helped him achieve that. He was very good.

GM: I talked to his daughter. [Mary Aparicio] Fontanilla is her name.

CM: Yeah, Fontanilla.

GM: He must have been an extraordinary man.

CM: Oh, he was.

GM: What do you remember about him?

CM: Well, I remember him as a big, strong man, very outgoing, with a very strong voice
and a very pleasant personality. Very outgoing.
GM: Right. How about Señor Rodriguez, el Mexicano?

CM: El Mexicano. He was a different type. He was a man a little bit more quiet and reserved, not very outgoing individual, typical in his appearance, typically Mexican.

GM: He was Mexican?

CM: Yeah. I could tell a little story. It's a little bit off color.

GM: Sure, why not.

CM: Talking about Mexicans, one of the ones that was a very leading party of that group was a Mexican lector. And of course, I was a very young person and I was working as a waiter during the summers at this, and when they would meet—he'd come in in the morning, you know, and he was very reserved. He said, "Young man, I don't know what's happening today. Every time I put on these glasses, all the people that I see here are a bunch of so and so's." He said it so quiet, and he meant it. I thought that was really cute. I always have remembered that.

GM: His son became a—

CM: I do that every once in a while. I say, you know, I think I— (laughs) You know, some things, when you are young they stick in your mind. Sixty years later you still remember.

GM: His son also became a lector. Wilfredo Rodriguez. Am I right that he is—

CM: Oh, he's very familiar with some of the—

GM: Is he the last lector still alive? Wilfredo Rodriguez?

CM: I don't know. He was much (inaudible), much younger than his father.

GM: Right, and he was just someone that—

CM: But he was not as well regarded as the father, who had quite a reputation.

GM: What about—let's talk about some others. How about Manteiga, the elder Manteiga?

GJ: Victoriano.

GM: Victoriano.

CM: One of the most respected men of his time. A tremendous individual. Very personable. Good looking, tall, always dressed just so—and in those days, sport wear was
unknown. You had to have your coat and your tie, no matter how hot it was.

GJ: White shirt.

CM: And that's the way he—course he was a terrific speaker and he could—he was very active in many fields, politically, particularly. Now, his son, the one that—Roland, and Roland has done well, because in order to survive with a newspaper like that here, that's a battle. Of course, I think the thing that keeps him going is this gossip column.

GM: Yes, right. He's a—

CM: You familiar with that column?

GJ: Oh, yes, yes, I am.

CM: I always read that the first thing.

GM: *Los lectores* have an image now in hindsight, in retrospect. Many people tell me that they were all reds.

CM: Who?

GM: Well, gossips, let’s say. Okay, that the—

CM: *Chisme, chisme* they call them.

GM: *Chisme*?


GM: How would you react to that? What were your father's politics?

CM: Politics?

GM: Um hm.

CM: Well, I would say he's basically a Democrat, voted Democratic.

GM: Now?

CM: Yeah. Course he died, you know, when I was quite young. I was almost—not quite seventeen. He died very young, thirty-nine.

GM: In 1917, you say?
GJ: No, he was seventeen.

CM: I was seventeen. Yeah. He talk about—my father was what they used to call a quack doctor. And this is kind of interesting, too, because in the development of medicine that I've seen since I got involved so much in it, is that there was a philosophy back in the 1890s in Germany, which was this question of Kühne, K-u-h-n-e. Dr. [Wilhelm] Kühne, who developed the philosophy what we call today rehabilitation with water and exercise and food and so forth and so on. More or less in the field of prevention. And my father hardly ever took me to the doctor. He'd always prescribe—he was a student of that, so I was.

GM: He did something right.

CM: So I was—not too long ago, I was given the responsibility of equipping the rehabilitation centre for the Centro Asturiano, and it so happens that a Tampa boy by the name of Rodriguez is the second man in command at NYU [New York University] rehabilitation, which is the world's finest. So I went up there and I was getting ready to pick up gear, select the equipment. And he said, "What do you think of all of this?"

I said, "Well, you want me to tell you the truth?"

He said, "Sure."

I says, "You know, my father used to do all that that you're doing here with a bunch of galvanized tubs and broken down chairs and buckets, and they said he was crazy."

GJ: (laughs)

CM: But now, the medical profession has come to realize that he wasn't crazy, that they just had failed to understand the tremendous power that water and exercise and all of that has a bearing on good health. And I was very lucky. Like I said, my father did not leave me any money, but he inculcated that philosophy and he could be a vegetarian.

GM: Really?

CM: And here I'm eighty-six, and I'm still going pretty strong.

GJ: Are you still a vegetarian?

CM: Well, I eat a lot of vegetables and a lot of fruit. And I, of course—being that I've had heart condition, I stay away from meats as much as possible. I watch my food. I've always watched my food. My tendency has always been to be fat. And that's one thing that—and the Cuban philosophy, they used to feed these babies, including me, condensed milk, which is very high in sugar. And once you get a child, when he's very young, indoctrinated, it's very difficult for him to overcome that. Muchas azúcar.
GM: You must remember some of the great strikes in Ybor City. You would have been old enough to remember the 1910 strike. What goes through your mind when I mention that?

CM: That was a rough strike. You know, they hung two fellows in West Tampa. And the citizens committee—so-called citizens committee—came to Ybor City and they would just beat these people up. And they would have to scramble and hide, because they wanted them to go to work. Course, that was the beginning of the union. I was a little bit communistic at that time, because I was already beginning to be able to read and make my own opinions—and of course my father being in management, that was kind of bad because I felt that the unions had a place in view of the fact that they, like I, saw in those days that the owners were abusing the workers.

GJ: In what way did you think that they were abusing the workers?

CM: Well, they were working them very hard. They were paying them very little. They would have tremendous power; if anybody did anything they would ostracize them. He couldn't work in the community, you know. Oh, they—but then, like in everything, then my first job was working in the cigar factory here. I hated the cigar factories, but I had to have a job, and I worked in the office. The time came when the owner could not go to the second floor to inspect the workers, cause the unions would prohibit the owner to go up the step to the galería. It got to be—we go from, you know, when you push somebody, and then of course the resentment is built there—bitterness, you know—then they're going to show, and it took a long time before a better understanding among the labor group came about. Younger people came in, the old ones faded out of the picture, and there was a better understanding. I was only in that factory—oh, about two years.

GM: How old were you when you—

CM: I was less than sixteen. I was fifteen when I went. I had to lie about that, cause they wouldn't employ any less than sixteen. So when my sixteenth birthday came in, and I told the man, and he said, "But you told me you were sixteen."

I had forgotten it. I said, "Well, I needed that [job]. Did you see my pants? All the holes that I had in my pants?" I just had to have a job. (laughs)

GM: What did your father say when you told him you were going to get a job as a cigar maker?

CM: Not cigars. I was going to work in the office.

GM: Oh.

CM: Oh, he loved that. He would liked for me to go into the cigar business, but I—

GM: What was your father's opinion during this 1910 strike? Did he ever express any
CM: He left. A lot of the people that could left Tampa. And many of them—this is—you—He went to work in Key West during that strike. Many people left. Went to Philadelphia, Chicago—

GM: And your mother?

CM: Those that could and were able to get jobs up there.

GM: Your mother stayed here?

CM: Yes, because that thing lasted for ten months, and this citizens committee would go around and overturn the pots—you know, the soup pots. It was rough.

GJ: What were the soup pots? Could you—

CM: The soup pot is at the—being that a lot of people didn't have any food, they would have these common places where they cooked soup and so forth, and they would pass it out to the people that would come in, like on welfare. And these members of the committee would come in and just overturn that, cause they wanted them to—in other words, if they were hungry, they would have to go to work.

GJ: No one to starve for someone else.

CM: Well, of course, you are familiar with the strikes during those days. In many cases, in many parts of the country they would call out the militia.

GJ: So is that what happened? They called out the militia?

CM: Not here.

GJ: Not here.

CM: No, they had what they called cométenos ciudadanos, citizens committee—the so-called elite of the community, see.

GJ: Now were these mostly—

CM: Mostly connected with the Chamber of Commerce and so forth and so on. Businessmen.

GJ: So these were not Latin people?

CM: Oh, no. No, no.
GM: D.B. McKay\textsuperscript{2} later said he served on that committee. Do you think that's true?

CM: I don't know. He used to be my neighbor. I used to live right across the street from him, and of course he became eventually the editor of the \textit{Tampa Daily Times}, and he used to catch the streetcar. In those days, everybody in Ybor City traveled by streetcar. There were no automobiles.

GM: Do you remember when your father returned at the end of the strike? What was Ybor City like when the strike was over in 1910, 1911? Do you remember your father returning?

CM: Yes. He went to work right away.

GM: Uh huh. In management, or—

CM: No, no. I think he went to work in the cigar factory, and then he eventually he went into management.

GM: What about the 1920 strike?

CM: Nineteen twenty strike. That was a short strike. I was already working at the bank. I didn't have too much to do with that.

GM: How about the 1931 strike, the last great strike over the—

CM: Oh, those strikes were small strikes. The real big strike—the one that really created the big sensation here was the ten-month strike, and a lot of violence took place and a lot of people were hurt.

GM: Many, many people, if you read the newspapers at the time—the \textit{Tribune} blamed the \textit{lectores} for these strikes. That the \textit{lectores} were radicals, they were fomenting revolution from the (inaudible). What do you think?

CM: Well, you see, this business of being radical is the moment that people become educated. One of the things about education—of course, my son used to go to the University of Chicago, and he used to worry about some of these things—you begin to question, see. If you're ignorant and they tell you this is good, and you know no different, you accept it, but if you've been in a place that is nicer than this, you say, "Wait a minute. I don't buy that." And then, if you know in the working field that in other places people are being treated better and there are other advantages and so forth and so on, socially, then you begin to say, "Hey, why can't I have some of that?"

You know, we go in to a list of everybody in the United States. I used to be in the psychiatric field, and like the medical doctor used to tell me, "Every kid that walks through that door, he says he is entitled, and of course I have to tell him that when he

\textsuperscript{2} Mayor of Tampa 1928-1931.
walks through this door, he's not entitled to anything except to that which he showed me he deserves." Don't you see? And of course, the lectores were reading all of this Rousseau, French philosophy, and who was the founder of—which brought about the revolution in France and they said, "Boy, but we are just being abused," and they began to question that. So, now, that's what you call fomenting communism.

GM: I think it was kind of interesting. You mentioned most people would regard Cesar Medina today as a prominent banker, financier, et cetera, that you once had communistic tendencies. Do you want to elaborate on that?

CM: Communistic tendency and that fit, and that I would have felt that if you were oppressed. I think that oppression is wrong. Ever since I was young—and I am of that opinion today—that you cannot push people around cause they are human beings, see. And of course, I had a business, like you say. To me, that's the best thing that I ever have given to my employees. We demand performance, but everybody was treated like a human being, and he was rewarded according to the way—if he deserved, he was recognized. And we had a very—my competitors had the money, I had the people.

My people were loyal and fighters. They would fight like nobody's business, and I'd rather have people that would fight than money. I can get what I want with that. And I did. That's why, when I was a kid and I used to read about all these injustices and all, you come out here and you beat people up in the street just because they don't want to work, I call it my privilege whether I want to work or not. Nobody has got to force me to work. I don't want to work, and I want to stop, that's my business.

GM: Do you think Latins were—in the old days, growing up, do you think they were mistreated in Tampa? Italians, Cubans, Spaniards?

CM: Absolutely. Yes. To grow up in Tampa during those days and having a Latin name was a tough undertaking, because you know, we had signs here in this city that said, "No Cubans or dogs allowed." A Latin couldn't cross Twenty-Second Street, that way, going to Gary³, cause he would be beaten up. And that's the way it was.

Of course, that was the reason that my father, when I was a very young child, taught me how to box, because he said, "In this environment that you live, you have to be able to take care of yourself physically. I don't want to ever hear that you've slapped anybody. When you hit somebody, you knock them on the ground so they won't bother you anymore." And you know, fortunately, I've only had one fight in my life, cause everybody knew that I box every day and that if they picked a fight, there's going to be trouble. So it was a good source of prevention, being prepared.

GJ: It worked in your case, didn't it?

CM: Yeah, I think it did. It works in every case. Being prepared is—

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³ Gary was a town east of Ybor City, which was incorporated in 1915. In 1919, the state legislature dissolved the town, and in 1923 it became part of Tampa.
GJ: Was your father a member of the Circulo Cubano?

CM: I'm still a member of the Circulo.

GJ: Still a member?

CM: Um hm.

GM: What do you remember about it as a young man, young boy, going over there?

CM: Oh, I—at one time I was a member of the board, when I was very young. It was a very interesting social place. Have you been in there? They had one of the nicest ballrooms in the city at that time, and they had a good theatre and they had a good cantina—and of course I've always loved to dance, so I used to go there on Sunday and dance with all the girls.

GJ: The tea dances? You'd go to the matinee?

CM: Uh?

GJ: You went to the matinee?

CM: I did. And of course in those days, to take out a girl was a kind of a problem. There were no automobiles, and generally you'd have to take the mother with you. Yeah, you'd have to take the chaperone or there wasn't no soap.

GM: Would the mother walk behind you?

CM: No, no. She would walk on the side, or maybe the aunt or the sister. It was a pain, because you couldn't hardly move. (laughs) They were watching everything you did.

GJ: How did you meet your wife? Did you meet her at a dance?

CM: At a dance, yeah, that's right. At the Italian club, where I seldom went. It's a funny thing. My wife was a secretary, and—

GM: At L’Unione?

CM: L’Unione Italiano. I used to work at the Bank of Ybor City. Are you familiar with Seventeenth Street? Now I have an office there, because I'm involved in redevelopment. So after sixty-seven years, I went back to the same office I used to have. Can you imagine that? I was amazed.

GM: What was your wife's maiden name?
CM: Alonzo. Generosa Alonzo.

GM: Uh huh. And she was a secretary there. Why did you go to the Italian Club that particular evening?

CM: Because her mother was Italian. An *italiana*. And her father was *asturiano*, Spanish. It was a—there was a lot of these mixtures between Spanish and Italian and Cuban and Italian.

GM: Mixed marriages.

CM: The Italian girls—and of course, the Italian fathers resented that, cause they did not want these girls marrying outside of their own race, you know. Yeah, some of them took it very bitterly.

GM: When you first met your wife's father, what did he think of you?

CM: Oh, well, he—being that I had a job in the bank, he thought I was all right—but then, at that time after that I went into the baking business, right after that. Two Brothers.

GM: Let's kind of go back just a second. Describe the evening at the Italian Club, a typical evening when you were dating.

CM: Well, mostly most of these dances would start around nine, from nine to one, and the girls would go there with their chaperones and the boys would go generally by themselves, unless they dated a girl and they had to go with a chaperone too. I did not. She went with a chaperone, and I went by myself.

GM: And you could—as a Cuban, you could go to the Italian Club without any problems?

CM: Provided you had somebody you knew; not everybody. You had to be a member. You had to be a member or invited by a member, because they would not let you in unless you have what they call a *recebo*, which was a—and my wife used to go by the bank everyday and I never saw her, never knew who she was until I went in there. You know the expression of love, how it works out, I don't even know. You meet somebody, there you go.

GM: Right. And what was your—how long was your courtship?

CM: About thirteen months. Everything was thirteen. Thirteen months, and we married on the thirteenth—and the Italians were also very reluctant about marrying on the thirteenth. You know, they say that's a bad day. But of course it happened to fall wherever it was convenient to me.

GJ: What month was it that you got married?
CM: December.

GJ: December the thirteenth. Right before Christmas time.

CM: December 13, 1926.

GM: Did you have to ask the—

GJ: So you've been married sixty years. Quite an accomplishment.

CM: Long time. Have three children.

GJ: Congratulations.

M: How did the groups get along in Ybor City? The Italians, the Cubans, the Spaniards?

CM: Unfortunately, not good. There was always this feeling that every group wanted to be on its own little segment, see, and that was particularly true even unfortunately among the Spaniards, who had the Gallegos, Centro Español, Centro Asturiano. Both of them are from the northern part of Spain, but they each feel—you know, Spain—you’re probably familiar—is not a country as such. It was about twelve different kingdoms, independent kingdoms that became united in 1492, just about the time that Columbus discovered America. That's when Spain became—so each of these kingdoms, even today, has their own—like we used to have here, which is the Yankees and the Southerners, you know.

Over there, I worked in Spain for a large American company. I was doing an economic study there, and when I used to go to these different areas of Spain—I was headquartered in Madrid. Boy, some of these places didn't have any use for anybody from Madrid, cause that's the political center, and they say they are a bunch of lazy, good-for-nothing politicians, see.

GM: What's the basic difference between a Gallego and Asturians?

CM: In what sense?

GM: Well, you know, from your reflection and observing these groups in Ybor City. Are there any differences? Or how did they perceive their differences?

CM: I would say the Gallego was the one that was more proud, that the fact that he was better than anybody else. And the Asturianos, as far as the Gallegos were concerned, the Asturianos were just black. Of course, the Asturianos also were very tough. They were the only part that the Moors could never conquer. Asturias was never conquered by the Moors. The Moors came in and they advanced north, you know.
And of course, the *Gallegos* have a great deal in common with the Portuguese. The language of Portugal, and the dialect of the *Gallego*, is very similar. They can understand each other. So there’s more similarity between the Portuguese and the *Gallegos* than the *Gallegos* and the people of southern Spain. The people of southern Spain, for example in Sevilla and Andalusia, where the Moors were there for a long time, they are more or less like the Cubans. Their philosophy of life, you know, having a good time and easy going and so forth. The *Gallegos* are just hard workers. My partner, that guy has—

GM: *Señor* Diaz?

CM: That's the smartest *Gallego* that came from Spain.

GJ: So the *caldo gallego*, that soup came from the—

CM: *Gallego* is said in a very—in a kind of—he's a *Gallego*, he is nobody. Stupid. But this *Gallego* has very little schooling, but he had a mind. Keen mind. Analytical mind.

GM: They were regarded as—Spaniards in general—as kind of the elite workers in Ybor City. Do you agree with that?

CM: They what?

GM: In terms of—they were the elite workers in the cigar industry. Is that right?

CM: Well, now they—yes, in this sense, that the *Gallegos*—see, being that the factories were owned by Spaniards, the better jobs—again, we talk about this discriminatory business—the better jobs were given to the Spaniards, and the Cubans and the Italians never got any of the better jobs. So the *Gallegos* and the *Asturianos*, as you said, were the selectors, and they were the cigar packers, who were—Even in the working philosophy, you know, you had different categories. That category was considered to be in the upper group.

GM: What group occupied—

CM: No Cubans hardly ever became a cigar packer. They couldn't.

GM: Who occupied the lowest stratum of the cigar industry?

CM: Cubans and Italians.

GM: What characterized the Italians in Ybor City?

CM: Italians in Ybor City, they were—in my opinion, they were hard workers, very thrifty, very concerned about the future. Like I said, they were very concerned about their children, education, even if they didn't know how to read and write. Most of them didn't know how to read and write. The less educated of all the people here at the beginning was
the Italian. Very few knew how to read and write, but they were concerned about their children, and that's why you would see the Italians in Tampa accomplish what they have. They are attorneys, they are doctors, they are judges and what have you, because their fathers always insisted that those kids go to school and get an education, and I admire them for that.

And of course, they were concerned about their future and they would buy one little house, and then they'd buy another house and another, so first thing you know, every little Italian had three or four houses. In those days, you could buy a house for five or six hundred dollars. My job was to inspect—cause I used to work at the bank and I had to inspect the houses. They were hard workers. They loved to eat spaghetti.

GM: What was the stereotype as a young man, about dating Italian girls and their fathers? What was the stereotype of the fathers?

CM: Well, of course, like I said, the fathers objected very strenuously. And for a long time the only way that you could take one of these girls, you'd have to run away with her.

GJ: You'd have to elope?

CM: That's right. You had to elope. And I threatened to do that with my wife, because her grandmother wanted me to have a big church wedding—because when they did have a wedding—you know, there's two things in the Italian life that is very important. Getting married in a big wedding, and having a big funeral with a big orchestra going down the street. Of course, my job was to go to all the funerals, because my boss wouldn't go to a funeral for love or money. And of course you go to a funeral at two o'clock and you wouldn't get home until seven at night. You had to go and walk the coffin in front of the Italian Club. You had to go to the cemetery. They had a lot of speeches. Then you had to go home and shake hands with everybody again before you—you're familiar with that? So, that was my job.

GM: How about the Cubans? It's difficult to stereotype your own group, but how would you have characterized the Cubans of your era?

CM: Hotheaded.

GM: Hotheaded, uh huh. Successful or not?

CM: Successful?

GM: As a group?

CM: Why, yeah, we're successful, but they were never oriented economically like the Italians, cause they always thought they were going to go back to Cuba soon. So their idea was not Tampa as a permanent thing, but Tampa only as a stepping stone to eventually going back to Cuba when they became able financially to undertake that.
GJ: How many people actually went back to Cuba?

CM: Very few, very few. And of course you know it's very disappointing. I've talked to many people who are Spaniards. When you leave a country as a young person and thirty or forty years elapse and you go back to that country to where you were born, you find out that you've been accustomed to so many things that they don't even know anything about. That is very frustrating and disappointing. What you thought as a dream is a nightmare.

GM: How about in terms of morals, the dating, et cetera? How would you characterize the Cubans compared to the other groups?

CM: You know, this question of morality is something that has changed so much in the last fifty or sixty years. In those days, of course, the girls probably were more moral because they just had to be. They couldn't get away from the eyes of their mothers from here to there, so of course nothing could happen. And of course with us that have gone through raising children and grandchildren—and I always—

You know, for my wife, who is partly Spanish and Italian, some of these changes that women have gone through, this young lady, you see—a girl today, as I see it, feels that she can do anything that her brother can do, and that if it's all right for her brother to do it, there isn't a thing wrong for her to do it. And of course, before, the only thing that prevented them from doing that was the fact pregnancy would occur. But now since that has been controlled, there's a different change, whether it's good or bad.

I think we went way down and now we're beginning to come up again. That marriage is beginning to be recognized as probably one of the good institutions that we have to live with, see. But this business of just having a guy tonight and then another one next week leads to nothing, because when you get old, what the devil happens to you? You see, we all wear out. And a woman, as long as she's pretty and young, fine, but then, one day she's forty and there are a lot of eighteen year old girls running around, see, and forty is no longer in demand. Am I right?

GJ: I don't know. I'm almost forty, Mr. Medina. I don't know if I want to comment on that.

CM: Believe me, you don't look like it.

GJ: Well, thanks, but sometimes I feel like it.

CM: You look like you're in your late twenties.

GJ: Well, thank you. You're very kind.

GM: Mr. Medina, there was a fourth group in Ybor City that not many people have
studied. The Afro-Cubans, the black Cubans. What are your memories of that group as a young boy and man?

CM: They were not a very strong group.

GM: In what sense?

CM: They weren’t socially oriented in the work. They were too few. That is, the Afro group of the Latin extraction. Now, I’m not talking about the blacks. Now you say black, that’s a different story. But they were never any factor. Now they had their own little social gatherings, and I think they had at one time a club, and they still—Martí-Maceo⁴. Martí-Maceo. It still exists, cause they came to see me the other day at the Ybor City redevelopment, that they wanted some kind of a recognition. I said, "Well, why don't you come to the meeting? State your case."

GM: Where did black Cubans live in Ybor City?

CM: Pretty well scattered.

GM: Um hm. Segregated?

CM: They were not segregated. No.

GM: How do you think they were treated?

CM: More or less like the blacks. Very badly. You know, until integration came about. Blacks—if a man was a black, was walking on a sidewalk and I was walking, he had to get off the street, see.

GM: A black Cuban?

CM: Any black, any kind of black.

GM: In Ybor City, on Seventh Avenue, a black Cuban?

CM: Not so much in Ybor City.

GJ: How was it different in Ybor City than it would be in, say, the rest of Tampa?

CM: Well, of course, the Ybor City element, the Spaniards and the Cubans, were not as discriminatory as the Americans, especially what we call the typical Southerner. Are you a Southerner?

GJ: I am.

⁴ Sociedad la Union Martí-Maceo.
CM: Where are you from?
GJ: I'm from—I was raised in South Carolina. So I understand what you're talking about.
CM: And of course you know, the Cubans were treated badly by the Spaniards here, but the colored were treated—see, they used to take them out and hang 'em at the drop of a handkerchief. I remember that very—and it only took some very strong sheriffs in Tampa to say you can't take that guy until he's judged by the court as to whether he's guilty or innocent, and many of them would go out there and go to jail and open the door and hang him to the first tree.
GM: But you were saying a while ago that there was conflict within Ybor City. Could you give us some instances, or your own personal experiences?
CM: Not conflict as such. I mean the lack of communication or willingness to mix and go for a common goal, see? Now for example, if the Spaniards had had a common goal, they wouldn't have had all the problems they are having today in the health care field. See, they have two small hospitals that are not doing anything instead of one. See? They would have had only one. By the way, you notice that the Spanish club has been sold. Centro Español. Now they are talking about building one. That's foolish. The Centro Asturiano is practically empty, see? They could use that.
GM: So there was more of a rivalry rather than conflict, you would say?
CM: Not conflict. A lack of acceptance of the ideas of each other. I want to do it my way.
GM: Um hm. Right.
GJ: Do you think ultimately Ybor City could have been a stronger community if there hadn't been this rivalry?
CM: Oh, absolutely. Sure. Absolutely. The Spaniards would have been a very strong force here, because for a long time, they controlled the industries.
GJ: What about the—since you were so interested and your father was so interested in the medical aspects, did he ever talk about the doctors who were on salary with the clinics and the mutual benefit clubs?
CM: Of course, as you know, when we say Medicare in this country, Medicare basically originated in these Latin American countries. And in Europe with socialized medicine has been in existence—for example, I was in Denmark. In Denmark, for a hundred and sixty-three years, they have had socialized medicine as we have it here. And of course, the Latin groups all had the so-called sociedades that provided care, hospitalization, because one of the things that we are talking about—cultural background—these people were very proud. They did not want anybody to give them anything. So if they had a child that was sick, they wanted to be able to take it to a hospital where they felt they
were paying. If his wife was sick, the same thing was true.

But in order to do that, they formed these so-called prepaid groups, which now we know today, like the Kaiser group in California. And we have them here; you've probably seen this advertisement that's in the paper now, the (inaudible) group. That they're going to take care of everybody if you turn your Medicare card over to them, which is a prepaid program that originated here in Ybor City from the beginning. That's the first thing. Centro Asturiano, Centro Español—go back to 1890 and 1895, 1902, the Cuban Club, the Italian Club.

GJ: Well, now the doctors who worked on salary for this, for the clinics and the hospitals, wasn't there some sort of discrimination by the American Medical Association about these doctors?

CM: Absolutely correct. Not only discrimination. They could not belong to the Hillsborough Medical Society, and if any doctor in that organization was found to be practicing what they call contract medicine—even today, you know, that's looked upon by the medical profession. None of that. Not as bad as—so many of the doctors who worked, like Dr. [G.H.] Altree in Tampa, who was connected with the Central Asturiano, and Dr. [M.R.] Winton, who was connected with the Centro Español, they were ostracized.

GJ: Are they still living?

CM: No, they've passed. Dr. Winton was—

GM: One of the giants of the mutual aid was Jose Avellanal⁵. Did you know him well?

CM: Oh, yes. You know, his son just passed away recently.

GM: Right. I'm talking about the father.

CM: I was very close to him, because at that time I was working at the bank, and he was one of my good customers and I got to know him. And being that I've always been—I've liked, been involved with doctors. He and I became very friendly. He was not only a good doctor, he was a rare species. He was a very good businessman. Doctors as a rule are not good businessmen. But he was.

GM: What about his son?

CM: Huh?

GM: His son.

CM: Of course his son was completely—I remember when he—when I was going to

⁵ Dr. José Ramón Avellanal. He also co-founded La Gaceta and owned a cigar company.
school, and that was during World War I, that he shot this little German boy in the eye with a little air rifle. He was the only son. It was a terrible thing for that family, because his father was such a wonderful individual.

*Side 1 ends; side 2 begins*

GJ: Do you have any reminiscences about the Gonzales-Toyes Clinic?

CM: The Gonzales—in addition to the clinics that the clubs had, like the Centro Español and the Centro Asturiano, their own hospitals—the Gonzales Clinic was one of the number of clinics that were independent that supplied the membership by prepayment medical services, and they had their own clinic there. They did a very good job for many years, but of course it became obsolete because hospitals became very modern, very expensive, and the facilities there were out of date, and the people who had been instrumental in building it passed away. And Mrs. Gonzales, who is now Mrs. Benez, was not—

GJ: Um hm.

CM: Do you know her?

GJ: Well, I'm going to talk with her on Thursday.

CM: Ah, well, you talk to her. Mrs. Benez—between us, she's a very fine person. She's formerly a nurse, but she didn't have the management technique or background to operate an operation of that kind. Operating a hospital is one of the most difficult. I've been involved in that for many years. One of the most difficult businesses you have to contend with, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And, unfortunately, when the product is people, and when they make a mistake, the people die. And that could be very serious.

GM: I'm interested in discussing Ybor City within the framework of traditional American history, World War I in Ybor City. What are your reminiscences?

CM: Well, I think that World War I was a very tragic thing, because it took a lot of the young people from here. The only reason I didn't go is because I had lost my father, and if you had a family, you were exempt—and so-called ship workers and essential industries. And then at that time, one of the things that caused a tremendous impact here was the flu epidemic.

GM: Right, influenza.

CM: Thousands of people died, particularly young people. Talking about the Cuban Club, the ballroom of the Cuban Club was being used as an emergency hospital. They had hundreds of people there laying on the floor. They would die like that. (snaps his fingers three times) And they couldn't do anything for them. I was working at the bank, and you know, fortunately the man that operated that bank had been a former eye and ear
and nose specialist, and he required that all of us, every two hours, we would go to the
bathroom and inhale water with salt. And none of the employees of that bank contracted
flu, and all around us, people were dying. Of course we were exposed, like he said,
talking to the customers, you know, all day long. You know, people would cough and
moan, but we were very fortunate.

GM: What about Armistice Day in Ybor City?

CM: Oh, fantastic. (laughs) It was wild. Wild.

GM: Where'd you go that evening?

CM: Oh, right up and down Seventh Avenue. See in those days people used to walk a lot.
They used to have these concerts on Saturday night. That's how you'd meet the girls, you
know. All the girls would walk up in this direction and the boys would walk up in this
direction, and they would hail each other and stop and talk and—

GM: The aftermath of the war also brought Prohibition, the Volstead Act.

CM: That was the worst thing that ever happened, in my opinion, in this country for the
disrespect of law.

GM: Ybor City was dry, I take it.

CM: When I was a child, you know, anytime anybody said that you violated a federal
law, people just dreaded being accused of anything like that, but when Prohibition came
and everybody used to drink on the side and had a bootlegger, violating the law became
a lot of jokes, you see, and of course it spread on. The disrespect for law in this country—
which has been growing, as you know, and that's why the crime rate has gone—I believe
the beginning of that was the Volstead Act. You cannot prohibit people to do things that
they feel that they are entitled to. Especially when it's prevailing all over the world.

GM: Ybor City was pretty wide open, I understand.

CM: Yes.

GM: Uh huh.

CM: I can remember. (laughs)

GM: Personal anecdotes?

CM: Well, of course, the red light district was across the street from Seventh Avenue.

GM: Uh huh, right. Was this the El Dorado and the Imperial?
CM: Oh, we all went to the Imperial, we always went to—

GM: Comment on that a little bit.

CM: We talk about all the girls dancing nude now—see, they were doing that a long time ago. There was no difference.

GM: Right. And Fort Brooke was pretty wide open too, I guess.

CM: That was a red light district like you see in Europe. You been to Europe?

GM: Um hm.

CM: You've been to Amsterdam?

GM: No.

CM: Don't know Amsterdam, you know, you been in—not Madrid, but every other city in Spain. Course that's accepted, and I don't know whether it's good or bad. I was in Panama and they have a red light district, and I was questioning that and they said, "Mr. Medina, if we didn't have this red light district, our wives in this city would be in danger, because all these sailors that come through here, they're just wild, and we've found that this is something that we have to accept as such."

GM: Just out of curiosity, rather than prurient interest, but were most of the prostitutes Latin women or women from outside?

CM: No, they were Latin women, but the Latin women were the minority for that reason that the moral situation. They were mostly Anglo-Saxon and—

GM: Mulattos?

CM: Huh?

GM: Mulattos in Fort Brooke?

CM: Yes. There were a lot of whites, too.

GM: Right, okay, yeah.

CM: Course I was very young. This terminated just about the time that—

GM: Right. What about the—in terms of bootlegging, was one ethnic group more involved than any other?

CM: I would say that the Italians were about—probably the strongest in that group. You
heard the Capone, but background in Chicago had filtered down.

GM: Um hm. They had—yeah. In terms of retailing, would they also retail? Or how would bootleg whiskey be retailed in Ybor City?

CM: Mostly by individuals from door to door, and of course in the restaurants they served it in little demitasse cups, you know. You'd see people drinking demitasse, you'd think they were drinking coffee and they were drinking whisky, and of course the law was condoning. You see, you cannot have a violation, you cannot have prostitution. You cannot have drinking, you cannot have gambling wide open, unless the law is approving it, either undercover or openly.

GM: It was quite obvious the police were being paid off, right?

CM: Why, of course.

GM: What about bolita?

CM: Bolita, that’s gambling.

GJ: Um hm. Um hm.

CM: Yeah, that used to be a big industry here. You know, it's practically disappeared. It's a funny thing about that, how things change. When I was young, that bolita—and even when I was in the baking business, the day that the bolita would be played, we would hardly sell any bread in the lower income neighborhoods.

GJ: You mean everybody's playing their numbers?

CM: They would rather have the twenty cents to buy a number than to buy a loaf of bread. It's amazing. You could just tell it just like that. That's why I'm against gambling for the lower income groups, because it's very destructive.

GJ: Did you ever see the bolita being played, grabbing the bag and—

CM: Oh, yeah, yeah, and we'd duplicate that at the Rotary Club. Every year we'd have a benefit for the cancer child center here, and some of the old timers—they know how to do it, you know—and they pass the bag and then they cut the little ball.

GJ: When is that done?

CM: Hmm?

GJ: When is that done?

CM: Generally around spring. They charge a hundred dollars for a ticket, because mostly
goes to the university, the cancer center over at the university\(^6\), the children. Mrs. Judiths—are you familiar with her?

GM: No.

CM: Yeah, she's very dedicated; she's done a fantastic job for the children.

GM: What do you think happened with *bolita*? *Bolita*, suddenly, in the late forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s] became—particularly the forties [1940s]—became out of hand. You know, Charlie Wall and Scaglione and these guys. What do you think happened to *bolita*? Why did it become so destructive in terms of gang wars?

CM: Well, of course that is because it was a great—it was a very profitable thing, and of course, *bolita* was manipulated too, they say—as I mentioned, if a number came out that the arrangement, the number to come out ahead of time by inserting certain balls in there that could be detected, and of course, if you did that, your pay-off was very small and your profits were enormous. It's sort of like in liquor, in bootlegging; some of the liquor that was sold was just terrible. It'd kill you, and, of course it was being sold as genuine scotch and so forth and so on. Anything that is under the table lends itself to a lot of manipulation.

GJ: Well, now did a lot of the families make their own wine and so forth at home?

CM: Yes, in the earlier days, and this is particularly true more of the—not of the Spaniards or the Cubans. The ones that were the winemakers were always the Italians, who had a background and they would bring it. They used to make pretty good wine. Some of them still make it. Very few. Very few. I've had some. Course the wines that I like are dry wines. And they generally do not produce dry wines.

GJ: No, the homemade are usually kind of sweet.

GM: In terms of the political development of Ybor City, why were Latins so late at getting involved in politics do you think? It’s not really till [Nick] Nuccio and—well, in the county commission in the thirties [1930s] then, but even Nuccio and [Dick] Greco in the fifties [1950s] and sixties [1960s].

CM: Well, first, to begin with, of course, it took the second generation to get involved in that. But you know the thing that is amazing—and I've discussed that with a lot of my Anglo-Saxon friends—is that they complained very bitterly sometimes about the fact that the Latins have been mayors and have been commissioners and so forth, and I says, "You know, to me it's unbelievable that you, the majority of the people in this community, permit this condition to exist, and you're so critical when it's within your power to run for these offices."

"Oh, well, but you know, I've got a job."

\(^6\) Moffitt Cancer Center at the University of South Florida.
I say, "Well, of course; if you don't want to sacrifice yourself to reduce your income by becoming involved in politics, you have to accept that these fellows are willing to do that." Nuccio and Greco and Rodriguez and you name them, see, who have been politically pretty active in this community.

GM: How about Nick Nuccio? How would you—?

CM: He was an honest politician. I knew him. He and I used to work across the street from each other. He married Mr. Licata's daughter. If he had been a different kind of a politician, he'd be a millionaire. As it is, the poor man is living in a very small home and barely getting by, you see? Cause he was in power for a long time.

GM: What did Latins think of him?

CM: Oh, they liked him. Well, you know. Of course, he was a professional politician. I knew him very, very well. Very intimately, as a matter of fact. And he would start running—he would get elected today, and tomorrow morning, he would start running already for the next one. And I used to tell him, I said, "But how do you do it?"

He said, "Well, you know, I got to get prepared."

GM: Was he good for Tampa?

CM: I think he was good for Tampa, yes.

GM: Dick Greco?

CM: Dick Greco was a smart individual.

GM: How was he different from Nuccio?

CM: Of course, he was much better educated, and of course, Tampa was a much bigger city and was growing already. [Bob] Martinez, I think, has done an outstanding job. There's another Latin boy, which I thought at the beginning I had a question mark because he'd been such a strong union individual in the teachers' groups, you know.

GM: I once accused him of being (inaudible) of the unions.

CM: But he showed his determination that he's not going to be swayed by any particular group. Tampa's grown, of course.

GM: What about the old county commissioner system when Nuccio came to rise? How did Ybor City benefit from that? I mean, do you remember any stories when you were a young man then of Nuccio dispensing favors?
CM: Well, that's right, building parks and sidewalks and small things like that, and of course naturally he would be looking after Latin interests as much as possible. That's human nature.

GM: How about Cesar Medina? We're finally getting around to you. Give us an employment history of Cesar Medina.

CM: That's a long history. I started working in the cigar factory as assistant bookkeeper for Salvistina Vega. I worked there for about three years, and then after that, I went to work with the Bank of Ybor City in the bookkeeping department. Eventually I became the head of the foreign department of that bank, which was one of the largest departments in the city at that time. After that, in 1924, I used to keep books—beside working at the bank—for several businesses around Ybor City, and one of them was a bakery where my uncle was involved. He had a son. The son died. He wanted to get out of the business, so I bought a half interest in that bakery, which was very small.

GM: What was the name of the bakery?

CM: Two Brothers.

GM: Two Brothers. Uh huh.

CM: At that time, if they had had a psychiatric hospital they would have locked me up. Cause everybody thought I had a very good job at the bank, and was making in those days what was considered a lot of money, and this was a very small bakery, but I could see the potential.

GM: Give me an idea of a bakery business in Ybor City. Just kind of a pause for a second. What was a typical bakery like Two Brothers like—what year was this?

CM: Two Brothers Bakery was a very small bakery. They would sell maybe about a thousand dollars worth of cakes and pies and cookies and so forth, and Cuban bread, mainly. And this Gallego was one of the parties that was in partnership with my uncle and there were twenty-six or twenty-seven of these little bakeries making Cuban bread and when the war—not war, when Roosevelt came to power. NRA—do you remember the NRA days? I was the head of the Latin group, and I had a terrible time trying to keep them in line, and I got so disgusted that one day I said, "I am not making any more Cuban bread."

GM: What do you mean, keeping who in line? The unions? Or—

CM: Yeah, in other words, they couldn't—not the unions, the owners. They were fighting among themselves and cutting prices and they would even—they put a couple of bombs in some of the ovens. And I was being the secretary, I was taken downtown for interrogation and all that kind of thing. It was a mess. I said, "No more Cuban bread for me."
And they said, "You can't do that."

I said, "Well, maybe. I'm going to make American bread."

He says, "But you're a Cuban and a Spaniard, and all the Cubans—all the American bread is made by the Americans."

"Yeah," I said, "well, this Cuban is going to make American bread." So we decided to go into the American bread business. And of course they did—they threw everything at us, but they never could beat us, and we survived and we became the largest bakery in this city, eventually.

GM: Just pause for a second. To a listener in the future, a hundred years from now, not knowing what Cuban bread is, how would you describe Cuban bread?

CM: Cuban bread is a derivative of the so-called French bread, but it's different. Cuban bread is different. And of course, we were very successful in making Cuban bread—and also American bread—because we always had departed from what is being done. We always believed in something new. So we introduced a process of making Cuban bread patterned after American bread, which was using a large amount of yeast, which was very expensive and the Cuban bakeries wouldn't go for that. And also controlling fermentation with ice, which was unknown in those days, and of course, our bread was completely different. I'd say there's never been any more Cuban bread made in Tampa like that, and there never will be unless they're willing to go back to that process. And then we used brick ovens. None of this modern fast business, see, so the flavor was distinctive. And of course it sold, and of course we had a tremendous business.

GJ: Did you put the palm leaves on the bread?

CM: And then of course, when we made American bread, we made it a bread—talking about South Carolina—that was very well-liked in North and South Carolina in those days, and it was unknown in Florida, and that's what they called dough brick. Very close—it looked like cake. We used to make that in a pullman loaf, which was very difficult to bake and very expensive, and our competitors just didn't want to go into that. So the women liked it and we got the business.

GJ: Could you say why the palm leaves were used on the Cuban loaves?

CM: How is that?

GJ: Could you describe the process of putting the palm leaves on the Cuban bread?

CM: The palm leaf—the individual had to go out in the middle of the woods and cut palmetto leaves, and many times they would be bitten by rattlesnakes, which would be curled around those. It was very dangerous. And then those palm leaves were brought
into the bakery and they were soaked in water, and then when the loaf was like this, then they turn it and they put the palm leaf [on it]. And the thing that the palm leaf did, being that it had moisture, when that loaf was introduced into the oven, the moisture would explode and that would make the loaf of bread open, see. Like—that's what they called table bread. There was table bread and sandwich bread. The sandwich bread, the palm leaf wasn't used but very little, so that it would be round and softer, because otherwise you couldn't eat the sandwiches. They were too hard. And Cuban bread has no keeping qualities. Four or five hours after it's baked, gone.

GJ: Oh, so you have to buy it every day.

CM: Twice a day. We used to deliver bread twice a day to the home. We used to put it on the nail on the wall, unwrapped.

GJ: Just whack it up there.

GM: Who were your great rivals? Was it Ferlita Bakery—

CM: Pardell, Ferlita, Moré.

GJ: Moré?

CM: Moré. His father was Segunda Centrale. See, the union one time had a strike among the bakers, and they lost out, so then the union people formed their own bakery.

GM: What did—your friends must have given you a lot of static about starting American bread, huh?

CM: Oh, they none of them—

GM: But you had the last laugh.

CM: They not only gave us static, they didn't like the competition and a lot of things that were bad. I had the St. Petersburg Times running ads from my competitors telling people not to buy—to be sure where they bought their bread, that some of this bread was made in Ybor City, which was very unsanitary. Ybor City was supposed to be a dump. And my boys used to bring it in and they'd say, "Look. What are you going to do?"

I said, "I haven't got any money for that. You know what I'm going to do with it? I'm going to put it in the—you know what you do tomorrow? You go over there and you find out where this guy has got the best customers, and you work on them and take that customer away from him, because there's one thing that they understand: the pocketbook. What we want is a business. We don't want any fight." And we had boys that were fighters from the word go. I enjoyed that.

GJ: You like a good fight.
CM: I do.

GM: When did you change the name to Wholesome Bakeries?

CM: In 1941, during the Second World War.

GM: Prior to that, what was the name of your—

CM: Bamby.

GM: B-a-m-b-i?

CM: B-a-m-b-y. Best American Made Bread Yet. That originated up in your part of the world, in Atlanta.

GJ: Oh, it did. My goodness. I never knew.

CM: It was a franchise name.

GM: What happened to many of the—well, two questions. What happened to many of your competitors, and what likely would have happened to you had you remained in the Cuban bread business?

CM: Oh, I would have disappeared. I would have disappeared. As a matter of fact, when I went into the American bread business in the thirties [1930s], there were eight or ten bakeries on the west coast of Florida that were very strong. When we merged with Continental Baking Company in 1961, there were only two bakeries of any size left on the west coast, and the bakeries—this is something that is going to be happening in the hospital business. That's why I'm retiring.

The small bakeries did not have the expertise in management available to them, and they disappeared. See, Wholesome was a national name. We had eighty-nine plants in the United States. I could buy flour and make a profit without even baking it faster than my competitors because I'd buy a barge-load of flour—and I was the only one that could bring a barge-load down the Mississippi. So when you become that big, the little fellows just can't compete.

In the hospital business in the next ten years, the small hospital will disappear, because the investor-owned hospital in this country has taken over. Hospital Corporation of America, American Medical International, Humana, so forth. In Tampa right now, look at the number of hospitals that we have are investor-owned. Ten years ago, they weren't here. Centro Asturiano is going down. Centro Español is going down. Tampa General is practically broke.

GM: Was there an event or a period where even second, third generation Latins began
eating white bread rather than Cuban bread?

CM: We were responsible for teaching the Latin to eat American bread, because none of the stores in Ybor City carried American bread. We used to sell bread for a nickel so that the kids would get accustomed to it, and then the kids didn't want to take Cuban bread to school anymore because the other kids would laugh at them, see?

GJ: Oh.

CM: So that's how we gradually educated; it was a matter of educating a population—

GM: Was this thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s]?

CM: —to eating American bread.

GJ: When did you move out of Ybor City?

CM: My home?

GJ: Um hm.

CM: Well, I lived in East Seminole Heights for a long—about twenty years ago. I moved to the island—that's Davis Island. And then I moved to the Harbor House on the Bayshore [Boulevard], and that's where I live now. I live in Howe Apartments.

Like I used to tell a doctor friend of mine, my walking partner—I've always walked—I said, "What a wonderful country this is. Can you imagine two kids from Ybor City, you and I, whose fathers had nothing—" his father was a barber and my father was a lector. I said, "Now, Lenny, on the Bayshore in Tampa's most aristocratic neighborhood, where in the world could that ever happen except in the United States?" So we hear people criticizing. Boy, this is the greatest. I've been in fifty-five different countries because I used to work beside—some of my interest has been in international work with the Chamber of Commerce, and I used to be representing the United States in the United—in the Chamber of Commerce of America. So I've been—and all these countries are beautiful, but boy, like living in the United States, no way.

GM: Seems an eloquent note to close on. Do you have any final questions? I've kept you a long time.

CM: I've told you a lot of stories.

GJ: You sure have, and you told them very well, too.

GM: We are most appreciative. Thank you very much.

CM: It was my pleasure.
end of interview