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Richard Gonzmart, Casey Gonzmart oral history interview by Andrew Huse, March 1, 2002

Richard Gonzmart (Interviewee)

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Andrew Huse: Good morning. On behalf of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics, I’m Andrew Huse, and I’m here with Casey Gonzmart today, co-owner of the Columbia Restaurant [Tampa, Florida]. We’re just going to talk a little bit about his history, the history of the restaurant, et cetera. I guess we’ll start out just by thanking you first of all to take aside your time. If you hear all the noise around us, that’s just the hustle and bustle of the restaurant business, and it doesn’t stop for anybody. Let’s just get started. First of all, tell us about growing up and everything under the shadow of the Columbia Restaurant.

Casey Gonzmart: The Columbia, of course, has been here nearly a hundred years. My great grandfather came to this country and started a small coffee shop serving those people that were working in the Ybor City area in the cigar industry, which was the main industry of the time in the early 1900s. Went through many changes over the years. We’ve grown, and fortunately Ybor City has prospered, and we prospered along with Ybor City.

My history began in the 1950s here. I was born in Ybor City and was able to visit the restaurant with my family, my parents and grandparents, and basically grew up in Ybor City. I’ve seen the Columbia come a long way, and I’m fortunate to say that we’ve been able to participate in a lot of the new things that are going on now. We’re delighted to be part of it. The food and the type of menu that we serve in my time, as I was a child is still the same food that we’re serving today. In the year 2000, the Columbia has not changed, and we’re very proud of that.

We are in the midst of a major restoration, every room to its original style. We’re practically complete with that. We hope to maintain this building and the influence it has on Tampa and Ybor City for decades to come. I hope that my children, along with my
brother’s children, will follow in the footsteps of their great grandfather and be part of what is Ybor City and what the future will bring. I skirted your actual question. I never answered it. I was just trying to set a little tone for how long we’ve been here. I did mention that I’m from the 1950s on.

AH: George [Guito] is going to give us a full tour so we’re going to get lots of the older stuff. We can talk about the older stuff.

Richard Gonzmart: Is George here today?

AH: No, I’d just like for you guys to talk about just how you got started. Then we’ll just go wherever you want.

RG: March 21, 1953 I was born.

AH: I was born twenty years and one day later.

CG: Oh, really?

AH: Yes, twenty years later and one day sooner. March 20, 1973.

RG: First day of spring.

[Participants speak to another person]

AH: Okay, welcome back. We have Richard Gonzmart here, too. We have both the brothers, and I guess, first we’ll just talk a little bit about how they got into the business and what it was like growing up around the Columbia. We’ll just take it from there. Richard?

RG: I can say basically, we were born into the business. I can first remember being four years old, touring the kitchen with our grandfather showing us how to select fresh red snapper and teaching us about quality. You can say it started at birth.

CG: Whenever we came to the Columbia, we were often here with family and friends. We started learning about the business from the ground up. As we proceeded to go to school, we would work here in the summers, and often times we’d work in the kitchen with the chefs, other times in the dining room. It just seemed like a normal types of lifestyle to us. We didn’t know any different. If our family had been farmers, we might have been out in the field, but in our case we were in this beautiful restaurant, and we were just able to enjoy being part of Ybor City, being part of the way things were growing and changing all the time.

The amount of people that were attracted to this restaurant from all walks of life makes it an interesting place to work and be in every day. Every day the different environment, we have a great amount of people that come in just to visit on a one-time occasion, but we
have a lot of local people, people from the Tampa Bay area and beyond that come and visit regularly. They come time and again for special occasions when they’re entertaining friends. They come just to have a great dinner or lunch. It’s more of an atmosphere where you get to know a lot of the people. You get to be able to cater to their interests and their needs individually. That’s part of what we enjoy doing. Not a day go by that we don’t see someone in one of our dining rooms that we stopped to chat with or talk to because we know them from another time or another place and they’ve come to visit the Columbia like it was part of their own family history. They often tell us stories about occasions that have gone by in their family when they’ve celebrated special events here with us. They remember the Columbia as being a very special place. We have people who visit now that were visiting years ago as children, and they’re here with their children.

I think that’s what’s great about Columbia Restaurant and being part of Ybor City and being part of Tampa. We are part of history. That’s really the exciting facet for me when I come to work. I’m always able to enjoy a lot about my customers as well as just enjoy the fact that we’re working here and serving good food and giving great service to the people.

RG: It seems, though, that we started officially at the age of twelve working here when we were able to start working the summers. Our first supervisor was my brother, who, at the age of seventeen years old was already a veteran. We started in the kitchen. That’s what I always enjoyed doing was working in the kitchen and learning how all the foods were prepared from the old masters that were back from the 1940s that were here in the heydays when the Columbia became world-famous, when our grandfather brought it into the prominence in 1935 with the first air-conditioned dining room in Tampa and the beautiful patio that we’re in 1937. We had the good fortune of having worked with some of the great chefs. We remember the flavors of yesterday, and we’re able to preserve them today. Hopefully, my daughters, who started working at the age of twelve, also know the business and front and back of the house. It’s important that we keep the flavors and the tradition[s] that have been going on now for nearly a hundred years.

AH: That’s no small feat, keeping the quality of food. You were talking about the great Pijuan, would be the legendary chef who actually cooked for the King of Spain. Also, Ybor City’s future was not always assured either. When you guys just started out in the 1950s, things were kind of slacking off, and Ybor City had seen better days at that point. By no means was it a sure thing that the Columbia would even be here many years from then. How did you all make it?

CG: You’re right. Ybor City went through a major transition in the fifties. There was a federal project called Urban Renewal, which devastated much of the neighborhood. It took many of the homes out. A lot of the people who lived here their whole lives were displaced and had to move to other parts of the city to live. The retail stores suffered because their customer base was destroyed. The industry, being the cigar business, was at that point, falling into the hands of the bigger companies that use a lot of automated equipment, and the handwork was being taken over by machinery. We were part of the victims of the industrial revolution as well as the Urban Renewal. The Columbia
Restaurant, fortunately to the perseverance of our father Cesar Gonzmart. He was able to bring in another aspect beyond the quality food and service that we were proud of. He brought in the aspect of entertainment.

Our father was a violinist by trade, before he became a restaurateur. He was educated at the University of Havana. He headed the orchestra. He traveled the country with a Latin band and performed the major cities throughout the world. When he came back to Ybor City in the fifties [1950s] and we at that point were finding Ybor City changing, he brought in that aspect, which was a natural magnet for our customers. People came from all around, not only to see the beautiful Columbia and eat here, but also to enjoy his violin and the entertainment that he offered. He brought that flavor to the Columbia, and that’s part of what helped it survive.

RG: He was known as Cesar Gonzmart and his magic violin. He brought the romance, brought the people back into Ybor. Like Casey said, when Urban Renewal came, and the families moved away, the neighborhoods were destroyed. Those cigar workers that worked so hard rolling cigars, their sons and daughters became the leaders. Look at our chief judge Denis Alvarez. Governor Martinez, all these families, their grandfathers and fathers worked in the Columbia and the cigar industries. We’re fortunate that we’re part of the history of Florida. We had a gentleman named Serafin Martinez, forty-eight years as a server working here. His son becomes the governor of Florida and says something about the dedication these people had towards raising their kids and wanting better. That’s what happened, really, with the cigar industry. Their children went on to become something, and then the industry became automated like Casey said and moved to Honduras and Dominican Republic where the workforce was cheaper.

AH: It was difficult getting through the Urban Renewal days. What’s the hardest thing for you guys, running the Columbia empire, since it does span far outside of Ybor City. What’s the toughest thing for you guys?

RG: The best thing to me is when I receive a comment card back from a person that says, “I started going to the Columbia in 1943, and it’s as good as ever.” That’s the toughest part: living up to the standards that were set by our great-grandfather. There’s a lot of pressure to make sure that the ambiance hasn’t changed, that we haven’t commercialized it, that we haven’t selected fast food items, that we take that extra step, do things the way they were in the old days from the beginning. Simmering the garbanzo bean soup for hours, made fresh daily, using the freshest products. Back in the day when our grandfather was operating the restaurant, you really didn’t have a lot of refrigeration, and product was bought fresh daily. We still follow the same standards and try to buy only the best product. It would be easy to cut corners, do things faster, but then you start losing. I think every day we’re judged, and we’re as good as our last meal. We want that to always be the best meal.

CG: Our customers, many of them, know the menu as well as we do. We present them with a menu at this, or any other location, and they set it aside, and they say, I know what I’m having. When they come into one of our restaurants, they anticipate that flavor of the
Columbia, the quality that Richard was commenting on, and we’ve been fortunate enough that our mother Adela has compiled a Columbia Restaurant cookbook based on many of her own recipes and recipes of the famous chefs that have worked here over the years: Pijuan, Salapico and other individuals. We refer to that as our bible. If we ever have a question about the ingredients of any of our famous dishes, we don’t refer back to any other source. We come back to my mother’s cookbook.

Richard and I always keep a copy in our office so if we have to find out if it should have a pinch of salt or a pinch of pepper, we know exactly how much it’s supposed to have, because our mother Adela has been able to put this together with some wonderful stories about the Columbia and Ybor City. It’s into multiple printings. The cookbook has been a major success. It’s been the number one best seller, and it’s amazing to think that a commercial cookbook can be something that a restaurant would rely on, but that’s history. That’s why we like to go back to our cookbook to find out how to cook the right way. It’s exciting.

RG: It took us twenty years to get our mother to do the cookbook. We would sit there, and she’d give us a recipe, but she’d leave out some minor ingredient, like maybe rice in arroz con pollo. She wouldn’t always give us the exact recipes, but now we have it. She worked hard, and we documented it. Like Casey said, it is the bible. We’ll preserve that flavor and that history for the next generations.

AH: It turned out great. Just the format of the book and everything is really well done. Between your mother and Ferdie Pacheco, you guys have a great combination there. It really did exceed expectations. What were you guys expecting? It came out in 1995?

CG: I think we originally thought to produce a booklet simply with our major recipes in there just so we could have something to pass out when people asked about our food. Then with the collaboration of Ferdie Pacheco, the fight doctor who my mother grew up with in Ybor City, the two of them started recounting stories of their youth. When they were together, they always had a new anecdote about something that had occurred way back in the old days. They started putting it on paper. They accumulated more and more stories. Pretty soon, there was little room for recipes so we started expanding the scope of the project. Between the two of them, they had so many stories that every other chapter, we go from a recipe to a story, to a recipe to a story. Some people have enjoyed reading the book for the stories and don’t even comment on the recipes any longer, when it started to be a cookbook in the first place. We just think it’s been a big success in that respect. It tells the story of Ybor City and the Columbia and gives you a good knowledge of what happened in our youth in particular, and before that in our mother’s youth, which goes back into the early part of the 1920s and so forth. It’s an exciting book, and I enjoy reading it. Whenever we have to give a gift, we always turn to the cookbook to give it to our special friends.

RG: The popularity of the cookbook took us now into the twenty-first century. We find that people wanted to make it even easier, so we started preparing our 1905 salad dressing, prepared in a bottle so you don’t even have to go to the cookbook. You’re able
to shake it up, and it’s the exact recipe. It has the flavor of the Columbia. We’ve prepared
our sangria mix as well. We realize the popularity from the cookbook. The customers
wanted more, and we’re fulfilling the needs and desires of our customers. We’re always
looking for what they’re looking, and hopefully what we might come out with for the one
hundredth anniversary is more photos, more recipes of the Columbia, and some of the
twenty-first century recipes that have been introduced with the changing taste of the
public. We have the old ones all preserved, and we’ve added new items over the years
that have become popular as well.

AH: The success of the cookbook is well deserved. You were talking about that it
preserves the recipes but also preserves all that history and all those stories that otherwise
would have just become part of history.

RG: If they weren’t written down, we would have never remembered them. Casey and I
reading the book, we both learned a lot about the past. We thank our mother and Dr.
Pacheco for helping preserve that history.

AH: You must have been about five years old when you made up your mother’s mind to
come back to Ybor City by asking her, I don’t remember what city you were in. You said,
“Do they have grass here, Mom?”

CG: We used to travel with my father when his orchestra was traveling around different
cities. We were up north in Chicago at the time. Being a Florida boy, I had never seen
snow. We were in the middle of the city. There was concrete and snow, and that’s when
my comment came. I said, “Mom, I don’t remember what grass looks like.” She
immediately realized that for us to be a family and Richard’s imminent birth, we wanted
to be able to grow up and be a part of the fabric of what is Tampa, that we needed to
come back and live and have roots in one place, rather than be traveling around, playing
from city to city with an orchestra.

It was an instrumental thing that my father did come back. Cesar, as we mentioned,
Richard and I are fortunate to have this restaurant preserved, and I think that he was a key
instrument for our family to be able to persevere and get to this period of time. We think
of him daily. Fortunately, Ybor City and its revival and how he would enjoy being part of
this. He’s looking down on us now, and we’re very proud of what has occurred in Tampa
in general and what the Columbia’s been able to do. We’ve always felt we’ve been an
anchor for the community. I think this is an issue that we feel very responsible. We feel
that we need to keep this preservation going on. Richard serves on many committees, as
well as I do, to try and ensure that this continues. At this point, people say that we look at
life through rose-colored glasses many times, but I don’t think that we have ever
anticipated a better future for Ybor City and Tampa than there is at this current time.
We’re excited about what’s going on.

RG: All businesses have their cycles, and we survived the Great Depression of the 1920s.
That was a very difficult time. In the book they talk about the one day that my
grandfather had receipts of $13. We survived the Urban Renewal, and we even survived
the 1970s in Ybor City when everybody moved out of Ybor City that had been here. We’ve been very fortunate. It’s through the dedication of the family to put back in and make sure we maintain it. The future now is wonderful for Ybor City. We’re looking forward to being again that leader in the area. The guests that come remember the history of Tampa and what Ybor City was about.

AH: It really is amazing the way that the area has rebounded. It seems like that cookbook really came out at a good time, too, just as things were starting to swing the other way here in Ybor City. It must have given you a lift with all these other things, with the sangria, and all these other things that you’re marketing.

RG: The excitement to me, though, is seeing that Ybor City has come full circle with the opening of the apartments, eight hundred residents moving in, town homes being built, the old homes from the 1920s being refurbished. You’re going to see the old Ybor with the people living here. No, it will never have those thousands of people walking down the streets like they used to, but they’ll have the people living, shopping, and being part of Ybor City again. That’s where the future is. That will take us here for the next fifty years.

CG: We’re looking at the surrounding area, the growth in the residential, the growth in retail, and now in many of the buildings. The old cigar factories where workers used to make cigars by hand are being converted into upscale office space. In the near future between the old buildings being refurbished and new buildings going up, in the next few months we expect to add over a thousand professional and high tech jobs all within a few blocks of our restaurant where we’re speaking right now.

I think that’s another major component to resurgence of Ybor City. You’ll have people living here in town homes and apartments, people working in newly refurbished and newly built buildings, and you’ll have an opportunity to have what I call an upscale urban experience. We do party until the wee hours, and we all know that there’s a great night life here. There will be people from having a cup of coffee in the morning until having the last call in one of the restaurants or bars and having a full circle of being able to work, live, and enjoy what is unique now in Tampa. I don’t think any other area can begin, maybe in Florida, to offer what Ybor City has to offer. The Columbia is right in the heart of it.

RG: We’ve been putting back into our business as well. You see the buildings have been renovated. We’re just completing a five thousand square foot addition to the restaurant, a brand new kitchen, state of the art, the most modern equipment available to better service our customers. After we move the existing kitchen that is the original from 1935, we’ll be adding two more dining rooms. You’re showing the first generation opening, the second generation, our grandfather, brought the prominence with the fine dining, and along with our father, the third generation that built the Siboney [Dining Room]. Casey and I along with my daughters who are working with me, we’ve added the new kitchen. Every generation has had to do something. We ran out of room so we had to go behind us. That’s what’s the exciting part, that each generation has contributed a significant part to making the restaurant be better.
AH: Definitely. When we were just talking about Urban Renewal and how Ybor City has turned around amazingly just in the last ten to fifteen years, the Columbia really had a lot to do with that. It wouldn’t be an empty boast to say that you guys played a big part in it. Your father Cesar, that was one of his almost obsessions, bringing Ybor City back to prominence. He had fantasies about bloodless bullfighting and Spanish-walled cities and everything. Unfortunately, it just wasn’t the right time. Here we are, and who would have guessed that we would have this huge entertainment complex right down the street from you. Your mother served in the Chamber of Commerce for Ybor City. You guys couldn’t really be more prominent in its resurgence here.

CG: On the Chamber of Commerce, coincidentally—she served, but so did my father, and so did my brother Richard, and our brother Cesar also. In this year, I happen to be serving as the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Our family, going back all these decades, has always believed in what is Ybor City beyond our walls, not only what occurs in the Columbia, but we think what’s good for Ybor City is good for the Columbia and vice versa.

We have to mention, also, the trolley, which is being built as we speak. They’re bringing back eight old time trolley cars on railroad tracks, not on rubber tires, but on railroad tracks, which will be connecting Ybor City through the Channel district and on to the convention center in downtown. This will be operational within the next twelve to fourteen months so people will be able to get a flavor again of history, of trolley cars that operated here many, many years ago, now in the new century. We’re excited about that being a new amenity. It will be delivering people that are going to the convention center and vice versa, people that are coming to Ybor City. We expect hundreds of thousands of people to take advantage of that.

AH: Sounds great. The kitchen back here we were just talking about is a great add-on too, because I was just reading in the cookbook how waiters hated to be assigned to this room because it’s such a long walk from the kitchen. Now, the kitchen is going to be stretching all the way behind here in the restaurant so there won’t be this pretend death march, as they used to call it.

RG: The worst room is the Siboney. You have a table on Seventh [Avenue] and Twenty-first [Street], and the kitchen is on Sixth [Avenue] and Twenty-second [Street]. Many a time when you had that server serving that table and the customer asks for an extra slice of lemon, he had to walk through so many dining rooms to get that lemon. It was very inefficient, but now the kitchen will be located directly behind with entrances to each dining room. It should be much more efficient.

AH: I’ve heard rumors and different stories about upstairs rooms and little gambling joints and so forth. Are you ever going to do anything with that stuff? Obviously, gambling joints were quite a long time ago.

RG: We don’t know anything.
AH: You’ve got all that upstairs. There must be a lot of history up there because I remember interviewing you and you saying how Jackie Robinson had to be smuggled in here during the days of segregation and brought to one of those rooms.

CG: They brought him in through a back door and served him in the Siboney, but the two rooms you speak about go back to the days of Prohibition, and they’re the hideaways. They still exist, but right now we have the situation where we only have one stairway, and we need to plan an escape. The rooms were fantastic, a little doorway that stands about four feet high. You kind of sneak in there. That’s where they used to serve liquor back in Prohibition. It was many a local judge and city official that used to lunch and dinner up there.

AH: Yes, definitely. Prohibition was much like bolita back in the old days where people just found it convenient to look the other way most of the time. What else is in the future for the Columbia then?

CG: We are already the largest Spanish restaurant in the world. We’re the largest restaurant in Florida. Richard commented we’re one full city block. You can walk from twenty-first Street to Twenty-second Street and still be within the walls of the Columbia Restaurant, but with the addition of the new kitchen, we have better production. We’ll be able to have the same quality food in a more efficient manner; therefore it calls for us to add more seating. I think at that point, what we’ll be doing is building our dining room that is going to be hopefully preserved here for many years to come and add the quality atmosphere that’s already in the other dining rooms in a new dining room. We’re looking forward to that so I think that’s going to be part of what’s going to be here for the future.

RG: The interesting thing, this will be the first dining room built in forty-three years. Casey and I look at the Siboney built in 1958 as being relatively new. There are very few restaurants in Florida that are that old. The thoughts are, what are we going to make these two dining rooms look like to capture that Spanish flavor? You’re going to know you’re in the Columbia. It’s an exciting project, that next phase.

AH: It sure must be.

CG: We do a lot of research. We traveled abroad recently and have taken a lot of pictures in Spain and tried to bring back more of the flavor of the continent to the United States. We think the people we’ll be very pleased with it. If you look at our family business, you rarely see one business that perseveres for so many generations, now to my children and my brother’s children of being the fifth generation, same location, same business, serving the same type of quality food for nearly a hundred years. Our biggest goal is to maintain that level of quality and make sure that our customers get the very best experience they can get. We’ll be bigger, better, and hopefully the people enjoy it as they have in the past.

AH: It really is amazing. Most restaurants don’t last five or ten years. It’s just amazing that this one has grown into such an institution and everything to where just the statue
behind us here has become a symbol of Ybor City. What do you have planned for the hundredth anniversary? I know for the seventy-fifth there was a line that must have gone several blocks because you were giving out free food.

RG: We celebrate in the month of September the Columbia anniversary. We roll back the prices like they used to be. The hundredth anniversary, we’ve been thinking about it for probably ten years. We’re getting nervous now because we’re four years away. It will have been fourteen to fifteen years planning it. We would love to have the King of Spain come visit, and we’re working on that, but we don’t want to make it a one-day event. We want to make it probably a two-year event, starting six months out and ending six months after the actual hundredth anniversary. It’s such an important date. We plan on having a lot of big functions to recognize and honor us. Again, we’re Florida’s oldest restaurant. It’s going to be exciting.

CG: We’re going back to our history. I can remember fifty years when we had our half a century anniversary. I have recollections of special things that my grandfather did for the people of Tampa and things that I remember as a child. That’s the type of things we want to create between Richard and I and our families now for the hundredth. Nearly fifteen years of planning, we’re going to have an extended celebration. I think that everyone’s going to be able to participate in one way or the other. We have made some contact with the King of Spain. We think it would be a tremendous tribute to Tampa and Ybor City if we could have him visit us during that year and possibly have an official reception with him and our mayor and have a recognition of our mother country, so to speak, here at the Columbia restaurant.

AH: That wouldn’t be the first time Franco himself—your parents actually met him.

CG: We had to go to Spain to meet him in those days. He didn’t travel to meet us. We’re going to try and go the extra mile to see if the king will find time in his busy schedule to come all the way here to Tampa from Madrid and visit with us here. There’s a possibility of that, but that’s only one of the things that we have planned. Of course it would be a monumental thing to have the reigning monarch of a major country visit our little restaurant, but we would be very proud.

AH: It would be quite appropriate, too. It’s been forty years since your parents met Franco. To have the king come across the ocean would be so appropriate because so many people could have written this place off and Ybor City off for so many years. You guys persevered, and I sure hope he comes to visit you. He won’t be sorry.

CG: We’re looking forward to it.

AH: Anything else you guys want to add?

RG: We’re excited that we’ve been able to put back into the restaurant here, total renovation starting in the café. The tough part is preserving that look and going back and looking at the old photos. The original bar from 1905, we had it hanging from the rafters
so we could rebuild the storage and the plumbing. It’s been a two-year love affair that we’ve had and had the privilege and honor of preserving this historical building. Getting ready for that hundredth anniversary, where we sit today, it’s probably the way it looked back in 1937 when it was built. The only difference is, the roof used to slide off. If you think about that time, it was very innovative. The only problem you have was that in Tampa, thunderstorms came from nowhere so any photo that we saw from 1937 and 1940 never had a table sitting in the middle. We have a permanent roof here, but we’ve been able to preserve, rewire, put new air conditioning in, and the Columbia is as youthful a hundred-year-old restaurant as you’ll find in the world.

CG: I think that beyond all that we’ve spoken about, that our staff here, particularly in Ybor City, has so much to do with maintaining the traditions of the Columbia Restaurant. We’ve had famous chefs in the past. Our current chef Daco Duarte has been with us for eighteen years. We have a great general manager, George Guito, who started here as a teenager and has persevered at the Columbia Restaurant for over thirty-five years and now is in charge of what is occurring and what people enjoy within the dining room.

That’s the type of thing that our customers have come to expect. Our people that work here with us know the customers, their tastes, what they like, and are able to provide that for them consistently, day in and day out. I think that if you look at it and see the amount of people that have been working here for many years, many people have worked here for decades, and the type of staff that we have, we’ve very proud of that because a lot of restaurants would be happy to have just a few people that do that. We have dozens of members of the dining and kitchen staff that have been with us for many years. I think that’s important.

RG: We created a hall of fame; annually we induct an individual that had a significant impact on the restaurant. This last year, the longest employee that we ever had working for us, our pianist Henry Tudela retired after sixty-four years. Guinness World Book of records recognized him as the longest gig. You look at a young lady who’s worked here now forty-four years, Lulamae Tollaman. It’s a family affair. They’re family. Many of these people were here working when we were young boys. You look at the entire staff of the Columbia Restaurant; over twenty-five percent have been with us ten years or more. In the industry, that is uncalled for. You will not see that.

AH: You mentioned Serafin Martinez earlier and his son Bob and how much of a gap there is between waiter and governor. We have to think, a waiter in the Columbia in his day was the equivalent of being a New York Yankee. It was the top of the profession. And being a waiter wasn’t just a simple fetching or gofer type of job. They didn’t use pads; it was all in their memory. One waiter boasted in an interview that he made a bet with a customer for a hundred dollars, and he took the orders of thirty people at a table and didn’t need to scratch down one thing. Pijuan, the original great chef of the Columbia, was buried with a menu.

RG: There are so many wonderful stories and you talk about those professionals. I think of a great server who worked here, Mr. Ramonin Lopez, who retired after his second
A pacemaker was installed at the age of eighty-three. At the age of eighty-three he still didn’t write down an order and didn’t use a tray, it was all arm service. His son told him, dad, I think it is time to retire. His son was chief of neurology at the University of Miami. There’s so many great stories you can tell about the history of the Columbia and the people that worked here. It’s been a great love affair that we have had and will continue and the next generations are going to be having that same impact.

AH: The building itself has a life of its own, on top of all the workers and everything else. I read an article not so long ago, about. I’m not sure, and I think it was in the eighties where a marble bar was discovered behind a wall. It was actually boarded up during Prohibition, right?

RG: The bar was actually in the patio. It existed when the room was built. But, many complaints from Baptist ministers that used to come on Sunday to my grandfather, said they couldn’t have dinner or lunch in a dining room that had a bar. So they covered up the bar in I think 1940. I’ve heard the stories, along with George Guito, who is the general manager, at the time was an hourly employee and said let’s go find that bar. It was covered up with glass picture. He said, “Your dad is going to kill us.” So we broke the glass, and thank God the bar was there. The bar actually was a bank teller’s window from a bank that had gone out of business during the Depression. So it’s part of the history in existence. Who knows what’s behind some of the other walls here.

AH: Yeah, exactly. There could be anything. It really does have that kind of intriguing atmosphere. We pulled around the back to park and saw this meticulously boarded up door with a little bit of stained glass over it, and I said, “What a great snapshot.” This is kind of like the Columbia right here. It’s patched together over the years, very meticulously, all of the pieces of wood fit perfect in this really kind of ornate reminder here with the painted glass—

RG: That will be a part of the Columbia expansion as well in the future. We have wonderful plans for that that we will be rolling out shortly.

AH: What about you’re other concepts? I know Cha-Cha Coconuts was one of them.

RG: We have the Columbia and we took that flavor because people use to drive from Gainesville, from Orlando, to the Columbia all of the time. We took the flavor of the Columbia, our dad along with our grandfather, opened the Columbia in St. Armand’s Circle in 1958. It is the oldest restaurant in Sarasota now. We opened in St. Augustine in 1983, and took a replica of the patio dining room that we are in and built that. It sits five hundred people in the historical district. We have a Columbia at St. Petersburg at the pier, a Columbia in Sand Key, Clearwater Beach. And Disney invited us to build a Columbia in the town of Celebration. Walt Disney once envisioned Epcot to become that experimental prototype community of tomorrow with a Buck Rogers theme, actually became an Andy and Mayberry town with all the homes with porches. That is our latest Columbia; it opened three years ago in 1998.
AH: And the community is big enough to sustain it?

CG: It is growing by leaps and bounds and is experiencing its best year ever right now.

RG: That has been the excitement, but we are very careful where we take the Columbia, where we open the Columbia because it is our family, it is our name, it is our heritage, and we are very proud of that.

AH: It is not a kind of disposable thing, like a Burger King, if it doesn’t work out, you just kind of say oh well. The Sand Key, I actually visited that restaurant before. It is beautiful. It is right on the water. It is obvious that you guys took a lot of time and investment to place it in an attractive location.

RG: That was our dad’s dream—that location as well. He loved the water, and he was a part of the construction of that restaurant. That opened in 1989, and is a beautiful restaurant like you say. What we found in all of our remodeling of the Columbia is we are capturing that flavor of the original one. We are taking all of the old photos of the history of the Columbia, of the family members that founded it, the antiques, and we are trying to get that flavor in Sarasota. It is tough to duplicate the Columbia Ybor City. It is impossible.

AH: Well, you guys definitely have your work cut out for you. All I can say is you guys seem to be doing a great job so far. The other amazing thing about the fact that a restaurant has lasted so long is that it has remained a family business, which can be very difficult in this day and age.

RG: That is our desire.

CG: My children, hopefully will follow as Richard’s daughters have, and one of my daughters is studying at the University of Florida, studying management, and works with us in the summers, and is looking forward to coming and joining her cousins and being a part of the restaurant in the next generation. We don’t know whether to write, sometimes are menus say the fourth generation, sometimes we write the fifth generation. I think we are at the point where we are going to always have to go with the fifth generation and we are very proud of that and we look forward to the next. That is our future. Our future is to preserve the quality and the history of the Columbia, but also preserve the history of our family, and hoping that our children will want to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors.

RG: My oldest daughter Lauren has been working with us now four years full-time and my youngest will graduate from the University of South Florida in business management in May. Probably starting in April she will start working in our kitchen. She loves to cook. She is a wonderful cook, and wants to have a better understanding. As long as we have family members that want to work the back and front of the house, we will continue to be successful.
AH: Well, as long as they are willing to get their hands a little dirty. You guys started from the bottom up, picking out snapper, learning how to cook, all of these other things, so—

RG: It is exciting to me that she says she wants to work in the kitchen in the preparation. That really made me very happy to see. That is what she really enjoys. That is what it takes. You have to get your hands dirty.

AH: Well, let me see, anything else?

CG: Glad you are here, and hope we can document this, and come visit us again, and possibly give you a tour of the restaurant so you can see the different dining rooms. Meet our general manager and have the opportunity to go from room to room. Starting in 1905 see where it all began up until the current time.

AH: Well, on behalf of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics and USF, and the Oral History Program, I thank both of you.

RG: Thank you very much.

CG: Great, our pleasure, thank you.

AH: Thank you, great to meet you.

*end of interview*