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Francisco Rodriguez Junior oral history interview by Gary Mormino, June 18, 1983

Francisco A. Rodriguez Jr. (Interviewee)

Gary Ross Mormino (Interviewer)

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Gary Mormino: My name is Gary Mormino, and today is June 18, 1983. So far, we've been talking with Mr. Francisco Rodriguez in Tampa. And now, Mr. Rodriguez, could you tell me something about your family's background?

Francisco Rodriguez, Junior: Yes. My father and mother are both Cubans. My father came here at the turn of the century. Like many of the Cubans, he was a cigar maker. And of course, he came over from Cuba in order to better his condition. And my mother came—well, she'd [been here] for many years when she met my father. But for a few years lived in the so-called Ybor City section. So they both were Cubans all the way even though, even though she lived in—

GM: Do you know that much about their lives in Cuba? For instance, where did they live in Cuba?

FR: Yeah. My father came from a section of Cuba called Pinar del Río.

GM: Mm-hm.

FR: And, of course, my mother came from Havana.

GM: Mm-hm.

GM: Yeah.

FR: And my father was a man who had read extensively. Very, very well-trained man without any formal education. He was one of the local leaders here. Excellent orator. And one of the more important [people] in the so-called Martí-Maceo club¹. He was a cigar maker in—

GM: He was a cigar maker?


GM: Right. You used the term "oriental." Now, for the listener, generally that conveys the impression of Chinese

FR: Chinese—yes, yes. In Cuba, at the time—I don't know about now, but at the time of my father's childhood, there was a strong Chinese element, and he is a—There is a strain of Chinese, you know, in section of—

GM: Province Oriente. And your mother lived in Havana.

FR: Havana.

GM: And her parents. Do you know anything about her parents? Occupation? Life styles?

FR: Well, she was what you'd call strictly Afro-Cuban. Her grandmother was a slave. Her mother was more or less illiterate, a household worker.

GM: Right. And did they ever talk to you about the great events in Cuban history? For instance, the one about the Cuban Revolution in 1895?

FR: My father was an avid reader, and of course he was also considered a local authority on the Cuban Revolution. Both from an empirical standpoint and from the vicarious standpoint. My mother always boasted of the fact that she had had contact with [José] Martí, because his headquarters was right there on the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue, where my relatives live. Right there.

GM: That's the Pedroso house?

FR: I still—this was the home then, in my lifetime. And that was one of his meeting places. Of course, my mother boasted of the fact that she actually had contact, and she'd

¹ Sociedad la Union Martí-Maceo.
actually seen what had happened. And there was a black woman named Pedroso. I don't remember her first name now, but she—

GM: Paulina.

FR: Yes. She was a rallying force, as far as gathering funds and as far as rallying the cause of Cuba in the revolution.

GM: Right. Right. Why did your parents emigrate to Tampa?

FR: Well, most of them came to the United States. It represented a promise of the type of economic betterment that practically everybody else was looking for.

GM: Right. Did they ever tell you about the rite of passage of the ships coming over, or anything like that?

FR: No. I don't remember anything, even as a child. It was during my time—there was a constant migration from Cuba to Tampa, from Cuba to Key West and Key West to Tampa.

GM: Yes.

FR: And at that time there was no difficulty. It was no problem at all.

GM: Why Tampa?

FR: Because Tampa was almost a transplantation of "little Cuba" at that time. Until, I guess—say until the thirties [1930s]. Tampa was a completely Latinized section, Ybor City. What we have now is almost is an attempt at a synthetic reproduction, but in those days they really had the real McCoy. They had, of course, shops that were really run by Spanish-speaking people, and what have you. It was very easy to find people who lived there who didn't speak any English at all. For instance, I had an aunt and an uncle who never learned to speak a word of English. They stay here fifty years.

GM: Mm-hm.

FR: Yeah. Ybor City was really the first—however, I remember very plainly during my childhood that practically all of them were obsessed with the idea of coming to the United States, making enough money to go right back to Cuba.

GM: Your parents also?

FR: No, I don't think so. I never heard my father say that. But practically every member of my family had that, for almost a personal obsession.

GM: Did your— Would you say your parents achieved the American Dream in Tampa? Ybor City?
FR: To a certain extent. My father had one particular aim in life, and that was that none of his children ever set foot in a cigar factory. And he was so obsessed with this that even when we wanted something from him, we had to stand outside. Just like a kid wants to go to the theater, or something like that. His daddy's not home and he wants to go to the job and ask dad for some money. We were trained never to go into the cigar factory, 'cause he felt that this was a (inaudible) step.

GM: Hmm.

FR: He had planned—even in the days when conceptually this was unknown to most Cubans, he had planned a high school and college education for all of us. And he did achieve that.

GM: And yet today—look back on cigar workers, it was very dignified work. And the wages during the early days were quite good, huh?

FR: Yes.

GM: All that seems a contradiction in many ways.

FR: Well, my father himself was a contradiction, you know, in that respect. Not only was the cigar worker considered at least a few notches above the average menial laborer, but even the whole aspect—

For instance, I know you've read about el lector in the cigar factory. They would read the current events in the morning, and the afternoon they would read novels and what have you. And it was almost an anomaly to hear oppression—talk about Victor Hugo's Les Misérables. He read Molière. And in Ybor City, in that section, (inaudible) had the Martí-Maceo Club, which was the club for Afro-Cubans, and every Sunday there would be a gathering. There'd be programs, concerts, plays and what have you.

GM: Yeah.

FR: (inaudible) cultural (inaudible) something beautiful. And it was almost unknown in this community.

GM: I'd like to pick up that point just a bit. How did your father find work in Tampa? Well, two questions. He already had relatives here, or not?

FR: No, no. He had no relatives here.

GM: Okay. How did he find work? Did he ever tell you? And where he even worked here?
FR: Well, he worked at what was for many years known as Marcelino Perez, which was Perfecto Garcia—they tore it down about six months ago—as a cigar maker. He was a very, very good cigar maker. So he was never out of work. And he never usually seemed to be out of work.

GM: Mm-hm. But he worked at different—other factories?

FR: He worked at Marcelino Perez most of the time.

GM: And your mother?

FR: She was a stripper. *Despalilladora.*

GM: Did they ever bring their work home? For instance, talking about *el lector*?

FR: Yes.

GM: Did he tell you about—

FR: Yes, yes, they would always transmit to us whatever they had heard at the factory.

GM: But was he here during the strike of 1901? Had he arrived by that time?

FR: Yes, I think so. Well into April. Of course, that was before my time but I think he had because a—I often heard him refer to the "Great Strike," and I think that was the second one.

GM: Right. Would you relate your impressions—his impressions?

FR: Well, you know, he was one of the labor leaders here and he—I have reference to (inaudible), but I'm not too clear because there were other subjects than the strike. Maybe of not that great magnitude—

GM: Mm-hm. Right. Right.

FR: —but there was a (inaudible) during my lifetime that I remember a little better.

GM: Right. While you bring up the earlier point—Could you recreate that Afro-Cuban community in Tampa? Where did they live? How many were there? What was the focal point?

FR: Yeah, yes—it's something so picturesque that I could never forget that. They lived in two sections almost exclusively, Ybor City and West Tampa. Ybor City they covered—well, what is Ybor City now? Never passed Twenty-Second Street. But peripherally around Sixth Avenue to Nebraska [Avenue] to maybe Fifteenth Street and back to Twenty-Second. They lived right in that section.
GM: Right.

FR: And there was such a close kindredship that you would presume that all Cubans were cousins some of the time. Every Cuban with every other Cuban. And, of course, you had an arm of the colony that lived in West Tampa, and they too lived within a confined area.

GM: Did black Cubans live in segregated areas in Ybor City, or not?

FR: Yes. Yes, they did.

GM: They did not live amongst the white Latins?

FR: No.

GM: They did not.

FR: No, no. For the most part, they would come over as one group. But as the white Cubans became part of the American ethic, they became a part of the (inaudible) concern. However, they didn't try to, you know, erase the descriptions in the American sense of the word. They respected other pretty good. They mingled freely in the factories, but all of the white Cubans that I knew—

GM: Let's get some kind of time. What year were you born?

FR: Nineteen sixteen [1916].

GM: Nineteen sixteen. Okay. If I interpret your analysis, though, you're saying in effect that you think that in the beginning, in racial—there were few racial tensions, and in fact the racial tension only came after Italians, Cubans and Spanish Americanized?

FR: No, I don't think so. There was no racial tension between white and black Cubans—never, never. That never came up. But they tended to isolate themselves, you know, with the others—the whites—and of course they had an excellent excuse because it was following the law of the land.

You know, racial prejudice is a terrible thing when you are the one being prejudiced against. But almost any weak person avails himself of the excuse to be better than somebody, you have nothing else to do. You know. It's easy to do because you don't have to accomplish anything. It's only human to want to say that I'm better than John Doe. Most of them engage in some form of segregation. They justify it on the grounds that this was the law of the land. This is why you have the Círculo Cubano², the white Cuban club; you have Martí-Maceo, which was the black Cuban club.

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² El Círculo Cubano de Tampa.
GM: In the beginning, did the black Cubans join Circulo Cubano?

FR: Never did.

GM: Never did.

FR: No. However, occasionally they would have festivals and they would invite a commission. So, what we call a committee—but in Spanish *la comisión*—from the Martí-Maceo would go and represent them on historic occasion where you would celebrate the Cuban independence or something like that. I was very confident because my father was always the visiting orator. He always represented Martí-Maceo, and he would be the one to speak. On such occasions they would mix. Or on some occasions they would come over to Martí-Maceo. But these were rare occasions.

GM: Explain the Martí-Maceo Club. The Martí-Maceo Club had certain very interesting aspects that—You know the two names?

FR: Mm-hm.

GM: Martí was, of course, considered the apostle of Cuban freedom. [Antonio] Maceo was one of the Cuban soldiers, who—If I am to accept all of the readings I have of Maceo, he would make 007 look like a Boy Scout. And I think most of it's true, too, by the way. But maybe there's still some hyperbole involved in it. But be that as it may, he was definitely a hero in the epic sense of the word, you know, masquerading behind enemy lines or leading fights against insuperable odds and what have you.

So, there we have the two great men: Martí, Maceo. And so, Martí represented the philosophical part of the revolution, Maceo represented the side against the tyrant. Now, the club itself represented a union of black Cubans, exclusively. And they had their own welfare, Medicare, Medicaid. All those things before America ever thought about it. The members had all those benefits, almost a small stipend that they paid once a week. It was a beautiful set up. Who were the founders from Tampa?

FR: Most of 'em are dead. Juan Cassellas just died recently, my father. I doubt any of them are really living now. Maybe one or two. I doubt if—I haven't been by there in the past year, but I doubt that any of them—the real founders—I doubt any of them are alive.

GM: Was it modeled after organizations in Cuba, as for instance Centro Asturiano was modeled after the Havana branch, or was this a unique creation in Tampa?

FR: I think it had a—Well, I don't know that the word unique is perhaps appropriate. I don't know that there is never anything like it, but I can't think—

GM: In Cuba?

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3¹ Referring to James Bond.
FR: —in Cuba that I ever heard of that they followed after. I think they had to do a little bit inventing of the idea, because somehow or the other the idea of two sets of Cuban groups was kinda suprising to them when they came over, and the Martí-Maceo Club as an attempt to give the black Cubans [something] that they hadn't had before. I can't think of anything they had in Cuba that would—

GM: As a Cuban, what role did the club play in your life?

FR: Oh, well, number one, it was always a form of recreation. You could always go there on Sundays and see a comedy, and see concerts. They always gave the sons and daughters of members toys and goodies during the Christmastime, or during any holiday period. They also—I also look upon it, at least now in retrospect, I look upon it as an organization that had a great deal of value educationally, you know, in their programs and things of that kind.

GM: Any more examples?

FR: Well, they were a little chauvinistic, but even in their chauvinism you had some value. For instance, we were always taught that though we were black, we weren't supposed to do things the black Americans do, 'cause we were better than black Americans. This is not very good as far as from the standpoint of—from the religious standpoint. From a practical standpoint, what they meant by that was that I wasn't supposed to get drunk, that I wasn't supposed to fight girls, that I wasn't supposed to speak in a loud voice, that I wasn't supposed to use profanity and things like that. And so that distinction was not the best in the world, but it had its side advantages, as far as character education.

I tell a group from time to time, I have a great distinction amongst most people. People talk about being discriminated against—I had all kinds of discrimination, because being black I was discriminated against for being black by white people, being a Cuban I was discriminated against in school—you know, the black kids always would attack us since we're black Cubans. On top of that, I had a great deal of love for my school—but my father thought very little of my school, however.

GM: Which was?

FR: American school, but however, he felt that this was the best of all possible evils, because we had to go to school. But these were the worst schools in the world. He thought all of my teachers were very stupid, but they were the only teachers we had. We had to go to school. So I found myself constantly (inaudible) all kind of (inaudible) until I got old enough to think for myself.

I was always taught that the sun rose in Cuba. So, of course it only shone on Cubans. My mother thought that a doctor who didn't have a Spanish name couldn't possibly be a good doctor. So in, in all that—there was some bad education.
GM: You mention the (inaudible) had medical benefits. Black Cuban doctors?


GM: No. Did you go to La Benifica⁴ or—

FR: Yes. Absolutely (inaudible) get you there. Yeah.

GM: Do you remember Dr. Vegano?

FR: Sure. Yeah. Dr. Denardo Trelles. There was a very famous doctor. He had over (inaudible) Suarez.

GM: I don't know.

FR: No. You're right. That's an anomaly, because despite all the segregation and what have you, the doctors gave their services with complete impunity, they didn't segregate. That was something you didn't have to worry about.

GM: Huh. What were the— Would the Afro-Cuban men go to the clubhouses at night, as did the Italians and Spaniards, and play dominos?

FR: Absolutely. You say clubhouses, there wasn't but one, Martí-Maceo.

GM: Right. Right.

FR: Yes. That was the only one they would go to. But they would, just about every night. Oh, yes.

GM: What were the great holidays in the year?

FR: Ah, of course, the Cuban Independence.

GM: Mm hm. But tell me your reminiscences of (inaudible).

FR: Well, all I know is—I have a picture in my mind that will never leave me. You would have to know the way the building was structured (inaudible) and the piano was (inaudible). The dance hall was upstairs. The auditorium was downstairs. They usually would meet upstairs for the lectures and these recitals and what have you. Downstairs was used as a theater, more or less. Almost invariably, every time we'd have one of these national holidays, somebody would come from Cuba.

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⁴ Clínica de Emergencias la Benefica,
One of them—I don't know why it sticks in my mind, but I remember one of them. And I remember a gentleman with a horrendous mustache, you know, and I remember seeing him crawl up (inaudible). When he got about halfway (inaudible) went up with (inaudible). And everybody just stood up. It was just a beautiful thing. You know, Latins are very, very dramatic, and this kind of fervor was present in practically all of our celebrations.

GM: Mm hm. You were speaking of your educational background, can you give me an idea of what schools you attended and your experiences there?

FR: Well, I spent my whole life going to school. That doesn't mean that I'm burned out.

GM: (laughs)

FR: I am a graduate of Florida A & M [Agricultural & Mechanical University]. I did graduate work at University of Pennsylvania and at Temple University. During the service, I went to school in China, (inaudible) since I came back and got a law degree from Howard University in Washington D.C. So then I came back, and after that, I don't want to forget two graduate hours at [University of] South Florida.

GM: How about the early years in earlier schools?

FR: I went to high school right here in Tampa.

GM: How about in your first day in school? What school? Grade school?

FR: Harlem Academy, which is a school that was torn down about ten or fifteen years ago. I almost cried. I was very fond of it.

GM: I assume by that that black Cubans could not attend—sent you to Ybor schools.

FR: No. I remember my first day of school—can't ever forget it, because I couldn't speak English. And no one tells you (inaudible). Well, I had a problem, you know, communicating, and I had to point to—you know, certain things. There was no such thing as bilingual programs and things of that kind. You just made out. Of course, my teacher was a kind old lady. She kind of understood, and I got along fine, except for—you know—I had all the loneliness of a kid (inaudible) you don't even know the language. You're not going to learn if you don't know the language.

And after Harlem Academy, the next school I went to was Meacham [Elementary School]. Now that, that was (inaudible) remodeled.

GM: All black school?

FR: All black school. Then I went to Booker T. Washington Junior High School, and I went to Middleton [High School], from which I graduated.
GM: Umm hmmm. Let me (inaudible) in some of the things you were talking about earlier, the different relationships you had because of your black Cuban heritage. For instance, let's examine some of these in school—now, how would you interact with the Afro-American youth, as opposed to your Cuban peers?

FR: Well, we received the jeers and we knew the cracks—the ethnic sorts that you hear, the Italians, the Jews or what have you.

GM: How did you perceive the Afro-American community from your perspective in Ybor City?

FR: I don't— You know sometimes we forget (inaudible). I don't remember that I was very hostile, except in one detail. I remember that there were certain words that I could not pronounce, that I could not handle. And every time that I had to use certain words the kids would always cause laughter in the class. Words beginning with "ch." For instance, I would say "share," meaning "chair," and "child," meaning "child." And it made me very defensive, but it was kind of the defensiveness that bore fruit in later years, because I picked up the habit of pronouncing every word that I'd hear and look it up in the dictionary. And I ended up, you know, with a major in English when I went to school.

GM: Did you ever question why you couldn't attend the white schools if you were Cuban with your white Cuban peers?

FR: No. No. No. Because we were always taught—that children's poem, "yours is not to reason why," you know; it's just there. However, I came from a family of rebels. We were never reconciled to it. Only, but (inaudible) we knew that this was just the way it was. Nothing we could do about it, something that, later on, I think I did something about. But as a child there was nothing, you know, you were, you were—things aren't that simple.

GM: As a child your role model would have been Booker T. Washington, or José Marti or Maceo. You know, Afro-American, Afro-Cuban or did you delineate—?

FR: I don't remember that I ever—I know that I—cause I was (inaudible). The first time that I was ever aware of anything like that, I think I was in the fourth grade and we had something called Legal History Week. And my sister prepared a paper for me to present, and it involved the—it was a (inaudible) she had to (inaudible) herself. But she did write a very nice paper. I could almost remember it by memory, and in it she showed there were black people who had achieved certain things, and she listed people and what have you. And that was one of the turning points in my life. I became very aware that being a member of a minority group wasn't the worst thing in the world. And I think I followed through from there. That's (inaudible) for me.

5⁴ Referring to “Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.
I used that as a model for many, many years. I just kept adding to it. And after that, I think that from fifth grade, beginning with that particular program for which she prepared the paper, I developed a sense of consciousness that I had something that I had to fight. And it became almost a (inaudible) affecting my life.

GM: How about your dealings with the other ethnic groups? For instance, today we tend to lump all of the Ybor City people as Latins. However, obviously there are different groups in that. For instance, the white Cubans—as a young boy, how would you interact with them?

FR: We had fairly good relations. For instance, I don't recall any outright hostilities. No. We also had very good relations with Italians. Very good. We had an Italian—we lived right next door to an Italian family, and we had very good relations.

GM: You had earlier said that Ybor City was segregated.

FR: Yes. The only reason we lived next door to the Italians is because they had a business and they lived in their business.

GM: Oh.

FR: Ordinarily you wouldn't find an Italian family having a residence, but they happened to have a business, and they lived upstairs of the business.

GM: (inaudible)


GM: (inaudible)

FR: Navara in a grocery store.

GM: A grocery store and a fish market. How about—?

FR: It's no longer there. One of them—

GM: Where was your home when you were born? What street did you live on?

FR: That street does not exist now. 1117 Sixth Ave. And one of the—the one member of that family that you could get your hands on—he would be the youngest member. I don't even remember. I don't even know if he's dead or alive. His name is Eddie Gramafara. And the last time I saw him, he was a court recorder in the courthouse.

GM: For the [Tampa] Tribune?

FR: No. No. I mean (inaudible) court recorder.
GM: Oh, okay. I know what (inaudible). How about the Spaniards?

FR: We had a beautiful relationship.

GM: None of the antagonism from the civil war?

FR: No. I don't recall any. The one thing I do know is that the Spanish were a little stiff-necked about most people. They thought they were better than Cubans. I know that, but I don't think it bothers us too much.

GM: Interracial dating, was there any, ever?

FR: Believe it or not, even in the days of some of the toughest segregation, there was some goin' on.

GM: How about your relations—you know, again, we tend to lump groups beyond Ybor City (inaudible) called the white Americans "Anglos." Your attitudes towards the "Anglos" of that period?

FR: Now you have to bear in mind that Afro-Cubans, they were different from the average black. We were like accustomed to associating with whites, even as it relates to white Americans. We didn't have that animosity to the (inaudible).

GM: What about them to you?

FR: I guess some did. Oh, yeah—oh, my goodness, yes. I know so many instances of race prejudice and what have you. But, wherever they (inaudible).

GM: Did you act the same on Franklin Street as you did on Seventh Avenue?

FR: Yes.

GM: You did. No distinction. Did they treat you the same on Franklin Street as on Seventh Avenue?

FR: Let me see if I can—now, you say they treat me like a (inaudible), but they treat me the same. Right. Right. And (inaudible) you both ways.

GM: Would you act the same and would they act the same?

FR: No. They did not act the same. Not until we had all these demonstrations and what have you. Had all these court suits we had. No. No. Because we couldn't use their facilities and what have you, so naturally it wouldn't be the same.

GM: How about on Seventh Avenue? Same racial color line as on Franklin?

GM: You could not go to the—

FR: Las Novedades.

GM: Las Novedades.

FR: No, we couldn't. Not in those days. And I had never thought of it. But, you know, we were—most of us were kinda forgiving, as far as (inaudible). For instance, we would not look upon it with any degree of bitterness if a white Cuban would not let us come into his establishment or restaurant; we thought do what he had to do. Not that I ever remember discussing it, but I'm sure we would have thought that way.

GM: What about in the movies?

FR: But I'm not saying that I endorse the idea—

GM: Well, I—

FR: —but this was the general consensus, you know.

GM: Yes. How about movie theaters?

FR: Same thing.

GM: In Ybor City?

FR: Same thing.

GM: You had your separate black theaters?

FR: Absolutely.

GM: Was there not even a black-Cuban theater called the Maceo? Do you remember?

FR: That was the same place. Martí-Maceo.

GM: Oh. That was—

FR: Same club. We had a theater within the place.

GM: Okay, right.

FR: And it was a theater—you know, we had plays, not movies.
FR: Incidentally, I had several points of bitterness, you know. I had—I never forget—I think I was in junior high school, and I had—there was a coach who, as far as I was concerned, he was just about the (inaudible) of all manly virtues. And one day he took me downtown to the office of recreation. I don't know what for, maybe some supplies or something. And I was so shocked when I discovered that here was this man who was my idol, and the white people in the office would not speak to him. As others (inaudible) genius, and that was traumatic in my life. Because in those days, a young black child—I don't care whether he was a black-Cuban or black-American—perhaps very often was completely sheltered from the racial idea until he got a certain age. You see, he lived in a certain neighborhood with Cubans, whites or what have you, and then suddenly something happens.

I had had a previous experience (inaudible). I remember that he lived six blocks from me and down the street. And it was [what] we call today a duplex, and there had been some man and woman (inaudible) caught his wife with a lover and there had been a shooting or something and the policeman was at our house by mistake and my father was trying to explain to him that he (inaudible). And I thought (inaudible) and I wasn't accustomed to hearing anybody talked to like that was the most traumatic experiences that young blacks have had. Some of them, (inaudible) they're very, they're very—they have a (inaudible) effect.

GM: And do you remember any instances of violence as a youngster?

FR: No. I believe—no, I don't. Do you mean between whites and blacks and what have you?

GM: Right.

FR: (inaudible)

GM: (inaudible)

FR: No, the violence came later on. You know, I felt much violence once I got out of college and out of law school and (inaudible). I saw a lot of violence, but I (inaudible) I didn't see (inaudible). Because during those days, I think blacks accepted things as they were.

GM: You alluded to the treatment by police. You want to amplify that, you know, in general, in Ybor City?

FR: The police had no respect whatsoever for anyone black. And (inaudible) number (inaudible).
GM: Someone once told me that the requirement for Tampa for a police officer was to be big, white, and from Georgia. Would you (inaudible)?

FR: Well, maybe that's just a figure of speech but the thought is correct. (inaudible) you had to be able to push somebody around and what have you. It's still a—I don't think (inaudible). I think if you was to pin it down to say a majority—no, I don't think it would be the majority, but I think this is correct. And I saw (inaudible) the fact that it was a female meant nothing to a white policeman. He would start cracking down just as easily. This is something they don't understand today. Nationwide squads of police forces had all of these cases wherein they require strict adherence to certain rules. See, they don't mention, they don't know the genesis of this.

GM: What (inaudible) of dating? Who did black Cubans date? Black Cubans or American blacks?

FR: Well—

GM: Let's talk about—let's be a little more precise. For instance, your parents' generation as a—would it have been unusual for a black Cuban to have married a (inaudible) American girl?

FR: Yes, somewhat. They were quite—they were clannish. Very, very clannish. Occasionally there was crossing the line. And in most instances that I saw this, I also saw another phenomenon of great interest and maybe you can use as an (inaudible). It was usually a case of a black Cuban man marrying an American girl, and usually she was perceptive enough to accept all Latin ways, and usually in a matter of six to seven months or a year she was speaking Spanish. But there was a taboo on marrying an American, almost the same the Jews were

GM: And your generation? How about your generation?

FR: My generation—

GM: Most of your friends, who did they date? Your black Cuban friends?

FR: Well, it had—The social bars had lifted a little around my time, but it was still there. Then, of course, it became a matter of necessity. As the Cuban colony started dwindling because of people (inaudible). You couldn't have too many restrictions on dating; there wasn't anybody to date.

GM: Right. Did your father ever try to give you any advice on who to marry or—

FR: No.

GM: What were his ideas?
FR: No. No. In fact, none of us— Well, no. That's wrong. I was getting ready to say none of us are married to Cubans, but now my brother is married to a Latin and that—

GM: Important question: in terms of identification, when you were young, did you see yourself as black or as Cuban?

FR: Neither.

GM: You didn't?

FR: (inaudible) I guess I saw myself as black, you know, so— You can't get around that. I never conceptualized that too much. You don't—as I said before, children don't think about things like that, you know, just didn't bother me at first. But at some point or the other it, it's like—you know, you could maybe [cross the] Rubicon at some point. You get used to these things. As a matter of fact—

GM: When did you make (inaudible)? When did you cross it?

FR: All right. Now, first and foremost, we were ridiculed so much in public schools because of—you know, speech, dress and the like—that we shied away from the idea of being Latin. And as we got into the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades we always spoke English, except at home. And I (inaudible) for a few years I forgot that I was, almost forgot consciously, intentionally forgot that I was from Cuba. And—but I do (inaudible) being a Cuban is very, very important.

GM: Why do you think (inaudible)?

FR: Well, from a very materialistic standpoint, I went off—I went away to school, and discovered there was a tremendous advantage in being bilingual. And discovered there was a tremendous advantage in being different and in being myself. And in turn, it brought me back to, to my senses. I think it happened my freshman year in college.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins

GM: Resuming our conversation with Mr. Francisco Rodriguez, and having just returned from a rousing game of tennis.

FR: Yes.

GM: One of the interesting features of Ybor City community, I think, has always been the role of sports and recreation. What did black Cubans do, when you were boys, for recreation?

FR: Baseball and dominos at the club. Mostly at the club.
GM: Right. And their—for instance, their baseball. I mean, was it organized on your own?

FR: No.

GM: How about—was there a black park in Tampa?

FR: No.

GM: And you were born again? Refresh me. What year were you born?

FR: Cuba.

GM: No, but what year were you born?

FR: Oh, sixteen [1916].

GM: Nineteen sixteen. So when you were growing up, there were no black facilities then. Right?

FR: Well, somewhere down the line the city had some plots of land that they allotted to black people, but they were never, never, never improved or anything. They just (inaudible) play—

GM: For instance, would you play within Ybor City on the club diamond? Afro-Cubans were permitted to play on—

FR: What club diamond?

GM: Well, were there any organized facilities in Ybor City?

FR: No. No. No. Let me give you an example. I have a peculiar case (inaudible) for several reasons. A group of black leaders bought a piece of property—no, I don't know whether they bought it or not; I think they asked the Cuban Club for it—a plot of land right next to the Cuban Club. And they put a tennis court on there. They had to actually buy the materials and put the court on there. This is really where I started playing tennis. The city, oh, some five or six years later, sold that plot (inaudible)—

**Pause in recording**

FR: (inaudible) cause we have— We had no place to play tennis. None whatsoever. And—I'm trying to remember. Oh, I think some of us, sometimes we played on some of the courts at the schools. And some of the courts at the schools were very, very poor. Later on, I was instrumental in filing suit against the city for the use of all recreation facilities, which involved (inaudible).
GM: Yeah, we'd like to get into (inaudible).

FR: Well, I have an affinity for tennis as far as—

GM: How about boxing?

FR: What do you mean, did they have any black—

GM: Like, were—do you recall any black Cubans boxing?

FR: Yes, yes, Cubans have always furnished boxers and baseball players.

GM: Mm hm. Why do you think? It's always been a curious point of fact about American history that boxing was one of the few sports that had—I guess you'd call it integrated—but the blacks were permitted to box whites. Of course you had Jack Johnson—

FR: No. No. No. They were not.

GM: They were not?


GM: How do you explain Jack Johnson?

FR: They did not. That came a little later on. That came on around Joe Louis' time. Before that time— About 1915, around (inaudible).

GM: Before that time. Now whether the South was different, that's another question.

FR: Yes, before that, at least in the South, you couldn't—a black man couldn't box a white man.

GM: How about in Ybor City, could a black Cuban—

FR: Nowhere.

GM: —fight a white Cuban or Italian?

FR: Well, they might have allowed that, in as much as there was a peculiar mentality about that. They felt that the black Cubans weren't quite so black, for whatever reason. So they might have allowed that. I don't recall a single instance, but they just might have. I don't know.

GM: How about the—you said the other day Cubans had cockfights. Do you recall that, or when you were younger in Ybor?
FR: No, because I used to kid about it. But cockfighting belonged to an economic strata of which I was never part. That was (inaudible).

GM: (inaudible) other great Latin pastime **bolita**.

FR: Oh, my goodness, now that's fantastic. We are wont to call gambling a sort of sin and a crime, and I'm obliged (inaudible) with special forces—I'm in the ministry—but it was not, it was a way of life. My dear mother was a walking encyclopedia of all of the numbers that had fallen at any time during the past year. She could tell you with ease, (snaps his fingers) just ask her.

Secondly, she was also very well-versed on dreams. Should you have a dream, you told your friend a dream, and there was a number corresponded, so you played accordingly. And it was a way of life. And they didn't lose money in the sense of gambling. Nobody went—nobody played—spent twenty five dollars on a number. No. Spent ten cents, you got eight dollars. Twenty cents, something like that. (inaudible)

I have something that's fixed in my memory about **bolita** that I can never get rid of. One of those things that I can't tell in church, but it's very near and dear to me. During my times there were no such thing as black Boy Scouts. But they had an organization that was roughly the equivalent of Boy Scouts called the (inaudible). And they were sponsored by the Knights of Pythias. I had joined this organization but I needed a uniform, and the uniform involved leggings, a very military hat and all the other paraphernalia that goes with marching and all this kind of thing.

And I ask my mother about it and surely she saw the anxiety, you know, in my face, but she didn't have the money to buy it. She said, "If you just had faith, the Lord will take care of it." But she meant faith in **bolita**. (inaudible) the truth. I mean, this would be, you know, this would be almost the (inaudible) of the day for someone to say that faith as if I'm gonna play at **bolita**, but it's my mother that said that. And she said it with so sincerity and she believed it so strongly that though she didn't have, she was completely (inaudible) she didn't have a dime.

She dressed me that Saturday, and we sat on the porch and waited for the call on **bolita**, and sure enough, she got the money. And she took me by the hand and we went hurriedly to the place—the building is still there on Seventh Avenue and Thirteenth Street; it used to be called the West Coast Army Store. It's a furniture store now. And each time I pass by, that tugs at my heart because I remember that particular incident. I thought that it was a tremendous gesture of faith. I've never told it to my congregation. (laughs)

GM: Yeah, and you get places like Chicago; in the black wards people like Big Bill Dalton, Nick (inaudible) are allowed a cut of the action. In Tampa, [were] black-Cubans or Afro-Americans ever part of the **bolita** network, or—

FR: No.
GM: —did they have runners or—

FR: Absolutely not. At best they might have had—oh, yes, they had some salesmen. Some bolita salesmen, they were maybe higher up than local (inaudible). For instance, we had a very good friend of the family that sold bolita. He had the only telephone in the whole district called Ybor City, which was a sign of wealth in those days. I remember him quite well. But that's about as far as it went. I never saw—I never even heard of a black man, let's say, owning a "house"—that's what they called them, "house"—for gambling. But there were some people had, I think, some kind of level above the others in the salesman category.

GM: Right. Right. And (inaudible) commentary on people like Charlie Wall, Red Italiano, Colbrook?

FR: Well, I think that anything that I would have to say would be pretty selfish. Those people were considered the scourge, sort of, of mankind. It was terrible (inaudible) what you have you. And yet their views on race were far nearer the Christian (inaudible) the things that he taught than some of your superintendents (inaudible).

I knew (inaudible) one of the Trafficantes. I found him to be very affable, and in the days of rigid you could sit by them and the black (inaudible) but I'm sure that I would have to say that—of course, I don't know really, but I can't say that I have that sort of repulsive feeling about him. I found them to them to be a very nice person.

GM: Right. The people and historians writing, you know, on Tampa saying that there were three significant (inaudible): the Urban League, the black church, and the nightclubs. As social centers, I don't—let's stay with the black church.

FR: All right. The black church—

GM: First of all, let's start with the black Cuban church. Okay?

FR: No such thing. No.

GM: No such—okay.

FR: The nearest we can come to that was a little Catholic church that was over the mission. that blacks attended. (inaudible) see the little church right next to it.

GM: That was located where?

FR: But that was partly black, anyway.

GM: You (inaudible) Peter Claver School.
FR: It's still there. It is on Scott [Street] and Governor [Street]. No, I didn't. Right next door to it is the small church where the blacks—

GM: Academy of Holy Name?


GM: Oh, okay. All right. By the indication then, most black Cubans are Catholic.

FR: Yes, sir. I'm one of the rare exceptions.

GM: Okay. Where—let's talk about that. Maybe that's interesting. How would you characterize Cuban attitudes toward the Catholic Church when you were growing up?


GM: Very devoted (inaudible) white Cubans (inaudible)

FR: White and black Cubans. They are (inaudible).

GM: Now, I think that some people would argue the contrary, that the Cubans felt betrayed by the church. And in Cuba they said the Catholic Church—

FR: Now, when you say Cuba, that's different, see, because I'm not sure—I'm not cognizant of all of the (inaudible) or of changes. When I said (inaudible) my recollections (inaudible) black or Cubans right here in Tampa.

GM: How would you have explained the—I don't know—would you explain the success of the missionaries? The Methodists, the Baptists, other congregations, all had missionary stations in Ybor City. Were they successful?

FR: Missionary stations?

GM: Missionary churches. One was the Wolf's Mission.

FR: Oh.

GM: The Methodist Mission. Trying to win away the Cubans, Italian and Spaniards from the Catholic Church.

FR: I don't know too much about it. I don't know what they were doing there. They certainly didn't win too many blacks, Cuban or American.

GM: What was your family's attitude toward the Catholic Church?
FR: My father was a (inaudible). Established religions would not make it. Almost an implacable (inaudible) established religion. He hated the materialism that was wrapped up in the ecclesiastical (inaudible). And he had a—he almost considered the emotional part of religion (inaudible) call it (inaudible). He was a scholar. He read omnivorously. He had a pretty good knowledge of the history of the Church. And so he (inaudible) position (inaudible) church.

On the other hand, my mother was a devout Catholic. And so was my sister. And she still is—and my brother is Catholic.

GM: Do you think that was a general pattern? Most men were ambivalent about the church, most women devout.

FR: Ah, let us not call it a pattern. Let's say there might have been some type of tendency to that direction. I don't know about ambivalence. I think that many Cubans were cynical about the Church. And I think the cynicism grew out of their knowledge either by direct study, or by vicarious information about the Spanish Inquisition and what have you. Because they were cynical about the Church—and you have to bear in mind that before Castro came along, the Catholic Church was a powerful influence in Cuba. It had land and all this kind of stuff. So they had reason to be a little cynical.

On the other hand, it would seem—and this was not a hard fast religious (inaudible)—seems like the women were always far more devout

GM: Did black Cubans worship the Madonna as others in (inaudible) Spaniards (inaudible)?

FR: Now, I don't believe I can answer that question. But now, black Cubans have a very strange approach to religion. They have two sets of saints. They had the Catholic saints and then they had the African equivalent of all of them. They had a mixture there. In fact, you oftentimes hear, in some of the college (inaudible) individuals have to learn the term Afro-Cubans. And that refers to the fact that there is that African mixture in the whole culture. Now, how have they separated those two, how have they mingled, I don't know.

GM: Can you give me an example of African saints?

FR: All right. (inaudible) is supposed to be the patron saint of all the Cubans. And (inaudible) had a black equivalent called (inaudible). I don't know, you know. And for every, for every saint in the Catholic Church, white saint, you have a black African saint.

GM: How about Manido?

FR: Who?

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6 Possibly referring to Our Lady of Charity (La Virgen de la Caridad), who is the patron saint of Cuba and analogous to the Yoruba goddess Ochún.
GM: Manido, M-a-n-i-d-o.

FR: I don't remember that. I'm not familiar with that. I'm more familiar with Marlo.

GM: Oh, they had (inaudible).

FR: The mostly—The one I'm most familiar with is (inaudible). There were a list of them. I remember some years ago, I ran for office, and some Cuban came to me and he performed some rituals and invoked the power of—I forget who. I forgot. But I lost the election. It will come to me after a while.

GM: Well, I mean, is this a vivid recollection? How would (inaudible) to a (inaudible) in 1983 or a listener, what was voodoo?

FR: All right—

GM: What was the meaning?

FR: Voodoo is the capacity of some gifted person—from whom I don't know that they get the gift—to actually cast a spell upon you. I think you've read about New Orleans. You know, they stick pins in dolls and all that kind of stuff. They had different forms, which were for what we call in the vernacular putting a hex on you. Or it could be done by throwing something in front of your door, or you could be exorcised.

GM: A shaman would do this? Or a—yes, chieftain?

FR: Yes, he would have to do it.

GM: Right. And do you recall them growing up?


GM: For instance—

FR: There were frauds, of course. But I think that the very fact that you believed in them almost made the things happen, you know. There's such a thing as—I know a young man—not a young man any more, but still. In his house he had all kind of pictures and what not and he (inaudible) the process of exorcising. You know, if you had bad luck, or something like that, he would come and clear your house of evil spirits and all this kind of stuff. It's still going on.

Incidentally, I forgot to tell you that there was really almost four forms of worship, because voodoo was almost a form of worship itself. There was the spiritualism, voodoo,
the Afro-Catholic church and the regular Catholic church. And some people took part in them all.

GM: There was a store—it's still on Seventh Avenue between Fifteenth [Street] and Sixteenth Street that had (inaudible). Was this a— Has this store been there a long time catering to the—

FR: I don't recall. (snaps his fingers) I've got the name. I know the name of the person that was supposed to make (inaudible), Babalu’.

GM: Babalu?

FR: Babalu. Babalu was quite a powerful saint. Babalu. Now going back to your question—

GM: Do you know the store I'm referring to?

FR: I don't remember.

GM: They've got dream books and candles and believing in Christ and—

FR: I'm in that area quite a bit, but I don't remember that store in particular. But there were many around.

GM: Across from the Ritz. Right across from The Ritz. I know. I was just there a couple of days ago. Well, it's no—

FR: I guess I just bypassed it, though that's not unusual. As I said, there used to have many of them.

GM: Obvious question, I guess, regarding religious community: why didn't black Cubans attend the Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which was in Ybor City? Why did they attend Peter Claver?

FR: There was another one—

GM: And there was Our Lady of Mercy.

FR: No, there was St. Benedict's.

GM: St. Benedict's.

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7 Babalu Aye, the spirit of sickness and disease, who is associated with St. Lazarus.
FR: There was a school for black Catholics on the corner of Columbus Drive and about Eighteenth Street. So, I mean the Catholics followed segregation patterns just like anybody else.

GM: Mm hm. Where did you go to school? In a—

FR: No, I went to black—public school.

GM: Church, I mean.

FR: Church? I went to St. Peter Claver and St. Benedict. But at some times—I had looked in the back of my mind—I remember I must have gone to Our Lady of Perpetual Help for the (inaudible). But that was after we started going to (inaudible) or something like that.

GM: Now, the congregation at Peter Claver; exclusively black Cubans? Were there any Afro-American Catholics.

FR: Both. Now?

GM: Then, when you were going.

FR: Now and then. Oh, no, no, no, it wasn't totally (inaudible). It was mixed. It was black Cubans and black Americans. Always. And it's so now. It was a beautiful church, now sitting on Nebraska [Avenue] and Scott [Street].

GM: Right. How about school? What was your educational experience?

FR: Well, the schools really were segregated. And so much so that it was a matter of fact, in the city.

GM: (inaudible) segregation in Ybor City was more (inaudible) than in white Tampa?

FR: It (inaudible) are you asking me?

GM: In their everyday—

FR: Was less segregated?

GM: Yes.

FR: Yes. There (inaudible). You could talk in terms of differ—there were, as a matter of fact, one or two interracial marriages in Ybor City. But nobody bothered about (inaudible)—among Cubans, that is—and in all cases it involved a white man married to a black woman. There weren't too many, but there were a few.
GM: Mm hm. I had mentioned earlier the black nightclubs. Some of them were the Green Frog or—do these names ring a bell?

FR: Hm um [no].

GM: People such as (inaudible). Doesn't that ring a bell to you?

FR: Hm um [no].

GM: Tampa Rose? The (inaudible) Brothers?

FR: Vaguely.

GM: (inaudible) Do you know these people? These people—these blacks had their beginning (inaudible).

FR: Yes. They were entertainers. They were not owners. Purely entertainers. The real colorful owners—night club owner—was a fellow named Charlie Moon. Roy Sanderson. A fellow named Buddy Helton. Johnny—Johnny Gray.

GM: I see where the man just died a few weeks ago.

FR: These people were very influential, because—well, any organization that has what you might call a captive audience, as these (inaudible), and they did. They had lot of people going there, and they handled money. So sometimes boys, somebody got in trouble, they would bond 'em out, you know. And they had connections with their (inaudible). But when they—they knew they had to get along with the people so they gave a (inaudible) causes (inaudible). You put out some kind of book or something for some big program, there would be their name. They'd make their contribution, what have you.

GM: You were growing up during the Prohibition era. Was black Tampa, like Ybor City, wide open?

FR: You mean as far as drinking? Oh, yeah.

GM: What—at these night clubs—did the clubs serve an exclusive black clientele?

FR: Absolutely.

GM: Well, where did the black Cubans fit into this network, in terms of socializing at night? They moved over in Ybor City, or—

FR: No. No. For the most part they stuck to Ybor City. No, I don't recall, I don't remember that they (inaudible) too much.
GM: Right. (inaudible) the national Urban League. (inaudible) Did you know Benjamin Mays?

FR: I was very small, but I remember him. And of course, I followed his career throughout. I met him again whilst he was out in Cuba to speak. And I've had occasion to see him—in fact, he's been back here several times. Even as young as I was then, I remember that he was the executive secretary of the Urban League. And he was here because he was such an avid foe of segregation.

And they gave a pageant here at what was then called the Tampa Bay Casino. The equivalent of (inaudible) auditorium. And it was supposed to reflect the progress of the black race. I don't know how much progress they had made then. But be that as it may, that was memorable. The audience was segregated. The black people sat on the upstairs balcony, whites (inaudible). And Mr. Mays wrote a very scathing article about this. Now, when you are the executive secretary of the Urban League, you are supposed to be ready to look passive, because the Urban League is funded in part by the (inaudible). What is it, four or five (inaudible)? The United Fund, and by philanthropists. It still is, in part. So you have to (inaudible).

GM: It was in 1926 to twenty-seven [1927] when he was there.

FR: It still is. Still is. So you can't go around stepping on toes. You have to be nice and courteous, and all this kind of stuff. That was not the manner of Dr. Mays. So before too long, they shipped him out of here. But the Urban League has been a tremendous institution in cementing the black community. And in getting employment for the black community despite the fact that they are—that they do not have the aggressive posture that's attributed to NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and other organizations. They have done a tremendous job in the area of employment, in the area of home improvements for blacks (inaudible). They have many, many daily programs. I worked with them for about two years.

GM: (inaudible) years?

FR: I lose track. It must have— This is eighty-two [1982]. It must have been the late seventies [1970s]. Seventy [1970] or seventy-one [1971], something like that. I was director of one of their programs.

GM: By implication, was the NAACP not as effective in Tampa in the early days?

FR: Well, now, it depends upon how you look at it. I think that in certain respects it was not, and certain respects it was very, very effective. In many instances the blacks in Tampa had suffered from a feeling of sort of false security. The presence of what you might call a polyglot—population which has many languages—(inaudible) whatnot have served to (inaudible) a little bit of the violence that we had had in other areas. And so therefore that helped (inaudible). They had not been pressed to fight as much as say the
black in Mississippi and what have you. So in that respect, I think the NAACP has not been as successful as it was in other areas. But, however, during the sixties [1960s], they, they filed about twenty-two (inaudible) anywhere else (inaudible). Some of the typical decisions came right here in the state of Florida.

GM: Let's briefly trace your career so we can bring it up to the civil rights movement. But let's bring your career up to high school. Where you were headed now?

FR: Well, let's see, I finished high school at Middleton High School.

GM: Junior high school?

FR: No, that's a senior high school. Then I went to Florida A & M.

GM: Let's examine this. Was that unusual for a black man to be going to college in Tampa? And this was in 19—

FR: Nineteen thirty-five. Thirty-five [1935], thirty-six [1936]. Unusual is not the good term.

GM: Okay.

FR: Because a black had to go to college; there was nothing else he could do but teach school or maybe a mortician or insurance or something like that. So if you wanted to do anything, you had to go to college. But the number was small. Because they couldn't go, you know; they didn't have the money or what have you.

So I left and went to college—

GM: Majoring in?

FR: Majoring in languages. And it was only years after I left there and studied on my own that I found out how understaffed the school was, and how poorly trained that I was. I had to almost go back to school on my own. But be that as it may, I got my baccalaureate degree there and came back here to Tampa.

No. I went to a small place called Ft. Pierce, Florida, and taught school for one year. And I was an absolute misfit because I had been accustomed to dealing with particularly whites just as people. Here in Tampa, so being a Latin, I would see white people in my house and what have you. I didn't think anything. But in Ft. Pierce, where things were (inaudible) segregated, where Negros just stay in the corner, what have you (inaudible). They were not accustomed to a black person who even looked directly to a white man, you know. I could talk better than them. I was a complete misfit there. So I only stayed there one year.
Then I came to Tampa, back home, and taught school, and then, of course, I was caught in the war. And I went to the United States Marine Corps. And I was in boot camp and then I went to China. (inaudible) was to be one of the more valuable experiences of my life.

GM: Part of the war effort?

FR: Yes. Went to China. We went to China right after they had dropped the bomb. So I can— See, I was there with the (inaudible) disarm the Japanese and send them home. And to bring about some stability. So while I was there I got a job as a librarian, as a teacher at one of their schools. I taught English and Spanish at the school while I studied Chinese myself, at night. So it was a tremendous experience. I wouldn't trade it for all the colleges in the world. I saw a different culture and a different people.

GM: What were your attitudes, during the war, about segregated in the army units?

FR: Well, you know—

GM: Did you feel this was the order of things? And—

FR: No, never. I never—there was no time. I never thought it was the order of things. But, like, late at night (inaudible) be without regard and (inaudible) do about it. I did apply for officer's training, which was not open to blacks. I did it just for the hell of it.

GM: (laughs)

FR: I was not admitted or anything. And I almost got in trouble one time, because I had more publications and I wrote something about segregation. And I came very close to being court-martialed.

GM: How did the whites treat you when you were Afro-Cuban and you speak Spanish? I mean were you (inaudible) as a kind of oddity or (inaudible)?

FR: Yes, yes. Well, no, that's white and black.

GM: Uh huh.

FR: I still get that. I still get that. And it's amusing, because in Cuba you have so many blacks. In fact, Cuba has a stronger African strain than any of the Caribbean islands. But they, they haven't learned that so they expect—well, if you're named Rodriguez, they expect to see a white person. Now, I get that almost, almost (inaudible) weekly, right here in Tampa, today, 1983.

I remember on one occasion I was in one of the courts, and there was a Mexican who didn't speak English and there was also a Portuguese and maybe a couple of (inaudible). But they spoke—I think they all spoke Spanish, with the exception of the Portuguese, and
the Portuguese was scared. Of course the Spaniard, he had spoken some Portuguese (inaudible), I believe. So I acted as interpreter for them. And one of the local justices was sitting in the audience. And he heard me. And two or three days later on he saw me and he said to me, "Rod"—he used to call me that—"Rod, where did you learn to use all those languages?" he said.

I was trying to be modest, I said, "Well, Judge, that's nothing. That's no big deal. My mother and father were Cuban."

And this baffled him. He said, "You mean after all of these years you been coming here (inaudible) I thought you were a nigger." (laughs)

So if you're a Cuban, some of them think that you're not black, you come from (inaudible), something like that.

GM: Where were you V-J Day? Were you in China, or—

FR: I was— No. I was in Okinawa—

GM: Uh huh. And when were you—

FR: thinking that I was coming home. And much to my disappointment, I went to China. But after I went to China, I was glad that I did go there.

GM: And what did you do after you were discharged?

FR: Oh, after I was discharged I came back. And I was so disappointed at finding things hadn't changed one iota that I just resigned my school teaching job and went back to school.

GM: Did you go back to Ft. Pierce? Or did you—

FR: No. No. I came back into Tampa—

GM: Okay.

FR: —but I taught one year. And I had so many disappointments.

GM: Yes. Where did you teach?

FR: Middleton High School.

GM: Ah, you were—
FR: But I left the profession completely. And went over to (inaudible) Washington to go to school. And I spent three years at Howard University and got a law degree there. I came back when I had—I was—

GM: You came back in nineteen—


GM: Sixty [1960], okay.

FR: And at that time I was on the staff of NAACP. And in sixty-one [1961], I became (inaudible) covering like seven states in the southeastern region through that time and oh, into the sixties [1960s]. Oh, I must have filed about sixty different type of civil law suits. Integration (inaudible).

GM: Two questions and then I (inaudible) some specifics. What was the impact of the Brown decision\(^8\) on Tampa?

FR: Nothing. Absolutely nothing, for a while.

GM: Well, where were you when you heard?

FR: I was in my office. I remember so well, because I can hear it. The dentist next door came and told me that they had ruled in the Brown case.

GM: Mm hm.

FR: Well, first and foremost, when the Brown decision came down, nothing happened because it was agreed that they would come back the next year or in the near future, which turned out to be next year. And some of the second decision had some implementation.

You see, May 15, fifty-four [1954] was the first Brown decision. May 31, fifty-five [1955] was the second one. That was supposed to be the implementing. And that's where the Supreme Court really goofed off. They missed the ball completely. And up to that time, you know, it had been an activist court, performing almost (inaudible). And then, instead of saying to the child, "You must do, thus, thus, thus and so," it said, "Move with all deliberate speed." Nothing else. And this is when they started (inaudible), see, because the people from the South, even the most rabid segregationists, were ready to comply, begrudgingly. They were just waiting to see where they could find a loophole, but they were ready to comply. But then the Supreme Court just said "all deliberate speed," and nothing else.

\(^8\) Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.
GM: Was that all this viewed in the black community immediately, that "all deliberate speed" did not mean with all deliberate speed?

FR: Well—

GM: Or—

FR: What we did was that we went to the (inaudible). Well, I don't know about the black community—I know that I was, I was active in the legal staff—and we went to a (inaudible). We had a national meeting in Mississippi to discuss the new laws. And we tried to design some kind of strategy, what have you. (inaudible) some of the important decisions came out of the files of the state of Florida. And one of them was the Gibson case. Where we came up with the idea, which was the first they heard about Constance Martin, and that it was not a drug from New York, that the Brown case meant that it was incumbent upon the school board to come up with a plan, not to wait for this. They were not supposed to wait for the black students to walk into the school. They were supposed to come up with something during that time. That came out of the district courts. (inaudible) Now, that (inaudible) it must have been several. Several (inaudible). But that's one of the things that came out of the (inaudible). It came out of two cases. People vs. Aaron and Gibson vs. (inaudible), they were both (inaudible) Miami. (inaudible) some of the interesting things—

GM: I think that it's interesting that the (inaudible) cases were being heard in Florida. How did they arise? The time and the (inaudible) and (inaudible). I mean, how did these cases—

FR: What, my cases?

GM: Yeah, your cases.

FR: Well, okay, now—

GM: Did the parents approach you directly or, or was it— I know you said to the newspapers in 1967 that there were more people who wanted to bring court cases than you could handle.

FR: Yes.

GM: So how did you choose those people, or how did that come about?

FR: Well, usually what I did was I tied, I took hands off, because there would be the possibility that they would charge me with fomenting (inaudible). But now the NAACP, the administrative department, you know, held meetings and they had (inaudible) who came in wanted to include, you know, the school system, to come in and fire 'em.

9 Gibson v. Florida Legislative Investigative Committee.
Subsequent to that, they had the Charley Johns investigation. They investigated all these parents. But that was the closest that they did. And some of them dropped off. But they stayed on, so the (inaudible) is still going on. Theoretically, anyway.

GM: What kind of people were (inaudible)? Were they part of the black birds, (inaudible) as people call it, or were they just people who were disgusted with the fact that their children were being bused—

FR: Okay, let me see—

GM: —and conditions were so bad? Or . . .

FR: Let me tell you what. With all the (inaudible) the one I remember the most. There's the Manning family, was what we call in the black race (inaudible)—

[Note from original transcriber: Audio quality of tape is deteriorating. Section is inaudible.]

[Transcriber’s note: The transcript of the tape’s content’s begins here.—MBI]

FR: . . . all opposition from that point on. The city got together and they found out that we can get along fine. I’ve always felt that (inaudible) many times, suits would just drag on and on and on until we entered some form of arbitration (inaudible). But the one in Ocala was actually started and finalized with actual palpable results.

GM: On the local level, I’d be interested in the transition between Curtis Hixon and Nick Nuccio, their attitudes towards race relations.

FR: Curtis Hixon belonged to a different time, a different age. I don’t think he saw—I don’t think you could say that he was against black people, but of course, I don’t think he saw the problem at all. But he was not averse to being—the black people would go to him and what have you. Yeah, they had a few little jobs, but nothing like they have now. Nuccio was the same thing. Nuccio was all right. He couldn’t even grasp the problem. The one mayor that we had that started the trend towards really (inaudible) the city was Lane.

GM: Julian Lane.

FR: Julian Lane.

GM: He paid for it, right?

FR: Yes. Julian Lane was—

GM: How did he pay for it?
FR: Well, he lost politically, so many people. John Branch in the legislature did the same thing. He had a Christian attitude towards race and whatnot, and he (inaudible), just like [Senator Claude] Pepper and all the rest.

GM: Blythe Andrews said—

FR: Junior or Senior?

GM: This would have been in 1950, early 1950s—

FR: Senior.

GM:—said Nuccio was the first Tampa politician to call blacks “Negro,” when others were calling them “Nigger.” You wouldn’t—

FR: Well, I think that was more a figure of speech than anything else. I knew him quite well. He was a pure politician. The one man that I think really—the two men in the state of Florida that really were able to put their hands on the problem and actually wrestled with it were Julian Lane and LeRoy Collins.

GM: Interesting. Do you want to comment on Collins at all?

FR: Oh, yes, absolutely. Collins didn’t do nearly as much as [Governor Bob] Graham, but he started it. He took the (inaudible) in the day when to say “Mister” to a black man was almost suicidal politically. And he was—when we were in the midst of protesting, singing and what have you, he went on the air and said that he would like to have peace, but he said, “Frankly speaking, I don’t see how I can reconcile myself to having a store and having a man come in and buy from my store and not want him to sit at my counter.” Now back in those days it was suicide. Today it sounds like nothing, but in those days that was suicide. He started the ball rolling.

GM: Running against Collins, of course, on the white supremacy ticket, was Sumter Lowry. Care to comment on Sumter Lowry?

FR: Well, Sumter Lowry was—shall we say, he was almost a distortion, or what you would call a white reactionary. He was a reactionary to reactionaries. And he had all of the emotional appeal that you could muster. But even a white person who doesn’t want to eat with a black person (inaudible) Sumter Lowry.

GM: He got a lot of votes in Hillsborough County.

FR: He did. But the (inaudible) Collins couldn’t possibly agree with Mr. Lowry. (inaudible).
GM: One last question now. When you delineate the meaning of—the name of the political ticket, the White Municipal Party in Tampa—does that—?

FR: I’ve never heard of such.

GM: There was a legal loophole to proscribe blacks from voting in the primaries in Tampa. The White Municipal Party—does that ring a bell?

FR: Not that I was aware. I don’t recall.


FR: Well, there was always some pushing. There was always somebody trying. But before—I’d say before the seventies [1970s], they didn’t have any political clout. And even today, they don’t have the political clout that they could have. And that was for many reasons. First of all—you know, Americans in general don’t vote as much as other people. And whatever’s wrong with white America is also wrong with black America. As a member of a minority group, we are naturally somewhat imitative, and unfortunately imitated the worst of white people. There’s too many instances, and that’s number one.

Number two, the (inaudible) on blacks made it almost impossible to see issues in elections. Number three, there was always the belief that, well—quote, “a white person’s going to do what they want anyway.” Now all of these have been more or less—all of these feelings still exist, but they have been greatly subdued. Now they’re accustomed to black people running for office. You have one on the city council, Perry Harvey [Junior]—I knew him as a kid; in fact, I used to teach him in school. And there are several in the legislature, and Dr. [A. Leon] Lowry on the School Board, and what have you. It’s still not nearly—oh, you have Bing on the county commissioners. All of them highly qualified. It’s still not nearly as much as they could have. The black church—and when I say “the black church,” I refer to the black Protestant church—has been an asset to the black community, but it has also been a liability.

GM: Explain that?

FR: Well, it has been an asset because it gathers more adults to its heart than any other institution. And of course, if you gather for a religious purpose, it does mean that you’re not going to kill anybody or you’re not going to smoke dope or commit adultery or steal. So that’s good. And they certainly forced certain ideals of living. That part is good.

But on the other hand, the church universally—not just black, universally—from the time of Paul to today, has always had a running fight with higher learning. The church always had, unless that higher learning was in complete consonance with all of the canons of the church. You know what they did to Galileo, and everybody else that opposed the church, that dared to think.
Well, the black church is no different, it’s just worse. It’s worse because of—it was one of the professions into which a man could go in and have a little dignity without working too hard, number one. And number two, it was one of the professions you could go into and get (inaudible) with white people, because at one time the preachers were completely harmless. Not so now. And so we still have, within the black church—black Protestant church—a core of leaders who believe in their training. And of course, they are anti-education. And so they (inaudible) about voting and things. They feel if they can just pray, everything will straighten out.

So in that respect, the black church has been a liability, because the black church—even though all churches have lost a certain centrality to the coming of existentialism, industrialism—the church—all churches anywhere—the church has lost the centrality. The church has lost its (inaudible) that it had at one time, but it still has that magnetism. It draws a lot of people to its side. And they could use it, but we’re not exploring it to its utmost capacity, not the black church.

W: I think—often we like to talk about things like black opinion, white opinion. What struck me in beginning to read up about Tampa in the fifties and sixties is that you don’t really have just one opinion. You have the NAACP believing in working through the courts to get desegregation, but then you have people like Otha Favors, who have a different point of view. How many points of view do you think there were in Tampa at this time, among the black community? How strong were these other opinions? Did Mr. Favors have a large following, or was it just a vociferous one?

FR: I think you put it very figuratively. Yeah, it was just vociferous—and novel. It was two things. A new movement comes in and it attracts. I don’t know where Favors is now. Incidentally, he was a young man who has a tremendous potential, but I don’t think he used it.

The difference of views was because people are different. There was another factor, too, to be considered, and that is that what many people didn’t realize is that all of these views had a place in the campaign for freedom of individuals. CORE and one or two others always deride the NAACP because they say, “Well, you are legalistic, and look how long it takes.” That’s true. But you have to bear in mind that there is some validity to the statement that this is a government of laws, not men. And so you’ve got to have some legal basis from which to spring. The same organizations that used to deride the NAACP about the slow processes of law, as soon as they get put in jail, they send for the NAACP to get them out and bond them out and what have you. So they’re really both. There comes a time when you need to actually—when you need what you call—you know, you need action. Walking down the street, protesting, boycotts—all of those play an important part. But sometime (inaudible) laws, there’s no question about it.

10 Favors was a member of Black Youth for Peace and Power during the 1960s and 1970s, often described as a militant. He was arrested twice; once for using obscene language at a demonstration and once for possession of marijuana. In 1979, he changed his name to Askia Muhammad Aquil. Aquil was the director of St. Petersburg Neighborhood Housing Services until 2008. He has also contributed an interview to the University of South Florida Libraries’ Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project.
I don’t think a lot of people realize the tremendous role that the black man has played in changing the whole history of American jurisprudence. The Fourteenth Amendment was created strictly for the protection of the blacks. And while for many years it almost lay dormant, I like to feel that black people—as you look through the diorama of mankind, the one group that tried to emancipate itself by the use of the intellect, rather than by the brawn. And we did that by the courts. It was the black lawyer who gave the Fourteenth Amendment the type of (inaudible) that everybody uses.

W: But you still had the riot in sixty-seven [1967].

FR: Mm hm. Well, I think they were necessary, because there are some things that you have to—for instance, the marching and what have you tended to strike at the matrix of white business. You march, people don’t want to go downtown to buy, and then they realize that this is a (inaudible). So it had a very significant (inaudible). It was very, very amusing, because young people really enjoyed it, and even sometimes they wanted to march, we couldn’t stop them.

I’ll never forget one day I was—I had been away, out of town somewhere on some matter for the NAACP—and I came in and went to my office. There were just about twenty young people milling around my office. They had taken over completely. There were signs (inaudible). (inaudible) using your office to make the signs. I said, “Well, if they get put in jail, who’s going to get them out?” He said, “You can get them out.” And it was this kind of thing, but it was kind of amusing in those days. And it was very effective, very, very effective.

I’ll never forget that day those kids went downtown and at that time, the Tampa Theater was in full bloom. They went and applied for tickets, and naturally weren’t allowed to go in, so they started marching up and down. The people started—Maas Brothers [Department Store] closed its doors right quickly, all the other stores closed down right quickly. At five o’clock in the afternoon, the mayor had me downtown—

GM: This was Lane?

FR: Yeah. (inaudible) “Rod, you’ve got to do something.”

And I was there, and I said, “Well, you know, Mr. Mayor, I don’t have the power you think I have.”

“Oh, yeah, you have to stop.” And they did make me sit in sessions. My next job was to—I think the mayor promised me that in thirty days, he would open up everything—theaters, restaurants, and what have you. And I knew that those kids were so impetuous that (inaudible). So I had the job of attending the kids for thirty days, and I had to sit and pray on that.
No one knows how much—really, one of the worst things I had to do was whenever we reached the bargaining table, and I thought that the city or the county or somebody had made us a fairly good offer—that’s really when I had a job, selling it to the blacks, in particular children. When I say blacks—not only blacks, really, that’s just a little unfair—selling it to the blacks and whites, because in those marches there were a lot of white children. Students from the University of South Florida were a tremendous force in this. So I always had a hard time selling them any kind of compromise.

**Gayla Jamison:** Just looking back on desegregation ten years afterwards. Do you think that massive bussing was the answer? Do you think desegregation in Hillsborough County has succeeded? That’s a loaded question, isn’t it.

FR: Yeah. I’m reminded of something that Justice Frank Pullup—I don’t particularly care (inaudible) to get the right answer you have to ask the right question.

GJ: Yeah.

FR: That’s not the right question! (laughs) But I’ll say this much: I have heard so many arguments about the impracticability of bussing and what have you. But you see, concerning neighborhood patterns, if you don’t—or didn’t—bus, then the brown kids would be a novelty. If you say when I let this child go to the school in the neighborhood, well, then you have de facto segregation, because all the blacks live in one section and the whites live in another section. Now here there are a few blacks now that have the money to move into (inaudible) and—what is it, Carrollwood—and things like that, but still, the majority of blacks live in one section. So it would be almost futility if you were going to integrate the schools and have them attend neighborhood schools.

Now, there certainly have been some dislocations and some inconveniences by the use of bussing, but remember that when you talk about bussing and desegregation, you’re talking about removing a cancer that has festered and has lasted so many years, and there is no soft, sweet, easy way to remove a cancer.

GJ: Right. The whole history of (inaudible) shows that.

FR: Right. It’s not easy to remove a cancer. So there has to be some inconvenience. And I’ll tell you something else, too: I have not had a chance to really do, in the past few years, much traveling, but school integration has worked far better than most of us imagined. Because what happened is the press augments and gives tremendous play to the dislocations and to the bad situations.

I find (inaudible) segregate schools. Never heard of it. They don’t talk about it. They’ve become accustomed to going to school and seeing black children. Some mix, some don’t. I work at a school where I see some students that you can tell that that child is (inaudible), because he’s sitting with whites and blacks. Then I see some whites that stick to themselves, but I see some blacks that stick to themselves. But that’s life.
GM: I’ve certainly appreciated talking with you. I have a feeling—if it would be amenable to you, we’ll have some more questions in the future.

FR: (inaudible)

*end of interview*