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William Garcia oral history interview by Ana Varela-Lago, May 12, 1997

William F. Garcia (Interviewee)
Ana M. Varela-Lago (Interviewer)
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Ana M. Varela-Lago: This is an interview with Mr. Willie Garcia. Willie, I would like to start by talking a little bit about your family. Tell me please, why did they come to Tampa, and what did they do here in Tampa?

William F. Garcia: Bueno, mi padre salió—

AV: (whispers) In English.

WG: —he came, left Spain when he was twelve years old, and went to Havana, where he had some relatives. And, he was in Havana a short while and learned the cigar industry. And then came to Tampa from Havana, in the early, either the late 1800s or early 1900s. And then he made a return trip to Spain. And my mother's family that lived in the area, she—her mother was widowed—asked him if he would accompany her to Tampa, since she was coming to Tampa and he was coming back. She was coming to Tampa to live with an uncle. And after she had been back, she had been to Tampa two or three years, then they got married. And lived in Tampa ever since; they went back to Spain on two occasions. For visits—

AV: Could you tell me their names?

WG: Sí, Daddy was Manuel Garcia, Manuel Garcia Alonso, and Mama was Ramona Fernandez, Ramona Fernandez Lopez. And, in about 1917, Daddy went into the restaurant business with a partner named Iglesias, and then he bought out Iglesias who went back to Spain. And he was in the restaurant business until he retired, oh, sometime in nineteen-fi—six or seven or eight.

AV: How about your mother, did she work, or was she a homemaker?
WG: Mother, before she got married she—Daddy era tabaquero, and Mother, before she got married, era despalilladora, a stripper. But then, after they were married, she stayed at the house. My mother and her sister were married to two brothers; my father and his brother were married to my mother and her sister. And Marcelo, my father's brother, also came from Spain and they lived in the same house, the two families. Then, my uncle Marcelo went back to Spain with three children that had been born in Tampa. Two of them came back to Tampa. He, my father, also brought two sisters and two brothers who, at different times, lived in our house. They always lived in West Tampa.

The restaurant that my father bought and operated was next door to Cuesta Rey Cigar Factory. And then, during World War II when personnel, manpower was very short and then the manpower that was available were all working at the shipyard—because there was higher pay—then Mama went and she was cooking at the restaurant. Back then, we had a coal-burning stove and every day you had to fire up the stove with, start off the fire with wood and then dump the coal in it, and at night you had to empty it out, empty out the ashes. Next morning you lit up the stove again. And that's the way it was until my brothers came back from the Service and then they bought a gas stove. But that was in '45 or '46, so all during the '20s and '30s we had a coal-burning stove in the restaurant.

I am the youngest of five children. Although my father also raised three of my cousins and one of my mother's cousins—who later became the cook at the restaurant. And other members of the family, at one time or another they lived in our house. It was kind of like the community center. And, I was the youngest, as I say, of five children. My older brother also operated a restaurant for a while. And two others were in the postal service after the war.

AV: Was your father's business also a boarding house, or just a restaurant?

WG: Yes, it was also a boarding house. The cigar makers were—I call the original city planners—because they would build a cigar factory, then they would build rental houses all around the cigar factory for the workers. And then of course there were a lot of bachelors—single men—in the factories and they had a boarding house on the second floor of the restaurant. They also had a barber shop in the same building. The building was owned by the cigar manufacturer; he built the restaurant building. And then across the street there was a grocery store that was also owned by the cigar manufacturer. Of course back then you didn't have the automobiles that you have today, so everything was within walking distance.

AV: You told me the story about the name of the business—

WG: Oh, the bar was called The Atlanta Bar because Cuesta, Angel Senior and Mr. Rey had a background in Atlanta—they had come from Atlanta—so when they moved to Tampa and they opened the restaurant—I don't know who the original owner of the restaurant was—but when they opened the restaurant it was called the Atlanta Restaurant.

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1 A despalillador/a is a person who strips the veins and stems from the tobacco leaves.
And that's the name it had all through the '60s—even the person that my daddy sold it to kept the name The Atlanta Restaurant.

AV: I see. So the boarders had to be cigar workers for Cuesta, or not necessarily?

WG: No, no. They were not necessarily cigar workers. There was at least one old fellow there that was handicapped and retired. I don't know where his income was from, but I know that he never worked. But—

AV: And workers from other factories could use it too, so it wasn't linked in that way?

WG: Yes, it wasn't exclusive, right. And, from other types of work also. But after lunch every day my mother—we always ate at the restaurant—we never ate at the house. And my mother would come for lunch, and then after lunch she'd go upstairs and clean up and make the beds. In the boarding rooms. And we'd help, of course, sweep up and that kind of thing. But, ordinarily they ate at the restaurant. Everybody ran a tab, and at the end of the week they'd pay their tab. Everything was on credit.

Same way in the factory; the fellow that had the restaurant also had the concession up in the factory for coffee—nobody took coffee breaks—the coffee man would bring the coffee to the work bench. And at the end of the week he'd have a little table at the—they, were paid in cash—and at the end of the week my father would have a little table at the entrance, and as the workers came out, they would pay their tab for the week. So many coffees at five cents; so many Coca-Colas at five cents. That kind of thing.

AV: I see. Where in Spain were your parents from exactly? From Asturias?

WG: From Llovio, El Llovio, Grao.

AV: Both of them?

WG: Both, well, I guess so. They were on two sides of a valley, as I understand it, their houses are still standing. Their houses are made of stone.

AV: Were they farmers, I mean, the family?

WG: Yes, they were farmers. And then one of my father's brothers went to Argentina rather than coming to the United States. And when in Argentina he hit a lottery. And he went back to Spain and bought a tavern in the area—it was between Grao and El Llovio. And the tavern was called—no me recuerdo. But it was in Llovio. And both of their houses, homes, were up higher in the mountains. And when my son was graduated from college, he went to Spain and went up to both of the houses and chipped off a piece of each—a rock of each one—and he had it mounted for me. My father's name was called Casa d'Agnon. D, apostrophe, A-g-n-o-n, which has kind of a French connotation. And my mother's house was called Casa del Canto.
AV: Casa del Canto.

WG: And, when I showed my mother—my mother lived to be 100; she died just short of 101—and when my son brought the pictures back that he took in Spain, I showed my mother the front door of her house and asked her if she knew what that was, and she said "Oh, yes, that's the front door of my house." And she says, "You see this sliver of wood that's a different color? That's when they fixed the door after the French Army—the French soldiers—banged it down." And that would have been during Napoleon's peninsula campaign. So, and the door's still there as I understand it. That house is still used—el Canto is still used. Casa d'Agnon is abandoned.

AV: It's still used by your family? Is your family—?

WG: No, they rent it out. They rent it out. My cousin has it. My mother's mother raised flax. And they would make hilo. And she went into great detail one day on how they would harvest the flax and then they'd take it down to the river and they would put stones on it and it would stay in the river a certain number of days. And then when it came out they would, they would remove the husks and spin it into thread, and then they'd take the thread down to the mill—or not to the mill—there was, somebody had a loom. And they would, they'd have three grades of cloth depending on where the string came from, whether it was the outer—the inner one was the finest, and that's the one that they would use for their clothing. The others they'd use for sheets or mattress covers, that kind of thing.

But yes we took, we have it on tape. We did a tape recording of that one day, where she named all of the implements that they used, and everything. Yes, it was a tough life. And, like I say, she, my grandmother—my mother's mother—was widowed when my mother was six years old. So, it was. And her brother had come to Tampa before her, and he died here very young. As a matter of fact he's buried in the Centro Asturiano, the old Centro Asturiano cemetery. Yes, my father's brothers and sisters—except for the one that went back, Marcelo went back to Spain—but they all married and I have, Maria had two children, Joaquina had three, had four, had five—one died when he was young, a baby, and another one was killed in Italy during World War II. Three survived.

AV: Was it common for people, like your uncle, to come here to Tampa and then return to Spain after awhile?

WG: I don't think so. I don't think so. But, my uncle Marcelo was a peculiar sort.

AV: So most of the people really stayed? I mean, maybe they thought at some point that they would return, but—

WG: Yes. The only ones that I know that went back were people that went back after they retired on Social Security and could still draw their Social Security check and live in Spain. We had some. I remember one boarder that we had, as a matter of fact, you were asking if they had to work in the factory. This particular man was a waiter in the Spanish
restaurants, Severo Castro. And he went back to Spain.

AV: Really?

WG: Severo, as a matter of fact, I told you my brother Manuel went into the restaurant business—he went into the restaurant business with Severo. They were partners. In a restaurant downtown at—

AV: What restaurant was it?

WG: —on Tyler and Tampa Street, on the southeast corner of Tyler and Tampa Street, the building is still there, and it was called El Madrillon.

AV: El Madrillon?

WG: El Madrillon. M-a-d-i-l-o-n.

AV: Why that name?

WG: From Madrid.

AV: Oh, really?

WG: El Madrillon. I think there's a Madrillon restaurant in New York. See, my brother Manuel had been to New York. In ’39, I think, they sent a delegation from Tampa. He was very active in the Frente Popular. And they had sent a delegation to Washington, D.C. to lobby to lift the embargo. And from there he went up to New York. One of my father's cousins lived in New York, so he stayed up there a little while. Just visiting—I mean not to—so then, when he came back home, he opened the restaurant, I guess, in 1940. And then, he had to go in the service. So he sold it.

AV: And Severo Castro was his partner?

WG: Severo Castro, yes.

AV: And this Severo returned to Spain then when he retired?

WG: Yes, when he retired.

AV: That's interesting. Okay. Was your family linked with the Centro Asturiano from the beginning?

WG: No, my father was in the Centro Español.

AV: Oh, really?
WG: All my brothers were in the Centro Español. And I was in the Centro Español until I went in the service. My wife was always in the Centro Asturiano. Her father was very active, her great-uncle used to work the picnics and work the bar during the fund raisers. Her father was very active with the recreation committee, and the baseball team that they used to have in the Inter-Social League.

AV: Right.

WG: I became a member when I got back from the service and it was obvious that the Centro Español was in trouble. And, well, the Centro Asturiano was in trouble too, but Manuel Tamargo, who was a relative—my wife's father's name was Tamargo. Manuel Tamargo, who was president and doing a lot of fund raising in the Centro Asturiano, asked me and my wife if we wouldn't join back up. So we did. This was 1961, or '62.

And I don't remember, but I think at that time the West Tampa Centro Español was already closed, and the one in Ybor City was not very active either. Although both of the hospitals were still operating. But, you know, by then I had my own insurance, my wife had her own insurance, and if we needed medical attention, frankly, we wouldn't have gone to either one of those two hospitals—although the Centro Asturiano then was much better than the hospital at the Centro Español. The Centro Español never had the—at least after the war, after World War II—I don't think had the quality medical care that the Centro Asturiano did. Although when they built the new hospital it had very good facilities; the one on Howard Avenue, and so the one on Bayshore. The one on Bayshore, I think the property had been donated by Cuesta. I'm not sure, but I think that—

AV: I think so. Yes.

WG: —Cuesta had donated that property—along with the property for the Academy of Holy Names. That's what I've always heard. I've never researched it. Although I did run into an article somewhere that there was a developer in one of the subdivisions adjoining Ybor City that was subdividing an orange grove, and had donated the orange trees to the Centro Español hospital on the Bayshore, and they had transplanted them over there. And I remember those. At the Centro Español hospital, they had cows in the backyard, and chickens, and they would use those, they would use the milk from those cows in the hospital. No pasteurization, no nothing.

AV: Right.

WG: And the chickens the same way, they'd use the chickens in the kitchen. Yes. They had a caretaker back there that took care of the poultry.

AV: Okay, let's talk a little bit now about your childhood in West Tampa. What memories do you have of those years?

WG: Well, of course, we were in the middle of the Depression. And we were better off than most people because we had the restaurant. At least we never had to worry about
where the food was coming from. But we didn't have everything that we needed, you know. I remember my mother making underwear for my sister and my cousins that were living with us out of the sacks that the flour for the restaurant came in, or that the rice for the restaurant came in. They'd bleach it first, to get rid of the labels, and then make slips for the girls. And in the summertime you never wore any shoes. Once school was out, forget it. Shoes were out. But shoes you did wear, they had a pair of shoes that we called them *zapato lechero*. They were—

**AV:** *Zapato lechero?*

**WG:** *De lechero.*

**AV:** *De lechero? Why? What is that?*

**WG:** Well, they were high-tops, with laces. And they came up over your ankles and that's, that was your pair of shoes. And you would wear those until they wore a hole through them, and then you'd put cardboard inside and wear them some more, and then take them to the shoe shop for half soles, and wear them again.

But, like I say, we never hurt for food, anyway. And at the house we always had a boarder, you know. We had a five bedroom house, and we always had a boarder. My daddy, when he built the house it would have been 1928. It had two crystal chandeliers with prisms in the living room and in the dining room, and you could see those from the street. And when they moved in, my mother would say that people would come at dusk and just stand outside to see the chandeliers. It was a, it had a very distinctive fence, that was specially made, in the front of the house. And there have been—there was one edition of the, what is it? The *Sunland Tribune*, I think, that one of the historical societies puts out. And they had an article on West Tampa and they had sketches of different structures in West Tampa. And they had a sketch of *el bordin*, which is what they called the boarding house.

**AV:** I see.

**WG:** *Was el bordin,* and they had a sketch of the restaurant. And they also had a sketch of our house. Because it had, like I say, it had a distinctive fence and a distinctive front to it. The long front porch. And the rocking chairs, and—but it had some very intricate brickwork. It had two planters that looked like turrets to a castle, you know, in front—

**AV:** Did it suffer with the decline of the cigar industry—?

**WG:** Well, the cigar industry, as I remember it was—during the war, it thrived. And, I remember, there were some periods like just before Christmas, where they would work three shifts. They would work 24 hours a day in the factory. Especially the machines would work the third shift. And, of course my father would take coffee up there just during the regular shift. He'd take coffee three times a day—twice in the morning and once in the later afternoon. And then right after lunch they'd deliver cold drinks. Of
course back then they didn't have canned cold drinks. They had bottles and they didn't have soda machines, you know, you had to deliver them to the workbench, again. Nobody took a break.

So, my job before going to school was to take the cold drinks from the restaurant across the street to the loading dock at the cigar factory and load up the Coca-Cola box. And then the iceman would come, and he would chop up the ice, along about ten o'clock. And then about one o'clock my father would make the run with the cold drinks. Then when I got home from school, first thing I had to do was take that rolling ice box and pick up the bottles. And then the next day, same thing. So that was all the way through junior high school. That was my job. It was, you know.

I remember for example, Christmas Eve, it was always, the whole family gathered at the restaurant. And my brothers, after they were married, they'd bring their children and it was a big gathering on Christmas Eve. We had a man that collected the slop. The garbage from the leftovers from people's plates. They'd all be put in a big can and he would pick it up every day. And then, for Christmas he would always give us a pig. So we would roast the pig. And my mother would cook. For example, the ham, she would cook—bake the ham. She'd take all the fat off. And the fat you'd fry and become chicharrones.

AV: Chicharrones, right.

WG: And then she'd bake the ham, and once the ham was baked, she would put a heavy coat of sugar on it. And, as I said, we had a coal burning stove, so we had this big bar that was a leaf from an automobile leaf spring, and that would be stuck right into the red hot coals. And then you'd get some real heavy rags and pull it out, and the end of the bar would be red hot. And with that, she would caramelize the sugar, planchaba el jamon, you know.

AV: That's amazing.

WG: And give it a caramel coating. And, in addition to sweetening up the ham, it also would coat it to where it wouldn't dry out.

AV: Right.

WG: Because it was caramelized. And she would use that same plancha for la crema Española, you know. She'd sprinkle sugar and then do a big pan of crema Española. Have a nice design on it, you know. With the strips of burnt sugar on top. Boy it makes my mouth water! Yes. I could never, you know, the flan, la crema Española and la natilla, I could never distinguish the different ways that she made it, but she'd make all three. She was a good cook. Fabada every Saturday.

AV: Oh, I imagine, right.

WG: Fabada Asturiana.
AV: Did they make their own chorizos, or—?

WG: No, the chorizos we used to buy from Andres Sanchez.

AV: But they were made in Tampa?

WG: They were made in Tampa, yes. The morcillas were imported. They'd come in a big can full of lard. A yellow lard. And the beans, and the rice, and the potatoes we would buy in bulk. And then, on Sundays we'd peel potatoes for the whole week. I'd sit there and peel potatoes for, stick 'em in a big pot of water and stick it in the refrigerator, and those potatoes would be used all week for the soup or for the carne con papas, or for whatever. We had—the olive oil always came from Spain and, for awhile, we would buy the wine in a regular barrel. And then we had this faucet—I forget, there's a technical name for it—but it's a spigot that you stick into the barrel. And we would serve the wine into pitchers, from the barrel. And that was always Spanish wine. And of course at Christmas time, turrón.

AV: Right.

WG: Alicante and Jijona.

AV: Right.

WG: Ordinarily those were the only two that we would get, but now you go to the store and you've got, you know, yema de huevo, and coco, and all kinds of turrón. But back then the only ones that I can remember were the hard Alicante and the—

AV: Jijona, right.

WG: — Jijona.

AV: It was famous brand. Still is. Yes. Okay, let's talk now a little bit about the war in Spain. What are the first memories that come to your mind when you think of those years?

WG: Well, of course, I was born in '31. And the war was from '36 to '39, so I was, tops, eight years old when the war was over. When did the war end, in March?

AV: Yes.

WG: So, I wasn't quite eight years old when the war was over. And my memory, of course, is that the great great, great majority of the people were loyalists, for the Republic. And in the house a lot of the talk was always fall of loyalism. There was always talk about the war. Every evening, of course, you had to listen to the short wave radio. We had a little table model Zenith. And, I think I told you, it had a little green light
up an top that as you turned the dial and zeroed in on a station, it had two radiuses that would open and close a pie-shaped figure and the closer you got to getting good reception, the closer the two lines would come together. The people next door had a floor model Philco. And sometimes they would get better reception than we would and we'd go over there to listen to the news.

AV: Was that every day?

WG: It was every day—as I recall it was every evening.

AV: And how long was the broadcast, would you say? Was it long, or—?

WG: I don't have a memory. I don't think that it was—I think that maybe it was half an hour, but I wouldn't swear to that—

AV: So people used to get together, and—?

WG: Yes, usually there'd be, you know, one or two neighbors would come in. Of course, all the windows were open and people would be, the set was in the living room, and you could sit on the porch and listen to it. *La Gaceta* at that time was a daily. So, of course, they had news of the day every day. News of the war, and *Chungas y no chungas*, the editorial column that Victoriano Manteiga wrote. They also had a running novella.

AV: Oh, really?

WG: A serialized novel, and my mother would read aloud to us every night. My mother was not educated, and she had a hard time with the reading, but she would read *la novela* to us every night. We'd sit there and listen to, a little 15 or 20 minutes of *la novela*.

AV: So why do you think the people were so supportive of the Republic here in Tampa?

WG: Well, of course, the people that came to Tampa were by and large farmers. They had no educational opportunities. The church, and the government, and the aristocracy did not want an educated population, populace. So, that plus the hard economic times. And I imagine that they, you know, heard from other people that had come before them to Cuba, and the majority—at that time most people came to Cuba which, of course, was a Spanish possession. And they came to Tampa after that because of the cigar trade. Just like they came to Key West because of the cigar trade. But it was largely because of economic conditions, you know.

And, like I say, my father, when he came and he got established and he got some money, well, he started bringing over his brothers and sisters for that very reason. I mean, they were up in the mountains and their only source of income—if any income, their sustenance—was what they raised on the farm. They didn't have any, nobody worked at some income producing job back there. So, I would say that was the main reason, just to better themselves economically because of the harsh conditions in Spain.
Incidental to that, of course, was the educational possibilities that they had here. My wife's grandfather was real down on the church because of the fact that he, they tried to get him into school and they wouldn't let him into the school for one reason or another. And he was always very down on the church. Of course, everybody that came here was baptized, and once they got here, nobody went to church. Very, very few people went to church, the Catholic church. More Italians went to church than Spanish. There were some Spanish that went to church, but it was largely the Italians. A greater percentage of Italians went to church than Spanish, let's put it that way. And, I think it's been noted that, even in the families that went to church, it was the women that went and the men were not particularly interested. But there was and is resentment towards the Catholic church, because of the conduct before they came here, and then because of the civil war and the participation of the Catholic church in the overthrow of the Republic.

But the war itself, at Daddy's restaurant, for example, the women's auxiliary, I remember they would come in and use the kitchen facilities to make churros for fund raisers. There was some activity going on, they would make the churros and take them and sell them. At the cigar factory on Fridays, which was payday, there would always be somebody at the door trying to raise money for one cause or another, sometimes not associated with the war. I mean, there were some impoverished people that would be there, in effect, begging. But that was always a means of raising funds.

And even during World War II, I remember some Russian relief activities where they had Russian goods that they were selling at the factory door to raise money for Russian relief. Russia, of course, was our ally during World War II. And there were, even some Russian sailors that came to Tampa to pick up some ships during the war. So there was an alliance there—and of course it went back to the Spanish Civil War days where Russia had been supportive of the Republic.

But, yes, there were always activities going on in support of the Republic. And I've said, when Lawton Chiles was famous for his walk through Florida. In his re-election campaign, he had a little symbolic walk from City Hall, I guess, down to, maybe three or four blocks on Franklin Street where he was going to be speaking. And I marched along with Lawton. And I was next to Phyllis Buzansky who was then County Commissioner, and I said "Well, you know the first political demonstration that I can remember was a march from Ybor City and the Centro Obrero to downtown Tampa to support the Republic." And, that was a 1938 march, in early 1938. I had to be six years old, you know. I turned seven in June of '38. So I wasn't quite seven years old.

And I remember that demonstration, from the Centro Obrero it went through Tampa Heights. I remember las Americanas, you know, what I figured to be las Americanas, because it wasn't either Ybor City or West Tampa. But there were women standing on porches and applauding and cheering and waving. And the chant was, "Lift the embargo against Loyalist Spain." And I didn't know what it meant, but I chanted it. And the demonstration, they had, the men all marched first in one group, and then the next group
were the ladies and then the next group were the children. And I could never figure out why it was done that way, but that's the way they did it. And then they marched to the courthouse and there was some speaking down there; I remember that. And I've read about it since then, of course—

AV: Was that common, to have demonstrations like that?

WG: That's the only one that I can remember participating in. Although I remember—and I don't know if it was an the same occasion—I remember being at the Centro obrero. And there was some speaking going on—some oration—and, of course, the windows were open, and I was outside, in like a little patio or courtyard, and I remember the windows were very low, where you could see in and hear. But I don't remember what it was about. I do remember that it was in conjunction with the civil war. But at the house, of course, my brother like I say was very active in el Frente Popular, and there was a lot of talk about fund raisers and—

AV: What kind of things did he do? Was he a leader, among the people at the Labor Temple—?

WG: I don't know that. I know that he was very active—

AV: How old was he at that time? He must have been very young.

WG: Well, you see, he was born in, he would have been around 20. Because he was born in, either '16 or '17. So he would have been early twenties.

AV: Was he involved with the Labor unions previous to the war, I mean was he already active?

WG: No, no. Because we weren't, you know, he was in the restaurant with my daddy. I mean, he had graduated from high school in '35, as I recall. So he worked in the restaurant with my father. That's, so he wasn't in any—

AV: So this was almost like his first political involvement, would you say?

WG: I don't know, you know. I remember in the restaurant we always had posters for Franklin Roosevelt, you know. There were always political posters. Back then the political poster was a very common way of propaganda and, whenever there was a political campaign, local or statewide or national, I mean, they had posters with the candidates and their pictures and, you know. My daddy always put up everybody's poster, you know. He figured if you're in business, you can't—

AV: Discriminate.

WG: —Yes, become committed to one side or another and antagonize some of your customers. So everybody that brought a poster could put up their poster. But, of course,
back then there weren't any Republicans. It was all Democratic party or, as they called, the municipal party, the white municipal party where only whites could vote.

AV: Could vote, right.

**Side A ends; side B begins**

AV: So your brother was involved in the—

WG: Very heavily, yes. Manuel was very heavily involved.

AV: Right. Do you remember any of the speakers who came to the Centro Asturiano, the Centro Español.

WG: No. I was six years old. Seven years old, you know.

AV: Right.

WG: I remember the name La Pasionaria, you know, and, of course, the song—

AV: The "¡No pasarán!" song?

WG: —"¡No pasarán!" Sí. Everybody knew that song! You know. Including me. I knew the words, at least the first verse I knew. And, the other one that I told you about: Sí los curas y frailes supieran / la paliza que van a llevar / levantando la mano, levantando los brazos dijeran / ¡Libertad, Libertad, Libertad! You know, like—

AV: Did you use to sing that too?

WG: I don't remember! I don't remember where I got that. It may have been that one of my cousins, when they came from Spain, which would have been after the civil war and after, in the late '40s or '50s, it may have been that they told me about it. But, you know, I don't remember where I heard it. I don't remember if it was from my childhood or whether I got it from them, but I, I didn't forget it!

AV: Yes. Do you remember the families of some of the volunteers? Do you remember your parents talking about people leaving for Spain?

WG: No, no, no. I knew the people that were leaning towards the fascists. I mean, and generally they were somehow involved with Mr. Cuesta, Angel Senior, because he had been knighted by the King and, I think that they were more Royalists than they were fascists. In other words, they didn't like the fact that the King had abdicated, and they were under the assumption that if Franco overthrew the government, that the King would...

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2 Dolores Ibárruri Gómez, a prominent member of Spain’s Communist Party.
3 This song is a satire of “El Himno de Riego,” the Spanish national anthem under the Republic, which was banned when Franco took over after the war.
be reinstated. At least that's my impression of what their beliefs were. There were several relatives of the Cuestas that lived in the neighborhood, and of course the foremen in the factory, they were leaning pro-Franco. But, other than that—and there were Italian families that were of course pro-Mussolini. But, other than that, everybody that I knew was for the Republic, and "fascista" was a dirty word, you know.

AV: Yes. Were there conflicts between the two sides, the people who supported Franco and the other people, or—?

WG: No—

AV: —how did they manage?

WG: —not outwardly, you know. My best friend, his family would lean towards Franco, I'm sure. They were related to the Cuestas. And, they were church-going Catholics. And, he attended a Catholic school in West Tampa. But we were still best friends and whatever socializing there was, you know, like going to the movies on Monday night, well, my mother would go with his mother, walk down to the theater on Monday nights. So, there wasn't any outward antagonism, but there was resentment, you know, and people were kind of stand-offish towards each other more than actual hostility—that I could remember. Now, I can visualize situations where tempers flared. And I know, you know, I know that there—I've heard—that there were fights and that kind of thing, name calling. But none of this, throwing a bomb through the house, or things of that nature.

AV: Now, you mentioned before that it was a little bit difficult for the Centros here to take positions?

WG: Well, as I understand it, the by-laws prohibited political activity, you know. So, whenever they had picnics, for example, well, all of the candidates were welcome. They never supported any local candidates for office or statewide, or anything else. They all came here and there was, even great reluctance on the part of officers to take part in any kind of political activity because they didn't want to give the appearance that the club was supporting a particular candidate. So anybody that came to the functions at the club were recognized and hosted around and everything else.

Even though, there were situations where everybody knew that guy wasn't going to get a single vote of the people that were there, he still had supporters that were taking him around and introducing him and everybody gave him a cordial welcome. And then they'd go out and vote against him, you know. But, insofar as the clubs themselves, there was, and as I understand it, it was in their charters that they were not to participate in political activities—

AV: So support for the Republic could be considered like taking sides—?

WG: I think that support for the Republic was considered to be a political activity. And then, they got legalistic, and found a loophole where they felt that they could support the
Republic, not so much in supporting the Republic, but in opposing the attempt to overthrow an established government, you know. And then they did take a stand, although I don't remember them ever actually sponsoring a fund-raising activity for either side. Because, again, they had members that were on both sides, you know, and that would have, it wasn't a question of, it wasn't an activity that would come within the purposes of the organization. The organization was a mutual aid organization to provide educational, social, cultural, recreational benefits. And as an organization, it wasn't within their purposes.

But no question that the leaders and the members were certainly active, on the side of the Republic at least, and I imagine on the other side also. Arango, who was a manufacturer who was active for Franco, as I understand it, is buried in our old cemetery, you know. So, and he had been, as I recall, a past president, or very active anyway, in the establishment of the Centro Asturiano. So, you know, it would have been a slap in his face to take the side of the Republic. And I just think that they didn't think it was appropriate.

AV: How about the other communities? You mentioned before that some Italians were obviously supporting Mussolini—

WG: Well, you know—

AV: And the Cubans, for example?

WG: I don't remember the Cubans being involved at all. I don't remember that at all. You know, there was an intermeshing of the liberal labor unions and the Frente Popular. So the Cubans that were active in the Labor union would be, you know, pro-Republic and active in—but the Cubans didn't see it as a personal battle. Although there were volunteers from Cuba in the International Brigades. So, there was—there was sentiment. There was a pro-Republic sentiment I would think, because, I mean just the whole history of the Cuban independence would have dictated that.

AV: And how about the Americans, how did they look at this support?

WG: It was standoffish, you know. It's none of our business type thing—

AV: Did they participate in any of their events, that you can recall, or—?

WG: No, not that I can recall. No, not that I can recall. Of course, the manufacturers that were active in the Chamber reflected, you know, their attitudes. Now, I remember that the Tampa Times, the Tampa Daily Times, was considered a fascist newspaper. Exactly why I don't know, but it was considered a fascist newspaper. And the only people on my block that took the Times were leaning towards Franco. So, that just added to—

AV: To the perception.
WG: —to the belief that they were a fascist newspaper. But I, you know, I never—six years old—I wasn't, the only thing that I was reading were the funnies, if that! I didn't speak English until I went to school, until I started school. They had a pre-primer, one year of school before you were let into the first grade. Officially it was known as pre-primer. And, unofficially it was known as "baby class."

AV: Baby class?

WG: You were in baby class. And you went to baby class before you went to first grade, and when I went to baby class I didn't know a word of English—notwithstanding that all my older brothers and sisters had been in school, but when they got home, you didn't speak English—everybody spoke Spanish, you know. Even in, with the kids next door and everything else, everybody spoke Spanish. The only time you spoke English was in school. And you sure couldn't speak Spanish in school because if you were speaking Spanish in the schoolyard, man, stick your hand out and here comes the ruler. "You-will-not-speak-Spanish-on-the-school-ground." Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. You know. So.

AV: How about the Catholic church? Was there—

WG: There was a lot of resentment against the Catholic church, because of their pro-Franco stand.

AV: But was the Catholic church here in Ybor City really, or in West Tampa, supporters of Franco, or was—?

WG: Well, the people that went to the church were, you know.

AV: But did the church as an institution actually do, you know, endorse him in any way, that you think—?

WG: I don't have any recollection of that.

AV: It was more like a—

WG: The only recollection that I have of the church's participation was a newsreel of Pope Pius [XI] blessing some Italian warplanes. Now, whether they were going to go bomb Spain, or whether it was during the Ethiopian campaign, or whatever—I don't remember. But I do remember the Pope blessing, in this newsreel, blessing the Italian warplanes, and the reaction that it got from the audience which was very, very negative. Booing and hissing. Even back then I thought that how inappropriate it was for a church leader to be blessing a war machine, you know. But, that was my only recollection of the Pope. And, you know, whenever he appeared on the newsreel he was hissed, booed, in the neighborhood theater.

And Roosevelt, of course, everybody cheered and, I mean when he was speaking you couldn't—your parents wouldn't let you get up to go to the restroom. I mean, you had to
wait until after he finished, and then you could go to the restroom.

AV: I see.

WG: It was disrespectful to get up when he was on the newsreel. Yes. So.

AV: Let me see. Do you, would you say, Willie, that the Spanish Civil War had an impact on your life in any way?

WG: Oh, sure! You know.

AV: In what way?

WG: Well, the Spanish Civil War, of course, was the precursor of World War II, and World War II was the same fight as the Spanish Civil War. My brothers went in the Service. My brother Max was in the Pacific campaign from 1941 until the end of the war, in the Philippines. He went all the way from New Caledonia on up to the Solomons and Guadalcanal and everything else, and survived. My cousin Juanito, who was one of my cousins that my father took in, was killed in Italy. My brother Manuel was in the Pacific. My cousin Pancho was in the Pacific.

So, you know, it was an anti-fascist, pro-democratic, liberal beliefs. And Spanish Civil War, World War II after that, I mean it just was the natural thing to do. The right thing to do! You know. Anybody else was wrong, and that, I've maintained that throughout. I mean, I don't shun the word liberal. They say, You're a democrat? "Yes, I'm a Democrat, I'm a liberal Democrat." And when they say, A liberal Democrat? I say, "Look up the word liberal."

AV: What was the feeling here when Franco finally won the war?

WG: Sadness.

AV: Yes?

WG: Sadness and concern for what was happening to the families. You know, of course, as I recall there was not too much fighting in Asturias after the beginning of the war. You know, all of the news was of Madrid and Southern Spain. The Northern provinces apparently had been stabilized, if you will, shortly after the war began. I started talking to my cousin—one of my cousins that came over, who was there during the war—the other day, and I never could get the story straight as to who actually controlled the area where my family was from. Whether it was the loyalists or the fascists. I got the impression that up in the mountains it was still the Loyalists that controlled the mountains, and the fascists had the sea. The seaside. But the Cantabrian Mountains were never, were always in the hands of the Loyalists. Now, I may be wrong about that and I've been meaning to talk to him some more about it. But, that was the impression that I got. And, of course, there were always letters from Spain, how they got them back and forth, I don't know, but
there was correspondence from Spain. And we would always send packages of clothing. I don't, my recollection is that they were sent directly to our family.

AV: Was that after the war, or during the war, do you think?

WG: It was in my youth. And if it was during or after the war, it was as far back as I can remember, you know? Se tenía que hacer un paquete, because there was—

AV: Right. But it wasn't through the Labor Temple and the Frente Popular, or something, it was more of a family—

WG: I don't remember that. No. It was—my recollection is it was always in the family, where—And usually it's because there was a ship that was going to Spain. You know? I guess it was a ship in the port that was going to Spain. Now, if there was an embargo, I guess it would have had to have been after the war.

AV: Yes, probably.

WG: I remember gathering clothes as far back as I can remember. It may have been that it was also in conjunction with the groups that were sending clothes, in general. And of course, you know the story of the cigar—I mean cigarette—wrappers, I mean—

AV: Yes, tell us a little bit about that. Were you gathering foil too?

WG: Yes, the tin—we called it tin-foil—of course, it wasn't tin, it was a lead foil that wrapped the cigars—I mean cigarettes, and also chewing gum. The individual sticks of chewing gum had a lead foil wrapping.

AV: Right.

WG: And we would gather those packs of cigarettes that were discarded, and open them up and peel off the lead foil. And the same way with the chewing gum wrappers, and make them into a ball and, you know, the word was that we were, that they were going to take this tin-foil and make it into bullets. To make bullets, to make bullets. And, it wasn't until very recently that I discovered that they were using it to make sinkers.

AV: Okay. Just to conclude this interview, Willie, I would like to ask you, is there anything else you would like to add, or some topic we haven't discussed that you think should be included in your tape?

WG: No, but if I think of anything I'll drop you a line.

AV: Okay. This concludes the interview with Willie Garcia, and I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this project, Willie. You'll be getting the transcript shortly.

WG: Good, thank you.
AV: Thank you very much.

_End of interview._