

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Rex Shaw and Mrs. Shaw

INTERVIEWEE: Rex Shaw and Mrs. Rex Shaw

INTERVIEWER: Amelia Cabot and Mary Malone for the Key West Women's Club

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Cabot: --in the series of interviews on local history, a project entitled 'Key West As It Was', sponsored by the Key West Women's Club as part of their bicentennial celebration. This is Amelia Cabot speaking and Mrs. Mary Malone, our chairman, taping. The subject today is 'Cigar-Making in Key West'. The making of cigars in Key West began as early as 1831 with the Wall factory on Front Street between Duval and Fitzpatrick.  
[audio cuts off and then on again]

Malone: Just go right on.

C: In 1870, Key West was the world's largest cigar manufacturing center. The industry reached its peak in 1890 when over one hundred million cigars were produced. Old-timers can give us vivid recollections of the Key West industry as far back as they can remember and we are very fortunate today to be in the home of Mr. Rex Shaw to interview him. Mr. Shaw comes from a family of cigar-makers and workers. Mr. Shaw, how old are you?

Shaw: I am eighty years old last July the twenty-third.

C: And where were you born?

S: Key West, Florida.

C: Tell us about your parents and their work in the cigar factories.

S: Well, my daddy was a cigar-maker by trade and he made cigars all his life until the time he died, and my mother was what they call a 'picker and packer'. In other words, she was a trained eye picking the cigars and the different colors and sizes although they'd lay out ten or fifteen thousand on the tables and she'd spread them over the table and pick them in different piles and when they put them in the box, they all look alike- pick and pack. Now, she had the two trades. Maybe you might had the pick trade and I had the pack, they worked in teams, but she didn't do it that way- she picked and packed both of them.

C: Well, how long did you work in the factories?

S: Uh-oh.

Mrs. Shaw: Since (?).

S: Wait a minute, how old was I?

C: Yeah, when you started working?

MS: [whispers] Seventeen.

S: Nineteen? No.

MS: You were about seventeen, you said.

S: Yeah! Seventeen, yes that's what you mean, yes.

C: Seventeen. And you worked how many years?

MS: Well, practically all of his life.

C: All of his life.

MS: Except the (break in?) of the war--

S: I went into the Navy.

MS: --and his work in the Navy yard.

S: Seven years in the Navy yard and two years in the war.

MS: And then he went back into the cigar business again.

S: (In the home?).

C: Well, we'll ask you about your own business later but let's talk about the factories here in Key West.

S: Well, the factories-- I only knew of one factory because (that's the one I learned my trade in?), see? That was the Key West Havana American Cigar Factory, the one they used to call the 'Trust' around Key West. Well, I learned my trade there, and if you learn your trade in the shop, you'll always have a job, see? If you're an apprentice in the shop and you learn the trade because you work in the trade for the factory, you work everyday, two or three hours for the benefit of opening what they call the 'cuttings', that's the wrapping leaf when cut-off from the wrappers, see? And you open them up so they can use it again. Well, that was all for free for the house, but that's the one I learned my trade in. And when I learned the trade, they gave me a job.

C: Well, now, I understand-- I know, not I understand, the making of a cigar is a very intricate procedure--

S: It is.

C: --and very fascinating. I wonder if you could tell us exactly how a cigar is made.

S: I can. There's two types of cigars: one is what we call a 'short filler' type and one is what they call a 'long filler' type. I'll describe both of them. The short filler is you put your binder down, you chop up tobacco in the grinding machine, see? That's in the short filler. And you do it in one motion, pick it so the sense of feeling in your hand, allows you to pick that tobacco up and you know just how much to put inside that binder and you fold it over; that's one. The long filler type is you put your binder on the board, the binder is what holds the filler, and you put it in your hand piece by piece until you sense the feeling in your hand that let's you know that you got the right size and you roll it over, put in on the board and put it in the press. And after you put them in the press for about twenty or thirty minutes, then you put the outside wrapper on it and that's the finished product.

C: Now, the outside wrapper is very important.

S: Very important.

C: Can you tell us about the importance of the wrapper? [both speak at same time] Like the Havana--

S: Well, the importance of the wrapper is-- well, there used to be Havana wrappers around Key West, but the later years when Havana-- we had the embargo, you couldn't get no Havana wrappers. You either use Santo Domingo wrapper, Puerto Rico, and-- Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico-- I guess that's about all.

C: Well, why is it that the Havana wrappers are so famous?

S: Climate conditions or soil conditions raise tobacco over there. In other words, we're just ninety miles away, we can't raise tobacco here. You may raise one little stalk or something like that. Everybody used to have a-- one tree or something like that, but the-- it's the soil conditions. It's just like tomatoes, you raise tomatoes someplace, you can't raise (peppers?) in another place, see?

C: Well, I understand that the daily news papers were read by a reader at the factory.

S: That is correct.

C: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

S: Well, it mostly read in Spanish. Interpreter would read sometimes in the Spanish and then revert over to the English and vice-versa, see? They had a very clever-- those readers were very clever but sometimes they only got fella that used to read in Spanish then they said-- if he couldn't read the English, then you had to have a reader to read to you in English. [both speak at same time] If you happen to know Paul Aubrey-- happen to know Paul Aubrey the ball player, he used to be one of the readers in the cigar factories.

C: Paul Aubrey?

S: Paul Aubrey.

C: Now, they not only read newspapers, they also read books.

S: They read books and nov--[both speak at the same time]

C: Now, how did they-- why were they chosen? How did they read the books?

S: Well, that was left to the factory, the Cuban element, see? Because Americans didn't have a thing to say in the question. Well, they have a say-- a list of a half a dozen different kinds of books. The reader would announce the ones he picked for all the people, see? Now, alright, maybe I recall one with Gloria. There used to be a very famous novel out of Cuba, *Gloria*- that was the name of it- and they used to read maybe a chapter about a day and every time they put that down, applause-- you could hear applause and 'Ah!' and 'Ah!' [laughs] all going through-- all through the (?).

C: Yes, and I was told also that famous classics like *Don Quixote* and *Les Miserable*-- [both speak at same time]

S: Right. *Don Quixote*.

C: How was this reader paid?

S: Well, he was paid by the Cuban element unless he interpreted in English. Now, like I say, I don't have to pay anything in the shop I was in because like I say, they had nothing but (?), see? Paid twenty to fifty cents a week according to if you want to contribute fifty cents; some may want to only contribute a quarter or so.

M: I would like to ask a question: were many American cigar-makers?

S: Oh, plenty of them.

MS: Oh, yes.

S: Plenty of cigar American. But there was majority, mostly Cubans. Mostly Cubans. See, the trade was brought over from Cuba and--

MS: Be careful. Is that still on?

C: Yes.

MS: Pick your hand up, that's all.

C: Go ahead.

S: The trade was brought over from Cuba way back there-- way back there, like I said, my daddy was a cigar-maker, see? My daddy, and I'm eighty. And he made the trade when he was a young man and he-- and my mother is what they called a 'picker and packer,' she developed that. But when daddy was a cigar-maker; he made the samples of one of the biggest mail-order factories in the world- Thomson Brothers. He was here-- located here one time now he moved from here went over to Bartow, Florida and I understand they work over three hundred people run those samples. It was five of them, made the samples with my daddy.

C: Well, when did you start your business over there on Fleming Street? Tell us about your own business and all of your experiences during those years.

S: Oh, golly.

MS: [whispers inaudibly]-- can I say this loud?

C: Yes, of course.

MS: He's had several factories--

S: Had four of them-- [both speak at same time]

MS: --not only that one, he had four different factories and then he had a break because he had to go-- he did the stretch there at the Navy yard, of course, and then he opened this one on Fleming and Margaret Streets, which in 19--about-- in 1940--I'll say '45, 1945, and he continued it up until last year 1974--

S: About twenty-seven years then.

M: I remember it.

S: Yeah.

MS: Yes, 1974.

S: --thousands of people coming in-- you know would you believe it that in this town of ours, even the people at my age or her age, see? People that (get more?) years had never seen a cigar made in Key West. I've had them come in my shop and say, "Rex, I've never this. I've been here all my life, eighty, ninety years."

M: [laughs]

S: And that's a fact! And the sight of them seeing what I've made.

M: Were there many independents like you?

S: At that time? Now or then?

M: Well, then and now.

S: Well, it was more so then, because like I say, they got the tobacco more or less from the big factories, see? It would be the same principle but the cigars they made would be the same principles that the big factories would have, see? They would sell all the paper leaf tobaccos like the (Colbert?) family, maybe Dr. (Colbert?)'s mother--father? He was up on Duval Street, he was quite a tobacco dealer around here because I used to buy tobaccos from him myself. And like I said, it was the same tobaccos that the big shops used to use around here.

M: Well, I know there's a number of houses, one of them in which the author Benedict (Thielen?) lived in. He moved it from Dey Street. It has a great big attic, it's a little cottage and they said they stored tobacco up there.

S: Where was this at?

M: Well, the house originally was on Dey Street.

MS: Dey Street.

S: Dey Street, yeah.

M: And then they moved it over somewhere on Von Phister.

S: Oh, Von Phister? Well, that's quite a way's away, isn't it?

MS: I don't know much about that.

S: No, I don't know about that either.

M: They called it-- they said it was a tobacco-maker's house. Because of that big ceiling, that--

S: See, as a rule, a factory is three stories.

M: Uh-huh.

S: Up on the first story, that's where they blend the tobaccos. On the middle pave-- story, that's where the cigar-makers are at. Now, down on the first floor, that's where the strippers would be pulling the stems like my wife used to do, pull the stems out of the tobacco. The selectors would be upstairs on the second floor. He's selecting wrappers all day long, see, but to pull the stems out of them. And then the (?) tobaccos down there over night, put over night. And now the second floor is where they made the cigars.

C: Well, how many at the time that you had your small factories, how many were there in Key West?

S: Little factories? Little factories? Well, we had quite a number of the big ones. Let's see, I'll call them out here if you want me to.

MS: She means when you had yours-- your small factory--

S: There's (Walton Parks?), Willy Bell, (Will Otis?),--

MS: Pirate's Alley.

S: Pirate's Alley.

MS: And yours.

S: And mine is five.

C: That was the last five.

MS: Now, it's only one.

M: That's Pirate's Alley, huh?

S: No, there's two.

MS: It's only Pirate's Alley.

S: And Willy Bell.

MS: And Willy Bell, that would be two--

M: Where is Willy Bell?

MS: Willard Bell is--

S: He's--he's an individual like myself with a cigar factory like mine.

M: Well, where is it?

S: Uh, seven twenty-- 724 or 624 Ashe Street.

MS: Ashe Street.

S: It's either 624-- it's 624?

MS: I don't know.

S: It's either 624 or 624-- [both speak at same time]

MS: It's right in that section.

S: But you can't miss it. He has a little shop--

M: Another thing I read-- A lot of what I know about Key West is what I read in books. That they had a lot of trouble getting boxes and they talked Mr. Norbert Thompson into building a--

S: Building the box factory.

MS: Exactly--

S: Exactly right where it's at today, the Carolina and Margaret Street.

M: Uh-huh.

S: But they produced-- old man Wes Archer ran the place, and they produced boxes to put thousands-- every cigar factory in Key West. See, we had to get our boxes imported out of Tampa and well, you can imagine, they-- the way of getting those boxes-- the Key West people getting the boxes, when Tampa had such big factories over there, they want their boxes-- they had a preference, see? Well, when they didn't have much work, then they'd give our boxes.

C: And talking about that a little bit. We haven't brought out once more reasons why the factories left Key West.

S: Strikes.

MS: One of the reasons--

S: Strikes. Nothing but strikes. In other words, many a time I told her, "Well, I'm going to work Monday morning." I didn't know when I went in the shop Monday morning will I stay there all day or not. Well, along about nine or ten o'clock, well, we'll say this is a row of fifty table from one side of the house to the other, here comes a piece of paper, you pass it to me and I'll look at it see what it is and pass it over to the other to see what it is. The Americans didn't have no strikes, it was the Cuban element. They brought on all the strikes. Now--

M: Was it union?

S: Well, we got organized later, but the majority of cigar-makers in the factory was Cubans or Latins or Spaniards or what have you. You know, we had to come out with them, naturally that threw--

C: Well, what were they striking about? What--?

S: Lady, your answer's as good as mine. Anything under the sun they--

MS: Well I think, too that--

S: Mostly tobacco stock. It's tobacco stock. Well, if you (?) the wrappers-- (question?) the wrappers, the wrappers are the most important part of rolling a cigar, that's the outside leaf, see? Naturally, if you had some dated bad wrappers, your cigar's didn't look so good, and they break all up, and you didn't make as many quantities as you expected to make that day, but you had patch and to do this and do that. It was mostly-- but the fact is, the tobacco they had, they couldn't throw those wrappers away. The wrappers cost just the same as the good ones, they all came in the same bale. And that's why they, well, the element just got up on their high horses and had a strike--

MS: And I think Tampa probably added to it by offering them-- probably, I don't know what they offered, but it was a saying that Tampa lured them over to Tampa to give them better wages or better conditions or whatever--

S: Free rent, free lights, free water.

MS: No doubt, Tampa had a big--

S: Well, you take a big shop, like I said, work a thousand people, they over hear in the run of a day is quite a bit, you know what I mean? Quite a bit.

C: They-- yes. I understand that Tampa had no unions and Tampa also offered free land and free lights and rents and took what was left of the factories here--

S: You take say the factory like Eddie Phillips-- there's another shop I worked in. It was small-- what they called a 'small' but it a medium shop, see? It worked a hundred cigar-makers; it wasn't no size to it like some of them we had around there because some of them had around six or seven hundred people, but it was a good little shop. That was a shop was mostly Americanized and they never had a bit of troubles. Never in all the time I worked for them, we never had one dissension, no trouble at all because Mr. Phillips made it plain, my uncle by marriage-- my uncle married my mother's sister and he was a foreman of that factory and he made it very plain in his mind, he was gonna hire Americans.

C: In other words, the Cubans were hot-blooded. [all laugh]

S: They still are. The answer to that is that they still are.

MS: They still are.

S: They'll never get it out of there system as long as they live. (?)

M: Amelia said it first. [all laugh]

S: I agree, huh?

C: I said it. Well, tell me, you finally had to close your own--

S: Well, yes I got out of the business. The reason, like I say, I was seventy-nine (?).

C: Yes.

S: Well, I had an opportunity to sell it, and I don't think I'd ever get the money all of it from anybody else in the world except a man from South Carolina or North Carolina, \$3000. [laughs]

MS: His eyes went bad, too, that's-- that was it, that was the main thing, his eyes and, of course--

S: And you know, I try to get some labor, but that's one of the troubles today (?) factories in Key West- you can't (buy?) labor, because a fella my-- old men like me that knows how to make a hand-made cigars. It's no--no one new is coming in the industry in Key West because they ain't got no shops, but the old people: too much social security, too much pensions. They'll tell you right plain, "I don't have that to do now."

MS: They're old and they don't--

S: They don't care--

MS: --if they're capable, you know, of carrying on like they did and if they had something that they can depend on, why, they'd just be--

S: There's a few scattered ones around through town, but they're going to help you out a little bit, but very few, they're not--

C: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to it?

S: You ask me if there's anything.

C: Um, let's see, what have we left out? I think we've covered--

M: When you had your own shop on Margaret Street, wasn't it?

S: No, Margaret and Fleming.

M: On Fleming corner there. When-- how did you sell your cigars?

S: Well, mostly by--

M: Were people coming in?

S: People coming in mostly, and that's the way I built up my trade and mine was mostly a mail-order business, but people coming in-- I was making the cigars myself, see? And I knew what I was putting inside the cigars, each one individually because in-- to the ordinary cigar-maker, it was so he could make his task that day-- he didn't care how much he put-- maybe a little bit of one kind, a little bit of another kind. But with me, I put piece by piece, separated the different kinds everyday, see what I mean? And each one got the same amount of tobacco and the blends will always remain the same. And that's where I picked up my orders by box trade and they light the cigar, then they reorder it.

U: He did a very good mail-order business by the tourists coming in and buying the cigars and then reordering after they had gone back to their hometowns.



S: See, in the-- in the shops, you could phony a cigar this way, and maybe three or four different piles the manager or the foreman say, well, put a piece of this, piece of this, piece of this, piece of this. Well, it takes-- when you make three or four hundred cigars a day. Stopping over here to get a piece, and pack, piece over here, you know what I mean? (?), but if you had one kind of tobacco, hey, put all that kind in.

M: And the next--

S: (?) ready for the next one, see? In other words, if the blender go to the shops, it wouldn't have a blend at all. In other words, but if you used all four of them you have a blend, piece by piece, piece by piece, which I try to do.  
[whispers inaudibly]

C: And so-- I'll finish. And so, the old order changeth, giving place to the new. One thing only has not changed: a handmade cigar is still the crown jewel in (?) luxury, and thank you Mr. and Mrs. Shaw for having us at your home and for this interesting interview.

S: You're quite welcome, of that I'm sure.

U: Quite welcome, more than glad to do it.

S: --glad to do it. But I give you the history of cigars.  
[audio cuts off]

M: As we were leaving Mr. Shaw with a twinkle in his beautiful turquoise blue eyes- even though they don't see so well, but they are beautiful eyes- said, "I hope nobody will misunderstand when I said that my wife was a stripper, that I didn't mean the nightclub kind of stripper. She stripped the stems out of the tobacco leaves."

**END OF INTERVIEW**