

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Gabriel Gutierrez

INTERVIEWEE: Gabriel Gutierrez

INTERVIEWER: Amelia Cabot of the Key West Women's Club

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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Cabot: --very happy to have with us Mr. Gabriel Gutierrez who will speak to us about the end of another era in our colorful Key West: the Coffee Mill era. Mr. Gutierrez owned the last of the five coffee-roasting mills that once operated within the city, namely the Triumph Coffee Mill. The coffee was packed in brown bags with the symbol of a muscular, up-raised arm imprinted on them, signifying strength. How old are you Mr. Gutierrez?

Gutierrez: Well, I'm seventy-eight.

C: Where were you born?

G: I was born in Tampa and I came to here when I had about three years of age and I've been here ever since.

C: How old were you when you started working at the coffee mill?

G: Well, I was around-- about eighteen years before the first war, and I'm seventy-eight now which would make it about sixty years that I've been in the business.

C: How did you become the owner?

G: Well, (?) used to own the coffee mill first, then he sold it to Howard Sawyer- his brother-in-law. After Howard Sawyer's death, (Paolo Pita?) and myself that used to work together in the coffee mill bought it from the widow-- bought it from the widow. And after (Pita?)-- after (Paolo Pita's?) death, I became the sole owner.

C: Tell us about the actual operating of the mill, the roasting of the coffee and its blends.

G: Well, the coffee is a very, very delicate business to run concerning the blends and things like that. You gotta buy your coffee green from the different countries and you'll get it in sacks of a 100, 135 pounds and you make your own blend. Each coffee company and the country have their own blend, they make their own blend with the different types of different kinds of coffee and we used to have our own that we used to use, our Brazilian coffee and Colombian coffee and Puerto Rico coffee and Ecuador coffee, African coffee, and all of those, we used to make our blend and we used to-- the people were satisfied with it and of course, that-- there was our blend, and we made it for many years and we made a success out of it. I-- I don't know but during that period of time, we used to deliver the coffee on the horse and the wagon. We used to deliver the coffee to the restaurants and hospitals and grocery stores and schools and all the important business, we used to deliver coffee. And we used make two blends of coffee-- we used to make two blends of coffee: Cuban and American. The Cuban coffee is different from the American because it's roasted darker, but we could make the same blend of Cuban coffee in the American coffee, just roast it lighter and grind it coarser. The Cuban is real dark and ground fine, which make it stronger, that's the only difference. Because in here in Key West, they used to call it Cuban and American coffee, the people were accustomed to that, but it's no American coffee because we do not have coffee grown in this country. Everything is the same blend, but we just roast it by style: the French style, Italian style, Cuban style, American style, and that's the only difference between one and the other. But, the Cubans like it roast dark and very fine in order that they could get a stronger coffee to drink.

C: And what did you roast it with?

G: Well, (?)-- our equipment used to be old equipment that we used to roast our coffee with charcoal. And up to the last year that I was in business, we roasted coffee with charcoal. We never had the modern equipment that used gas or electricity or anything like that. We still run it-- we still roast it with the charcoal.

C: Does that seem to make it taste better with the charcoal?

G: Well, the people used to like it that way and I think it was-- of course we couldn't use any other method because our equipment used to-- we had to use the charcoal. But it came out very good and the people liked it and we used for sixty odd more years.

C: Now, you used to have the bags, there used to be a white bag and there used to be a brown bag. What's the difference of the two--?

G: Well, we used to put the white bag, which is a better blend of coffee, we used to charge (?) than we did the other, more expensive blend into the coffee and we used to have that different on the white bag and on the brown bag. The brown bag, we used to have a 'B' on it and on the white bag, we used to have a double 'A' and that would make it the difference between the two bags which was coffee and different blends. The white bag was better blend and a better coffee than the other ones and some people like one blend and the other used to like the other, but we used to sell them both and we also used to sell the American coffee. We used to supply the American coffee that we used to have our own blend of American coffee that we used to supply the schools, hospitals, and stores with it that they liked the better blends.

C: And at the peak of your business, how many pounds of coffee did you sell a week?

G: Well, we didn't have such a great business here in Key West, but we used to manage with what we use to sell. We used to sell about a couple of thousand, two thousand (?) pounds a week. And-- [both speak at same time]

C: Thousand?! A thousand?! Two thousand pounds?

G: Yeah, a week. Which it gives us a pretty good profit in those days because it was cheaper and we used to manage pretty good with that sale.

C: Now what is the difference in the prices of a pound of, say, standard coffee, how it started sixty years ago, how much was it- a pound of coffee- 'til how much was it when you ended your business?

G: I tell you, I had times in my experience in the coffee business where we used to sell coffee for twenty cents a pound. Twenty cents a pound. Ten cents for half a pound during the Depression. We had to buy coffee-- the cheapest coffee that we could possible get and roast it and grind it and put it in half-a-pound package, ten cents a pack for the people that had no money, they had to buy coffee and we used to supply them with coffee, used to have four, five cents a pound- green- in those days. But now, you couldn't buy any coffee no less than eighty cents green, without all the expenses of transportations and shrinkage of the coffee and so forth. The shrinkage of the Cuban coffee you put the coffee in the oven, you put a hundred pounds and you get eighty, you lose twenty percent right there, besides all the other expenses and paying for coffee eighty-something cents green now like we pay for Colombian coffee--

C: Well, did Castro have any effect on your business?

G: Well, in a way it did and in a way he didn't, but in fact, it kind of hurt something because you're not doing-- when Castro took over, the people used to-- all the Cubans scattered all around and they came to over to Miami and they opened all kinds of business and they started up making Cuban coffee and selling it and putting in packages and selling it around the store and naturally, that kind of hurt our business. But it still-- we existed. But other problems besides that, due to the transportation and the conditions of the countries today with Depressions and all of these things, well, it forced me to-- make me decide to quit and retire which I had the age enough to do it so I thought I'd quit.

C: So, this is when you finally closed?

G: This is when I finally closed.

C: Due to transport--?

G: Due to transportation travels and all, a lot of competition and so many things that-- price of coffee so high, (winning?) and all of that, that's why we didn't (win?).

C: Mr. Gutierrez, there was something that you had to say about coffee and its spelling. Now what was it that you wanted to tell me about that?

G: I wanted to call the attention concerning the way that 'coffee' is spelled. The Cuban coffee-- the Cubans call the coffee 'café', which is C-A-F-E, and they drink it the same way that it is spelled. They take the 'C', for instance, for 'caliente', which it means 'hot'; they take the 'A' for 'amargo', which is 'bitter'; they take the 'F' for 'fuerte', which is 'strong'; and they take the 'E' for 'escaso' which is 'little bit'. So the drink is hot, bitter, strong, and little bit, and that's coffee and each of those letters has a significance.

C: Well, that's very interesting. Thank you, Mr. Gutierrez for an interesting interview. I'm sure the people living near the coffee mill have really missed the tantalizing aroma of coffee roasting in the early-morning hours as they awaken and prepared for their daily tasks. This is Amelia Cabot speaking, Norma (Renner?) taping. We are working under the chairmanship of Mrs. Mary Malone as members of the Key West Women's Club bicentennial project.

END OF INTERVIEW