

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Virginia Perez

INTERVIEWEE: Virginia Perez
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Perez: Maiden Name? You need the maiden name.

Irving: Okay.

P: You don't need--

Unknown2: Mama, just talk to them.

P: [laughs] What you wanna say? My name is Virginia Perez. My name is Virginia Perez.

I: Now, I need you-- I--

P: My grandmother's name is Lecia Roberts and my grandfather--

I: Did she come from the islands?

P: My grandfather-- she came from the Bahama Islands. Which? I don't know. And my grandfather was from the Bahama Islands, also. And my mother was Key West born.
[audio cuts off]

I: Okay. Your grandfather was from the islands, you say?

P: My grandfather and grandmother was from the islands. My grandmother was named Lecia Roberts and I'll say my grandfather was named (?) Roberts.

I: Okay.

P: And my grandmother was named Lecia Roberts.

I: Do you remember what the-- why did they come to Key West?

P: No, I don't--

I: You don't remember?

P: I don't know nothing about that, it's too far back.

I: And you don't know how they came?

P: No.

I: Do you know anything else about--?

P: I know his-- the brother's name- he was also over here- (?) Roberts.

I: Mm-hmm.

P: And he had a sister, her name was Carolina (?). She was-- she died on Thomas Street. That's um-- (?) great-grandmother. But my father's from Spain. What else you wanna know?

I: Well, I wanna know when your grandparents came to Key West, then, did they bring your moth-- was your mother born here or was she born over there?

P: Can't tell you nothing about it. Maybe I could tell you more about it if I see Lecia. See, I could-- 'cause she-- see, she's the oldest child. She's eighty-nine.

I: Well, maybe I could talk to her, too.

P: Yeah. She eighty-nine and I don't remember.

I: So how far back do you remember? When you were how old?

P: How far back I remember and how old I was? I remember when I was six years old. I was (?) alley right here in back in the lighthouse.

I: What's the name of the alley? Terry Lane?

P: Terry Lane. And I remember that my sister- (?) Perez- she was the queen of Zion Church. No, she was the queen of the (next under the queen- third queen?). But then she beat the queen and then they didn't have no more queen for many a years.

I: Well, why?

P: Because she would out-dress the queen. (My aunt went to the limit?). She put the very best she wore. I'll never forget, I wore the dress out. (And if she wore?) the Chinese silk (?).

I: Did she make it?

P: She had it made. I think it was made by some white people. And after that, they didn't have no more and they used have-- they had a picnic right out there by the (?), that was a picnic ground out there.

I: She picnicked on Flagler?

P: Yes. You know where they had that bar across the street?

I: Mm-hmm, the--

P: Yeah, my mother was (living?) (?) then. She-- they prepared for picnic then two and three days cooking. Two and three days cooking and preparing meals, you know, and they had a wonderful good time.

I: Well, what was the picnic for?

P: Just picnics. They had (parties?) like people have picnics now- church picnic.

I: Did you go to church regularly?

P: Every Sunday.

I: Okay.

P: Every Sunday. My mother sent us to church every Sunday. (I went-- attend?) to convent school. I went to convent school, me and my sister both. And I remember one time they had a terrible storm here and they put the school high up off the ground, see?

I: Where was the school?

P: Right where it is right now where they tore down. See the one they tore down? The old school, not the boy's school. One behind this place where they vote. You know where they vote on Duval Street?

I: Oh, yeah.

P: There was the school behind that. But it was high up off the ground.

I: Was that a big wooden building?

P: Yeah.

I: Yeah, I remember.

P: And big two-story building. You remember that?

I: Mm-hmm.

P: And then they had some kind of bad storm here and-- they had a storm here and we had cows-- they used to drive cows here every Tuesday, every Wednesday, and Thurs-- Friday. So--

I: Drive cows with what? What do you mean?

P: They had a slaughterhouse on the beach.

I: Oh, okay.

P: They had a slaughterhouse.

I: What beach?

P: Monroe Beach.

I: Okay. I have to ask you these questions--

P: Yeah, I mean, they had a slaughter-- uh, yeah, a slaughterhouse. Mr. (?) he used to be the man that killed the cows and we had a meat market there over this (town?). We ate fresh meat, we didn't eat no injected meat when I was a kid. We ate fresh meat. Fresh meat. And every four o'clock in the afternoon, that's when the meat came into the market and we had to go on-- you know, we used to go and get the--

I: And buy it.

P: And buy it.

I: Buy what you want?

P: Buy what you want. Anything you want. They used to hang it up, hang it up in the market--

I: Do you know where the market was? Do you remember?

P: Yeah, right out here in front of the-- right here in front of-- his name was-- well, I don't remember his title. He was a Cuban man. My mother used to deal with him and he-- right here in front of the Van Dyke.

I: Oh, on Whitehead Street.

P: Whitehead Street. Then we had one right here on-- next-- by the Cuban Club. Then we had one downtown though-- but I think the Lumley Market, that came afterward-- you know, after I was born. I remember that in childhood. Then we had one right there-- you know where the-- you know where they had the (restaurant?) on Truman Avenue? Truman Avenue?

I: Yeah and Simonton?

P: Right off from (?).

I: Mm-hmm.

P: Well, that was the meat market. Right there, that was the big meat market.

I: Then everyday people would go--?

P: Everyday get fresh meat. Everyday, fresh meat. I know when stew meat was fifteen cents a pound.

I: Mm-hmm.

P: Yes. That's true. Fresh meat killed from the market 'cause they used to bring the cows-- I don't know where they used to bring them from but they used to bring over here, you know? And they bring here into town and this man named (Sheeley?), he used to-- his daughter, she's about the only one living now. She's-- that's her daughter-- his daughter and he had a son (?), he was named after his daddy and he died and his daddy died.

I: Do you know if they used to bring this cattle in by boat or by land or what?

P: Yeah, by boat.

I: By boat?

P: Mm-hmm. They used to bring them in by boat-- on a ferry. My mama-- I could always remember that I got the worst whipping once. (?) looking at them (first?) cattle. Got up early before anybody got up. (?)--

I: Do you remember how old you were?

P: Oh, I was about eleven, I guess, something like eleven years old. A child.

I: Yeah.

P: About eleven years old. I wanted to see (?). (?).

I: Where did you live when you--?

P: Right down (?).

I: You lived on Whitehead Street?

P: No, no, no, no. I lived on Truman--

I: Truman and--

P: --and Si--

I: --and Simonton. Right.

P: But I lived mostly on Truman. (Right from that launderette, right in?) because they got the (?) there right now where the cars used to go in. And in there, they had-- I lived mostly to that same school (?) that we were talking, but one house divided my house from them- (Taylor Roberts?).

I: Right there where that motel and the-- right in that same block with the motel and Lindsley Lumber on that block? More to the back of the school was?

P: Where the motel is at?

I: Yeah.

P: No. Let me see. Did we have any motels in the back of Lindsley? No.

I: Yeah, you know, there's service station and then there's a motel right there.

P: There's a service station, then a motel, huh?

I: Right in front of--

P: Yeah. And then Lindsley.

I: Mm-hmm.

P: Now, I don't mean on the side where the drugstore, now.

I: Yeah, on this side.

P: Yeah.

I: I know.

P: And it was a family of all colored-- (?) whites, Cubans, so the people used to mix more than they do now. They used to have a wonderful time.

I: Did the families do things together? The blacks and whites and the Cubans?

P: Yes, Cubans-- yes, right, the Cubans. Whites used stand for the childrens- for colored childrens and colored people used to stand for the white childrens. They used to call them 'comadres' and 'compadres'. Comadres was the godmothers and the compadres was the godfathers. And they lived in (unity?), very good before all of this calamity hit. Very good. They used to have big dinners sometimes and invite different families together, you know? And then they had-- on the corner where (?) is, that was a big-- that was a bar room. People could go and buy good wine in those days. And then when people used to drink them, they-- you hardly ever seen drunken people up and down the street because they used to drink. This used to be a bar, right here- the place (Chuck Chase?) living.

I: Oh, right here on the corner of Truman and Thomas?

P: Right here. Right here.

I: Okay.

P: And down there where the projects on the side-- the first beginnings of project on Truman?

I: Mm-hmm.

P: That used to be (?), that was a bar right there.

I: Truman and Emma Street?

P: Yes. On the side where the (office?), that used to be a bar.

I: Well, then, was this a bar just for black people or everybody?

P: Everybody.

I: So--

P: They didn't have no division. (When they started that was some killing the time when?) (?). Then they had a large bar right down here by-- let me see where the next one was. Around here where the (?)-- oh, right here where (my boss got his?) (?), that was a bar.

I: That's Petronia. On Petronia and Thomas.

P: That was a bar.

I: Now, down in this area here, then, what was--?

P: That was divided. Thomas Street was divided from this street. All the people was-- oh, I can't say the word but I mean, people that lived the life-- let's say people that lived the life they wanted to live. They made a division between them. They lived on Emma Street. Only the people that had property back there would live back there but the people from this side of the town- unless it was men folks visit that side. The better class people- the division was between the good and the bad. You can always pick out the good or the bad.

I: You mean the people who would go out and have fun?

P: People that lived-- they had a class of people that the good-- the better class of people didn't mix with. When you mixed with those people, you have to stay over in there, like getting on the other side of the fence.

I: Oh, and that was, like, beyond Thomas Street?

P: Beyond this street right here, back. All of that--

I: Back to Fourth Street?

P: Yeah, all of that was the town where people went-- men folks that went who wanted have good times and whatnot and run about especially if--

I: But they didn't take their families back there?

P: Oh, no, their family never crossed this line here. Then they used to have concerts on the beach. Concerts on the beach. Every Sunday, it used to be horses and buggies, people put up (?)--

I: What kind of concerts?

P: Band.

I: Band?

P: Band concerts on the beach and people used to go out there to listen to the-- to the um-- to the-- to the--you know, to music.

I: What kind of music?

P: Band! (Really band, really?)--

I: Was it Cuban music or just--

P: (Junka?) music and then the Cuban music used to come here probably once or twice a year and they used to have a big get-together- dances. Sometimes you couldn't even get a chance to-- the people from, you know, downtown find out that they're such a good orchestra. They would want them and they'd-- sometimes they'd have to wait probably 'til the last minute before they can get them, you know, down (?) then they played they had to leave and then something else had to take the (?) and then they went down to play because there was just one band. It used to be-- and they never brought the whole band because it was a band of a hundred people but they brought so many people and then these Cuban ships used to come from Cuba here. Used to be a wonderful time living. Nice people. This town used to carry the most-- best record for good women, this town right here. The older people will tell you that. Many used to come from all around looking for a wives right here in this town here because girls was up to their dignity. They was up to date, you know? But when you -- they used-- when the people like these new people around here dressing up around like they dress up on now, these people. They used to have a name for them. They called them 'hooker'. 'Hooker'.

I: Oh.

P: They used to call them 'hooker' because--

I: And these were the people who lived beyond--?

P: Some of them used to walk around or if it's another class used to be around in the town. You know, of the class like some they got today. Can't call them names because you get in trouble. And they made a separation-- the people had made a separation and then when they had dances like that, you couldn't attend. If you didn't get an invitation, you couldn't attend, you couldn't go. And then men never went into a ballroom without a necktie and a coat. Never. And when they had these balls, the men would come out on the porch, but they had a ballroom right in front of Zion Church. But the women wouldn't allow them to come out until it was finished. You couldn't come out. (?) ballroom. They couldn't--

I: The women had to stay in?

P: In. But the men could come out but not the women.

I: So, what-- do you remember when you were a child, what kind of games you all used to play?

P: Well, yes, I can remember what we used to play. We never went out to play games. When I was a girl, I used to shoot marbles. I used to (high?) kites like a boy. Boy told me about it the other day. If I saw a tamarind, if I want it I'd climb the tree. I remember one time, I was feeling (zealous?)- I don't know how I didn't break my leg- I jumped from out the tamarind tree down to the ground and nothing happened to me because I was always (falling?).

I: Well, there were-- when you were growing up, there were a lot of fruit trees--

P: A lot of fruit. Sapodillas--

I: --the people that you go in their yards and get them?

P: Well, sometimes they give you permission to go in, sometimes they didn't. But (Mrs. Eden-- Mr. Eden?), he looked like Santa Claus. He was a white man with plenty of beard like these people used in the old days down here. Even Mr. Prichard that used to collect the rent- (ground rent?)- for the Prichard Square. He wore a beard, you know. And I used to be scared of him (?). And this was a wonderful town; a very clean, wonderful town to live in. And then there was another bar- (?)'s bar- right on Petronia Street. He used to bring his merchandise from the warehouse-- they used these great big strapping horses. They pulled these big wagons that he bring this--

I: What did he have on the wagon?

P: He'd bring his beers and stuff like that.

I: Oh. Liquor and stuff like that.

P: Yeah. And he would (?) and they--

I: He would bring it on a wagon?

P: Yeah, he bring it from-- he buy it on the wagon, see? He furnish his own transportation, this man here because my son-in-law used to work for him and he used to tend to his horses. And that's why my husband sent him back to Cuba because he used to take the horses out swimming, take them so far out because somebody told him one day that he better, you know, stop him because if he didn't he would drown them. And he sent him back to his country (for a month?). But this was a wonderful town, a clean town. You could have (?) and Duval Street, on holidays, it was a pleasure for people to go shopping. People-- when it's Christmas time, people used to be cooking for weeks.

I: What kind of things did they cook?

P: Oh, like they cook now and tasty-- not like they cook now because the people don't cook like then, they don't take no time. They cooked baked chickens and stuffing and baked turkey and the best of cakes. Some of everything, they just cooked. And everybody goes and they used to have here like they call masquerade. They would go around five or six wagons, you know, masquerades, dressed up like these people dressed up now but more specially better in all kinds of colors and these great big hats like the old country (?), you know, these old (tall things?). And they go from corner to corner. We wasn't allowed to go too far- couple of corners and then you had to go back home. And they go all around from house to house and house to house. They had Christmas--

I: But what would you do when you went from house to house?

P: Oh, the men, see, not children.

I: Oh, and what were they doing, though?

P: They go and drink and eat from house to house and have parties and dance and whatnot--

I: And the children would follow behind them?

P: Some of them was allowed to but some couldn't 'cause the parents wouldn't let them. And they would get on the corners and play the music and pick the guitars and play the music and when they get tired, they get up and they go again for many blocks and they kept that up. I'll say, Christmas wasn't one day. Sometimes, it'd go over a week. They were (keeping?) Christmas after Christmas, because the people really had a good time. (Really?) had a very good time. The people now, if they would take time to enjoy themselves like the people in the days back, it wouldn't be-- the people wouldn't be so badly confused because they'll have something to occupy their mind. I could tell you that another kind of the people get-- you know, get-- you know, get-- I'll have to tell you that afterwards. They had parties everyday- another kind. They could have parties. They enjoyed themselves. They used to have parties for weeks. Among their friends (?). And I mean-- but they enjoyed themselves and, you know, there used to be couples that they enjoyed themselves. And the people used really have-- the people used to raise their own hogs here when I was a girl until the law came by and they stopped them. They raised their own hogs, they raised their own chickens and

then when this neighbor kill the hogs, they would give the next neighbor and then the other. One killed, they'll always share. That's the way how the people lived here; they used to share with one another. They wasn't, you know, selfish. They used to share with one another.

I: How was it with raising children here a long time ago?

P: Oh, the childrens had to listen. They got (something?) on they self if they didn't listen--

I: They had to listen to who?

P: To the parents. They wasn't allowed to go out of the yard. I only went out once a week when we bought our-- went to buy groceries or went to buy something on Duval Street (and after that?) was Christmas. Then they had the carnival come here. Some people-- I mean, you know, straight people, they were there everyday but certain families-- and this town was (honored?) for the beautiful of women and men that you could ever (clap?) your eye upon because they were mixed Spanish and Cuban.

I: Why didn't the parents let the children go out? Why did--?

P: Because they told us that they (protecting them?) from the dangers, from the danger of life. They tried to make them to be good men and women. You know, some of them was unruly but, you know, that's been happening since the beginning of the world but when childrens got unruly and girls got unruly, well, they had to classify that the girls that was in their (rank?). And if a girl was keeping company with her friends and if she happened to get married, well they'd speak with one another but they kept no more company. They had to divide them up. They didn't visit no more one another, they couldn't be together no more. That's the way it was in my time. They had to separate. A girl had to -

I: Who had to separate?

P: Why, their parents wouldn't allow them to keep company anymore with a married girl.

I: Oh.

P: They asked that once they got married, they had to look for the married company to be with; no more single girls, see? They had to get out of that life. You know, they didn't dislike them and they'd talk some and whatnot but they wouldn't have nothing to conversate about 'cause they felt like they didn't have nothing in common, they didn't have (?).

I: You were saying that Key West had some of the-- you mean the colored people that were some of the beautiful--

P: Yes, the most-- Key West had the most beautiful women that anybody want to (clap?) their eyes upon. You know, and I would include myself but you know how people is. [laughs] But I knew it was told-- it was told to me and my sister. And my sister--

I: That you all were beautiful?

P: My sister was the most beautifulest girl- anybody could tell you- that ever walked on the face of Key West.

I: She was a mix of what?

P: Same thing I am.

I: What?

P: Spanish.

I: Spanish and what else?

P: American.

I: American?

P: And Spanish, mm-hmm.

I: Okay. So-- I mean, that was Bahamian, too.

P: (?) used to tell me all the time. When he'd catch me, he used to tell me about my sister. He said, "You have the most beautiful sister that ever walked--" and she was, anybody will tell you about her, (?), she was beautiful. Beautiful.

I: What did your parents do for a living?

P: Well, they worked. They worked. They had a lot of hand laundries then when they took in laundries and my-- (I wouldn't say?) my mother, she was doing the laundry for twenty-seven years. And then the next husband she married, he was a fisherman of kingfish. He used to catch kingfish and he used to bring home sometimes five and six kingfish and then she'll cut them up and pass them around to the neighbors, you know. People had a wonderful time, wonderful time. What's beautiful, you know, is-- and the difference that the people-- that's why you see people with (grays and then white?) they can't get out there with those people of these days. All you have to do is look.

I: You mean older people?

P: Yes.

I: Yeah.

P: Because you wasn't leaving much when they was much younger (?). We couldn't get out there because it's just like seasoning something. You already seasoned it one way-- just like you. You got a foundation of raising here. That's why you so much different from them, um-- your family because once a child get a foundation- a way of living- it's kind of hard to change them. You know, you can't change them so easily.

I: Right.

P: But somebody that is raised up in this attitude, well, they ready for the-- for whatever comes.

I: Did your mother do-- you said your mother worked in a laundry?

P: Hand laundry, yes.

I: Was that all she did? She didn't do any other kind of work?

P: No, that's all she did. She was a very--'a number one' hand worker. She was a--

I: Who were they doing the laundry for?

P: Chinese. This place was full of Chinese. This place was full of Chinese.

I: Uh-huh. Where did these--?

P: Chinese laundry.

I: Oh, the Chinese people were here, so they-- what were they doing in Key West?

P: They were doing laundry for the city. This place had factories- cigar-maker factories. The cigar-makers used to come from Cuba from Tampa or any place. When they had a strike in Cuba, they used to come here. When they had a strike here, they used to go to Tampa.

I: Oh, okay, they went back and forth--?

P: Yes, when they had a strike, see? And then after, the people that's smart enough to know how to make cigars with a machine, then that cut the hand-makers out. Your granddaddy was a first-class cigar-maker. He was a very good cigar-maker, first-class. He worked in the (?) out here where they have the (?)? That was a--

I: On Simonton? Right there on Simonton?

P: Yeah, about, not far. Then (?) halfway out on the highway, that was a factory. This restaurant they got for the children now for school, that's there they-- that's where they-- the cigar-makers used to eat breakfast there, those that didn't want to-- (?) canteen because they used to send canteens out there for the (?) to carry the canteen. The (?) every morning, seven days a week, and they used to pay them.

I: You said there were Chinese workers here?

P: Oh, yeah.

I: What did they do?

P: Right here in this house. The Chinese laundry.

I: Oh, the Chinese came here to do the laundry.

P: Yeah, they took in laundry to make money.

I: And they would do the laundry for what people?

P: People and hire colored help- ironers and colored washers.

I: What would happen to these Chinese people?

P: Well, after business wore out, they scattered like everything else. People follow the business, you know, and follow their living.

I: Were they here like around maybe the time the when railroad was being built?

P: Well, they were (slacking?) out.

I: At that time?

P: Yeah, they (slacking?) at that time, yes. That's how some million-- oh, I can't (think of it?) anymore.

I: Are you tired? You want to stop?

P: Well, I mean, I'll tell you after because you're taking a record-- you're recording. And all my--

I: Any other kind-- any other different people? You named Chinese here in Key West?

P: Yeah, they used to have-- the Irishmen used to come here a lot. They used to come here-- for what reason? I don't know. But they used to come here. The Irishmen- they was very white in their face, looked like the blood was ready to come out. The blood was always to the surface of the skin. All nationalities from (?)-- the boats used to run from New York, from (?), Cuba, all over the world, the boats used to come in here. (?) port and this used to be a big Navy yard, you know? Big business there in the Navy yard, people from all over the world. A lot of Key West girls got married to a lot of servicemen and they, you know, took them to different parts of the world. And this used to be a wonderful place, this place. This place is nothing like it used to be. This used to be a good, God-blessing place here, this place.

I: Everybody you say got along?

P: They got along. Now, everybody gonna have ups and downs. They had quarrels and the bad class people, they had fights (?) good class ones, too, but I mean, you didn't see it everyday, you know, like they do now. People used to drink like they do now but seems like knew how to drink because they used to have it to their house everyday and when they have-- they used a lot of table wine.

I: Mm-hmm.

P: See? (?). Maybe somebody can give you a longer story than me--
[audio cuts off]

END OF INTERVIEW