

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Amado Parra, Juan Borges, and Gabriel Gutierrez

INTERVIEWEE: Amado Parra, Juan Borges, and Gabriel Gutierrez

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

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Cabot: --seventy-five. This is another 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 Norma Renner taping. We are both working under the chairmanship of Mrs. Mary Malone. Tonight, our subject is 'The Cuban Club'- 'Sociedad Cuba'. We have three gentlemen here who are very knowledgeable on this subject. I will introduce each one to you. Mr. Amado Parra, how old are you?

Parra: I'm seventy-nine in six months.

C: And where were you born?

P: In Tampa.

C: What-- how old were you when you came to Key West?

P: Seven years old.

C: Seven years old. Well, we'll hear from you later.

C: Mr. Juan Borges, how old are you?

Borges: Seventy-eight.

C: And where were you born?

B: Key West.

C: In Key West. Oh, that's good, you're an old Conch.

B: Old Conch.

C: And Mr. Gabriel Gutierrez, how old are you?

Gutierrez: Seventy-seven.

C: And where were you born?

G: In Tampa.

C: In Tampa. And how old were you when you came to Key West?

G: About three years of age.

C: Three years. Well, you're nearly a Conch.

G: I'm an honorary Conch.

C: An honorary Conch.

G: They gave me a certificate.

C: That's good, you have your certificate?

G: Yeah.

C: Very good. Well, Mr. Parra, I understand that the original Cuban Club was where the Casa Blanca Apartment House at 1317 Duval Street is now located. Can you tell us about this first Cuban Club?

P: The first Cuban Club was originated by Mr--

C: Can one of you gentlemen tell him?

G: [inaudible]

P: Mr. Horacio Moreno. And his main subject was to join together in harmony all the residents- especially Cuban residents- and establish a quota of twenty-five cents a week which gave them doctors, medicines, and child-birth for the wife.

C: What are some of the other activities that they had?

P: They had the recreation department was downstairs and it was run by Mr. (Collar?) and also had a bar, but it did not have a gymnasium until they moved to the present which there, many men-- or one man became very famous as a boxer-- as a boxer that hit Broadway was Pete Nebo, the Seminole Indian- the only Key Wester to ever reach Madison Square Garden in the big fighting ring.

C: That's very interesting--

P: Then came the chess-- chess champion and Ernesto (Garcio?) was a chess champion of this city. The boxers: Emilio (Galle?), (?) Reyes, and his other brother. Then Julio Sanchez that was a billiard champion, he then moved to Tampa and made a living playing pool. Then--

C: What about dances? Did they have dances?

P: The dancing was very colorful and the ladies were very beautiful. (In that group?), beautiful Cuban girls with black eyes and black hair. There were also Americans like the (Peterson?) girl, the (?) girl, (?) and them which were-- they were very beautiful.

C: Well, is that all you two can remember? How many members did it have at that time?

P: Oh, the big numbers of the Sociedad Cuba (?) 2800 was the most it ever had, 2800. And it has declined to thirty-two at present time.

C: Alright, well, Mr. Gutierrez, I understand that you used to attend some of the dances that they had there. Can you tell us about your-- or other activities, can you tell us about that?

G: Well, I-- I remember going to the dances over there on many occasions and I remember the way they used to have those dances over there and the way the beautiful girls used to dress and they generally open the dance with a march, a grand march and then everybody get their partner and they start dancing. But at the beginning of the dance

before you go in, they used to give you a program with a pencil hanging on it and the names of each piece that the orchestra was gonna play, and they give each- a girl one, and each to the boys one- and you used to go in there and ask the girl for the dance, and the dance that she give you, you mark it in your program and she mark your name in her program and you don't have to be asking for (one code or the other?), this is my dance or this is your dance, everybody go there and they know about the program, the dance that they had with such a girl. They picked her up and they go and dance and we used to enjoy it and have a beautiful, beautiful good time.

C: Were there any special dances for special holidays or did they have it every week or--?

G: Well, I remember we used to have the-- we used to dance (most?) Waltz and Two-Steps and (?) and I remember that they used to have a dance each month, free for the members and in May, they used to have what they called a 'Flower Dance' where they used to decorate the whole room with flowers and used to be very beautiful inside and they enjoyed very much and we surely did, too?.

C: I understand, Mr. Parra that you were the one that used to make the flowers for this dance in May. This flower-- because I have here, I wish everyone could see the beautiful, colorful flowers that Mr. Parra has brought here tonight for us to see. Is that right? Did you make all of these hundreds of flowers?

P: That is correct. Yes, and I was taught by my sister. From an early age, I was taught to make flowers by my sister. Today, you don't see those kind of type of roses nowhere.

C: What kind of paper do you use for them?

P: The highest paid paper. I paid five cents a sheet--per each sheet of paper and I have eleven colors.

C: That's very interesting--

P: Wrapping paper, also. This is wrapping paper.

C: Now, Mr. Gutierrez, how much did the dances cost? Do you remember?

G: I can't exactly remember the price we used to pay for the--

P: It used to be fifty cents.

G: Fifty cents, I knew it was very cheap.

C: Fifty cen--

G: (And up to our?) young fellas they could pay in those days. And I remember all the girls used to have a chaperone, that there mother used to take them to the dance and they used to sit in the chairs that they had around the hall and they used to watch the dances until the dance was over and they take the girls home.

C: Oh, Mr. Borges, can you tell us why they moved the Cuban Club from that location to the present location?

B: Well, because (Dr. Pintera?) bought the building and they asked us to move because they gonna build a clinic and then we bought the Cuban Club where it is now.

C: What year was that?

B: I believe that was 1918, I believe it is, 1918.

C: And you say you bought a building?

B: Yeah, it was the cigar factory-- (Zodiac?) cigar factory used to be on Duval Street there, 1108. The cigar factory used to be there, (Zodiac?).

C: And that's one building, but they say the unique thing is that the Cuban Club is two buildings put together.

B: Well, because we make them-- we make a collection between the members-- no, not the members, the cigar-makers, too, and everybody, everybody in town. Ernesto (?) was the chairman of that committee and he go to the commerce-- eh, to the commerce-- como se dice?

G: Chairman of Commerce.

B: Chairman of Commerce and they pick up a few dollars and there, we bought that there and then we build the (Zodiac?).

C: So in other words, it was two buildings that were bought and put together, that's why you see two roofs if you notice that the two roofs of the Cuban Club can be seen. Is there anything you can remember about the moving of the Cuban Club?

B: The moving?

A: Yes, uh-huh, you've told us that moved and put the two buildings. Well, maybe Mr. Parra can tell us. Now, we're at the present Cuban Club now and he said it was moved in 1918. Now, you brought with you tonight the by-laws of this present Cuban Club and I notice that these by-laws were made in 1921 and they were incorporated with the State of Florida. Can you tell us something about that? About this present Cuban Club?

P: Well, the incorporation in the sense is to get the protection of the state in case of troubles; that goes good with all corporations in America. It assures the membership stability and guarantee.

C: Now, are the purposes of the-- the purposes of the Cuban Club, this new Cuban Club and these by-laws the purposes of forming the club were the same? They just continued the same policy from the old Cuban Club to the new Cuban Club?

P: The same policy is the same recreation and the same gymnasium, the same dances.

C: Now, I understand that the sick benefits for members was outstanding-- the sick benefits were very outstanding. Can you tell us about them?

P: The sick benefits were very economical. A member used to pay twenty-five cents a week for doctors, medicine, and dentist, and the if the ladies paid a quarter, or twenty-five cents, they would be entitled to child-birth and medical care. Now, the last doctor that we had was Dr. DePoo.

C: The present Dr. DePoo that's still here?

P: Was the last doctor and (?) was the last dentist. And Dr. DePoo called me and told me that it was impossible to take care of the members of the Cuban Club and his clients. And some abuses were made and he didn't like it. They pretended to be sick when they wasn't, they took the medicine to the family and the doctors knew the difference so he asked for his resignation which was accepted. With me on that committee, was (Canalejo?), Mr. (Canalejo?).

C: Now, I understand that you said something one time about it being socialized medicine. Can you tell us that remark again that you made to me before?

P: Well, socialized medical-- medicine was originated at the Cuban Club, while other countries and cities claimed that title, which is not true.

C: Well, why do you say that?

P: Because, I have made my own survey in different parts of the country and found it to be the most reasonable and economical as a socialized plan.

C: Now, I read here in your by-laws and I think I'm going to read this because I think it's interesting. In the paying it says, "Members paying the forth receipt of twenty-five cents and taken sick at the time, not being able to attend a daily work, will receive \$1.50 per day for sixty days, and thereafter \$1.00 per day until the entirely recovered. Beside this benefit, the member will be entitled to medical attention." So in other words, they pay twenty-five cents and if they were taken sick after paying it four times, they would get a dollar and a half a day.

P: That's true.

C: So that really is pretty good, isn't it?

P: And he lived to pay that.

G: Yeah.

P: He lived to pay the collector. The collector was a man who paid the client.

C: And collect it from them. And you are pointing to Mr. Borges. And now Mr. Borges, can you tell us about this collecting? How long have you been collecting from the Cuban Club and how has it changed from those olden days to now?

B: When I start to collecting, there was four collectors. Uh, mention the names, too?

C: Oh, yes.

B: Mr. Eddie Gomez Jr., Jose Marcus, (Rodablio?) Felipe, and Juan Borges Jr. [laughs]

C: Very good. That's you.

B: And-- that's me. [laughs] And we had a list- about 300 members- each collecting.

C: And that was twenty-five cents a week at that time?

B: Sixty cents.

C: Oh, sixty cents. So, when you started collecting--

B: It was sixty cents.

C: It was sixty cents.

B: Sixty cents.

C: At the very beginning, it was twenty-five.

B: Twenty-five.

C: And did they still give a dollar and half per diem, then? When it was six--

B: I had to come everyday to the sick members--

C: You took it everyday to them.

B: Everyday, everyday. And they give medicine, they-- \$15 for the birth of the baby and--

C: And dentist?

B: The dentist.

C: Dentist?

B: Yes, that's right. Everything.

C: So that was then, that many members. Alright, now on the years it started to decline, until at the present time, how much is it and how many members do you have?

B: In the present time?

C: Yes.

B: We only have thirty-two members.

C: Thirty-two members. And you're still collecting from the thirty-two members?

B: I'm still collecting.

C: Now how much do you pay now? Mm-hmm.

B: Three dollars a month.

C: Three dollars a month?

B: And the only benefit we got today is sick benefit-- I mean death benefit, when you die.

C: That's all the benefits these members will have, death benefit? Now how much is that?

B: Three hundred dollars.

C: Three hundred dollars? No other benefits? You don't have doctor or anything else?

B: Can't do it.

C: No, because it's impossible. Well, what will happen to the Cuban Club? I mean, it's-- they don't have any activities there at all now?

B: No, not--

C: Now what will happen to it?

G: Well, I think what happened to the Cuban Club was this (?), you know like a group (?) and we see you and-- I believe that is what happened.

C: Yes, of course, all the others. Mr. Parra, do you want to say something? Add something to that?

P: To mention the (?) that in the state of Florida, the Cuban Club cannot get an insurance from the insurance companies.

C: Why is that?

P: Why? That's my question, why?

C: You can't-- you don't know any reason why the Cuban Club can't get an insurance?

P: Anybody can insure, why us not?

C: No, I don't-- we'll have to investigate that. Why?

G: I know why.

C: You know why? You think? Okay, well, we'll talk about that later. Now, while the Cuban Club was declining and going down, you-- I think, Mr. Borges, you mentioned something about the cigar-makers giving something to help keep it up a little bit? What was that?

B: Well, that was in the beginning.

C: At the beginning?

B: At the beginning of the club.

C: Uh-huh. Well, tell us about that incident at the beginning. This is in order to build it up at the beginning?

B: Well, when we bought this building here--

C: Mm-hmm.

B: --on 1108 Duval, then they wanted to make the collection in the cigar factories and the (?) down. They make a collection, and we bought that house.

C: And so what about the cigar-makers? What did they contribute?

B: You know, a quarter or fifty-cents a week.

C: They gave?

B: They gave.

C: Voluntarily, they gave this for it?

B: That's right, yeah.

C: Now, there isn't such a thing as them giving a month's salary or anything like that?

B: Well--

C: Did that come later?

B: With the employees, one time, all the employees from the doctor to the janitor they give one month.

C: Oh, that's the employees of the Cuban Club itself?

B: The Cuban Club, that's right.

C: Including the doctor and the collectors and all of them that worked there?

B: Dentist, everybody.

C: Everybody gave that. Now, Mr. Parra, when I went to your home, you showed me a Cuban flag. Now, the Cuban flag that was given-- or put on the chair of each of the cigar-makers by Marti himself, now, was this for the Cuban Club--?

P: No.

C: That was for San Carlos?

P: San Carlos, for the revolution.

C: For the revolution. Oh, that's where-- the cigar-makers, in other words, were always giving things to help the cause of the Cubans here?

P: The Cuban liberty.

C: The Cuban liberty. Now, Mr. Parra, would you tell us about that? Although it doesn't concern the Cuban Club, but it still concerns our Cuban culture and our Cuban people so I think it's very interesting to bring that in. I saw the Cuban flag that Mr. Parra has, tell us exactly how you got it.

P: Well, Marti came to Key West--

C: Yes.

P: --in search of corporation and money to continue the revolution in Cuba. He'd done that in Key West to the cigar-makers in New York, Key West, Tampa, and Jacksonville. And he's one that had the flag get ten percent of his salary. And to show for it, the flag was put it on his working bench. From there, he reached Washington and Teddy Roosevelt in Washington. The friendship was (gotten?) and Roosevelt guaranteed corporation for the revolution, which he did. And eventually, he invaded Santiago de Cuba with his Rough Riders, all (colored?) infa-- uh, artillery-- uh, infantry and beat the Spaniards out, and in 1998 [1898], Cuba got its freedom. The American flag was brought down and the Cuban flag went up.

C: And this flag that you have was given to each cigar-maker by Marti himself and each cigar-maker donated a--

P: Ten percent-- [both speak at same time]

C: --ten percent

P: --of their salary.

C: --of their salary to the cause of the revolution?

P: That's correct.

P: Ten percent of the salary. Talking about donation, Mr. Borges, didn't you tell me that Mr. Rosillo who tried to fly a plane from here to Cuba and I believe isn't there a monument at the airport?

B: Yes.

C: Well, that did he say-if he was successful- what did he say that he was going to do?

B: Yeah, he say he gonna donate \$200 to the Cuban Club.

C: If he was successful and--

B: Yes, that's right.

C: --unfortunately, he wasn't.

B: He was, I think, he got back to Key West and he donated \$200.

C: Oh, he was?! He flew?!

B: Yes. Yes.

C: He flew? He flew to Key West?

B: He flew back to Key West.

C: And back to Key West. That's right, he certainly did. And he donated the \$200?

B: That's right.

C: Very good.

P: The next day, the original Cuban- Parla- which was born in Key West, he took off and landed in Mariel where the plane was crashed. And he flew over without the war vessels in between Cuba and Key West.

C: But did he really fly across, too?

P: Well, they need protection.

C: That was Agustin Parla?

P: Yeah, Parla. Born in Key West.

C: But then he wasn't given credit for it or he was?

P: Oh, yes.

C: He's been given credit for it?

P: He was made General of the Cuban army.

C: Very good.

G: [inaudible]

C: Pardon? Mr. Gutierrez?

G: He's there with red hair on the-- in the airport there.

C: The monument.

G: There's a monument there for Parla--

C: For Agustin Parla, also.

G: I remember that morning--excuse me, I'm Gutierrez speaking.

C: Go ahead, Mr. Gutierrez.

G: Well, I remember that morning that both supposed to fly that very day. And--

C: Oh both--

G: Both were supposed to fly that very day. But Rosillo had a different type of plane and he could stand much bad weather better than the other, Parla did. So, Rosillo started his flight from the Trumbo island here, he flew over the beach-- South Beach where Parla was supposed to stop and Parla saw Rosillo going up in the sky, going to Cuba, of course, they had all the protection, all the battleships was waiting in the sea there in case something happened. But when Parla saw Rosillo going by and he couldn't go on account that his plane was an old model plane made out of bamboo, and he took out a gun and he says, "If you don't let me go, I'll shoot myself." So he did it, and everybody there wanting to go-- they don't want him to go. He says, "If you don't let me go, I'll shoot myself." So, somebody cut one of the wires of his plane and know that he couldn't make it. So, he started his plane and he went off, but instead of going, he couldn't reach the plane high and he landed on Whitehead Street Beach. See, he landed there. But the next day it was good weather, he went and flew to Cuba and passed Havana, we went over to Mariel.

C: Well, that--

G: And that's the monument that we have here- of Parla.

C: That's very interesting.

G: What happened that Rosillo was the first man that made the trip, because he had a better plane.

P: Mr. Rosillo was not a Cuban, he was French.

C: Mr. Rosillo? Mr. Parra? He was French. Well, that's very interesting and of course, all of that has a connection with the Cuban Club and the benefits and all.

[audio cuts off]

C: Mrs. Renner and I wish to thank you Mr. Parra, Mr. Gutierrez, and Mr. Borges for your help in recalling the history of the Cuban Club in Key West for the bicentennial and for posterity.

END OF INTERVIEW