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Lydia Lopez Allen, Francisco Lopez, Ferman Lopez, Clemente Mirabel

Lydia Lopez Allen

Francisco Lopez

Ferman Lopez

Clemente Mirabel

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Interviewee

Lydia Lopez Allen, Francisco Lopez, Ferman Lopez, Clemente Mirabel, University of South Florida -- Tampa Library, and University of South Florida Libraries -- Florida Studies Center. | Oral History Program

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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
Oral History Program
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[Transcriber's Note: This interview was conducted as part of Dr. Susan Greenbaum's Central Avenue¹ research project in 1994. Greenbaum wrote the detailed summary seen here, including her comments in brackets. These comments have not been altered. The USF Oral History Program uses footnotes where necessary to explain or clarify concepts.]

This interview was conducted by S. Greenbaum. It took place all afternoon, in two locations—Mrs. Allen's home, and Mr. Mirabel's. They live a few houses apart, near the corner of Eighteenth Street and Twenty-First Avenue. Mr. Mirabel lives in the house where Lydia and her brothers, Frank and Ferman, grew up. Once a comfortable middle class Ybor City neighborhood, it is now deteriorated. Santo Trafficante² used to live in the next block, as did many Italian families (as well as black and white Cubans). Lydia said that there are still some elderly Italians living in the area, and she still gets along well with them. When their younger relatives visit, however, they treat her rudely.

The main object of the interview was to obtain information about Chick's Lounge/El Chico Bar. The proprietor was Ferman "Chick" Mirabel, Clemente's brother and the uncle of the other three. Clemente helped him run the business.

The Lopez family history includes a white Spanish grandfather on one side, and a white Spanish step-grandfather on the other. The latter, named Lopez, was one of the early members of the Centro Asturiano. He came initially without his wife, who was mulatta³. When she arrived, he could not bring her to Centro Asturiano. There were also difficulties with neighbors in Palmetto Beach, and a dispute over sitting together on a streetcar. They moved to Ybor City, where they could live without being bothered. Lopez was involved with *bolita*, and associated with Charlie Moon (black *bolitero* on Central Avenue). Through this association, Chick and his two brothers (Clemente and Frank, who is deceased) began working for Charlie Moon in the early to mid-

¹ Tampa, Florida

² Santo Trafficante and his son, Santo Junior, were prominent Tampa Mafiosi.

³ Mixed black and white.

1930s. In 1939, Ferman hit a big number⁴ and used the proceeds to buy his own bar. He got a good deal on it (amount not known). This was the beginning of Chick's. In the same year, on November 25, 1939, the first Gold and Maroon Tilt⁵ was held on Central Avenue; it was Chick's idea.

[There is an article⁶ about the Tilt and Chick's in the *Sentinel Bulletin*, 7/24/71, p. 11, includes a photo; note at the end of the article indicates that the Tilt actually began in 1937, need to check on this]

Lydia told me about a book, written by William Bradford Huie, entitled *Ruby McCollum*⁷ (Signet Books, New American Library, 1956; 1954). Tells of a murder case in Live Oak, but involves people on Central Avenue and has a description of it. Chick was a business associate (in *bolita*) with the husband of the accused.

One of the Lopez grandmothers was from Nassau; she came via Key West, where she met her husband; she never learned to speak Spanish. She was a member of the St. James Episcopal Church (city directory 1893, corner of Constant and Central). Lydia said that this church has always been composed of mainly West Indian and Cuban Protestants. The present church historian for St. James is Herman Munroe.

Frank Lopez joined the interview while in process. He told me, off the tape I believe, that Carl Warren had related to him a story told by Carl's father (who instigated the lawsuit for single member districts). He had been in an adjoining room [where?] while a meeting took place involving Perry Harvey⁸, Moses White, Blythe Andrews⁹ and others, where the destruction of Central Avenue was agreed to in exchange for personal financial gain by the three aforementioned individuals.

Mrs. Allen told me about two Solomon brothers (black) who had worked for many years for the Greek Stand¹⁰. Neither is still living, but Ruby Solomon (wife of Johnnie Solomon, one of the brothers) still lives near Mrs. Allen.

[Mrs. Allen's interview¹¹ was taped; transcript will complete this information; the following notes are from the interview with Clemente Mirabel, his niece, Frank, and Ferman, also on 7/9/94.]

Q: When was Chick's started? What was it before he bought it?

⁴ I.e., won the *bolita* lottery

⁵ Football game played by Bethune-Cookman College.

⁶ A photocopy of this article is included with this detailed summary as part of the USF Department of Anthropology African Americans in Florida Collection.

⁷ *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail*.

⁸ Perry Harvey, Senior.

⁹ Blythe Andrews, Senior.

¹⁰ This was a popular restaurant on Central Avenue.

¹¹ This interview is also part of the African Americans in Florida Oral History Project, A31-00070.

He bought it in 1938 [Lydia said 1939]; it had been a “beer garden” before it became Chick’s. He was able to get a very good deal on the price of the business. [Lydia said that he had gotten the money to buy it from a winning *bolita* number.]

It became very popular, had a reputation for being a clean place with good facilities, not a dive. There was a jukebox with a small dance area. The floor in front of the jukebox was worn down and rutted from all of the dancing that went on there.

Patrons were mostly Americans, not too many Cubans. During World War II, it was a popular hangout for soldiers from MacDill Air Force Base.

Q: Do you remember the disturbance during the war?

Yes, it was in 1942. A Spanish store owner stabbed a black soldier. Resulted in a fight. Truckloads of soldiers (white) were brought in to quell the violence. They cleared the streets.

Q: Did you know about the incident with Julia Padron’s cousin, who was a soldier at MacDill and got arrested for insurrection during that time?

He did not know anything about it, but did know Julia and Ramon. He spoke about the hotel they owned in Ybor City, and the Cuban bands that he brought into Tampa. I asked about whether Cuban musicians played on Central. No. Leon Claxton’s Review¹² did have a *Harlem in Havana* show with some Latin musicians, but they were not from here. [Cuban musicians played at Martí-Maceo¹³.]

Before he went into business for himself, Chick had worked for Charlie Moon (as did his brothers, Frank and Clemente). When Charlie learned that the Mirabels were opening their own place, he was very angry.

Q: What was Charlie Moon like?

He was very influential; he could help you and he could hurt you. If you crossed him, he would turn you in; he was a snitch.

He did serve soup to hungry people during the Depression. Was well liked for that.

He also took out insurance policies on lots of people, paid their premiums and collected when they died. [This is very strange; do the economics of this work? Did he hasten their demise? Must have given him a unique position vis a vis the insurance company he was dealing with; was it Central Life?]

Charlie owned: The Silver Moon, Little Savoy, Stinking Moon, and the Apollo.

¹² Leon Claxton was a wealthy black vaudeville producer who lived in Tampa. *Harlem in Havana* was part of the Royal American Shows, and traveled across the country.

¹³ Sociedad La Union Martí-Maceo, the club for the Afro-Cubans.

[Clemente said that the Pyramid Hotel was built by H.B. Plant.]

Charlie had a habit of throwing large amounts of change into the street in front of his places. Passersby would pick it up, bring it inside and spend it, presumably along with some of their own money.

Q: What do you know about Pearl McAdam¹⁴, the man who killed Charlie Moon?

He was a “bad hombre.” Pearl’s sister worked for Central Life; she was killed by a man she was seeing, who had not known she was Pearl’s sister. When he learned that Pearl was looking for him, he committed suicide.

After Pearl shot Charlie Moon, he did not die at first. Charlie’s brother got into the ambulance to go to the hospital, but Pearl climbed in with him and rode to Clara Frye¹⁵ with a gun on the brother. When they arrived at the hospital, Pearl told the nurses that Charlie better not make it [survive].

Pearl used to break raw eggs into a glass and then drink the contents; was viewed as a show of manhood and toughness.

Pearl killed many people, including his own wife. He worked for anyone with money. “Anyone with money could make the monkey jump.”

Everyone was scared of him. Clemente tells of a scene he witnessed when Blythe Andrews was sitting in a parked car. He caught sight of Pearl headed his way, and immediately slumped down in the seat of the car to avoid being seen.

Lydia was in school at St. Peter Claver when Charlie was killed. After school, a group of them went to the Pughsley Funeral Home to see his body. When they looked at him, his eyes were half-open; then, they saw a black hand coming from behind a curtain; they all got scared and ran.

Q: Who owned the property around Central?

Did not really know. Knew that a Dr. Higginbotham used to own all the houses in the area known as 44 Quarters. Frank and Ferman said that later Joe Nuccio bought lots of property on Henderson and Cass.

Brief discussion about Blythe Andrews and the *Sentinel Bulletin*; Andrews got the paper from the Potters [they think that Potter School is named after them]; they were the owners of the former *Bulletin* [Potters were activists, I think. Need to check oral histories.] Also may have been a tie between *Bulletin* and Grand Union [check Andrews interview].

They remember the Lily White Hospital, on 29th. Do not know too much about it.

¹⁴ *Sic*; his name was actually Pearl McAden.

¹⁵ Clara Frye Hospital.

Brief digression about cigarmakers and *lectores*; Lydia's father, Francisco Lopez, was a *lector* at Perfecto Garcia [he may have been white, need to check this].

Q: How did Ferman get the nickname Chick? How related to Chico?

Charlie Moon called him Chico [do not know why]. He called himself Chick. When he opened the place, he named it Chick's. He changed it to El Chico when they moved onto Central.

The reason for the change was to give it a new start. As Chick's they had gotten in the newspaper a lot [unflattering coverage presumably].

Discursion about Moses White; owned Palm Dinette, later bought Cozy Corner. Moses White gained control of Mrs. Pughsley's house when she died¹⁶ [?]. He catered fancy parties for white people. [Lydia expressed negative sentiments about MW, partly because she was irked by a *Sentinel Bulletin* article giving him credit for the Tilt, which she claimed was started by Chick. She said the Whites did not come to Tampa until the 1940s, and then they lived in the projects. She did not think he was eligible to be called "prominent." Others also reflected these sentiments. Felt that he had gotten rich by being an "Uncle Tom." Mentioned the large amount of money he got from urban renewal.]

Back to El Chico.

Q: When was it busy?

All the time, every day. They were the first bar to have air conditioning, was the cleanest place on Central Avenue.

Q: Who were the patrons?

Mostly longshoremen, they were the main ones; most were Americans, some Cubans. The other bars did not want the longshoremen because their clothes smelled bad; they unloaded fertilizer [*mierde*] and other smelly cargo.

Q: What do you know about the union?

Perry Harvey used to charge people for jobs. Could not get a job without paying him first [union dues or bribes?].

Perry Harvey also sold crabs that were filched off the boats. He got longshoremen to get them for him. People could tell they were his, because they still had barnacles on them. Harveys were not rich. Perry Harvey Junior used to have to work in Toribio's barbershop. [Toribio Lara was an Afro-Cuban barber with a shop in Ybor City.]

¹⁶ According to Bea Rodriguez (A31-00046), Mrs. Pughsley owned a funeral home, which Moses White took over when she died.

Back to Chick's: told a story about the bar on Sundays. People would come into the back door from the church parking lot, place a number [*bolita*], and go back out to church.

Q: Who ran *bolita* in Tampa?

Different layers. Charlie Moon on Central, Santo Trafficante was the top man in Tampa, but he had an out of town banker named Buck McAllen.

Q: What about Charlie Wall?

[CW was son of a prominent old Tampa family who preferred the company of gangsters; was murdered in the *bolita* wars.]

Charlie Wall lived on Thirteenth Street and Seventeenth Avenue; was hopelessly addicted to alcohol, was drunk when he was killed; he was the "fixer" in the operation.

Q: Do you know anything about Kid Mason?

His store sold everything from hardware to ice cream; he put out a calendar with that slogan on it. (Chick's calendar had cheesecake.) Kid Mason's had a bar in the back. He used to dress in children's clothes. [? I did not follow up on this. His photo in the center¹⁷ is in golf attire. Is that what this means?]

Q: Did white people come to clubs and events on Central?

Generally did not think so, but told of a traveling vaudeville show, Silas Green Show¹⁸, staged at the end of Central in a big tent. That attracted both whites and blacks; show featured white people in blackface.

¹⁷ May be referring to the Kid Mason Community Center.

¹⁸ *Silas Green from New Orleans*, a traveling minstrel show that ran from 1902 to 1957.