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Tampa Food Families Oral History Project
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Interviewer: This is an interview with, now manager, of Naviera Coffee [Company], Dan Fernandez. Many companies formed in the old country.

Dan Fernandez: No. They all were formed here.

I: Okay, who started the company?

DF: This company?

I: Yes.

DF: My grandfather. His name was Carlos Menendez. And he originated the company with his brother, Jose Menendez. That was back in 1921. Now prior to that, they originated another coffee company, which was La Reguladora. They owned that for about three or four years, and then sold it. And they each took a trip back to Spain to see their families. And when they came back, then they—well, my grandfather went to Tarpon Springs and opened up a restaurant. And he lost everything he had (laughs) doing that! So then he came back to Tampa, and he originated with his brother, like I said, in 1921, La Naviera.

I: Okay, also going to ask you, how was the name derived, La Naviera?

DF: All right, Naviera is the name of a steamship company in Spain, or a Spanish steamship company. And I imagine that he—at one time or another when he did come to this country, he came in the Naviera lines, and the name I guess was attractive to him. And he said, “If I ever have a business, I will name it that.”

I: And then, okay, how were the employees hired? Were they all Spanish speaking at the time? Or a mixture, like American—

DF: At the time? No. They were all Spanish speaking. Now you got to realize that back in 1921 Ybor City—so was West Tampa—was a self-contained community, composed of Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians. And in order for you to do business in Ybor City, you had to speak Spanish.

I: Right.

DF: So you had to have people that were able to speak Spanish. And that's why I imagine that, you know, that's why they had people that only spoke Spanish.

I: Right. And okay, how much money was needed at the time to open the company?

DF: At the time that he opened the company, he borrowed a hundred and fifty dollars from a friend of his, and that's how he started (laughs).

I: (laughs) And then there in the time that the business was going on, that the Depression, World War II, or the Civil Rights movement ever hurt the company? Like during World War II, I know (inaudible) as war.

DF: I don't say that it hurt the company—

I: Oh, so what I mean by that was, did you lose your customers?

DF: No.

I: Many customers that you had—

DF: No.

I: I figured the men would go to war, and the women stay home with the kids, if they had any. And sort of you know, had to tend to their own, and to Ybor City, in the heart of war.

DF: Well, let's put it this way, as far as I know, I don't think it hurt the company. I can appreciate that a lot of the young boys from the local area went to war, and I appreciate that. But I think that the majority of the older people that stayed, which were the heavy coffee drinkers. Coffee tends to be a beverage that more mature individual drinks than—versus, let's say the youth.

I: Right.

DF: Youth drinks pop, soda pop.

I: Right. Okay, and so in other words, it didn't hurt at all. No (inaudible)—

DF: I don't think so.

I: Like when the blacks were rioting in 1964, you know, I thought maybe they might have tried to—

DF: Well, what it did at that time, like everything—like everybody, let's put it this way. Like everybody that was in Ybor City, I think that what it hurt was the foot traffic. In other words, the people that used to come down to Ybor City and walk up and down the streets and do their shopping. I think it hurt that. Where we, I guess compensated for it, was the fact that we do serve chain stores. And instead of coming to the counter, let's say, and buying the coffee, they would go ahead and buy it at the grocery store. But you must also realize one thing, which is that you're talking to about the late 1950s when there were a lot of cigar factories here in Ybor City. There was a lot of people working here in the area. There were a lot of people walking around the area because they were working here. That no longer exists as you very well know. There's only what, about three cigar factories left in Tampa?

I: Yes.

DF: So—

I: Cigar—

DF: Times change, needs change. Today we service the state of Florida, whereas at that time, we were only concentrated in Tampa.

I: Right. And in the Depression, you know, it didn't hurt nobody? Like—

DF: I imagine that it did.

I: Money?

DF: Let's put it this way, I recall you know, occasions when my grandfather and my father both, telling us that they would collect from their customers a nickel a week. Because that's the only way that they could you know, get any money. But what I can tell you by it is that, you know, we survived and we made a living, and it was—it wasn't a real fancy living, but we did survive. And I think that coffee is one of the products that, whether you are in a depression, a recession, whatever, you're still going to have a market.

I: Right.

DF: It's not a luxury item, it's more or less a habit forming drink. And you need that cup of coffee in the morning if you're used to having it.

I: Okay, and on an average, how many Anglo-Saxons, blacks, or Spanish and Cubans drink your coffee? Now I know you don't have a—

DF: No, I know—

I: An average, but you'd say—

DF: I have no idea at all.

I: You don't even know—

DF: I have no idea.

I: Ten percent blacks or something?

DF: I have—like I said—that—

I: No idea.

DF: I wouldn't even venture to say, because I mean—

I: Right.

DF: I don't know.

I: Okay, then you had home deliveries in the beginning, and you have it now?

DF: We did. And about three years ago we gave it up. It was no longer economically feasible to do so.

I: So we'll say like, 1979?

DF: About that time is when we gave it up, yes.

I: Okay, and through the years, how did the packages cover differ? The package cover?

DF: Well when we went to concentrate more, let's say, change store or grocery store and deliveries, what we did was upgrade our packaging. We bought a better bag, a better bag to seal the flavors in, then it would last longer. And then we went into heat-sealing, which we had not before. We used to have, you know, regular tape.

I: Right there.

DF: Yes.

I: Okay, and how much coffee was roasted daily before it is packaged for market?

DF: It varies. What time of the year, you're in—

I: Oh yes, in summer—

DF: In the summertime you don't do as well, in the winter you do more. Like I said, there's—I don't know.

I: You really can't tell (laughs).

DF: You can't tell.

I: Right. And who manufactures it right now?

DF: The what?

I: The coffee. Ya'll do, right? The packaging?

DF: Yes.

I: Okay. Okay, has the location of the mill or the mills ever affected the company? (inaudible) Now people don't want to come here at night, because of the black situation—

DF: No, I would say no. And I go back to saying in 1963, when we moved into the present building that we're in. Ybor City was down, and I think since then it has picked up some. I think it's in better position than it was then. But at that point in time, we had competition that moved out of Ybor City. We decided we wanted to stay in Ybor City. We originated in Ybor City, we wanted to stay here, it is centrally located. Because our business is not directed to over-the-counter sales, it really doesn't affect us as to where we are. And as far as manufacturing is concerned, it is ideal for us here. It's centrally located. We can disperse our trucks all over, and it's a good location for us.

Now you mentioned a little while ago about the riots. We had no problems, none at all. We had no problems during the riots at all.

I: Right because any coffee companies, that would have been on 22nd Avenue. Where they had some riot problems, because 22nd [Street] where the riots began—

DF: You're talking about 22nd Street.

I: Right, 22nd Street.

DF: I imagine so.

I: Yes, that's what I meant.

DF: I imagine so. Yes, I imagine that would be a worse area than this one.

I: Right. And okay, how many managers has this company had?

DF: Well, my grandfather managed it until the time he passed away. And then my father and my mother, and then (inaudible).

I: That was (inaudible) Okay. And when [the] Ybor City fire came about, you didn't lose any customers?

DF: Fire?

I: Yes, they said there was a fire here, in nineteen—

DF: Oh my goodness, I—that I can't answer, I don't remember—

I: No?

DF: I don't know.

I: No. And how many different mills does this company have?

DF: We have one mill per city, we'd have different labels.

I: Different labels and one mill? Okay, what kind of labels are they?

DF: Well we package Naviera, we package Norma, we package Aguilla, we package Montaña, we package (inaudible).

I: Okay. And how many employees now work for the company?

DF: Now, presently we have twelve.

I: Twelve employees. Okay. Okay, and do you think the company will ever go out of business?

DF: No.

I: No? (laughs) hope not! Okay, do you think there's a good location for business?

DF: Depends on what kind of business.

I: Well, coffee business.

DF: Yes, I think it's a good location for it, like I told you know, centrally located.

I: Yes, right. And how many college students come around and even know that there is a coffee mill in this area?

DF: Very few.

I: Very few—

DF: Very few.

I: And did your company supply the coffee for the cigar factories in the thirties [1930s], forties [1940s] and sixties [1960s]?

DF: Yes.

I: Okay, so they really—and did the company ever belong to union? No, right?

DF: No.

I: Okay, in what did Emodelo join the company?

DF: We bought Emodelo six years ago, so that was about 1976. And about three years ago we bought Norma.

I: Okay, so who were the company's competitors when it first began?

DF: Oh my goodness, back at that time, there must have been about ten of them. There used to be La Flor, there used to be Colonial. There used to be La Floridana. Caracorello—is still in existence. There used to be, what—all these and Anto—Modelo, Norma—I think there was somebody else, and I can't remember now who they—

I: What about Hillsborough Coffee Company?

DF: Hillsborough Coffee is an American coffee.

I: Yes, right.

DF: We are also. But at the time we were talking about then, we were strictly doing Cuban style or demitasse coffee. We went into the American business, American coffee business, oh, about fifteen years ago. We did do that. And in that line, as far as competition is concerned, then you have, well, all the national brands that are here locally. But as far as roasters are concerned, you only have Brisk coffee, Stanley Brothers, and Hillsborough Coffee and ourselves that roast coffee. And (inaudible) and the Cuban coffee. Those are the only roasters left here.

I: Really have four or five.

DF: Yes.

I: Okay, now here's one—how did Naviera Coffee begin? How did you continue?

DF: When we went to American coffee, we—fifteen years ago, like I said—we knew we had established our name as Naviera Coffee, and that was associated with a dark-roast demitasse type coffee. So we wanted to create a new name for the American coffee, and we saw that people would not automatically think, Hey, this is Cuban coffee. It isn't. It's a regular hotel and restaurant blend, and we've done quite well with it.

I: And from what country are the beans from? The coffee beans?

DF: Central and South America.

I: Peru and—

DF: Oh, Peru, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Columbia, Brazil, Santa Domingo, Costa Rica. It depends what's available at what time of the year.

I: And—

DF: And match the price.

I: Right. And how's the coffee on the market that's privy to that? Other products—

DF: We have a segment of our production is distributed by our own trucks to the chain stores directly. And then we have a segment of our business that we send, and we sell through brokers. And we send through a common carrier.

I: Okay, now is your grade of coffee mild or strong?

DF: Which one?

I: Well—

DF: Are you talking about the American coffee?

I: Talking the Cuban? Cuban coffee?

DF: Cuban coffee—you can have a strong—you can have very many blends of coffees and very many different tastes of coffees. Now we have them that are stronger than others, and we have a milder with it. Still within the Cuban coffee. But we do have different blends in there that you can pick from. In other words, you can get real fine sweet and mild coffees and roast them either in a light roast, which could be your

American coffee, or you can roast any of them dark roast. Not quite—about a—I would imagine it's a—about like the color of your shirt—

I: What like this [points to shirt]—light brown? Darkish?

DF: Yes. A darkish brown.

I: Darkish.

DF: And that would be your Cuban coffee, and then you can also, if you happen to buy, you know, cheaper coffees, beans where the coffees are not as mild as sweet—then you're going to have a bitterer coffee.

I: Right. Okay, now here's a—is the coffee ground by hand now? Or by machine?

DF: No, machine.

I: Okay. And which supermarkets and family stores carry your brand of coffee?

DF: All the major [grocery] chain stores here.

I: Kash n' Karry—

DF: Oh yes. Kash n' Karry, U-Save, Family Mart, Albertsons, Winn-Dixie and Publix—what else is there?

I: Let's see—Enterprise.

DF: Well, they're not here locally any more—

I: Right, they used to be.

DF: They used to be, we used to sell them. And then I would say ninety-five percent of the independent stores also.

I: Right. Like their own businesses—

DF: Yes, like (inaudible) and (inaudible) and La Teresita, you know the independent grocers.

I: Okay, what restaurants buy the coffee—do you sell the coffee to? Like Columbia, I know you got it—

DF: No, Columbia roast their own—at one time, oh that was another coffee mill that existed at a time.

I: Okay.

DF: Columbia coffee, yes. And they shut down their plant as far as selling to the public, and they just roast enough for their own consumption.

I: Okay, in other words, restaurants, like you mentioned *La Teresita* and—

DF: Oh yes, I would say we service about, I would say, again, about ninety-five percent of all the Latin restaurants here in Tampa. And then in American coffee, percentage-wise I don't know what—

I: Yes.

DF: It's not as great. You know, there you have a lot of national brand competition that you're in. But we do have our share.

I: Oh yes. And how many ounces are on today's package as compared to the old packages in the first beginning?

DF: The first beginning, I don't know. But I can tell you since I've been here, twenty-five years, we originally were bagging fifteen ounces. And about, about twelve years ago, we went to fourteen ounces. We're talking under Naviera and La Norma. La Norma went to twelve ounces, and about five years ago, (inaudible) also bags twelve ounces. Now we bag twelve ounces in Montaña cans, and we bag ten ounces in Aguila cans. But fourteen ounces is what we bag Naviera under. Now our—all our American coffee is bagged in pounds, sixteen ounces.

I: How are you ranked with other coffee companies? Like you say you're like third? Or—

DF: Let me put it this way. I don't rank myself with anybody, I just take care of the business that I have—

I: Right.

DF: And standing doesn't mean anything to me.

I: That's true, that's true.

DF: The name of this game is, like the name of everybody that's in business—it's not how much you sell, its how much you make out of what you sell. That's all.

I: Yes. And okay, how many commercials have been done? Advertising your coffee?

DF: Well, presently advertising and—let's see, La Gaceta, and (inaudible) In two Latin radio stations. And we have, in the past, advertised on television in Miami, Café Aguila. Which we also bag.

I: It's never advertised in Tampa.

DF: No.

I: Okay. And okay, what family records were kept?

DF: Such as?

I: Of the coffee, you know, like, how many—like when it first began? What records, you know, of your grandfather started [the] company, like he might have kept some records? Like how many—

DF: Like how many pounds of coffee he was selling?

I: How many pounds of coffee he would sell, right. Or import?

DF: Yes, we have all that information.

(Buzzer sounds in background)

I: (inaudible) Okay now, let's see. Okay, now why were most of these mills located in Ybor City?

DF: Because the concentration of population of Latin (inaudible) was here.

I: That's why? Okay, yes, because I was going to say it's compared to Central Tampa and Eastern Tampa and that—

DF: Because there weren't any Latin's in that area.

I: Right.

DF: You had the Latin's all concentrated either—like I said, Ybor City or West Tampa. And all the cigar industries. So back at that time, you know, they shopped and lived and worked in Ybor City and West Tampa, and that's it. They very rarely went out of there. All this (coughs)—all this came to an end after World War II. And World War II changed everything. In the sense that the Latin element that was here at the time became more Americanized with war. And then after the young boys came back from war, they had become more Americanized than what they were before. And therefore, they spread out throughout the whole City of Tampa. Which, then the need, again goes for Ybor City because you only spoke Spanish. Well, after World War II, through education and the

war and everything else—and I guess it's second third generations after the immigrants came, that the necessity wasn't there.

I: Okay and what percentage of management were women?

DF: Of management where?

I: Here.

DF: Well, my mother was. But she was the daughter of the owner.

I: Yes. And then what percentage of the workers were women?

DF: Women, we don't have any except my wife who works in the office out there—

I: Yes.

DF: And my mom has consequently retired since then. We did have a lady that used to help us bag, but she retired. So that's it.

I: Okay, and this will be the last question—what were the different price ranges? From it's early beginning up to now?

DF: Eight cents per pound.

I: Eight cents per pound.

DF: Yes. That's what it was at the beginning. And today let's see, our most economical blend is a dollar [and] nine [cents] in the Cuban coffee. And the American coffee is two [dollars] fifty [cents]. And also about five years ago when the coffee prices went crazy, it got up to four dollars. But—

I: Okay, yes.

DF: Okay? I enjoyed the interview.

I: Okay.

end of interview