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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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Note: Since Mr. Rodriguez did not speak much English, his son Francisco, Jr., translated for him. The original transcript summarizes the questions and responses, and does not transcribe them verbatim.

How Mr. Rodriguez came to Tampa

Mr. Rodriguez was born in 1888 in Cuba, in the province of Pinar del Río. He came to Tampa on November 3, 1909, at the age of twenty-one. All of the factories in Cuba had a *lector*, or reader, and the readers always had glowing accounts of the United States and its progress and industries. When he arrived, Tampa “was a very poor city and very scarce in culture.” However, there was a lot of promise for Latin cigar workers, who were very skilled.

The cigar workers’ culture and training was very meager in those days. When work was scarce the black workers were the first to lose their jobs, even though they were among the most skilled. Domestic life was very simple because there was nothing to do but work, and most of their energy was spent on trying to survive. “There was little room for cultural growth or any other kind of growth.”

Forming La Union Martí-Maceo

During the Cuban war of independence, the black and white Cubans in Tampa would meet and discuss what they could do to help the war effort. There was a great fraternal spirit between the black Cubans and the white Cubans during this time. They would meet together at the same place without thought of race. But after the war there was a fragmentation between the two races. Therefore, it became necessary for each group to form its own organization, since the white Cubans began following the local custom of separating from the blacks. This led to the founding of La Union Martí-Maceo. However, since the epic hero of Cuba, Antonio Maceo, was black, there was always some fraternal spirit between the two groups. The Union Martí-Maceo always

preached unity among black Cubans, because they were a minority and needed to always work as a unit.

Tampa's black Cubans during the war

The black Cubans in Tampa had a great influence, because in Cuba, many of the war's leaders were black. The principal emancipator was Antonio Maceo. Black history as it relates to Cuba's independence has not been given its proper place in history, but anyone who has lived in Cuba or read about Cuban history is familiar with it. There were many generals and other people who played an important part, such as Quintin Guanderra.

In Tampa, there were many Cubans, but the cigar factories where they worked were owned by Spaniards. This was a very awkward position for them. Paulina Pedroso was a black Cuban woman who organized the black people to raise money and enthusiasm for the war. She was the only one who had the guts to hold meetings at her house. José Martí came to some of the meetings there. The house was located on Eighth Avenue and Thirteenth Street, where there is now a statue of Martí. The Rodriguez family lived in this house for many years.

Paulina Pedroso was a very homely looking woman, very dark with almost African features. She lacked formal education, but she had a great speaking ability and could captivate the entire audience whenever she spoke. She had a tremendous driving force. Many of the blacks were afraid of losing their jobs, but Pedroso could get them going. One time at a meeting with many reluctant people, Pedroso said that the man who is fearful of the Spanish should climb on stage and give her his trousers, and he could have her skirt in exchange. "He should be wearing the skirts and I need to wear the trousers that he has on." This is a very famous incident.

Pedroso's house was the only place where José Martí was not afraid to go. He would not stop in white Cubans' homes because he was afraid for his life. He organized expeditions in Tampa, New York, and New Orleans, which ultimately left from the Keys.

In Tampa, there were a few minor conflicts. Many of the Spaniards had themselves suffered from tyranny and government mismanagement, so they were in favor of the Cubans. Therefore there weren't too many problems. The real enemy was the Spanish manufacturers; the ordinary Spaniards were on the Cubans' side. Vincente Martinez Ybor was a Spaniard, but he was very sympathetic to Cuban independence, which made him almost an outcast with his own people.

Martí and Maceo

José Martí was a white man, "an apostle of independence;" Antonio Maceo was a black man, "a fighter for independence." Martí was highly educated and cultured. He was not involved with the physical aspects of the war, but rather gathering funds and marshalling forces. Maceo was the military man and epic hero.

Mr. Rodriguez does not think there was any special significance for naming the club after both of them. During the war black and white Cubans had one objective: independence from Spain. All of the concerns about prejudice came later on.

La Union Martí-Maceo and its influence

The club was very small and had very little effect on the community in terms of material things. They didn't build big buildings. But they had a high level of very good behavior. At that time no one ever heard of a black Cuban being arrested for being drunk or beating his wife or stealing. That didn't happen until later when they became "real Americans." Black Cubans were given some special treatment. They weren't as good as white people, but they were considered better than black Americans. The club used to have monthly recitals, speeches, plays and other things, which no other part of the black community had.

Black lectores

There were not many black *lectores*, or readers, in the cigar factories. Mr. Rodriguez Jr. only remembers one, Facon Gracion, who was related to Mrs. Griñán. There were several *lectores* who tried out, but they didn't make the grade.

The cigar factories

Mr. Rodriguez worked for more than sixty years in the cigar factories. All of his family was raised here, and he supported them by working in the cigar factories. Francisco Jr. is the youngest of his children. There were many factories and blacks worked in all of them except Hav-A-Tampa, which was owned by Americans.

Strikes

There were two significant strikes. The first was in 1910, and lasted seven months. It was all about union recognition, which was for the white people. Union recognition meant expelling blacks from any positions. The unions were not in favor of blacks.

The second strike was in 1920 and lasted for ten months. The blacks were opposed to this one for the same reason: the unions were not in favor of blacks. The blacks stood to gain nothing from the cigar unions.

Vigilante activities

Both men remember a case that involved the chief of police. The [Joseph A.] Shoemaker and [Eugene F.] Poulnot case was one of the worst. Both were tarred and feathered; Shoemaker died, while Poulnot survived.¹

Other cigar factories

There were about twenty or twenty-five factories, including Stockenberg and Martinez Ybor. Father and son discuss some of the factories in Spanish.

Afro-Cuban religious traditions

¹ This case occurred in 1935. Shoemaker and Poulnot were members of the Modern Democrats, a political organization which opposed Tampa's two dominant political factions. Police officers arrested, flogged, tarred and feathered them, along with Dr. Samuel A. Rogers, who was also a member of the organization. Eleven policemen were indicted for kidnapping and second degree murder, including R.G. Tittsworth, the chief of police. Five were convicted and sentenced to four years in prison, a verdict reversed by the Florida Supreme Court. Ultimately all charges were dropped.

The Cubans had several different religions. The first was basic Christianity. The second was saint worship. They had a group of African saints that corresponded to every Christian saint. Then they had spirits, “and you can just pick yours.”

Superstitions, voodoo, and childhood pranks

There was a Cuban woman who was very superstitious; she didn't like Francisco Jr. and was always making him get punished. Francisco Jr. and his friend Raynell E. Sloan got into a lot of mischief. They got a little bag of loose tobacco, which they made look mysterious. They took some sand and dyed it by pouring ink on it, which they poured into the bag. Then they took a chicken feather and put it into the bag. To people who believe in voodoo, this is a terrible thing. They slipped the bag through the woman's shutters, and when she saw it she screamed and panicked. No one knew that Francisco Jr. did it until he was grown up and would not be whipped for it.

The woman spent lots of money to be exorcised from the bag. She got a witch doctor, who told her that it was designed to rot her legs off. According to him, it was a special poisonous substance from the South American jungles. He charged her twenty-five or thirty dollars for this service, which was a lot of money then. Then she went to a second witch doctor, who told her to wash her house with male urine, then bury the bag in the sand and put a white cross on it, which would send the evil spirits away. This witch doctor also told her that another woman in the neighborhood had done it, so she convinced the landlord to get rid of this second woman. Francisco Jr. liked the second woman's daughter, and the incident is still on his conscience.

More about Afro-Cuban religion

They had a four-tier system. The first was basic Christianity. Then there was a series of saints, and people worshiped the saint of their birthday or birth month. Each saint also had a corresponding African saint. Finally, there were the spirits. Some people might skip one or two of the grades, but some followed the whole thing. Some people were so well-versed they knew all of the saints.

Everybody had a saint. When people got together, they would start talking about saints and ask who each person's saint was. One of the most powerful was [Our Lady of Charity], who corresponded to Oshun, the African saint. People borrowed a lot from African worship.

Lottery

There were two types of lotteries. One was numbers from one to a hundred, which people would play. Then there were lottery tickets. People could pick up as much as seven thousand dollars if they got the right ticket. Running alongside the lottery was the “dream book.” Dreams always corresponded to a number, and there was always someone in the community who was an expert on dreams. If you dreamed about a spider, the expert would tell you to play the number seven, since that corresponded to spider. Francisco Jr.'s mother and cousin had encyclopedic minds for numbers.

The lottery would throw every day, but his mother could remember what number had been thrown thirty days ago, and whose number it was. People never played for large sums of money: ten, thirty-five cents. It was a topic for conversation. People would discuss how long it had been

since their numbers won, and someone else could say which day the number had last been drawn.

People “subscribed” to their numbers. Francisco Jr.’s mother had the number ninety-eight, and the numbers man put her down every day for ten cents on that number. She didn’t have to pay every day, only on Saturdays when she had the money. If ninety-eight won, the man would bring her eight dollars for a dime.

Faith and the lottery

When Francisco Jr. was a child, he joined the Knights of Pythias, which was like the Boy Scouts. They had uniforms, but the family could not afford to buy him a uniform. People in Ybor City would ask God to throw their numbers, so that’s what his mother did. Every night the numbers were thrown at eight o’clock. There was a particular store that sold uniforms, which closed at nine o’clock. His mother dressed him and sat him down on the porch, and continued with her business. At 8:15, the numbers man came and brought his mother her eight dollars, and she took him to the store and bought him the uniform.

The lottery was never seen as a sin; it was just part of life. Mr. Rodriguez was very conservative and never played, but Mrs. Rodriguez did. He never objected to her winning money, but she never spent a lot of money on the lottery like some people did.

How black Cubans viewed black Americans

Mr. Rodriguez suspects that black Americans feel as if black Latins look down on black Americans. This may be an erroneous concept that comes from the language barrier, since people didn’t speak the same language. Francisco Jr. agrees that the language barrier plays a role, but he thinks the customs barrier is also important. The black Cubans were from a small country, and people from small countries are highly nationalistic. They were in a very strange position, since they were Latin by background but went to American schools. The Latins used to live in their own section with their own clubs. His parents adhered to Latin customs and wouldn’t change because they were living in America.

For example, at that time in Latin homes, girls had to have chaperones whenever the young men came to visit. If they went to an American home and saw a girl sitting with her boyfriend, they would consider that highly immoral. Part of this was because of the time they were living in, but a great deal of it was the culture. The Latins had a much higher concept of the sacredness of womanhood than the Americans did, so they had certain customs that could not be violated.

Other groups in Ybor City

Sometimes there would be Jews or Frenchmen, but they were just single people. The basic composition of Ybor City was Spaniards, Cubans, and Italians, and within those groups there were blacks and whites. People often don’t understand that about the Cubans; they don’t realize that there are black Cubans. Francisco Jr. experiences this every day.

A lot of people don’t understand that the African influence is very strong in the islands. There are so many black people in Cuba. This is also true in Haiti, which is a black republic and the

people all speak French. Even [American] blacks cannot conceive of a black man speaking something besides English.