

Interview with Dr. M. Santos, a Cuban Immigrant, between 1936 and 1939

I was born in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, in 1886. I came to Key West eight months after my birth. Of Key West I remember very little. I remember that my father had a bakery, and I saw many horses. I remember having been in a private school which was more to keep me from annoying in the house.

I had two years and was very fond of a lady that was named Mrs. Francicsa. She had a baby boy, and I was so jealous that one day I grabbed him by the neck, and if he had not been taken away from me, I believe I would have smothered him.

I was in Key West until around '94. The greatest impression I had was when I came to Tampa, and saw an electric street car. The impression that it gave me was that how could a street car move without horses. I would stand up on the seat and would ask my mother where were the horses, and she would tell me that they were behind the street car. The first thing I did when I stepped down was to go running to see where the horses were.

The first school I went to here was the Free School on 8th Avenue, between 13th and 14th. The mother superior (superiora) (1) was called Mrs. Greer, All us boys loved her very much. I did not complete this school.

I remember that the Federal Government took military possession of the Centro Espanol when war was declared between the United States and Spain, We used to hollow through the streets, "Hurrah for McKinley," I also remember (1) I presume he means the principal.

... that they used to sell certain post cards with the "Maine" (2) painted. One would place the fire from a cigarette on one extreme. The fire would travel until it reached the Maine, and produce an explosion.

In 95 there was a great freeze which burned all the oranges, I remember this because all us boys would go to search for oranges. In 98 or 99 we went to Cuba and stayed in Cuba some three or four years. We came back to Key West where my father again opened a bakery. We stayed in Key West until 1902 or 1903, and I commenced learning how to make cigars at the factory of Teodore Pares. Then my father determined to come to Tampa again where he had properties, and I continued learning the trade in Tampa at the factory of "Principe de Cales," and afterwards in the one of San Martin, where I finished learning the trade.

Then I went to work in different places, and when I lacked two months to have 18 years, I went to New York with two friends. These friends did not know English and I was the interpreter. In New York I reached 18 years of age. I stayed there some three months. I visited the museums of the city, The Museum of Natural History, the Aquarium, where I was much impressed by the Hipocampe, or marine horse. I also saw Caruse sing at the Grand Opera. Also the Flat Iron Building. Another thing that

impressed me very much was the hour of the rush at the City Hall, down town, in order to take the subway. I also saw the Brooklyn Bridge.

While I was working at the factory of Regonburg, in New York, I saw the first snow fall. This was something I had never seen, and I stood at the window to see the snow fall. (2) Cf. "Remember the Maine."

... I went to live at 74 street, number 202, where the Madame was an English woman, a very refined lady and of pure sentiments. Her name was Redicoa. She fondled me as if I was a son of hers. One day I was going out, she saw me with a roll of bills, and did not want to let me go out. When I first went to live here I could not sleep because of the noise of the elevators. The noise was so great that it was impossible for me to sleep, until I began to get accustomed.

The most difficult problem for us was the hour of eating. I did not know the name of the dishes, and I had to ask for the three. They would give me the list, and I would read and read it, but I did not know what it was. The only thing I understood was ham and eggs, and we ate ham and eggs for a few days.

Afterwards I would point out a dish on the list to the waiter. The waiter would tell me the name, and if I liked it, I would write it on a paper. On Sundays we would go to Coney Island and my attention was very much attracted to see so many people at the beach.

As I had never left the family, I felt home-sick, so I returned to Tampa. I continued working here as cigar-maker. Years later I returned to New York, and remained there various years. I returned to Tampa around the year 1911. Then I went to Chicago where I lived various years, always working as cigar-maker.

From Chicago I returned to Tampa where I remained one month, and then continued to Havana. I stayed in Havana some five or six months. I was a policeman some three months, and resigned because the police were given very bad treatment. And then I went to New York. I stayed in New York two or 4 three months.

From New York I returned to Havana, as I had been called for a bottling factory of Palatino. I worked as interpreter with the engineer who had the construction work of the bottling factory of Palatino. I worked for about two months in that company, and then returned to Tampa. I went to work at my trade at the factory of Garcia Brothers.

While at this factory I entered the school of the Tampa Business College, and was there some few months. I did not graduate as I had to return to Cuba because my father sent for me to put up a business of machineries to fix shoes, which was not carried out because I did not wish to compromise my father in something on which he could lose the little money which remained for his old age.

In Havana I had a friend of my infancy whose name was Dr. Ubaldo Ubeda, Optometrist. He advised me to study that profession. He insisted so much with a gift of persuasion which was inborn in him. He dominated my manner of being, which is very indifferent, and I determined to write to the American Optical College of Philadelphia, and I was enrolled.

I commenced my studies which at first I thought were a failure because I believed that I could not understand that science. I must say that Dr. Ubeda; the Doctor and Professor of the University of Havana, Dr. Luciane Martinez; Dr. Magarita de Armas, Professor of the University of Havana; and also

her husband, Dr. Justino Baez, helped me at the commencement of my studies with their vast knowledge. I graduated from said college with excellent marks in all the assignments except one. In my profession I believe I have had a success as I estimate that in my work of optics, at least in 95% I have not had complaints.

... The business of optics nowadays is like a corpse with life, as the competition, so great and destructive that the "chain stores" make, selling cheap glasses, and in many cases harmful and injurious to the sight, is the principal cause why this profession is so extremely fallen. At the houses of the "chain stores" the glasses that they sell are usually spherical, and it is proven by the last statistics that more than 50% of the people suffer from astigmatism, and, therefore, these individuals need special cylindrical crystals, which the "chain stores" do not sell.

As to the New Deal, I believe that it has been a failure as it has protected the trusts more than the American people. Today, the poor are poorer, and the trusts are richer. Another reason: this is a country that is controlled by the trusts. When one stands on the street, and closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them and looks; everything, absolutely all that one sees is made by the trusts. The automobile that passes by, the street car, the trucks, everything that one wears: shoes, clothes, etc. When one enters a restaurant, he sees the plates, the tables, the spoons, all is made by the trusts. 95% of what one eats is controlled by the trusts. The trusts for more than 200 years have been controlling all the industries, and killing the small business men. We have reached a state in which the trusts dominate all, as they are the owners of the money, or nearly all the money that there is in the United States.

The war can already be seen between one trust and others; the strongest will dominate the weaker trusts, and the capital will be reduced to a few men who will control everything. In my particular opinion, all is not lost. A few men are necessary, who would have sufficient energy and intelligence to make social laws: as for example, all machines which displace ten men, should give the salary to those ten men. For example, one machine can, manipulated by the number of individuals which it displaces, taking turns by hour. The Capitalist will have the right to a certain equitable percentage, and there cannot be a Capitalist who can have as capital more than one million dollars. All that passes this amount the Federal government will confiscate it for the betterment of the community. The utility companies should be the property of the communities. All poor men who passes 50 years should be pensioned of the government, with a modest pension, but at the same time sufficient for the necessities of each one.

The system of voting in this country should be reformed, as the system that exists nowadays is very antiquated as it is frustrated in nearly all the country. One of the principal things that should be done is the ["carnet?"] (identification card) with the picture and finger prints to avoid fraud.

This country gives more salary to the government employees, as a general rule, than all the countries in the world. And from the President down, the salaries should be cut. It is my firm opinion that if the President does not change his imperialistic and antedemocratic system with the people, not many years will pass in which the blood will run here as in France when the revolution; and in Russia not many years ago. For the same reason that the machine cannot be detained because it is the progress, neither can the right of justice be detained which is demanded by all who produce.

History shows us that every step towards justice and liberty has been bathed in blood.

The American people are a people well disciplined and docile, but the American people if some day they should determine to shed their blood against this imperialistic and antedemocratic system, all that passed in France, and in Russia, will be a drop of water compared with what will happen here.

We must take into consideration that the American people have more progress and civilization than the rest of the world, who know their rights; who are accustomed to eat and dress, and that today they do not eat nor dress. The American people know that in the United States there is a surplus of food; there is a surplus of clothing; and there is a surplus of everything, while he {?} all.

Days before the NRA, lard was at .07¢ per pound, today May 1935, lard is at 21¢. And thus successively all the article, an enormity; but nevertheless, the workers earn less today than before the NRA — those who work — and those who do not work, have multiplied to such an extent that if I should say that 25,000,000 workers are without work at the present moment, I would not be mistaken.

Not long ago Clarence Darrow, the most famous lawyer in the United States of world fame, made declarations where he advised that if the government wanted a success, it should lean towards socialism. I know that this will not be done, as human egotism is inborn in the human being, and as I have said before, all liberty, and all democracy has been baptized with blood. I do not think of living when that will be carried out, but I have the absolute certainty that that has to come in one way or another.

I do not believe that Roosevelt will solve this crisis, for if he had wanted to, as he promised to the American people, he would have solved it, 8 as the Legislature and the Senate have given Roosevelt more power than any other president of the United States. For more than 40 years I have lived in this locality. I remember from my first infancy how this locality was gradually founded. Although small I remember Martin Herrera, the founder of West Tampa.

We lived almost happy, as earning was plentiful, and living was very cheap, and I remember that my father had the bakery in which he made good business.

“Estabamos [ancho?] come el [guarandol?] de a peso.” My father made some capital with his bakery, and I remember that at 3:30 in the morning, one of the bakers would knock at the side of the house, and he would get up to deliver the bread from house to house. He did this work for thirty years, and I have certainty that in the thirty years he did not fail once to go to work, rain, lightning or thunder. I have always been an admirer of the virtue and honesty of my father.

The industry grew in this locality to such an extent that the Havana tobacco, made by hand in Tampa, had the largest credit than any other tobacco industry has had in the United States. Then the Jews came and reformed the manner of making cigars, and make them by mould. That system began to multiply itself to such an extent that more cigars were made by mould than by hand. They sold as made by hand, and the consumer was deceived.

Later the “very scientific” machineries have come for making cigars which have displaced in this locality more than 15,000 operations. The government has not taken any measures to protect the worker, who remains (2) An expression used in Ybor City to signify prosperous, well-being or equal to the idiomatic expression of “swimming in abundance.”

... with the arms crossed and given the manufacturers all the opportunities to assassinate or kill of hunger their workers.

There is much talk about the liberty of the United States. The word "Liberty" is very much heard in the land of Uncle Sam, but this work has its limits. I am a great admirer of the doctrines of Jeffersons, but from Jefferson to F.D. Roosevelt things have changed very much. That is to say, from Jefferson to McKinley, this was the greatest country because of its democracy, its [idocology?] of the right of man; but McKinley was the first Apostle of the Yankee imperialism. From McKinley to F.D. Roosevelt - all the presidents, absolutely all, with the making exception of anyone, have been imperialists more or less. It is necessary to read the politic of the United States with Latin America. The government of the United States, in combination with Wall Street, have taken away and placed presidents in Latin America. The last step in the American imperialism was that Roosevelt placed as president Carlos Manuel de Cespedos in Cuba; and like Carlos Manuel de Cespedos, were placed all the presidents that Cuba has had.

The people of Cuba rebelled against that imperialistic politic, and removed Cespedos in a few hours, and placed Professor Grau San Martin as president. This not greatly displeased the "democratic" F.D. Roosevelt, and he answered with 32 warships of the democratic American marine, to surround the island and take it by force. Thanks to Mexico and certain other Republics which kept the Americans from entering in Cuba.

The order was given that the troops were not to disembark in Cuba when they were already at the Morro. In one of the ships was [Hall?], secretary of State, to take charge of the government. On receiving the telegram of not disembarking, "hise el papel" (1) (literal, he made the paper) of going on a 10 pleasure trip to Panama or other place. That is the cause why I do not believe in the democracy of/ F. D. Roosevelt.

The mutual aid societies formed entertainments here, and many times "se formaba bulla" (2) (literal, noise was made) because the Americans felt a certain racial hatred toward us. These Americans entered the picnics and would get drunk. When they were drunk "se metian," (literal, they put themselves in) the women in order to pick a quarrel (busear bulla).

One time in one of these picnics, there were three Americans. I remember that one of them was called Otto, a bully. This Otto grabbed a girl, and siezed her breasts. Her sweetheart, who was called Mario Garcia, came after me, and told me what the American and the two others had done to his sweetheart. Then I went to ask an explanation of him. Otto answered in a contemptous way, and at the time closed his hands to threaten me.

(1) Idiomatic expression equivalent to "He played the part."

(2) Idiomatic expression used in [Yoor?] City equivalent to "trouble was created."

(3) Idiomatic expression used in Ybor City equivalent to "pick a quarrel," "to tease."

This word "[materse?]" is a very loose idiomatic expression. In Ybor City it is used in various forms, such as "fulane esta metido con cielana" — a certain person is in love with a certain woman. This idiom is now used in place of the former idiom of "carger el cubo" (literal — carry the bucket) to make love. This expression has now almost completely disappeared. We also have "el se metic con una mujor" — He teased a lady "especially if it is in reference to an old lady; if however, it is in reference to a girl it means that he is trying to make love to the girl. We also see in Ybor City, especially among the boys when they are fighting, and one should ask the reason, one or the other will say: "El se metic commige." He picked a quarrel with me. In the present case it means "they troubled the woman." This idiomatic word is also used Ybor in place of the Cuban work "pirepear" (to flirt, to flatter. Sometimes made use of indecently.

... Rapid as a tiger I threw the first “[cinbonbase?]” (1) with all my soul. He fell behind a door which was half open. The other two threw themselves on me, and I answered the attack with all the anger and indignation, with all the power of 19 years (more or less), and of two consecutive years of gymnasium.

When this combat was being unfolded, there was at the pavilion more than five hundred persons. The “corre sorre” (2) (run run) was terrible. I continued fighting with these two bulls in stature, weight and age. Then a policeman came of more than six feet in height, leaping over the chairs to get to me. He lifted me in weight (me levanto en pese) by the shoulders, and placed me behind a row of chairs, where for the moment I remained entrenched from my enemies.

I was baptized in the Catholic Church of Segna la Orando, Province of Santa Clara. My family never forced me to go to church, but in Tampa, my teacher was an ardent Catholic, and forced me to go frequently to church. “llego a embullarmo tante” (4) with her stories that I came to be lay brother (monigate) (5) at the church. Today when I remember this, I laugh because of the

(1) An idiom used in Ybor City of Cuban origin, equivalent to “terrific” blow.” I presume it is derived from “bomba,” a bomb. This word is also used in a different sense meaning a terrific explosion, as when they say: “ciste el simbombaso?” (Did you hear the terrific explosion?)

(2) This is another one of the idiomatic expressions used Ybor City. It is used as a noun expressing rush, or running for cover.

(3) An expression which means suspended in the air.

(4) A colloquialism of Cuban original. Its equivalent in English would be: “She enthused me so much.”

... lies, so big, that they told me of the Christian doctrines and others. I have arrived at the firm conviction that religion, as Charles Marx said, is “the opium of the people.”

The writers I admire most in the United States are, first of all, Sherwood Eddy, and Arthur Brisbane. I have read different great authors, but I had never read a book with so great an honesty as the one Sherwood Eddy wrote, and which is entitled “Russai Today.” I do not believe there is any God, and neither do I believe in say superstition. Whosoever believes in God is a true blunderer (or mistaken) “equivacado.” (1) Who has seen this being?

What he really means is alter boy or acolyte. This word “monigate” is very often used in Ybor City without its true meaning and very often used in a despicable way as “tu eres and monigate.” You are a monkey, or you are a sissy, according to the inflection used. (1) Mr. Santos had originally used the word “[Berrace?]” and then asked to have it changed to “equivacado.” The word “[berraco?]” is a disrupted form of “[bellaco?]” meaning deceitful. In Ybor City the word “[berraco?]” is very often used, and conveys a despicable meaning. Its equivalent in English would be “fool.”

I am single. Many of my friends ask me why I have not married, and I answer them the truth, that with the woman I would have married, she was not worthy of me because she was a woman of a “[suddy?] conduct,” (2) and would have been a very great grief to my parents. In order to get rid of her, I had to leave for Havana, so as to forget her, for in Tampa whenever she would look at me with those great black eyes, it made me go back with her.

I must state in making these declarations that I was one of so many fools that believing in the so much “cackled” ([casarado?]) New Deal, and that I went to deposit my vote for the one who is today President of the United States,

... Franklin D. Roosevelt, who has “[desepcionado?]” (deceived) my most pure illusions with the respect to the solution of this great crisis which effects “en le mas profundo,”

(1) (in the most profound) the people of the United States.

(2) Prostitute

(3) A corrupted form of the noun “[deception?],” (deception, deceive, disillusion). It is very commonly used in Ybor City, although it is an incorrect verb. It can be termed as a colloquialism.

(4) An expression conveying the meaning of “very deeply.”

I wish to state also that I will not vote again for any candidate for President of the United States, who belongs to the Democratic or Republican party, as I believe that anyone of these presidents has not an ideology really democratic and just, for those of us who work, and produce, and are respectful of the law.