Mexico & Caribbean Area Series
Vol. V No. 6
(CUBA)

American Universities Field Staff REPORTS SERVICE

SKETCHES FROM CUBAN PROVINCIAL LIFE

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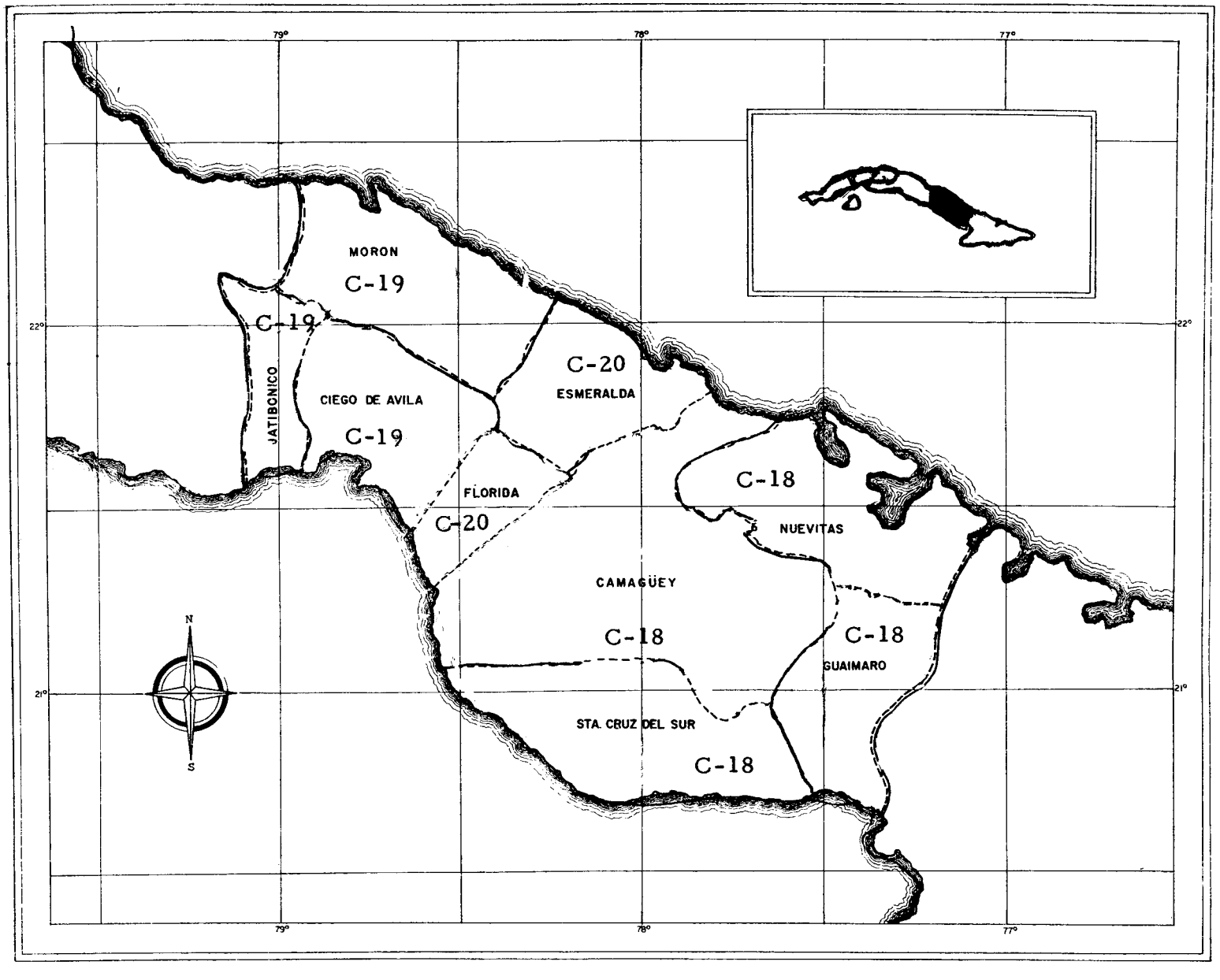
Camagüey, Camagüey
August 1960

The National Institute for Agrarian Reform has emerged as the chief instrument of the Cuban Revolution. The statistics contained in its first report indicate that it has effectively taken control of almost all productive land in the island and has moved rapidly to encompass also the industrial complex related to the land. A program originally announced as a way to give to the poor and the penniless a means of livelihood has been changed in direction and emphasis so that it now gives to the state control of the land and its products and control also of the labor of the rural worker.

The reports of new land seizures, new interventions in industry, newly founded co-operatives, and the official statistics and announcements detailing progress in the reform program all conspire to impress one with the vitality of the instrument and the ruthless efficiency of those charged with responsibility for wielding it.

Behind the facade of statistics, reports and propaganda, however, are operating offices. Last May, visiting one of them in Camagüey, I found something akin to chaos. My progress to that point had also been somewhat chaotic.

Following the directions of Camagüey citizens, I reached an edifice bearing the name of



INRA Administrative Zones in Camagüey Province

INRA. Outside the barred doors was a group of some 50 to 60 persons, mostly women, each with a paper held aloft, most of them shouting and calling to a guard at the door, all of them pushing to be admitted.

A bystander on the corner, on being questioned, said the supplicants were representatives of needy families seeking a monthly dole. A dole of 20 pesos, he said; of 50 pesos, corrected another bystander.

"From INRA?" I asked, not with too much surprise. I pointed to the name on the building.

"Oh, no," replied the bystanders. "INRA has moved," said one. "This building now is for the relief agency. These people are unemployed." And they told me how to find INRA.

Once you know the locality it is easy to find the INRA administrative offices for Zone C-18. It is likely to be one of the busiest spots in any town. Outside there will be jeeps, autos, trucks, each bearing the mark of some INRA division: "Industrial Section Chief," "Supplies and Transport," "Inspection of Co-operatives." Outside will be groups of men, many wearing boots and the broad, white hat of the Cuban countryside. Inside more people will be waiting and there is likely to be a receptionist with a curt, impatient style.

INRA in Camagüey has a modern building on the river, larger than those of the organization I had visited in other provinces. And it seemed better organized: there were department heads (co-operatives, industrial, personnel, fiscal) each with an office. There was an office labeled "provincial delegate"--the man I had come to see, a Captain Jorge E. Mendoza Reboredo. "He is in Havana," the receptionist announced curtly.

I inquired for his substitute and I asked if the receptionist or someone wouldn't please just read the letter I bore introducing me. Although (or because?) the envelope carried the imprint of the Prime Minister's office no one seemed interested in opening it. But I was shown the office of the provincial delegate and thus introduced into the inner sanctum of INRA (and without a pass--an oversight I later had to explain). The letter was read, and I was shunted to the personnel chief's office. It was occupied by a teenager and a bearded youth in uniform who on being asked his position blushingly explained he was in the army and only "visiting." (He had been reading a magazine.) The teenager summoned an older man (he must have been nearly 40) who was presented as one of the administrators of Zone C-18, one of three in Camagüey Province. In his office I met the teniente, age 25, and a very pretty stenographer who had been caught, as we entered, in a personal telephone conversation.

After the usual exchange of amenities, I asked, "And when did you begin your work here?"

"In the time that Matos left."

The young teniente talked easily, with no show of embarrassment at his reference to Dr. Fidel Castro's onetime friend, Hubert Matos, who was imprisoned because he openly opposed the radical administration of the Agrarian Reform Law. (In Santa Clara, capital of the neighboring Las Villas Province, people still whisper the name of Matos.)

"And that was how long ago? A year, perhaps?"

"Yes, about a year. No. Not that long." The teniente turned to a passing soldier, older and browner than he. "Chico," he said, "when was it that Matos left?"

"In October, I think." They counted the months together. "About six or seven months ago," the teniente announced.

"And what has INRA done in those months? You can get me some figures? How many co-operatives, what kinds . . . ?"

"We are only beginning to know these things. Land was taken. Land was given . . . deserted. We hear of these every day. It will be six or seven years before it is organized, the fiscales only now are beginning to measure, to count the cattle, to make valuations of the buildings. In six or seven years we will have the job done."

The teniente shrugged his shoulders. "It is a tremendous obra. There always are problems. One works night and day, visiting the co-operatives and here in this office. What you are seeing is a quiet day."

The inner sanctum into which the five or six private offices opened was large, dim, and cool. It contained two large tables and around them were gathered a number of men, farmers they seemed, standing and sitting as one of their number entered figures and names on a list. Everyone seemed to talk at once, and with the additional noises of the street, the talk of those waiting outside and in the reception room, the shouting was explicable.

I asked the teniente what the men around the tables were doing. "Administrators from the co-operatives," he said, "and their assistants. Collecting for their vouchers."

As we were talking, one of the problems of which the teniente had spoken presented itself. A bearded and long-haired soldier came in and commandeered the single telephone. "Get me Simón Bolívar, direct," he commanded. At my startled look the teniente explained that "Simón Bolívar" was a co-operative. "We use names of our heroic dead," he said, "but sometimes other great people are honored. But we're not running short of names. We have 20,000 dead, you know."

"And how many co-operatives in Cuba, in this province?"

"Who knows? We now have 51 in this zone."

A list of the co-operatives constituted in Zone C-18 of INRA (as of May 5, 1960) was found for me and the names of three co-operatives formed since it was typed were added by the pretty stenographer.

I thanked the teniente and bowed my way out of the offices from which part of the Cuban Revolution was being administered. My departure was confused only slightly by my need to explain why I wasn't in possession of the pass I should have been carrying.

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Casualty of the Cuban Revolution

His name was José Manuel Casanova and if he were alive today he would be 75 years old. He died 10 years ago of a heart attack, leaving most of his great estate to his only son and namesake, then 20. At the time of his death and for decades before that, the senior José Manuel had been known as the king of the sugar business, as indeed in a certain sense he had been. He certainly was a very wealthy man, the owner of great sugar cane lands and a mill in Pinar del Rio Province, which for many years he represented as senator in Cuba's Congress. He was a power in the old Liberal Party of Cuba and while he never succeeded in capturing the presidency for one of his candidates, his advice and support was sought by the men who filled that office; they made him Cuba's chief spokesman in Washington when there were sugar deals to be made and he became almost as well known by United States leaders in the '30's and '40's as he was known by those who mattered in Cuban society. For when he was 45 years of age, don José Manuel had ceased to be interested primarily in making money or in adding land or mills to his sugar holdings. "I started then," he told his son and heir later, "to seek honor for our name and to serve our country." He also, it seems, sought social position and prestige.

He had been born with none of these, nor with wealth, education, powerful friends or relatives. His father and mother were Cubans by birth, the children of Spaniards of obscure and plebeian ancestry, probably of a mixture of Basque and Catalan, though young José Manuel isn't certain. He knew only his grandmother, his father's mother, a stern lady whose view of life differed greatly from that of her husband.

The Casanova family lived in the village of Bahia Honda, in Pinar del Rio Province, one of those rustic municipalities established during the 19th century to administer the law of Spain, to furnish a market place for the farmers and for the few fishermen of the nearby bay in the Gulf of Mexico. The father and mother had inherited some land from their respective parents but most of it had been sold or mortgaged away by the time José Manuel was a small boy, attending the village grammar school.

For the father was more poet than businessman or farmer. He had a royal sinecure of some sort; he was one of the few men in the village who could read and write well. Apparently he was content with little money, an easy life, playing the guitar, singing the songs of old Spain and of Cuba, reading and writing and reciting poetry. "My grandfather seems to have been a happy man who wasted away his property while his wife grimly warned of retribution to come," the Casanova heir recalls. "She was filled with forebodings and made my father aware of the struggle for existence awaiting him. She was a woman who saw only extremes: 'One was a master or a slave,' she said, 'one wore the sash of recognition or the halter.'"

In 1896 the nearby town of Cabañas was captured from the Spaniards by General Antonio Maceo one of the heroes of the Cuban war of independence and within a few years Señor Casanova had lost his royal sinecure and with his wife and son had sought refuge in Havana, then a day or more distant from Bahia Honda. The family was penniless and the parents decided to place José Manuel, at 13, in the home of relatives where at least he could be fed and clothed and perhaps continue some schooling. The father and mother hoped to be able to care for themselves in the city.

The boy, however, was proud; he refused to be farmed out to relatives and instead he set out alone, on foot, his belongings tied into the traditional bundle over his shoulder, to return to Bahia Honda where he expected to find work. His first stop was a U.S. Army camp, under construction at Guanajay near Mariel, where the U.S. Navy was establishing a coaling station. These towns today are but 30 minutes or so from Havana on modern highways. At the beginning of this century, when young José Manuel returned on foot into Pinar del Rio Province, they were more than a day from the capital.

His first job was working for the Americans, digging ditches, latrines, and sleeping at night on the soiled uniforms of the soldiers in the storeroom. His fellow Cubans, realizing his limited physical capabilities, soon made him their water boy, and thus during several weeks he earned a little money and his livelihood.

José Manuel and the other Cubans eventually finished their work at the army camp and the boy continued his journey to Bahia Honda. There he found work in the cane fields of an ancient centrale, the Orozco Mill, owned and operated by a French couple, who soon got to know the young Cuban whose father had been the wit and poet of the nearby town during Spanish times. José Manuel labored at the killing work of cane cutting until the French owners made him first an employee in the mill office and then at 15 a clerk in their Havana office, for most of the sugar mills maintain such offices to handle the shipping and sales part of the business.

In Havana, José Manuel attended a night school at the Centro Asturiano where he studied accounting and business management, graduating at 19 with

certificates in these subjects. Meanwhile, he had risen steadily in the employ of his French friends; he seems to have had a persuasive personality and much native ability. "Everybody liked father," his son reports. "He worked hard and he knew the sugar business from the bottom up. When he was but 20 he had a position of responsibility at Orozco and when he was 21 he was the choice of the mill's owners and creditors to manage the mill. The French family had been losing money steadily, they were in debt, and they decided to return to France. Father took over before he had become of legal age."

Within a few years, as sugar prices rose, young Casanova began to earn profits for the absentee owners and the Cuban creditors, mainly bankers. When he was 25, the young manager had paid the debts and earned a $60,000 bonus from the owners, a fortune before World War I.

"In those days many mills were in debt and father had no trouble renting many of them. He used his capital to rent, buy, and sell mills and cane lands. He worked well; when he was about 28 he retired with about $250,000 in cash, and investments in properties and bonds," the son reports. That would have been early in 1914, before war started in Europe. Or perhaps it was 1913. The son isn't certain. Anyway he knows his father was 27 or 28 and that he retired and went to Paris.

"Father wanted to learn French and he wanted to see Europe. He loved life. He liked people and he had a wonderful time for two years (until the United States entered the war) which he often spoke about. He learned to speak French well and he understood some English but he never spoke it."

"In Paris, he told me," the son continued, "he rented a studio and pretended to be a painter. He advertised for models and many came . . . . Another time he met a Cuban Negro and hired him to dress as the servant of an Oriental potentate. Father wore a turban and went about Paris followed by his servant. They spoke in a language they had created and the people who saw them must have thought father was a very important character from the Orient. He played this game for weeks, he said."

Eventually the rich young Cuban came back to Havana. He was 30 and still very rich and the next 15 years he devoted to increasing his fortune. (He was 42 before he married José Manuel Jr.'s mother. They were divorced seven years later and the father remarried. The only other child is a daughter, half-sister to the heir, and about 26. Both widows are alive.)

During these years of fortune-making José Manuel organized Cuba's first national association of independent (non-American) sugar mill owners and he defended the small producer against the large one, mainly U.S.-owned. He was back of the legislation of the period that did away with monopolistic practices by which large mills squeezed the little ones until they sold out.

"Father was a nationalist, and he fought to protect the Cubans in the sugar business. He was very successful. He brought about the basic laws still governing the business. In the United States he fought for Cuban interests. I often went to Washington with him to be his interpreter and the American officials[1] always said they found father a tough bargainer."

Don José Manuel had given his son a Cuban-American education: Ruston Academy in Havana until he was 10 (this is an American-run elementary school) then a Cuban academy and institute, then Culver Military Academy in Indiana, then the Babson Institute, and then at 19 the son was granted legal adulthood to become his father's assistant, with full powers to handle the business of the family. By that time the Casanovas had a new mill replacing the old Orozco and many acres of cane land. The elder Casanova was the recognized leader of the industry, with wide interests, a multimillion-dollar fortune, and scores of friends on the island and in the United States.

Among his closest friends were the Riveros, don Nicolás, director of the newspaper Diario de la Marina from 1895 to 1919, his son, Dr. José Ignacio, who succeeded as the newspaper's director until his death in 1944 and José Ignacio, the last director of the now closed conservative journal.

"In the '30's when the Communists were pushing ahead," the son recalls, "a crowd decided to wreck the building of the Diario de la Marina. Father went there to help his friends the Riveros. He grabbed a submachinegun and went out to meet the mob, called to their leaders to parley with him, had a committee formed and took them to the editors. Soon the mob dispersed. Father believed in the power of reason. They say that if he could talk to anyone he could win them over to his side. In the present situation I am sure he would have gone to Dr. Fidel Castro in the beginning, to talk about the future of Cuba, and that the Prime Minister would have listened to father. He never would have accepted the loss of his property without a fight; not father."

The Casanova heir is a latifundista--a large landowner. The net income from cane lands owned by the family (unless the Government intervenes) is expected to exceed $50,000 this year. This does not include profits from the sugar mill operation or from other sources. This enterprise was created by the father and preserved and enlarged by the son, who even before his father's death had shown his wisdom and ability in the business of the family, which he extended to include ranching and the raising of blooded cattle.

Father and son were born and reared in the Roman Catholic Church; the son recalls attending mass with his pious father. Yet the father was divorced in a civil court without church permission and remarried and the son has had two divorces and is now again remarried, without church consent.

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[1] In their country home the family has an autographed picture of José Manuel with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The father's best friends were the editors-owners of the strongest pro-Church newspaper in Cuba, a paper which backed Franco in Spain and even the Nazis in Germany. Yet José Manuel and his son could be sincerely pro-American, while remaining Cuban nationalists.

Father and son considered themselves businessmen, not landowners primarily, and the father, as this account shows, was in no way sympathetic to or related to the landowning aristocracy of Cuba. Both father and son recognized the evils of the quasi-feudal system of the past; the father founded the first social security system in the sugar industry and helped to organize the sharecroppers to get for them some security in land tenure. The son agrees that to distribute the wealth of Cuba more equitably, and to improve the education and health of the rural landless peasantry, much heavier taxation was called for and also, he asserts, there had to be distribution of land to the landless farmers. He claims he would have accepted in good humor a "fair law" depriving him of much of his land and income.

But he denies feeling guilt because he inherited property from a self-made latifundista father who he considers to have been a great Cuban and a great father.

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Pepe de Holguín

One of the richest and most populated municipalities (counties) of Cuba is Holguín in central Oriente Province, with some 240,000 persons and about 6,500 fincas (farms and estates). It has four prosperous sugar centrales (mills) and nearly 200,000 head of cattle. In Holguín the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) has some of its largest holdings and is engaged in large-scale irrigation projects. In the chief city of the county (Holguín, formerly Ciudad de San Isidoro de Holguín) there are several factories of national consequence (candies, soap, cigars, mosaics, etc.) and the usual numerous retail stores of the seat of a fertile farming county.

Cuba's busy Central Highway passes near the city of Holguín where it lined with gasoline service stations, garages, industrial buildings and an attractive roadside restaurant. It is about the proprietor of this day and night restaurant and his friends in Holguín that I write, about Pepe of Holguín. For his experiences, his views, and his attitudes may help to explain revolutionary Cuba. First, however, Pepe needs to be explained because although he is thoroughly Cuban, he is not from Oriente but from Havana and Connecticut, a man of parts and, even for a Cuban, an extremist in his fondness for baseball. In appearance he approaches the stereotype of a Mexican general (Hollywood version)--bull-chested, paunched, agile at 50, and with black eyes, strong hairy arms and hands, and a flashing pearl and golden smile.

Pepe is the owner of what in Cuban terms is a substantial business

and his friends are other businessmen and local officials. He has sired two families, broken by divorces, owns his own home, employs from six to 10 persons (depending on the season) and probably earns a monthly profit "in four figures." He is not a learned man, but he reads a great deal, mainly books. He can get along in English and he is a lazy conversationalist in Spanish.

For some 10 years Pepe worked in a Connecticut foundry, earning "up to 130 bucks a week." The work "was rough" but that isn't why Pepe came back to his native Cuba. It was "the immigration people" and seemingly a domestic crisis (his first wife remained in the United States and remarried) that sent Pepe and his capital back to Cuba about eight years ago, when he purchased the roadside restaurante in Oriente, "the best part of Cuba."

The Castro Revolution, which he said he strongly favored, did not affect Pepe much. Business, he reports, "is O.K. I can't complain. I could use more tourists, more motorists."

But with his 24-hour service, his excellent food and bar, dance floor, music, and separated outdoor thatch-covered patios, Pepe gets plenty of local trade from among the revolutionary elite and the businessmen of Holguín. Since his establishment never attracted the landowning wealthy of the county, not regularly at least, and since it has no overtones of depravity or luxury, it is "acceptable" to the revolutionaries, though to one of them recently Pepe himself was not.

"I have the habit of saying what I think," Pepe declared. "In the States you say what you think and no one cares. So I do it here. I tell people what I don't like and I tell them what I do like. When I don't like something, I yell like a bull.

"So it came the first of May and in the days before they came to me, these friends, and they said: 'Pepe, why don't you come to march with us on May Day.' And I said to them 'Amigos, on a holiday I am tired and glad for the rest.' And I said to them: 'I work here 20 hours nearly every day. When I am closed, which is not often, I want to stay home and read.'

"So they went away. Then I saw some of the other chicos who were going to the May Day parade and they called me a reactionary because I wasn't going and I told them: 'See here, you fellows. I know you. You went to the Batista meetings, too. You go to all the manifestations. You are aficionados of meetings. You just like to march and yell. And you don't work so much either, between the meetings.' That's what I told them because I have a habit of saying what I believe. And it was true, absolutely true. I saw those same people going to the Batista meetings. But they didn't like what I told them. They were mad, very mad, at me. So I said, 'So what, let them be mad. It is true what I told them.'

"Then came the guy from SIER (Servicio Inteligencia Ejercito Rebelde, the intelligence service of the army) and he told me: 'You come along with me. You have been making counterrevolutionary talk.'

"I looked at this guy and I said: 'Oh! You want to arrest me for what I have said.' And he said: 'You are dividing the people making this counter-revolutionary talk.' And I said: 'Pardon me, but I thought the Batista times had ended. I must be mistaken. I see I am mistaken because now no one can say what he believes without being arrested. So we are back in Batista times, I guess.'

"He got real red, this SIER guy. I knew all about him. He had been arresting people and they couldn't yell back. They were afraid. They belonged to the wrong class or something. But I can yell and I yelled and I telephoned the chief of the SIER in Holguín and right there in front of this guy I told him what he had said. And the chief came over and he said 'leave this man alone' and then he began to investigate, because I told him about the innocent people this guy had put in jail, and they were released and this guy was kicked out and I mean kicked out and into jail himself.

"So you see, señor, we are not in Batista times because that never would have happened under Batista, you would just stay in jail and the crazy police they would beat you. Not now. They put this guy in jail where he belongs for arresting innocent people and for telling me I had to go to jail because I said what I think. Is it not better now? Of course.

"Oh, I know these agents, these people who want to make you agree with them or else. I know the Communists because I lived with them for three years. I learned all their songs. But they never convinced me. Not Pepe."

The dictatorship of President Gerardo Machado placed Pepe de Holquín in jail for the first and last time, and there he met the Communists. "I was just 15 years old and they couldn't try me because of my age. So they held me for three years in Principe Prison in Havana 'at the disposition of the President' as they said. That was in 1925 and when I got out I went to the States.

"I was a revolutionary at 15 and they gave me a bag filled with grenades to take to Havana from Miramar (a suburb) and I was walking across the bridge to Havana when they grabbed me. They were waiting. Someone had squealed.

"I fought them. I was young and I had a gun and I shot some of them, wounded them, and they shot me in the leg, and I went to the prison. The place was filled with Communists and they taught me all their songs, the Internationale and the others, and told me all about Russia and Marx, but I

said to them: 'You are good chicos but I am not going to become a Communist.' And I didn't. And when they released me I went to Miami and then to New York and then to Connecticut where I worked in the same foundry for 10 years until I came back to Cuba, and after a while I came here to Oriente and went into business.

"I have a friend here in Holguín who owns a chain of coffee stands and he complains about the revolution. 'They are ruining me,' he says. So I had a talk with him and we sat down and went over his figures. The workers, the girls he employs, they want a raise to 80 pesos a month and then he would make maybe 2,000 pesos a month instead of 3,000. Is that so bad?"

Pepe said he tried to convince his businessman friend to co-operate with his workers, to make a little less, to pay his taxes. "But he just shakes his head and says 'who can do business these days. They will take everything.' He is wrong but what can you do?"

Many of Pepe's businessmen friends call all the revolutionaries Communists and insist they are trying to nationalize every business. "I tell them: 'Don't you think I would know a Communist when I see one! These people aren't Communists.' Oh, maybe one or two. Maybe that guy from the SIER who tried to arrest me. And maybe not. He might have been trying to look good, to show his chief how many 'counterrevolutionaries' he could put in jail. That can happen in any country."

It is Pepe's opinion, so he said, that Cuba had to have this revolution and that it is doing much more good than harm. "They talk about United States' intervention. Well, didn't the American Ambassador tell Machado what to do? And Batista too? Sure there has been American intervention. Everybody in Cuba knows it.

"Americans are good people and don't want to steal anything from Cuba. I know that. But Americans here in Cuba, what about them? They didn't treat us like equals. I know that too. What do we want now? Dignity. To be treated like a free and equal country. Why not?"

Lynn Gleam