

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project. "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century."
Gilberto Hernandez (**GH**) interviewed by John Soltis (**I**), May 26, 1998.

I We're doing Voices of the 20th Century and we're interviewing Gilberto Hernandez. Gil could you tell us when and where you were born?

GH I was born in a small town named Comarillo in Puerto Rico on May 9, 1934.
In 1934, and how many were in your family?

GH Three brothers.

I Three brothers.

GH I'm the oldest one.

I Okay, and could you tell us a little bit about what it was like in Puerto Rico when you were there?

GH Well, like I said it was a small town we didn't have many activities to you know, that we could go to, mostly we just, we use to play just baseball you know that was the sport that we use to play there.

I What did your parents do for a living, your father, maybe your mother?

GH They would just work in the factory, my mother use to work, use to work in a tobacco, you know just work in tobacco shipping the tobacco it was shipping for, for.....

I Oh, for export?

GH For export to, to make cigarettes and whatever.

I Uh huh and ...

GH My father was a policeman, they're both dead, you know, they passed away both of them.

I Okay and how old were you when you left Puerto Rico?

GH I was 17 almost 18, 17 years old when I left Puerto Rico and came directly here to Bridgeport.

I You came right to Bridgeport?

GH Yes.

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I Why Bridgeport?

GH Well, I had relatives in Bridgeport you know my cousin was here in Bridgeport and I decided to come to Bridgeport and try to make a better living.

I Did you have a job waiting for you?

GH No I didn't, I just came because he told me there was, in Bridgeport at that particular time they were looking for people you know for jobs, but I had problems getting a job because of being so, so young you know.

I Okay, this was what like the early 50's?

GH 1951 when I came here..

I And did you just come or did your family also come?

GH No, I came first, I was the first one to come then after I settled myself and got a job then I brought my family over.

I Okay, when you first came to Bridgeport whereabouts did you live?

GH I use to live, when I first came to Bridgeport I lived on Gilbert Street.

I Gilbert Street.

GH (laughter) A short street on downtown and then from there we moved to, oh my God, what's the name of that street, Courtland Avenue.

I Oh, Courtland Avenue?

GH Courtland Street, I think, no, Courtland Street, you know, where the telephone company is?

I Yeah, yeah.

GH By the Post, I think it was Courtland Street and then we moved over there and then after I got married then we, that was the...moved to a few other places, yeah.

I And what was the first job you got when you did get, finally find work here?

GH I started working, there was a place in, like Cilco, you know, Water..on Seaview Avenue the old City Lumber Company.

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I Oh, okay sure.

GH And they had a shop over there where they used to make boxes, wood boxes for bullets for the Remington..

I Oh, for Remington Arms?

GH For Remington Arms, and that was my first job when I started doing that you know working in the shop there.

I And how did you get that job?

GH Well, I knew a couple of people that just, I met people and there was, I met a guy who told me that they were looking for people there, I went over, I was looking, I was lucky enough that they hired me, because I couldn't get a job no place else because my babyface I had (both men chuckle).

I That's right you were only what 17?

GH Yeah, I was, by then I was 18, yeah.

I And what did you do there did you make the boxes...

GH Yeah, we use to, they have this nailing machine you know and I use to operate one of them, where you kick and the whole thing came down and I don't know how many nails, you know, I don't...

I Oh, put the box together?

GH Yeah, and put it together you have, they came in pieces you know you just put it together hit, the machine came down with all the nails and nail about 25 nails at a time (chuckle).

I Make a lot boxes

GH Oh yeah, we use to do a lot of them, yes.

I And how big a shop was this about how many people worked there?

GH Oh we had about 20, 20 or 25 people working in there.

I And what was the pay like you know not just your pay, but what'd the average guy make there?

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GH I think we were getting \$1.25 an hour.

I \$1.25 and what, in a 40 hour week or...

GH Yeah, for a 40 hour week yeah

I Were there benefits, vacations, holidays, sick time things like that?

GH We didn't have those benefits back then.

I No? No union?

GH Then we organize, when we got a Union at the, and because most of the people working there were Latinos, you know, I was the only one who speak a little English, they elected me the steward, union steward

I Oh really?

GH I didn't know anything about unions or anything like that I said, "Why me?" Because I could communicate, you know, with the, with management so they elected me the union steward that.... (chuckle)

I Oh really, and how long would you work in this place?

GH I...think... work about, I think about two years over there, yeah

I Okay so the union came in while you were there?

GH Oh yes, they did...yeah and like I said, yeah...they came...

I Did things change?

GH Well, what happen is that they closed the shop, they closed the shop and we have to go look for another job (laughter).

I Yeah, that'll happen...okay, so where did you go from there?

GH From there I think I went to work on a little shop over on River Street that use to do handbags for ladies, you know and belts, you know

I Yeah

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GH ...and I work there for 75 cents an hour, less money than I was making at the other shop, so I work there for a little while. Then my brother was working in Avco Lycoming and he recommended me, you know, to try to get a job over there making more money of course so that's when I went to work in Avco.

I Sure.

GH And I work over there for 14 and a half years.

I That was like, --what '53?

GH '56, '56 and I work, yeah.

I Okay and, what were your duties there when you first started, you know what kind of job was it?

GH They trained me to be a machinist so I was what they call an internal grinder and that's the work I did in Avco for those...

I For 14 and a half..

GH But of course then, because I don't know why but I was also elected as union steward in Avco you know.....

I Well, they heard about you (laughter)...

GH ...a little experience, but the reason I was elected in City Lumber is because most of them didn't speak the language but over there they're all Americans you know but they heard that I had a little experience as a union steward for about 5 years and then from there I became a committee man.

I And this was for the UAW

GH And then, and then, UAW local 1010 yeah, right and then

I Yeah

GH I became a committee man, a member of the negotiating committee, and I was one of the members of the negotiating when we were summoned to Washington by President Johnson because we were ready to go on strike and that's when we had the conflict, you know....

I Oh, this was during the Vietnam...

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GH Vietnam and then I was summoned to Washington and we negotiated the contract at the Secretary of Labor's office you know, so that was something I will never forget about.

I Yeah, I guess that would be quite an experience, during this time now you were living here in what, whereabouts on the East Side?

GH Um hm, I was living in, yeah, on the East Side, Kossuth Street and then we bought this house, that was 38 years ago, I've been living here for 38 years.

I Okay and this is...Hough Avenue?

GH Hough Avenue right on the East Side also, yes....

I Okay tell us a little about Bridgeport during this time, late j50's early 60's yeah what was the neighborhood like?

GH Everywhere, everywhere was, you know you could walk at night, any hours midnight you just walk, I use to walk from, when I work in Avco - first started, I use to my Aunt use to take care of my daughter you know Father Panik Village, I use to come in Father Panik Village 12 o'clock at night you know, when we use to go dancing with my wife whenever she use to take care of my daughter I use to walk, downtown that's when we were living on the other side of town, this city was beautiful we use to sleep we didn't have money for an air conditioner we use to sleep with doors open, the windows open. So this was a beautiful city so, way back you know in the 50's.

I You mentioned you use to go dancing, where'd you use to go dancing?

GH Oh we use to go dancing they had a place, State Street they use to call it the Bayamon Social Club.

I Could you...

GH Bayamon Social Club, you know....

I Bayamon like the town in Puerto Rico, could you...

GH Bayamon the town in Puerto Rico and they had another one over by the Rivoli Theater on upstairs I forgot the name of that place, right on Fairfield Avenue

I Oh okay...

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GH ...by the Rivoli...

I Ballroom, no forget it.

GH I forgot the name of it, but there was a place there we use to go there dancing we used to go to a few places, often we use to go to New York you now Palladium in New York...

I Oh, okay...

GH We use to go dancing most of, and when we're young, we still go out and do a little dancing, my wife had a heart operation so now we slow down (chuckle).

I Oh well we're all slowing down a little bit (chuckle). Besides dancing what else was there to do in the area, a lot of movies or....

GH Yeah, just go to the movies, go dancing and that, and of course weekends we use to go, summer times we use to go to the beach and just enjoy, you know...

I Seaside Park or Beardsley?

GH Mostly Seaside Park, yeah.

I And what was the ethnic makeup of the East Side at that time, ethnic and racial makeup

GH No, we don't, back in the 50's we didn't have that many Latinos on the East Side

I Okay

GH Most of them were on the West Side.

I Oh, okay

GH You know like, Bostwick Avenue, that's where they started the Latino community then it moved, when they torn down that section for rehabilitation the Latino community moved down to State Street, Lafayette Street you know that area over there.

I Okay

GH And then the bulldozer came again and everything went down and then they moved, just kept on coming down this way you know from Bostwick to State, State and Lafayette down to the East Side.

I Was a lot of that due to putting in I95 and that kind of thing?

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GH Yes, yes, that's 95 I think was in '57 something like that, yeah

I Right, so is the highway another...

GH Another projects....

I So that's how a large Latino community wound up on the East Side?

GH Wind up on the East Side, Bridgeport, yeah.

I I didn't know that.

GH Yeah...

I Okay, let's get back to Avco now, okay so you're a committee man at Avco and you're a machinist?

GH Yeah right, I was a machinist I went to a training program in Avco, yes and became a machinist but because of the, when I became a committee man I really didn't do much work to be honest with you because the stewards were always calling...me they had problems and also always in union business most of the time, you know...

I Yeah, there were a lot of, I talk to another gentlemen who's telling me there were a lot of wildcat strikes and that sort of thing.

GH Oh yes, oh yes, we always had labor problems then.

I And what was the pay like then the average worker, let's say in the early 60's at Avco

GH Well, in Avco was a good buck, you used to make good money that's how we bought this house as soon as I start working over there I saved a few bucks and I bought this house.

I Yeah well, what would a good buck be considered back then?

GH Oh gee, I don't remember, you know why, John? Because we used to work 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, so I don't even know what how much I was getting paid by the hour. It was, we was paid work 12 hours, 7 day a week.

I So there was lots of time and a half and that...

GH Pay you 7 days a week, you know, we used to make money, yeah.

I Yeah, and I assume there were benefits, vacation...

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GH Oh yes, we had benefits and everything then, yeah.

I Okay, so you stayed there 'til, 14 years 'til what when was that?

GH I believe it was, '67 '68 that I left Avco to buy, that's when we bought the businesses, I bought a liquor store, and a bridal shop I was running a bridal shop with my wife right next to, right here on East Main Street, I had a bridal shop.

I Oh really!

GH Yeah, I had a bridal shop and the liquor store one next to the other and that's the reason I left Avco I didn't leave because of money, it was because I had the opportunity to get into business.

I Oh, okay so it wasn't a layoff or anything like that

GH No, no I left on my own.

I And how did that go, tell us about the businesses

GH Oh, we had a good business especially that bridal shop, you know, and of course the liquor store because a lot of people knew me you know and....

I Oh yeah.

GH But that bridal shop people use to come from Boston, New York from everywhere. We had a good business there. We had everything for a wedding, tuxedos, my wife is a seamstress so she used to make the gowns for the girls, tuxedo and then I had the liquor store you had one stop (laughter). You get everything there (laughter), yeah.

I And how long did you operate those businesses?

GH We operate those for about, oh quite a while, I don't know if it was 10 or 15 years. I don't remember, but we run it for quite a while, yeah and when I had the liquor store I use to also run a radio show you now on W....., the old WNAB I use to have a program there I run for 8 years..

I NAB

GH On Sundays from 6 to 12 we use to, we call it the 'La Voce Espanol de Bridgeport', the Spanish Voice of Bridgeport and I run that show for 8 years.

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I Yeah.

GH People used to love it, because we use to put good music and I had a good show there and then they sold the station

I That's right, yeah

GH That's when....

I Yeah...is now, is that Spanish language?

GH ...just on Sundays, right!

I Yeah, I mean the station itself was regular for predominantly English speaking

GH Yeah it was English, just that, those 6 hours on Sundays. That's the Spanish station now 1450AM

I Oh really, yeah, 1450 it's the same...

GH That's, that's was WNAB

I WNAB yeah I remember WNAB being 1450AM

GH 1450AM yeah, that's with the Cumbre

I Oh, so in a sense you were the forerunner to what's now the Spanish language radio station?

GH Yeah, but there was a couple of people that ran the show. The Spanish show before me there, you know but I guess I was the longest. You know, the guy would run it for a year or so and then when I took over I was there until they sold it, yeah.

I Okay, now somewhere along the line here, I happen there's some political activity comes up (both chuckle), just think about that a little bit.

GH Oh yes, I got involved in politics way back when Tedesco run..., that's when I first got involved.

I That's in the 50's

GH Yeah, right '57 something like that. And I did like politics and from then I started running primaries here on the East Side against, there was a powerful man here, the district leader over here. His name was Frank Scinto. He was powerful you know but I keep on running

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primaries against him and against the brothers Curcio. They were state rep before Fred, his brother, was a state rep...

I Oh, I didn't know that, before Freddie?

GH Yeah his brother who passed away and I run for primary keep running primary and then finally....

I Keep losing and then finally...

GH ...losing. Finally, I got the name recognition in the district and then I ran for Alderman in 1971 and I won --finally, won that after I got beat so many times (chuckle)

I Now these were Democratic primaries?

GH Democratic primaries, right. Yeah, and then finally in 1971 I was elected Alderman and I serve for the common council for ten years.

I 137th

GH 137 District yeah and of course after I got out of a, I was defeated of course...that's the first time that 137th went Republican in this city.

I I remember that.

GH They just want I got rid of, you know, who was in power and they were republican. They just went crazy! Republican's here in this District there never, never was want Republican, Republican and then after that then I ran for District Leader and I won, then I lost, and I'm back again. I'm the district leader for 137th District Democratic party. But I love politics. I like it, you know. It gives me something to do, you know, --so, you know. (chuckle)

I There you go. (chuckle) That was an interesting year in '81 though when the Republicans won.

GH Yeah, oh yeah, some of the people couldn't believe it they haven't seen one Republican, they did. I...while they sell for the common council, I, that was when Nick Panuccio was the mayor, that's when I first got elected when Nick Panuccio, Republican, but I was elected you know for the Common Council, we had ten Republicans and ten Democrats and '75 I was nominated for president of the common council by John Guman. John Guman was a member of the Common Council then hoping that we have a Latino on the other side, a Republican hoping that he would vote for me, I...would have been president for the common council but of course a lot of people talk to that guy you know, his name was Emilio Coriasco, you know, and then a lot of people talked to him, you know, could get our

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political parties, you know, lets talk about, you know, Latino. But they wouldn't go for it and that's how Bill Sears is the one who got elected president of the Common Council and Panuccio left right after that.

I And he...

GH And he became the mayor for 55 days, I could have been the mayor for 55 days if Coriaso had voted for me...

I (chuckle) ...but Bill Sears gets it

GH You're right, yes, yeah.

I And who knows a Democratic mayor at that time, things might...

GH Yeah...

I Yeah, who followed Panuzzio, was that Mandanici?

GH Mandanici, I served two terms under Panuzzio and three terms under Mandanici, right

I Yeah, so you might have been mayor instead of Mandanici.

GH (laughter) Yeah that be the comment you know. (laughter)

I Okay, any other stories about politics you'd like to share? Now what are some of the things that, some of the interesting things that happened, let's say, when you were on the Common Council, you know, you got to meet a lot of different mayors and...

GH Oh, yes, like I said I served under two different mayors a Republican and a Democrat and we have tough battles like the, when they tried the get the \$20 an hour for the policemen I voted against that, but then I was thinking whenever they saw my car in Bridgeport (laughter), but I voted against that I didn't think that 20 years for... was one of the main issues, one of the toughest issues when I was on the Common Council.

I Yeah, what year was that, do you recall?

GH That was under Panuccio, that was under Nick Panuccio I think it was just before he left, I think it was '74, I believe it was '74, that was a tough one to live with (chuckle).

I Then he left to go to Washington. Bill Sears takes over for two months or whatever...

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GH 55 days, yeah.

I And then John Mandanici comes in.

GH Yeah

I Heard a lot of stories about John Mandanici? What was it like to be an Alderman under Mandanici?

GH You know I, you know, John was, --he had a good heart.

I That's what I hear.

GH You know, he had a good heart. He talked tough, but really inside he's good. He got a good heart. He would help anyone that went to him, but he just acted tough and we have 'mucho' respect because I didn't back off. He used to talk tough too. Everybody thought everybody was gonna get scared. I never got scared. He never scared me and he used to say that: "I like him, because he doesn't back off," and when he believe in something, I would go and fight with him. We have good arguments in the back room, you know. Because when I believe in something that I thought it was right, that I was right, I argue until it was proven that it was wrong and I he... we used to get along, but he was, inside he was a good heart, a good guy, he helped a lot of people.

I That's what I keep hearing as the years go by, I keep hearing...

GH Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I Things like that and then after Mandanici it was Paoletta.

GH Lenny, yeah, yeah that's when Lenny came in yeah but I was already out of the council then.

I Yeah.

GH Yeah.

I Okay, anything more on politics that we can think of? Now during this time you were done with political things and you were running the liquor store and the bridal shoppe what happened after the bridal shop and the liquor store? As far as your working career?

GH I went every branch of City Trust Bank.

I The bank?

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GH Yeah, I worked for City Trust for about 5 years.

I And what was your position there?

GH I used to be a, what they call a floater, I used to go wherever they need me, if they needed as a teller I used to go and do teller, if the head teller was out, because they trained me, you know, if the manager was out on vacation I used to go and fill in for whatever position, I just float, I used to work any position and everywhere, I went to every branch of City, including Cos Cob over by New York, close ... so I used to work everywhere and that's when, my God, Tommy got it, I think.

I Tom Bucci?

GH Tom Bucci got elected and I knew Tom from before and he called, he had Maria Agosto you know who was one of his aides you know this assistant to the mayor whatever they want to call it, you know, but she fell and she got hurt and then he called me and he had wanted me to go and work for him, I said I got a good job with the bank but he made me an offer I couldn't turn down, (laughter), you know, and I said, "But I don't want this lady when she, what about when she comes back, you know and I don't want her to have bad feelings against me by then I'm taking over her job?" he said "don't worry about it when she comes back we, we'll take care of her." He said, "the reason I would like you to come in, that I'm offering you the job because you spent ten years on the Common Council and this is and you understand, you already know the ins and out of what's going on in this office you know, and you could help me with your experience." So I did. I went over and worked for Tom until he got beat by Mary Moran. (chuckle) That's when we both went out.

I That was in '87.

GH ...'89 I think it was '89 that's when believe or not I don't think that she never thought she was gonna win. You know why, John?

I Why?

GH Because after she won the election she asked us, who were in the mayor's office, for two weeks until she gets people to...

I ...fill the positions?

GH Fill the position, she wasn't ready to take over. She didn't believe she was gonna win. So I stayed there for two weeks working for her...

I For her...

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GH She asked whether I could stay and I said no, because she's a Republican you not gonna tell them no and leave her all by herself in the office you know, but that happened, you know.

I Yeah, yeah I imagine, though, before she decided to declare bankruptcy.

GH Yeah, well you know something that I didn't mention about politics, on his second term when Tommy won, when he came into the office, he called me into his office of course, I was in there, in the office and he wanted me to be the MC, that was the, I just couldn't believe it, I said how John, Tom? First off my English is broken English and with all the people that you know, all the lawyers, you know, you can get some help, he definitely wanted me to do it and I was the MC, Master of Ceremonies for his second term.

I Really!

GH I have it on tape, on the what do you call it, the uh...

I Tape recorder, the tape, the cassette.

GH The cassette! because they recorded it and then they made copies of the recording I have that, that's something.

I Sure is.

GH I was so you know, that's the biggest thing in life for me in politics, you know, when the mayor asked me to be the ...

I Now this is the MC for what the....

GH The inauguration.

I The inauguration, in City Hall?

GH The inauguration, second time that he was elected he said, oh yeah the Common Council chambers.

I Yeah when the place is full and everybody is, yeah, yeah,..

GH All the people in there I was the Master of Cermonies at that...That's something I could never forget.

I Okay on a slightly less upbeat note, now Mayor Moran takes over and your two weeks are over, where'd you go from there?

GH and I was, then I went and applied for a license for a bail bondsman and that's what I did for awhile until Joe Ganim

I'm still doing it from my hours, off- r regular hours from work and weekends I'm still doing bail bondsman business.

I How exactly does that business work, I mean you get a phone call and...

GH pick up the paper like last year, I think it was around November and you see the front page, this business is so you , I'm very careful I don't go out and bail, I would say about 75% of me to guarantee that that person I'm going to bail out is going to be responsible to it, you know, they could bury you, you know.

I Yeah, because you're totally, if they fail to appear you're totally responsible for the..

GH I'm responsible for the full amount, so I pay you off for five, let's say you got a \$5,000 dollar bond I go and bail you out for 10%, we get 10% \$500 but if you take off I l \$5,000 so you know it's a risky business.

I

I work you know on his campaign, I did work very hard through his campaign and when he lic Works and that's what I did ever since.

I

My title is Office Manager of Public Works, you know, but I do a lot of things, I also go in

Uh huh.

GH And they use to go in the parking lots. So I'm in charge of that, I do work in the office I go, I got four guys in charge, that work part time so the parking, I do quite a few things. I work

I'm plans running for public office again?

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GH No, I don't think so, no because of my wife's condition, she just got out of open heart operation, so I don't think so, no, I been asked to run for state rep, I been asked to run for this and that but not because the condition of my wife, yeah.

I Yes, family has to come first.

GH Oh, definitely. Yeah, definitely.

I Leave that stuff for the young guys, I'm sure there's people out there who want it (chuckle).

GH Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I There always are, okay we're almost done but before we finish as I said before, this tape is going to be in the library if, forever hopefully, is there anything you'd like to say you know for posterity or anything at all?

GH Yeah, I just want to, especially grandchildren, because my kids are all grown up already, they're over 35, the youngest one is 36.

I I forgot to ask you, how many kids do you have?

GH Well, I have three, two daughters and a boy, yeah, and the youngest is 36 so, you know, for my grandchildren, I hope that you know they follow my steps --not in politics, but I have lived all my life and haven't any problem. And I try to live a life where they could be proud of -- and I hope that they could -- they don't deviate and do the wrong things. I hope they live the kind of life that I live in Bridgeport.

I Okay, thank you Gil.

END OF INTERVIEW