

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.

Transcript

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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 used to play just baseball you know that was the sport that we used 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 used 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.

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 different...we moved to fewer 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 [harbor terminal], you know, on the Water, on Seaview Avenue, the old City Lumber Company.

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?

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 organized, when we got a Union and because most of the people working there were Latinos, you know, I was the only one who speaks 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 happened is that they closed the shop, they closed the shop and we had 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 used to do handbags for ladies, you know and belts, you know

I Yeah

GH ...and I worked there for 75 cents an hour, less money than I was making at the other shop, so I worked 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 worked over there for 14 and a half years.

I That was like, --what '53?

GH '56, '56 and I worked, 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...

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.¹

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?

¹ See interview with AVCO UAW Union President David Kelly, Part 2

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

I Okay tell us a little about Bridgeport during this time, late 50'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 used to walk from, when I worked in Avco - first started, I used to -- my Aunt used to take care of my daughter, you know, Father Panik Village, I used 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 used 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 used 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...

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 I-95 and that kind of thing?

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

I Right, so is the highway another...

GH And other projects....

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

GH Wound 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 into 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, I was, they paid you to work 12 hours, 7 day a week.

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

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

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

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, I was making 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 operated 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 used 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 used to, we call it the 'La Voce Español de Bridgeport', the Spanish Voice of Bridgeport and I run that show for 8 years.

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 that, that was Spanish language?

GH ...just on Sundays, right!

I Yeah, I mean the station itself was regularly 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 speak about that a little bit.

GH Oh yes, I got involved in politics way back when Tedesco² 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 primaries against him and against the brothers, the Curcios. They were state rep sbefore 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 served for the Common Council for ten years.

I 137th

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

² Samuel J. Tedesco (February 21, 1915 – August 5, 2003) Tedesco succeeded Jasper McLevy as Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1957. The 76th Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut from 1963 to 1966.

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! Republicans here in this District -- there never, never was one 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...what I saw from the Common Council, I was nominated for -- that was when Nick Panuzio [Nicholas A. Panuzio, Mayor, 1971-1975, Republican] was the mayor, that's when I first got elected when Nick Panuzio, Republican, -- but I was elected, you know, for the Common Council. We had ten Republicans and ten Democrats and in '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 talked 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 political parties, you know,-- lets talk about, you know, Latino. But they wouldn't go for it and that's how Bill Seres [William Seres, Mayor, 1975] is the one who got elected President of the Common Council and Panuzio 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 Coriasco had voted for me...

I (chuckle) ...but Bill Seres 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 Panuzio, was that Mandanici?³

GH Mandanici, I served two terms under Panuzio 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)

³ John C. Mandanici, 1918-1986. Mayor of Bridgeport, 1975-1981.

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 to 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 Panuzio, that was under Nick Panuzio 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...

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 believed in something, I would go and fight with him. We have good arguments in the back room, you know. Because when I believed in something that I thought was right, that I was right, I argued until it was proven that it was wrong and I ... 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 doing the political things and you were running the liquor store and the bridal shop what happened after the bridal shop and the liquor store? As far as your working career?

GH I went and worked for City Trust Bank.

I The bank?

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 [Mayor of Bridgeport, 1985-1989]?

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 beaten 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...

GH She asked me and what are you gonna say? because she's a Republican you're 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 Ceremonies 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 I just went out and I collect (chuckle) I went and collected 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 was elected and he called and offer me a job, but I was doing bail bondsman for a while. I'm still doing it from my hours, off-hours after 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 Yeah, most of the people call, but it's a very risky business, you know, too risky. When you pick up the paper like last year, I think it was around November and you see the front page, 65,000 in Connecticut out there on failure to appear, 65,000 in Connecticut that's how risky this business is so you , I'm very careful I don't go out and bail, I would say about 75% of the calls I get I turn them down unless I know the person or the person is going to sign for 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 lose \$5,000 so you know it's a risky business.

I (chuckle) It's very careful. Okay, so when Joe Ganim was elected mayor.

GH I worked, you know, on his campaign, I did worked very hard through his campaign and when he was elected he offered me a position at Public Works and that's what I did ever since.

I Okay, what exactly, what's your title?

GH My title is Office Manager of Public Works, you know, but I do a lot of things, I also go in the parking lot, the old, you remember the old Parking Authority?

I Uh-huh.

GH And they used 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 for my money, let's put it that way, (laughter).

I I'm sure you do, this probably isn't a fair question, so you don't have to answer it but any plans running for public office again?

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, there always are. (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 in my footsteps --not in politics, but I have lived all my life and haven't had any problems. 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