
THE END OF THE COFFEE MILL ERA IN KEY WEST

by

Gabriel Gutierrez

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Mr. Gutierrez owned one of the last Coffee Mills to operate in Key West, known as the Triumph Coffee Mill. The coffee was packed in brown bags with a label showing an arm of strength.

Mr. Gutierrez is 78 years old and came to Key West when he was 10 years of age and has been here ever since; he was born in Tampa.

"I started in the coffee mill when I was about 18 yrs. old. Sam Ketchum owned the coffee mill first, then he sold it to Howard Sawyer's brother-in-law. After Howard's death, a fellow who I worked closely with in the Mill and myself decided to buy it, and eventually I became the sole owner.

"The roasting and blending of the coffee is a very delicate process. As time went on there were so many types of blends. We'd get it in sacks of 130 and 135 lbs, from various sources and then we'd have to process it into the various blends. We used to have a roller that we'd use on Brazilian coffee, Puerto Rico coffee, African coffee, Cuban coffee, etc.; with each one, we'd have to process into several blends.

"I remember when we'd deliver the coffee with a horse and wagon; we'd deliver to the restaurants, hospital, grocery stores. The Cuban coffee is different from the American because it's much darker; it's that way because of the longer roasting—that's the way the Cubans like it so we had to do it that way. But before it's roasted, it's basically the same as coffee from

other countries.

"We'd roast the coffee with charcoal; after other methods came about, we continued with the charcoal because people seemed to like it that way. I think it tastes better anyway. Our coffee was bagged in a white bag and a brown bag. The white bag represented a better blend of coffee and was more expensive; it was labeled with a AA grade; the brown bag--A grade. We used to sell about 2000 lbs. a week.

"There were times in my experience with the coffee mill when we'd sell coffee for 20¢ a pound. Right now, you have to pay 80¢ a pound for green coffee--before it's roasted--so this had made the coffee price jump way up.

"Our relations with Castro has affected the coffee industry in some ways. It brought many Cubans into Miami who started up there in the coffee business and this did affect my business here. But, the transportation down here and other problems of this country affected me more, so that's why I decided to give it up.

"The Cubans spell their coffee, C A F E. A Cuban word for each letter carries a meaning in the order of drinking it."

C. aliente. Hot

A. mando.. Wet

F. uertes. Strong

E. se aso.... Little bit.

Interview was conducted by Amelia ^{Cabot} ~~Cabe~~.