Havana Province, 1977

Conversations with Cubans

BY CONN NUGENT

HAVANA is an amiable place with little evidence of squalor or inequity. People seem warm and animated.

The city is rundown and a little seedy. Most of the buildings could use a paint job. Many need repairs for shaky staircases and balconies that threaten pedestrians. You often see wooden buttresses clamped between buildings on opposite sides of the street, stiffening their spines. There are a lot of cockroaches and a good deal of litter, although nothing in the class of New York.

To a degree, this is intentional. The government wants to discourage migration to Havana and to make the countryside more attractive. So most public works occur on other parts of the island. Housing projects for the city are erected on its outskirts, in unfinished new towns that have welled up by the shore. My wife Linda and I are restricted to the Province of Havana (about the size of Rhode Island), but even within those bounds the rural emphasis is apparent.

Still, Havana is dilapidated but not sad, and its shabbiness has charm. The colonial architecture is admirable, the houses come in pleasant, irregular pastels, and there's a lot of life in the streets. The very fact that the government chooses to make showcases of other people in other locations lends a taste of anarchy and candor.

The cars are endearing, if you like cars. When the United States imposed its economic blockade in early 1961, automobiles (and lots of other things) became hard to come by. So Havaneros, through skill and perseverance, have kept alive a dwindling fleet of American has-beens. Ghosts sputter by: DeSotos, Packards, Hudsons.

It's hard to walk down a street in Havana without one of these old turtles straddling the sidewalk, hood up, while somebody tinkers with the insides. My first day in town begins with two men fixing a 1951 Henry J. We talk a little car talk. I ask them to suggest a good starting point for a walking tour of the neighborhood. At my first stop I meet Elena.

Elena helps run a soda fountain, but since there's no soda pop left she's taking a break at one of the open-air bars that dot Havana Centro. She says that the beer at the tourist hotels is much stronger than the stuff we're drinking, so you have to take a lot "to feel really good." She orders me another round. A fellow with a clipboard and badge then comes in and asks for a beer. Sorry, says the bartender, we just ran out. There are smiles all around as the man with the clipboard drums his fingers for a moment, then turns and walks away. He is "just some functionary," they say, and they seem to enjoy his discomfort.

Elena says she doesn't think much about politics. She doesn't care for "all those people with their little pieces of paper," and she asks me again and again to tell her about "some of the things you have in the United States." But, she says, life is good. Her husband is a fine man (she squeezes his arm), she has all her friends (gestures towards the rest of the customers), and her heart is here in Havana. She wants to know about my family, the kind of house we have, how other Americans live, what kind of beer we drink. She wants to know what Americans think of Cuba. I tell her that most Americans have no fight with Cuba and would like to meet more Cubans.

"That's right," she says, "forget about the politics! The Cuban people are good, and so are the Americans. Let's be friends!"

Everyone nods.

One of the advantages of American hostility to Castro was that it allowed Cubans to develop international points of reference. The economic blockade countered our natural ties of geography and culture. And yet, for a stylish Havanero, American taste still rules. A government station plays rock 'n roll every night at six. Cuban mills produce blue jeans and bright polyester dresses and even polka-dot tennis shoes. People still complain. Not enough goods, of course, but also not enough "things of quality, like you have in the United States." I am a real disappointment in baggy chinos and bland short-sleeves. Only my Adidas shoes — blue stripes on bright yellow mesh — evoke any approval.

I ask a woman on a bus if there is lingering resentment of a country that controlled her economy, invaded her territory, and tried to kill her Prime Minister.

"Yes, but that is all politics, and all in the past." She is quiet for a while, and her gaze settles on the shoreline near Alamar. "But I'll tell you something. I remember in 1962, in October, the morning I woke up and looked off at the ocean here. For as far as you could see, there were ships of the United States Navy. Oh my, that was something."

CECILIA is an undeviating Revolutionary and an aspiring Party member. She sits on the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, and is a member of both the Communist Youth and the National Federation of Women.

She also embodies some of the best characteristics of the Cuban people. She is generous, friendly, unaffected, talkative, proud, good-looking and funny. She has invited us to her place for some conversation.

In July, 1977, the author discovered the easiest route to Cuba for North Americans — an outfit called Treasure Tours in Montreal — and hastily took advantage to pursue his interest in Catholic cultures. Conn is Irish, born in Ireland in 1945, reared in New York, lives in Boston, with a couple of degrees from Harvard (History and Law). He did two years in Costa Rica as a Peace Corps Volunteer and now is the director of two private foundations in Boston — "One half of the money goes to inner city social services, because St. Francis said to do it, and the other half to the productive use of renewable resources."

—SB

At Habana Este, left to right, Cecilia's mother, Cecilia, Linda Baker, Inez, and Ronaldo. The boys: Alfredo, Ramon and Enrique. Photographs by Conn Nugent.

When she speaks, her hands fly in all directions. They cross her breast to convey sincerity and conviction; they touch your arm for understanding. They flutter about her face, describe circles in the air, turn up in supplication. Cecilia is a dynamo, and very winning.

She has a great love for children. She is delighted with Linda's pregnancy, and offers lots of tips on childrearing, most of them throwaway jokes. Her own two boys are in the room. Ramon is dressed like a Viking in preparation for tonight's carnival. He lumbers around the apartment in his horned helmet, stopping now and then to show off something he learned in school. His brother Enrique clings to Cecilia and gets great smacking kisses in return. She imparts a deep taste for life.

So it seems strange to hear her politics, all straight from a catechism. There can be no socialism without a unitary party of the vanguard. The Party, by its nature, represents the people. Leonid Breshnev is a great leader in the quest for peace. China is deviationist. The American working class lives in poverty and debasement. Soviet troops rescued Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1968. The Cuban press is the voice of the people. All policy announcements — even those by Fidel — represent the collective and scientific wisdom of the Central Committee.

Cecilia works at the National Psychiatric Hospital, of which she is proud. She shows us some photographs of the grotesque Batista-era facilities. She then shows photos of the new institution, a modern complex where, she says, the residents do productive work under the care of a large staff. Later in the week, we pass by the hospital and look in. As promised, it looks very fine and the residents seem well cared for.

Who can doubt her sincerity? Cecilia works at an interesting job in a benign environment. Her children are receiving what appears to be a solid education, and they are healthy and happy. She and the family live in a clean, airy apartment, well maintained. There is enough to eat.

And yet something of Cecilia comes from beyond the dialectic. "Don't think I don't know you North Americans. I know about the United States. My father abandoned my mother and me in 1967. He lives near Detroit. He has never known his grandchildren."

"Do you ever want to see him again?"

"No, never."

I ASK Ronaldo, another strong Revolutionary, what he thinks of those who left.

"Well, you know, many of those people were large landowners *(latifundistas)* or very rich businessmen from Havana."

"Sure, but there couldn't have been 800,000 *latifundistas* and rich businessmen."

"Well, that's right. I come from a poor family and my brother now lives in Miami. He was brought up in the old ways and he wanted many things. I am a younger man." He shrugs. "Listen, even Fidel's sister left. It's a hard thing."

THE ACHIEVEMENTS of the Cuban Revolution have been catalogued many times, but some bear reiteration. Illiteracy has been virtually eliminated. Free medical care is available in all parts of the island. There is something close to full employment. Women enjoy the same legal rights as men. There are many new public facilities.

And food is sufficient, although by no means plentiful. Any person who has walked the streets of the Third World can probably recognize the cry of a child who is starving. It is a high, agonized wail, generically different from the cry of a child not getting its way. I never hear that cry of starvation in Havana Province, and never see anyone who looks malnourished.

Perhaps the most arresting feature of Cuban society is the racial harmony. It goes beyond anti-discrimination, for there appears to be no impetus to discriminate; people seem to get along (or not get along) without reference to color. Linda attributes this to interracial marriage, and it's true that Cubans come in all shades. But inter-marriage prevails throughout almost all of Latin America and, in fact, I am surprised

at the large numbers of people who are of unmixed blood. They live and work together with no apparent tension or effort. Even the sturdiest anti-government prople admit that this is the case. It is a wonderful thing.

We spend a day at the beach town of Santa Maria del Mar, once a private enclave, now a public resort. Here Cuban integration is palpable. Blacks and whites don't just share the beach (something we can't pull off in Boston). They mingle unself-consciously, cluster in mixed groups. I play volleyball with a white Cuban, a brown Cuban, two black Cubans, and a gym instructor from Quebec. We declare the game a tie, and trundle off for some ice cream.

I meet Adolfo on line at the ice cream parlor. First you queue up for the cashier. Then you give the cashier your order and pay for it. The cashier hands you scrip which you turn in to the counter attendant after you get through a second line. Adolfo and I both want milk shakes, receive little tickets marked "milk shake," and finally reach the appropriate counter, where they tell us there isn't any milk left. So we go back and re-do the whole process, this time with little tickets that say "ice cream."

Fellow victims, we silently wolf our orders. Adolfo leans back, pats his stomach, and asks me what I think of Carlos Santana, the American guitarist. This is home ground, so I sing the first few bars of "Oye, Como Va." Adolfo hoots, then sings the whole stanza. Then we both sing "Black Magic Woman" and "Evil Ways."

We take a long walk through Santa Maria, and Adolfo tells me about himself and Cuba. He was a sailor, he says, on a fishing boat that the Coast Guard boarded and towed to Miami. The incident was a cause celebre in the Cuban press, an example of Yankee high-handedness. Adolfo liked Miami. "I have eyes. I saw a beautiful rich city." I tell him I prefer Havana to Miami. "That's life," he says.

Adolfo is a hedonist and his "bad attitude" has cost him his seaman's permit. That's all right, he says, if you look at things in the long view.

"There will always be this planet, you see, waves on beaches. I die but I do not die. Do you understand?"

In the short run, though, Adolfo has a lot of complaints. He describes himself as apolitical, and says he appreciates the advances in health, education, and race relations. But he chafes under the current regime. "The police, man, what a bunch of fuckers! You can be standing in the door of your house without a shirt on and the police will yell at you to put on a shirt. If you don't, off to jail. I swear this to you. If you aren't carrying your identification card, off to jail! A friend of mine — a Catholic — was stopped by a policeman one day, and the bastard grabbed the crucifix around my friend's neck and ripped it off. Just ripped it off and threw it in the street!"

I say that black Americans report the same kind of abuse in Roxbury. But it's not just the police, he says, it's the whole system. If you're not a Communist, forget it. Communists drive the new cars, Communists get the new houses, Communists get the travel visas.

I tell Adolfo about Cecilia and her fervor for the Party and the Revolution. I ask him what percentage of the population feels the way she does. With slow disdain he holds up one finger.

"Listen," he says, "you must understand this. Communism is a religion, it is the religion of our times. It sounds good, of course it does! But it is like other religions: it exists to serve its priesthood. And this woman you speak of wants to be a nun. Oh, yes.

"Now Fidel Castro is no administrator. He is a prophet. He tries to impress everyone with his statistics — and he is a very intelligent man — but really, he is a prophet of this new religion. I respect him, but it doesn't work."

Other odds and ends from Adolfo. Cuban bellbottoms fall apart. Young people in Havana smoke dope mostly on weekends, and mostly as a prelude to making love. The lifeguards on the beach are Party hopefuls required to report any incriminating conversations they overhear. Russians are boors.

These things are hard to verify. Two other assertions he makes are patent. One is that despite all the propaganda for a collectivist spirit Cubans prize their individualism and tend to their private appetites. The other is that Havaneros like not working much more than they like working.

CUBA is a near-full-employment, labor-intensive society. One side of this is that almost every adult does something of some utility and gets enough money for basic physical needs. Another side is that productivity is a little slack.

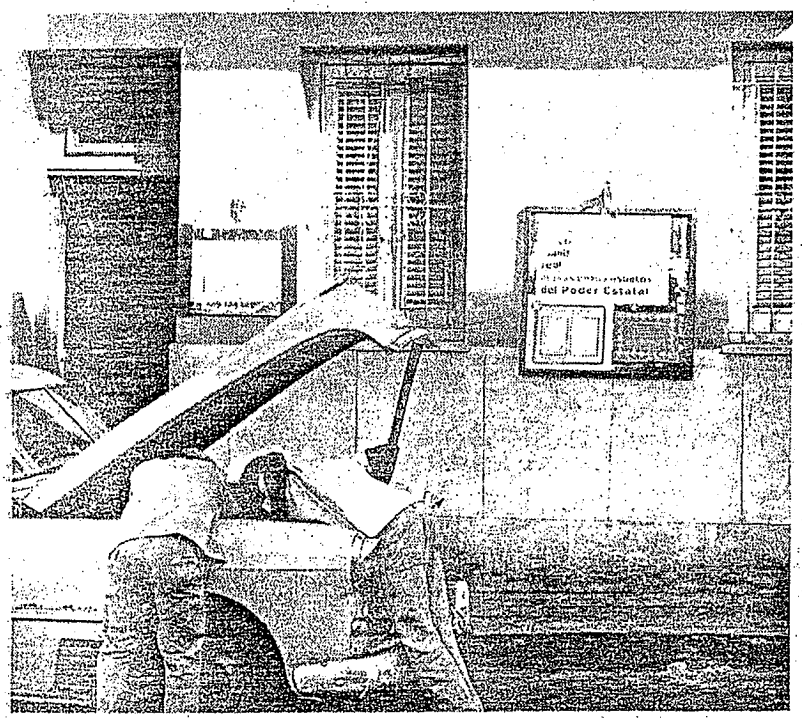
One man's job is to sit in a shack by the railroad tracks, way out in the country, and let motorists know when the train comes. The train comes by a few times a day, and the man strings hammocks for his family.

At the tourist hotel, an operator runs the automatic elevator. Food is served buffet style, but there are lots of waiters just in case. Men in olive coveralls rake pine needles from the ground beneath the trees, and very slowly.

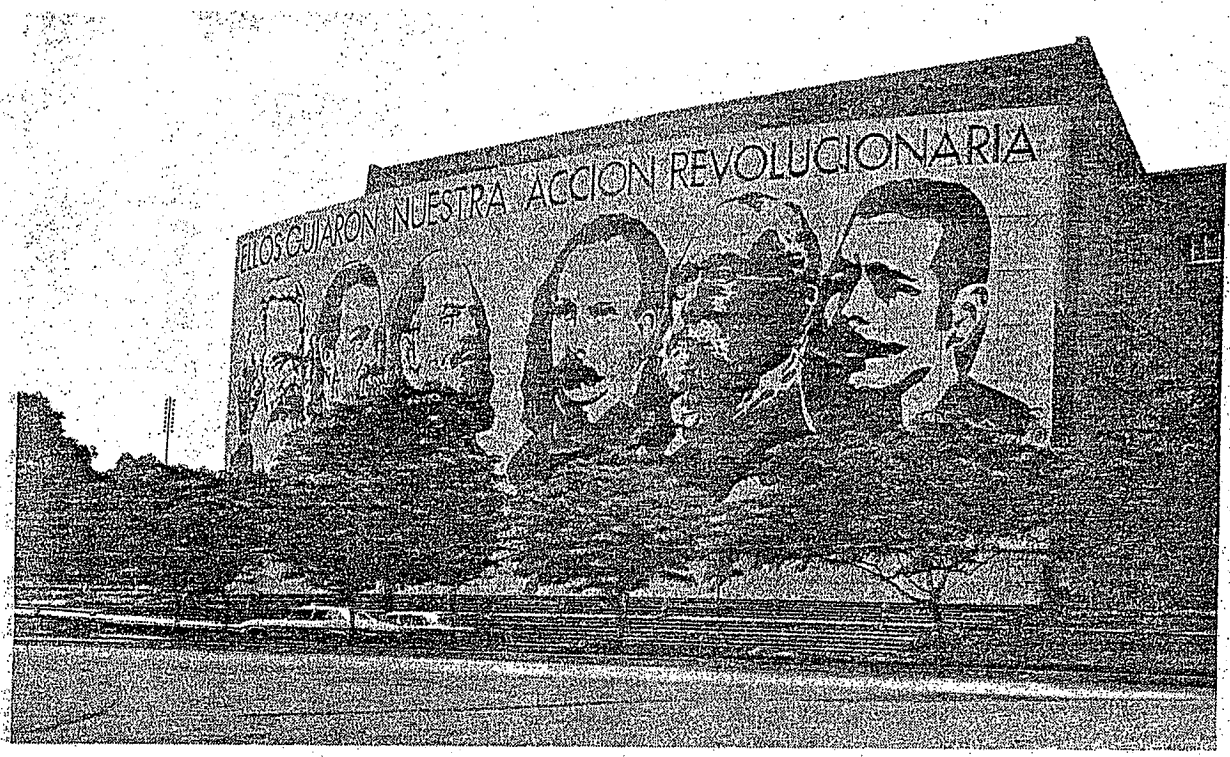
Service attendants at stores and bars and fountains tend to spend much time waiting for supplies. For every one man working on a street gang, there are three guys looking philosophical. Lots of people just seem to be hanging out. "*Como anda?*" they ask: "How goes it?". "*Bastante bien,*" they say: "Well enough."

Incentive is a problem, and the question of inducing labor bedevils the Cuban economy. You can tell by the billboards. Exhortations to work, work, work; cartoons of busy bees; slogans like "Let's cultivate up to the last inch of land!"

Money is an incentive, of course, but you can't buy all that much in Cuba. Food and clothing are rationed and other goods are in short supply. Another incentive is to work for the common good, to labor for a better



Two guys fixing their 1951 Henry J. and catchy propaganda: "The rendition of productivity records is one of the manifestations of the real participation of the masses in the exercise of state power."



The Plaza de la Revolucion. Left to right, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Marti, Gomez, Maceo. "They will guide our revolutionary action."

future. There is evidence of this — university students chopping cane, for instance — but on the whole, not much. Sugar production, despite all the ballyhoo, has barely equalled pre-Revolutionary levels.

A new incentive system aims to reward workers for both productivity and "good attitude." (You hear the phrase "good attitude" a lot, and it gives pause to someone who attended Irish Catholic schools.) If a given sector of the economy is doing well, its labor union *(sindicato)* may select certain workers and supervisors as especially deserving of material favors: a radio, TV, refrigerator. The criteria for the reward are work performance and revolutionary dedication. On a lower level, the work unit — roughly equivalent to one of our union locals — makes similar decisions as to who will be nominated for new housing.

The result is that in some places you get rewarded for working hard and keeping quiet. In other places you get rewarded for coddling the local Party representative and putting up pictures of the Prime Minister of Angola.

The system requires an ant-army of bureaucrats, with forms and quotas and "educational materials." They are widely regarded as tedious pains.

One day Linda needs a restroom in downtown Havana. The man behind the desk at Hotel X says to try Hotel Y. The woman behind the desk at Hotel Y says she will have to check with the boss; she returns a minute later with the Cuban equivalent of the-boss-is-away-from-his-desk-right-now. A sympathetic onlooker suggests we ask a maid instead. The maid cheerfully shows Linda a restroom. The onlooker says, "Never ask a functionary for anything."

At each taxi stand in the city there is a man or woman whose job is to "supervise" the drivers and to check out every fare. One of them sticks her head into our cab and scolds the driver for not signing in between three and four o'clock.

"Where were you, comrade?"

"I was here, comrade, right here!"

"That's not true! You were not here!"

"Comrade, I must go," says the driver, and pulls away from the curb.

She is right. He was lying. Between three and four he was out making a black market run for some guys who play in a jazz band.

OPPOSITION to the regime assumes many forms.

A young woman watches me walk past her park bench. She calls me over. "Give me a peso," she says. I refuse. She notices the hotel stationery sticking out of my pocket. "If you're staying at the Marazul, you must be living well." That's true, I say. Is she living well? "No, my friend. I am living very poorly." Her eyes are uninviting, and I flee.

Jorge never misses the Voice of America. He keeps tabs on the struggle against Communism. Watergate baffled and saddened him ("Why did you get rid of that remarkable President Nixon?") and the coup d'etat in Chile perked him up considerably. He says there are only two hopes for the overthrow of Castro. One is an invasion from the United States. I tell him that would be implausible. Then, he says, we must take action on our own. He stares ahead, all drama and high purpose.

Pepe and Geraldo are musicians. They like to persuade foreigners to buy them flashy shirts in the tourist-only shops at the big hotels. They show you how to sneak ahead of lines at the restaurants and how to avoid the taxi cab supervisors. They have friends who help them out. Life consists largely of evading the rules. "Listen," says Pepe, "it's all right here, but I don't like all the foolishness. Did you bring American cigarettes?"

THERE'S not much kowtowing in Cuba. Thanks to the Revolution, it is now bad form to order others around, to call people "Sir" or "Madam," or to engage in non-subtle pulling of rank. Cubans and Americans are the most egalitarian people I know; both cultures are pretty good at thumbing the nose at self-importance. Cubans may be even better.

So it seems natural that Linda and I have become good friends with Inez, a waitress at the hotel. One day at breakfast, attracted by my Spanish and Linda's pregnancy, she stops by our table for a long chat. It ends with an invitation to spend an evening at her apartment.

The next day we travel twelve miles to Inez's housing project. The trip takes

A sidestreet off Avenida Zanja in Havana

fifty minutes by bus. Inez lives in a small unit of a modern, cement-block building in a new town called Habana Este (East Havana). Her place is simple, but cool and well-ventilated. She has indoor plumbing. Her taste in interior decorating runs with families I knew when I lived in Costa Rica: angular plastic furniture, Formica table, color prints of rural scenes and popular singers. Inez hangs a picture of Che where a Costa Rican might put the local soccer club.

Inez likes to talk about the weather, and the beauty of the countryside, and having children, and how nice everything is. She is not elusive, but has no taste for ponderous discourse.

Politics she leaves to her husband, Ronaldo. Ronaldo is the superintendent of the National Warehouse for Spare Parts of the Asphalt Industry. He is responsible for twenty-seven men who drive replacement parts to disabled heavy equipment throughout the island. He is a strong supporter of the government.

He comes from a poor country family in the province of Camaguey. Soon after the Revolution, Ronaldo moved to Havana and worked his way up to his current position. "I am a hard worker," he says, "and I do all kinds of work. I keep the books, yes, but I also do loading and stacking and even some welding. I work a lot and I eat a lot." He inhales three helpings of rice and beans and stew and tops them off with a chunk of flan mixed in with a half pound of cream cheese.

After a while, he cautiously asks if I have an opinion of the American economic embargo. I tell him I think it's foolish. And the war in Vietnam? Cruel and arrogant, I say, but remind him that the percentage of the Cuban population fighting in Angola is higher than the percentage of the American population that was stationed in Vietnam. The treatment of black Americans? Indefensible. And the multinational corporations? We'll dance on their grave.

I turn it around. Are there political prisoners in Cuba? Yes, there are still counter-revolutionary elements; not nearly so many as in the early days; very few, probably (actually, there are thousands). What of the Cuban press? I can understand why you would not like it. Why is public transportation so bad? Because of the American embargo.

I tell him that Cecilia says I am a bad socialist but an acceptable "progressive." He laughs, and we shake hands on it.

Ronaldo honors me with an invitation to see his warehouse. Off we go in a battered Citroen panel truck with two of his co-workers. Cubans are proficient car-poolers.

The National Warehouse for Spare Parts of the Asphalt Industry is a humble affair, a big shed with a small repair yard. It is nice and homey. Ronaldo keeps a fish tank by the front desk, and part of his extensive post card collection is on display. Scenes of Prague, New York, Paris, Moscow and Luanda. Also photos of Breshnev's visit to Havana and a poster that says "Men die, but the Party is immortal."

Paper work is done by hand, painfully slow to someone accustomed to American data processing. A driver has to haul a shipment to Cienfuegos. Ronaldo takes fifteen minutes to collect the appropriate forms. Let's see now, where's that bill of lading? OK, now where's that stamp? Hey, who took those papers the Ministry sent us? His desk is a big mess. The driver calmly smokes a cigarette while Ronaldo checks under paperweights and rifles his drawers. Once everything is assembled, Ronaldo transcribes all the data by hand. Slowly. Finally, all is done and the driver pulls away. Ronaldo turns to me and beams. "That was a big shipment, wasn't it? Three thousand dollars' worth!"

We return to the apartment, where Ronaldo shows Linda and me his stamp collection. Then he and Inez give us East German toys for the baby that's coming. He walks us to the bus stop where we wait thirty minutes for a ride back to the hotel.

FROM a bulletin board at the University: "Requirements for applicants to the law school —

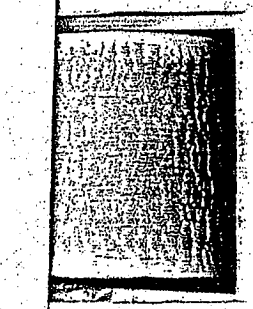
e) the applicant may not maintain an active passport for the purpose of abandoning the country;

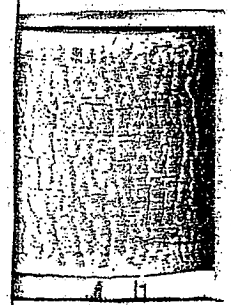
f) the applicant may not maintain relations with antisocial elements or with elements disaffected with the Revolution.

All applicants must be nominated by the organization in which they work."

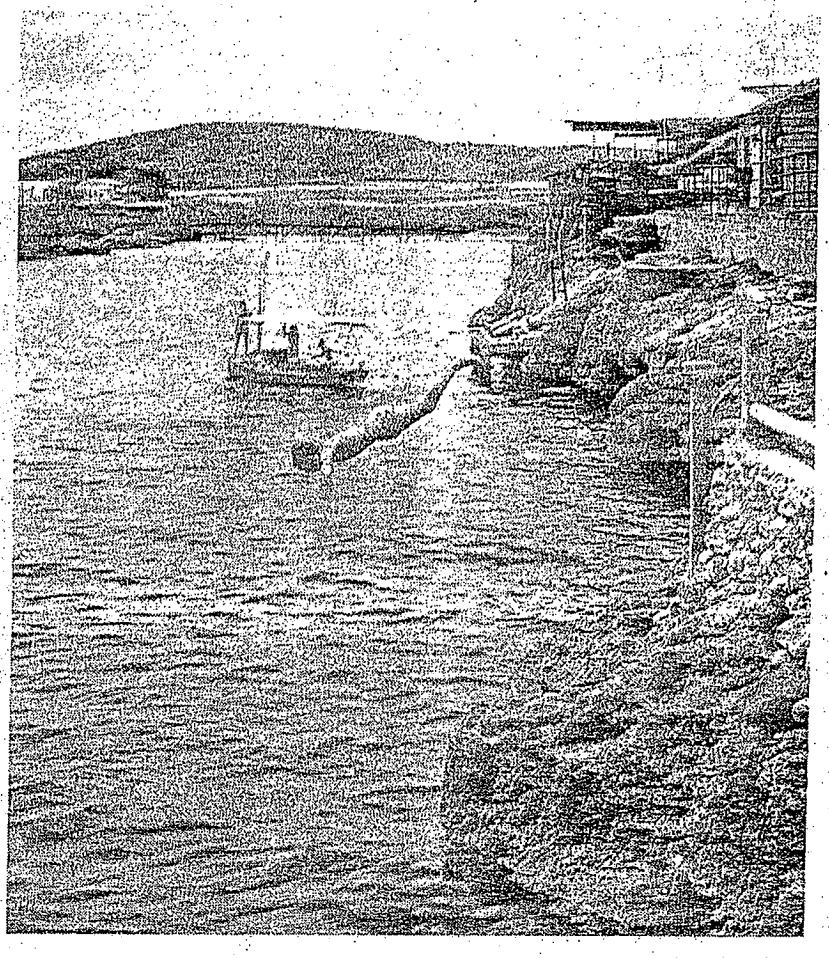
And from a second-grade textbook in Santa Cruz: "Ernesto has 34 Soviet stamps. His uncle brings him 12 stamps from Moscow. He receives 15 stamps from Soviet students. How many Soviet stamps does Ernesto have now?"

ASIDE from the merchandising system and the social services, there is strong physical evidence of Cuban socialism. Once you get beyond Havana you see scores of new housing projects, all of the same mold: large cement rectangles. People say they like them. There is virtually no construction of individual houses, and the government encourages (some say coerces) the rural population into collective activities, which take place in other cement rectangles.





Santa Cruz del Norte. The boys diving insisted we catch them in mid-air. Cuban boys are not shy.



There are lots of new schools and recreation centers.

There is no private advertising in Cuba, which is a mercy. There is public advertising, however, although nothing on the scale of American salesmanship. Billboards urge you to work hard, save money, confront your "difficulties," and prevent fires. There is much enthusiasm for international solidarity. We are told that this year Cubans will work even harder, spurred by the sixtieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution. Angola is a battlefield in the anti-imperialist struggle. Lenin is "the genial teacher of revolutionaries."

Not many people read the newspapers. The sports page tells you all you'll ever want to know about Bulgarian weight lifters and the Hungarian sabre team. The international page gives you the lowdown on how "James Carter" will not succeed in hoodwinking the Soviet people.

Curiously, Fidel Castro appears to be an open, inquisitive man. He is willing to talk about some of the failures of the Revolution. His speeches are the best things published in Cuba, far-reaching and surprisingly flexible.

Is Castro's relative broad-mindedness a luxury reserved for the head-of-state? A Cuban tells me, "Once Fidel notices something wrong and criticizes it, fine. But God help the person who criticized it before Fidel got there." Or does Castro represent a larger element in Cuban Communism, a school of thought that welcomes some diversity and criticism? I can't tell. Official pronouncements in Cuba — newspapers, magazines, posters, broadcasts — are on a par with Izvestia. But Linda, who has spent time in the Soviet Union, says that Havana is infinitely more relaxed than Moscow or Tblisi. For that matter, Havana is more relaxed — and more diverse — than a lot of American cities I know. The staunchest Revolutionaries we meet, Cecilia and Ronaldo, seem adamant in their own views but interested in ours. They are good people, and very kind.

Maybe it's a question of the general and the specific. The overall Cuban ambience is loose and breezy. There is a lot of zest, even quirkiness. But when events occur within a politically-charged setting — job evaluation; university admissions; journalism; police work; administrative reorganization; cultural expression — you feel the cold hand of dogmatism and intolerance.

Perhaps the worst feature of Cuban society is the wholesale lying it encourages. The government deals in half-truths and uplifting nonsense. Workers twist their words to get a new apartment. Students lie to get promoted. When so much stress is placed on "good attitudes," the natural effect is to engender cynicism and play-acting.

THE last day we save for the country. We engage Anita, a young black taxi driver, to drive us through the rural sections of the province. Anita is a city girl and a little afraid of the cows that flank the back roads. I moo at one out the window of the cab, and Anita shrieks disapproval.

"I'll let you off right here," she says. "Behave yourself."

"Come on, Anita. They're harmless."

"I don't like animals."

"You don't like any animals?"

"Well, I like chickens."

"You do?"

"Yes. Fried or broiled!" She laughs and laughs and pokes my arm.

We go to La Sierra and talk with some old men on a veranda. Every boy in town comes by and asks for chewing gum and attention. We visit the old village of Jibacoa and the new Colonia Jibacoa, a model for the government's program of rural development. Then to Valle Elena, Valle de Picadura, Aguacate.

With the exception of Colonia Jibacoa, Cuban hamlets resemble those in Costa Rica. Small houses with roofs of tin or thatch, yards with chickens and flowers, rutted roads. The people are similar: ingratiating and a little shy. The differences lie in the extremes. In most small towns in Costa Rica, there's one or two ostentatious houses for the bank manager or large landowner. And there are always a few shacks where people live wretchedly. In Cuba, I see neither.

Cuba looks good here, amid the plain people and the unforgettable countryside. The land is rich, green and rolling. Palm trees sprinkle every vista, and nowhere are you far from the Caribbean. It is an extremely sensual environment.

The Cubans match it. This is the sexiest place I have ever been. There is no pornography, no confusion of sex and materialism. Just thousands flirting and touching. Cubans are an unusually beautiful people, and their bodies on a beach put Malibu far behind. They flaunt affection. Young people neck wherever convenient. More surprising are the endearments between parents and children, the hugs people exchange on crowded buses, the way an old couple sits on a bench, silently stroking each other.

One day, in the Plaza of the Revolution — a vast space for rallies and May Day parades — I am surprised to see only two people in the whole area. A man and a woman are lying against a police barrier. They are eating fried chicken. They alternately lick their fingers and kiss each other. The man salutes me with a drumstick, and calls me over. We have a nice little chat. ■