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Automovilismo Cubano – Cuban Motorsports: A Brief 20th and 21st Century Cultural and Political History

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Cover Page Footnote

Photo courtesy of Bent-Jorgen Perlmutter, Producer, Havana Motor Club movie (2015); used with permission.

Introduction – Cubans and Cars

As one examines the history of Cuban motorsports from the early years of the 20th century to today, one must base that examination on the economic, social, and cultural landscape of Cuba in the mass transportation era (with origins in the early 19th century). In the case of Cuba's economic growth, the rise and dominance of the country as an important producer and supplier of commodities (sugar cane and tobacco being the most notable) appears to be a point of origin for the development of transportation systems (both rail and shipping).

With respect to the former, the first railroad began operations on November 17, 1837 (the result of the Junta de Formento's – Board of Development's – planning efforts, which began shortly after the group was formed in 1832).¹ Relative to the latter, Cuba's strategic geographic position as a port serving Europe and the Americas (as well as the development of both the aforementioned sugar cane and tobacco / cigar manufacturing industries) was clearly evident.²

In the early years, sugar cane and tobacco production took place on large plantations; labor was supplied by a robust slave trade until the mid- 19th century when a mass immigration from Europe brought European white settlers (from Spain -- under which it was still under political control -- and surrounding countries) and a wage-based economy.³ As the 19th century ended and the 20th century began (with Cuba gaining independence from Spain on 1 January 1899 and functioning under United States control until 1902)⁴, the importance of both industries (as well as American influence over them, as well as the economic activities of the country) grew exponentially.

The 1903 Reciprocity Treaty (where Cuba was guaranteed a 20% market share in the United States for raw sugar cane with low tariffs) contributed greatly to the economic growth of Cuban industry and wealth development.⁵ As a result, the need for skilled sugar cane and tobacco plantation workers was satisfied by the European white settlers to work the fields and aid in shipping preparation activities.

It is these European white settlers, primarily of Spanish origin, as well as the participation of other nationalities who were part of in the industrial age in their respective countries (Europe, the United States, and the Americas) that introduced motorsports to Cuba. Not only were

¹ Fernández, Luis, et al. *Encyclopedia of Cuba: People, History, Culture*. 2003. Retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/59869/1/ENCICLOPEDIA.pdf>

² Watkins, Thayer. *The Economic History of Havana, Cuba: A City so Beautiful and Important It was Once Worth More Than All of Florida*. [2012] Retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/havana.htm>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ History of Cuba. (2016, August 22). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 19:43, August 26, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_Cuba&oldid=735713621

⁵ Derubín, Jacome. *Autos in Cuba 1920 – “The Dance of Millions”*. 2012. In “Cuba in Memory”. Retrieved August 26, 2016 from <https://cubaenlamemoria.wordpress.com/2012/page/4/>

participants attracted to Cuba's tropical climate and flat-to-rolling plains topography⁶, they saw great opportunity in creating a motorsports mecca in the region (hereafter referred to as the Americas) with international appeal. The opportunity to promote their country-of-origin connections to motorsports and how those experiences influenced their new life in Cuba made early Cuban racing events historically significant, exciting and transformative from an international perspective.

Cuban motorsports historian Orlando A. Pulido Morales divides Cuban motorsports development into three distinct eras:

- Stage 1 – 1880-1930 (The American influence and early development of the automobile industry)
- Stage 2 – 1931-1959 (Building of Cuba's Central Highway and the Cuban transportation network)
- Stage 3 – 1959- (Post Cuban revolution, the American embargo, and new international relations)⁷

Thus, the context and groundwork for Stage-specific events like the Havana Cup (the *I Carrera Internacional de Autos de Cuba* or First International Car Race in Cuba) as well as notable participants and vehicles is clearly evident.

Havana Cup – Origins of Road Racing in the Americas

One of the earliest attempts to stage an organized international motorsports road race (i.e. grand prix) in the Americas (as opposed to the developing track-based racing event) was what can be considered the *I Carrera Internacional de Autos de Cuba* or First International Car Race in Cuba -- later known as the Havana Cup. The race started in Arroyo Arenas, and it ended in San Christobal.⁸

Morales indicates that the small 158 kilometer race (6 participants) was actually significant in that it took place less than two years after the fateful 1903 Paris-to-Madrid road race (often referred to as the "Race to Death").⁹ The Paris-to-Madrid Race (the light car / voiturette car road race where early, notable motorsports pioneers -- the Frenchman, Renault co-founder Marcel Renault, and famed English racer Lorraine Barrow --died) had, according to Jarrott, been so destructive that the French government seized the participants' vehicles and

⁶ Geography of Cuba. (2016, July 21). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 12:42, August 24, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Geography_of_Cuba&oldid=730832766

⁷ Morales Pulido, Orlando. La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba [History of Car Racing in Cuba]. 1898. [Club de Autos Clasicos y Antiquos] Portions retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://www.alocubano.org/index.php/en/cuba-car-history>.

⁸ Amigos de Fangio La Peña. Cars in Cuba. Retrieved August 26, 2016 from <http://www.amigosdefangio.org/cuba-car-history>

⁹ Morales Pulido, Orlando. First Cuban International Car Race. Retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://www.alocubano.org/index.php/en/cuba-car-history/10-primera-carrera-internacional-de-autos-en-cuba->

arranged rail transportation for them to return to their points of origin.¹⁰ Its impact hampered similar large-scale road racing events in Europe for several years thereafter.

Yet, the desire to continue to expand motorsports events (including road racing, track racing, endurance racing and related activities) continued to grow in 1905, with the French hosting two major races (the Eliminatoires Françaises de la Coupe Internationale and Coupe Gordon Bennett); the Germans continuing the Frankfurt Circuit Race and the Bahrenfeld Race (the former first run in 1900); the British staging the inaugural English Elimination Trials; the Italians promoting the latest iteration of the Coppa series (the Coppa Florio); and the Americans running another Vanderbilt Cup race (started in 1904) and a Vanderbilt Elimination Race.¹¹

A Paris-to-Madrid race alumnus and American, Joseph Tracy (piloting a 30 horsepower Renault who also participated in five Vanderbilt Cup races from 1904-1906)¹², H. W. Fletcher (driving a French produced 90 horsepower De-Dietrich)¹³, H. A. Robinson (who drove a 40 horsepower De-Dietrich), and Joseph Birk (driving a 40 horsepower Mercedes), were joined by Cubans Ernesto Carricaburn (60 horsepower Mercedes) and Ramon Mendoza (90 horsepower Mercedes).¹⁴ Fellow Americans E. R. Thomas and Edward Hawley did not compete as the former's 90 horsepower Mercedes collided with an ox cart during preliminary trials.¹⁵

Carricaburn eventually proved victorious, covering the distance in 1:50:53 3-5 with an average speed of 53 7-10 kilometers per hour.¹⁶ While some disputed the victory (due to the fact that Carricaburn had started 30 minutes later than Tracy), it was determined that Tracy's "broken pipe and fallen battery" robbed him of the victory.¹⁷ Other controversies included the lack of spectators as well as the support of the newly-formed "International Automobile Racing Association of Cuba".¹⁸ Yet, history would prove to show that the inaugural race established a culture of motorsports that would grow as rapidly as the development, production and use of the motorcar itself grew after 1905.

¹⁰ Jarrott, Charles. The Race to Death [Paris – Madrid Race of 1903]. Retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://www.grandprixhistory.org/paris1903.htm>

¹¹ Motorsport before 1906. (2016, May 12). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 11:27, August 26, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Motorsport_before_1906&oldid=719910696

¹² Kroplick, Howard. Starting Lineup: The 1904 Vanderbilt Cup Race. 2011. Retrieved August 24, 2016 from http://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/the_1904_vanderbilt_cup_race_entrants_results

¹³ Frost in Cuba. In *The Motor World* 1904, v.9, p. 1021. Retrieved August 24, 2016 from <https://books.google.com/books?id=Z0I-AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA1021&lpg=PA1021&dq=Fletcher+De-Dietrich&source=bl&ots=eERVucfwLj&sig=2WYnIIF9qa67u8xTfNX2oJ8W4C4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiDyrqd5drOAhVEKCYKHfoVVK0Q6AEIJDAE#v=onepage&q=Fletcher%20De-Dietrich&f=false>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Marcelino Amador – Cuban Motorsports Pioneer

While Ernesto Carricaburn and Ramon Mendoza found early success on the emerging Cuban road race / grand prix circuit, one of the best representations of Cuban motorsports success during the Golden Age of the automobile (1910-1930) can be found in the archives describing the life and racing career of Marcelino Amador. Not only did Amador find success on the road race / grand prix circuit, he set speed records on short tracks throughout Cuba during the time period.

In those early days of what is classified as “short track” racing, venues such as baseball fields, small oval dirt tracks, and horse racing tracks served double duty as prime locations for automobile racing. The Oriental Race Track in Marianao, Cuba is no exception to this fact and served as one of the most popular short track racing venues in the region. Amador found great success at this location, setting a track record of 59.6 miles per hour during a race at the Oriental held April 14, 1918.¹⁹ The 1918 victory at Oriental had followed several years of victories there, as well as at the Eastern Park Race Track, where Amador was often joined by famous names such as Louis Chevrolet (founder of the iconic Chevrolet automobile), Ralph de Palma, and George Souders (Indianapolis 500 race winner in 1927 and third place in 1928).²⁰

Driving Cadillacs, Amador also started to compete in what would become the Pinar del Rio Races, with the early races originating in the city (along the newly-constructed Central Highway) and ending in La Coloma and latter races finishing in Havana.²¹ These races (joined by the Grand Premio de Cuba or Grand Prix of Cuba, discussed later in this treatise) showcased Amador’s talent as a smart and calculated driver whose consistent dominance of Cuban motorsports would last for over a decade and coincide with Cuba’s major transportation achievement of the 20th century – The Central Highway.

According to the “History of Cuba’s Central Highway”, the “Carretera Central” or Central Highway was begun in 1927 under President Gerardo Machado’s administration as the main highway running from Cuba’s eastern to western tip.²² The original roadbed was 6 meters wide, had a concrete base, and was covered with a material known as “Warrenite Bitulite” in rural areas and granite blocks in major Cuban cities.²³

¹⁹ Derubín, Jácome. Marcelino Amador (Cuban river). In *Cuba in Memory*. Retrieved August 26, 2016 from <https://cubaenlamemoria.wordpress.com/2012/10/28/marcelino-amador-driver-cubano/>

²⁰ Morales Pulido, Orlando. La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba [History of Car Racing in Cuba]. 1898. Portions retrieved August 24, 2016 from <http://www.alocubano.org/index.php/en/cuba-car-history> .

²¹ Derubín, Jácome. Marcelino Amador (Cuban river). In *Cuba in Memory*.

²² De Cespedes, Carlos Miguel. History of Cuba’s Central Highway [Cuban National Committee, National Committee for the Reception of the United Spanish War Veterans, No. 2, Thirtieth National Encampment USWV, October 7-12, 1928, Havana, Cuba]. Retrieved August 26, 2016 from http://cuban-exile.com/doc_201-225/doc0222.html

²³ *Ibid.*

Contractors for the project were the Warren Brothers Company (Boston, Mass. USA) in the eastern provinces and the Compañía Cubana de Contratistas (Cuban Contractors Company) in the far west Matanzas province and the central Santa Clara province. Bridges were built by the H. C. Nutting Company (Cincinnati, Ohio USA).²⁴

The Central Highway represented a high point for economic development in the 20th century, following the collapse of the Palma Regime and United States influence of the Platt Amendment (whereby the U.S. established a permanent Cuban presence by leasing Guantanamo Bay). The Second Occupation of Cuba (1906-1909) was also a contributing factor, as U.S. companies had great influence on the performance of the Cuban economy during this thirty-year span (circa 1927-1957).²⁵

While this period following World War I brought prosperity, it also established the oligarchical rule model of the Machado regime (1925-1933). Later, the rise of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, which included brief periods of populist reform (led by the Grau and Zaldívar regimes), had periods of economic growth (including a sugar boom and public works projects) as well as nepotism and influence of the American Mafia. Furthermore, the start of the Batista era (which continued throughout World War II and into the late 1950s) included periods of economic growth – sizable middle class, the largest gross domestic product (GDP), favorable labor laws, and, as will be noted shortly, a resurrection in motorsports interest promoted by government.²⁶

However, during this time of Cuban political and economic development (from roughly 1933-1952), participation and promotion in Cuban motorsports waned. Few organized racing events were held, and those that were successful could be classified as grassroots and local in nature.

Yet, Amador's early dominance of what might be considered the beginning of modern Cuban motorsports proved that the overall cultural and economic interest in Cuban racing continued to be strong and vibrant from a local perspective. Amador's efforts established the foundation in the 1950s for what might be considered the golden era of Cuban motorsports – the resurgence of the track / road racing phenomenon and the rise of the pre-Revolutionary Grand Prix.

Gran Premio de Cuba - Cuban Grand Prix – Cuban Motorsports Golden Age

During the early years of the Batista regime (circa 1952), Morales foreshadows the rise of Cuban motorsports (as well as government support for such activities). Racing resumes at the

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ De Cespedes, Carlos Miguel. History of Cuba's Central Highway [Cuban National Committee, National Committee for the Reception of the United Spanish War Veterans, No. 2, Thirtieth National Encampment USWV, October 7-12, 1928, Havana, Cuba]

Oriental Race Track, with midget racing featuring several Americans using Offenhauser racing engines, well known in open wheel /midget/sprint racing circles.²⁷

Another significant event signaling the arrival of the Cuban Motorsport Golden Age was the 3er Clásico de Automovilismo Sagua - La Habana - 3rd Automobile Classic Sagua – Havana. Held October 10, 1956 at the Havana Sea Wall, the 3rd Automobile Classic Sagua – Havana. The event (held during the same timeframe in 1954 and 1955 at closed circuit locations -- the Havana Sea Wall and the LaCayuga Airport) had several classes and was well organized by both private benefactors and the Batista government (via the National Sports Commission).

Several stock classes were included, with Class A being won by Modesto Bolaños, Class B won by Armando Menéndez, and the Sport Class taken by Felipe Gutiérrez.²⁸ Average speeds were clocked in the 155 KMH range with few accidents or mechanical failures.

The significance of the 3rd Automobile Classic Sagua – Havana was that it showed international Formula I class motorsports organizers that Cuba could host a well-orchestrated race and provide the human capital, economic resources, and political backing to make the event both successful and memorable. In this case, the 3rd Automobile Classic Sagua – Havana established the groundwork for what would become the Cubano Gran Premio / Cuban Grand Prix. The Cuban Grand Prix not only represented the quintessential Formula I event for the time period, it also became a defining moment in what would become the Cuban Revolution and the rise of the Castro Regime.

The Malecón Avenue area of Havana is a picturesque beachfront esplanade and roadway at the mouth of Havana Harbor in what is known as Old Havana. The area covers 8 kilometers and begins at the Centro Habana neighborhood and ends at the Vedado neighborhood.²⁹ Started after the Spanish-Cuban War of Independence during the brief occupation of Cuba by the United States, Malecón Avenue was built in stages, with the first stage (from what is known as the Paseo del Prado to Calle Crespo) completed in 1902. By 1921, the second stage was finished up to the Monument to the Victims of the USS Maine, and in 1952, the third stage (at the mouth of the Almendares River) was finished.³⁰

With popular landmarks such as the José Martí statue, the Hotel Rosita de Hornedo (now called the Sierra Maestra) and others serving as backdrops (along with the coastline and other natural features), Malecón Avenue served as an excellent location for a grand prix race. Its accessibility to Central Havana as well as the location's reputation as a popular gathering and

²⁷ Morales Pulido, Orlando. La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba [History of Car Racing in Cuba].

²⁸ Morales Pulido, Orlando. 3rd Automobile Classic Sagua – Havana. 2016. [Club de Autos Clasicos y Antiquos] Retrieved August 27, 2016 from <http://www.alocubano.org/index.php/en/cuba-car-history/14-3er-clasico-de-automovilismo-sagua-la-habana->

²⁹ Malecón, Havana. (2016, July 27). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:28, August 27, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Malec%C3%B3n,_Havana&oldid=731836075

³⁰ *Ibid.*

entertainment spot were obvious selling points for the Batista Regime and the National Sports Commission to use in their presentations to Formula I officials and prospective sponsors.

The 1957 version of the Cuban Grand Prix (500 kilometers) posted a field of 19 drivers from 11 countries, with notable Argentinian (and eventual winner) Juan Manuel Fangio leading the pack in a Maserati 300S.³¹ Other well-known names included Sterling Moss, Eugenio Castelloti, Masten Gregory, Alfonso de Portago, and Carroll Shelby (who later gained fame as the creator of Ford's Shelby Mustang in addition to creating high-performance products for Dodge, developing the AC Cobra, and winning the 24 hours of LeMans in 1959; incidentally, it was Shelby, driving a Ferrari 410 who Fangio passed in the final stages of the race).³²

In 1958, the second Cuban Grand Prix was held on February 24, following the same Malecón Avenue course. This time, the field grew to 32 drivers from 12 countries; however, the crowd was saddened to hear of the absence of Castelloti and de Portago who both died a few months prior to the event.³³

Further tragedy shrouded the second Cuban Grand Prix as two major events took place. The first event was the kidnapping of Fangio by a group organized by Castro known as the "26th of July" Revolutionary Movement. Fangio was abducted from the Lincoln Hotel where he was staying and held captive until the race was officially over. It has been determined that the kidnapping was a symbolic act to highlight past Cuban oppression of the masses under the Batista Regime.³⁴

The second Cuban Grand Prix tragedy was the massive wreck on Turn #6 where the car driven by Armando García Cifuentes crashed into a crowd of spectators – killing 9 people and injuring 70 others.³⁵ As a result, the race was ended at that point and the leader, Sterling Moss, was declared the winner.³⁶

While the Cuban Grand Prix would survive both the Cuban Revolution and the deaths which occurred during the second race (a third Cuban Grand Prix was cancelled during the height of the Cuban Revolution), the race would symbolize both the end of the Cuban Motorsports Golden Age and a paradigm shift in the methods Cuban motorsports enthusiasts pursued their craft. This covert philosophy had several facets and represented what would

³¹ Morales Pulido, Orlando. *La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba* [History of Car Racing in Cuba].

³² Carroll Shelby. (2016, August 25). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:58, August 27, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Carroll_Shelby&oldid=736115723

³³ Morales Pulido, Orlando. *La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba* [History of Car Racing in Cuba].

³⁴ Morales Pulido, Orlando. *La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba* [History of Car Racing in Cuba].

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

become known as the challenge for Cubans to survive and thrive in their motorsports pursuits under the new communism-based Castro Regime.

For the third Cuban Grand Prix, a new venue was chosen – the former Columbia Air Force Base runways known as “Cuidad Libertad” or “Camp Freedom”. The area covers nearly 4 miles and, according to the January 1960 issue of Florida Sports Cars magazine, “Meet officials are pouring a new surface on the track to make it ready for racing.”³⁷ Also new for the third Cuban Grand Prix was the addition of Indy, sport, junior, and stock class races.³⁸ Again, Sterling Moss won the Formula I race.

Another notable post-Cuban Revolution race was the “4 Hours of Alamar, which ran from Havana to Alamar and included 17 drivers who drove sport class makes.”³⁹ The race, held in late 1959 also signaled the beginning of the end for public-facing Cuban motorsports. One of the last public races (which predated the United States Commercial Blockade, which ended the flow of spare auto parts into Cuba) was the closed-circuit races at the Ciudad Libertad Airport and at Port Avenue / 26th Street.⁴⁰ These races, attended mostly by Cuban citizens, were what could be considered the last vestiges of what can be considered the Cuban Motorsports Golden Age.

The United States Commercial Blockade, launched on October 19, 1960, began with a ban on U.S. exports to Cuba.⁴¹ On February 7, 1962, the Blockade, or Bloqueo, included Cuban imports into the U.S.; thus, the influx of sugar cane and tobacco (among other products) into the U.S. that had been the foundation for Cuban economic success for nearly 100 years came to an end.⁴² It is the aforementioned impact on the exporting of spare auto parts to Cuba that would spawn another revolution to help Cuban citizens pursue their love of motorsports and highlight the challenges and successes of their cottage efforts to further pursue and promote Cuban motorsports activities for the subsequent half century and beyond.

TailLight Diplomacy and Cuban auto restoration / motorsports – Rick Shnitzler and John Dowling

There was a great sense of uncertainty and wonder associated with the automotive landscape left following the Cuban Revolution of 1958. This ambiguity was reinforced by the United States Commercial Blockade, as the Bloqueo introduced two important unknowns into

³⁷ La Habana / Camp Freedom. Retrieved August 27, 2016 from <http://www.gdecarli.it/php/circuit.php?var1=2849&var2=2>

³⁸ Morales Pulido, Orlando. La Historia del Automóvil en Cuba [History of Car Racing in Cuba].

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ United States embargo against Cuba. (2016, August 15). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 18:43, August 27, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=United_States_embargo_against_Cuba&oldid=734552224

⁴² United States embargo against Cuba. (2016, August 15).

the Cuban automotive equation. First, would Cubans ever again gain access to other automotive marques (or would they be “frozen in time – forced to exist using 1950’s era vehicles in perpetuity)? Second, would important automotive parts supplies be suspended permanently (and what alternatives would become available in the future)?

To answer the first question, Navarro identifies in “Cuban Wizardry Keeps Tail Fins from Drooping” a Cuba where nearly 60,000 1950s-era American cars used daily in Cuban provinces since 1960.⁴³ These vehicles, used daily as taxis and as personal vehicles, are, in many cases, kept operational by a host of creative alternatives to traditional car parts replacement -- including handmade hood ornaments and a version of motor oil produced by combining shampoo, oil, and soap.⁴⁴ In many instances, these relics of the past are preferred to the Communist-based Lada and Volga nameplates as well as more modern Japanese and European imports, as the American vehicles are more stylish, simple, and larger (particularly helpful when the vehicles are used for livery purposes).

In regard to answering the second question, the aforementioned development of home brew-as-motor oil substitutes as well as the homemade hood ornaments, auto glass, and other vehicle parts / accessories poses a major hurdle for Cuban auto enthusiasts who not only want to keep their cars running but aspire to both race them and celebrate their antiquity at authorized car shows and other events.

Whereas in the past prior to the Cuban Revolution, the ruling Cuban regime had promoted local/national motorsports activities and automotive restoration (i.e. the Batista regime support surrounding the Cuban Gran Prix and other racing events; the Macado regime developed the first part of the Central Highway), the Castro regime was not nearly as generous with the authorizations to sponsor local/national motorsports activities and/or encourage automotive preservation (either for individual vehicles or to create venues to care for and preserve vintage automobiles).

Once successful quasi-museum venture has been the creation of the Depósito del Automóvil or Automobile Deposit. Located in Old Havana, the venue displays over 30 vintage vehicles (a 1930 Cadillac V-16 and a 1956 Mercedes Benz are examples).⁴⁵ Curated by Eduardo Mesejo, a former mechanical engineer and Cuban car culture expert, the Automobile Deposit attracts nearly 40,000 visitors yearly who pay a dollar to see the vehicles and participate in automotive history presentations and vehicle preservation activities.⁴⁶ The need to continually promote the goals and objectives of the museum, as well as the challenges created by a lack of restoration parts and labor led Mesejo and others to make connections with humanitarian groups

⁴³ Navarro, Mireya. Cuban Wizardry Keeps Tail Fins from Drooping. In *New York Times* (June 5, 2002). Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/05/arts/cuban-wizardry-keeps-tail-fins-from-drooping.html>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Luxner, Larry. America has an Eye on Old Cuban Cars. In *Miami Herald* (June 21, 2004). Retrieved August 28, 2016 from http://www.luxner.com/cgi-bin/view_article.cgi?articleID=1230

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

in the U.S. and elsewhere who work with agencies like the Automotive Deposit and individual citizens to identify strategies for acquiring parts / commodities and ways to produce parts in less-than-ideal conditions (i.e. where raw materials and other components are scarce-to-nonexistent and expertise needed for fabrication and installation are also lacking or not available at all).

An American duo, seeing the need to open possible automotive parts channels and provide knowledge support, started the Taillight Diplomacy – a nonprofit group affiliated with the United States Sister Cities Association.⁴⁷ The duo, Rick Shnitzler and John Dowlin, started the group in 1998 and have made numerous diplomatic visits to Cuba. According to the ArchiveGrid description of the group:

TailLight Diplomacy was organized as a U.S.-Cuba automotive initiative by Rick Shnitzler and John Dowlin in Philadelphia. Rick Shnitzler, the lead organizer of the initiative, described TailLight Diplomacy (TLD) as a deliberative mechanism which hosted and enabled dialogue between U.S. and Cuban old car aficionados and key policy makers. Between 1998 and 2012, TLD worked to promote awareness of Cuba's pre-1960 fleet of over 30,000 Detroit-made automobiles as global symbols and cultural icons comparable to San Francisco's cable cars or London's double-decker buses. The initiative also attempted to lay the groundwork for a U.S.-Cuba Old Car Trade Agreement to allow spare automotive parts to be conveyed to Cuba so that private owners could continue to maintain their antique heirloom cars. Born in 1943, Rick Shnitzler has spent most of his active career in Philadelphia. From 1975-1994 he operated as a vendor of vintage Cadillac cars, parts, and automotive literature. In that timeframe, he also worked as an urban planner and public policy advocate.⁴⁸

The sense of viewing Cuba's pre-Cuban Revolution fleet of American cars as heirloom items is evident in the observations of Terrel Cass, General Manager of WLIW TV in New York who was producer of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) program "Classic American Cars" who observed, "Everybody in Cuba seems to be a mechanic... Every two or three blocks you see a car jacked up and someone under it working on it."⁴⁹ Similarly, Shnitzler estimates that nearly 70% of Cuba's American car antiques are worth restoring, as is a similar percentage of antique trucks and motorcycles.⁵⁰ These efforts tend to be multigenerational in nature, with grandfathers

⁴⁷ Navarro, Mireya. Cuban Wizardry Keeps Tail Fins from Drooping.

⁴⁸ Shnitzler, Rick. TailLight Diplomacy records, 1950-2012. In ArchiveGrid. Retrieved August 28, 2016 from <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/data/729738875>

⁴⁹ Navarro, Mireya. Cuban Wizardry Keeps Tail Fins from Drooping.

⁵⁰ Luxner, Larry. America has an Eye on Old Cuban Cars.

being aided by sons and grandsons utilizing networks of fabrication specialists who work to create reproductions of original equipment (either using original specifications or modified ones).

There is also a viewpoint that pre-Cuban Revolution American cars are, actually, merely vestiges of the original and represent more to Cubans than just being an antique automobile. According to Caruso-Cabrera's "Antique Cuban Cars: Why Collectors are Holding Off", U.S. antique automobile collectors, such as McKeel Hagerty of Hagerty Insurance, feel that these cars have, "...Morphed into their own species. It's not a Cadillac; it's something else...When I went [to Cuba on a diplomatic visit], I jumped into a 1956 Cadillac, and it looked really good. Because they've been cut off for so long, they've morphed into their own species."⁵¹ Hagerty added that many Cubans want to keep their cars in Cuba, "as an example of the last vestige of the spirit of survival. There's something down there about these cars that means more to them than just a car."⁵²

The effort to give Cuban antique automobile collectors a source of both new old stock (NOS) and reproduced parts is one of the key goals of TailLight Diplomacy. Shnitzler and other TailLight Diplomacy supporters understand both the intrinsic and extrinsic value Cubans have placed on their vehicles, both as individual owners and from a nationalistic point of view.

It is also the nationalistic view of pre-Cuban Revolution American cars (and the need for parts) that influenced Cuban motorsports activities from the 1960s and drives Cuban motorsports activities today. As was mentioned earlier, state-sanctioned motorsports activities were banned in Cuba when the Castro regime gained full control of Cuba in 1961. The 1960 Cuban Grand Prix was the final state-sanctioned motorsports event. However, CARISTAS, has identified evidence of clandestine drag racing taking place during the moratorium. In essence, drag racing's two-participant short course design enabled covert events to be staged without government interference. This was juxtaposed with the images of past Cuban motorsports events, which tended to be either overt, government-sanctioned road races (as represented by the Havana Cup) or organized rallies (as symbolized by the Cuban Grand Prix).⁵³

Thus, drag racing has become the current symbol of Cuban motorsports in an evolutionary Cuba where the Castro regime maintains political power in a changing economic and diplomatic landscape.

⁵¹ Cabrera, Michelle. "Antique Cuban Cars: Why Auto Collectors are Holding Off". In CNBC. 2015. Retrieved August 29, 2016 from <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/08/03/antique-cuban-cars-why-auto-collectors-are-holding-off.html>

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Bostelaar, Robert. Racing Returns, A Quarter Mile at a Time. In CARISTAS. 2015. Retrieved August 29, 2016 from http://caristas.blogspot.com/2015_04_01_archive.html

Havana Motor Club – Cuban drag racing – 2020 and beyond

From the evidence identified, accessed, and analyzed for this treatise, Cuban motorsports, circa 2016, is a combination of Cuban nationalism, historic preservation, and automobilism / automobility (the use of the automobile at various levels – work, pleasure, etc.). With respect to modern Cuban motorsports activities (and the rise of drag racing in Cuba), a movie symbolizing the current Cuban drag racing culture and its pursuits is the [Havana Motor Club](#).

As described in a summary of the film:

HAVANA MOTOR CLUB tells a personal, character-driven story about Cuba's vibrant community of underground drag racers and their quest to hold Cuba's first official car race since shortly after the 1959 Revolution. It tackles how Cuba's recent reforms — the owning of property, allowance of small businesses, and greater exchange between Cubans, Cuban Americans, tourists, and other foreigners — have affected the lives of these racers and their families. One racer enlists the help of a Cuban American patron in Miami to bring in parts for his modern Porsche. His main competitor is a renowned mechanic who uses ingenuity rather than resources to create a racing machine out of his 1955 Chevy Bel Air. Another racer ponders whether he will participate in the race or sell his motor — one that he recovered on the ocean floor from a ship used to smuggle Cubans off the island — in order to flee Cuba on a raft headed to Florida. Meanwhile, the race itself is in jeopardy of coming to fruition due to factors ranging from its status as an elitist sport to the arrival of the Pope in Cuba. Through the experiences of these racers and their community, HAVANA MOTOR CLUB explores how Cuba is changing today, and also what its future holds in light of [President of the United States Barack] Obama's recent move to normalize relations with the island nation.⁵⁴

The challenges of filming that producer Bent-Jorgen Perlmutter and his crew encountered during the filming of the Havana Motor Club (which took place in 2012 and 2013) as well as the details surrounding the lead drivers and cars listed in the film summary have been clearly summarized by Rix in his British Broadcasting Company (BBC) TopGear review of the film.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Perlmutter, Bent-Jorgen. [Havana Motor Club] – the Film. 2015. Retrieved August 29, 2016 from <http://havanamotorclub.com/the-film>

⁵⁵ Rix, Jack. Film Review: Havana Motor Club – New doc underground drag racing against the backdrop of a changing Cuba. In *BBC TopGear* (March 29, 2016). Retrieved August 29, 2016 from <http://www.topgear.com/car-news/movies/film-review-havana-motor-club> .

To begin, Rix profiles Reynaldo ‘Rey’ Lopez Garcia, a second-generation mechanic, whose domineering, yet well-intentioned father, Tito, pushes Rey to use creativity and non-traditional methods to build a competition ’55 Chevy dragster using makeshift parts and sweat equity.⁵⁶ Obviously, the victory over the obstacles imposed by the United States Commercial Blockade come to life on the screen.

An interloper to this form of “Yankee ingenuity”, as described by Rix, is Carlos Alvarez Sanchez; Sanchez is a driver who has a Cuban American benefactor whose access to NOS parts enables Sanchez to create high-performance cars – a vintage ’56 Chevy and a newer model Porsche 924 powered by a small-block Chevy V-8 engine.⁵⁷

Joining Garcia and Sanchez is Jose ‘Jote’ Antonio Madera, whose ability to adapt used equipment is taken to a high level when he locates a marine engine from a sunken boat and places it in the engine bay of a ’51 Ford. The albeit noisy engine is a testament to one’s ability to create much from little. However, Madera longs to become an illegal expatriate and flee Cuba via the open waters. He rationalizes the fact that he might have to sell the car (and its symbol of perseverance) in order to make the journey to the U.S. Mainland possible.⁵⁸

As the drivers proceed to stage a big race, they encounter Cuban police and a host of scheduling challenges (including what eventually became Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Cuba - March 27-29, 2012).⁵⁹ Yet, the efforts of Perlmutter and his crew to capture the essence of Cuba’s continued admiration for motorsports and antique vehicles is both admirable and prescriptive in that viewers have a better understanding of the cultural significance of both Cuba’s cars and its owners as well as the struggles they face, along with the small victories they celebrate.

According to Perlmutter, the desire to include a realistic view of drag racing in today’s Cuba was a primary focus as the filming progressed. Additionally, several diplomatic challenges were encountered during the film crew’s Cuban visits. Fortunately, the outcomes were, for the most part, positive ones.⁶⁰

With U.S. / Cuba diplomatic and economic relations continuing to develop now and in the future, the opportunity for Cubans to reap the benefits of any reciprocal trade agreements that can be generated (particularly in the area of replacement NOS / refabricated auto parts) definitely

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Miroff, Nick. Pope Meets Fidel Castro, Wraps Up Visit to Cuba. In *National Public Radio (NPR): All Things Considered* – March 28, 2012. Retrieved August 29, 2016 from <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/28/149549480/pope-wraps-up-cuba-visit-with-mass-castro-meeting>

⁶⁰ Perlmutter, Bent-Jorgen. Personal phone conversation, August 30, 2016.

exists. The challenge will be to determine how much commercial and human capital exchange can take place legally and how the Cuban government will decide to view drag racing and other Cuban motorsports. These two factors – both government- controlled in nature– will either give Cuban motorsports enthusiasts cause to celebrate or further reinforce their current covert efforts to pursue and enjoy their hobby.

*Photo-Credit Note: Photos courtesy of Bent-Jorgen Perlmutter, Producer, Havana Motor Club Movie (2015); used with permission