

Latinos, Paper Clash in Miami

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MIAMI—Contrary to this city's image, Miami Beach is the only spot here where the sidewalks really are painted pink or where lapsed New Yorkers still fill patio furniture in conspicuous numbers.

These days, a more accurate postcard would show 8th Avenue, or "Calle Ocho." The language on the street is Spanish. The nearest glass towers house Cuban-owned banks, not resort hotels.

In less than a generation, the United States' southernmost big city has seen a thorough transformation: from Democratic town to Republican, from retirees to refugees, from key lime pie and kosher deli to key lime pie and coffee Cubano. And no institution here is more concerned than the city's powerful and famous morning newspaper, the Miami Herald.

Circulation Dropping

For years Miami's Cubans have derided the Herald as too "Anglo," ethnically insensitive, soft on communism. In the last decade, as a result, the percentage of households buying the paper in Miami's heavily Latino Dade County has dropped by 20%.

The Herald, for its part, reacted by trying to follow its Anglo readers as they left the city for the the suburbs, only to find over time that many of those readers preferred the improved suburban papers. Herald circulation—stagnant for most of the decade—has dropped in the last two years by 28,000.

Now, its suburban strategy a disappointment, one of America's great newspapers has embarked on wrenching reorientation: It has decided that its financial future depends in large part on serving the increasingly multicultural and multilingual central city.

From now on, said Angel Castillo, the Herald's newly appointed Cuban-born assistant managing editor for news, "If a reporter

comes to me and says he doesn't want to learn to speak Spanish, I think maybe he'd be happier working in Tulsa."

Newspaper's Challenge

The challenge is one faced by other American newspapers—including those in Los Angeles: How does a newspaper reflect the life of a city that immigration has made multicultural and multilingual? Does it have a responsibility to try? If a paper reflects only the Establishment culture, what is the economic peril?

The answers may come here first, however, because no immigrant community has come so far so quickly as Miami's Cubans.

Latinos now are the largest group in Dade County—roughly 42% of the population—and roughly 85% of that new plurality is Cuban, enough to form a distinct and powerful community.

As political refugees, many of them members of Havana's bourgeoisie, Miami's Cubans quickly gained wealth: in Dade County 30 Latin-owned banks, two television stations, 30 medical clinics, three giant health maintenance organizations, 500 groceries and 60 car dealerships.

They also gained influence. Miami's mayor and city manager are Cuban. So is the county manager.

"In the old days the Anglos had all the power," said Luis J. Botifoll, president of Republic National Bank, the largest Latino-owned bank in the United States. "They don't have it all anymore."

To many Cubans, the Herald, housed in a gold-colored building on Biscayne Bay, represents the old days: Anglo Miami, downtown, by the water. The palm tree-lined street outside the Herald is Alvah Chapman Boulevard, named for the chairman of the board of Knight-Ridder Newspapers Inc., which owns the Herald.

"For 20 years," Botifoll said, "the Cubans have hated the Herald."

Primary among their complaints is politics—particularly the overriding concern among many Cubans with what they perceive as the threat of communism.

"You can write in there that Adolfo Leon says that they [at the Herald] are communists, and they defend communists," volunteered a man named Adolfo Leon, who was

sampling perfume at the Flagler Race Track Flea Market one recent Sunday.

Among its sins, the Herald opposes military aid to the rebels in Nicaragua, a stance that Spanish-language radio station owner Salvadore Lew likened to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolf Hitler on the eve of World War II.

Divisive Issue

So strong is the Cuban aversion to communism that sporadically it splits this town open, often—the Cubans feel—with the Herald on the other side.

Earlier this year, for instance, Cubans led by the area's Spanish-language radio stations forced cancellation of a play by a Cuban author thought to be sympathetic to Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

"Sen. Joseph McCarthy is long dead, but his sniveling ghost is alive and well in South Florida," wrote Herald columnist Carl Hiasen in reaction. The Cubans are led, he said, by "witch-hunting weasels . . . drooling zealots burdened with such a stupefying ignorance of American tradition . . . the usual band of right-wing radio harpies."

"Many of the people who write over there are in favor of the Sandinista regime," countered Tomas Garcia Fuste, one of Miami's most popular Spanish-language radio personalities and a figure at the center of the controversy over the play.

"Sometimes we disagree with the freedoms of a free society that endanger freedom," explained radio station owner Lew.

"There is no way we can put ourselves in their shoes," said Herald Publisher Richard Capen, conceding some inevitable ethnocentrism. "But then there are some people in the Hispanic community who wouldn't be happy with this newspaper unless it had an anti-Castro editorial every day."

Not Restricted to Politics

If the problem between the Herald and the Cuban community were restricted to politics, however, some Cuban leaders think the two sides could agree to disagree.

But many Cubans in Miami, including some on the Herald, believe the paper has other problems for which it must bear blame.

"They sit in their office and they

are not a part of the community," said Raul Martinez, mayor of Hialeah, Florida's fifth-largest city. "They have never had one Spanish-speaking editor for the coverage of Hialeah, even though Hialeah is 85% Cuban."

Lew, repeating another common complaint, charged that the Herald tends to note the ethnic heritage of Cubans who commit crimes, something it does not do if the criminal is Anglo. Lew said such practices, which editors say are less common than critics allege, contribute to the perception that the Herald is written for and by Anglos.

Herald editors say some, but not all, of the criticisms are unfounded. "We made some mistakes that tended to alienate us," Capen admitted.

At the heart of the problem, some say, is the Herald's record in hiring Latinos. Although it is the best in the newspaper industry, according to Herald columnist Guillermo Martinez, past president of the National Assn. of Hispanic Journalists, it is little to brag about.

43 Latinos on News Staff

Forty-three members of the Herald's newsroom staff—about 10%—are Latino, but of those about 23 work for El Herald, a Spanish-language edition inserted into the English Herald.

The Herald pays for reporters to take Spanish lessons, and Executive Editor Heath Meriwether estimated that 40% of the Herald newsroom is now bilingual. But others in the newsroom scoff at the figure. "It's closer to 15%," once you subtract El Herald, one editor said.

Perhaps more important, there were no Latinos among the paper's 30 top editors until the reorientation began and Castillo was hired and columnist Martinez was given the title of senior editor.

Nowhere is tension with the Latino community more intensely focused than on El Herald, the paper's Spanish-language edition. When launched in 1976, it was the first foreign-language edition published in its own city by a major U.S. paper.

"The idea was to help introduce Hispanics to the Herald," said Frank Saler, first editor of El Herald and now a magazine editor in Miami. "The thought was that El Herald eventually would serve its purpose [as Latinos assimilated] and fade away."

'Ethnocentric Dream'

It proved controversial from the start. The notion that Cubans would assimilate, Castillo charged, was "an ethnocentric dream." Miami's Cubans have maintained a partially independent Latino culture even while succeeding economically, explained Dr. Thomas Boswell, an expert in Cuban immigration at the University of Miami.

Even the name El Herald, "is like a joke," Castillo said, "the way Anglos who don't speak Spanish will put 'el' in front of things."

Although the English Herald averages 56 pages a day, the Spanish edition is only about 16 and is inserted free in the English edition for anyone who requests it. Only 64,000 of the Herald's roughly 400,000 subscribers have done so.

Cubans feel that "we at the Herald . . . give them this little newspaper because that is all they merit," Castillo said.

Inside the paper, Meriwether, the executive editor, said, El Herald "began to be something of a crutch," which allowed the paper to "compartmentalize" Latino coverage in the Spanish edition rather than incorporating it throughout the Herald.

If the Herald failed adequately to cover the Latino community, the reason was in part economic. Frankly, Meriwether said, "We were loath to spend a lot of money to go after the Hispanic market."

Economy Was Suffering

Miami's Latinos had not yet achieved their current affluence, and Miami's economy was suffering as tourists skipped Miami Beach for Orlando's Disney World and the housing boom moved to the suburbs in Broward and Palm Beach counties. "So we spread north," Meriwether said.

As the Herald approached, however, the suburban competition awakened. In Broward County, the Tribune Co. of Chicago moved the little Pompano Beach Sun-Sentinel to Fort Lauderdale, launched it countywide and in eight years saw circulation grow 191% to 137,000.

The suburban papers succeeded, in part, because many suburban folks want little to do with Miami, argued Gene Cryer, editor of the Sun-Sentinel and the Fort Lauderdale News, and because the suburban papers could be more local than the Herald.

Back in Dade County, at the same time, other troubles were brewing. Miami's growing Latino population was not reading the Herald in the same numbers as the Anglo residents it was replacing. The percentage of households buying the Herald each weekday had dropped since 1976 from 50% to 40%.

And circulation, despite the big push north, wavered between blah and bad. Daily circulation has hovered near 420,000 for years and this year dropped to 407,000. Sunday has dropped by 48,000 since 1979 to roughly half a million.

Assessment of Future

This year, the Herald took stock. It engaged in an intense series of meetings to assess the paper's long-term future. It decided, in Meriwether's words, "Our future is in Broward and Dade counties. We've got to use our resources there."

The Herald began pulling back from the northern push this summer. It laid off 17 reporters and editors, eliminated a suburban edition and took steps to "reallocate resources" in Capen's words, back toward Dade.

And "we made a conscious decision to look for someone [Latino] who could be a senior executive in our newsroom," Meriwether said.

In October, the Herald hired Castillo, a reporter-turned-attorney, as one of seven assistant managing editors. Castillo said his duties include the Sunday and Monday papers, El Herald, helping with legal matters, and sitting on a Latino resource committee.

The Herald also has embarked on extensive market research into the paper's image in the Cuban community, including "focus group" interviews of Latinos with Herald managers watching from behind one-way mirrors.

For his part, Castillo is insisting on more bilingualism and biculturalism within the paper.

Seeking Name Change

He also wants to change the name of El Herald, add staff and pages. El Herald currently has only two news reporters. He would like 10. And Castillo wants to open a storefront office in Little Havana to give the Herald a presence there.

Even the harshest critics within

the Cuban community say the Herald has shown more concern for the Cuban community since Capen's arrival four years ago as publisher.

Winning the Latino readership, however, will not prove simple. For one, some in the Latino community, such as Mayor Martinez of Hialeah, are skeptical that the Herald is willing to hire enough Latinos.

"It takes more than one black bean in the white rice," said Mayor Martinez, "to make *congrí*." Congri is a Cuban dish of white rice and black beans cooked together.

Internally, more than a few on the Herald staff resent the emphasis on hiring Latinos.

"When Castillo was hired," one Herald staff member said privately, "there were a lot of people who thought this meant that the only ones who would get the top jobs from now on would be Latinos."

Some staff members complained—even to Meriwether—that Castillo was given the job that some Anglos deserved more. "It created a very bitter taste around here," another reporter said.

Another reporter who recently left the Herald charged that the paper was "pandering to the Cubes."

Meriwether agrees that the reorientation has caused tension, and insiders say Castillo's candid style has inflamed some staff members. In part to answer that, the Herald has since given two Anglo editors titles above Castillo's, a change Castillo says has made his job easier.

Yet management, and some of the paper's Latinos, consider those concerns either an inevitable cost of change or a sign of the problem. "I think between pandering and ignoring 45% of your home county there's a lot of working space," columnist Martinez said.

Another part of the problem, publisher Capen believes, is that many Latinos are accustomed to Latin journalism, in which papers align themselves with political parties.

For instance, Miami's Latinos are not reading the other English-language paper in town, the Miami News, an afternoon daily that appeals largely to older Anglo readers.

Some Latinos read *Diario las Americas*, a Spanish-language daily that specializes in news from Latin America, and most days has an editorial that manages to denounce either Marxist-Leninism,

Fidel Castro or Moscow. But with only limited local coverage and a largely older immigrant readership, *Diario's* circulation of 67,000 is only slightly more than *El Herald's*.

Others watch one of the city's two Spanish television stations. One of them, WLTU, is No. 3 in South Florida in prime time, even ahead of the CBS network affiliate.

Many Non-Readers

Yet apparently many Latinos in Miami, particularly Cubans, do not read newspapers in any language. They listen to one of the city's five Spanish-language talk and all-news radio stations. One of them, WQBA, is the most popular AM station in South Florida.

Their formats are born of Havana—WRHC stands for Radio Havana Cuba—and are a special mixture of politics, arts, entertainment and separatist paranoia.

"Our radio station is like an embassy for the Cubans," said WQBA news director and on-air personality Tomas Garcia Fuste, whose station set up a storefront in Little Havana serving as a type of action-line agency for Latinos.

The stations also have organized

political protest rallies, letter-writing campaigns and, in 1980, aided in the Mariel boat lift of 125,000 refugees from Cuba.

Another favorite target is the Herald. "They try to control everything," complained Garcia Fuste.

"I have been called the communist bogymen," said the Herald's Cuban-born columnist Martinez. "And the Herald is the evil empire."

And then there is the question of politics, the one issue that may prove unresolvable. Said Salvador Lew, "If we were reading the New York Times or the Los Angeles Times we would have problems with them."

As difficult as multiculturalism may be to attain, however, the Herald may no longer have much choice economically. And a least some in Miami are pleased.

"We've come home again," Castillo said. "It's like going out with someone for years and not being sure you wanted to marry them. When you finally realize he or she is the one for you, it feels great."

Times researchers Lorna Nones and Doug Conner contributed this story.