

Operation Pedro Pan in FIU Library Collections Presentation – NOTES

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SLIDE 1 – Introduction slide

In this presentation I will be highlighting FIU's collections documenting Operation Pedro Pan. Our most significant holdings are the personal interview videos with prominent Pedro Pan figures, including Monsignor Walsh and James Baker, who started Operation Pedro Pan. To begin I would like to give a brief overview of Operation Pedro Pan for those that may not be familiar with it, and then show a couple of clips from the personal interviews.

SLIDE 2 – OPP dates & N.Y. Times

Operation Pedro Pan was name given to the exodus of approximately 14,000 unaccompanied children that fled Castro's Cuba to the United States between December 1960 and October 1962.

Approximately half of these children did not have family in the United States to take them in and were cared for by child welfare agencies, coordinated by the *Cuban Children's Program*.

This New York Times newspaper clipping from 1963 refers to these 14,000 children being sent away by parents who didn't want their children to be "Communist Indoctrinated" and would "rather entrust the children to relatives, friends or strangers in the United States".

SLIDE 3 – Voorhees Report clippings

During the same period as Operation Pedro Pan, thousands of Cubans were arriving in Miami, fleeing Castro's revolution, and the arriving refugees were basically destitute due to the limitations on what they could take with them when leaving the country: \$5! The local social welfare agencies were extremely unprepared to handle this flood and requested help from Washington. President Eisenhower had sent down Voorhees as his representative to review the situation and to allocate federal funds.

Here is a clipping from Voorhees report, which was translated into Spanish and is the copy we have in FIU Libraries' Special Collections. In this report from 1960, Voorhees mentions more than 1,000 Cuban refugees were arriving weekly, mainly arriving and staying in Miami.

SLIDE 4 – Walsh and Baker

Operation Pedro Pan was the result of a meeting in 1960 between Father (later Monsignor) Bryan O. Walsh, Director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami, and James Baker, the Headmaster of Ruston Academy, an American school in Havana.

Father Walsh, through his work as Director of Catholic Welfare Bureau operated a home for children. He had already taken in a 15 yr. old Cuban boy when the boy's uncle brought him to Father Walsh because he could no longer support the boy financially. Walsh knew there would be more minors facing this situation as parents were sending their children out of Cuba to recently arrived struggling relatives in Miami. Walsh met with officials from Washington and strongly advocated for the proper care of the unaccompanied minors by securing federal funds. He also campaigned that the child be cared for by established child welfare agencies according to their religious heritage.

Once funds were secured, Father Walsh launched the *Cuban Children's Program* in 1960 as a separate division of the Catholic Welfare Bureau to manage the care of unaccompanied Cuban children in Miami.

Right about this time, in Dec. 1960, James Baker from the American School in Havana, came to Miami as he was interested in bringing some children from Cuba to study in the U.S. – mainly to get them out of the country. He was sent to see Walsh and together they drew up the plan to obtain student visas. Walsh would provide the required documents from the States, which consisted of a signed letter as Director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau accepting ultimate responsibility for the child, and the enrollment forms from a local school. Back in Cuba, Baker would assist the parents in getting the student visas from the U.S. embassy in Havana.

SLIDE 5 – Children arriving

What was later going to be known as Operation Pedro Pan was underway when the first children arrived on December 26, 1960 under this original plan by Walsh and Baker, with no idea of the huge exodus it would become.

To help explain why and how it ended up that 14,000 unaccompanied minors were sent out of Cuba, I would like to give a little background to the situation in 1960 Cuba.

SLIDE 6 – 1960-1961 Cuba

When Operation Pedro Pan started in 1960, one year after Castro had taken power, Castro had already established relations with the Soviet Union. He had enacted laws nationalizing large national and foreign businesses, and hundreds had been executed in his ruthless elimination of any opposition. Many who had passionately supported Castro's rising became disillusioned and were now forming counterrevolutionary groups.

By 1960 Castro had established the *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución*, neighborhood committees across the island which also served as the "eyes & ears" of the revolution, reporting on any possible counterrevolutionary activities of their neighbors. Also the youth groups had been formed to engage children of all ages in communist ideology.

1961, the crux of Operation Pedro Pan, was the Year of Education in Castro's Cuba. Private and catholic schools were confiscated and closed down permanently, sometimes with militia storming the schools in session and destroying Catholic images.

State schools were closed while the curriculum was rewritten to meet the new revolutionary ideology. During this period, the children were being sent out to the countryside to work for the revolution. Castro had sent his own son to the Soviet Union to study, as did other revolutionary leaders, and the word was that a large number of Cuban youth would follow.

Some parents, frightened by what they were seeing, began hiding their children at home and were desperate for a way out.

SLIDE 7 – Video clip of Baker Interview

I'm going to play a one and half minute clip of the interview with James Baker explaining the situation he saw in Havana. Baker was the Headmaster of Ruston Academy in Havana who started Operation Pedro Pan with Monsignor Walsh. The full 45-minute interview is part of FIU Libraries' Special Collections *Cuban Living History Project*.

SLIDE 8 – Height of the Cold War

We have to keep in mind it was the height of the Cold War. There was a lot of fear of communist indoctrination. The parents who sent their children to Miami thought it would be a very short-term separation. No one could imagine a communist regime could exist just 90 miles from the United States.

But the original plan drawn up by Father Walsh and Baker involving student visas met a major hitch when the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and closed the U.S. embassy on January 3rd, 1961, ending the student visas. At this point only about 20 children had arrived in Miami.

SLIDE 9 – Video clip of Monsignor Walsh Interview

Here I'm going to play another short video clip from the FIU Libraries' Special Collections *Cuban Living History Project* and let Monsignor Walsh explain how they got around this obstacle.

SLIDE 10 – Visa waiver

Here is a copy of the visa waiver letter Father Walsh referred to - he was authorized to issue these by the Department of State. These were distributed by a clandestine network across the island.

SLIDE 11 – Pedro Pan Shelters in Miami area

As a result, 14,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in Miami in less than 2 years through Operation Pedro Pan.

Various shelters were set up in the Miami area, some as temporary transit centers until the child could be resettled somewhere else in the United States.

These varied from personal residences loaned to Walsh by the Ferré family, to a summer camp located on the edge of the Everglades, where tents were added to accommodate the overcrowding. The largest facility was in Florida City, 40 miles south of Miami, which was actually a block of apartment buildings housing girls up to 18 years old and boys under 12.

SLIDE 12 – Photos of homes

According to Walsh, 100 cities and 35 states eventually provided group and foster care for these children.

Operation Pedro Pan came to a sudden halt in 1962 when the Cuban Missile Crisis ended commercial flights between Havana and Miami.

Many Pedro Pan children were reunited with their parents when the Freedom Flights between Havana and Miami were started in December 1965. These flights gave priority to parents and immediate family of Cuban children in the U.S. under the age of 21.

However, many of the children continued in foster care for many years later. The *Cuban Children's Program* continued to care for children who arrived from Cuba until 1982.

SLIDE 13– Pedro Pan LibGuide

This slide shows the link to a research guide I created that includes information, research resources, and links, which we will briefly go over.

libguides.fiu.edu/PedroPan

SLIDE 14– Pedro Pan LibGuide Home page

SLIDE 15– Pedro Pan LibGuide Oral Histories page

The *Cuban Living History Project* consist of approximately 114 personal interviews of prominent Cuban exiles conducted by Miguel González-Pando between 1990-1998, and housed in FIU Libraries Special Collections.

As part of this project, there are 23 interviews with Pedro Pan children and others involved in Operation Pedro Pan and these are listed on this page. FIU is in the process of digitizing these interviews and will be making them available through online streaming.

SLIDE 16– Links to Interviews

This slide includes the links to the full interviews with Monsignor Walsh and Headmaster James Baker.

SLIDE 17– Contact Information