

Three Little Boy's Escapades at the MYC

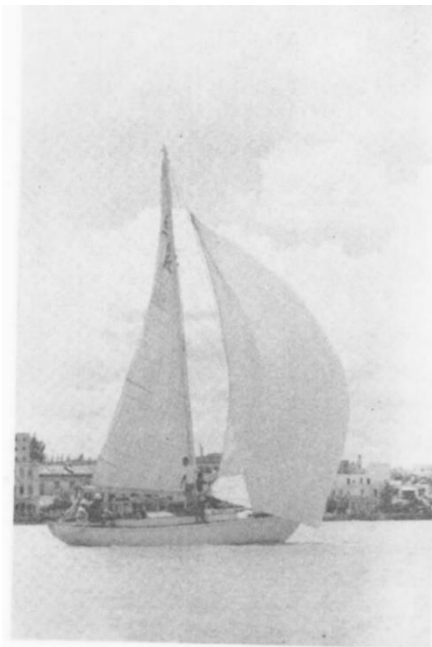


Here is a short story about 3 boys around nine years old who spent the summers of 56, thru 59 at the MYC. They lived within walking distance of the club and going to "El Miramar" was an exciting thing to look forward to, on the weekends or any day during summer. They didn't rule the club like the teenagers or their parents did. They might have not gone to all the wonderful parties the club gave with the top Cuban bands like Benny Moré (El Bárbaro del Ritmo) and his band. They weren't part of the sailing regattas, with the bragging rights that came with them, and girls were still not interesting to them. But they sure used the facility to the maximum extent possible. This is where they learned how to swim, fish, play baseball, and the love for sailing. They had their most memorable good times ever at the MYC.

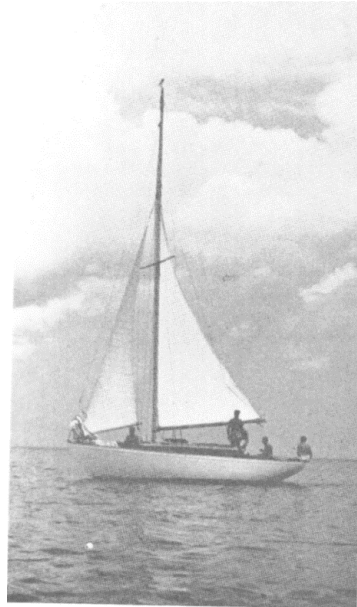
During the 1950s, things were a lot different. Parents deemed that dropping off their kids at the club for the day was absolutely safe. And the caring and able staff running the club made sure they didn't get into too much trouble. Later, when it was time to go home and somebody would pick them up or they walked home, they were so tired, that no sooner their heads hit the pillow, they were sound asleep.

For this brief recollection, we'll call these boys Mario, Eddy (his younger brother) and Benny their neighbor. Their fathers were also good friend and member of the MYC. Mario and Eddy's father was Mario Muñoz (aka Pipo), an avid sailor and champion of many regattas in Cuba, the Bahamas, and the St Petersburg to Habana regatta. Benny's father, Ventura Montes, was also an avid sailor in the 1940s and raced many times with the Muñoz-Bustamante brothers Mario and Eduardo (Pipo y Chupi) in the Bicho Malo, the Cyclon, and later in his own 28-footer Chavela. But in the 1950s Ventura switched to power and bought an all wood 32-foot, twin engine Chris Craft cruiser called "MONPE".

Below are a couple of pictures taken from the 1944 February issue of the Miramar Yacht Club magazine. You can read the caption in Spanish if you zoom in. According to Chupi, the Chavela was a copy of the Bicho Malo and was made in the MYC boat yard, under the direction of the Inclan brothers.



"Chavela", del Sr. Ventura Montes, nuevo cutter de la flota del MYC.



El "Bicho Malo II" de Muñoz Bustamante, que defendiendo los colores del Miramar Yacht Club, obtuvo la victoria de la clase "Cutter", en la regata de la Flota de Cruceros, la de la D.G.N.D., la del Miramar Yacht Club, la de los Comodoros, la de los Setenta Barcos y la del Habana Yacht Club.

Once you got past the main entrance and the lobby, you came out to the open terrace as shown below with a little open cafeteria/bar at the end. Back then it was full of picnic tables on either side of the hallway. The tennis courts, boat anchorage and dry boatyard was on the left side. The skating ring, pool, beaches, bowling alley, and squash courts on the right side.

The moment you stepped out into this terrace you felt an exhilarating moment. It was a great feeling. Music was piped throughout the club, so your ears were filled with a wonderful blend of popular Cuban and American songs: Personality, Diana, O Carol, Only You, Surrender, So Rare, Unforgettable ...

As you stepped on this terrace you would think with excitement about what you would do next: go left or right? We usually went right to go to the locker and get your bathing suit on. Jacinto who worked at the men's locker



room was the best. Being 8- or 9-year-olds, he took care of us like we were his children. He usually greeted you at the front door and showed you where your locker was and gave a towel. He made sure you put your clothe away, if not, he would do it for you later. It was like your mother was there: when you came back to change again, he would show you where your locker was, if you didn't remember. He would hand you a bar of soap and another towel to replace the one you lost. "Here, go take a shower" he would say. After your dressed, he'd hand you a comb: "Here, comb your hair", or he did it himself. Then he would wrap your wet bathing suit in paper to take home, making sure you didn't forget anything. To us was the tall, thin, middle aged negrito with sunken eyes, who always had a good disposition. Yes, we fondly remember Jacinto.

Lunch Was Not Free

The open terrace was a favorite place for families to have lunch. As nine-year-olds, we used to have lunch there a lot: Benny's usual was a club sandwich cut in fours with Cawy and grenadine. Lots of granadina por favor. The waiter would later come and ask you to sign a little piece of paper with stuff written on it. On one such occasion, Benny was eating there with his two sister and some friends. And his father Ventura showed up and joined them for lunch.



As Benny remembers: "We had a nice lunch with him that day, but when the time to pay came, papi got the bill. This must have reminded him about an issue he had about the bills he was getting. He complained to my sisters that he was getting large bills from the MYC for these lunches. So, he went into a "berrinche" about this because the teenaged girls were buying lunches for everyone. It wasn't too big of a berrinche, but he made his point. Well, this might have been a losing battle for Dad with teenaged daughters, but fortunately for him, his two sons were not old enough to start bringing their girlfriends."

The Roller-Skating Ring

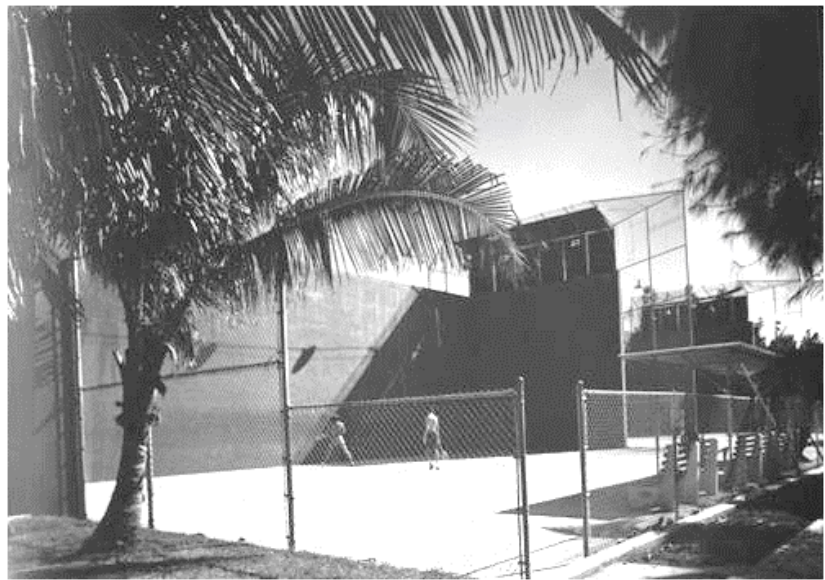
Just to the right of the entrance terrace was the roller-skating ring, as shown on the right. This was a large space with terrazzo floors, smooth and perfect for roller skating. It had three concentric rings, with each ring stepping lower. Other than an occasional roller skater it wasn't used much. It was used mostly to hold parties with live bands and other events. But when squalls would come in from the sea, as it often did during the summer, the kids got to work and came out to play in the rain.



When the heavy rains came, the center ring would fill with water, and you could slosh around in the center ring in a foot of water; And the terrazzo floors on the upper rings became so slick you could slide on your belly for 20, 30 feet easy and that's what we did. On one such occasion a lightning bolt hit really close by and within seconds mothers were screaming at their children to get out of the rain and kids bolted out of there to take cover. Fifteen minutes later it was all over, all the water would dry up and it was hot again

The Squash Courts

For all practical purposes, these shirtless kids playing in the squash (or Jai-Alai) courts shown on the right were Mario, Eddy and Benny. Benny picks up the narrative: "We use to bring our tennis racquets and the tennis balls Mario usually brought and play squash in the heat for hours. We were young and could take direct sun with ease all day long. Then, when we got bored, we would start slamming the balls up in the air to see how high they would go and try to lodge them on the nets that were up above us.



When we ran out of balls, we would sneak behind the courts (there was a little "secret" door next to the courts) and we would look there for tennis balls." There was a lot of assorted debris back there, mostly glass and broken or worn-out tennis balls. There was a chain link fence that bordered the east side of the MYC. The empty field on the other side of the fence was popular with fishermen, but the field was eventually taken over by El Comodoro Club when it expanded years later.

From the squash courts you could hear the rumbling going on in the Bowling Alley building. And after playing at the Squash courts, we used to peek in there to see what was going on. But it was mostly the teenagers and adults who used this place. The Bowling Alley was state of the art, semiautomatic, and you could see the guys working in the back putting up the pins and returning the balls.

Sneaking Into El Cubanaleco Club

On the west side of the MYC, there was another club called Club Cubanaleco, owned by the Compañía Cubana de Electricidad. There was no place to keep or dock a boat, but it was a very popular place. There was a 10-foot cement block fence between the clubs, but Mario, Eddy, and Benny used to walk next to the wall by the seawall and dive in the water to swim over to this club. The place had a partially covered, long pier over the water where they used to have a food bar and picnic tables. It was always crowded and noisy, full of families having fun. Benny recalls: "We used to climb the ladder to the wooden pier and dive off it, over and over again, then we swam over to the floating platform in the middle of the swimming area where the adults hanged out. On the way back to the MYC, we would sneak out the front of the club dripping wet, shirtless, shoeless, giggling and laughing like we just got away with something. It was so much fun." This club was torn down and is now the FOSCA building.



The entrance to the old Club Cubanaleco

Hurricane Season

One summer when a hurricane came close to Cuba, Mario, Eddy and Benny were hanging around near the club's boat house. That day the sea was not that rough, but the tide was high and big roller waves would overflow the top of the sea wall. These waves would pour water over the concrete slab about 3 or 4 inches deep. The water would empty back out to sea and then another roller would come in and flood the slab again. But the surface on that slab was blackened with very a thin film of algae covering it and it was very slick when it got wet. So, when we were walking around by the boat house that day, one of these roller waves came in and Eddy, being too close to the edge, got swept out to the water. He started screaming for help and his brother Mario fearlessly and carefully went up to him by the edge of the seawall, grabbed him by the arm and pulled his younger brother out. But when Eddy came out of the water he was grimacing in pain and could barely walk complaining about being stung by sea urchins. Fortunately, there were a few young men from the club making preparations for the storm and one of them came by,

picked Eddy up, and carried him to the club's infirmary on the main building. We found out later they had pulled out about 21 stickers from this leg.



The sea urchins in Cuba have very wickedly sharp spines, as seen in the pictures above. They grow everywhere and even came up along the side of seawalls (far right). When Eddy was pulled out by his older brother, his leg was full of little black dots like the picture.

The MYC Buccaneers

Benny remembers hanging out a lot with his neighbors, Mario and Eddy, at the MYC. He recollects: “Speaking for myself, Mario y Eddy were my best friends. I’m sure I overstayed my welcome at their home many times playing baseball (pitcher/catcher) in their backyard or with their toy trains (a retractable table that would fold up into the wall). Mario was always so funny, he used to summarize whatever adverse situation we got ourselves into by blurting out his repertoire of dirty words; and with a big grin on his face, he would say: pipi, caca, peo, eructo (you figure it out); then he would beam with laughter, delighted in saying it out loud. We all laughed with him!”

Mario and Eddy’s father bought them a little dingy which they took out every once in a while. It was black and red, and it had a pirates’ head painted on the bow. To launch the dingy, all they had to do was ask one of the boat house workers and soon it would be in the water. We had a lot a fun with it. We used to play pirates in it and would attack the boats docked in the marina. We wouldn’t board or hit any boat, but we would blast them with water using the oars. But it was mostly us who got wet with all the splashing. We would yell out our threats to board and burn them and uttered a few other fiendishly childish curses. Mario would direct the attack from the bow, yelling “a babor! ... a estribor!” (to port! ... to starboard!), pointing to where he wanted to go. But we mostly meandered aimlessly about, giving orders to each other, scrambling for the oars and going in circles, laughing, giggling, and getting wet all the time. It’s amazing we never sank dingy. But Ooooh, what fun we had.



Berrinche at La Barra

To the right is a picture of the main open bar (La Barra). It was located on the ground floor of the main building facing the boat harbor, it was below the men’s and the women’s dressing rooms. The sliding glass doors would open all the way, to expose the entire front wall. To the right of the picture, you can barely see the circular stairway that went to the women’s dressing room. The men’s stairway is a little closer to us beyond sight of the picture. It was possible to get confused and go up the wrong stairway. Benny went up a few times on the wrong stairs and was immediately turned way by the lady at the door.

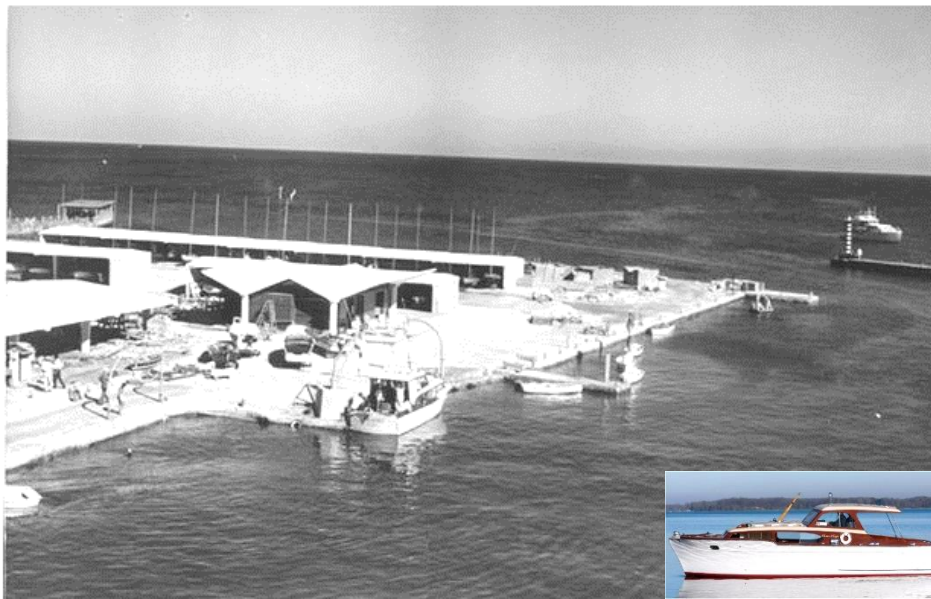


On weekends, there was always a trio (guitar, bass, and a big mambo drum) playing and singing popular Cuban songs of the time. They stood behind and to the left of the guy taking this picture. The smell of cigars, cigarettes, beach, Coppertone, and rum was heavy in the air. The sound of chattering, laughter, dominos, and slamming “cubiletes” (a dice game) also mingled with the soft sounds of the trio playing in the background. The terrazzo floor was usually wet and sandy. To sum it up, it was like a taste of Cuba: Sabor a Cuba.

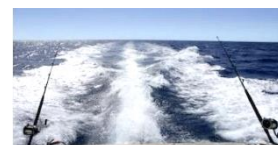
On Saturdays, after fishing with his father's partner, Joe Perez, on the MONPE yacht, Benny used to sit by the little table at the foreground with a big chunk of aguja or dolphin, wrapped with paper, as they used to do back then. There he waited for someone (papi, mami, or Joe Perez) to come and take him home.

One Saturday afternoon, while Benny was sitting there waiting to go home, another boat owner that was just coming back from fishing sat at the far end of bar where Joe P and other captains sat. And as they used to do, they talked about their fishing luck for that day. Well as it happened, earlier that day Joe P was hooked to a sailfish and was fighting the fish while the captain was maneuvering MONPE to help him land the fish. But while the fish was still far from the boat and another boat came by and saw us struggling and didn't realize that we were hooked up. So, this boat started circling back to the MONPE to see what we were doing; And Joe P and the captain started frantically yelling at them, waving the other boat off and to stay away so they wouldn't cut the line with the prop. The guys in the other boat instead came closer trying to hear what we were yelling about. Finally, with a twang the line snapped, and we lost the fish. Joe P and the captain were incensed and uttered quite a few obscenities. But what was done, was done, and we kept on fishing but caught nothing else that day. So, later this guy that came up to La Barra happened to be the same guy that cut us off; and after a while Joe P realized it was the guy who cut him off. So, a big "berrinche" started between the two of them with a lot of cussing and arm waving. But in the end, it didn't get violent. Eventually Joe P calmed down and they finally patched things up.

How a Little Boy Started Dreaming in Blue



The picture above shows a wonderful rendition of a typical day at the club before going fishing for sailfish (aguja) and dolphin (dorado, not a dolphin like Flipper). The first thing we did was move the boat from anchorage to the gasoline dock, as the large yacht shown above has done. There they provisioned the boat with food, bait, ice, and gas, etc. The MONPE looked very much like the one shown in the Photo. (You can see a boat being launched just to the bottom right of the picture.)



It was a thrill when the engines roared to cruising speed

In the summer of 1958, Joe Pérez used to go out every Saturday fishing for sailfish on the MONPE with Benny along with the hired captain. When Joe caught dolphin, he would harvest it for eating but he saw it as a nuisance fish, his prize fish was sailfish, which he also harvested. He used to pick up Benny at 7 o'clock in the morning (just barely awake) and take him to little breakfast place they used to have by the Coney Island Park. (Coney Island Park was a big amusement park with an iconic wooden roller coaster "Montaña Rusa". It no longer exists. The place also had a distinct and wonderful smell of roasted peanuts.) Benny continues the story: "Later at the club, after gassing up the boat, we idled slowly past el farolito (the little red and white striped lighthouse by the harbor exit, as can be seen on the right side of the picture). Then we usually went right toward El Morro, while Joe Perez and the Captain figured out where they were going to fish that day. While the boat was moving slowly, I use to like to go to the bow. I knew they would call me to come back when they were ready to throttle-up the engines, so I would lay flat on my belly, holding the rub rail, and stuck my head out the bow looking straight down at the water. The sea was so clear! You could see glimpses of fish, coral rocks, sea urchins, and all kinds of sea vegetation. In deeper water, the sea turned a beautiful deep blue where you could see the sun rays zigzag their way down and disappear. It was there, on the bow of the MONPE, that my deep love for the blue sea was born."



Montaña Rusa

Then in early 1962 Mario and Eddy left Cuba, as Benny remembers:" They gathered in front of their house on the way to the airport and Pipo, Mario and Eddy came over to say goodbye. Then one of them went to the house and brought back Mario's prize 3-speed race bike with skinny tires; And they gave it to me. I was delighted, but again missed the big picture of this event: I was losing my best friends ever for ever... so sad" ...



Aquí está Benny (8) con su hermana Fanita y una amiga. Estamos en la entrada de la playa de adultos del MYC que tenía una plataforma que flotaba en la parte honda. Se ve la baranda que tenía a la entrada. Una vez contemplando si me metía ahí, vi un sábalo gigante rodeando rápidamente por la muralla, aparentemente buscando la salida de ahí. Por cierto, ese día no me metí.

Circa 1957. El novio tome la foto.