

Sandy Lillydahl Venceremos Brigade Photograph Collection

1970-2005 (*Bulk:*1970)

1 box (0.25 linear foot)

Call no.: FS 056

Collection overview

A 1969 graduate of Smith College and member of Students for a Democratic Society, Sandy Lillydahl took part in the second contingent of the Venceremos Brigade. Between February and April 1970, Lillydahl and traveled to Cuba as an expression of solidarity with the Cuban people and to assist in the sugarcane harvest.

The 35 color snapshots that comprise the Lillydahl collection document the work of during the New England contingent of the second Venceremos Brigade as they worked the sugarcane fields in Aguacate, Cuba, and toured the country. Each image is accompanied by a caption supplied by Lillydahl in 2005, describing the scene and reflecting on her experiences, and the collection also includes copies of the file kept by the FBI on Lillydahl, obtained by her through the Freedom of Information Act in 1975.

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Background on Sandy Lillydahl

In 1969, the antiwar activist and former president of Students for a Democratic Society, Carl Oglesby, proposed that the SDS should organize a contingent of American students to travel to Cuba as a gesture of revolutionary solidarity. As guests of the Cuban government, members of what would be called the Venceremos Brigade would go not as tourists, but as workers intending to assist the struggling nation reach its ambitious goal of harvesting 10 million tons of sugarcane for export, allowing them to raise capital to shore up the economy and lessen dependence on the Soviet Union. Following on the heels of the First Brigade in 1969, the Venceremos Brigade became an annual

project, sending thousands of American students over the years to work and to learn about Cuban history and culture.

Among the participants on the Second Brigade was a recent graduate of Smith College, Sandy Lillydahl. A native of Wisconsin, Lillydahl had become involved in SDS as an undergraduate and shared in the group's radical opposition to the war in Vietnam and their desire to remake American society on more egalitarian grounds.

In February 1970, nearly 1,000 volunteers from across the United States traveled to Cuba in two large groups defying the imposition of a comprehensive embargo on travel and trade. Several hundred Brigadistas from the western states flew to Havana by way of Mexico City, while approximately 500 participants from the east traveled to New Brunswick, Canada, to board a freighter, the *Luis Arcos Bergnes*, southward. Once they arrived in Cuba, the participants were subdivided into smaller Brigades based on their region of origin, with New Englanders comprising Brigades 5 and 6 -- the latter Lillydahl's Brigade.



Jamie Lasalle, cutting cane

After harvesting sugarcane in Aguacate, southeast of Havana, for several weeks, the Brigade spent two weeks touring the country from Santiago de Cuba and Oriente Province to Havana, visiting schools and other facilities to learn about Cuba's revolutionary project. After returning to the United States, Lillydahl, like nearly every other member of the Venceremos Brigade, was approached by the FBI about her involvement. She refused to cooperate.

Scope of collection

The 35 color snapshots that comprise the Lillydahl collection document the work of during the New England contingent of the second Venceremos Brigade as they worked the sugarcane fields in Aguacate, Cuba, and toured the country. Each image is accompanied by a caption supplied by Lillydahl in 2005, describing the scene and reflecting on her experiences, and the collection also includes copies of the file kept by the FBI on Lillydahl, obtained by her through the Freedom of Information Act in 1975.

Inventory

Lillydahl, Sandy: FBI file

1975, 2005

13 items

Folder 1

Lillydahl, Sandy: Venceremos Brigade, Second Contingent, February-April 1970 2005 Dec. 13 items Folder 2

Venceremos Brigade photographs 1970 35 images
Brigade members arriving in Havana Harbor 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 3

Contents: "Taken the morning we reached Havana Harbor. A small launch filled with Cuban Venceremos Brigade staff motored out to greet us and accompany us to the pier. It was the first time we saw the orange shirts of the Venceremos Brigade."



New England Brigade #6 members in camp, Aguacate, Cuba 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 3

Contents: "A long line of buses brought us to our campamento or work came in Aguacate, a small town southeast of Havana. We were divided into small work brigades by region. The two New England brigades were #5 and #6. We shared 2 tents, one for men and one for women. Photo 2 shows most of Brigade #6 in front of one of our large canvas tents. The gravel floored tents were lined with mosquito netted bunk beds made from bagasse, the pressed refuse from sugar cane processing. Graveled walkways between the tents were bordered by coffee bushes and lime trees. The cold water bath house was walled by roofless (and we did have some drenching rainstorms). Other amenities included large thatched roof dining and meeting halls, and an open air movie theatre that consisted of a large screen and rows of pam tree trunks for benches. The wooden bench in the foreground of the photo was out meeting spot where we'd pick up our spouted water jugs and sharpen machetes before talking out to the cane fields.

"Back row from left: Lucy Marx (Amherst, Mass.), Adelia Moore (North End of Boston, Mass.), Eva Mondon (Putney, Vt.), Jamie Lasalle (Essex, Mass.), Mike Wells (Cambridge, Mass.), Rhody Streeter (Cambridge, Mass.).

"Seated from left: Jay, me in white shirt just behind Jay, Paul Miller (Plainfield, Vt.), Joel Sloman (Cambridge, Mass.), Mark Smith with bare chest (Amherst College), our Cuban jefe Renato in orange shirt, Elsie Morales in braids and orange t-shirt, Ted Rosner in white t-shirt (Cambridge, Mass.), Will Soper (Cambridge, Mass.), Barbara Rice (East Boston, Mass.) is the red headed woman to the left and behind Henry Norr. The other faces are either too indistinct or I've forgotten who they are."



Postcard of Renato, Cuban jefe of work brigade, seated on bench (postcard from Sandra Rice inviting Lillydahl to festival on Cambridge Common)

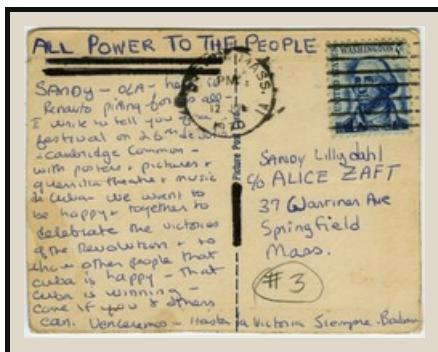
1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 3

Contents: "The card mentions a July 26 celebration on Cambridge Common in honor of the Cuban Revolution. Barbara and I participated with other returned Brigadistas in a guerilla theater skit on Cuban revolutionary history. The photo is Renato, the Cuban jefe (chief or leader) of our work brigade. Renato was from Oriente province and introduced us to the Oriente accent and Cuban leadership style. He was friendly, wryly humored, modest, and conscientious, and he would carefully watch and listen to understand what was going on before offering us advice or assistance. When I was having trouble getting into the swing of cane cutting, he came and cut beside me for a while until I picked up his rhythm and technique. When I improved, he walked away to help someone else -- all without saying a word. Cubans believed in the power of exemplary action, in which a leader demonstrates something worth emulating and others are inspired to pick it up. Renato was my first example.

"After our first week of cane cutting, Renato called a meeting for us to set our production quota for the next week. Someone proposed a cautious 10 percent increase over last week's output. A more eagerly revolutionary companero said we should double it. Uncertainty reigned as we thrashed out how much we should challenge ourselves, getting increasingly nervous both about our ability and the prospect that we would look slack compared to other brigades who might set more optimistic quotas. When we came to a grandiose conclusion, Renato said quietly that the reason for the quota setting was to let the cane processing mill, the centrale, know how much cane to expect next week. After a brief silence while we took in the difference between posturing and reality, we decided to go for the 10% increase since we thought we were still getting up to speed. We had these production meetings every weekend, but the latter ones were always more realistic and we became fairly accurate in our estimates. There was no reward or punishment in setting or failing to meet quotas -- they were merely a planning device."



Lourdes Chateloin and Dulce, Cuban women who worked with Brigade #6

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 3

Contents: "Their orange Venceremos Brigade t-shirts are printed with crossed machetes and one red star for the one million arrobas of sugar cane cut by the first brigade (25 pounds = 1 arroba). At the end of our stay in Cuba, we were given shirts with 3 red stars. Because we had increased the Venceremos Brigade's output by another 2 million arrobas. Lourdes was from Jaguey Grande, a small town near Playa Giron or the Bay of Pigs. During the Bay of Pigs invasion she said that her town was napalmed. Although this had never been mentioned in the US I have no reason not to believe her account. Lourdes was a very open, warm hearted, and happy woman. Dulce (in curlers) grew up in Teaneck, NJ, and returned to Cuba with her family after the Cuban Revolution. The reverse migration of returning Cuban exiles was something I hadn't heard mentioned in the US either. Neither was the bombing of our cane fields which belonged to the Hershey Corporation before they were nationalized. I was walking out to our assigned cane field one very foggy morning with Jamie Lasalle when he grabbed my arm and yelled at me to stop. I looked down to find myself on the edge of a large bomb crater, about 10 feet deep. Cubans told us that US planes bombed the cane fields in the early years of the revolution."



Eva Mondon cutting cane

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 3

Contents: "We cut sugar cane in pairs, each machetero following two rows of cane through the field. The leafy tops were slashed off and discarded on the sides of the rows, and the remaining canes were cut and stacked in piles to await pick up by the alzadora crews in trucks or ox wagons. The Cubans issued each of us thick blue grey work shirts, work pants, heavy gloves, straw hats, and work boots if we needed them. Cutting cane was very hot and demanding work, and we needed headbands and scarves to keep streams of sweat out of our eyes. Bare arms and legs risked being slashed by the sharp edged cane leaves. The little infirmary at our campamento treated machete cuts, blisters, poison ivy like rashes caused by 'pica pica' vines, and minor illnesses. Brigadistas could purchase Cuban contact lens for \$20 a pair, and some women had free abortions, which were illegal in the USA at the time."



Brigade member Joel Sloman responding to Lillydahl's request to "look revolutionary"

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 3

Contents: "Elsie Morales is emerging from the tent on the left. Joel wrote 'Cuban Journal: a Poet in the Venceremos Brigade,' which mentions Brigade 6 names in the poems. I had tried to keep a journal, but machete work soon cramped my hands to the point where I couldn't grasp something as small as a pen. I used to sleep on top of my open hands to prevent spasmodic clenching during the night. At the end of evening entertainment programs there would be a short period of silence while the audience pried our finger open for a round of applause."



Meriendas: Brigade members (Renato, Joe Griffin, Jane Krebs) on break in cane field 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 3

Contents: "Midway through 4 hour morning and afternoon work shifts, a pickup truck dropped off our meriendas (snacks). Meriendas were delicious and sweet: lime or mango yogurt, cake soaked in cane juice, soda tasting like bubble gum, bags of oranges, and always chunks of sugar cane we cut ourselves. After an ox ate another brigade's merienda, we were quick to collect and enjoy ours. From the left are: Renato, Joe Griffin, who at 14 was the youngest member of the Venceremos Brigade, and Jane Krebs (Lenox, MA), one of my cutting partners, who is drinking 'bubble gum' cola."



Meriendas: Mary (Cuban member), unidentified Brigade member, Elsie Morales, and Jay on snack break in cane field 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 3

Contents: "The red and white tin held squares of sweet cake... Mary was from Havana and had a small daughter whom she visited on weekends. We were each told to bring a metal file to Cuba to use in sharpening our machetes. One by one the files got lost in the fields until Jay possessed the only remaining file in Brigade 6. He kept it strapped to his belt, and we'd take turns sitting next to him to use it. Jay became a father about a year after he returned to the US and named his son Zafra after the cane harvest."



Jamie Lasalle cutting cane

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 4

Contents: "As the cane fields were around the camp, native wildlife proliferated in the tents. A mouse nibbled by friend's hair at night. Another friend arrived at our pre-dawn breakfast with a lizard on his head. We had to check our shoes for little scorpions in the morning. Small green frogs lived in the toilets. One work brigade found a dead horse among the cane stalks, and Jane Krebs nursed a little of kittens found in another field. After fields near the camp were set on fire to burn off the leaves, some tents had to wage nightly campaigns to clear the bugs and rodents out of their space. When we cut the blackened burnt cane, our skin, hair and clothes became covered with sticky boiled cane syrup and ashes. It was our worst cutting experience -- aside from the day we tried to prove our revolutionary merit by cutting in the rain."



Jamie Lasalle cutting cane (close-up)

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 4

Contents: "Renato kept records of our paired cane cutting output, and gave us the weekly results along with the group statistics. The most productive machetero duo from each work brigade was rewarded by getting to cut cane with Fidel Castro when he visited our camp. Adelia Moore and Henry Norr were Brigade 6's delegates to Fidel's cane team. Fidel was large and a very strong man -- a productive cane cutter himself, friendly and engaged, and a charismatic speaker with a remarkable memory. In the evening he remembered not only an encyclopedia of facts about every aspect of Cuba, but the faces and names of those of us he had met individually during the day. His visit was the highpoint of our trip.

"The Brigade spent 6 weeks cutting cane, with weekend trips to nearby beaches (including a memorable day at Veradero) and areas of interest like our central, a model dairy farm,, and a nearby small cigar factory that had been treating us to free cigars in the evenings. We became cigar afficianados, savoring different kinds and discussing their respective merits."



Evening view of central Ruben Martinez Villenas sugar mill 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 4

Contents: "Our centrale, the Ruben Martinez Villenas sugar mill that processed our cane. When we returned from a trip in the evening, we could always tell we were near home by the warm molasses aroma of the cane fields and the centrale. The cane we cut was brought to the centrale where it was washed and crushed to extract the juice. Juice was boiled down in large metal vats until it was dark, thick, and beginning to crystallize. A spinning centrifuge separated sugar crystals from molasses. Sugar was shipped to export warehouses, and molasses was fed to cattle in pens attached to the mill. The cattle were F2 hybrids, the offspring of imported Holstein milk cows and the tough native Zebus. They had odd looking knobby little heads with long floppy ears and large bodies. The Cubans wanted cattle that could withstand a hot climate and produce both meat and milk. Cuban ice cream was exceptional, rich and creamy with high butterfat content -- our favorite dessert."



Campesinos (one on horse) waving 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 4

Contents: "Campesinos, the rural peasants of Cuba. If our assigned cane fields were a long walk from the camp, we'd hitch rides with campesinos driving farm machinery, and we often saw them on their horses. When asked 'what has the revolution done for you?' they would invariably smile and say 'I can read.' Bundles of books strapped across the rear of their saddles indicated their continuing studies in adult education classes. The nationwide literacy campaign was one of the great early successes of the Cuban revolution, and we witnessed its popularity in the countryside."



Campesinos on horseback riding past Brigade buses

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 4

Contents: "After completing our work in the cane fields, we spent 2 weeks touring Cuba in a convoy of buses. This photo shows a campesino escort welcoming our tour buses into their town."



Traveling to Topes de Collante in the Escambray Mountains 1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 4

Contents: "Traveling to Topes de Collante in the Escambray Mountains, the road was so steep and twisting that our buses proceeded upwards at timed intervals. Half way up we stopped to have buckets of water thrown over the bus engines to cool them down."



Topes de Collante: View of complex

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 4

Contents: From left: Paul Miller, Jamie Lasalle, and the front half of Will Soper. "Brigadistas went into classrooms in small groups to observe Cuban teaching methods. My group had trouble understanding what was happening at first. Grade school students were clustered as several small tables, talking together, and every now and then one of them would jump up and add more figures on a large blackboard. We found out that the students were working on math collectively, discussing the problem together and then adding their conclusion to those of the other groups to complete the assignment. Developing collectivity was a preoccupation wherever we went in Cuba, and in that environment we learned to live and work more cooperatively with each other. This experience was one of the greatest benefits I received from the Cubans."



Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs): Lunchtime

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents: "We had lunch at a workers' resort, and a Cuban entertainer is shown dancing on a beam. Throughout our time in Cuba we were treated to many different kinds of Cuban music and dance, from the National Ballet's Yoruba dancing and a China band, to the camp 'cultural event' dances and the continual late night Cuban-American conga drumming sessions. We were awakened in the mornings by a loudspeaker blasting our wake up song 'De Pie (On Your Feet),' and listened to a string of Cuban and American music during free time in the camp. One popular radio program was an English language Cuban program called 'Cards and Letters,' in which Americans in the US would send in their questions about Cuba, to be answered by the Cuban host."



Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs): Brigade members and others atop inactive tank

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents: After lunch, we visited the US invasion museum. The Brigadistas in the photo are climbing on an American tank captured during the invasion. The boys in the foreground are some Cuban students who met us at the museum. The indoor exhibits looked very familiar to us -- some of us were wearing Army Navy store clothing and equipment identical to what had been captured and put on display."



Cuban coastline

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents:



Isla de la Juventud

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents: "Formerly known as Isle of Pines. We took a ferry boat to the Isla de la Juventud, supplied with tamarind pods to prevent sea sickness. Disembarking, we were greeted by a crowd cheering and throwing handfuls of candy at us. The Isla was a designated experimental area to discover whether it was possible to have a truly communist society in which everyone would work and receive what they needed to live... There was no money on the island. We were always able to fan out on our own during our visits to different areas, and by comparing our experiences afterwards were able to pool our individual perspectives. On the Isla we discovered free restaurants (lobster pizza), free movie theatres, and stores where goods were rationed but free. We were told it was considered an honor for young people to come to school and work on the island, like those who tended these fruit orchards, and the general exuberance of it. Our 2 nights on the Isla were spent in outdoor hammocks strung in long rows next to a black sand beach and small resort."



Isla de la Juventud

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents:



Isla de la Juventud: tractors

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 5

Contents: "An all-girls' tractor driving school treated us to rides on their tractors. Cuban students wore uniforms, usually grey and blue, but these girls' uniforms included bright red pants. The visit was quite a revelation to us Americans. The women's liberation movement was in its early stages back home and we'd never seen anything like this school where teenage girls laughed and joked as they skillfully drove tractors around the courtyard."



Isla de la Juventud: prison complex where Fidel Castro was held 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 5

Contents: "This photo shows the prison complex where Fidel Castro was jailed for several years under the Batista regime. After the revolution Fidel wanted it to be transformed into a school or hotel, but the round building retained its ominous atmosphere and was left as a memorial."



Brigade members in cane field 1970 9 x 9 cm. Folder 6

Contents: "Traveling through Cuba, our bus convoy stopped every now and then by a cane field and a bullhorn would announce 'Peepee caca, cinco minute.' A general exodus from the buses started climbing down and up through the ditches, over and through barbed wire fences to reach the scant privacy of the cane stalks. At one memorable stop a feisty bull had the run of an open alley between the fence and the sugar cane. We had to time our crossovers to coincide with the bull's charges in the opposite direction. One Brigadista caught her bright purple pants suit on the top strand of barbed wire, and was stuck for some intense moments while the bull charged and the crowd on the buses yelled and cheered as rescuers managed to yank her to safety in the nick of time."



Cuban woman and children

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents: "Infatible circulo or child care center in a rural village. The children in the photo are wearing their grey uniforms and having a merienda. Some of the women in this village worked in a small factory with a nursery adjoining the workroom. Mothers could take breaks to visit their little ones in the nursery. Individual cribs for the smallest babies were next to large communal cribs for the older ones. An open sided pavilion in the village had a free laundry service so that working mothers could be relieved of some of their housework."



Rural housing in Cuban countryside

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents:



Rural housing in Cuban countryside

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents:



Brigade members gathered around a pool

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents: "One lunch stop was at an idyllic retreat formerly owned by Batista. This fresh water swimming pool was built so that a small river could flow in one end and out the other. There was a political and often historic reason connected with each of our tour stops. One morning we unexpectedly encountered armed Cuban soldiers as we climbed on each of our buses. After a few minutes of uncomfortable whispering, I was delegated to ask why there were soldiers with us. The answer was that some members of Alpha 66, a militant Cuban exile group had landed near Baracoa on the north coast. Young Cubans receive military training, and in an event like this, they assume uniforms and weapons if needed to fulfill their military roles, which in this case was guarding our buses. The invasion group was rounded up within a short period of time and we never again had an armed escort."



Oriente Province, with Santiago de Cuba in distance

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents: "Several Cuban independence campaigns had begun in Oriente, and it was regarded as the most revolutionary province in Cuba. When our buses approached Santiago in the darkening evening, hundreds of people lined the road, carrying lit candles. It was a beautiful and deeply moving experience to ride for over a mile looking at their illuminated faces. The Venceremos Brigade represented their hopes for an end to the embargo, and a more humanely united world."



Santiago de Cuba, Moncada

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents: The Cuban revolution dates its beginning to July 26, 1953, when a group of about 100 rebels including Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks. The pink building in the background is the Moncada barracks, flying a Cuban flag next to large numerals '26' on the roof. July 26 is celebrated as Cuba's Independence Day."



Santiago de Cuba, Moncada

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 6

Contents: "After the revolution, Moncada was painted pink and turned into a school for children. The students are shown in their uniforms, waving from the stairs and windows with their teachers. The transformation of a notorious barracks into a colorful school for children serves as a living symbol of the many transformations of post-revolutionary Cuban society."



Contents: "We stayed in this building during our visit to Santiago de Cuba. The dorm was light and airy inside, and was named after a late hero of the revolution, Camilo Cienfuegos. The buildings in this university were being designed and built by faculty and students who combined work with study. Some friends from Brigade 6 and I were invited by a student to visit his computer center. After we admired the computers built by students, he opened one up to reveal a rubber beach ball inside, painted with little ducks, that played a tune when it was spun around. The student told us that was for when you got bored. He also took us to meet his mother and little brother in their small apartment in the city."



Cuban house, suburban Havana

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 7

Contents: "Havana began and ended our trip to Cuba. Towards the end of our trip we learned that a right wing congressman was trying to introduce a bill to ban our return to the US. Nothing came of it... Everyone who went on the Venceremos Brigade was investigated by the FBI, whose agents made attempts to interview each one of us every 3 months. I never agreed to engage in these interviews, but I may have unknowingly been questioned by an undercover agent to provide the information found in my FBI file. Or maybe the agent got tired of the chase and made something up."



Administrative information

Access

View of countryside from bus.
The collection is open for research.

1970

9 x 9 cm.

Folder 7

Provenance

Gift of Sandy Lillydahl, Nov. 2005 (2005-266).

Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, June 2013.

Digitized content

Digitized versions of the images in this collection have been added to SCUA's online repository, **Credo**.

Language: English

Contents: "This is how I love to remember Cuba's landscape, with the blue mountains, wide sky and reddish earth, a few homes and farms among the trees. Months after the second Brigade returned, we learned that despite all efforts, the harvest had not produce its goal of 10 million tons of sugar, but we had given it what we hope was our best. A succession of Venceremos Brigade contingents have since traveled to Cuba, and the embargo is still in place, but more relaxed. In 2000 my son Elijah traveled to Cuba with Cross Cultural

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Search terms

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