The Impact of Operation Pedro Pan on the Pacific Northwest: Issues of Memory, Identity and Community
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Introduction
My summer research focused on Operation Pedro Pan which was an exodus of 14,048 Cuban children from 1960-1962 as a result of Fidel Castro coming into power in Cuba. The children were sent unaccompanied to the United States first to Miami, FL. The program was orchestrated by multiple religious organizations (mainly Catholic Charities) and the US State Department.

As more and more children began flooding in the US, there was not enough room to house all the children in Miami, so they started being sent to different states across the US. The children were often housed in foster homes and stayed there until their parents arrived in the US. For some children their parents arrived within months, while others didn’t see their parents for years or even never again.

One of the places where some children were sent was Portland, OR. These are the children that I focused my research on.

Why Portland/PNW?
The first reason I decided to focus on Portland is because I am from Portland and my Dominican family was there in the 60s. Due to the fact that there were so few Latine people in Portland at the time, many of my family members were in community with the Cuban refugees that ended up in Portland. Many of the people I ended up speaking to knew members of my family at some point.

The second reason is that in terms of scholarship about Operation Pedro Pan there is very little information about Portland. This is likely for a few reasons, one of the largest ones being that Portland is, understandably, not considered a hub of Cuban culture. Most information about Operation Pedro Pan centers around Miami, Florida because that is where all of the children first landed and where a lot ended up eventually.

The experience of Pedro Pans in Portland is unique but also reminiscent of the general experience of Pedro Pans. It is important to add information about Portland to the topic of Operation Pedro Pan because it helps to create a more complete history.

Use of Oral History
One of the main ways I gained information was through oral history. Oral history is a practice that involves interviewing people who were involved in a particular historical event or moment. The style of interviewing is unique and involves improvising questions.

For my research I interviewed 5 people who came to Portland from Cuba in the 60s, three of which come over as accompanied minors through the Operation. The other two were a bit older and thus were not a part of the Operation but still traveled to Portland and lived there at the same time as the others. I mainly asked them questions about their lives in Cuba, their travels to the US, their time in Portland and their perspectives looking back on their experience now.

“My mother looked at me saying that she had left a child and I had grown up”
-Bertica

“I am grateful to my parents that they made this sacrifice to give us the liberty and freedom that we would have not been able to have in Cuba”
-Rosita

“It has been 60 years and we are not going back to Cuba”
-Consuelo

Conclusion
After doing oral histories and reading scholarship, I began to see how the Pedro Pans that ended up in Portland do have experiences that divert from the general narrative of Pedro Pans.

The things I noticed that aligned with the general trends of the Pedro Pan experience were that the people I talked to were upper-middle class when they lived in Cuba and they were all light-skinned. These demographics represented a lot of Pedro Pan kids but of course not all.

Their experiences seemed to divert in that, all of the people I spoke to were older when they arrived in the US. They ranged from 13 to 19 in age. It also seems that Pedro Pans in Oregon felt welcomed by the community and many of them were not separated from their parents for more than a year.

References
- Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program by Victor Andres Triay
- Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children by Yvonne M. Conde
- The Oregonian Archives
- Pedropan.org and oralhistory.org

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