

Gustave Gilg

**Interviewed June 27, 2007
By: Megan Zuba
Midway Village Museum**

Gustav Gilg

Megan Zuba: What is your name?

Gustave Gilg: My name is Gustav Gilg G-I-L-G

MZ: How old are you?

GG: How old I am, that's personal

MZ: Are you married

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GG: I am married. I have been married almost 56 years

MZ: Do you have any children?

GG: I have four children. One lives near Chicago, one lives near Philadelphia and one in Machesney Park and the youngest one is in Rockford.

MZ: Where was your country of origin?

GG: I was born in Haiti, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Swiss origin so when I came to this country they gave me a visa on the basis of where I was born, not of my nationality. It would've been a lot more difficult to have a permit from Switzerland. There is a long list waiting list but for Haiti it is a lot shorter.

MZ: So when did you decide to come to the United States?

GG: Well that was why I came to the United States to go to college because I needed to get out of Haiti and go on with my education.

MZ: What was your life like in Haiti?

GG: It was fairly good. We had a good situation. My dad had a business and we had good friends and I went to school there for high school and after high school I worked for my father for two years and then I came to the United States and studied business in college.

MZ: What kind of business did your dad have?

GG: My dad had an import and export business. He imported some products like pharmaceutical products, office, machines, etc. Then he exported coffee and that's why he was in Haiti originally.

MZ: So when you came to the United States, what city did you come to first?

GG: I came to Washington because I had my older sister was in Washington and then I came to Harvard to find myself around and since I was in Washington they told me that Georgetown University was good so I went there and they accepted me and I started studying there. Something that attracted me there is because they have the wartime schedule and I could graduate in three years rather than four years and I did it in two years and nine months.

MZ: Did you know anyone living in the United States around your area that was from Haiti?

GG: Well no I didn't know they came in once in a while in New York. In Washington I didn't know anybody.

MZ: So when you were living in Haiti did anyone else influence your decision to come to United States? Had any of your friends been to the United States?

GG: No, well we had many friends who were Americans and we were close to the United States and we often talked about the United States and I had relatives in California my mother's family was there and I had two uncles and aunts and cousins over there and I had visited them in 1932 when I was only six.

MZ: So you had made a trip to the United States before?

GG: Yes and in 1939 I went through New York to go to Europe and the war came so I came back to New York again and down to Haiti so I was familiar with the United States. We studied a lot about it in school. We were neighbors.

MZ: So what did you do right after college where did you go?

GG: Well I went the way for me I meant to mention that yesterday that from Haiti, New York was the United States we only spoke about New York people went through New York so I went to New York looking for work and I ended up working in an export business thread forwarding for a couple of years that was boring to work filling out paper's all-time. Then I went on to the international division in a bigger corporation and then I went on to work as an export Sales Representative for a factory and I started to travel.

MZ: So but when you came to Haiti did you have your family with you did your family moved back with you to the United States or was it just you?

GG: No what family my parents stayed in Haiti.

MZ: Your parents stayed in Haiti?

GG: Yes I have four sisters. They were all scattered. I had two in Canada at that time, one in the United States and one got married. She went with her husband other places

MZ: So starting out in New York when you are in college in Washington where did you live?

GG: Well I lived in a boarding house and that was very good. I'm glad I did not stay on campus which is what attracted me in the first place. On campus there is a lot of kids I was not used to unruly life like that. I was too old. I was 20 years old and the other kids behaved like they were in their teens. It was better in a boarding house where I had two meals a day. I did not have my privacy like I would like to but it was okay and when I got tired of the food I moved. I went to another boarding house.

MZ: Was it an all boys boarding house or was it co-ed?

GG: The boarding house was full of girls oh it was but we had the first floor was for the men and then the girls were upstairs. That's the way they divided.

MZ: So where else did you travel in the United States after you moved to different places after when you were living in New York? Where did that take you?

GG: Well okay when I started travel in 1957 I went through Latin America for two months living in New York all the way down to Chile and back through Central America and came back home for two months and I enjoyed it very much. I met many people on the trip who knew my family indirectly or directly and very coincidently and then in 1958 and went to Europe starting in Ireland and went down to Belgium and England and all that and it went all the way to Iran and came back down to the Congo and went all around Africa and back through Germany and Denmark

and back to New York in 60 days and after that I was getting ready to go to Asia and my boss went to Asia instead and by coincidence I started a business in Puerto Rico so I moved there.

MZ: What kind of business was it?

GG: It was office machines and supplies that we had in Puerto Rico.

MZ: So it's still there you established it there?

GG: No, it lasted 10 years and I had to go look for work and a friend of mine invited me to Arlington Heights and that is where I got in touch with National Lock and I started working for them.

MZ: So then when did you come to Rockford?

GG; That is in Rockford National Lock?

MZ: When was that then?

GG: That was in 1972.

MZ: And you came because a friend told you about it?

GG: Because of the job yes. I met the person who knew about an opening and I came to Rockford. I applied for the job and I got it.

MZ: So how was living in Rockford? Where did you end up? Where did you stay first?

GG: At first I had well it was very nice I had rented a room for a couple of months and one of my sons came up from Puerto Rico and I looked around and got an apartment on Fairview Blvd. and from there the rest of the family came up and I looked for a house and I got one where I live now since 1973. Yeah, it's a very nice neighborhood.

MZ: So did you ever meet anyone from home from Haiti that you still keep in contact with?

GG: I've got that Dr. Dubois. I did not know him in Haiti but I met him here and he has a picnic every year so we meet there and he has some patients I don't know. Some I had to help when they first came. I taught them English then I counseled them too because they had children in school and they were raised a little bit differently than Americans here, very strict with a belt they corrected them anyhow so , but I did not keep in touch with them. I have friends that I met in Puerto Rico who are from Haiti. My Neighbor in Haiti was also in Puerto Rico and I met some of them but otherwise nobody here.

MZ: What about do you see any major differences between the culture and Haiti and Rockford and the United States do you brought any of your, I don't know, anything you used to do in Haiti that you brought over?

GG: Not really I lived I am the same person and I married a Swiss girl that I met in New York but here I lived exactly the way I want to. It's very comfortable and I got and because of my Spanish I got involved in the Spanish community first with the Catholic Church we had the meetings for the Hispanic community. We had meetings at their home every week and I kept in touch with them like that.

MZ: Where were you living at that time?

GG: Same place in Rockford. Yes in Rockford they have a big community then I started working with the Department of Health because I had Spanish so I accompanied nurses who visited the new mothers to offer them their services so I went there to translate.

MZ: What languages do you know when you came to the United States?

GG: Well when I first came to college I had a background in French and of course I studied French but in that school I had eight years of English, seven years of Spanish, six years of Latin and I forgot most of the Latin maybe two words. When I went to Puerto Rico I expanded my knowledge of Spanish and when I came to Rockford I speak Spanish and I talked to the Hispanics and then after awhile I worked with National Lock and then they closed their office so I had to look for something to do all kinds of work and I ended up with the Department of Health, Winnebago Health Department and from there I started to want to expand my knowledge so I went to school at DeKalb University and started to become a counselor. So I got a masters degree and while I studied that I worked in different places in Rockford and I started to counsel people the Hispanics because I had contact with St. Mary's Church and I could use one of their rooms there to counsel couples and families and then I worked with the Department of Rehabilitative Services because I spoke Spanish so I had the Hispanic community. So when I finished my work there when I retired I expanded my work as a counselor for the Hispanics and I have clients of DCFS. They gave me families to counsel for awhile and that dried up by now but I had a few families and that was very interesting work. That is what I should have done from the beginning of my life.

MZ: So what other groups did you teach English? I know you said you taught Hispanic people but what other groups have you taught?

GG: I taught English to the refugees from Yugoslavia, from the Congo they had a few families here who spoke a bit of French and from there I could teach them English.

MZ: And how did you get involved in that?

GG: The Catholic charities gave me one because I had seen a paper in the Observer that is the Catholic paper that announced the arrival of an Asian family and Catholic Charities was taking care of them. So I called them and asked if I could help and while I was teaching them English their neighbors were refugees from Yugoslavia and they asked to help and then I explained it like that.

MZ: Are you involved in your church a lot in Rockford?

GG: Well right now I'm retired but I'm with the Holy Family and get involved in the church there but I'm no longer outside very much. In the Knight of Columbus we have very few activities.

MZ: Were you involved in any political organizations?

GG: Political, no. I had a job as, politician gave me the job as a how do you call that a GED Examiner. I was a GED examiner for a while. That was quite interesting.

MZ: You had quite a lot of jobs.

GG: Yes it was very nice.

MZ: So when did you become a citizen of the United States?

GG: Alright when I came to the United States when I became a resident that time because I came here as a student and my visa expired when I'd finished school so I had to do something so I decided to become a resident and there was a school for residents for that in Washington in

immigration school that took care of all the documentation and when it was ready I had to get out of the country and then come back because my passport had to have the stamp of residents and the immigration officer told me that I had all the rights of a citizen except that I could not vote and I could not run for office. That was the limitation and I was quite satisfied with that. I could do anything I wanted and then when two of my children were born they were American citizens and then I decided to become a citizen so I'd wait five years and in 1954 I became a citizen.

MZ: Was that really exciting for you?

GG: Oh yes of course. It was very great when I travel I was a citizen I could go anywhere. People respected Americans at that time.

MZ: So what other jobs did you have in Rockford?

GG: One other job I had was with the Epilepsy Association. It was a volunteer job but I had to translate movie films that they had on epilepsy and when I showed it was in English and I showed it to Hispanics and so I had to translate it for them.

MZ: So you just said what was going on in the movie to them?

GG: Yes, I translated what they were saying and show them what was going on, yes.

MZ: How many years did you do that for?

GG: I did that for a short time, maybe for a year or so.

MZ: So you're saying that you wish you'd done counseling your entire life. Why do you like it so much?

GG: Well because it's easy to do that, to listen and to try to help somebody solve the problems and I had while working with Dors, the Department of rehab I had many people that I helped. Ten years later they call me to thank me again. I don't even remember them you know and that is very unusual and in one of the clients I helped on my own. The woman had a lot of problems with her husband and I helped her and she told me once that she could not have done it without me, how much it had helped, I don't know exactly. It helped her to be able to talk to somebody when you have a problem otherwise you explode. I wanted to mention that DCFS contacted the Epilepsy Association and even then without working with her once in awhile I did get in contact for that to present a film on epilepsy. That was good.

MZ: So are you still doing any of that currently, teaching English?

GG: I only teach English because the Catholic Charities call me and I'm helping them with the family who arrived from the Congo and the man speaks French. It is difficult to understand his French. but he does and I'm able to teach him English. He says he knows the English in writing but he doesn't know how to pronounce it. I would like to repair one of my dictating machines so that I can put on the tape and he can repeat it gradually.

MZ: Do you have any plans of going back to Haiti any time in your life?

GG: No, I left Haiti in 1945 and I went back a couple times to visit my parents. I have no desire to live there and I left Puerto Rico in 1972. I have no desire to go back there either.

MZ: You're happy with living here?

GG: Yes, I pick up my roots and I move.

MZ: So did you ever miss your parents when you were living in the United States?

GG: I miss them for sure. I would write them regularly and I would see them once in awhile but not since I'm in Rockford. It is very difficult because that's when they died when I came.

MZ: Did you keep in contact with any friends that lived in Haiti?

GG: We had a couple of friends. We would call each other once in a while or write and the other day I had a call from a friend from Haiti and I realize hey wait a minute that was 62 years ago.
We are not chickens anymore we; are not kids anymore.

MZ: What do you think about the weather difference from Haiti and the United States? How do you like that?

GG: One reason why I didn't go back to Haiti is because it's so hot and I didn't like the heat at all.

MZ: It sounds like you integrated yourself really well in the United States. Do you have any trouble doing that, adjusting?

GG: No, well I did not enjoy living in New York because New York is too crowded. You don't meet anyone. You're crowded against each other. I lived in an apartment. I never met my neighbor. It was a big apartment building and I never met my neighbor. It was too busy; people are too busy. We would take the train, an express train from Natchez Street down to Wall Street half an hour nose to nose collected people touching each other, you never meet them, I didn't like that always running. You didn't have time to live life, you just have to rush, rush, rush work and then I moved to New Jersey and I had to take a bus to New York and from the bus to the subway and then back to the bus every day. Yes to go to work and I started working in New Jersey too and that took me 45 minutes by car to drive all the way to Hoboken and I never met friends in that route only ones from Hoboken New Jersey. We had my job was in a building course it was a factory in old section of Hoboken but going to Puerto Rico was good because there we have a different life style. Neighbors talk to each other. You have time for that.

MZ: How was your experience in Puerto Rico?

GG: Very good.

MZ: You were there 14 years you said?

GG: Yes in Puerto Rico I had a business. I joined the Chamber of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau and they were very good people. I was amazed because coming from New York where the impression was that Puerto Rico wasn't nice and they would fight there are beautiful people down there. The president of Lions International is from Puerto Rico or at that time was. The president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce was Puerto Rican too so Puerto Ricans are very much up to date.

MZ: So you lived with your wife in Puerto Rico right? When did you end up getting married back in New York?

GG: We married in New York in 1949.

MZ: When did you have your children?

GG: It happened well I'll tell you the story my wife is Swiss and she had an aunt who had met a Swiss who was from Haiti. They traveled together on a ship going to Europe and coming back and there was a Swiss party in New York and they invited me to go to that party and I met the

aunt and when my wife came to New York the aunt invited me so I met her and that's how it was so. That's how it all started.

MZ: So do you have any stories from Puerto Rico?

GG: The moustache, well when I started to travel to Latin America and decided that it was better not to be taken as a gringo completely so I dressed correctly like an American would, a jacket and neck tie all the time and I let myself have a moustache so people never knew exactly if I was a local or a stranger. Except one time when I went down to the dining room in a small hotel and I decided it was so warm I didn't put my jacket on. I didn't put a necktie on. Somebody came to me talking to me in Spanish addressing me as a captain. I said well that's too much too dangerous so I kept my mustache.

So what did you do for fun? Did you have time for yourself to do anything?

GG: Well in Puerto Rico I went back to play tennis. I used to play tennis in Haiti when I was younger and I never developed any special aptitude to be a professional player but I was enjoying it very much and in Puerto Rico I met a friend who was interested in playing tennis too and we played tennis quite often especially at night when it's cooler. That was very good and here I try to play too with the kids and it's a very good sport.

MZ: Did you play any other sports other than tennis?

GG: No, in Puerto Rico I used to play soccer with the Swiss team. They were the cooks at the Swiss chalet. We would play at night; that was fun.

MZ: So was tennis a really big sport in Haiti?

GG: Well for us it was because we were members of the country club and tennis was available which was a nice group of people and very good courts. So we played very well.

MZ: Did you have a lot of American friends in Haiti?

GG: No, I did not have American friends in Haiti. They were all Haitians or French or half but no Americans because they were very secluded. They had the American club and we didn't belong to the American club.

MZ: So how is the schooling there and everything?

GG: The school was excellent. My school was run by the French Christian Brothers and they were all Frenchmen from Brittany so we had a thorough school. A very good school,

MZ: Was it a public or private?

GG: No, it was a private school but it was inexpensive enough that anybody could go to that school buy they were very strict, very orderly, very, very strict so we were well-trained and I learned a lot about the United States a that school you know about Europe of course.

MZ: So what you think has been best part about coming to the United States?

GG: The best part is feeling at home and being free not to worry about who's going to spy on me except lately that's a different story again. I don't know who's listening to my telephone.

MZ: So you really feel like right when you came here did you feel an automatic sense of being an American or did you have to wait for your citizenship?

GG: No when I came and went to school I was with guys who were older. I was 20 and the average age was 35. They were all veterans from World War II and they were so nice, so open, so friendly. I decided by golly I'm going to stay here. I had more contacts here than ever in my life so in a short time so it was fine.

MZ: Did you ever feel unwelcome?

GG: No not at all. As a matter of fact seeing how much trouble some of the immigrants have nobody has ever stopped me to find out if I had a green card or not because of my color I guess. So unless I talk when I talk then they question me where do you come from ,where do you have an accent from?

MZ: What do you think has been the most disappointing part, the hardest part of living in the United States?

GG: The most difficult is work. It is very difficult to find a job that you like and that you want.

MZ: But you felt like you've found that eventually?

GG: Eventually working with the Department of Rehab was the best because it was something I enjoyed doing except that it was not necessarily the most pleasant. You have a lot of problems, dealing with problems and people who have problems but otherwise when I was traveling I didn't mind going to Latin America. It was fun because I met people; sometimes I met people from school. I bumped into them or some Swiss who knew about somebody else I knew. It was fun.

MZ: So how did you raise your children through traveling going everywhere throughout the world? Where did you raise them?

GG: Well first of all we went to Puerto Rico when the youngest one was born so until then they went to school, parochial school in New Jersey and then we went to Puerto Rico and they went to parochial schools there and that was very good too, excellent schools.

MZ: Did you tell them a lot about your life in Haiti? Was it important to you to tell them?

GG: Well when we were down there we went to Haiti once in a while to visit.

MZ: Show them where you grew up and stuff?

GG: Yes. So they knew the family and then you where I lived and whatever. They're fine.

MZ: Do you think that they'll go back to Haiti someday? Do you think that you growing up there, being born there is important to them at all?

GG: They do feel like I have one especially who would like to go and visit but I don't encourage them to go to live there now. It's very difficult, a very difficult situation.

MZ: So you said you have one child living here in Rockford?

GG: Yes

MZ: Do you guys do a lot together?

GG: Well he's married so that's a different situation. He takes care of his family.

MZ: Yes that's true. Do you have any friends that you've kept close ties with since college that you still talk to now?

GG: I have one friend from Georgetown University. He lives near Washington, DC so we write to each other at Christmas that's about all. Yes that's difficult in life to be pulling my roots out and starting. It's not easy to make friends when you are past 50 years. You're settled. You go to your neighbors, your nice neighbors.

MZ: So you have free time now right what do you do for fun?

GG: For fun what is fun? Right now I spend a lot of time reading the newspaper which I get. It gets me very upset because I don't like the paper at all, the Rockford paper and then I get the Tribune, also the Chicago Tribune. It takes good care of that and then I teach English that takes care of one or two days and then only an hour and a half each time I keep busy like that at home.

MZ: So being an immigrant to the United States how do you feel about the current debates and issues?

GG: I am not interested in what's going on really. These people are here and frankly you would not know the difference if they are illegal or legal. They come and they work. That's what they want. They want to work. Now some of them bring drugs too I guess but the main idea is that they come here to work. Now if you want to give them a visa then they have to go back to Mexico for 10 years before coming back, forget it. They are not going to do it like that because they are hungry. They need a job. There is no work over there. That's the problem now to do it well maybe we should set up more factories over there to attract them back to work but after a while the work goes to China so I am happy to be here in Rockford. It's very nice here. I remember walking down to National Lock from Fairview Blvd. You know where it is I walked down to 19th Street and 7th Ave all the beautiful yards. They have birds, squirrels running around, rabbits, that country living compared to Puerto Rico where it's so crowded and fast people are always fast, fast. It's very different. It's very pleasant, very nice. In 1957 when I was visiting Latin America I stopped in Colombia, first I stopped in Venezuela. My sister knew a Swiss couple in Venezuela when she'd been there so we got together and they gave me the name of their family in Santiago, Chile so I left there and went to Columbia and I was to the city of Cali which is a very large city but I was walking down the streets and I saw her name of a business (unknown name) and I said well that Swiss because in New York we had a Swiss council by the name (unknown name again). So I walked in and I introduced myself and I told him that my dad is Swiss council in Haiti and they said well come back we'll have coffee together. So we did. He introduced me to Mr. Souter who was vice consul of Switzerland for Cali who told me I should go and talk to his brother who had a bakery store right next to my hotel. I got there, gave my card to the wife who was at the counter and she gave it to him at the back and he called do you know somebody Gilg in France? I said yeah have my uncle (unintelligible word). Well he had a business with him for 25 years. So that was fantastic and then I went to Ecuador in Guayaquil I came down for dinner one night and right there at the elevator was a friend from school. He was from Ecuador we established contacts there he was very friendly. I got on the plane there was an officer from Columbia going to Chile as the military attaché but I didn't know that and on the plane he had three or four kids and I called one of the girls sat next to me so I taught her English, to count in English and she thought it was so funny she asked me if I would help her sister so they changed seats. So when we got to Ecuador and he was going on and staying he gave me his card and told me that I should call him when I get there and I did and I saw them and they were so happy to see me and yet it was five minute deal. You know that's nice. I really enjoyed that very much

MZ: It seems like you've traveled so much. What's your favorite place you've ever traveled to?

GG: It's home yes.