

[That's me in the picture: Sheldon Shapiro recalls a teenage meeting with Fidel Castro, Washington DC, 1959](#)



We were on a class trip to Washington DC from St Louis, Missouri, in April 1959, and our hotel was just across the way from the embassy by Meridian Hill Park. Someone in our group suggested we head to the Cuban embassy and ask to see Fidel Castro, which we all thought was a great idea. It so happened that he was in town at the same time, looking for support and financial assistance, and the day before we were due to leave we headed to the embassy to try to see him. We waited for about an hour, but he never appeared, so we went to tour the Capitol for a while and came back later to ask again. His bodyguards told us to wait a minute and, because Castro often did things on impulse, he decided to come out. It was almost like, "Can Castro come out to play?" And the answer was yes.

We started walking with him, heading to the park across the street, chatting about politics and economics. We were with him for a couple of hours. We tried using our high school Spanish, but he spoke English fairly well so we gave up. He asked questions about us. I remember one particular exchange when he said that the girls in the group should be sure to know how to cook when they got older. I wonder how that would go over today.

Many of us supported Castro back then. Compared to Fulgencio Batista, he looked like an angel. He invited us to Cuba that summer. I don't think anyone went. He also said that if anyone posted him two dollar bills he would keep one, and autograph the other and send it back.

At one point I went into the gift shop in the hotel and found a 12in cigar, which I brought out to give to him. Of course he wouldn't smoke it - he preferred Cuban cigars - but he was very polite about it and said, "Thank you, that will last me the evening."

I thought he was very impressive. Even though this was a spur-of-the-moment encounter, I felt he knew

exactly what he was doing. He was out there pressing the flesh like a good politician does.

There were some reporters there, although not very many. I noticed a news reporter for the St Louis Post-Dispatch called Richard Dudman. He said someone had called and told him some kids from St Louis were with Castro and that he'd better get over there in case he missed a good interview. I don't know whether or not he spoke to Castro, but when our photograph appeared on the front page the next day, it was alongside his byline.

I remember getting off the train in St Louis the following day and all our parents and friends standing there with newspapers ready to show us. It was great. What a crazy thing to imagine, that the head of a revolution would actually stop and talk to a group of 16-year-olds. We were absolutely thrilled.

The photograph resurfaced in a news report about 10 years ago and my daughter recently spotted it again in a History Channel documentary exploring the relationship between Castro and Kennedy. Later in life, I taught social studies (history, economics, politics) for 11 years and thought that this photograph would make me a minor star, but it didn't impress my students. They didn't think it was as great as I did.

Source:

Newspaper The Guardian
21/11/2014

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