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Heritage, Customs, Family

Terms of Endearment:
CHENHALL'S
Nomenclature

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ON THE COVER

Guayabera, 2012.
Since the first-four
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may have been influenced by the design of the
Cuban flag. *Photo courtesy HistoryMiami*

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HistoryMiami *The Guayabera, A Shirt's Story*

The *Guayabera, A Shirt's Story*. “Hmm,” I thought when I began the review of this Leadership in History Award nomination, “this must be some shirt.” Then I saw the shirt and it *was* some shirt. It was the shirt of my childhood!

All of a sudden I remembered walking down Olvera Street in Los Angeles eating taquitos with my sister, family gatherings with guitars strumming, and generations of relatives chattering in Spanish—even my own wedding. All of those memories had people wearing the shirt, the guayabera. Prior to this moment, I never knew the shirt had a name, never knew it had a history, but now the story of the guayabera was personal and I had yet to read the pictures' captions.

HistoryMiami's Folklorist Michael Knoll was drawn to the guayabera's distinctive style when he moved to Miami from Wisconsin. Knoll saw that the shirt was more than a passing fashion trend of south Florida. “I learned that the shirt is of particular meaning to our Cuban community, but is also popular with local residents from other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean,” he said. “I also learned that Miami is a major hub for today's guayabera industry. In fact, local designers and businesses are responsible for much of the current innovation in the tradition.”¹

With the support from the National Endowment for the Arts and CUBAVERA, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Perry Ellis International, HistoryMiami and its South Florida Folklife Center set out to create an exhibit on the guayabera. It was a perfect blend of history, culture, and modern relevancy that was reflective of their local community.

The work began with an international research effort on the history of the

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President Luis Echeverría (clapping) with Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of England, 1975.

In an effort to humanize the presidency, Mexican president Luis Echevarría often wore the guayabera. His use of the shirt for government purposes both locally and internationally helped popularize the garment.

shirt. This was no easy task considering the general lack of academic research on the topic. What the research team did discover was that there are as many stories for the origins of shirt as there are names. The guayabera is also known as the Mexican wedding shirt, the chabana, and the shirt-jac, among others. Research can trace its origins to Cuba, Mexico, Trinidad, and numerous other countries. However, the name guayabera is thought to derive from the Spanish word for guava. The most prolific story of origin for the guayabera is attributed to an eighteenth-century farmer in Cuba who asked his wife to make him a shirt with many pockets so that he could carry

his belongings. The result was the original four-pocket guayabera.

Since the first four-pocket peasant shirt, place, time, function, and meaning have transformed the guayabera. By the nineteenth century, the Spanish and Cuban military adapted the shirt for military use, and by the twentieth century it had only two pockets and was worn by the Mexican president. In the twenty-first century men from every ethnicity sport guayaberas intricately embroidered and made of fabrics such as silk and linen. To many people who wear the shirt, it holds a meaning of heritage, customs, and family. It says where they come from and who they are.

EVOLUTION OF THE GUAYABERA

Spanish Military



Circa 1895-1898. Spanish records indicate that Spanish soldiers in Cuba wore a field uniform called a “guayabera.” This guayabera was made of a linen or cotton fabric called “rayadillo,” the material used for most of the Spanish military’s tropical uniforms of the period.

El Encanto



By the late 1940s, the guayabera with two breast pockets and two hem pockets was in common use in Havana. During the mid-twentieth century, clothing stores carried the shirt year-round.

Cuban Flag



2012. A handful of fashion designers in Cuba are attempting to revitalize the shirt’s popularity. One popular notion concerning the design of a typical guayabera is that the shirt’s back, which features a decorative shoulder yoke and multiple stripes of pleating, may have been influenced by the design of the Cuban flag.

Dress



GRAMMY® Award winning recording artist Celia Cruz wore this custom-made dress at a 1993 Chanel fashion show in South Beach.

HistoryMiami

“Given our predominantly Hispanic population, the *guayabera* is of notable cultural significance in South Florida,” said HistoryMiami Chief Curator Joanne Hyppolite. “With this exhibition, we hoped to engage this population and expose others to this popular tradition.”

For the exhibit, HistoryMiami built a collection of guayabera, both vintage and modern. With examples from nineteenth-century military uniforms and different fashion changes through the decades, the collection is perhaps the world’s most varied and complete assemblage in one location.

The museum invited community members to submit photos of themselves wearing a guayabera along with a story to accompany each photo. This proved a popular way to engage the community to not only view the exhibit but to also be invested in its success. The photos and stories remain part of the online exhibit and anyone with Internet access can submit their photo to become part of the ever growing history of the guayabera.

In addition to the bilingual (English and Spanish) exhibit, MiamiHistory developed online content and outreach

programs to engage a wider audience. Education programs for school groups and community members, including a workshop on how to make a guayabera, downtown tours of a guayabera workshop, and curator-led tours and talks were just some of the offerings.

The guayabera, once a shirt worn by peasants, is now sold by top fashion designers and mass produced for retailers such as Old Navy. Upon returning home to Charleston from the awards committee meeting, I attended a cookout at a friend’s home. Sitting poolside, I noticed that my Charleston friend from Ohio was wearing a guayabera! When I told him that his shirt was a guayabera, he said “No, it’s a Tommy Bahama.” And so I told the story of the guayabera, along with my own memories of the shirt, to an audience of Charleston residents from California, Ohio, and Maryland.

Knoll stated that the exhibit “was done with the goal of educating the general public about the guayabera and its historical development.” That goal was met in the exhibit hall of MiamiHistory and in a backyard in South Carolina. *The Guayabera, A Shirt’s Story* made a shirt

relevant and personal. I imagine there are people walking down the streets of Miami and Los Angeles and everywhere in between, telling the story of the guayabera and their own part in it.

The Guayabera, A Shirt’s Story was on display June 28, 2012 through January 13, 2013 and hosted more than 25,000 visitors. It received the 2013 Award of Merit and the History in Progress (HIP) Award from AASLH. The exhibit is now traveling and can be booked by contacting Robert Harkins at rharkins@historymiami.org. The online exhibit is available at www.historymiami.org. ●

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See <http://about.aaslh.org/awards> for information on the Leadership in History Awards program.

¹ All quotes derived from the Leadership in History nomination packet.