

# Cuba's Hershey is far from the "sweetest place on Earth"

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.15.15

Word Count **871**



The first train of the day leaves the Hershey train station shortly before sunrise, heading toward Matanzas, Cuba. Photo: by Sarah L. Voisin/Washington Post

Along the coastal highway 30 miles east of Havana, Cuba, the road signs point to a turnoff for Camilo Cienfuegos City. It doesn't exist. At least not by that name.

"AIR-shee" is what everyone still calls it. Hershey. That much remains.

Most of the rest of the town founded by U.S. chocolate company owner Milton Hershey in 1916 is in ruins. The looming sugar mill was once among the world's most advanced. Now, rusting machinery spills from the wreckage as if blasted by a bomb.

Up and down Hershey's grid of residential streets, many of the original company-built houses remain, with some of the only screened-in front porches anywhere in Cuba. The old company hotel and several of the bigger homes, where the American supervisors lived, have caved in.

Gone, too, is the Hershey Social Club, the golf course and other traces of the American experiment that flourished here until it was destroyed by the Communist Revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1959.

## **Businesses Had To Pack Up**

Communism is a form of government where businesses are controlled by the government. People from the United States who were running businesses in 1959 had to leave. Then, the U.S. government made doing business with Cuba against the law.

Today, U.S. companies are hoping for a chance to do business in Cuba again. Because of this, a new optimism has reached rural towns like Hershey, even if no one really expects the Americans to get the mill running again.

Hershey, as much as anywhere on the island, is a place to excavate a buried history of U.S. involvement in Cuba. The history of the town is complicated.

## **Cuba's All-American Town**

Milton Hershey arrived when rural Cuba was feeling the effects of devastation from two bloody independence wars against Spain. These wars ended with a military intervention by the United States in 1898, and afterward, the United States maintained a great deal of power in Cuba.

Land was cheap, and Cuba needed help. Many Americans thought business was the solution to Cuba's problems.

Milton Hershey chose to build an all-American town in the sugar cane fields on Cuba's northern coast, as sugar prices were peaking during World War I.

He did not come to Cuba to make a profit the cheapest way possible. Along with the mill, Hershey built modern utilities, schools, health centers and inexpensive housing for his workers. The town's ballpark was one of the island's most beautiful, drawing teams from all over the island.

## **Sweets And Segregation**

Hershey chocolate bars and Hershey's Kisses were so plentiful "they would expire, and the shopkeepers would just throw them away," remembered Amparo DeJongh, 92, the first person born in the town and one of the few who stayed to see it fall apart.

The Americans also brought a system of segregation by race and class to Hershey that Castro's revolution tried to erase.

"Black people weren't allowed to cross into this side of town, and we weren't allowed to live in these houses either," said 81-year-old Berta Campoalegre. She got a job in the mill after it was seized by the Castro government.

DeJongh speaks of Milton Hershey with respect. However, she said she remembers the way U.S. plant managers "looked down on us Cubans," she said. "I have to be honest about that."

## **Town, Sugar Mill Slowly Dissolved**

Hershey died in 1945 and gave most of his fortune to charity. He had already instructed his executives to sell off his property in Cuba. That proved to be a wise business decision.

The Hershey mill and tens of thousands of acres of sugar cane fields fell into the hands of Cuban sugar tycoon Julio Lobo, one of the island's richest men.

Lobo wanted to cut costs, said Agustin Perez, whose father and grandfather worked for Hershey. Lobo "reduced the number of jobs at the mill and closed the main cafeteria in town." Hershey had opened the cafeteria to offer food at prices all Cubans could pay.

When Castro took power, he made the Hershey mill the property of the Cuban government. He eventually did this with every other business in Cuba.

The town and its mill were renamed for Camilo Cienfuegos, a revolutionary hero. But the new name never stuck.

## **Eerily Quiet Streets**

When the mill closed for good in 2003, the government retrained some of the workers for jobs in tourist resorts and oil fields and built a new ceramic tile factory in town. But many Hershey residents left for Havana, Miami and beyond.

The town's heart, its entire purpose for existing, was gone, abandoned to the elements.

Elis de Cary Rojas moved back to the town with her young daughter a few years ago, preferring its peace and quiet and space to a cramped city apartment.

The sense of ruin around her is depressing, Rojas said. "There's nothing here, no playgrounds, no parks, no ice-cream shop," she said. "But it doesn't have to be this way. It's still a beautiful place."

She said she heard a rumor recently that the Hershey company wanted to return. Or maybe it was Julio Lobo's family.

It didn't matter. Rojas is 23. She said she just wants someone — anyone — to bring the town back to life.

## Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph in the section "Cuba's All-American Town" explains why Hershey decided to build a town in Cuba instead of somewhere else?
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Businesses Had To Pack Up" hints at hope that businesses will return to towns in Cuba?
  - (A) Communism is a form of government where businesses are controlled by the government.
  - (B) Because of this, a new optimism has reached rural towns like Hershey, even if no one really expects the Americans to get the mill running again.
  - (C) People from the United States who were running businesses in 1959 had to leave.
  - (D) Hershey, as much as anywhere on the island, is a place to excavate a buried history of U.S. involvement in Cuba.
- 3 Which section provides a description about how Cuban citizens were treated in Hershey?
  - (A) "Businesses Had To Pack Up"
  - (B) "Cuba's All-American Town"
  - (C) "Sweets And Segregation"
  - (D) "Town, Sugar Mill Slowly Dissolved"
- 4 How do the introduction [paragraphs 1-5] and conclusion [last six paragraphs] contribute to the article?
  - (A) They summarize the article's main ideas.
  - (B) They introduce a series of events in chronological order.
  - (C) They provide descriptions about the town in the past and present.
  - (D) They point out problems the town has and how they can be solved.

## Answer Key

- 1 Which paragraph in the section "Cuba's All-American Town" explains why Hershey decided to build a town in Cuba instead of somewhere else?

**Paragraph 9:**

**Land was cheap, and Cuba needed help. Many Americans thought business was the solution to Cuba's problems.**

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**(C) "Sweets And Segregation"**

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