

DULUTH--A UMD student last week quizzed Prime Minister Fidel Castro at his Cuban country retreat.

Impressed with the sincerity of the bearded rebel leader, he came away convinced that "the American press has grossly misrepresented the Cuban situation."

Russell V. Schoumaker, 921 W. Fifth St., Duluth, was one of 190 student leaders traveling to the revolution-keyed country as guests of the Cuban National Student Union.

The UMD sophomore, coordinator of the campus National Student Association, flew to Cuba with three other University of Minnesota delegates following the U. S. 12th National Student Congress in Urbana, Ill.

The program was labeled "Operation Friendship."

Schoumaker commented further on press coverage of Cuba, based on his interview with Castro, who spoke in English, avoided no questions.

"Our publications tend to give a superficial view of what's happening," Schoumaker said. "They interpret the revolution as merely a change of dictators, when it is in reality a new philosophy of life."

"The press has overplayed the presence of communism (often a trouble-maker during revolution) and the mass trials during the Castro shakeup."

"Castro's reforms for the people outweigh these," Schoumaker said. "These reforms we have actually seen."

The student leader referred to the groundwork being laid for the agrarian program and the building of hospitals and schools. Castro has converted "one of Batista's military fortresses into a school for some 10,000 primary-age children," he said.

The group took a three-day side trip into the country, talked to the Cuban people.

They saw Pinar Del Rio, a typical agrarian center. Here, farmers were helping to build six-room houses which are major improvements over the thatched huts of the Batista "feudal system" regime, Schoumaker observed.

Pinar Del Rio, when finished and ready for operation in December, will include schools, a playground, a commercial center.

Almost completely sympathetic with Castro, Schoumaker admitted to skepticism on one count:

"The people have such an emotional and almost God-concept of their leader. I wonder, should corruption leak into the government, would they be blind to it?"

Schoumaker and the group were chosen for "Operation Friendship" on the basis of campus leadership and a written essay. University of Havana students were invaluable help along language lines, Schoumaker said.

The air was politically tinged during student elections on the Cuban campus. But there was happiness that the school was again open.

"The people want to restore Havana University to the prominence it knew before Batista," Schoumaker said.

Enthusiastic on the subject of international affairs, the UED student commented, "This is the first time I have been thrust into the minority."

It was good to visit personally and to communicate with a people who are involved in world tension. I hope I can help erase some of the stigma attached to the Cuban situation."