

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA

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D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: Today is Thursday, April 17, 2008 and I am here with Armando Rodriguez to begin our third day of discussions about his life. We left off last time with events surrounding his time at the Matanzas Seminary but before we go into his graduation from Seminary as well as his first assignment and ordination. , ¶ G O L N H W R W D O N D O L W W O H E L W D E R X W V would like to talk about. One is a missionary by the name of Garfield Evans. Armando, can you tell us about your relationship with him?

R: Yes. Garfield Evans was a very nice and very active missionary in the Holguín area. He founded the ElenaClinic in Holguín. That was very nice situation because it helped the rural people from the area that were sick. They provided not only medical assistance but also free medicine and this was very good work. But, more than that, he founded and built about ten more chapels in the rural area of Holguín and he also helped a lot of young people from different rural areas. He helped to study human beings and in many other ways in their life. He was a very important leader in our church there in Oriente

D: Do you remember the first time you met him and what kind of interaction you had with him?

R: We met him the time I visited my girlfriend in Holguín. I knew his work, of course, it was not only Methodist, but the clinic project was an interdenominational project. The father of my future wife was Pastor Juaquín Barríos and he was the treasurer of the clinic.

D: Was that while you were in seminary or before you decided to go to seminary?

R: No, this was during my time in the seminary.

D: So that was the first time that you met him?

R: Yes.

D: Now, there are some other people that we would like to talk about and your relationship with them also. I will name them very briefly then we can discuss them as we go: John Stroud, Eulalia Cook, Victor Rankin, Sada Fernandez, Leora Shank, and Francis Gaby.

R: We spoke a little bit about Garfield Evans, but John Stroud was another very active missionary. He was a missionary in China and when the door was closed there he came to Cuba.

D: That would have been about 1949 right?

R: Yes. He did a great job for the Cuban church. He was the founder of Escuela Agrícola Industrial in Preston, Oriente. That was very nice and a very good agricultural school where there was about forty or fifty young people, men and women, coming from the mountains in Oriente and many other rural areas, especially in Oriente but also in other provinces. They studied in a very scientific way how to work the land, how to manage a farm, and how to do everything on the farm. There was a very important professor, Van Hermann, and he was a specialist on how to graft plants and he did that for all the land owners around the school. He made a very, very important contribution to the agricultural situation in Oriente.

D: Were most of the teachers Americans?

R:





D: What was graduation from seminary like? Did you have a graduation ceremony?

R:

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began to walk to the Methodist Church in Alcalá, waiting for the Batista army to come any moment and kill us but, thanks be to God, when this big army, the Chief was Sosa Blanco, a person with a bad reputation because he killed a lot of innocent people in Oriente, he took the way to Mayarí and not the way to Banes and Antilla

people. Maybe, since I had the experience during the time I was a member of the Orthodox Party, God was preparing me at that time for the beginning of this time. But, of course, it is a very, very difficult situation. For example, not all of the people understood us. There was a very difficult occasion in my life when I was very close to death. For example, at that time there was no normal communication between these places and the city of Holguín where my father-in-law lived and there was not much food in my town. I needed to go to Holguín to buy food for my wife and daughter and on one occasion, the bad people from the Batista military in Holguín went to my father-in-law's house. I was there and I saw the people from the Batista military and the guerillas. Then, on that occasion, this visit was made for one special soldier that the people called Mano Negra Black Hand. Because the people said that when they had a person in jail he put his hand, with one black glove, and he strangled the person and this person was looking for me. Thanks be to God I was not there. I was surprised by that and I never went to Holguín

I had another very hard experience during the moment when my father-in-law was moving from one house to another house in Holguín and I went to Holguín with my jeep to help him move. Then I made a different trip from one house to the other house but it was necessary for me to go through one street where the chief of police for Batista was living. I made two or three trips without problems. The guards for the chief of police were there but there was not a problem. But, on one other trip, I suppose that the leader of the Batista police was there and the guards thought that I would kill him and they stopped me with guns in their hands. I was very nervous and they asked me questions and looked in my jeep.

D: Do you think they knew who you were? Did they have any idea who you were?

R: No.

D: They just recognized your jeep?

R: Yes, they saw the same person passing back and forth many times down the street and when WKH\ VDZ WKDW , ZDV D JRLG School RO will not kill you. RO OG PH 3

D: That brings me to another question to follow up from your incident. Do you think the Batista people knew you or that you were part of the Orthodox Party and that you were likely to be a collaborator with the guerillas or sympathetic with the guerillas? Would they have known about your activity with Chibbas?

R: Maybe they had some information about my life but, of course, I was only in my pastoral duty and the problem was they knew that there were some Methodist members of my church that were guerillas. Why? Because, in Tácaj the difficult situation was there was not any food in any store. Then, some mother with little children came to our home asking us if we could give them some food, but we had little food at that time for my wife, my first child, and myself, and I SUD\HG WR \*RG 32K \*RG ZKDW FDQ ZH GR LQ WKLV adventure. I met another person in the community, he was not Methodist he was a friend, but he had a truck and I spoke with him and asked him to go with me to visit the land owners of the area because there were many agricultural products that they could not sell because there was not any communication at that time. And then, he and I went to every land owner and explained to them

that they cannot sell their product and that the people in the area were hungry and we asked them to give us their product, the agricultural product, and we would distribute it in the church. That way the people would not go to take their products by themselves. This was a very, very great experience.

D: Were the big land owners cooperative?



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R: Of course, almost all the people made contributions and they also received some provisions that they needed. We had pretty good cooperation from everyone.

D: Now were you at these two different churches simultaneously or one and then another?

R: Simultaneously. We had the main service at different times on Sunday and during the week.

D: Can you name those two congregations again?

R: The first one was Báguano the biggest congregation, and the other was Tácajo where I was living. The idea was that the two American missionaries lived in Báguano and I lived in Tácajo.

D: I see. So you were at both places at least one time a week probably?

R: Yes.

D: Ok, how many people were in each or both congregations would you say?

R: Well, I had these two congregations and three other missions and we had more than four hundred people in the services every week and in the Sunday school.

D: So four hundred in Tácajo?

R: All together. Then I had another experience and I admire my wife a lot because she paid a big price in the ministry. For example, another day I was visiting the land owners asking for food and, at that time, an avioneta a little plane, came from the Batista army with guns. I needed to leave my jeep and go to the forest or they would have killed me because they knew that, in that area in that community, there were not modern cars. My jeep was ruined because they thought it was a guerilla car. The other very great, great experience was the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1959. At this moment we knew that Batista and his military left Havana. But, also at that moment, the guerilla attacked the Báguano barracks. I was, of cou-5(e)4(id(e)-15(942J9JTJETBT1 0 0 1 183.26

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