

CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA

DATE: APRIL 9, 2008

D= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

R= ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ

D: Today is April 9, 2008 and I am with Armando Rodriguez. , P GHOLJKWHG WR EH ZL
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JODG WR EH KHUH ZLWK \RX WRGD\ \$UPDQGR ZKDN \RX Y
which is located at 720 East Park Street, Lakeland, Florida. WH UH JRLQJ WR
questions. What year were you born?

R: I was born in November 30, 1929.

D: 1929. Where did you live, where were you born?

R: I was born on a farm that my father, Manuel Rodriguez, owned and the name of the farm
was, Ojo de Agua Eye of Water, in the south part of the Las Villas province, now i 393.19 3413o.

D: So your father was a farmer?

R: My father was a farmer. He bought this farm and he met with my mother, Elisa Borges, and
they were married.

D: Where was your father from?

D: Do you know whether he was from Spain, or whether he had lived in Cuba a long time?

R: Yes

R: Yes, they were from this area of Yaguaramas, she had three other sisters, Angela, moved to Havana, and Ana and Leonila moved to Camagüey province and she also had one brother, Fernando, who lived in Havana.

D: Would they visit pretty often, did you have a chance to meet them?

R: Not very often, but sometimes.

D: Did you have a chance to go to Havana as a little boy?

R: I went to Havana after my time of working in Matanzas province when I was a young worker.

D: So you grew up on a farm?

R: On a farm until I was sixteen years old.

D: What kind of things did you do on the farm and what kind of things did they produce on that farm? And how large was the farm?

R: The farm, in Spanish we say trece caballerías thirteen caballerías , G R Q ¶ W N Q R Z Z K D W mean in acres. I suppose, more or less, three hundred, four hundred acres. And he grew mainly sugar cane, but he also grew vegetables for our family use, and also he had cow and pork and chicken.

D: So you had plenty of work to do?

R: Yes, we had plenty of work to do and I can tell you that I had a happy childhood with a very good atmosphere of love and everything.

D: Were you the oldest in the family?

R: No, we are six brothers and four sisters. I am the sixth of them.

D: W K D W Z H U H W K H D J H V R U M X V W W H O O P H \ R X G R
what were the ages, when was the first born and then when was the last born I guess would be one way to cover it?

R: The two first, Nora E R U Q L Q D Q G \$ Q W R Q W a widow with two children and then . . . she and my dad had Manuel in 1925, Oscar in 1927, René in 1928, Armando in 1929, Jesus in 1931, Lydía in 1933, Ohilda in 1935 and Ildelisa in 1937.

D: When was the last born?

R: In 1937. Right now in 2008 my older sister, she is alive, she is eighty-nine years old. My

D: He gave away everything.

R: Yes \$ Q G K H Z D V D Y H U \ O R Y L Q J I D W K H U , G p h y s i c a l W U H P H discipline.

D: No corporal punishment?

R: No corporal punishment, he was very loving. And, of course, I also have a great memory of my mother. She was a very loving mother. She was a hard working mother, as my father. And she was also a very organized person. You would not think she would be with ten children, but she did everything one day in the week or everything had a place in her itinerary. She died very early at forty-seven years old, during surgery in Havana. I was seventeen and my youngest sister was nine. This was a very hard time for us as family. But my father died at ninety-six years old and he died here in Orlando, Florida because, of course, when Fidel came he took all the farms and property. One of my brothers, Oscar, had about one-hundred fifty cows and the government took them. My brother, Rene, he had a tractor and other equipment and the government took it. At that time they came to Florida.

D: Now back when you were a child did your father hire workers on the farm to help with the sugar?

R: Yes, of course . . .

D: How many workers did he have on the farm?

R: This depended on the time of year. For example, when he was planting the sugar cane he needed for a week maybe ten or fifteen workers. And when it was time to harvest the sugar cane, he had, more or less, the same amount of workers. He transported the sugar cane with a carreta con buyes. This means a good transportation by cow. A wood cart with two big wheels and then the cow was pulling the cart.

D: Were there a lot of people that you saw every day or was your farm isolated? Was your farm isolated or were there many other families that lived nearby?

R: Our next neighbor was maybe less than one kilometer and there, of course, the owner of other farm and so there was maybe in the immediate area about five or eight other families and other farmers.

D: Besides your parents, when you were growing up, who did you most admire? Were there any people that you met that you admired growing up? Any teachers or anything like that; that you admired, people you looked up to?

R: Well, I admired a lot my brother Manolo. He was my hero, my ideal. And there was other family that I respect a lot.

D:

R: Well, of course, the last of them when I was converted and I participated in the life of the Methodist Church was Dr. Carlos Stuart. He was a very important person in the history of the Methodist Church in Cuba. Of course also, the missionary who worked in the college that the Methodist Church had in Cienfuegos not far from our farm, and then in that Church in Cienfuegos I was converted when I was about twenty years old and I had very good contact with them.

D: When you were growing up, were you a Christian growing up or did you have chance to go to Church very much on the farm . . . or have access to that?

R: No, on the farm we have not Church or school or electricity or highway. But, my father when he was a young person he had contact with the first American missionary who went to Cuba and when he was living in the Matanzas province and he had a good understanding about the gospel and the religious life, and also he had a cousin that lived in Abreus about twenty miles from our farm, and this relative sent us a Bible and other Christian literature including the Evangelista Cubano, the magazine of the Methodist Church in Cuba that was edited twice a month.

D: \$ Q G W K D W Z R X O G K D Y H E H t 1940 s Q W K H μ V L Q W K H V

R: Yes, this was in 1930, 1940 until the revolution they printed this magazine.

D: Now when you went to Matanzas working for the company, was that in the city of Matanzas or was it in the province?

R: No, this was in the central part of the Matanzas province in the Los Arabos municipality close to Colón.

D: Was that more of an urban center than what you had been used to?

R: No, this was more or less a rural town, very rural town.

D: W D V \ R X U P R W K H U ¶ V I D P L O \ & K U L V W L D Q "

R: Not exactly, but I was speaking about my family and the main Christian contact was the familia Valero my father ¶ V F R X V L Q

D: Can you remember anything that happened in your childhood before we go to the Matanzas . . can you remember anything that happened in your childhood that was particularly distressing you or required a lot of . . . it was a very solemn occasion or was a bad memory I guess, do you remember having any bad memories?

comiendo harina This means that Machado was making new laws but the people were eating harina. Harina is the corn. And for Cubans, the more low level in food is harina or corn.

D: When you were growing up, what would you say was the attitude toward the United States among the people that you knew? Did they like the United States, did they not like the United States?

R: At that time, and after that time, I would say before the revolution the ninety percent of the Cuban people had a very good concept about the United States and the American people. And they saw the United States as a country that liked to do the best, not only for them but also for others. And in Cuba, when a person had work with any American enterprise they were a very happy person and we did Q. We had feeling as found in Spain or in other Latin-American countries. The Cuban people always were a very friendly people to the United States.

D: Now the company that you worked for, I would imagine, in Matanzas and then many other companies, was that company owned by the United States, was that an American company?

R: No, in the beginning, of course, the American

R: Although I was a farmer boy, I think there was the same attitude, more or less the same, especially in

D: Armando can you share with us a religious experience during your childhood; a personal religious experience?

R: My religious experience in my childhood came from especially my father who taught and spoke with us about God, the gospel, and the difference between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches. And after that I had a very important personal experience. When I was six years old, on the farm, came one huracán. A very, very, bad huracán and we were in our home and the wind went down the roof of my house and then our father told us we will remain here at home because if we left the home, there are many dangerous situations. And then we went de bajo la mesa, como se dice?

D: Under the table?

R: Under the table in the dining room, a big table, and, in that moment, when we were there the rain was coming, of course, the wind and so, I remember for all of my life the prayer that my father said. G 7 K L V Z D V D Y H U \ O L W W O H D Q G V L P S H O S H D, S W D \ H U , remember that. I saw through this prayer one p

R: Yes, then I had some special job, mainly in the cane department. This means to take account of the sugar cane that the sugar mill receives and what amount belonged to each one of the land owners. There were many land owners. And then I worked also helping in Departamento de nómina\$the payroll department. And I had very good contact with the land owners and also the workers of the factory.

D: How many people worked in the mill altogether?

R: In think that around, in the harvest time, there was more than three hundred.

D: How many people were full-time in the office?

R: In the office we had, in the harvest time, about ten; and during the rest of the year, maybe six.

D: What was the name of the company?

R: CompaniaAzucarera Zorrilla(Zorrilla Sugar Company).

D: 2 N Z H ¶ U H E D F N L Q 0 D W D Q] D V Z K D W \ H D U G L G \ R X E H J L
that?

R: I begin to work in 1946 only in the harvest time and then I began in 1947 permanently until 1952 when I was sent to the central office in Havana, until 1954, when I resigned and went to the seminary.

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R: Yes, free housing. And I paid for the meal, but only thirty or thirty-five pesos a month for the three meals.

D: Did everyone in the mill eat there as well, just about? Did everybody have the same situation?

R: Well, there were different situations. Of course, many of the workers had their own house and family there. They didn't have that arrangement. They had a person who cooked for them. And the others, that didn't live in the town, we ate in the restaurant.

D: In the 1940s, political events were changing quite a lot in Cuba, what were some of your experiences? That was right after World War Two.

R: Yes. Even before 1946 other young people and most of the Cuban people were against Batista and they saw in Grau San Martín hope. For that reason Grau San Martín won the election with a very, very high proportion and all of us were very happy thinking that the political situation will be changing. But, after one or two years we knew that he was the same as other politicians and then the people were very angry on that occasion.

D: The same being bribery, corruption, graft, that kind of thing?

R: Yes. And also, there was some group that was fighting in the university and other places. The security problem, the violence was very high at that time.

D: And it emanated out of the university?

R: Yes.

D: And Grau was from the university, correct?

R: Yes. Grau was Professor in the medicine school.

D: Did Grau have his university backers, I guess, or were there conflicts among the different university factions.

R: He was a man without any specific personality and principle. He was speaking against the corruption of Batista and, for that reason, the people followed him. But he was not a person with a real personality in principle and he wished to be with all the groups.

D: His party was the . . . ?

R: Auténtico partido auténtico Do you know what mean auténtico?

D: Sure, can you describe that for me?

R: Yes, this was the Partido Revolucionario Cubano That was the party that was founded by Jose Martí. And they say auténtico E H F D X V H L W ¶ V W K H V D P H S D U W \ W K D W -

D: They represented their party as an heir to Martí?

R: To Martí, and Martí is a big leader in Cuba as you know. But he changed, he was corrupted, many people in his government made many, many mistakes and, for that reason, in 1948 when Prío Socarrás became President, all the Cuban people were very unhappy with the way of life in Cuba.

D: 1 R Z L I Z H J R E D F N W R Z D V Q ¶ W W K H U H D Q H Z F R Q V W

R: Yes, this constitution was a very nice constitution. And the good purpose of the leaders in Cuba put together, they thought, and they made, we think, the best constitution that we had had. But, for that reason the election was started because, before that, there was a period from 1933 that Machado was finished and many other different Presidents, not elected, and, in that time, Batista gave the Golpe de Estado en cuatro de septiembre four of September of 1933 and he work, more or less, as Fidel did. He was a sergeant, but the sergeant who had the task of sending the orders; and he was together with three or four other sergeants

HYHU\WKLQJ´\RX NQRZ s DQG Dho. Wk for R Wksn, Baoh DGHU
 was elected in 1940 with a very close relationship with the Communist Party and with both the
 left and the right hand. They divided the power, a little power to each one. A very famous
 communist lea

R: 21 FRXUVH WKL V ZDV P\ GUHDP EHFDXVH P\ IDWKHU ZKHQ \$UPDQGR \RX PXVW VWXG\ DQG WR SUHSDUH DQG WR GR \R

I had this goal. But, the year when I was ready to do the test in the business school, they started that, to have the right to do this test in this school, we must have at least twenty-five years, and I was only twenty. (laughter) But then I said Oh I need to do something and then I went to the other school, social science, and they did Q ¶ W K D Y H Q U W K H N V A D J H H I took the test in the other school. I was approved and I studied DV , Z L O O V D \ D V H [W H Q V L R Q V W X every day to school but I was registered and I bought the books, I studied, and then I went to take the test, final test, there. And then, I, in 1954, I was a graduate of Licenciado en Derecho Administerativo. This is more or less Master in Business Administration. And then I had some matter common to the business school, but, at that time, God called me.

D: If we go back to your time in Matanzas you went to the movies?

R: Yes.

D: What were some of the movies that you enjoyed watching back then? Did they have American movies?

R: Yes, there were some westerns and also the Mexican movies. The Mexican movies were very popular in Cuba because, in that time, Cuba was the most developed in all the region. I will say to you even in the Latin-American region. Maybe Argentine with their tie with Europe was more or less, but when I went to my first international gathering in the Church in 1961, I was in Argentina, Buenos Aires, and then the cars that they used were very old. And in Cuba we had the car of last year. In Havana, the agency of car they put the new car in the same day that they did in New York and the main city here in the United States. And then, in Cuba, in that way for Mexico and even Puerto Rico, we were more developed than Puerto Rico, and Cuba was, I will say, honestly, in the first place in economical development. PET?, there was poverty, there were many problems, but the other 11(?) years had bigger problems than us but they did Q ¶ W K D Y H the economical development that we had in that time.

D: Now in 1946 were there telephones and electricity on the Island, pretty much by that time, in 1946?

R: Of 11(?) years radio, we had radios. In that time, when I went to the sugar mill in 1946 the electricity that we had in the town was produced by the company, not three or fyears after that then came the national electricity company.

D: General Electric?

R: Well, we say Compañía Cubana de Electricidad but was owned by American enterprise.

D: Now also railroads, were there railroads in your memory growing up, or were railroads not extending to yarea? Do you remember?

R: Yes, I remember, we had railroad. Federal rail in a little time about eight . . . two or three miles from my farm, that went three days in a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And they went from there to the Cienfuegos Bay and then we had there some ships to Cienfuegos City. And then, in Yaguaramas ten miles from us, we have a railroad that the train came every day, then we had a connection with all Cuba: Havana, Oriente, etc.

D: So you could ride, as a little boy, to Havana on the railroad?

R: We needed to go by horse to the railroad station in Yaguaramas.

D: When was the first time you went to Havana, do you remember the first time?

R: Yes, I remember very well because the central highway in Cuba was about three miles from the sugar mill where I worked. And then I went to Havana by bus and my uncle, Jesus, my IDWKHU¶V EURWKHU OLYHG WKHUH DQG WKHQ, ZHQW WR surgery in Havana with the best medical doctor that we had, but she died in the surgery. She had a heart problem and she died at forty-seven years old. And, after that, of course, I went to Havana to study.

D: As you progressed in the company, did you go to Havana? Did you go on business or visit there, travel there?

budget and when I was the first time in the seminary, the 1st of October of 1954 I did what I like. I asked to my pastor in Havana to loan me ten pesos for my trip from Havana to the seminary, in Matanzas (laughter), because I like to live by faith not with a savings account.

D: Baseball, how much did you know about baseball? Did you play baseball?

R: I played baseball and I was very fond of the game

D: Was it a very popular sport?

R: Yes, very, very popular in sport. And there was the professional organization for baseball in Cuba, very, very high condition and many of the Cuban player went to the major league here in the States, for example Oreste Meñoso.

D: Minnie Minoso?

R: Yes and Adolfo Lague, Miguel Angel Gonzales, many other . . .

D: Tony Olíva?

R: Tony Olíva, Tony Perez.

D: Now, when you were young, growing up, and also in Matanzas did you know all the players, did you go to games, did you ever have a chance to go to the games?

R: When I was in Havana, working in Havana, I had many opportunities

