

## CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Mr. Argus Gene Parks

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

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M= James M. Denham ("Mike")

G= Gene Parks

M: Today is October 29th, and I'm here once again with Mr. Gene Parks. And we're here today to resume our conversations about his life. And again, today is October 29th. And what I would like to do now is begin with the discussion of your time in Cuba and after you were appointed. We left off yesterday with that.

M: Mr. Parks, how are you today?

G: I'm fine. Thank you very much.

M: As I mentioned before, we're going to begin discussing Cuba. And the last time we were talking is you got that call from the Methodist leadership encouraging you, very, very thoroughly, very strongly to consider going to Cuba. And how did your wife respond to that after only being in Clearwater for a few months and kind of getting settled into that?

G: The best way I can describe it to you is that the call came about 11:00 at night. And my wife was sitting in bed when she got the drift of the call, and I can still see her holding her knees and praying and saying to herself, God, you're bigger than the bishop. We just discovered that we were not sure about that after that. So for her, it was quite an experience.

M: Now, she was expecting at the time; is that correct?

G: That's correct.

M: And she, once again, had just moved from the Tennessee State Penitentiary?

G: Right.

M: And now she's gone to a pretty nice place and now she's going to a land that's she doesn't know much about.

G: Yes.

M: Did she know anything about or did you know anything much about Cuba?

G: Zero.

M: Did you know that Cuba was part of the Florida Conference?

G: I learned this.

M: You learned it very fast. You learned it pretty quickly I'm sure.

G: That's right. So what did you do the next day besides hoping that you had had a bad dream? Did you begin reading about Cuba?

G: No. What happened the next day was that neither Kathleen nor I could eat, quite literally, could not eat. Because I had told the bishop that we would not go. And in those days, the idea of anybody saying no to a bishop about anything was way off the charts.

M: So this is Bishop Branscomb?

G: That's right.

M: Uh-huh.

G: So by the end of the day, it was clear to both of us that we didn't have any choice. So I called him back and I said, Bishop, we'll go. We'll go wherever, anyplace you want us to go.

M: So you, that night, you told him no at 11:00?

G: Right.

M: And so the next day you reconsidered, and you, after a night's sleep, you decided that you probably ought to just acquiesce?

G: No question about it.

M: Did you talk to any of your other friends or anybody else besides your wife?

G: Nobody.

M: Okay.

G: That was it.

M: Did you consider another form of employment?

G: It truly was traumatic.

M: Well, walk us through the -- now, did you have another child yet or was this just your first child that was --

G: This would be our second child.

M: So you had a small, small one. How old was that child?

G: Lisa, at that time, was three.

M: Okay. So you have a three and one that's about to come any day. Pretty soon. Okay. What was it like when you first went to Cuba? And how did you get there, and what was going through your mind as you made that journey? Did you fly?

G: We did.

M: From Tampa?

G: And neither of us had flown before. Well, I had flown in college, but aside from that. But our frame of reference in all of this was that we had no options except to do what we were asked to do. And so, I may have said to you earlier that the Conference Board of Missions told the bishop that he could not appoint us because missionaries volunteered for mission work. The result was that they said we won't approve this unless you send the two of them to Havana and let them make the decision.

M: And you didn't know any of that at the time I guess. You didn't know that that's what was going on behind the scenes?

G: That's right. But then when I got the call from him, the bishop's office was in Jacksonville at that time. He had us to come to Jacksonville. We have a wonderful picture of our little crew and the bishop and the district superintendent.

M: That was before you went to Havana?

G: Yes.

M: Now, when you were there, did they fill you in on the size of the church and anything about what you would be doing?

G: No. All that the bishop told me essentially was that the committee had told him that we had to go make the decision ourselves. And he said, I cannot begin to send my missionaries all around the world to check it out, find out if they'd like to be there. So he said, but I'm doing what the committee has said. And I want you to go, and while you're there, I want you to make arrangements to move.

M: And make a good impression so they like you?

G: Yeah.

M: And so we don't have to find somebody else?

G: He didn't mention that at all, all he said --

M: But that was implied.

G: Yes. That's right. But the main thing was the committee was completely out of the picture. We had the responsibility to say yes.

M: Okay. So you come back to Clearwater and get everything organized and took the flight, what was it like to fly over the Gulf of Mexico into Havana and then to land in Havana? What did you see when you got there and what was it like when you went to the airport?

G: Well, it was, you know, we are young people, relatively young, and everything was so totally foreign.

M: On the other hand, it seems to me it might have been quite exciting. After all, Havana was a fun place. It was a tourist destination.

G: Yes.

M: There was a lot of excitement going on, not the kind of excitement that Methodist ministers might enjoy. But nevertheless, even so, it must have been kind of an exciting adventure perhaps. Or did you not look at it like that?

G: We really did not. And the reason is that we have, you know, we have a box that we're in and there are no decisions to be made as far as we're concerned. And so our focus was learning from the existing pastor. They didn't have a pastor for the English-speaking congregation, that's why we were going, but there was a missionary couple that was filling in. And so we spent some good time with the two of them to get a feel for the situation.

M: How large was the congregation there in the church in Havana?

G: We had probably I would say 250 people.

M: And it was a pretty sizeable church; correct?

G: Yes, and a beautiful church.

M: And were you going to be the head pastor or are you going to be an assistant?

G: No, I am the pastor.

M: Okay.

G: When I got there, I discovered that the English-speaking congregation and the Cuban congregation were at sword tips over the use of the facility. And the Anglos had a room or two that they had locked and that space was not available for the Cuban congregation.

M: Was there a Spanish-speaking minister there as well as an English-speaking minister?

G: Yes.

M: So you would have had a counterpart then?

G: Yes.

M: Who would have been -- now, would he have been, I guess, equal to you or would he have had to do what you told him to do, or was it an equal appointment?

G: Regardless of how it had been handled before I was there, I never knew what the relationship was between the two, but my orientation from the very beginning was that it was completely a collegial relationship. I did away with all of this stuff between the two congregations. We worked together beautifully.

M: You had a good relationship with him, then?

G: Oh, wonderful.

M: What was his name? He was a native-born Cuban then I guess; correct?

G: Yes. Yes. Ernesto Vassar.

M: So you hit it off with him, and you really worked pretty well with him. And you got that problem sorted out pretty quickly. Now, can you describe the setting there in Havana, the church there? It's quite remarkable. It's very close to the University of Havana; correct?

G: Correct.

M: And there is a lot going on in that compound?

G: Right.

M: Just kind of describe the scene and the grounds.

G: Sure. The church had adjacent to it a student center. And that was really the focus of a lot of activity.

M: You're right next to the University of Havana?

G: That's correct. So there's a lot of movement back and forth, a lot of students that stay there like a dormitory setting.

G: That's correct.

M: And they're on scholarship; correct? And so they stay in the grounds?

G: Right.

M: Now, that would have been pretty exciting I think to have the young people around, I would think? It may also have caused some problems.

G: You know, quite honestly, there was just never a problem once I was able to sit down

and work with my colleague. Everything was smooth from then on.

M: Were there student leaders that participated in the church activities at all? Not really?

G: They went to the Hispanic congregation.

M: And were there two different services?

G: It's two different congregations. In fact, I developed a very small congregation later on for the Jamaicans that lived in the area. So we really had three groups that used the building. So we, in other words, we had a good relationship.

M: Now, most of the parishioners, your parishioners, the American Anglo parishioners, what kind of livelihoods did they do, what did they do? What were their occupations primarily?

G: They were all high level, responsible for international business.

M: They were executives?

G: All executives.

M: Sugar companies, telephone companies?

G: Yeah.

M: Being so close to the University of Havana, were there activities, things going on at the University that sometimes would spill over? And would there be like demonstrations or things like that, because this is increasingly becoming kind of a frightful time in Cuban history, '57, '58, '59? Can you remember some of those kinds of things in the earlier days? I'm sure it got a lot more boisterous as time went on.

G: Right. In the earlier days, nothing was really happening or going on. And the relationship between our government and Batista was real tight. Batista was our man. Turned out that he was a tyrant in the true sense of the word. And all of the corporations that owned probably 60 to 70 percent of the land that was useable so and he was very supportive of American corporations

M: So tobacco lands, sugar lands, and also the phone company, the electrical companies were all pretty much in American hands?

G: That's right.

M: And they had Cuban subsidiaries but they were primarily just serving American corporations?

G: That's correct.

M: And his regime went back all the way to the '40s really, in and out of power whether he was really head or not? He was really still pretty much in charge.

G: Yeah.

M: How many people in your congregation had interaction with him or his government?

G: I actually do not recall any specific interaction between ... That could well have taken place without my knowing. Because that was what, you know, was in a different sphere. So there's not a reason for them to comment to me about it.

M: Did you feel that you were living in a dictatorship when you were --

G: Actually, did not.

M: Did you feel like you were being watched in your sermons for things that might have been said?

G: No.

M: Did you feel like you had to hold back on telling the truth or preaching about certain things that might have been controversial?

G: I did not.

M: Not that your job is to preach social justice necessarily about politics but --

G: It was really a non-issue for me because, you know, I have stepped into a role and into a community and that community has its boundaries and all. And I fit into all of that.

M: You're kind of in a compound?

G: Yeah. And so, you know there just isn't occasions for there to be discussion until the Revolution broke. To have a dialogue about that sort of thing. Once the Revolution came into effect, we had a real significant division among ourselves.

M: I want to get into that in just a second but I want to ask you some other questions. Now, up to that point, up to '59, did you have a chance to interact with any other Cuban Methodists outside of Havana? Were there any Cuban Methodist Conferences that were held maybe in Camaguey or other provinces that you might have gone to?

G: I had only one occasion when we had a group of clergy from The States who went to Cuba. And they were spread all over the island. And there were services that they participated in and so I was a part of that and working with those that had come in for a visit.

M: Okay. So you were able to travel and visit other areas?

G: Yes.

M: Now, did your wife ever adjust to things? Did she kind of settle down and get kind of a changed point of view with regard to Cuba?

G: Yeah, she really enjoyed the women of the church. They had very good United Methodist women and she was very much a part of that. And so it was -- it felt comfortable to both of us after a relatively short time.

M: Now, another thing that you would have been aware of as pastor of the Methodist Church is the reputation of Cuba for gambling and prostitution and all these things that were really emerging at that time and almost about to peak I guess. Would that have been something that would have been hard for a pastor to ignore for one thing, and then deal with. Did any of that encroach into your church congregation?

G: Right.

M: Did it affect it at all?

G: Not really.

M: And most of that was way out on the other side of town or something like that I guess going on.

G: Yeah. That was just a different world.

M: Did you get a sense that they were kind of like different cities within a city, almost like you've got the University, you've got the Malecon, you know, you got that. You've got, you know, all of these other kind of places. Anyway ... one of the people that was involved in the Cuban Methodist Church is Angel Fuster. Is that pronounced correct?

G: Yes.

M: Now, what did you know about him and what did you learn about him when you were in Cuba?

G: I really was never thrown with him. I just knew him by name. Because we were not in the, you know, immediate areas.

M: But he was a recognized leader among the Methodists?

G: Yes, very much so. Very much so.

M: Would you say that he would have been, you know, the leading native-born Methodist leader at that time?

G: I would say so.

M: Okay. And so can you also describe the relationship with Cuba to the Florida Conference? Cuba is a part of the Florida Conference and were there annual meetings, I guess annual conferences? Where were those annual conferences held, here in Florida?

G: The Cuban Conference actually had its own conference, its own meeting, its annual conference. It's kind of interesting reflecting on being at annual conference and having Bishop Roy Short as the bishop. And I remember he was a great storyteller. He got sort

of carried away and was talking to the conference about parsonages and how the parsonages had been upgraded and improved over the years. And he said, I remember when my parsonage had a floor that the wind could come in through the floor. And he said -- The rug would come off the floor and it would shake like a woman's bustle.

M: He got so carried away?

G: Yes. Well, the end result was, end result was that they had to have a break.

M: Everybody just started laughing.

G: We actually had a break in conference for it to settle down.

M: So was this in Havana or in Jacksonville?

G: Havana.

M: In Havana, okay. Did the Cubans get the translation on that?

G: That's why we had to break for a break.

M: Now we mentioned of course, Bishop Roy Short. The first time you met Bishop Roy Short was of course before this, and that was in 1953; is that right?

G: Uh-huh.

M: We should have done this before, can you tell us about that moment and then tell us about your interaction with Roy Short up to this point?

G: Okay. Well, my interaction with him in the Tennessee Conference was really very limited, simply a matter of ordination. So I didn't have contact with him other than that. But it's been a great joy to me that he, you know, has played such a big role in my life by virtue of things that happened after that. And we just had great affection for him.

M: So did you see him again until you were in Cuba?

G: I saw him after Bishop Branscomb's death.

M: Uh-huh. And what date was that?

G: I don't remember.

M: Was that when you were in Cuba?

G: Yes.

M: Okay.

G: He went down, back up. When Branscomb died, Short was asked to take over the Cuban Conference for a time. Well, he had been the bishop here and in Cuba previously so he knew the situation. He and his wife, Ms. Louise, who is an incredible

character, went down to look the situation over, you know, to get a feel for it. So the two of them came and I was their chauffeur. And I spent a week chauffeuring them. And we covered the entire island. And all of the churches and it was just a delightful experience. It was just really interesting.

M: What were some of the memorable stops on that trek around, some of the memorable ones?

G: Well, you would have to know Riley Short's mother, who is now over 100, and as Riley told me not long ago, has on her own, given up her car. She was still driving when she was -- And he said, I thought I would never see the day that she would turn it loose without my having to take it because she is one of the most delightful and interesting people that you could know. She just is something.

M: Now, was your wife able to go with you when you went around together with the two of them; correct?

G: No. It was just -- there were four of us. Because he had with him, Ashton Allman, who was with the General Board.

M: So did you go to Camaguey?

G: Yes.

M: You went to Santiago?

G: Yes.

M: Santa Clara?

G: Yes. We made the rounds. And it was so funny, we were, you know, making our rounds, and we stopped at a church. I've forgotten which one it was. But there was a pastor who had in this conference, who had a group that he was taking on a tour of Cuba. And we happened to wind up at the same church at the same time and they wanted to kind of get hooked up with us. And Ms. Louise made it very clear to the bishop that she was not going to be bothered with these people, that we have business to do. And I can just see him and hear him, because she's being very, you know, strong and not going to put up with this. And he said, Louise, if you don't stop, I'm going to get out of the car. So it was just a fun kind of thing that happened. But that was all. That was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

M: Now, when you rode around this big island, Cuba, which is what, is it 900 miles long? It's a lot bigger than people realize.

G: Yeah.

M: And this would have been '58, '59, something like that. What kind of reception did you get and what kind of feeling did you have when you rode around this island that up until recently had been Catholic? Did you get a sense that the people were interested in Methodism?

G: Our mission was to go to every church so that the bishop knew what their circumstance was.

M: Right.

G: And so we really didn't have any intercourse beyond that mission.

M: I guess that question would pertain to your time in Havana too. What did you think was -- you know, nobody knows what the future's going to be, what did you think the future of Methodism in Cuba would be?

G: When?

M: In 1957 and '58?

G: I think I expected it to be as it already was.

M: Just continue along like it was? And really not set the world on fire and not evaporate but just kind of continue on?

G: Right. Yeah. That would be my ...

M: Because it had been going on for 60 or 70 years by that time, so why not?

G: Right, exactly.

M: Okay. What I want to do now is kind of shift gears, unless there's something else you would like to say about your congregation, or any other experiences in Havana up to now, but what I'd like to do now is talk a little bit about the degenerating political situation.

G: Okay.

M: Unless there's something else you would like to say.

G: Well, I think I'd like to talk a little bit about my love for the Cuban people.

M: Okay. Good.

G: It was just simply awesome. In the first place, the way that they responded, I'm talking about not church people but just Cubans. They were the most gracious, I can't describe them, they're just incredible people. We had not been there just a short time and Kathleen and I went to one of our member's home way on the other side of town and when we were leaving, I realized I didn't know how to get to the church where we were. A young man on the street, I said, I need to go to go to the Methodist Church compound, and he said, I will take you. So he got in the car with us and we drove quite a long way, you know, to the church. And when we got to the church, I tried to pay him for his generosity, you know, he would have absolutely nothing to do with it. Now, he has to turn around and ride a bus way across town and the saying was that if you ask a Cuban for directions, he will never say, I'm sorry, I don't know. He is going to tell you, he cannot not tell you, even if he gives you the wrong direction, he cannot not tell you. I'm

serious. It's that sort of thing, *mi casa es su casa*, that sort of feeling.

G: When the ship docked in Havana, when we first got there, we got Lisa and a baby in arms, and everybody is ready to go down the gangplank, and here comes a Cuban sailor, and he's trotting. Sweat pouring all over him. And when he comes to us and he sees Lisa, he stops dead still, puts his hand on her head and runs. Their sensitivity and love for children makes us -- we are cave people in comparison to what they are.

G: The doorbell rang. I went to the door, and here are two Cuban men and my daughter, Lisa. On our street, there's seldom a car, okay? It's mostly hand push carts with vegetables and so on. That's about the traffic going to our house. Well, occasionally, there'd be a car go by, but very seldom. But at the end of the block, a couple of houses up, is another missionary who has a couple of small children. And Lisa without my knowing that, she had decided that while she was visiting there that she was going to come home. And so she is walking across the street and they are driving. Parked the car, they take her by the hand, they bring her to the house and they give me the lecture of a life. I kid you not. I mean you cannot be a parent and act that way. I mean, that runs all the way through everything. Everything.

G: Morrell Robinson, I don't know whether you know that name or not, but he's one of our pastors. Morrell was a missionary in Cuba. Morrell told me that he performed a wedding. And the young couple moved out and got their own little place. The bride cried every night. This went on for quite a while. They finally gave their place up and moved back home because she was crying and crying and crying. This is the house where -- the apartment that they let go, the little house they had. This is where mom and daddy lived. That's how far it was (indicating).

M: Wow, that's unbelievable! Which is only basically across the street almost.

G: Exactly. Now, let's say that there are five children in a family. And mama has gotten old and can't take care of herself. These five children have to decide who's going to take mama. And there's real tension among the five as to who's going to take care of mama. And what this really amounts to is each one is saying me, I'm the one. I'm the one to take care of mama. Look at us.

M: We're the opposite.

G: Exactly.

M: Who's going to have to take care of mama?

G: Exactly.

M: Who's going to have to do that?

G: Exactly.

M: Yeah.

G: Now, when you see that, and that isn't isolated, that is the Cuban whole weave. I came away from Cuba regarding children and regarding elderly people with a disdain for

my own country. Really.

G: We had a Canadian couple. He was a banker. He and his wife told me one day, just houses came up, she said, you know, I've been in Cuba 30 years. And she said I read the paper in Havana every day. And she said, I want to tell you I have never seen one case of child abuse in 30 years. Hello.

M: Uh-huh.

G: It's mind-boggling. But it just rips your gut when you just see the contrast, and you say, how can we be this way? You know, how did we get this way?

G: One of the pastors down in the Oriente area, took me to one of the sugar plantations. He took me to this little village. And there were probably six or eight *bohios*, you know, little houses, thatch roof, dirt floors. And he said one of the members of my church is a supervisor in that area. And he said he came to me and told me that the people that lived there -- they had a pump at the end of the street, down at one end of the village. Everybody took their bucket to the pump. Well, these guys got the idea, you know what, we can run us a line and pipe one line into each of our houses so that we got a faucet.

M: Uh-huh.

G: And they went to the supervisor and said we are requesting permission to run a line, we will buy the materials, we will do all of the work, we're asking for permission to do this. This was an American superintendent. We'll have none of that. I just don't understand and I made myself a note, when the Revolution came, 75 percent of the land that was worth anything was in our hands. And we were simply self-obsessed. The Cuban people, they didn't mean anything to anybody. 75 percent --

M: And did you notice how the only way that they could really survive or become anywhere near prosperous or anywhere near to the point of making a living was to work for one of the American --

G: Oh, absolutely.

M: And so there was a built up group of people who basically just essentially supported the system because it was the only way to really operate I would imagine.

G: That was absolutely -- it was slavery.

M: Uh-huh.

G: Just pure and simple. So I came away from the experience with a great deal of disappointment.

M: Because you witnessed this situation?

G: I mean --

M: And did you see it coming? Did you see this overturning, this Revolution coming?

G: No, no, no.

M: You really thought that Batista was really strong and invincible and --

G: Exactly.

M: -- with the American support that he would go on and on. Just like, kind of like the Methodist Church would kind of just go on and on like it was there.

G: Yeah.

M: Well, let's talk about that a little bit. When did you start seeing the cracks, did it come all at once or was it kind of -- when you came to Cuba in '57, Castro of course was in the mountains at that point.

G: Uh-huh. Right.

M: What did you hear about Castro and what did you know about Castro? Was it reported in the radio or the newspaper about what he was doing?

G: No. We just didn't see much of anything in that. What I did experience was we had a grocery store that was more like a supermarket. Everybody had the little corner shops, you know, but I'd go to the store and --

M: By the way, was this an American type supermarket which catered to catered to the Americans in your neighborhoods?

G: Right.

M: Okay.

G: Right. And I had gotten so that some of the young guys that worked in there, I would speak to them and that sort of thing. And went in one day and he's not here anymore. And then in my neighborhood, I noticed that there was a young man that lived across the street and he wasn't around. After a while, I began to put together that they were gone. They had gone to the mountains. I had no idea really what that meant.

M: And people would say that?

G: Yeah, uh-huh.

M: They've gone to the mountains.

G: Yeah. Gone to the mountains.

M: They've disappeared and they've gone to the mountains. So they had, you know, been sympathetic with that movement but they were still living in Havana in their normal lives?

G: Uh-huh.

M: Interesting. And that seemed to happen more and more so as you moved towards '59?

M: Okay. Let's go ahead with the path you were taking. So when did things really begin to kind of degenerate? And when did it look as though there's really some trouble coming?

G: We went through a phase where there was quite a debate among the members of my congregation concerning what was going on.

M: Americans?

G: Yes. And there was a clear division among us on the subject. I and a number of the other missionaries felt extremely supportive of the effort. We knew nothing at all about Fidel other than his name. We had no knowledge at all of his time at the University and what his leanings were and all of that sort of thing but we had old-timers who were very, very much thumbs down all the way.

M: Because they had been there long enough to know this troublemaker at the University and all the things he had been involved in at the University.

G: Right. But for them, there was the financial realities that went with all of this. But for those of us who didn't, you know, have those kinds of ties and that kind of orientation, we saw it as liberation. And some of my very kindest and sweetest people were very unhappy with me about that. I've always had the -- somehow I wind up, you know, on the wrong side of the fence. And I can't help it, it's just something about -- what my understanding of the Christian religion is that doesn't mesh with all of this other stuff.

M: In other words, the Gospel's really matter and really mean something?

G: Yes. They actually do mean something.

M: I don't want to put words in your mouth.

G: Well, no, you got it. You got it exactly right.

M: So let's get into that a little bit more. Did your sermons, I know it's probably hard for you to remember all of this, but every Sunday when you preached, did your sermons reflect, you know, those kinds of messages? Did you ever feel as though you might have gone a little far on that side and did you get a backlash, were there those in your congregation that felt like you were preaching politics or anything like that?

G: I did not do that. But I engaged in the conversation with the congregation as individuals or in groups where we would have events or whatever. I engaged them in the dialogue on the subject but I never put it as a part of worship.

M: Would you say that your congregation began to be polarized?

G: Yes, sir, no question.

M: Were there those in the congregation that really were opposed or in favor of change?

G: We had people who understood, who knew the realities. Everybody really had vested interests --

M: In keeping things the way they were?

G: Yeah.

M: Now, were people in your congregation -- you said that there was one person there for 30 years. So were there people there that had been in Havana going to that church for 30 years?

G: Yes.

M: Yeah. Wow! That's amazing. That's really amazing.

G: The Anglo community was a significant community. And we had an Episcopal congregation. We had a Baptist congregation, and the Methodist. And we were, the pastors, all three of us, were pretty much on the same page.

M: Okay. That's a good -- I'm glad you mentioned that. Okay. Try to remember and try to tell us what it was like on those frightful, exciting, whichever way you want to call it, those days in 1959 when it was clear that Castro had kind of gotten out of the mountains and he and his army were turning the tide against Batista's forces. What did you hear in June -- or not in June, I can't remember exactly the month that they entered Havana, but they certainly made their way toward -- began making their way towards Havana, so can you remember some of that? What did you hear about, I guess in the news or in the radio or whatever?

G: Batista left on January 1st. I looked that one up. January 1st, '59. We woke up that morning and ka-boom. I don't know where, I think he went to the Dominican Republic, but I'm not sure.

M: I think you're right. So he left and there was no pre-warning of that.

G: That's right.

M: Did you have any sense that Castro's forces were close or anything like that? You didn't have any information?

G: I knew -- let me back up. On our tour with the bishop, we're down in the Oriente Province and it's only one road as you know --

M: Right.

G: It goes from there to wherever.

M: I've been on that road.

G: Yes. And we had Ashton Allman with us and we passed a soldier. And when we got past the soldier, there was a discussion between the bishop and Ashton. Ashton was

claiming that soldier was really a woman. And the bishop said, Ashton, I don't think you saw him like I did. I really think it was a woman in uniform. And they seesawed on that for a mile or two. So I just stopped and turned around and went back. So we got back and it was a man. And the bishop said, Ashton, he said, I'm worried about you. He said, I don't think you read anything but the Florida Methodist. But that was the first time that I had seen one of the participants in the movement.

M: So he was actually a guerilla then?

G: Exactly.

M: He was an irregular soldier as it were. Correct.

G: Yes. So I had -- that stuck.

M: So here are these people out there and they're not really having any authority. Okay. As you went further into Oriente Province, did you see evidence other than that of any other guerilla activity or anything?

G: Nothing at all. Just that lone soldier we saw on the highway.

M: So describe what it was like on January 1st, 1959. What confronted you?

G: Sure. Well, that was -- it just blew everything because it was clear to everybody at that point that all hell had broken loose. And --

M: And so if I understand you, everything was normal on New Year's Eve?

G: Uh-huh.

M: And then on New Year's Day, there was this whole, whole transformation.

G: That's right.

M: Wow!

G: Now, when Fidel came to town, it was something to see. Because they were just loaded on open truck vehicle kind of things. Anything and everything under the sun.

M: Anything that would move?

G: And it was just like -- almost like a forest fire. You could just feel the change in everything. And their effort to establish themselves included a mopping up of dissidence folk who were against. And they were moving from community to community cleaning up.

M: When you say cleaning up, gunfire?

G: Yes, We were in our dining room, and we had wooden shutter windows. We had a Jamaican lady that lived with us. And she looked out the window, we were just sitting down to eat and she looked out the window and she saw soldiers, or rebels, moving

toward the little grocery store. And she said, Close the windows and get on the floor. And that's what we did. And they cleaned out, they took one or two people but they were specifically there for that purpose.

M: Did they kill them?

G: They just disappeared.

M: They took them into custody?

G: Yeah.

M: And they probably looted the store.

G: Don't remember whether they did. The stores were so tiny and so, you know, there wasn't much to loot on that.

M: But could you hear gunfire?

G: Yeah.

M: Around most of the day?

G: I have a sermon that I was working on one evening and I'm writing along and then all of a sudden, my hand just goes like that (indicating) and it was gunfire right outside our window on the street right in front of the house. So all of it became real, real, real. And so we knew that it's a whole new world.

M: So as the weeks and weeks unfold, are people already leaving, beginning to leave almost every minute?

G: Yeah.

M: Every day?

G: Yes.

M: People in your congregation?

G: Oh, yes. Yes.

M: Probably certainly the business -- American business companies are leaving. And so what are you --

G: I looked this one up. It was on August 6th of 1960, they nationalized all properties.

M: Okay.

G: And that was the point at which we left.

M: Okay. So you're there until August of 1960?

G: Yeah, So when that happened, then that was, you know, full exodus.

M: So I guess what I'd like to do now is just go ahead and follow that path if we can up to August of 1960. You've got a long time to go. You got nearly two years at this. From January 1st, '59 to August of '60, so for you, you're still very much a Methodist pastor and you're still very much living in Havana. What did you and your wife discuss at the time about your own personal situation. And what kind of information were you getting from the church authorities at that time?

G: There really was no interaction between me and the general church. We simply stayed as long as the congregation stayed but when they reached a point that the exodus was clear, we were one of the latter ones to leave.

M: Did you have any interaction with the new revolutionary government or did you wonder about what the role of churches would be or religious churches and did you have any interactions or discussions about that with the other denomination leaders?

G: We had no contact at all with the new government. None at all. We did have one occasion where we had a number of pastors and the bishop came and we had a dinner with Raul not with Fidel.

M: And that was different religious organizations as well as --

G: No. It was just Methodist.

M: Just Methodist?

G: Just Methodist. Yeah. And I really am fuzzy in terms of who put this together, how it came to be, I wasn't a part of that. But that was the only contact that we ever --

M: Did it include just your congregation or --

G: No, no.

M: -- other Methodist ministers?

G: Yeah. It was of the missionaries and --

M: Do you remember what went on at that meeting?

G: No. Raul was, seemed to me, like six hours late getting there. It wasn't that far but we waited a long time. But there was no real interaction of -- and I don't even remember what he had to say but we were all on ends of -- you know, anxious to hear. I was among those who did not accept that he was a communist.

M: There were already rumors about this?

G: Yes.

M: You just weren't sure at that point that that was really going to pan out like in that

direction?

G: That's right. Really didn't see it that way. We had our whole relationship as a community and as a faith community within the larger community, we had differences but we never had any serious conflicts among ourselves. We were always--

M: Civil in your disagreements?

G: Yes, yes, yes. We just never did -- we didn't go that way. And that meant a lot to me that we were not alienated from one another even though we, in good conscience, you know, viewed a very serious subject. You know from different perspectives.

M: Now, when this is going on, and even during the Batista regime, did you have a television?

G: Huh-uh.

M: Did you have a radio?

G: Huh-uh.

M: Was the newspaper active? Were there were any public pronouncements? Or did you hear any official statements about the way things were going to be as far as the way things were going to go?

G: No.

M: Not really?

G: It was a very interesting is a good word for it, interesting time in one's life. We were some of the last to get out and had very little in the way of personal effects. But we did have some silver and we were able to, you know, leave with whatever we had in our bags. Many people were not able to accomplish that. But the -- it was quite an experience.

M: Now, when you left, did you get a sense that you were just kind of closing a door behind you, leaving a key in the door lock I guess as you say? Is there anybody left at all in the congregation to carry it through?

G: No.

M: And you really didn't know what was going to happen to the building or anything like that?

G: That's right. Of course, the Cuban congregation was still ongoing.

G: Yeah.

M: Okay. Okay. Now, in August, did you see and witness the confiscation of land and the confiscation of property that was going on?

G: Yes. That, I did. I didn't see it, but knew, you know, that all of that was going on and that that was why the congregation was leaving, and there was no question at all that we're out.

M: Did there seem to be any movement out of the country into the city or vice-versa, that is refugees or any kind of massive moving out of the country, maybe land was being taken up by the government perhaps and people would have been forced into the cities? Anything like that going on or any attempt for the people in the city to be pushed out to work on the land so there was no great migrations of any kind?

G: I'm sure those sorts of things happened, but they happened after we were gone.

M: Okay. Okay. Okay. So you leave Cuba with I guess what you have to be able to take back with you. So where did you go immediately after Cuba? Did you fly out of Havana or did you -- where did you go immediately after Cuba?

G: We flew into Miami, drove out to a Ford Motor Company and bought an English Anglia. A very big expensive automobile; wasn't it? Do you remember it?

M: I think so.

G: I bought a new one. It was \$1,500. And the congregation had given me enough money to buy it. And I kept it for a long time.

M: The Cuban congregation?

G: Yeah.

M: As a going away present?

G: Yes.

M: Okay. Incidentally, in future years, did you see any of your parishioners in later years?

G: In later years, I came across two or three of them. And as always, very heart-warming. Anyway, the superintendent that gave me the appointment in Lockhart, he knew that I was taking a 50 percent cut in salary. And he assured me that at the end of the year for the new year, I would be moved so that I would be back on the level that I was supposed to be or had been at that time. So Lockhart was fine with me for a year. He had made it very clear that I would be moved after one year. Well, it came annual conference time and he called me. And he said, you know, Gene, you have taken in 101 members at the Lockhart this year. And I simply can't move you. I can't do that to the church. And I said, I'm a Methodist preacher and I go wherever I'm needed to go or what have you. I went to annual conference fully expecting to go back to Lockhart. And you remember when there used to be the -- I'm trying to remember the name of the restaurant that used to be -- it's over by the lake where the Texas Cattle Company is.

M: Red Lobster?

G: No. It was before that. It used to be a -- I can't say it. I know. But anyway, I went in there for breakfast with a friend and started out, one of the superintendents was there. He said, Brother Gene, are you a traveling elder? And I said, No, Brother Jesse, I'm

sitting still. It's good to see you. Well, that was back when we had annual conference at First Church rather than at Branscomb. And as soon as I got into the church, one of the preachers said your superintendent is looking for you. And I walked into the church and he was standing right at the altar and waiting, looking for me. And he told me that my appointment had been changed the night before. Because the pastor that had been at Miami Beach had withdrawn from active ministry. He was marrying a wonderful person from his congregation and he was not going to be active anymore. And so that left them with an opening in Miami Beach. And so that's the reason that Lockhart was only one year. As it was, it was intended that I was going to be one year, and as it turned out, it was one year.

M: Well, describe the situation that you came into in Miami and what was the community like, what was the church congregation like, what were the characteristics of them?

G: Miami Beach has a -- I don't know whether you've been over there to the Methodist Church there but it's a beautiful church. And the parsonage is the house next door. The people who own the properties around the church were very unhappy that the church had been built and the folks who owned the house next to the church were very upset. You know, they considered putting an institution in the middle of their residential area.

M: Uh-huh.

G: And it's on Lake Surprise. Anyway, bottom line was that S. S., I've got a male preacher friend named S. S., the owner of the stores, K-Mart and so on, was Kresge, S. S. Kresge. He wintered in Miami Beach. And he owned a home four or five blocks from the church. And so he bought the parsonage and gave it to the church because he did not want the community all up in arms about it. And so that's how they have one of the nicest homes for a pastor. We enjoyed living on Lake Surprise. It was just a wonderful place.

G: My only experience in Miami Beach was really neat. I became the president of Rotary. I was the only clergy person that had ever been the president of the Rotary Club in Miami Beach. Just had good relationships with everybody, colleagues from the other denominations, it was just a wonderful time. And it's one of the high points in my life just to have been with the people that were there. It's a very small congregation. I had a phone call one day from a man by the name of Holcomb who came to the church. He had a home on the bay. And he called me and he said, Preacher, I've decided to give my house -- he lived in Indianapolis, he said I've decided to give my house to the University of Miami for the president of the college. And we've got some antiques in the house. And I don't know if you would like to have them for the parsonage or whatever. And I said I'd love to have them but what I really want is the house. He said, well, what would you do with it? So bottom line was that he gave us the house. And it was really quite an interesting experience. Less than a week after he got home, he died. And one of the last things that he did was to give the church that house. I went to his funeral and it was really a sad event because he had no immediate relatives that he was close to. But all of the relatives that, you know, were connected in any way were there. And I was there. And it really was like a movie where the dynamics of the whole place is just absolutely sparkling with fire because there is just all of this give me, give me, and tug, tug. And you know --

M: So how did you manage that? How did you -- did you just kind of slip away?

G: I stayed very quiet. But it was quite an interesting experience. But the house turned out to be a wonderful asset. In fact, the district superintendent's office was there for many years. I think when Lloyd Knox was in the district that he moved the office.

M: Now, what was this gentleman's name?

G: Holcomb and he lived in Indianapolis.

M: Okay. So what was one experience that you remember happening to you in Miami?

G: This is funny. Kathleen and I went shopping at -- oh, I can't remember the name of the store. It was one of the, you know, Burdines, probably. I think that's what it was. And she gave me a note that she wanted me to buy a little girdle. And the name of the girdle was Stay There. So I went to the ladies department and I handed her this piece of paper, and she just absolutely went white because she thought that I was robbing her because it said Stay There. And I finally was able to get her calmed down enough to understand that I'm trying to buy a girdle. I wasn't trying to take your money.

M: Well, I guess this all means that you're a pretty obedient husband. If you're going to go to the store, to a department store and buy a girdle for your wife.

G: Yes.

M: That needs to be said from the very beginning.

G: It was so interesting. At that time, the Burdines in the Christmas season, they would have a party for the employees at the end of the day. And they would have one of the pastors to come in and it happened that that was my year. And I told the group about my experience with her thinking that I was trying to rob her. And she just nearly died. You know, it was hilarious. The whole thing was just like something, you know ... but anyway, it was funny.

M: Okay. When did you have a feeling that your time in Miami was probably beginning to be completed?

G: Didn't have it.

M: Didn't have any idea? You thought it might go on and on and on?

G: Yes. I've always been pretty much accepting of ministry. I've never had a pastorage that I felt uneasy about or dissatisfied with. So any place that I am, I'm happy. Because it's just the way I feel about ministry. And so I stayed there until they decided to move me because of a reason, I don't even know why. But the superintendent told me that he felt like I needed to move on because I had been there for several years. He sent me to a suburban church in Jacksonville. At that time, people didn't want to go north. Everybody wanted to come south.

M: In Florida?

G: So the superintendent told the preachers in one meeting --

M: I bet now it's kind of the other way around; isn't it by the way?

G: Yes, oh, yes. But he said that, you know, you all need to understand that there is a podium up there someplace. When you're sent to the north, there's going to be a podium around someplace and you need to change your mind-set about staying here or going. But for me it just was not a problem to -- I guess it goes back to my whole life, my childhood. I've always been a migrant.

M: And you adjust well to new environments. You had to kind of get used to that growing up.

G: Exactly.

M: This is probably a good point to wrap things up for today. I look forward to our next session.

G. I do too.