CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Mr. Argus Gene Parks

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Lawton Chiles Center for Florida History
McKay Archives, Florida Southern College
Lakeland, Florida

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 29, 2009

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:

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:

G: Yeah.

M: How many people in your congregation had interaction with him or his governme67

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

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 chauffer. 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 we just [illegible] 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 isBT1 0a bi5ET5ery

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-

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.

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 Batiste'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

direction?

G:

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

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.

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 needol EWLWE2sY@@5q3âP!wa|YeAFÑÊHWGâ&A