

ORIGIN OF THE FREE WILL BAPTIST MISSIONARY WORK
ON THE ISLAND OF CUBA

To my knowledge the only foreign missionary work the Free Will Baptist denomination had at the time of the beginning of the Cuban work was: Miss Laura Belle Barnard, and the work she had established at Kotagiri, South India, Miss Bessie Yeley located in Venezuela, S. America, (having been sent there by the F. W. B. of Ohio), and Thomas and Mabel Willey, with their children Tommy and Barbara, located in Panama, Central America. However, the Willeys had just moved from Panama to the island of Cuba a short time before the F. W. B. work was established there. The Willeys were working with some independent missionaries by the name of Payne; Hugh and Samuel Payne and their mother. Before continuing further let me say that Rev. Hugh Payne served as interpreter for our deputation party during our first visit to the island, and he was a marvelous interpreter.

Rev. Willey was appealing to the National Association of F. W. B. to send a deputation party to Cuba for the purpose of aiding him in deciding where would be the most logical, and promising, location on the island for the beginning of a F. W. B. work. At this time the writer was serving Promotional Sec'y__Treas. to the F. W. B. National Foreign Missions Board. It was enjoined upon myself to organize a group of ministers for the purpose of carrying out this deputation tour. The final outcome of the organizational effort resulted in the following brethren making up the deputation party: Rev. Melvin Bingham, Tulsa, Okla., Rev. Bert Rogers, Wewoka, Okla., Rev. Kenneth Turner, Rev. George Lashum and Rev. Winford Davis, all of Monett, Missouri. We travelled by car (owned by Rev. Rogers), arriving at Miami, Florida 10:00 P. M. Wednesday January 21, 1942. Bro. Thomas Willey had a sister living in Miami by the name of Mason, Dr. Lydia Mason, and arrangements had previously been made for our party to be her guests while we were in Miami making preparations to sail. We were taken care of in royal fashion, every hospitality having been shown us, and needless to say, we enjoyed it very much. The mother of Dr. Mason and Rev. Willey was living with Dr. Mason. She was a very dear old soul, and we found both her and Dr. Mason to be devoted christians.

We only ran into one "snag" in our preparations for leaving Miami. In our haste and detailed preparation for leaving home we had overlooked the matter of getting a release from our local Selective Service Board. Three of us, Rev. Turner, Rev. LaShum, and myself, being draft age, had to wire immediately to Caaville, Mo. for a release so as to visit Cuba for ten days. We were, of course, very anxious until the answer came about six hours before sailing time, giving us permission to leave the states.

At 7:00 P. M., Friday, Jan. 23, 1942, the S. S. Cuba begin to plow the waters on the 236 mile voyage to Havana, Cuba. Bro. Rogers had declared his car, and had gotten it loaded on board ship so as to have it for travelling over the island. We sailed all night under blackout, The ship was painted a dull gray and we "zig zagged" across the water most of the way. All for security reasons, of course, as the German submarines were very active along the Atlantic coast at that time. A United Fruit boat had been sunk a day or so before we went over. One official on the boat told me he was making the voyage one more time and then he was quitting because of the danger. We were conscious of danger, of course, but, far greater than that, we were keenly conscious of the divine presence and protection of the Lord. We sighted land on the island about 7:30 Sat. morning, and about 10:30 the boat docked in Havana harbor. Bro. Thomas Willey and Bro. Hugh Payne were on the dock waiting for us. We immediately drove to the home of the Willeys in the little town of Jaruco (pronounced Haruco) some distance to the east of Havana. We spent ten days on the island visiting and preaching in a number of the mission churches with whom the Willeys and Paynes were working. One preaching tour was made over into the Matanzas Province, visiting the cities of Jaguey Grande and Agra Monte down near the Carribean coast. We saw seven souls saved during the ten days, and made, as we felt, many wonderful contacts. Our boat sailed for the states at 3:00 A. M. Monday Feb. 2nd, arriving at Miami 4:10 P. M. We arrived back in Monett, Mo. 11:30 P. M. Feb. 4th. For us all it had been a precious experience indeed.

As to a location on the island for a Free Will Baptist work, our first ~~thought~~ impression was that perhaps in the Matanzas Province would be a very ideal section for a beginning, but after further consideration it was deemed wisdom to go farther to the west and begin our work in the Province of Pinar Del Rio. This was done, and our work was begun in and around the Provincial capital city of Pinar Del Rio (which name means River of Pines). Here long an eighteen (18) acre farm was purchased some miles out of the city, and a missions school and compound was established on the same.

(Pines)

The work went forward with great strides. A number of mission churches were established in a short while, and in 1944 the Foreign Missions Board asked us to go back to the island and cover the field, and bring back a report. We were also charged to go through the office of the Superintendent, Rev. Willey, and take special cognizance of all official papers, records etc. In the mean time I was planning to be married. I was nearing the age of 40, but as yet had never taken to myself a bride. So the bride to be and I just decided to consummate the marriage and make the missionary trip together; letting the same trip also serve as our honeymoon. Therefore late in the afternoon of April 3, 1944, the wedding ceremony was performed by the Rev. John B. Rollins, and we immediately boarded the train in Monett, Mo. for Nashville, Tennessee to attend the spring Bible Conference at the College. Please allow us to state here that the entire expense of the bride on this trip was paid by us, and not from the treasury of the Foreign Missions Board.

I had been booked to bring a prophetic message each day during the Bible Conference. This we did for the five days of the conference, saw three souls saved, and at the close of the conference we took the plane for Havana, Cuba. We were there thirty (30) days, during which time we covered the entire field; mostly on horse back. We ate and slept in the homes of the natives, in tobacco barns etc. Usually on a wire cot with one thin blanket spread over it. My wife stayed at the Mission Compound with Sister Willey and the students while I would be out on the field with Rev. Willey and some of the native preachers on horseback. We indeed had varied experiences. On one occasion I witnessed the hogs sleeping in the kitchen while I would be sleeping (or did I) in the adjoining room, (dirt floors of course). On another occasion I experienced the hogs and dogs fighting under the table while we ~~were~~ and the family were eating the meal. In another home we dared not lay down on the bed for a brief afternoon rest without first shewing the chickens off the pole work above. But the dear people, bless their hearts, were so kindly and hospitable. They would do anything in their power for us. All they had was ours while we were among them. They were so precious.

My records show I preached 16 sermons on this tour, saw 80 professions, baptized 31, helped organize a church in the town of Vinales with 24 charter members, and helped ordain the two deacons of this church. We arrived home May 16, 1944.

Before we arrived in Cuba for this tour in 1944 Miss Bessie Yeley had been transferred to this field from Venezuela. We had wonderful fellowship with Sister Yeley. She was a very sweet person, spoke excellent Spanish and was very useful on the field. I look forward to meeting many of these precious souls in Heaven. Some of the native preachers with whom we fellowshiped were executed before the firing squad after the takeover by Fidel Castro.

While there we had opportunity to observe something of the corruption of the Batista Regime. The Cubans were very disgusted with his rulership. On one occasion Rev. Willey, a native preacher and myself rode into the valley of San Andrace (Saint Andrew in English) for a service. We also spent the night there. We three were on horseback, of course. There was no possible way into the valley, and it was a great valley, except on foot or on horseback. We were told that funds had been appropriated three different times for the building of a road into this valley, but had been squandered each time. Dictatorship preys on the dissatisfaction and unrest of the populace. Castro rode into power on the island of Cuba on the waves of just such dissatisfaction and unrest. They thought anything would beat what they had, so they were ready to grab at a straw; any straw. There is an old saying, "out of the frying pan into the fire." Such was the case with those lovely people. Referring again to the valley of San Andrace: the day we left there a young man was being carried back into the valley on a stretcher from the hospital in Vinales, 18 miles away. He had fallen from a cocanut tree and had broken a leg. He had to be carried out and carried back in on a stretcher.

While going through the official documents of our Sup't., Bro. Willey, I discovered the deed to the 18 acre farm, which had been purchased, was made out to the persons of Thomas and Mabel Willey; not to the denomination of F. W. B. This (as we found out in the Boards further procedure later) of course, was the only way it could have been done. But no member of the board, or even any one in the denomination, had stopped to consider the existing situation. Upon this discovery I immediately realized that the denomination legally owned no land whatsoever in Cuba. It was owned personally by Bro. and Sis. Willey. To be sure that was a part of my report upon my return home. So we begin at once to try and find out what moves ~~and~~ and legal

(Let it be made clear that no reflection is cast on Bro. and Sis. Willey. As afore stated, it was the only way the purchase could have been made at that time.)

procedure must needs be taken so as to get this matter on a correct and legal basis. We had great difficulty determining exactly what must needs be done. We seemed to be unable to find any one in the denomination, or elsewhere for that matter, that could tell us what to do. Finally some one (I disremember who) made the suggestion that we contact a Cuban Consulate. Also we found out we would have to incorporate the Foreign Missions Board before we could hold title to property outside the United States. This we did, securing the services of Rev. L. R. Ennis of Goldsboro, N. C., to draw up the Rules of Incorporation. In turn I, right away, took those rules of Incorporation to the Cuban Consulate in St. Louis, Mo. The Cuban Consul ~~was~~ there was a Cuban lady. She looked at the papers, ~~she~~ shook her head and said "I can't do anything for you as you are incorporated under the laws of the State of Tennessee, You will have to go to Chattanooga and see the Cuban Consul ~~there~~ there." We had learned that we had to incorporate under the laws of some state, and since the denominational headquarters were being established in Nashville, we concluded it would be the consistant thing to do to incorporate under the laws of that state.

Some time after this trip to St. Louis, am quite sure it was the latter part of the summer of 1946, wife and I with our first young son ~~took off by car to Chattanooga, Tenn.~~ Jim, took off by car to Chattanooga, Tenn. There I presented our papers to the Cuban Consul ~~there~~, who was serving in this office for the State of Tennessee. He, right at once, got things fixed up for us and we were on our way. We returned by way of Birmingham, Ala. where we attended the National Association for a short time, and returned from there to Monett, Mo.

After all the time spent, many inquiries made, the rules of incorporation drawn up, etc., etc., we finally had legal matters in shape to where the title to the eighteen acre farm could be officially received in the name of the denomination of Free Will Baptists.

The following spring I took the plane to Cuba, travelling by way of New Orleans, for the purpose of receiving this title. I left May 12th and returned May 18th, 1947.

In Cuba, at that time (I would not know under Castro), a Notary Public was a ver-y important official. So the papers must needs be taken before a Notary. An interpreter, of course was provided, and as the Title Deed was made out, and in turn read to me, the interpreter made it clear to me in English. Please allow me to take time out here to relate this incident: While this business matter was proceeding there was some fellow came in and begin to peck on an old noisy typewriter rather close by. It was, of course, disturbing. The official at once ordered him out. He left, but in a short time, was back doing the same thing. Again the official ordered him out in no uncertain terms. Again he left, and again in a short time was back at it as before. The Notary reached in a drawer and pulled out a huge pistol, and drawing it on him gave him strict order to stay away from that typewriter, else he would suffer the consequences. So, that was the last we saw of him.

In due course the matter of business was completed, the Title Deed received, and in just a day or so I was on my way back to Missouri. I recall while flying up the Mississippi valley in the night on my way home there was a terrible down pour of rain, extensive thunder and lightening, etc. Presently the plane hit an air pocket and went up and down a variation of 500 feet before the pilot could get it straightened out. I suppose that wasn't too much, but it was certainly enough for me.

Concerning the termination of our time and service with the Board of Foreign Missions we perhaps should give this explanation: After a few years (I disremember just how many years) our missionary work had grown tremendously, for which, of course, we were all very thankful. In the mean time denominational headquarters had been established at Nashville, Tennessee, and it was becoming apparent that the secretarial office of the Board of Foreign Missions should be moved to Nashville. The Board asked me to consider moving to Nashville, promising me a full time Secretary and a weekly sa-lary; stating the amount. After making this move I was to go on the field (the home field) spending my full time in the interest of the missionary program. I asked them for some length of time (so many hours) to think it over and pray about it before giving an answer. By this time wife and I had two small boys. I just could not see myself moving into this large city with my family, then leaving them alone the greater part of the time with my boys to grow in the big city atmosphere and surroundings with ^{no} daddy at home. So I layed my wr-itten resignation on the table; resigning from both the office and as Board member (our Board being in session in Nashville at that time). I left this session of our board meeting with everything and every one in prefectly good will and harmony, and can truthfully say I have never regretted the move. I felt, and yet feel, that I did the will of the Lord. I am very grateful for the way our foreign missionary work has continued to grow under the leadership and oversight of others, and our sincere prayer is that it will ever continue to do so.

Yours for the salvation of the lost of the world

Humbly submitted

Winford Davis
Winford Davis

P.S. My salary during the years I served as Sec'y.-Treas. was \$75.00 per month. (not per week)

Could have been the Ala. State Bar not real sure