

Guillermina Batista Villareal 1895-1988

Untitled memoires 1972

English translation from Spanish by Eduardo and Teresa Casas, October 2009

“Throw me a little piece of cane!” this is my earliest memory. The tracks of the Lajas railway ran behind my house, which extended from one street to another. Lajas was located in the middle of a sugar cane growing region and during harvest season trains constantly passed by with cars loaded with cane for the nearby refineries. The workers who traveled sitting on top of the cane kindly threw us down a few of the best pieces.



<http://www.internationalsteam.co.uk/trains/pics00/>

On this website steam engine enthusiasts share their pictures of antique engines still in use. These were taken in Santa Isabel de las Lajas station (above) and just north of the village.

The house in which we were all born was an enormous house with I don't know how many rooms, a living room with a dozen chairs, eight rocking chairs, a table with a large mirror and many tables of different sizes. Beside each rocking chair there was a porcelain spittoon that today would be the envy of any antique dealer. On the tables and on the floor there were plants which were actually in poor shape but were my mother's pride. I don't remember much about the dining room but the furniture was solid and good and by a window that opened to the street there were four rocking chairs. The patio must have been large and I remember a “güira” plant and nothing much else.



House interior in village of Trinidad



http://temployorubapr.com/wp-content/gallery/osain/guira_igba.png

The gourd of the guira plant is used for Santeria rituals.

My father had died when I was three years old and my brother only three months old. His parents were both from Grand Canary, having made a fortune and they owned much land dedicated to livestock and growing sugar cane. Long before my birth, upon my grandfather's death, the divided fortune was not much and my father dedicated himself to conserving his inheritance. But the wars (1868-1878) (1880-1881) and the last, the one of Independence from Spain (1895-1898) so impoverished the country that, outside the cities, life was very poor.

My father had married at age 35, the same age as my grandmother, when my mother was only 17 years old and when he died at about 60 years of age after a long illness which finished with the little that remained, he left my mother with eight children, the oldest 16, ill-prepared because in those days outside the large cities it was enough that women could read and although she was extraordinarily intelligent, in those times it would not have

occurred to anyone that a woman work outside the house. At the same time the blockade of the island and the internment of the population in the towns was coming to an end. The Americans had blockaded the island to finish the war more quickly and the Spanish had ordered that everyone leave the countryside and move to the towns so that they could not help the insurgents.

My mother's stories were horrifying. All those people with nothing to eat, full of disease and misery took refuge under house porches and other places where they could take shelter. My mother said that before they ate, although they had little, they had to close all the doors and windows so that the people outside would not enter. Many died of hunger and more than once my mother found people dead in our entrance. No one could do anything because nobody could be sure that they would have enough for themselves. My aunt Lolita was married to a Spanish merchant and gave us what she could. It was not much but we survived and finally the war ended, the farmers returned home and instead of the Spanish flag there was the American one. But for us life did not change very much. We were still a widow of 43 years and eight children. We had the house where we lived and not much more. My aunt had moved to Cienfuegos; my mother was too proud to accept help from her relatives, knowing that they were all were in the same situation. My mother, I don't know why, never had a good relationship with my father's family and when he died it nearly ended. I was not aware of the situation but I knew that there was little to eat, the other necessities did not exist: clothing, (even I was dressed in black), could last, school was free and the doctor prescribed drugs that were made in the pharmacy, very cheaply and he never charged. Every day Tomas came to our house. Tomas was a black who had been a slave but who had not accepted independence from the family. He did the heaviest jobs—cutting wood for the kitchen, drawing water from the well, and helping my older sisters in the kitchen. I remember when he was finished in the evening he would pass by the window where my mother put my younger brother to sleep and invariably his greeting was “Until tomorrow, Dona Antoñica” and she always replied “God willing, Tomas”. We all loved Tomas very much and after we moved to Sagua every year Ines and Honorata, who also had been our slaves, visited us. Honorata continued in the house and was my governess but when the situation got worse they left us but lived in front and when they bathed and dressed me in the afternoon I went to see Honorata who always had a sweet for me.

When the Americans reached Lajas they immediately opened a public school. Although I was less than four years old I was taken to be enrolled. They gave me a piece of paper so that I could go to the warehouse to get notebooks, pencils, a primer and a pen. How I remember it! It was red and not very long with replaceable metal nibs. I guarded it for many years like a real treasure. School was a paradise for me from the start in spite of it not having furniture and there weren't enough benches without backs and the youngest had to sit on the floor. My teacher was called Maria Rodriguez, a very common name.

My mother had promised me a prize when I learned my primer. First you had to memorize the lower-case letters, then the upper-case ones, double syllables, simple words split into syllables and finally speeches and paragraphs, some very funny such as “Yo niño bonito con mi cachuchita” (gorra) Juan the dunce fishing for the frog” and the

last, most difficult one: “Tell (I don’t remember the name) to bring the umbrella because a mouse has bitten Concepcion.” I had learned to read fluently! Besides winning the promised reward of ? <indecipherable word perhaps brand name of candy, equivalent of Cracker Jack> (sweet corn confection) containing prizes, I was the marvel of the family! Everyone who visited us had to hear me read from the Fourth Grade reader; needless to say I parroted the words without understanding them—but I read!

My sister Matilde had gone for the holidays to our Aunt Otilia in Sagua where she was preparing to pass the teachers’ exams and to obtain a position, which she did eventually. Our life continued to be sad, beyond the scarcities, my mother’s character gave us no happiness or security for she was always worried and brooding about our situation. If she bought us something that we needed it was given to us accompanied by a lecture on how long it had to last and the sacrifice it had taken to buy it. I loved her very much but I can’t remember her offering me even one happy moment. She was very conscious of the status of her family; her ancestors had founded five of the principal cities of the province <Las Villas> and her Grandfather Mora had founded Lajas. We were related to very distinguished families in the village and the province and it was impossible for her to forget this so that on top of our poverty we had to constantly struggle to maintain appearances. My mother had little religious background but was nevertheless very austere. We had no toys, never took trips, never sang and rarely laughed. I don’t remember any celebration of Christmas but we didn’t have abstinences during Holy Week. I don’t remember having ever having gone to church in Lajas and years later when we were in a slightly better circumstances we only went to High Mass at 8 when we had hats.

At last, when my sister began to work we moved to Sagua where an aunt lived; the house was prepared for us with some new furniture to which we added those we brought from Lajas. The house was much like all the others in which we have since lived: it had an enormous living room, the dining room was with the kitchen and in the patio there was an outhouse. To bathe we used a large tin washbasin that we set up in a bedroom and filled with cold water; it goes without saying that we didn’t use it every day. But, we had three marvelous things in our house: running water, coal stove and electric light. The electric light lasted only until 11 at night and so each room had a candlestick, matches and candles. Being the youngest it fell to me to clean the drops of candle wax on the floor every morning.

Another of my chores, a little later, was the cleaning of the chamber pots and emptying and refilling the washbasins. We had a cook, and a washer woman who took away the clothes on Monday and brought them back on Saturday. The mending and patching of clothes was an institution in the family, we had small slender chairs, the type used to take to church and we would sit in a circle around our mother. She separated the clothes and handed them out according to age and skill level. Since I was the youngest, I got the dirtiest and most worn items. In the afternoon when the task was finished we would part our knees and make a double-knot. Everything was sent to the washer woman, the fine dresses, the stockings, the dishcloths; on Saturday the clean clothes would be distributed and each of us would put our own away.

Our life was very methodical, at seven mother would wake us up, we would dress and have café con leche for breakfast. Samuel was given two centavos with which to buy four biscuits, two for himself and one each for Ñ and me, at 8 am everyone had to be in school and life everywhere began. At 10 am the first session would be over and after a two-hour lunch break we would return until 3 or 3:30. Although I knew how to read when we arrived in Sagua they sent me to the Kindergarten All the teachers were Americans from the southern states and everything was in English. People thought it extraordinary that children be sent to school to play and sing but we enjoyed it enormously in spite of the fact that we understood nothing. It was very different from the K nowadays, it was the original Kindergarten of Froebel with “gifts” and activities, games and songs. When we arrived we stood in a circle painted on the floor, we sang the greeting and other songs and then we marched to work tables where the “gifts” were kept.

These were boxes with geometrically shaped objects that we used to construct things; this is how we learned to distinguish cubes, cones, pyramids, etc., after, we marched accompanied by the piano, carrying our chairs we formed a circle. The first to get into the centre of the circle had the right to choose the game we would play. If a typically Cuban game was chosen the American teachers would have to hurriedly learn the music to accompany it but in this they were helped by the Cuban assistants. After this, we did the “occupations”—we would take the chairs again to the tables where we would work with clay, seeds, we would weave colored paper, etc. following this we would, again, form a circle this time for the “Goodbye.” Although it differed greatly from the contemporary educational thinking the K was a great thing. My observational skill and my manual dexterity stems, I think, from this initiation and later, when I was a teacher I could see the enormous difference between those children who had passed through the K and those who came directly from the home (I almost always taught Grade 1.)

When I turned six years old I went to full-day primary school. The public schools were so bad that no one ever got beyond fourth grade despite the fact that the law demanded attendance to the age of fourteen. The last years of public school were a torment for me, there were three black girls who were odious, they made fun of me and being older, bullied me in other ways—I was forced to hide to eat my snack because if they saw me they would demand it from me by touching my hand and saying “capufloreando.” Even now I hate the memory of them.

Life continued in the same routine, in 1903 my second sister Rosita (madrinita)<diminutive for godmother> fourteen years older than me, married. She had always loved and petted me and I returned her affection. She left us to live in Cienfuegos but I visited her, and there, had one of the best vacations of my childhood. Her husband’s family lived on the beach and the house was reached by water. In the morning a man would come out in a boat to bring us out and at night we would return in the same way. We would bathe in the sea, not from the beach but in a wooden bathing house that rested on posts in the Indian style and was connected to the land by a long bridge. A long rope went through the house and by holding it those of us who could not swim were able to

safely be in the water. Since then it's been one of my greatest pleasures to swim in the sea.



Cayo Carena, Cienfuegos, <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/23497330>

My eldest sister was married in 1905 and the same year, in November, died in childbirth, it was a great loss for the family because she was a very good and loving person, I have no memory of her. Already in 1904 my sister Hortensia, having passed the teaching exams at age 16, succeeded Matilde and was able to bring in an income. We lived as well off the small rent for the house and the lands in Lajas for which we received two “onzas” (\$34) and, if my mother had been more practical it wouldn't have been so bad but she insisted on keeping a cook and sending our laundry out, the only thing done in the home was to sew, to do cross-stitch and to embellish borders with fancy needlework for in those days even the bedclothes had to be finished in this way. A set of bedclothes consisted of a bedspread with a decorated centre, a bed ruffle that went around the bed and two pillow cases. At age five I was taught how to do cross-stitch and at 9 I completed a full set of bed-clothes and after this I did two more. I can do the pattern from memory with my eyes closed. I also made other items such as diapers for my nephews, handkerchiefs, etc. To achieve this I would have to sit down to do the sewing chores as soon as I came home from school. I was not allowed to play until it was done. On Saturdays there was the same sewing to do but there was more of it, what was not completed had to be done on Sunday. The outcome of this was that my own daughter grew up not knowing how to do anything due to my determination that she would not

suffer the kind of tyranny that I endured. In spite of all this I have always loved handiwork.



Baby sweater knitted by Guillermina Batista Villareal for one of her grand-children.

From when I could remember until I was fourteen years old the shoes were the same, boots with buttons on the sides and patent leather toes. Some of my friends had low shoes but my mother said that socks should not be mended. The same shoes were used for formal occasions and everyday the only difference was that the more worn pair was used for daily wear. The socks, always black, were knitted in a reverse pattern. These were worn to the knee until age six or seven and after this, stockings secured with elastic were used. The underwear consisted of the following set: pantaloons in which the back could be opened, ruffled cotton slip that was heavily starched attached at the waist with a cotton band. The style after age eight or nine was always with cinched waist, high collar and long or elbow-length buttoned sleeve. Sunday dresses were white with embroidery and a waist-band, hats were only used to go to church or on trips.



Guillermina Villareal Bonet circa 1900

Against my wishes I had long hair; with the arrival of the American influence many girls wore their hair short, but everyday *we* had to comb our hair part it in the middle and make braids of both sides, the two braids were then woven into the rest of the hair to form a single braid. I had a very thick hair and a lot of it so that combing it was a martyrdom along with its cleaning which involved my lying face up on a table with my head over the side while my mother washed my hair, but even worse than that was the process of untangling it. This was the situation until I was twelve at which point I came down with scarlet fever and because the day that I came down with it I had been drying my hair from a wash it became so tangled that the doctor insisted that it be cut. When my grandmother found out she let out a huge cry. Although, of course, my hair grew, it never became so long and I could wear it down, parted on the side and tied back with a ribbon that was almost always black.

In that era, around 1905, women used long dresses that were long enough so that one didn't have to worry about stockings which were almost always raw cotton linen with white horizontal stripes, the shoes were brown, beige or black, they could be shoes or boots with various sizes of heel; the dresses consisted of a skirt and blouse with a high collar and long sleeves; often a ribbon at the waist or a belt was used with a matching one around the neck; underwear consisted of a long chemise, my grandmother always used one with small sleeves, over this would go the corset made with thick cloth and much whale bone, it came down two or three inches below the waist so that the hips flared out as much as possible, at the front it rose high to half cover the breasts so that it wasn't

necessary to support the breasts with anything else but if they were large, a draw-stringed corset cover usually covered with embroidery, was used. Many women used a “polizón,” a little half-moon shaped pillow to add to their behinds and if their breasts weren’t large enough they stuffed the empty space in the corsets. In those days, around 1900, women didn’t wear underwear because with the chemise, one or two slips and the dress it wasn’t necessary. Later, with the American influence, the knee-length chemise became popular. To sleep we all used floor-length sleeved nightshirts or nightgowns. For coats we used capes that came down to the hips but because of the climate these were not very necessary. One never went out by day without a parasol because the parasol accompanied {...} in those first years of the century no decent woman went out alone and when my sister went to work she was always accompanied a girl who we almost always had to help us in our chores; these girls were practically an institution, black—their mothers almost always happily lent them to us to be fed and clothed; they learned to cook and sew, acquired good manners and by the time they were 14 or 15 they could work as maids or cooks and earn money. I remember the last one we had, Maria, married the milkman, Benito. Domestic labor was limited because the maid did not cook and the cook did not clean. The cook arrived at seven and served lunch at 10. She went back to her house and returned at 2 to cook dinner for 5. The maid cleaned and served at the table, nothing

C/B A' LA SPIRITE
CORSETS
FOR THE
WOMAN
OF
FASHION
NEWEST CREATIONS FROM PARIS

more. We never had maids, my older sisters and then later Niquita and I cleaned the house, the only form of work I have always hated. My mother never did anything around the house. She got up very early to make breakfast (boil milk and make coffee) and to water and attend to her plants; the patio was laid with bricks and the plants were in all manner of containers, often I saw in the countryside, chamber pots in their final destiny, and naturally the plants were inferior, whenever they managed to produce a rose or two it was a great event; when I see the beautiful flowers in Canada I remember her with pity—How she would have loved a little garden here!

There were a collection of plants used to decorate the home and some nights we had to take them outside so that they could catch the dew. When my mother finished making breakfast, a cup of café

con leche that we drank standing up, she washed herself, dressed—in a white blouse and black skirt, that according to my memory was the only thing she wore and she set to work sewing, sometimes clothing, another task at which she was very skilled. Instead of a single item of underwear being made at a time, when the rent from the lands in Lajas came in she would buy one or two pieces of English linen cloth Crea La Corona. 30 “varas” cost \$10. She would find patterns and cut chemises, underpants and nightgowns for each one depending on what we needed. Each piece was rolled-up and placed in a drawer to be sewn according to the opportunity. At 4 the sewing was put away and we would sit at the living room window until dinner time at 5. After dinner we continued the same activity, unless there was a visit to be made.



<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>

Visits were an institution of the period in small towns and they were almost always at night. When a person moved into a neighborhood they sent a message to all the neighbors around the block offering “la casa y una amiga” {“hospitality and a friend”}. When the neighbors considered themselves inferiors, black or white, they would not accept the offer and would abstain from visiting. Those who were social equals would come to the house, almost always at night for one hour or more to converse on just about everything more or less. These visits would be returned or not based on the acceptability of the people. Everyone in the house was expected to be present to receive guests. At other times, there were return visits to be made “we have to return the visit of so and so” someone has to accompany me”...and often it was the children: what martyrdom! Sitting tensely, fighting with sleep and hearing things that one did not understand! If, by lucky chance, there were children in the home we were sent out to play on the sidewalk. One always took advantage to visit other homes close to the one being visited and

because there were no telephones these were surprise “drop-ins.” Sometimes, rarely,, there were pleasant visits; but they had to be made—they were a central entertainment of life in those first years of the century there were no movie theatres, theatre companies or musical ensembles perhaps once each year as well as the circus and the carrousel; of course besides the circus and the carrousel nothing was suitable for children, but every time there was something playing at the theatre the cook would take us children down to watch people entering, lit by the street lights , the black women would be making empanadas, to do this they set up tables and portable stoves on the street, they would make the pasta, they would fill and fry them, they were enormous—the size of plates and they cost 0.10ç; I wasn’t always lucky enough to eat one.



Parque “Libertad” Liceo in the background <http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>

There were also two small parks, one, very beautiful took up a whole block and had large trees, marble seats with wrought iron backs, stupidly they modernized it and converted it into a little cement plaza with wooden benches. These parks were the main entertainment on Sundays; in 1903 they assembled a children’s band, something that was in fashion, and they would give open-air concerts, I suppose the music must have been terrible but at least they made noise, the people promenaded around the park, the women in one direction and the men in the opposite—and they did this for hours! How extraordinary! Of course, I didn’t go every Sunday (a couple of months later) but when I was 12 or 13 I could go with my older sisters and there meet my friends to take a turn around the park, the open air concerts were at first only on Sundays and after also on Thursdays and they were my main source of fun until I left Sagua in 1920 and one of the memories that still makes me laugh out loud is seeing the men, who still used hats (until 1940’s) and often strolled in groups of four abreast, lift their hats in unison and put them back on again in sync.



*Detalle de la foto anterior donde se ve el
Garrito de Helados "La Villa de Paris" (1902)* **TINTIN
Collection**

<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>

Already, when I was 11 or 12 there were the first movie theatres, there were two and if there was no show they charged ten centavos but if there was a "cupletista" (singer of couplets) the price went up to 40 ¢. It was the age of the great Cupletistas: La Chelito, La Bella Otero, the couplets were ribald but never obscene and there were never any movies that everyone could see. The program consisted of a main feature and several shorts and



Calle Cespedes esq. Marti, Sagua La Grande-1902 **TINTIN
Collection**
Mirando hacia la calle Padre Varela

when each reel finished one had to wait for them to put the next one on; they were silent and a man played the piano, often with so much spirit that it made me excited: the eruption of a volcano or the death of a person was passed on screen in time to a loud two-step. At that time throughout the country carnival was celebrated before the start of Lent. There were two clubs the Liceo and the Casino Español, these were clubs for *men* and women went only invited to do so for dances in spite of the fact that the only entertainment they had in those places was cards, billiards or domino the men having finished their suppers left the woman at home and went to the club or the park to meet other men.

During carnival there would be a dance every Sunday (6 or 8). When the Casino had a dance there was none at the Liceo. The Liceo was for the aristocracy, there was a monthly fee of \$3.00, while the Casino had the more popular following, the central element was the Spanish who, in fact, received hospital and medical services along with their membership. And, although many Spaniards married Cuban women there was really very little intermingling. The Casino dances were more fun, but those of us who could tried out our new dresses at the Liceo dance. Beyond the carnival dances the Liceo had dances on 31 of January, 24 February, 20 May, 10 October, and the 31st of December with the exception of the last, the dates are all national patriotic holidays for the Liceo was consummately Cuban.



My first formal dance was on the 20th May, 1914, until then I had been in mourning for my mother (+1912), my sister Lili who had never been close to my mother, was opposed

to my going but I rebelled. As a concession to her I was forced to wear purple fabric flowers on my dress which was a calf-length white Crepe de Chine. I went to carnival dances at the Liceo as a Turkish lady, a Japanese lady and in pink Chiffon with a large pink lace hat. We would go as a group calling ourselves a “comparsa.” I went to the Casino <Casino Español>only once. On that occasion it was to the Red Ball that they gave every year for the Feast of the Candelaria. At the door of the club there was always a greeting party, these men would offer their arm to the ladies and escort them into salon to the seats. Then, the men would approach with their dance cards, little notebooks with pencils on which they would note the schedule of dances and partners and copy the information on their partners’ cards. I danced very badly but I thoroughly enjoyed these dances. It goes without saying that we always went chaperoned even though sometimes the chaperone was the brother of the friend with whom we were going to the dance. We used chaperones only for dances so that I had a surprise when I went to Havana in 1918 to learn that the custom there was for all women going out at night to have chaperone; a tradition that lasted almost until the revolution.



Liceo

<http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/16496272.jpg>



Casino Español

<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/909042>



Tintin Collection

<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>

Returning to the past: in 1905 there was a huge flood in Sagua—the city is situated on the lowest point of the river from which it takes its name. Every year during the rainy season when the river threatened to crest its borders people took precautions by placing things in high places but that year the worst fears were realized and the water in some places reached three metres. My mother, with help from friends was able to store our things safely high and in spite of the stench and dirt we were able to afterwards clean the house and make it habitable again. On the other hand the poor suffered horribly and almost all the stabled livestock was lost so that for three or four days there was little food.



<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>



<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>



<http://sagua-la-grande.tripod.com/>

When we saw the water begin to flow into the gutters we went to the home of friends who were considered as close as family, the Llorente's, who had upper storey rooms at the back of their house. There, in two rooms, the women in one the men in the other, we spent two days, sleeping on the floor with the food served cold and strictly rationed because it wasn't known how long we would have to stay there. One night we heard an enormously loud sound—three houses in the street behind us had been swept clear away. Fortunately, construction methods in Cuba have changed since that time so that this type of incident doesn't happen as often anymore. (months later) In 1910, the year of

Hailey's comet, I turned 15 but I remained a girl. In the year 1908 "madrinita" <Rosita> had a son, this was an extraordinary thing for me, it was my first nephew and I felt deeply honored.

I think it was in 1906 that my mother decided to withdraw me from school and my sister Hortensia was to give me classes in preparation for the teaching exams so that I could take over from my sister as the family breadwinner. This was a radical change in my life. They prepared a schedule for me which I was expected to follow rigorously. Waking at 7, clean the rooms, make the beds and study until 10, lunch, then at 12 begin to sew until 4 when Hortensia arrived and we would begin two intensive study sessions broken for a quarter of an hour to have a café con leche. My sister's educational level was no more than Grade 5 or 6 but she was very intelligent: often when she didn't know something she would turn to me and say, "we have to study this." By the time I turned sixteen, the minimum age for the teaching exams, I had absorbed the following courses of study: full Arithmetic (applied), extensive Grammar, History of Cuba, Geography of Cuba, and the world, anatomical physiology, natural Sciences, Line Drawing and Pedagogy (the latter very little and of poor quality, we were 50 years behind in Cuba.)



La Caridad School, Camaguey

http://merrick.library.miami.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/chc5017&CISOPTR=1507&CISOBX=1&REC=21

In 1911 my mother was operated for cancer in Havana and a few months later it recurred. In 1910 Ñiquita had become engaged and planned to marry at Easter, 1912 but when my mother became sick again my sister Hortensia, who in fact was the head of the family, in agreement with Miguel, Ñ's fiancé, decided that they should marry in December of 1912 and, in this way, we could live together with the protection of a man, an idiot of 24 years who thought himself very important. Several months later, in April, my mother died and, although she was never close to us, her death was a very great loss for me. Immediately Ñ y M moved in with us and so a new period in my life began. My sister Hortensia was sweet and generous and those months were perhaps the best in my

life. We were in mourning so we didn't leave the house at night, while she read aloud I sewed and when she tired I took over the reading. We were making her trousseau because a few days after the death of my mother she had become engaged to Federico Fernandez with whom she had been going out. Preparations had been made so that when she left the teaching post I would take it over. There were many candidates but my sponsors were influential and, at last, on the 20th of May of 1913 I was given the post. Hortensia had married in February. Her husband was working as a bank administrator in Banes, Oriente, she went and married him there, taking Samuel with her to live with him and his father. This was very sad for me, it seemed impossible to me to live so far from her; Samuel who was then 14 needed more attention and I had the security of a job in Sagua so that's how things were settled. My life with Ñ didn't go very well, she as always was very giving but Miguel as head of the family was full of ?, thinking he had the right to set the rules for me while I, very spoiled and economically independent, rebelled. These must not have been very pleasant years for poor Ñ.

I was looking forward to being able to spend the holidays with my sister when, in February I had a terrible shock. Federico had defrauded the bank and in February had had to escape the country on a banana boat, Banes was the export centre for bananas. After that, I don't know how but she managed to get on a sailing boat headed for Costa Rica where she wrote to me. I worried for her for I had little faith in Federico's honesty but little by little the situation stabilized and eventually through the intervention of my uncle Laureano I was promised that he would not be arrested as long as he did not return to Cuba. It's worth noting that even though Hortensia could never machine embroider as well as Lili and me she was able to earn money teaching this skill in Costa Rica where it was unknown. The moral of the story is: "All knowledge can prove useful."

They were in Costa Rica until 1917 when the owner of the coffee plantation where Federico worked, a highly regarded and respected man, thought that he might do business with Cuba and who best but Federico to set this up. They left by the Pacific and arrived in San Francisco where they stayed until 1919 when she became pregnant and he thought it might be a good moment to return because the bank he had worked for had fallen into crisis so that there was no danger that the old matters would be remembered.

... I was writing about Sagua and now I am in a park in Sharon Spring surrounded by jews. How many changes there have been in my life, I hope that there are few left at 80 years.

Mourning!

A great part of my youth was spent in mourning. There was a custom that was practically law that set out the amount of time one had to dress in black after the death of a relative, often someone little cared for, or even hated, as was my case with my grandparents. It was established that for parents and for one's children it was one year of black with no adornments, one year of lace followed by six months of black and white. For siblings and grandparents it was exactly half of this, for aunts and uncles three months and for cousins one wore black and white for only several months.

At three years I lost my father. I was a baby dressed in black for a full year. At age nine my eldest sister—another year; at sixteen my mother, two and a half years. Having just finished this mourning, it was time to dress in black for my aunt—three months. At 21,

mourning for my grandmother—one year; at 25 another aunt; at 28, a brother. After this there have been other mourning periods but by then the custom was not so severe, and being older it did not matter so much to me.

The widows, mothers and children used gloves, which were seldom used, dark leather shoes and a hat with a long veil that hung behind and was called “pena.” I know of a case in which upon the death of a grandmother, the clothes of the grandchild who had not yet been born at the time of her grandmother’s death were embellished with black ribbons, (although usually in such cases the ribbons were lilac or purple, considered mourning colors.) Men, then as always, had the easiest part in the matter and their only mourning was the black tie and hat ribbon; shirts were always white. When a person was dying neighbors and friends would fill the house, from everywhere they would bring chairs, and when the coffin was brought from the funeral home with the body wrapped in a sheet so that they would see it. Due to the climate the body had to be buried within 11 hours after death. Only the men would attend the burial. Someone, a prominent member of the gathering “despedía el duelo” this involved remembering out loud the positive aspects of the dead person. There were rarely religious services. There were also no natural flowers rather the wreaths and flowers were covered with rather beautiful fine porcelain flowers and black or purple ribbons with inscriptions. These would be returned to the home after the burial and would be placed at the grave each year on the Day of the Dead. Later the Public Health Department prohibited this.



Cemetery Santa Isabel de las Lajas

Timeline Abuela Memoirs

- Early to mid 19th c. **Villareal** father of Julian (Abuela's father) travels from Grand Canary Island to Cuba amasses fortune in land and livestock in las Villas, centrally located province in Cuba
- Early to mid 19th c. **Mora** maternal grandfather of Antonia **Bonet Mora** (Abuela's mother) founds Santa Isabel de las Lajas, a village in las Villas, north of Cienfuegos serving a railway station that links fields, refineries and port for sugarcane industry; Bonet men found the 5 principal towns for which the province Las Villas is named
- Circa 1881 Julian Villareal, age 35, marriage to Maria Antonia Bonet, age 17, in Lajas location of his colono (by the date of the death of their father in 1886 or shortly thereafter the three Bonet girls, Lola, Otilia and Antonia are married)
- (1868-1878)
(1880-1881)
(1895-1898) Wars of Independence, the central military theatre is in the central provinces (Spanish base of power is West and Rebels is East) this undermines the agricultural base of the economy and so decimates the inheritance of Julian Villareal
- 1882-1898 Eight children, six girls and two boys are born to Julian and Antonia in their large house in Lajas
- 1886 Freedom granted to all slaves, some, such as Tomas, Honorata and Ines, respectively the servant and nannies of the Villareal Bonet household willingly continue to serve the family without pay for many years
- 1898 Julian dies, age 60, after a long illness, leaving widow to support eight children ranging in age from 16 to three years
Americans reach Lajas during the war and open a local school.

Abuela, not yet 4 years old, attends the American school and cherishes its supplies and routines: "School was paradise."

Americans blockade the island; the Spanish orders everyone leave the countryside and move to the towns; famine and plague

Abuela's aunt Lolita, married to a Spanish merchant, helps the family survive by sending them food
- 1900 ca. Abuela's Bonet aunt, Otilia moves to Sagua, and invites Matilde, Abuela's eldest sister to come to live with her and prepare to

qualify as a teacher in this town where the family is well-connected, being related to the town's founding fathers.

1900. Matilde obtains teaching position and the family rents their lands and large house in Lajas and moves to Sagua la Grande in the north of the same province of Las Villas
- In Sagua Abuela enters the new American-run Kindergarten. "People thought it extraordinary that children be sent to school to play and sing but we enjoyed it enormously in spite of the fact that we understood nothing." It was the original Kindergarten of Froebel. Abuela attributes her skill in handiwork and love of arithmetic to Froebel exercises. In later life, as a teacher, she will choose to teach Grade 1.
- 1901 Abuela enters the mainstream public school system in full-day primary school.
- 1902 War ends but poverty and hunger prevail and the country is under occupation, "...instead of the Spanish flag there was the American one."
- 1903 Abuela's second eldest sister, Rosita, her godmother, is married and goes to live in Cienfuegos where Abuela visits her and has her most memorable vacation in which she discovers her love of swimming in the sea.
- 1904 Hortensia replaces Matilde as family bread-winner, qualifying to teach in Sagua.
- 1905 Matilde marries and dies in childbirth the same year.
- 1905 huge flood in Sagua (information on internet place this event in 1906)
- 1906 ca. Abuela is withdrawn from school to begin to be prepared by sister, Hortensia for teaching exams
- 1908 Rosita has a son; Abuela is deeply moved over the birth of her first nephew
- 1910 appearance of Hailey's comet over Sagua "(that year) I turned 15 yet I was still a girl"
- 1911 Abuela's mother is operated for cancer in Havana but a few months later it recurred
- 1912 Ñiquita marries Miguel (December)

- 1913 and they come to live in the house after the death of Doña Antonia (April 1913) so that there will be a man to protect the household
- 1913 Hortensia marries Federico Fernandez (February) and leaves Sagua with Samuel to join her husband in Banes Oriente where he is a bank administrator
- 1913 Abuela is granted her first teaching post (May 20th) having now financial independence and being eighteen she resents the authority of Miguel, Ñiquita's husband and head of the household.
- 1914 Federico Fernandez is found to have defrauded the bank where he works, he and Hortensia flee Banes on a banaba boat and take refuge in Costa Rica (February). They live there until 1917 when they go to San Francisco where they remain until 1919 at which time, because the bank in Banes has folded, they can return to Cuba. Through the intervention of Hortensia's uncle Laureano Falla, the authorities have promised not to prosecute Fernandez.
- 1914 Abuela's attends her first dance (May 20th)
- 1915 Abuela in mourning for grandmother Adelaida Bonet Mora
1920 Abuela in mourning for an aunt. (Otilia? un-named)
- 1920 Abuela, age 25, leaves Sagua.
1923 Abuela in mourning for a brother. (Samuel? un-named)

The map in the following page shows the expansion of the Western Railway in Las Villas 1854-1868. The founding of the village of Santa Isabel de las Lajas on the line just north-west of Cruces, was the direct result of the North-South railway going through this territory.