

“LA LUCHA” (The Struggle)
A Southern Belle, a Visionary and a Dream for Democracy

III. SUMMARY

A. Narrative Synopsis

Introduction:

Some biographies help us understand the broad historical themes and issues of the time period during which their subjects lived. Others appeal to the universal emotions of the human experience. And some simply entertain us with vivid characters and nearly novelistic events. Henrietta Boggs’s compelling life story does all three. While her story serves as a window into a little-known piece of history, it is also a chronicle of universal themes that reach deeply into the human experience.

Background:

Henrietta Longstreet Boggs was the first of five children born to Ralph and Meta Long Boggs on May 6, 1918, in Spartanburg, South Carolina – what she describes as the “very, very Deep South.” When her engineer father moved the family to the South’s then-largest industrial hub, Birmingham, Alabama, it was the first of Boggs’s many destined border-crossings.

The blessings of her youth were many: a loving family, a caring community, and the encouragement toward greater education. But the proscribed Southern Presbyterian conventions of the day also shrank her world. As she describes, “The church dominated everything.”

According to William J. Cooper, Jr. of Louisiana State University and Professor Emeritus Thomas E. Terrill of the University of South Carolina in their 1991 book *The American South: A History*, by the late 1800s, “The Presbyterians, better educated in general” were not as astringently anti-intellectual as other Southern Protestants. But in Boggs’s religious family, she says, “the basic idea was: Do not question. Do not doubt. Close your mind and believe what you are supposed to believe.” Meanwhile, “white supremacy” was not an isolated opinion but a fact of segregated life. Cooper and Terrill state, “. . . the urban South in the 1920s developed a fortress mentality; Southerners became almost hysterical about alien people and ideas. Many Southerners believed that foreigners and alien ideas constituted a grave threat to American values and even the very survival of the country. Aliens were vaguely defined to include immigrants, Catholics, Jews, blacks, communists, and socialists.” To make matters worse, the Great Depression crippled the country in the 1930s; per Cooper and Terrill, the federal government concluded that Birmingham was “‘probably the hardest hit city in the nation.’” As Boggs recalls, “Little by little, everything was closed in and closed in and closed in” – finances drained, possessions became more precious, and Boggs stayed local for college at Birmingham-Southern.

But Boggs, a habitual truant from church, was baffled by the irrationality of racism and began to yearn to escape from her hometown's stifling conformity. Her travel-savvy, multilingual mother encouraged her daughter to embrace her desire for adventure and cultural exploration, so as World War II enveloped Europe at the end of 1940, Boggs embarked by ship to visit relatives in "the Land of Eternal Spring" – Costa Rica.

Greeted at the port of Limón by her witty Uncle Vinell Long and imperious Aunt Ernestine, the new environment instantly startled and engaged Boggs: the scorching, thickly humid air, somehow different from the stifling heat of her native South; the boisterous music, and voices ringing from weathered buildings and across ragged roads; and the kind locals ever patient with Boggs's weak Spanish. In her own words, "The culture shock was stunning. This was my first trip outside the United States, the first time in a developing country, the first encounter with a society whose language I didn't understand. Since I was shy to begin with, not speaking Spanish made me feel even more inadequate, and a sense of inferiority haunted me for months after my arrival." But "locals were gracious and helpful with anyone struggling to learn their language." Indeed, in the 2000 book *Culture and Customs of Costa Rica*, Spanish professor Chalene Helmuth of Kentucky's Centre College calls its citizens "extraordinarily hospitable," "eager to please," and "accommodating to a fault."

In the summer of 1941, José Figueres, known informally as "Don Pepe," cruised one day on his motorbike to her relatives' rundown coffee farm to talk business. The son of a country doctor, Figueres was born on September 25, 1906 in San Ramón, Costa Rica, but most of his maturation took place in the United States. Largely self-educated after an electrical engineering stint at MIT in Boston, literate and fluent in several languages, Figueres was now an entrepreneurial rope manufacturer and coffee grower inspired by American history and democratic principles. During this visit to the farm, following his sharp criticisms of his country's governmental corruption, Boggs's Aunt Ernestine predicted that their guest would one day be president – and that Boggs must therefore marry him. Although Boggs placed little credence in her aunt's often unusual premonitions, on this one occasion, she was right.

Traditionally, Costa Rica has had a "macho culture," as described by Tjabel Daling, a Mexico-based journalist, in 2002's *Costa Rica: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture*. "Generally women played a subordinate role in political and social life, accounting for a mere fourteen per cent of all political posts and receiving only nineteen per cent of the national income." Yet, as early as the 1940s in a country that would boast a female president in 2010, Boggs represented for Don Pepe an intellectual equal, an individual with estimable literary skills who improved his understanding of American culture and the English language and who in turn was impressed with his political, philosophical, literary, and agricultural knowledge. Boggs's American life receded ever further into the past. "I did not want to return to Birmingham. The limitations of that racist, religious world were too small to permit the kind of life I longed for." She admitted that she was not in love with him, but "admired him and felt that life with him would be fascinating." She married Don Pepe in 1941.

In October, they moved to his rope factory's sisal farm, La Lucha Sin Fin ("endless struggle"), where Boggs, the Southern belle, settled ambivalently into the role of a Costa Rican farm wife. She recounts, "I was assailed again by what was becoming a familiar feeling: A wave of astonishment that I was really in Central America, riding a horse along a muddy road towards a sisal farm where I would be living the rest of my life. What was I doing here? How had it all happened?"

Alongside the dramatic downpours of the country's rainy season, Don Pepe's reserved, driven, and subtly controlling personality made the transition a challenge.

Less than a year after their wedding, Boggs recommended and helped her husband prepare for a political speech over the radio. Later, Uncle Vinell called La Lucha with shocking news: Don Pepe was in jail. Mid-broadcast, just as he was calling for the President's resignation, soldiers invaded the station and arrested Figueres. Indignant and frightened, Boggs visited him in jail – unaware she would not return home for two years. Figueres was exiled, a punishment the Constitution prohibited against a citizen, but one that the ruling president, Rafael Angel Calderón, wanted for a man who dared to criticize his government.

United by their shared zeal for social justice and the ultimate creation of a new society, it turned out Boggs and Figueres needed to leave Costa Rica in order to better it. Exile served as a productive hiatus for Figueres and the start of a six-year obsession that would shake a hemisphere.

So it was done. Hours after Figueres was sent away by plane, Boggs flew out after him, to unfamiliar San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador – the first of several relocations over the next two years. Boggs admits, "The idea of exile was so bizarre for an American that the very concept was hard for me to grasp."

As the film will show, her time in the isthmus's shakier areas was less a purgatory than an eye-opening excursion into Central American conditions, mores, and politics. "Like everyone else traveling in Central America," Boggs says, "we were surprised by the differences among the five small countries. Though they shared a common language, religion, history, racial mix and ties to Spain, each one was a tiny world unto itself."

For three months, they lived in El Salvador under its smothering heat, a climate Boggs "managed to interpret as a personal offense." Her husband busied himself by contacting businesspeople, visiting coffee farms with Boggs, surveying leather goods factories, and digesting the country's agricultural operations, labor conditions, and the extreme divisions between the rich and the impoverished. Boggs remembers the home of one land owner: "It was all so authentic and old and above all – rich, I found it difficult to shift from the poverty of the huts outside to this cool opulence." Furthermore, she observed the sharp racial divide that split the classes: "As I met more of the wealthy Salvadoreans, I was struck by the physical differences between the upper crust and the

peons. Many of the land owners were tall and fair skinned, while the peasantry was dark and Indian looking, their smallness probably due to malnutrition.”

During their stay, El Salvador’s president sent Figueres a note warning that he was not welcome there. Though the President later changed his mind, Boggs and Figueres decided to move on to Guatemala, where Figueres had family friends. There Boggs writes, “The air was like a cool caress. I felt that I could breathe again for the first time since leaving Costa Rica, and the spectacular landscape was a constant source of delight, the most dramatic in Central America because it is more broken and oddly shaped.” It was a country where “everything . . . seemed to be more intense, the dramatic landscape, the volcanos, history, even the food.” But ominously, they encountered the taints of dictatorship, such as soldiers at regular sentry posts checking vehicles for guns as well as dire peasant conditions that seemed just fine to rich coffee growers.

Next stop: Mexico, where Figueres had more friends and could more easily prepare for revolution. The couple created a comfortable life, complete with apartment, car, and town office – a respectable front for purchasing arms. “As the weeks passed,” Boggs describes, “our lives ran along a double track. During most of the hours of the day we were the soul of respectability: The careful businessman interested only in Mexican ceramics, his pregnant wife seemingly not involved in anything outside the home, and a few quiet friends coming and going without noise or fuss, polite and colorless enough to fade into the background. Who would suspect that the businessman spent as many hours a day as he could setting up a network of contacts through whom he tracked the arms dealers.”

Determined to right Costa Rican politics, Figueres concluded that armed revolt was the only answer. He contacted arms dealers and bribed Mexican officials as high as the Cabinet to support activities the U.S. discouraged in volatile Latin America. Beyond his own nation, he wanted to liberate the rest of Central America from its legion of dictators: Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez of El Salvador, Jorge Ubico of Guatemala, Tiburcio Carias Andino of Honduras, Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, and Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua. With Calderón steadily progressing down that path, Figueres believed, Costa Rica seemed the best place for the first strike.

In 1944, Costa Rica cycled through another election, one that consisted of overt fraud and almost unprecedented violence. As expected, Calderón’s hand-picked successor Teodoro Picado won, and as hoped, a new administration meant that after two years in exile, Boggs and Figueres could go home. In San José, Uncle Vinell and Aunt Ernestine hosted a welcome fiesta at which Don Pepe expressed to the adoring crowd his gratitude for their support and prepared them for the upcoming civil struggle. The end of exile heralded his first surge toward political power and Costa Rican history. As Boggs says, “Until the end of his life he believed on that day destiny had finally caught up with him.”