



The Belgian Expedition in Guatemala

HUGO MADRIGAL



In the year 1841, the Belgian colony was founded in Guatemala at the port of Santo Tomás de Castillo in the department of Izabal. It was established by emigrants from Belgium who arrived with the desire to settle in this Central American country. They were the pioneers of the foundation of this port.

The present work is a compilation carried out by my brother, *Óscar René Madrigal González*, a graduate in Communication Sciences from the University of San Carlos of Guatemala, who sadly passed away on November 26, 2008.

As a tribute to him, and with my heartfelt thanks to *Licenciado Celso Lara Figueroa*, Director of the Center for Folklore Studies of the University of San Carlos, who supported me at all times to publish this work that my brother, *Óscar*

René, researched and intended to publish. Unfortunately, my brother had handwritten the text, as the CD containing the fully described information from this research was misplaced. However, I have very important data and photographs that he took, and the following text reflects his findings:

I became interested in this research after some German filmmaker friends sought information about the German colony in the country that had settled in the Verapaces, specifically in Cobán. Together with them, we visited that department of the country and managed to create a short film. I could elaborate on that project, but today, the focus is on how I became interested in the Belgians who arrived in Guatemala in the 19th century.

After collaborating with the Germans on the short film, I became, as mentioned earlier, interested in these colonizers from Belgium who left their mark on Izabal. I managed to contact several descendants of these families, including members of the *Esmenjaud* and *Klanderud* families, who provided me with the following information.

Mrs. *Olga Esmenjaud* recounts how her grandparents used to tell stories about their arrival in Santo Tomás, particularly about how her grandfather's father was the one who took the initiative to embark on the mission to settle in the "New World," as he called it, according to Mrs. *Olga*.

He did not have a specific destination in mind, but the ship arrived in Guatemala,

and they found it a suitable place to settle in the port of Santo Tomás. Mrs. *Olga* is 60 years old and lives in this area of Izabal.

She recounts that her family is quite large and that she feels very proud to be a descendant of these Belgian colonizers.

Mrs. *Flor “Chita” Klanderud*, who lives in Puerto Barrios, shared how her relatives who arrived from Belgium came with the desire to settle in the country and form a beautiful colony, which they achieved. However, yellow fever unfortunately wiped out almost all of them. “Thanks to God,” she says, “some of us descendants remain.” My grandfather used to tell us that his father recounted how their grandfather was very determined and had great love for this region of the country, despite the constant illnesses like malaria and yellow fever, which ultimately claimed the lives of many of these families.

Mrs. *Esmenjaud* took me to the cemetery, where we took some photos, including one at the grave of her grandfather, *Camilo Esmenjaud*, who died very young. She also told us the story of *Doña Romualda Estrada*, a local woman who married a Belgian.

For the Belgians, living in a place like Santo Tomás was a highly risky endeavor. The area was practically unpopulated, and undertaking a venture such as colonization was a remarkable feat. It fills us with gratitude toward those memorable men and women who, sadly, were mostly lost to the plague.

Some locals from these Guatemalan lands joined with the Belgians, which is why the descendants in Puerto Barrios, Santo Tomás, and several villages in this port region proudly live on, knowing that their ancestors were the pioneers of the founding of the Port of Santo Tomás de Castilla.

Oscar René Madrigal González

Puerto Barrios, December 3, 2007

Note: The material my brother collected is more extensive. It is somewhat difficult for me to understand his handwriting, so I was able to recover only what is included in this text today. H.M.

















