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Persennaire, Cornelius Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Interview with Mr. Persennaire on March twelfth, 1977 on Saturday afternoon: two o'clock. Conducted by Steve Cochrun and Roger Ackerman. He lives on 32 East 26th Street, Holland Michigan. It took place in his living room.

Topics discussed:

Where he has been in his life
Dwelling place in Nigeria
Strange occurrences
Reaction of the natives to missions
The languages he speaks
Wild life in Africa
Where he attended school
Experiences with the native food
The society of the Tiv people
Unique and interesting stories
Ants
Rainy season
The inter-tribal war
The Ibos
Experiences he had in the war
The Tiv and how they react to missionaries
Other places he has been to
Nigeria as opposed to the United States
Elephantiasis and polygamy
Being a missionary

English with
Chuck Huttar
Pd. 7 3/20/77
S: We are in the home of Cornelius Persennaire, the date is 3/12/77. My name is Steve Cochrun and my interviewing partner is Roger Ackerman.

C: Is it on right now?

S: Yes. We're just going to talk and let you tell us about some of your experiences and what your work has been involved with. And, we'd just like to know, well, how long have you been back from Africa?

C: From Nigeria or from Central America? See I've-

S: First of all, where have you been in your life?

C: Well, I've been a missionary in Nigeria for a total of about twelve years. See we went to, in 1956, and were there for, up until 1962. And then we had to come back for health reasons. We went in 1965 for another six years, came back in 1971, the early part of '71.

S: So have you lived in Holland ever since then?

C: No, we went to Costa Rica to study Spanish, and that was in Central America for about, well just up until September of this past year. So we've been four, total of five years in Central America, and about twelve years in Africa, and in Holland now since, ah, well September we started our work here in Holland with the Latin speaking people. I was a missionary for the Christian Reformed Church in Nigeria.

S: Where abouts in Nigeria were you located?

C: Well, various places. Now our work is mostly in the Beninway Province, which was known at that time as the Beninway Province, now is called Beninway State. So another state has been divided into two states, but at that time it was called the Benin, the Benin River is one of the larger rivers of Nigeria. It enters into the Niger River. And we were working south of that area, south of the river among various tribes. Now I was especially with the tribe we call Tiv, the Tiv people T-i-v. They number about one million five hundred thousand people, something like that. They're, they were very primitive at the time I became acquainted with them. Of course a lot of them are educated now. In fact, education is really on the growth in Nigeria. Oh, when we first started in 1956, many of them were illiterate, they lived in very primitive conditions.

R: What kind of dwelling did you live in? Was it a grass hut or something like that?

C: Well, usually missionaries in our mission live in mission compounds, that is, they build, ah, buildings of cement blocks or mud blocks. Nothing really extravagant. Let's see, it was a fairly large house, which was quite convenient. We lived in a grass-roofed house for a while. It was a large grass-roofed house, very old, built around 1930 something. Then after that we moved into a new house because we opened up some new mission stations. But generally that's just a stereotyped idea that missionaries live in grass-roofed houses. They generally either live in the cities, most of them live in the cities now, or live on mission compounds. Now we, we lived on mission compounds,
surrounded by tribal people. And one of the places we were alone for a number of years, there wasn't a white man within thirty-five miles. The rest of those were the people living in their little grass huts, as you are acquainted with.

S: Did you see any real odd things happening that might be of interest to Americans?

C: Yes. Well the people with whom we lived were pagan people, and they worshipped idols made of wood, it was usually a rather crude carving, with the sexual organs usually extended because they were fertility idols. I watched them already, the sacrificing to the idol. They'd take the chicken for instance, ah, cut its throat. Let some of the blood fall down into a little hole in the ground that they had made with a knife, mix it with some water, some mud with the blood of the chicken. Then they'd take some of the stuff and put it over a person's head, and put it on their body, say some mumbo - jumbo over it, wave the chicken over their head, and throw the chicken out into the bush. And that is where the sickness is supposed to go. This was a very common way, they called this "Soracumber" acumber is the fetish, and sor is the word for fixing. So they sacrificed to the fetish. This was done whenever the person was sick. When he was sick he went to the old man of the tribe, who was the witch doctor, you might say the medicine man. He would fix the acumber for you, so he would kill the chicken for you and go through various rites. Hopefully the sickness would leave the person, or the evil spirit who caused it.

R: How old was your compound in Nigeria?

C: Oh, it makes a difference, some of them were built by a former mission that was before us. So we took over a mission field and some of those were at least thirty years old. Now I opened up two mission fields, there, ah, one was built in 1958, and we lived on it for about four years, and then moved on out to another one. That was in 1959 or 60, or something like that. So some of them were not so old and some were older. Some were as old as 30 years, some were as young as the very year we began working.

R: How did the people react when you first started working in the village?

C: Oh, they were glad we came.

R: What happened to all their old customs, like cutting the chicken's throat? You introduced them to new ways how did they react?

C: Well they usually stopped once they had listened to the Bible and became Christians. And then they would throw their fetishes away. In fact, right now in Nigeria it'd be very hard to find people who believed in fetishism. Education, Christianity has practically wised out the pagan beliefs. You'll find it yet in some of the isolated areas, like when I was still there, I'd go into the bush and I'd still find pagans. But anywhere around the cities and towns, paganism has practically disappeared. Doesn't mean they're Christians, it just means that they don't believe in idols anymore. They figure that the white man's medicine and so forth is far more powerful, that their primitive type of fetishism.

S: What else did you provide for them beside Christianity? Education? Medicine?

C: Oh yes, we built hundreds of schools and teachers colleges. Two hospitals were built and, ah, at least fifty clinics were established. We were training nurses, doctors and teachers. People who just wanted a general education,
would go on to be lawyers and to universities and so forth. Our mission was
to administer both to their physical as well as their spiritual needs. We
had agricultural work going on, literature work, printing books. See the
mission was the only one who worked with the Tiv language and so it meant
that the mission did most of the literature. It would make books, not only
translations of Bible passages and Bibles, but of other literature too.
Both Christian and (unknown). So you might say it was the mission that
opened up the culture, the western culture to the Tiv people. The govern-
ment supported that too.

S: What language...

C: I spoke Tiv, the language of the people.

S: Was it real complicated?

C: It's a Tono language, Bantu Tono language, or semi Bantu Tono language. Like
the greeting would be, osu uganana. It's a Bantu language.

R: Where did you learn Tiv?

C: I had to learn it there, I learned it from other missionaries who were
teaching various new missionaries who came. We would learn it from him, then
we would learn the grammatical aspect of it you see. It was not a written
language, it was written by the missionaries. Then we'd learn the grammer,
then we would work with informants who would correct us as we speak.
Gradually you work up a vocabulary with which to speak. In six months I was
using it very efficiently, in preaching.

R: How many languages do you know?

C: Two. Well two languages I am speaking, well three with English I mean, that
I can speak. I know several reading languages. But there are only two for-
eign languages I can speak, Tiv and Spanish. I did learn some other African
languages just, not to speak too clearly, but to get along with it, like
Hause, which is one of the trade languages, I learned a little bit about
that too, to be able to get along in Nigeria.

Nigeria of course has many languages, it's a country of over three hun-
dred different languages. English is the official language and is the language
most people learn, who are educated, then comes Hause, Ibo, and Uorabu. Now
all the rest are smaller tribes, with the Tiv being one of the larger ones
but not the biggest tribe. So the Tiv language is large enough to be worth
putting into the Bible and other books, but not large enough to be the
lingua-Francua, the language of Nigeria.

S: Did you see much of the wild life when you were in Africa?

C: When I first came there, yes. There was a lot of wild life at that time. I
would go into areas, ah, where the lions were still around yet, and hyenas,
and bush cows and so forth. Oh, you wouldn't see it too often, but just
occasionally you'd run across it. I mean the bush country you know was high
grass. They hear you coming and they're gone. But I'd hear them at night
when I'd be sleeping sometimes in the village, and I could hear the lions
around, and the hyenas would occasionally come around. Bush cows, I never
saw one in the wild, but they always kept away from me. I usually went
through the bush either walking or bicycle riding and they'd hear you coming
so they were gone. But they were around, people hunted them. They weren't that
dangerous, and bush cows were probably the most dangerous of all the animals.

S: The bush cow, would that be like... 

C: Buffalo.

S: A water buffalo

C: Yes, a water buffalo, it's a dangerous animal. And snakes, always had to be careful of the poisonous snakes because they'd be on the roads, the paths, and so forth. That was one of the things we had to be careful about.

S: Did you see many snakes?

C: Oh, yah, I saw lots of them, all kinds of snakes. We'd have them in our house. The most dangerous ones are the adders, the small night adders, which would just lay on the path, you know you don't see them, or they bite a person on his toe or his foot because most of them had a small mouth. Just give you a little bit, but that is very poisonous.

- At this point Mr. Persennaire had to excuse himself for a phone call -

C: Now it's on again?

R: Yes. We were wondering where you attended school before you went to Africa?

C: I graduated from Holland Christian High School, and then went on to Calvin College and Calvin Seminary, graduated from there. Then I went on to Kennedy School of Missions for six months. Of course then, well before I had a church before I went to Nigeria. It was in the state of Washington, after that I went to Nigeria.

S: Where abouts in Washington?

C: In Zillah, near Yakima.

S: This is in the United States isn't it?

C: Oh yes, state of Washington, Zillah Washington, it's near Yakima, you know Yakima apples? The Yakima valley, big apple country, it's where all the apples come from. I was there for about two and a half years. I went to Africa from there. We came back, and were in Iowa, and went back again to Africa, then to the Honduras, four years in the Honduras.

R: Did your children go with you?

C: Oh yeah, When we went to Africa, sure. Our children were in school there, it was a mission, a missionary school for Americans. They lived, it was away from home, they were not living at home. They would come home, oh well, six weeks at a time on vacation. There were two vacations a year:

S: They lived at the school?

C: Yes, they lived in a dormitory.

S: About like us at college.

G: Yeah, that's right. So ah, they were smaller children, and they had to
be under hose parents and so forth.

R: How many children do you have?

C: I have five children. Two are married, three are married.

S: Yes, we noticed that your little girl had a broken arm.

C: Yes, she fell at school, ah, sliding.

R: Have you ever tried any of the native food?

C: Oh yeah, I used to eat their food all the time.

S: How was it?

C: Oh, it was very hot, you know, you see what they generally ate, when the yams were in season, that's a white tubular plant about this big (he makes a gesture with his hands, portraying about a foot in length).

S: Did it taste like potatoes?

C: Well, it tasted a little like potatoes but it's a little sweeter that potatoes and more pasty like. And this they would pound up so it would become, ah, a white mass which you'd pick it up with your hands and that is how you would eat it. Take and make a bowl of it and put it in some soup. The soup was usually very hot, made with red peppers, and meat! Vegetables like (unknown) or spinach, with a few spices in it, with mostly hot peppers. The meat would generally be a chicken or fish, dried fish, or a bush rat. Nice or sometimes a large lizard, even mokeys if they could get a hold of one, and snakes, certain types of snakes could be eaten. I used to eat all the time with them, I used to go out on trails, I would generally eat with the Africans. I carried some of my own food along too, because I'd get tired of their food all the time, I'd carry some bread and things like that. Water generally was more difficult, I could eat their food, but I had to take my own water with me, either that or take a kettle with me and boil some. You can't drink any of the water in Africa without first boiling it, it's just, it's just impure. When often it wasn't going to be to long of a trek, say, two or three days, then I would take water with me, if it was going to be longer, then I would have to boil it. I usually took along a little stove with me, kerosene stove, to boil my water, and other things I needed to do.

S: How far back in the bush did you have to go?

C: Well, what I would do is take my car to a certain area, as far as I could go, and then would take a bicycle or a motorbike, and go on from there. Walking depending on how good the paths were. If the paths were good enough for the bicycle, I'd bicycle, if I had my motorbike, I'd motorbike it. I had a small motorbike. Usually go out with another African or some African leaders, we'd go out visiting villages for teaching, preaching. We'd take some medicine and stuff like that, giving literature as we went.

S: Did the Tiv people grow their food or hunt or what?

C: No it's all grown.
R: You mean they're all farmers?

C: Yes, they're all farmers, they are all farm people. Yams is their major food crop, with the guinea corn, that's the crop that grows a little like corn, but it has a tassel on it, it looks something like sorghum, do you know what sorghum is?

S&R: NO

C: Oh well, the top of it is what you eat. And also another crop they call millet we see here in this country too. These are the main food crops, along with the vegetables.

S: Did they have any domestic animals?

C: Yes, they had cows, goats, pigs, chickens. It was a small cow a pigmy cow, or the hump-backed cow. They didn't raise the hump-backed cow too much, they had more of the pigmy cow, that looks something like the holstein, but it was small. The (unknown) people had the hump-backed cows, these of course were not as good eating, tough, but, ah, the others were better. Goats were more common that the cows meat, the people usually ate goats meat.

R: What was their society like, did they have a chief?

C: It was trible, and they, the Tiv tribe did not have a main chief at first, when I first came into the country, they had no main chief. Later on a chief was elected, it was interesting, they elected their own chief, who lived in Bocu, their capital at that time. Then underneath the chief were subchiefs and sub-chiefs, so that what you had was clans, each clan had its own clan chief, and the sub-clans had sub-clan chiefs. There would be counselors who advised the chiefs on the cases that came to their courts. They could decide on all matters of property, marriage problems and things like that. The matter of a wife or woman running away would become a court case, and they would decide why she ran away and who owes what. All marriage is done by paying a dowry, the bride price, and this becomes quite often a court case of who paid what and how much. With regards to full detail on this or not so this is what these chiefs were usually sitting on and that was usually causing much problems among the people, many problems among the people. As well as land, who was supposed to have which pond and where, they'd have some arguments over that. See there is not property which is owned by anyone. Each tribe has its own land, and each clan has its own land, each family within that clan had its own land. They would decide that within their tribe, or, ah, village groups, who would be where and who would have this land to cultivate and who would have the other. So this also would become a matter of jurisdiction in the courts. Chiefs usually had plenty of work and court cases going on.

S: Do you have any unique or interesting stories you could tell us?

C: Well, I can remember for instance when I came through the bush, I was out in a real far off area, there hadn't been a white man in there for years, and as I came into the village I saw all the women and all the little children just run away as fast as they could, hide in the grass. I asked what for, what's happening? They said to me you're a witch coming in here with a motorcycle, with a white face, they had never seen that before and they were scared stiff. It took about an, oh, I'd say about an hour, before the women and children had confidence to back out again, and I would talk with
them and tell them who I was and why I had come. I had times in which I have been traveling along and suddenly there was a big snake on the path, there was one on my bike about this big around (4 inches in diameter), so I had to quick slam on the brakes and jump off my bike, and let the snake squirm through. This has happened to me more than once. I was traveling one time while out in the bush, and was sleeping, I woke up and heard an owl right above my head, whooting like ever, you know, and of course this is very dangerous for the Tiv because that's a witch for sure, they change into owls at night. Everyone was concerned that this owl was hovering over my head that night because it was a witch seeking my life, I mean that's what they believe. At the same time I had got up, gotten up and gone out for a while, it was pitch dark and all at once I felt hundreds of little bites going up and down my pants and it was, I stepped into a line of army ants and they were all over me before I knew it. You can imagine how quickly I ripped off my clothes and started smashing away at those things to get them off of me. This has happened more than once. We've been driven out of our house a couple of times by army ants. We were sleeping in our bed, and at once we felt all kinds of little bites. The army ants had come in, over the roof and down in through the house, they were in our bed and everywhere, they were all through the house.

S: How did you get rid of them?

C: Well, we, what I did, I had some fly spray at the time, and we took that and just sprayed it all over the line, where they were marching. We also took some ant powder and I made a circle around our house with the ant powder. That broke the line, so they left and by the next morning they were gone. If you once break the line and can get them to march out in another way, then they will finally leave. We had one though, it was a who pile of them that had gotten into our rafters, there was a big clump of them, that was just hanging together. So I took some, ah, fire, you know, a bundle of grass and lit it, and put it up there and burnt the whole pile of them, and the whole thing just dropped down dead. There must have been thousands and thousands of them, that were in our house.

S: They were after the bats?

C: Yes, we had bats in our house, little flying bats.

R: Brown bats? S: Fruit bats?

C: Fruit bats, oh, ah, no not fruit bats, these were insect bats. Fruit bats are bigger.

R: How big were the ants?

C: Well, the army ones that we had around were not very big. They were only about that long, about a quarter of an inch. But ooh could they bite, they'd just take a piece right out of you. Tremendous, and it sure hurts for a long time afterwards. There are bigger ones too, but they are not as numerous, and they don't get as close to people. But these army ants will build their house or their nest no farther than forty or fifty feet from your house sometimes.

S: Are they the ones that build the huge mounds?

C: Yes, oh no, that's the termite. They don't bother you.
S: Have you ever seen these mounds before?

C: Oh yeah, we have them all the time in Africa. The big termite mounds. You can dig into them, and you can use the mound itself. The Africans use the mound itself to make their floors, because when you pound it and dry it, it becomes hard and smooth, and makes a pretty good floor. The termite itself, the queen, produces sort of a honey like substance, and you can eat it. They'll dig into these termite mounds and get this honey like substance and eat it. In fact, when the termites sprout their wings in the spring time, after the rains, that's a good time to eat them. The people would gather them up and make soup of them.

R: Have you ever eaten any termites?

C: No, I've never eaten them and have not cared about eating them. I've eaten the locust, but not the termites.

S: Do you have a very rainy season?

C: Oh yes, the dry season begins, around in November, the later part of November, and it will be dry up through the end of March, first of April. And after that the rains begin gradually. You've heard, you'll probably have one hard thunderstorm in April, and then it will quit for maybe a week or two, then you get another one. Gradually it builds itself up, so that by June you're getting rain every other day. Then it stops for maybe a week or two, or a short dry spell, then it starts all over again. September is always a very wet month in Nigeria. Heavy rains and thunderstorms, the rains usually last six months a year. It's very wet, it's been so muddy that the roads completely went out. Last year when I was in Nigeria, it was impossible to pass the roads, in some places; we had to go into the bush to get around. We just could not pass over the roads. Sometimes that would get so bad that we had to try to get back, get through with four wheel drive, even that would get boggled down. It was terrible. We were stranded a couple of times, we just couldn't get in; it really get wet. Now, since they've had all their oil, they've made their roads better. They paved many of them so that it's better than what it use to be. When we were there most of the roads were gravel. It's been only the last five years that they've been paving the roads in that part of Africa.

S: Have you ever witnessed any inter-tribal war?

C: While we were there the Civil war was going on in Nigeria; in fact there was inter-tribal wars among the Tiv who were fighting against the Hausa. That would happen while we were there too, but during, while we were there the three year civil war took place. It was; ah, some of us had to leave our stations. I didn't have to; I was able to stay because I was more on the fringe of it. Some who were closer in, their wives and children had to all leave the stations; all the men stayed. It was a time of rather, dangerous times because the soldiers were at various stopping places on the roads; ah, what would you call them...

S: Checkpoints?

C: Checkpoints, right. They would put a gun in your face and go through all of your belongings, and see what was going on, and that was the beginning of the war; Towards the middle of it, it wasn't too bad, they'd just stop you and ask you where you were going. That was it. It was a little
scary at first and there were several times you wonder if you were going to get shot or not. We got through it; it was two and a half, three of it.

S: What was the Civil war?

C: It was between the Ibas and the National Government. Remember Biafra?

R&S: Yeah.

C: Well, the Ibas were the people of Biafra. They broke away from the national government, and they wanted to set-up their own state. Well, which they did, but the national government did not want to permit this so the Civil war resulted in which they invaded Biafra. The Biafran tribe first tried to invade the north and they did so and in turn were invaded by the north by the national government. It lasted for a long time. It's estimated that about four or five million people were killed during that war. It was a terrible war: because much of it was the killing of the civil, civilian population. It starts out first with the Ibas who lived in the north, living in north cities and the people in the north didn't want them anymore. They(Ibas) were a proud people and often looked down upon their fellow Nigerians. So they started killing them and there was an exodus of close to two million people from the north, fleeing down the roads in railroad cars and railroads and so forth. Thousands were killed, killed by the civilian population, killed by the soldiers, killed by the police. Near our home there was ah, several places where they had lined them up out in the bush and just shot them and let them die. The bodies were later eaten up by the dogs, by the birds and by the vultures.

S: Ibo, how do you spell that?

C: E-I-B-O, oh, no it's I-B-O.

-End of Side One

S: How or where were the Ibos?

C: There were nine million; they called it the eastern region at that time. Nigeria was divided into four regions when we were there—eastern, western, northern and Lagos area. This was called eastern region and later became Biafra. The Ibos made up this area, or they were the predominant tribe there. The thing is, they were more educated; the British had gone there and educated them earlier than the other parts of Nigeria, so these people were in many government positions throughout all of the north. They were traders—they were the ones who had a lot of the stores and other businesses, and they were found all over the country. Because there was not enough work and room for them in their own land, they left their own country. They were all very proud people, and they looked down on all the other Nigerians. They treated them like scum, too, many times. For that reason, there was a real legacy of hate building up, and it finally broke out in 1960. In 1967 or '68 is when it really broke out; and that is when they started killing Ibos all over the north. The civil population just took any Ibo they could find and chopped his head, or butchered him, or what ever they could do with him. So that the Ibos became afraid and started fleeing the north. At one time there was a whole trainload of them—close to 5,000 Ibos on the train, just piled high hanging out the windows, the doors, on the roof, everything. All of them fleeing, leaving everything behind,
just to get out. And soldiers were somewhat protecting them, but at the same time, no also, those who were not that well disciplined. There was a report at Mahurdi, that when they got to Mahurdi they, after they crossed, the soldiers were suppose to kill all of them and throw them into the river, but they crossed of the Benue river at that place. Of course everyone was concerned whether this would happen or not, but it didn't. The captain of the soldiers probably was able to control his men, so the train was able to get back; it did get back to Ibo land without the massacre. There were thousands who were massacred. This is the eastern region; for that reason they decided to break away to start their own government. You see what really started, it was the first coup, that took place. You see, Nigeria had a democratic government ruled by a Prime Minister, who was a Hausa man and a Moslem. Now the Iboos felt that they were the more intelligent people; therefore, they should take over. So they had a coup; they killed the Prime Minister and the Moslem leader. They shot him, took over the government, and for about six weeks they were in control. Then there was a counter coup, which killed them, and that is what started the bloodbath of the Iboos, because they had killed their Moslem leader you see. It was just like killing, well their, not only their political leader but their spiritual leader—that's how they looked upon this. So they were out for vengeance; The Moslems were out for vengeance. Then everyone who had a score to settle with the Iboos decided well here's our chance to do it. So it became a bloodbath and a massacre.

S: And that started in the North?

C: That started in the North, started in Kano and various places in the North. Now, we missionaries, and other Europeans tried to help to keep peace as much as we could, and when Iboos were being cut up and killed and so forth, we did give them help, tried to help them get back to their own people and gave them medicines and bandaged their wounds and so forth. In one place, in Jos where our children were they had about 5,000 of them in one camp. No one would take care of them; no one would give them food or water, so the missionaries were really the ones who were taking care of them. Our children participated in, rather our older children helped bind up a lot of their wounds and so forth, because many of them were practically hacked apart by machetes and so forth. It was a bad time, and of course the people for that reason looked upon white people, the Americans especially, as being for the Iboos which was not really true. We felt that they were being unjustly persecuted, although they had some of it coming to them, but not that extreme. For that reason when the war did break out there was rather strange relationships for us too; we had to be very careful.

S: Now, Biafra, that was a part of Nigeria that they turned into their own state?

C: Yes, see that way eastern Nigeria, which became Biafra. Then the national government of the north from Lagos, invaded it with help from Russia and Egypt. They were able to invade, and they were able to take over, and finally destroyed it; but it took them two years of hard fighting. There were thousands of people killed in the war. They, of course, had help from Russia in doing this, and many Russians came there and Egyptians flying Russian's planes. This helped; it made it possible for Russia to get her first step into Africa. And it is still there; yet; there is a lot of Russian influence yet in Nigeria because of...Again, it was very poor police on the part of the United States in supporting Iboos against the national government, our government took a hands off policy and sort of unethically helping Iboos, which was stupid. After all, there was a revolt against
the national government and they should never have done it. They should have realized in turn the national government was going to get control, and then the United States would be out on a limb, because they hadn't supported the national government. It's the usual case of not reading politics correctly. Ever to this day we have lost influence in Nigeria.

S: What section of the country did you say you lived in?

C: The Benue province, which is part of the north. See it's, it's called the middle belt area. The north, the far north is Moslem, and where we were was pagan. In the southern part, the eastern region is Christian. It was mostly the Ibos who were Christians, they'd been Christianized. We were in the pagan area, above us, it doesn't mean there weren't any Moslems around us. The main Moslem enclave was in the north. We were in the middle area.

S: Did you meet any other foreign missionaries?

C: Oh yes, we met them all the time. See they, each one of us had our various locales where we worked, but you would always run across each other. They would be from England, Norway, Sweden, from Scotland, Ireland, some Hollanders, let's see Irish, ah, various others and areas. Most of the missionaries were Americans of course, the majority of the missionaries were Americans. It's an amazing thing, America has produced more missionaries that any other country in the world. Where ever you go, you always find them.

R: Did the tribe except you very well?

C: Oh yes, the Africans wanted missionaries, especially the Tiv people. In fact, we are pulling out now and putting it more and more in the hands of the nationalists. It isn't because they want us to, it's because that it's the proper thing to do. They would love to have us there for eternity, after all, we'd bring in money, and we bring work, we bring medicine and help in various ways. They're not eager to see us go. Now the national government doesn't want, this was a policy in the national government to try to stop the mission work in Nigeria, but they found out they couldn't do it themselves. Now they're asking us to come back again. Like just recently, the national government took over, or state government, took over one of the hospitals. They wanted to run it, they said our doctors could remain, and our nurses, there, but they would be under the employ, control of the government. Well we excepted for a while to see what would happen, and now, about twelve months later, they're asking us please take it back, we can't run it. That's very usual, the government simply just can't run hospitals or schools as far as that goes. All our schools were taken over by the government, and they've gone from bad to worse.

R: Are the Tiv people accepting the modern way or do they still cling to tribal customs?

C: No, ah, no they are definitely coming into the twentieth century rapidly. Ah, that creates a problem too, because sometimes they, they are throwing away the good of their culture in doing this; going into the twentieth century and to city life, that's what they are going into without being really prepared for it. So what you have is a lot of people coming into the cities and they don't have work. They're not educated, they live either on their neighbors, brother, or thievery. So, ah, it's getting worse and worse in the big cities of Nigeria. Everyone wants to leave the farm now, and go to the city. If you have a little education, well then you don't
work with your hands anymore, cause that, that's no right you see? When you have education, you work with your head not with your hands, but they don't work with their heads either. That's a real problem in Africa, what to do with these young people who have left their homes, have an eighth grade education or less and don't want to farm anymore. There's not enough work in the country. Nigeria is not that industrialized. So they're in the cities doing nothing, but getting into trouble, and they've left the best of their culture, cause there was good in their culture too. The strong family, the home built around the patriarch of the tribe. I mean this was good, it was cohesive, it kept the people together. Now this is being destroyed, in fact, many young people have no respect at all for their elders, which of course is bad. They're losing all of their group cohesiveness, that was in their tribal life.

S: Yes you mentioned you lived in Costa Rica?

C: Yeah, I spent ten months in Costa Rica, San José.

R: Why were you there?

C: Learning Spanish, and I was doing some mission work too. At the same time I would go out on tours, with teaching and preaching and selling Bibles and giving literature and things like that. We were there for ten months, it's a nice place to live. Then later on we went to the Honduras. There I was working in Tegucigalpa, which was, is the capital. Working in the city as well as outside the city, areas and little towns around the city. It's a very poor country, Honduras is the poorest country in Latin America. The average wage of a man there is about one dollar and a half to two dollars a day. The cost of living is greater than the United States, you can imagine how poor it is. Many people are unemployed, it's, thousands of people are looking for jobs, and there isn't enough jobs. The result is, it's a real poor country, real problems. We had good work going, established four churches while we were there, doing social work, helping the poor, helping in medical ways and education as much as we could. It was very difficult.

R: What has your work in Holland dealt mainly with?

C: Yeah, I'm sure, ah, you're probably acquainted with the Spanish Reformed Church, the Spanish Christian Reformed Church, on the corner of Maple and twentieth.

S: Is that over by the Civic Center?

C: Oh no, it's right up here (he points west down twenty-sixth street), at Maple and twentieth. It's a white church, a little white church down there on the corner. My work has been to visit the Latin people, inviting them to come to our services, teachings and preachings. Helping them out in any physical way we can, they need help. We'd help them financially if we could and help them out socially too. Any way we could be of help to them we would, administer to them or direct them to organizations that could. There are various organizations in the city that give help to the Latin people and the poor people, that's what we are doing. We work with three kinds of Latins, you know, the Mexicans who come up from Texas and Mexico, who are the majority, some Cubans, and some Puerto Ricans, there is quite a few Puerto Ricans in Holland too. The Cubans are usually better educated and they're ah, they're workers, they get ahead much quicker. Most of them do
have a job, and are not unemployed. It's the Puerto Ricans and Mexicans where you have the biggest problem of unemployment. Most of them are not as educated as the Cubans. I don't know whether you are acquainted with the Latins here very much or not.

S: Ah, no, not that much.

C: Are you from Holland?

S: No I'm from St. Johns, it's straight north of Lansing.

C: Yeah, I know where it is.

R: I'm from New Jersey.

C: Jersey, oh, then you have quite a Puerto Rican problem, don't you?

R: Yes in Paterson.

C: Are you near Paterson?

R: Yes, my home is right near Paterson.

C: I know Paterson.

R: Do you?

C: Yeah, I used to preach there once in a while. The Christian Reformed Church there and at several towns all around Paterson.

R: Do you see any advantages of living in Nigeria as opposed to living in the United States?

C: Well, I enjoyed the fact that I could, I lived out on the country you know, and living among the primitive people. You'd go out by motorcycle or bicycle or, I just enjoyed staying with the natives and listening to them talk, and in turn talking with them. It was sort of a challenging life that way, a life of being, you might say, how our forefathers used to live. After all it got back to pretty much the essentials, at times I would live in the grass huts for a week right with them. Live right with the people, listening to them, talking whenever I could. There were times when I would go into the village and they'd send a message to me, an elder is dying or a chief is dying or very sick, come and help. I would go down there, usually it wasn't more than a malaria case or bad dysentery. I would always have pills with me. Morale would be miraculous because the elder would react to these pills because most of these people were not on anti-malaria so that when you would give them a malaria pill immediately there would be their immediate reaction, so that it cured the disease over night. It would be quite a surprise to the natives.

S: Did you see any strange tropical diseases?

C: Well the most unusual that we used to have there was the dropsy kind. It's called filariasis, you'd see a man with.

S: Elephantiasis.

C: Yes, elephantiasis, you'd see that often. At times you'd see a guy coming
having to, with large hernias you know, have to practically carry his intestines along with him in a sack. These were some of the strange things you'd see. Snake bite cases too. There was one case where the whole arm of a little boy was practically eaten away by the poisons of the snake's venom. Is that what you mean those kinds of things?

S: Oh yes.

C: Yes, filariasis is very common, in fact my wife had it, and we had to come back because of it, see, cause she kept getting it all the time. (unknown) is another one found in a snail, people bathe in these waters and the insect it's a micro insect, it gets into your bladder, and it's debilitating, this disease can kill a person if he doesn't get treatment for it. Dysentery is one of the bad ones. Many children die of dysentery and malaria, cerebral malaria kills thousands of children a year. While we were there it was considered that over fifty % of the children die before they reach the age of five, a very high mortality rate. Even now it is still high.

R: Did they practice polygamy?

C: Yes, yeah there were polygamist in their society.

S: Did the Tiv?

C: Yes, both the Tiv and, well all the tribes were polygamist. It's legal in Nigeria, polygamy is still common in Nigeria. One man there, he was a chief, I think he had about a hundred wives. He didn't even know all of them, I don't think. In fact, one of the missionaries asked him; do you know all your children? He thought awhile, and he said I think I do, but I'm not sure. He had many of them, it was common, but usually not more than two wives, was common anyways, ah, it was only the rich men who could have more than five or six wives.

S: How did they determine wealth, by land, or, . . .

C: Not by land, land remember is owned by everybody. Wealth was the number of cattle a person had and the money they had too, because afterall money was becoming a big thing there too. Also the number of wives a person had, the number of children, things like that.

- Someone had rang the doorbell so Mr. Personniare left for a few moments-

R: What made you decide to become a missionary?

C: Well, I always had a feel for going out into other countries, foreign countries, with the gospel, and I always used to listen to missionaries talk when I was younger, and particularly Mrs. Hannah Veenstra, who came from here. She used to intrigue us when she came back from Africa with her stories of Africa. I read stories like Livingston, and others and so forth. It has always intrigued me and I felt if I could I'd like to go. The way was open so we were able to go. Exceptional blessings on the work too, I was both the evangelist as well as a, ah, pastor training, was able to see many churches come into existence, trained several young men, some that were able to go out.

S: It must be a very satisfying type of work.

C: Yes it is, very satisfying work. Things in my life that I'll never forget.
In certain ways I miss it now, here in Holland, this is much tamer than what I am used to.

R: Would you go back?

C: I couldn't go back to Nigeria, because we had to leave because of visa problems. The government did not permit me to go back. Honduras, I was, I felt it was time to leave, my children were getting older, I wanted to get back here. Also this work here was offered to me, so I felt that I'd better come back. I did not feel as intrigued with the Honduras as I was with Africa; Africa was my first love. We had spent five years in Central America, and we thought that it was about time we got back to the states. I spent close to eighteen years in foreign countries. It was quite abit of my life.

S: I was wondering if we might return to take some pictures, ah, we don't have a camera with us, but of some of your furniture.

C: Sure you can, you don't have a camera now?

R: No.

C: Oh well, when you come sometime with it, ah, I have some other African pictures, and things you'll want to take pictures of!

R: Yes those pictures (pointing to the wall).

C: Yes, those are of the African home life, I have some more in my study.

R: Where these done by Africans?

C: Oh no, my wife did them, all these paintings we have on the walls. Well do you want this thing turned off?

S: Oh, oh yes.

-click-

The end
S: I am here today in the home of Mr. Cornelius Persennaire, the date today in April 12, 1977. My name is Steve Cochrun.

S: Well, first of all ... I was wondering if you could spell sor akombo?

P: Sor akombo? Sor Akombo, s-o-r, that's one word and akombo, a-k-o-m-b-o, sor akombo.

S: Oh, o.k. I was just wondering about the spelling.

P: Which really means to sacrifice or prepare the fetish, they did it by sacrificing.

S: What kind of programs do you or have you participated in or founded?

P: Oh, in Africa as well as here.

S: No, just here.

P: I've been working most with the Christian Reform Church here and it's program of relief. Like, oh, if people would need help we would work through our deaconant, which means the deacons. And I would work with them to find out what is needed, how much help is needed and so forth. The Good Samaritan House, I believe that's what it's called, we have also worked with them, I work with them as a pastor of the Spanish Church. If we have a problem in which they could help out in, then we would direct the people to them or they in turn would direct people to our congregation too. This is the main program that we use here in Holland. Then of course with the literacy work, now I have not been working it myself, but I have members of my church who are working in literacy. Who are helping the people to learn English, to read English and write English, and ah, we have some people at our church who are doing this. Now I, myself, am not involved in that because that's more than I could do without becoming involved in that too.

S: Yes, you said that if you could not help them, that you would point them to other organizations that could, well could you tell me some of those organizations?

P: Well, I'm thinking more of S.S., ah this is one, and the Aid for Dependent Children, is another. And, let's see another one... those are the main two that we work with. Along with the Good Samaritan House. Now, the poor of our own church, who are members of our own church, we try to take care of our self. Of course they do receive relief work, relief from the city and relief from the state also. But if there are special cases, then we will try to help them to find the place where they can receive help.

S: You said part of your work was to help the Latin community financially if you could, does this mean you would help but don't have the money?

P: No, we help them by giving them money. Let one, me, put it this way, not all people who come to us for help deserve help. We have to be discriminating in who we help, and how we help them. For instance, we had a man who was coming up to us and we've helped him twice already and we found out that this man was just using his money for playing dice or another thing, and wasn't actually trying to help himself.
bingo and other things, and was not really trying to help himself. And so, ah we cut down on our help until finally we told him, this is the last help we are going to give you, until you get work and get employed yourself.

S: This was monetary help?

P: It was a monetary type of help, we were helping with there. Sometimes we'd help a person try to find a job. I mean, I may not do it myself, but I'll get in contact with people who can find a person a job. I've done this several times, so we can help them find work. Our idea is not to just hand out money, but if we can, try to rehabilitate the people, and help them find work if possible. And this we do work quite a bit too, because we work with Christian business men and industries which are interested in helping out these people.

S: Are the Latin people that you have tried to help, have you seen some improvement?

P: Yes, there are some who definitely have, are much better off than they used to be. Some who come here you know, needed help continually. Right now they have a steady job and are working, and they hardly need any help, in fact don't need any help, because they are able to help themselves. Of course you always have new people coming, so there's always demands, so type of help that is necessary, ah to help a family.

S: What seems to contribute to the Latins' problems?

P: Well, the Cubans are usually good workers and don't miss much work, they seem to be dependable. It's with the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans where you have a lot of trouble with missing work. Ah, I hope you don't publish that,(laughs).

S: I doubt that I will(laughs).

P: Oh, but it's true.

S: Do you have any idea as to how many people you have helped?

P: You mean in, over the time of the history of our church? Here?

S: Ah no, just since you've been back here in Holland.

P: Oh, since I've been here. Since we've been here, I'd say that's been about six families that we have been able to help, monetarily as well as trying to find work or something like that for them.

S: So the unemployment is the major problem that you see, right?

P: Yes, unemployment for one thing, though sometimes it's people who can't be employed because of illness. Like this one family that we are helping every once in a while, the father is blind and the mother has terminal cancer, and the mother has to be home to take care of him. So we do help this family off and on, because it's just one of those things. They get aid too from the government and the city, but they do need help. It's a disability.
S: Do you plan to draw-up any new programs?

P: You mean in social work?

S: Well, that's what I was wondering, do you consider yourself more like a social worker?

P: No. Any help that we are given, is more in the idea to show mercy and kindness. To show the people that the church is here to help them to, both physical and spiritually. We don't want to try to take the place of being a social worker, because we feel the city has people who are hired just for this, and that's not our job to do. There's a spiritual problem, which effects the family, then we will definitely go into and try to help, and I've had some of these too. Which are problems ah, morales and so forth, and we try to help them to straighten out their lifes'. Drinking or adultery or broken-up homes and things, this does, we do if you want to consider this social work I suppose you could. But we interpret this as being a spiritually problem too, you see? The social worker is just trying to regulate the living condition, so that they can live decently together, while we try to go deeper into it so that we are not only attaching the problem but the cause of the problem too. And we do have alot of that, and do deal with those kind of cases almost weekly.

S: How do you get ahold of these needy people? Do they come to you or does someone tell you about them?

P: Comes both ways. Sometimes I go out and I run into a cases in which they pour out their problems to me, already then I'll try to help them. Other times, other people of our church direct me to the situation, and I'll try to help that was if I can. And maybe even a member of the church which will come directly to me and say well we're having this problem, ah, with our family can you come and help us out, and then we'd do so.

S: Do you know the number of the Latin speaking of Holland?

P: Yes, ah, our recent census, I think estimated that there are close to 7,000, if not over 7,000 Latin people within Holland. It's Holland and North Holland you do know, not just the city of Holland but Holland township too. In other words the community around Holland, there are about 7,000 Latin people. It's considered about one-third of the total population of Holland, so it's a considerable number.

S: Do the families that you work with mainly speak Spanish?

P: Oh, Spanish and English. The younger group mostly speak English, and the older group speak Spanish. So I may come into a home and I may be... speaking Spanish to the dad and mon and English to the children. And the younger families, ah, I will quite often just use English, because they are just more at home in English than in Spanish.

S: Do you feel that the language barrier is still a big problem today?

P: It definitely is a problem for some to get work, because they know only Spanish and they are , ah, there are employers who are not ready to hire them. I would not say it's a serious problem, but there is some
of that. But there are a lot of them that are employed, in factories and do not know much English, but yet they are employed. So it isn't a problem that's impossible, they're able to find work.

S: Do you think that the Latin population is like another group, in which you find many good one or workers.......

P: Well, I generally find that the Latins who are employed are making good enough money that they're, ah, you'd class them in the-lower-middle-class people. They're probably ah, an annual salary of from $10,000 - $11,000 dollars a year. Now what you have, and that is quite common, is breaking-up of homes, in which the mother is left with three or four children and doesn't get child support. In these do have problems, and these are the ones that quite often are receiving ADC and aid from the state, like SS. And you have lot of this like in our church we have at least four or five women like this, who don't have means to support their family, because their husbands left them.

S: This is one aspect I wanted to point out that these cases are not the mode but are ah....

P: No, oh no. Generally speaking I would feel that Latin community of Holland is better employed and lives better than many of the black people of Grand Rapids. Where you have whole ghettos, ah, around Division and parts of Grand Rapids, which live in very, very poor conditions. And are much less employed than the Latin people are.

S: Do you have any idea how long you will continue this work?

P: Well, I've would imagine at least four, ah probably five more years, but maybe more. But my feeling for now is about five more years.

S: You are the pastor of your church?

P: I'm the pastor of the Spanish church.

S: How many hours a week do you put in?

P: Doing my work? Not just generally helping people, but my whole work?

S: Yes.

P: Oh, I would say that, the time I spend in calling, instructing and so forth, I would imagine about five or six hours a day, in just calling people, calling on people. Which means about you'd put it about thirty-five or thirty-six hours a week.

S: Now this would be involved in going out to help the people?

P: Going out, talking, calling up people, teaching, helping them out with their problems. At least thirty-five or thirty-six hours a week.

S: You grew up in Holland didn't you?

S: Do you have a goal to reach?

P: A goal? Right, my goal is to try to help this church wanting to become on its own. So that it is a self-supporting church. What I mean by that is being able to support it's own pastor, able to run it's own affairs, and to be a large enough and strong enough group, financially as well as spiritually, to be able to go out on it's own and to be it's own people you might say, it's own group. That's my hope and my idea. Right now, the church is definitely being helped by the other Christian Reform Churches in Holland. For instance, my whole salary is paid for by the other Christian Reform Churches. The building itself, and any improvements on it are paid for by other Christian Reform Churches. The church itself pays for it's daily expenses, but on top of that, most of it is paid for by the Christian Reform Churches in Holland. My hope is that the church will grow enough so that it will be able to support itself financially, and there will be enough leaders in it to be able, you might say, run it's own affairs, spiritually as well as physically. This is what I am working for, of course, in doing that you're helping the people of Holland come together and be a better people.

S: Do you feel that in doing this you are helping to preserve their heritage?

P: My feelings are to do that, right. I don't feel that it's necessary to oh........

S: Separate people just because of their ethnic........

P: No, ah, I, the feeling more is, they had a heritage, they have an ethnic heritage which is good, and they feel happy in it. And I see no reason why they can not remain a Latin church, in which they have their own way of worshipping, they're own expression of doing things, which is Latin. As long as the people appreciate that I see no reason why we have to make them become completely North American and all this. Let them go in their own way. It's been done that way through out the ethnic groups in the United States. The Italians, Dutchmen, and Polish they all did the same thing, and the Latins can do the same.

THE END