

## INTERVIEW OF TOMAS B. ALDAN

by Howard P. Willens

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- Willens: We are interviewing today Tomas B. Aldan, a distinguished member of the Commonwealth community who was a colleague of ours in the Third Northern Marianas Constitutional Convention. Tom, thank you for being available to assist on this project. Could we begin by asking you when you born.
- Aldan: I was born on December 21, 1945 in Yap.
- Willens: You were born in Yap?
- Aldan: Yes, in Western Caroline.
- Willens: Were your parents also born in Yap?
- Aldan: As far as I know my father was and my mother was not born in Yap.
- Willens: What was your father's name?
- Aldan: Felipe C. Aldan.
- Willens: And your mother's name?
- Aldan: Ana Benavente Aldan.
- Willens: Where was your mother born?
- Aldan: She was born in Saipan.
- Willens: What had taken her to Yap?
- Aldan: The information I gather was that my mother's father's brother was working for the Japanese government during the Japanese occupation and he was transferred to Yap. He was the family leader at that time. He was the oldest. I guess he was the most well-educated member. The family looked up to him so when the Japanese took him to Yap, they would follow.
- Willens: So your mother's father followed him to Yap?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: When did you actually move to Saipan?
- Aldan: That is a good question. I think it was about April of 1946.
- Willens: So you moved as a very young child.
- Aldan: I don't have any recollection of Yap at all.
- Willens: What prompted the family to move from Yap to Saipan after the war?
- Aldan: I suppose it is just a military policy to move all the Chamorros from all the islands back to Saipan. Most of the people that came from Yap and other districts were relocated to Tinian. And I don't know why we were not part of that Tinian relocation.
- Willens: Do you have recollection of what you heard about that movement of the Chamorros?
- Aldan: None whatsoever.

- Willens: Did your family get land on Tinian through the homestead program?
- Aldan: No. When I was young, we were staying at As Lito. It was a village then.
- Willens: So you were living in a village home in As Lito?
- Aldan: Yes. That's the first recollection I have of Saipan. I was staying in As Lito and then we moved down to Chalan Kanoa, District No. 1.
- Willens: How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- Aldan: There are four brothers besides me and eight sisters.
- Willens: Are you the oldest?
- Aldan: Yes. There is Joe, Ramon, Francisco and Rudy.
- Willens: And your sisters?
- Aldan: Rosaria, Margarita, Teresita, Marcelena, Merced, Remedía, Carmen, and Lourdes. That is eight.
- Willens: Where were you educated?
- Aldan: Saipan Elementary School and Hopwood Junior High School.
- Willens: Then you went to Guam?
- Aldan: Yes. Then to John F. Kennedy High School in Guam.
- Willens: When did you go to Guam to the J.F.K. High School?
- Aldan: In 1963.
- Willens: And how long were there?
- Aldan: I was there three years. From 1963-1966.
- Willens: Then did you have any further education?
- Aldan: I went to the University of Hawaii for a couple of years.
- Willens: Did you go there right after graduation from high school?
- Aldan: Yes. I was there from 1966 to 1968.
- Willens: What did you study at the University of Hawaii?
- Aldan: I tried engineering, I started with that.
- Willens: Did you not like it?
- Aldan: No, I guess I didn't like too well, just too much mathematics.
- Willens: Did you switch fields?
- Aldan: Yes, to business.
- Willens: Did you get a degree?
- Aldan: No, I didn't get a degree from that school. I got married in 1968. I stopped my education for awhile, and worked.
- Willens: What was your wife's name?
- Aldan: Jean Y. Yokoyama. She is Hawaiian/Japanese, second generation.
- Willens: Then did you return to Saipan?

- Aldan: No, I stayed in Hawaii and I took part-time courses at the Hawaii Pacific College. Now it is Hawaii Pacific University.
- Willens: What kind of work did you do in Hawaii?
- Aldan: I did all sorts of things. I worked as stock clerk, file clerk, and parking attendant.
- Willens: How many years did you stay in Hawaii?
- Aldan: I stayed there until 1972, so that makes six years stay.
- Willens: What brought you back to Saipan in 1972?
- Aldan: I decided it was time to come back. So when I got back I started working for the Division of Revenue and Tax.
- Willens: That was a division in the TTPI government?
- Aldan: Yes, under the Congress of Micronesia.
- Willens: Were you working for the Executive Branch or the Congress of Micronesia?
- Aldan: My understanding at that time was the Division of Revenue and Tax is under the Congress of Micronesia but supervised by the Director of Finance.
- Willens: What kind of work did you do for the Division?
- Aldan: I was the Revenue Officer for Saipan. There were three of us. I assisted the taxpayers and basic tax work on the three percent gross revenue tax. As well, I would go up to the airport and meet the plane because we also had the custom duties.
- Willens: How long did you stay in that job?
- Aldan: I worked for three years at that job. Then I went to the University of Guam to finish my schooling.
- Willens: How long were you there?
- Aldan: I was there a year and a half.
- Willens: What did you study there?
- Aldan: I studied accounting and economics. I did graduate in 1976.
- Willens: During the time that you were working for the TTPI, were you aware of the political status negotiations that were going on between the Micronesians and the United States?
- Aldan: Not really. The first I heard of that was when I was at the University of Guam. A group of Political Status Commission members came down and informed us of what they were negotiating.
- Willens: Did you have any views at the time as whether it would be desirable for the Marianas to have its own separate relationship with the United States, independent of the other districts?
- Aldan: Well, I always thought that it was better to be united. I don't know whether it is because I was born in Yap. I always felt that the history of the United States is to unite. The Civil War was fought just to unite the United States. I would like to see the Pacific area to be like that, but I don't know why each went separately. The Marianas during that time started negotiating separately and at the same time has a member in the Micronesian Political Status Commission.

- Willens: Were you aware that during the 1950's and the 1960's the Northern Marianas political leadership had repeatedly requested the United States to let them become U.S. citizens and become part of the United States?
- Aldan: Yes. As a matter of fact, if I am not mistaken, that is the foundation of the establishment of the two party system. The Territorial Party wanted direct negotiations with the United States and the Popular Party wanted to unite with Guam.
- Willens: Based on your experience as a student in Guam, both in the middle 1960's when you were in high school and some ten years later when you were in college, did you think that reintegration with Guam would be in the interest of the Northern Marianas Islands?
- Aldan: No. I always had this feeling and I have always known when my father was working for the Naval Administration that we were part of Micronesia and we all should join together. I never thought the Marianas would benefit by joining Guam or by direct communications with the United States. I thought it would be better off always if we continued with the rest of Micronesia.
- Willens: Were views along those lines back then influenced by the fact that you were from the Carolines?
- Aldan: I think so. I don't know why I always have that feeling. Again, reading history and going to school and knowing about the American history. I always felt that there was a way to unite.
- Willens: Did you consider yourself a part of the Carolinian community on Saipan, as distinct from the Chamorro community?
- Aldan: I considered myself a Chamorro.
- Willens: How does one makes that judgment when there's a clear Carolinian background as there was in your case?
- Aldan: I guess you can say the color of the skin. Chamorros are brown and the Carolinians are darker brown.
- Willens: Your mother was in fact Chamorro?
- Aldan: Yes and so was my father.
- Willens: When you worked for the TTPI during the 1972-1975 period did you come to know some of the officials including the expatriates who were working in the TTPI?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: What was your sense then of their ability?
- Aldan: Do you know that I have a strange feeling about this during that period of time.
- Willens: Why is that?
- Aldan: Because my understanding is that they were here to train their counterparts. The expatriates, they won't be here that much and the Micronesians would take over. But in my years since I started working I didn't see a single Micronesian that stepped in to replace an expatriate.
- Willens: And you are speaking principally of the finance and revenue area or the other divisions as well?
- Aldan: Yes, everything.

- Willens: For many years the TTPI Administration had stated that they were committed to a policy of bringing more Micronesians into higher positions. Is it your judgment that they simply failed to accomplish that objective?
- Aldan: Yes, for the most part.
- Willens: How about the compensation situation and specifically the dual pay system, what did you think about that?
- Aldan: I didn't think about it. I didn't feel that I was underpaid as compared to somebody who was an expatriate because most of the revenue people were local. So I didn't know that an expatriate would be getting more than I would be getting for the same job. I think in the Internal Public Auditor's office, the first two people are expatriates and maybe the guy that eventually became Chief of Finance and Accounting felt that he was not being compensated for that. For me, I didn't see the discrepancies until I read it in the newspaper under a section called "expatriate pay". Anyway the Division of Revenue and Taxation at that time was directed by the Congress of Micronesia, for our salaries. For the money in general, I felt that it was reasonable.
- Willens: Where there any members of the Congress of Micronesia in the early 1970's that you came to know on a personal level?
- Aldan: No.
- Willens: Did you have dealings with the District Administrator, Mr. Ada, during that period of time?
- Aldan: I knew him as a teacher. He was my teacher for civics at Hopwood. I thought he was one of the best teachers I had.
- Willens: By the time that you were working for the TTPI in the early 1970's, had you become affiliated with one of the two political parties?
- Aldan: No, I never have. Up until I became a Director of Finance I never thought I belonged to any single party.
- Willens: When did you become Director of Finance?
- Aldan: In 1982.
- Willens: The Covenant was signed by the negotiating representatives in February of 1975 and it was then scheduled for a plebiscite in the summer of 1975. Do you have any recollection of the political education campaign that when on with respect to the Covenant?
- Aldan: None.
- Willens: Did you support or oppose the Covenant as it was presented to the people?
- Aldan: I basically opposed it because of the taxes.
- Willens: What aspect of the tax issue bothered you?
- Aldan: The Internal Revenue Code.
- Willens: You are speaking of the fact that the Covenant required the Internal Revenue Code to be applied here as it was in Guam. What particularly about that offended you?
- Aldan: Comparing Guam and the United States vs. the Commonwealth, the earning income of the local people doesn't require that we have such a complicated tax system.

- Willens: That was a view widely shared by the people who negotiated the Covenant. Did you think that the authority to rebate taxes to some extent might soften the burdens of the Internal Revenue Code?
- Aldan: No. Because of its implementation the mechanics would still be there. The difficulty of implementing the system would still be there for the people to comprehend or even understand what's going on with the Internal Revenue Code and why they would have to file and then rebate during that period of time. Well, I studied income tax when I was in Hawaii Pacific College. It's difficult, but I got an "A" for it and when I came here and compared it with the local tax system which was implemented I think in 1968, the system here is so simple that it's very easy to administer and the people could easily understand it. As compared to that time when I was going to school, I think it was two volumes of tax laws.
- Willens: Were you surprised by the vote on the Covenant?
- Aldan: Yes, very.
- Willens: How so, did you think it might be defeated?
- Aldan: No, I always thought it would pass but not by 75-78%. I thought it would be under 60% or mid-50's.
- Willens: Do you remember any of the opposition to the Covenant that was being lead by, among others, Oscar Rasa?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: What did you think of the campaign against the Covenant?
- Aldan: It's good. It's a good education system but at that time I wasn't that active in entertaining political issues. I was more in tune with how I could raise my daughter and provide for the family.
- Willens: How many children do you have?
- Aldan: Now, two. My daughter was born in 1968.
- Willens: What's her name?
- Aldan: Her name is Bernadette.
- Willens: And the other child?
- Aldan: Phillip.
- Willens: As you indicated earlier you went to Guam in about 1975 for about a year and a half and graduated in 1976. By the time you came back to Saipan, had the First Marianas Constitutional Convention been elected?
- Aldan: I don't remember.
- Willens: Did you have any interest in what the First Constitutional Convention was doing?
- Aldan: Yes. But I don't remember voting for anybody.
- Willens: Did you become involved politically in the 1977 campaign for the first officials of the Commonwealth government?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: Were there candidates from the family that you supported in particularly?

- Aldan: No.
- Willens: Were you active on behalf of one of the parties?
- Aldan: No, I was not active.
- Willens: Did you take any position in the first Commonwealth government?
- Aldan: No. Not until late part of 1981.
- Willens: When you came back in 1976 did you go back to your former job?
- Aldan: Yes. I was working for the Trust Territory at that time.
- Willens: So you continued working for the Trust Territory even as the Commonwealth government was taking shape?
- Aldan: Yes. As a matter of fact I went to all the districts, at that time to perform tax audits of five of the big businesses in every district.
- Willens: You were doing that in your capacity as a TTPI revenue officer?
- Aldan: Yes, as a TTPI revenue agent.
- Willens: Based on your views and your visits to the various other districts at that point in your career, did you still have the view that it might have been desirable to get all of the districts and the Trust Territory together?
- Aldan: Yes. I never stopped having that idea. As a matter of fact I stayed in the other districts for one month while I was auditing. I find the people that I meet very friendly.
- Willens: By the time that you went to visit the other districts, did the Marshalls have its own separate status negotiations and Palau have its own status negotiations?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: What do you think prompted those districts to want to go their own separate ways like the Marianas did?
- Aldan: To me the only reason that they did that is because of financial negotiations. Even the Marianas to me [is] not as much as anything else but purely financial. I think that if there's no finances involved, then Micronesia would still be together.
- Willens: When you said finances are you referring to issues of allocating tax revenues?
- Aldan: No. What they can get from the U.S. government.
- Willens: It is your sense that they thought they could get more money by proceeding directly in negotiations with the United States?
- Aldan: I think they did.
- Willens: What led you to go into the Commonwealth government then either in late 1981 or early 1982?
- Aldan: The Division for Revenue and Tax started to dismantle the office. They were telling us to start looking for jobs within our own government.
- Willens: What position did you end up in the Commonwealth government?
- Aldan: Basically the same job. I was an auditor when I worked at TTPI and when I came down here I was Compliance Manager for Revenue and Tax.
- Willens: Is that the head position with respect to compliance?

- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: How many people were working for you at the time?
- Aldan: Approximately eight, three auditors and five office and tax assistants.
- Willens: Had Pete Tenorio been elected Governor by the time you went into the Commonwealth government?
- Aldan: No, Governor Camacho was still in office. As a matter of fact, you know, we hired two revenue agents from the Internal Revenue Service. They were training the staff here. One of them became the Director of Finance. He was appointed by Governor Camacho to be the Director of Finance.
- Willens: Was he a good director in your judgment?
- Aldan: Yes, except that he fought too much with the Public Auditor. He was trying to protect the Governor and the Public Auditor was auditing issues not to the benefit of the Administration but rather to the Legislature. I don't know if you recall or not, Bob Bradshaw was the Public Auditor.
- Willens: I remember the name. I don't recall meeting him. It sort of goes with Public Auditor's job, too.
- Aldan: At that time the Governor even vetoed the Public Auditor's budget.
- Willens: The first Administration did generate a lot of controversy and litigation.
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: What you think caused that controversy and litigation during the first Administration?
- Aldan: At first, I think the Governor doesn't have good advisors. I know of two cases where the government eventually lost and had to pay back. One is the Public Auditor's case and the other was the Personnel Officer's case.
- Willens: The Personnel Officer. What was that all about?
- Aldan: Basically the Governor terminated the Personnel Officer and replaced him with a Personnel Management Officer. He changed the title.
- Willens: What do you think were the issues that brought Governor Pete Tenorio into office? Was he viewed as someone very different from Governor Camacho?
- Aldan: Yes. I think the sentiment of the people changed because of the way Governor Camacho ran the office. People were saying that he was untouchable, he's unreachable. It even became to a point where they called him King Carlos.
- Willens: What was your view at the time in the early 1980's about economic development here in the Northern Marianas? Did you personally want to see more economic development?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: Were there particular obstacles to economic development at the time, in the early 1980's?
- Aldan: No. My thinking is that the Commonwealth was not known yet by economic investors or investors, even in the U.S. for that matter, what was available and open for economic development or for investing. The airports were not that good. I remember working for the airport before the new one came up. I think it's a matter of promotion.
- Willens: How long did you stay with the Commonwealth government?

- Aldan: Until 1994.
- Willens: What were the various positions that you held during that period?
- Aldan: I was Chief of Finance and Accounting under Governor Camacho.
- Willens: Then what was your position under Governor Tenorio?
- Aldan: Director of Finance.
- Willens: How many years did you stay in that position?
- Aldan: Four years. In 1986 I moved to the Retirement Fund. He wanted me to stay on but I felt bad about the office.
- Willens: Why?
- Aldan: It was too much politics. My mind is not trained for politics in terms of finances. I cannot continue to prepare documents to transfer charges from one area to another just so that the books can balance, all because of politics. I don't like that.
- Willens: Was the Retirement Fund more of a non-political position?
- Aldan: It is non-political.
- Willens: And you stayed in that position at the Retirement Fund until 1994?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: And that's when you officially retired?
- Aldan: Yes.
- Willens: Looking back on the Commonwealth over the last 20 years, what would you identify as significant successes of the Commonwealth over the last 20 years?
- Aldan: We had good improvements in power, the sewer system, and the air transportation.
- Willens: Are you generally pleased with the economic development?
- Aldan: No. I am very disappointed with the way the economic development of the Commonwealth is progressing. I wish that the economic development kept pace with infrastructure so that other villages in the Commonwealth or in Saipan, for that matter, are given the benefit of power, sewer system, better roads, better water, a better environment basically. When I was young I remember staying in the village and, you know, it's good. All the neighbors are good, we know each other very well, we can walk the street at midnight and there's nothing going to happen to you. Now, it is different.
- Willens: You made reference to the infrastructure not keeping pace. Do you think that the economic development has put more demands on the infrastructure than the infrastructure can handle?
- Aldan: Definitely. The government is not putting enough money in to keep pace with the demand.
- Willens: The other point seems to go to the quality of life.
- Aldan: That's the bad side of economic development.
- Willens: What do you think is the prevailing view of the community about the alien labor problem? What do you think those people want to accomplish here?
- Aldan: I wish most people would have the same feeling that we should, the people or the leadership step back and look at the Commonwealth, and look at it carefully. There's just

not enough leadership in the Commonwealth to have a vision of what's happening. Even at the present time, we seem to be operating every day as a crisis. I wish they would step back and look at it. What are the basic needs of the people vs. the economic development that's happening. For example, there's a lot of cars, but not enough roads. The road system is very poor. There's just not enough going into our roads. We call it economic development. We need more businesses so that we can do more, but if you bring in more businesses, the demand will be more. To me, it's sad that every business here in the Commonwealth that you go in and you say something in the local language thinking that he or she may be local but their response is in English. Our culture needs our language and everything else about the Chamorros or even the Carolinians. Eventually that is going to die if we don't take a look at it and try to preserve it more closely.

Willens: Do you think that the local community has participated in the economic development to the extent that you would like to see it?

Aldan: No, that's the sad part they don't participate too much.

Willens: I am just asking you your views on that subject since we hear from some people that the local people have not invested in businesses and that is why they are not profiting from it. I would like your judgment on that point.

Aldan: I think the local people who go into small businesses, their downfall is their own fault. The local people have a tendency to bring down local people. They don't support local people—only when it's time for election and that's it. There's no support basically. Joeten is a good example. Joeten could have helped the local small businesses and get them involved in bulk or bargain order so costs would be competitive for the system.

Willens: Are there any other things that you would like to say for the record about the Commonwealth and how you think it has worked out over the last 20 years?

Aldan: Personally, because I am fortunate that I was there the right time and I get to retire comfortably. Other than having an expense of a son. It's good for me, personally. The development of the Commonwealth is good for me. But you can say that for only a few people. For the majority of the people it is not very healthy.

Willens: Well, thank you very much for taking your time. It's good to see you again.