

INTERVIEW OF BERNADITA T. SEMAN

By Deanne C. Siemer and Howard P. Willens

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- Siemer: Bernadita T. Seman has kindly agreed to an interview to help with our historical project. Bennet, could you start by identifying your father and your mother and tell us where they were born?
- Seman: My father was born here on Saipan, he passed away ten years ago. My mother was Japanese, she was born in Japan, and she was a Japanese citizen until she was naturalized during the TT Administration. I believe it was the late 1950s.
- Siemer: What are their full names?
- Seman: My father's name is Felipe Macaranas Seman and my mother's maiden name is Dita.
- Siemer: How did your mother come to Saipan?
- Seman: She was here as a nurse, a chief surgical nurse, and that is how she met my father.
- Siemer: What was he doing?
- Seman: He was also working in the hospital. He was being trained to be a pharmacist.
- Siemer: When were they married? Before the war?
- Seman: Yes, before the war.
- Siemer: How about your father's family. Did his mother and father come from Saipan?
- Seman: Yes. The ethnic family background from my father's side is mostly Carolinian, that is where the Seman is. Actually my father's mother was born in Guam and she was half Scottish or something like that. We don't know what. My grandmother's mother was Carolinian. My father's father was half Chamorro, actually from the Palacios family but he didn't take the Palacios name. A lot of people at that time were half and half. We are all related somehow.
- Siemer: Where in Japan did your mother come from?
- Seman: In the middle part of Japan, in the countryside. My mother was the youngest in the family. She was sort of orphaned because her mother died a few months after she was born and her father died while she was only a toddler, I believe five or six years old. On my father's side, my grandfather died of gangrene. He went fishing, and he came back injured. At that time medical facilities were not well-equipped. And my grandmother [on my mother's side] died during the war.
- Siemer: How long before the war did your mother come here?
- Seman: In 1930.
- Siemer: Was it unusual for a woman to come out of Japan to Saipan in those days?
- Seman: I never heard that it was unusual because there were a lot of other Japanese women married to Chamorro men here. How they came here, I don't know. But my mother was a professional. She was a nurse. I guess that her skills were needed here.
- Siemer: How many children did your parents have?
- Seman: They had nine children.

- Siemer: Can you identify them for us?
- Seman: I have two brothers, Vicente and Jose. The girls are Inez, Elizabeth, Esther, Isabelle, Jacoba, Kathlene, and myself. One died right after the war of malnutrition. She was, I believe, only two years old when she died.
- Siemer: What do your brothers and sisters do now?
- Seman: Four of them reached retirement age.
- Siemer: What did they do when they were working?
- Seman: My oldest brother earned his midshipman rating, the second brother was a hospital administrator until he retired. Inez was a part-time housewife because she had a job until Frank was given the position of District Administrator, I believe. The others, Esther was the Postmaster until she left about three or four years ago, and Isabelle is a nun. She belongs to the Mercedians. Jacoba still has her job with the government, she is the Federal Coordinator, something like that. The sister above me is at home now.
- Siemer: You are the youngest?
- Seman: The youngest of my parents, but we recognize also as a family member another sister below me.
- Siemer: Tell us where you were educated and what you studied?
- Seman: I graduated from Mt. Carmel High School here and then I went to Creighton University in Omaha. I went back in 1977 and I attended Humboldt State University in Northern California for two years and then transferred to University of Utah, and that is where I obtained my bachelor's degree.
- Siemer: What year did you graduate from high school?
- Seman: In 1971. I got my bachelor's degree in 1981. My degree is in accounting.
- Willens: When were your born?
- Seman: I was born on January 26, 1952.
- Siemer: In the time that you were in the States in school the first time, did you come home during the summers?
- Seman: No. I only completed one semester but I was there for one school year.
- Siemer: And then you came home for how long?
- Seman: I came home from 1972 to 1975. At that time I started out working for J.C. Tenorio Enterprises in the Accounting Department. Then I was temporarily to moved to cover for the secretarial position under the late Joe Screen and the late Joeten. I guess I did a good job. I was given a full-time position for three years until I decided to go back to college.
- Siemer: So then you went back to the mainland?
- Seman: In 1977.
- Siemer: And came back?
- Seman: In 1981.
- Siemer: Where were you employed then?
- Seman: I worked for three months for Pacific Development Contractors. It was a construction company. Then I was hired at MVB [Marianas Visitors Bureau] to be the first in-house

accountant. In a few months, they continued adding new responsibilities until 1983. In 1983 I was appointed to the position of Assistant Managing Director for Administration. In 1985 I was given the official title of Deputy Managing Director.

Siemer: How long did you stay in that job?

Seman: As Deputy it was from 1985 to January of 1990 when I took over as the Managing Director.

Siemer: Then how long were you Managing Director?

Seman: For four years and seven months before I got fired.

Siemer: That was a political change, was it not?

Seman: Yes, it was definitely a political reason that I was terminated. We had a settlement on that one.

Siemer: And then you went into the public school system.

Seman: I taught for one year and during that time I spent some months as an elected Con-Con delegate. And so I took a break to take on that responsibility. I went back for fourteen months, but I felt I wasn't really qualified. I learned that dedication and desire was not enough to be a really good teacher. I planned to take some teaching courses at the college just to prepare me better for that challenging position.

Siemer: During the war, was your family treated by the Japanese Administration any differently because your mother was Japanese?

Seman: You know, my parents really never said how they were treated. If they were treated differently, I didn't hear about it. But they were treated well, I think, because of their professions.

Siemer: When the invasion occurred, where did your family go?

Seman: They went to family property—in translation, it is a ranch but not really a ranch in terms of the ranches in Montana or California. And they hide in like a cave and they stayed there.

Siemer: What happened after the Americans landed?

Seman: My mother never liked to discuss the war. What we learned in bits and pieces was that when the Americans came, they had a megaphone calling people out of their hiding places. And this is how my grandmother was killed. She was protecting a wounded Japanese soldier inside the cave, because he helped them. And when they were asked to come out, she feared if she would have come out what the American forces would do to him. So the Americans used the flame thrower and they both died in the cave.

Siemer: What happened to your mother and father and their children after they came out of the caves?

Seman: Like I said they never really discussed that part. What we learned from other people was that they were turned into the Susupe camp.

Siemer: Did they go back to their jobs in the health system?

Seman: Not my mother, just my father. He was like a translator or interpreter for the American forces back then. He was really proficient in these languages.

Willens: Was he proficient in Japanese?

- Seman: Yes.
- Siemer: Did he go back to the hospital?
- Seman: Yes, he worked at the hospital until he retired in 1972.
- Siemer: After the war and after your parents were back out of the camps, did they join a political party?
- Seman: My father was very active in the political process under the banner of the Territorial Party which later was established as the Republican Party. He was very active in that one.
- Siemer: Was that due to his Carolinian family ties?
- Seman: Yes. My father was well-respected in the Carolinian community. He was looked up to as one of the respected elders. Our family always lived in the Chamorro community but he was always going also to the Carolinian activities. He participated, but not in the dances. I remember going with him. So we always had a lot of jolly times, but I never saw him dance. I know he was very well-respected. They claimed the mother of his father was a daughter of a chief.
- Siemer: Which of the Carolinian clans did the Semans belong to?
- Seman: I don't know. They lived in Oleai and San Jose.
- Siemer: When did you get active in local politics?
- Seman: When the issue came up for the ratification of the Covenant. When I was growing up I was always following my father to campaigns and enjoying myself. That's where I learned all the shouting, but as an individual I was conscientious of the political issues when the Covenant was brought before the people.
- Willens: Did you become aware that the Territorial Party and the Popular Party both wanted to become part of the United States, but the differences between them was to whether reunified with Guam or become directly affiliated with the United States?
- Seman: I felt it was very accepted sentiment that we would be permanently part of the United States. I remember in the 1950s or early 1960s about the efforts to reunite politically with Guam. I remember that issue also and the Territorial Party was opposed and the Popular Party wanted to [reunite with Guam]. The Carolinians were affiliated with Territorial Party. The Chamorro leadership at that time also argued that we would be overwhelmed by Guam and that we would not have enough political voice because Guam was already well-developed politically and in education and everything. The people there were already advanced in the global family unlike Saipan which was still sort of isolated, culturally isolated.
- Willens: During the 1960s when you were growing up and attending Territorial Party meetings with your father, as I understand it the Popular Party seemed to be winning most of the elections in those days. Is that your recollection?
- Seman: Yes, because they were running by what we call districts. A majority of the Carolinians like I said were for the Territorial Party and the majority of the Chamorros were in the Popular Party. And, of course, the Chamorro group outnumbered the Carolinian group. And then the way that the districts were set up, the only areas where the Territorial Party had a good foot were District 4 and District 7. That was in Chalan Kanoa, Oleai, and San Jose.
- Siemer: District 4 was Chalan Kanoa?

- Seman: Yes. At that time there were four districts in Chalan Kanoa. I guess the majority of the population lived there.
- Willens: Were you aware of any sentiments in the Carolinian community in the late 1960s and the early 1970s to effect that they would prefer to stay with other districts as part of some future political entity rather than become a separate entity here on the Northern Marianas Islands?
- Seman: Not necessarily just the Carolinians. I belonged to a group that would like to see a stronger unity within Micronesia. I think we sort of liked the motto *e pluribus unum*.
- Willens: United we stand.
- Seman: Yes. Maybe we were something like that. And we stood by the idea that with our diverse cultures we could be stronger if we united together in the same political family.
- Siemer: What was that group?
- Seman: We called ourselves the Saipan Women's Association. I know we even had ourselves chartered. Most of the women in our group were already exposed to the various people in Micronesia. I know Agnes McPhetres, she was a nun. She had spent some years in Chuuk and probably Pohnpei. Chailang, she was not there because she was still in the Order.
- Siemer: Rosa Palacios?
- Seman: She was still a nun. Starting I believe either in 1964 or 1965, we had girls from all over Micronesia attending Mt. Carmel School. We called them residents because they lived with the Sisters in a dormitory. So that is how we got exposed to the different cultures. We learned about them and we came to respect and understand them in spite of the differences.
- Siemer: Had you traveled to other parts of Micronesia by then?
- Seman: No.
- Siemer: When did you start to travel, for example, to Federated States and other places?
- Seman: Island hopping when I first started to college. In the late 1980s, then I really visited those places. I also had encounters with those people working for four summers at the Congress of Micronesia. I really came to respect those people, the leaders from the other islands.
- Siemer: When did you work with the Congress of Micronesia?
- Seman: In 1968, 1969, 1970 and 1971.
- Siemer: What did you do there?
- Seman: I started out as a page boy or page girl. Then I just worked myself up. We were given the position clerk typist, that sort of position, for summer training. It was a very interesting experience.
- Siemer: How did you get appointed?
- Seman: We applied and they selected.
- Siemer: Who were some of the others who worked with you at the Congress of Micronesia?
- Seman: A lot of us, mostly from Mt. Carmel School. I remember one year Jack Villagomez was there. Elizabeth Rechebei also worked there. I believe she worked one summer. Then she went to college.
- Siemer: Who were some of the others who were active in the Saipan Women's Association?

- Seman: Kate, Felicidad, Josephine Sablan, Agnes McPheters, the late Bernie Mitchell, my sister, before she had the breakdown, myself, Maggie George. It was a small group of very vocal people.
- Siemer: When did the Saipan women's group get organized?
- Seman: Along about the time when they were negotiating for the Covenant. I believe it was towards the end of the negotiations.
- Siemer: Where did you meet?
- Seman: We meet at my parents place. We had one abandoned building so we fixed it up as our official meeting place. We had officers, secretary, coffee makers.
- Siemer: How often did you get together?
- Seman: I believe twice a week because we had to move fast on that one.
- Willens: There was a practice of putting out joint communications at the end of every session and sometimes position papers were published in the paper. How did you get your information about what was going on?
- Seman: I recall we were a little bit frustrated because it seemed like the negotiations were all in secrecy. Now we learn that when you negotiate you don't say everything that you have on the table, you don't want the other side to know. But then, we were sort of frustrated because we believe we were entitled to more information. The newspaper, when did Younis start it?
- Willens: He started it in 1972. It was only a weekly and a very small paper as you remember. Did the Marianas Political Status Commission make an effort to have village meetings or otherwise report to the people?
- Seman: No, not until they had the final product that is going to be presented to the people. Not during the process of the negotiations. I remember once, you were meeting in one place and we staged like a sit in and tried to demand to see the Ambassador. We were shooed off. I don't know, for whatever reason he wouldn't see us.
- Willens: Was it actually during a round of negotiations or was it after the Covenant had been signed?
- Seman: Just towards the end.
- Willens: Well many of the sessions then were held in what used to be the Continental Hotel now the Hyatt and earlier they had been in the old Hafa Adai hotel.
- Seman: But I think there was a reception in one place and we wanted to catch the attention of Ambassador Williams.
- Willens: Do you remember what the issues were that really got you excited about the Covenant?
- Seman: Well, we strongly felt that we were entitled to information, we wanted to be well-informed. That was one issue that we were always raising. In the beginning, one of the members from the Marianas Political Status Commission, Dr. Palacios, he was coming out opposing to what the United States was offering. At that time his view was that the United States was trying to offer us things that really were detrimental to the preservation of our cultural heritage. And then all of a sudden everything was fine. We wanted to know really the reasons [for his change of views]. We wanted them to explain to us how did they arrive at the final terms of the provisions of the Covenant.

- Siemer: Was there somebody on the Political Status Commission with whom your group felt particularly friendly?
- Seman: In the beginning we were looking for Dr. Palacios. And that was a disappointment when at the end he turned around and he said, oh this is good for us. And then we strongly supported him on that issue that the food stamps weren't really free, nothing is free. We were aware of that one. As women, and I was also a young mother at that time, the withdrawal from Vietnam was important. I believe at that time we were concerned about our sons, our children, being drafted to fight a war which we felt would be mostly like World War II, where we weren't really part of it. That's one issue. Then we started questioning about the price for all the Tinian land and the Memorial Park.
- Willens: Was Dr. Palacios someone that was of importance because of his position in the Carolinian community?
- Seman: Well at that time he was elected to Congress of Micronesia. And his profession is highly respected.
- Willens: Let me identify some of the other members of the Commission and let me see if you have any recollection of dealing with them. Like former Senator Borja, was he someone that you had any communication with about the Commission?
- Seman: No.
- Willens: What did you think his position was going to be?
- Seman: It was always for the Covenant from the beginning.
- Willens: Joeten served on the Commission for only about a year and then he resigned. Did you ever have the occasion to discuss with Joeten what his views were with respect to political status?
- Seman: Joeten didn't want to walk into that relationship permanently with the United States until the United States is committed to bring us development in terms of education. Because Joeten was really a strong believer in education. He said that once the Covenant is approved the port of entry will be opened to U.S. citizens, we are not ready to compete with the U.S. citizens. Also they will be coming here to look for economic opportunities here.
- Willens: Did you share that view?
- Seman: Yes, in fact that's why when it was ratified I went and got my degree.
- Willens: Joe Screen served as a consultant for the Commission for a very brief period of time but never really participated with the members of the Commission. Was he someone that you discuss the political status issues with?
- Seman: Yes.
- Willens: What was his view?
- Seman: He shared the same view as Joeten. They were on the same wave length. But Joe Screen didn't fear the U.S. people coming in already. He would joke about that he was an alien on the island so he still had to go through the process of labor permits every year. Even his family, he had to go through that every year, the same form that they are using now. The photo, the police, all the same information has to be submitted every year. I remember he felt that if we were to align ourselves with a greater power our safest country would

be United States, the most democratic country. He told me that the United States would provide a political stability to the islands, therefore, it would be good for us.

Siemer: Did Joeten and Joe Screen see the future business contacts being primarily with Japan rather than the United States?

Seman: Yes, because it is closer, the market is closer and they recognized that. But even at that time, Japan was a strong ally of the United States. Japan had never offered to take us under its wings. The only country at that time was Russia. I know Oscar Rasa and Francisco Aldan were strong advocates of relations with Russia. They were very radical.

Willens: Do you think they were truly serious about that?

Seman: No, I just think they were trying to stir some fire. We felt strongly about being with the United States except that we really wanted to go to the table with our own terms.

Willens: During the time that you worked for the Congress of Micronesia, some of the Congress of Micronesia leaders from Truk and Pohnpei were very strong advocates of independence for Micronesia. Did you think that made some sense?

Seman: No. The independence group, I believe, was not really a large group. I believe that the person really involved in the negotiations was Lazarus Sali and he was all for a Federated State of Micronesia with a relationship to the United States. That was the procedure in the beginning and he was pushing for it. When the two sides couldn't come to terms, then a minority came and said okay if you don't want to take it then we will go independent. That was my feeling at that time.

Willens: Do you have any recollection of Francisco Uludong working in the Congress of Micronesia?

Seman: Yes, he was at one time the Journal Clerk.

Willens: And do you know whether he had any affiliation as a staffer for something called the Independence Coalition?

Seman: Yes.

Willens: You remember there being an Independence Coalition?

Seman: Yes. From my perspective or my recollection it wasn't really a strong group. We were moderate people and we would look at that group as very radical. We knew that we could not develop independently. We recognized that we have limited resources and then later on we recognized that tourism might be available. But it wasn't recognized at that time about tourism. It was more about natural resources. But we knew we just couldn't go independently. It would take years for us before we would really let go of that assistance. We still needed the aid from the United States.

Willens: Some of the names that have come up about the independence movement have been Andon Amaraich from Chuuk, Tosiwo Nakayama from Chuuk, Hans Williander and some others. I just wanted to get your recollection of whether you thought it was an important coalition.

Seman: Andon Amaraich was really a well-respected leader. He had good vision for Micronesia. But I am not sure if he was really pushing for independence right away. I think one of the terms for the Federated States would be mutual consent termination of the agreement. I don't know whether he was going to come to independence right away but, if we are ready, to be free [in the future], to have the right to go that route later on.

- Siemer: Did anyone from the United States negotiating team other than Ambassador Williams ever meet with your group or talk with any members of your group?
- Seman: I don't recall.
- Siemer: What did your group think about the ability of the Marianas Political Status Commission to deal with a large power like the United States and its delegation?
- Seman: Well, we never questioned their qualifications to sit down. We had a lot of questions on their motives. Their personal economic gains.
- Siemer: For example, some of the businessmen might have economic motives with respect to how the Covenant worked out.
- Seman: Joeten, he left. Like you said, he served for only one year.
- Siemer: Was it your view that the politicians would be better off under the Covenant in the way that they had structured it?
- Seman: Only on that part where they were really buying out land in Tinian.
- Siemer: So it was mostly personal economic interests.
- Seman: If it was going to be for economic benefit to the rest of us, I don't think we questioned that. But we did raise [questions] about the food stamps. We were really opposed on that issue about the food stamps. We felt that in our culture we take care of our own people and we didn't want to see all this freebies coming down and then the people would forget about our own family responsibilities. And we touched on that. We stressed to the people on that one.
- Siemer: What was your group's view about the land alienation requirements that were imposed in the Covenant?
- Seman: I think that was well accepted, except for me. I remember I said they want sell to the Japanese at a better price, why not. I always felt that way. If I do not sell, I will lose my interest anyway. I would have given up any and all rights to that parcel, so why not get the best price. But some people felt that the land should belong to the local people and, of course, I personally I feel really strongly about being local but not in that sense.
- Siemer: You thought that local people could fend for themselves and get the best price even if they were selling their land?
- Seman: On that one I didn't think about the other people. I was thinking about myself.
- Siemer: What about the members of the Political Status Commission from the other islands, from Rota and Tinian, were your group familiar with any of them?
- Seman: No.
- Siemer: You looked primarily to the members from Saipan?
- Seman: Right. Eddie Pangelinan was there, Pete Tenorio and Dr. Palacios in the beginning were against the provisions of the Covenant, I believe.
- Willens: Felix Rabauliman ultimately did not sign the Covenant. Oscar Rasa was elected to the Congress of Micronesia in 1974 and became a member of the Commission in the very last stages of the negotiations. Some of the other members from Saipan were Ben Santos, Ben Manglona, Ben Camacho, Felipe Salas, Manny A. Sablan for a short period of time. Do any of those names prompt any recollections of conversations you or your group might have had with them?

- Seman: No.
- Siemer: Did your group write to the Political Status Commission at any time?
- Seman: I don't think so. We didn't have a typewriter. Writing at that time was not a way to communicate. We didn't think about keeping permanent records and all.
- Siemer: At the end, when the Commission had a document on the table and the members of the Commission had to make up their minds whether they were going to sign or not, did any members of your group contact them or discuss that with them?
- Seman: I remember we met with Dr. Palacios, Ed Pangelinan and Pete A. Tenorio. Those three gentlemen. Like I said we wanted to be better informed of what we were voting for and we questioned why the rush. Why couldn't we have at least a year for us to digest [the Covenant] so that we can tell them what they should be representing to the people. I believe it was just a short period of time before the final end.
- Siemer: You thought it would be good to have a waiting period between the time the document was written and the time the Commission voted on it?
- Seman: Yes.
- Siemer: Pete A. Tenorio had run for office of the Congress of Micronesia in November of 1974 and he won. Some people recall that he ran on a campaign of let's go slower.
- Seman: Yes. That is why we questioned them because all of a sudden, when they voted, they changed their positions.
- Siemer: How did he explain that change of position?
- Seman: He couldn't explain it. I remember that he couldn't explain when he was facing us.
- Siemer: In February of 1975, a short two months later, he was in favor of signing the Covenant.
- Seman: We asked him what was the change. Not just the reason for his change but what change did he contribute that convinced him that was going to be a good Covenant for the people.
- Siemer: One of the changes that had occurred in that short period of time between the election in November of 1974 and the signing in February of 1975 was a provision that was presented by Rota that there be a bicameral legislature and that they have equal representation in the upper house. That was something that came in at the very last minute. Was that discussed by your group at all?
- Seman: No, I don't think so.
- Siemer: Did people back then appreciate what would happen if there was a bicameral legislature with equal representation in the upper house?
- Seman: We knew that no negotiation would take place if that provision is not in there.
- Willens: Was that your view?
- Seman: Yes.
- Willens: You did not think that Rota and Tinian would go along with the Covenant without that provision? How did you hear that?
- Seman: Benjamin [Manglona] was also in the Congress of Micronesia. He was a very strong voice for the people of Rota, not for the entire Marianas. He was always for Rota.

- Willens: Did you think the representatives from Saipan were more oriented towards a Commonwealth-wide perspective than the representatives from the other islands?
- Seman: You know that is a big question. Like I say, we always questioned why the rush. They just gave in to Rota and Tinian so they could wrap up the negotiations.
- Willens: You mentioned food stamps. There were other federal programs such as Social Security, the SSI extra family payments, minimum wage. Was your group also opposed to some of those other federal programs that would provide benefits to the local people?
- Seman: Food stamps were the one that they brought to us. That was the one that made us aware that, oh, you can get free food and what not. We had Social Security already at that time under the Trust Territory. I don't know how it was administered, but we had the Trust Territory Social Security. Of course, we were all aware especially about the student financial aid. That really opened the door and opportunities for our young people to go and further their education. But it was more on the food stamps because the Commission members were really pushing for those. They highlighted that.
- Willens: How about the availability of U.S. citizenship under the future relationship, was viewed by you personally as something of importance?
- Seman: No. The question is at what price. Because like I said, it was just the last final years of the Vietnam war. And we were concerned because it was a big issue in the United States. I think it was a political issue about the Vietnam war and the draft system that determines the Presidential election. That's where we raised this issue. Are we willing to sacrifice our sons to a war that maybe is not our war and it is decided in Washington. That's the thing about U.S. citizenship we looked at, about being drafted.
- Willens: Was it unusual in the early 1970s for a small group of women to get organized and present their views with vigor as you did?
- Seman: No. The women on the island always took an active part in politics. Maybe they didn't run for office, but they were active in campaigns. This is just my personal view, but in families here, your political affiliation runs with the family and sometimes it's the mother's side that determines which party you belong to. If you married into a family of a different party, you get assimilated.
- Siemer: Was most of your group in the Territorial Party?
- Seman: We never asked each other about political affiliation.
- Siemer: Was there a women's group in the Popular Party?
- Seman: Back then, the Popular Party had a very active women's group. Maybe they were not officially chartered, but they called themselves Women's Group in the Democratic Party. In the Territorial Party, they also had very active old ladies. They were respected.
- Siemer: The Territorial Party had begun to win though by that time, had they not?
- Seman: They were winning elections at large. Because then we had the large Carolinian vote when you mix them altogether. For the local elections under the TT we had districts. And the majority of the districts are divided among the Chamorro population. The Carolinians were in Districts 4 and 7.
- Willens: After the Covenant was signed in February of 1975 there was a period of four months or so before the plebiscite. Did you and your group play any active role in the hearings?

- Seman: We followed the public hearings and raised questions. I remember we appeared on the local T.V. at that time, black and white, cable. Saipan Cable T.V. it was called. It was operating out of Rota.
- Willens: Did you organize yourself with the opponents of the Covenant or did you just continue to ask questions rather than argue that the people ought to vote against the Covenant or for the Covenant?
- Seman: We were aware that the majority was leaning towards acceptance of the Covenant. Because like I said, most of the people in the Democratic Party worked for it or their leaders said this is good. At that time, I think we were trying to buy more time so that would give us more time to present our side.
- Siemer: Back in that period of time, after the Covenant was signed and before the plebiscite, Oscar Rasa and Joe Mafnas came up with a list of points that they wanted to renegotiate. Did your group think that renegotiation was a realistic possibility?
- Seman: It was always a possibility. If we had a stronger voice demanding renegotiation it could be. What we can offer to the United States at that time was our strategic position. I felt that the United States cannot afford to let us go.
- Siemer: So you thought you had some leverage to renegotiate?
- Seman: Yes.
- Siemer: If you had been able to set the period of time between the signing of the Covenant and the vote, how long would have been the right amount of time?
- Seman: I never thought of that. We never really set how much time we needed.
- Siemer: When the Congress of Micronesia met early that year, in 1975, they appropriated \$10,000 to contribute to the public education campaign here in Saipan with respect to the Covenant. Do you remember that?
- Seman: I don't recall. We didn't use any money from outside.
- Siemer: Then in April, Erwin Canham was appointed as the Plebiscite Commissioner and arrived here in Saipan to supervise the elections. Did you have a chance to meet him?
- Seman: I think we did but I believe it was during the public hearings. He was there. But not as a group. Like I said nobody wanted to meet with us as a group except when we demanded Palacios, Eddie and Pete A., those three. That was like a private meeting. We didn't call the public to come and meet with us. We were trying to be responsible, trying to present our views.
- Siemer: That meeting occurred before they signed?
- Seman: After they signed.
- Siemer: When Erwin Canham began to set up his Advisory Committee, did he asked for a nominee from your group?
- Seman: I don't think so. Check with Agnes. I don't recall. Right after the Covenant was voted, I left the island.
- Siemer: When Canham began to set up the voting machinery, did your group have any view about whether the vote was going to fair or not?
- Seman: We felt we had nothing to fear about tampering of votes. But I remember Oscar [Rasa] raised that issue. I remember he either locked himself in the car or he demanded

- something. Oscar thought that the vote should be on the cards. He went and guarded the ballot boxes himself. He was just trying to make a name for himself.
- Siemer: Before the vote, Commissioner Canham published a list of registered voters so that anyone who wanted to challenge a prospective voter could do that. Was that a big issue back then?
- Seman: No, I don't remember too much about that. At the end the day, we were sort of resigned because we knew that it was going to through. But not with that majority. We thought maybe 60 percent. We thought we could reach at least 40%.
- Siemer: You were surprised by the vote?
- Seman: Yes.
- Siemer: Once the plebiscite was over, did your group participate at all in the efforts in the United States with respect to Congressional approval of the Covenant?
- Seman: No.
- Siemer: How about with respect to the Con-Con elections. Did your group take any position with respect to those things?
- Seman: I think we just sort of resigned ourselves.
- Siemer: How about yourself, did you go to any of the Con-Con sessions?
- Seman: No.
- Siemer: Were you personally concerned about any of the issues that the Con-Con was considering back then?
- Seman: Oh, we felt that it would be pretty much on the model of the United States. The land alienation was not a big issue for our group. I mean it was accepted that we should have some period for us to be more sophisticated in the land transactions.
- Siemer: That was a different set up because the Con-Con was open to the public so anybody could and listen. So you didn't have the worry about the closed sessions. In the middle of the Con-Con they recessed published a draft Constitution and held public hearings. Did your group participate in those?
- Seman: As I said, our group sort of dissolved after the Covenant.
- Siemer: Were you yourself worried about any of the things that you saw in the draft Constitution?
- Seman: No.
- Siemer: What was your sense about the Constitution? Did you think it was generally acceptable back then?
- Seman: Yes.
- Willens: Were you on the island in 1977 for the first election?
- Seman: I left in August.
- Willens: Do you have any views based on what you heard at the time as to why the Democratic ticket was successful over the Republican ticket?
- Seman: I was surprised because I thought Joeten was pretty strong with Oly Borja.

- Willens: Just a few questions about your work for the Marianas Visitors Bureau. When you came back to Saipan in about 1981 had there been any economic development of significance since you had left in 1977?
- Seman: Yes.
- Willens: What were some of the changes that you recall seeing upon your return?
- Seman: Paved roads. The airport was operating before I left but the development around that area was bare when I left. But when I came back, Herman Guerrero had built his family business there. The Hyatt and other constructions [were going up] all over the islands.
- Willens: Would you say based on your subsequent experience that the economic development had begun to increase significantly in the Northern Marianas by the time you came back?
- Seman: I would say so. I don't have the economic figures to support my feelings on how much economic development took place in that period. But just by seeing the activity around the island, I was surprised.
- Willens: During the next decade, during the decade of the 1980s, what is your recollection as to what sort of triggered the major economic development on Saipan, in particularly?
- Seman: I was still here working for Joeten when the two major airline carriers were fighting for the Japan route. Pan Am and Continental. It was a big fight and it even went to court on that one. That was the opening of the tourism industry when Continental started their direct flights, bringing tourists from Japan to Saipan. I don't believe it was on a daily basis, but that was really what spurred the development and the need for more hotel rooms. And subsequently you have all the other industry to support that.
- Willens: There was apparently a change in the foreign investment law sometime in the 1980s under Governor Tenorio.
- Seman: In 1983, they repealed the TT foreign investment law.
- Willens: Did that have any significance?
- Seman: Yes, I believe so. We had more foreign investors coming in. They were not tied to the stringent requirement under the TT foreign investment law where you are limited, I believe, to 49 percent [foreign ownership]. You have to have a partnership between a local and the foreign investor. I believe the fee was high—49 percent or something of that. Then Governor Tenorio repealed that because he had a majority of the Legislature under his Administration. They repealed that Trust Territory law and then that's when it really pushed foreign investment into the islands. A lot of regulations prior to that were sort of controlling economic development. So when those provisions were removed then, of course, with Japan booming it was the ideal place to invest.
- Willens: Just looking back today from your perspective, what is your assessment and evaluation of the economic development that has occurred here?
- Seman: Phenomenal for the time span that it took place. I may be biased because I was on the job promoting visitors and that requires capital investment. For the most part, I think the people benefited. We could have been a little more cautious, done more planning. And even under the Bureau, we were pushing for some sort of land use controls so that we would develop in the land not in a haphazard fashion. A gas station here, a car repair shop here, and then you have the hotels. We knew the value of providing an attractive environment.

Willens: How do you think in retrospect that the Covenant has worked with respect to the Commonwealth?

Seman: I personally think once it's done, it's done. You look forward. I don't dwell on "what if," but maybe we could have done better. I have to live with that idea that we could have done better. But how much better I don't know. Its working pretty well. I have no complaints for the most part.

Willens: Just in terms of your own perspective on the Commonwealth, is there anything else you would like to say?

Seman: My views are qualified opinions in accounting terms. I am not an expert like I said. I was just growing up at that time. But I really took that whole period of growth as a valuable learning experience. I always look for something to learn, not just accept changes.

Willens: Thank you very much.