

THE BRAGA BROTHERS
COLLECTION AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF FLORIDA

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The Braga Brothers Collection is a recent addition to the University of Florida's Latin American Library and is one of the principal sources for the study of late colonial Cuba and Republican Cuba before Castro. It is by far the best single source available in the United States for the study of the Cuban sugar industry in the twentieth century. The collection was donated to the University of Florida on 24 November 1981 as a gift from B. Rionda Braga and the late George A. Braga, and it occupies some seven hundred linear feet of shelf space. The essential arrangement of the collection was completed in the summer of 1985, and the collection is now open to qualified researchers. A finding guide will be published by the University of Florida Library in 1986.

The collection consists primarily of the business records of the Czarnikow-Rionda Company of New York and its subsidiaries. At one time, Czarnikow-Rionda was the leading cane sugar trading house in the United States, and through its affiliate, the Cuban Trading Company, the firm handled over 20 percent of the sugar imported from Cuba in the years between 1907 and 1960. Czarnikow-Rionda was also involved in the trade of Cuban cane molasses and was a major exporter to Cuba of jute bags, mill machinery, and other provisions. In addition, the company owned six mills in Cuba worth over \$134,000,000 at the time of their confiscation by the Cuban government in August 1960. Over the years, Czarnikow-Rionda and its affiliates were involved in every aspect of the cane sugar business, including cultivation, raw sugar manufacture, refining, transportation and storage, brokerage, and financing. All of these activities are well documented in the business records.

The collection is composed largely of correspondence files and business books (ledgers, journals, cashbooks, and the like), but it also includes hundreds of published items such as newspaper clippings, brochures, trade circulars, and annual reports. Both Spanish and English are used in the correspondence, but English predominates, espe-

cially in the more recent files. The collection also contains over a thousand photographs, most of them of the estates. A large portion of the collection consists of material related to the technology employed in the manufacture of raw sugar, molasses, alcohol, and other cane products. This part includes a large number of blueprints for mill machinery, harvesters and cultivators, and railroad equipment, as well as files and plans for several experimental projects. Maps, including aerial photographic maps, also exist.

The collection is arranged in four record groups that are subdivided into over 150 record series. The oldest records, which comprise Record Group I, date from the second half of the nineteenth century but do not relate directly to the Czarnikow-Rionda Company. Rather, the material in Record Group I is the remaining record of several merchant firms associated with three Spanish brothers who migrated to the United States and Cuba. Francisco, Joaquín, and Manuel Rionda y Polledo were natives of Asturias who, through family connections in Cuba, established themselves in the production and trade of raw sugar. The eldest brother, Francisco (1844–1898), appears to have resided in Cuba most of his life. He worked with his uncle, Joaquín Polledo, in the firm of Polledo, Rionda & Company, and on his uncle's sugar plantation in Matanzas, the Central China. The second brother, Joaquín (1850–1889), ventured to New York City and formed a partnership with Lewis Benjamin in 1873, which they operated under the title of Benjamin, Rionda & Company. Manuel Rionda (1854–1943) joined the firm in 1874. Benjamin had been engaged as a commission agent prior to his partnership with Rionda, and although the material in Record Group I is concentrated in the years between 1872 and 1885, a few items from the years prior to the partnership are also included. Other company names that appear are Rionda & Gómez, Rionda & Kelly, Rionda Hermanos, and Rionda, Noriega & Company. But the records of Benjamin, Rionda & Company form the core of Record Group I.

The firm of Benjamin, Rionda & Company was reorganized as Rionda, Benjamin & Company after Lewis Benjamin died in 1876. Both firms dealt primarily in sugar imports from Cuba, but they also traded heavily in lard, grain, and other provisions that were purchased in the United States and abroad and then exported to Cuba. The Benjamin family had been engaged in trans-Atlantic trade before their association with the Riondas, and a large portion of the company's correspondence was directed to merchants in London, Antwerp, Paris, and Hamburg as well as in Cuba.

In December of 1878, Polledo, Rionda & Company collapsed, leaving a debt exceeding \$400,000 to Rionda, Benjamin & Company and causing the eventual failure of the latter. As part of an 1880 court settlement, the Riondas took charge of their uncle's sugar mill. Conse-

quently, the remainder of the material in Record Group I tends to emphasize the management of their estate rather than trade matters. Certain legal documents indicate that the mill was eventually acquired by a New York sugar refinery. Record Group I ends in the mid-1880s with all three Rionda brothers in Cuba.

In addition to its value to the study of U.S.–Cuban commercial relations in the nineteenth century, Record Group I should prove to be an excellent source for research into the largely unexplored Spanish immigrant community. It is also a logical complement to the holdings in the New York City Public Library related to Moses Taylor & Company, the largest importer of Cuban sugar until the mid-1880s. Record Group I contains correspondence, accounting books, cancelled checks and invoices, maritime papers, legal documents, and trade circulars. The condition of the records varies from excellent to very poor. Much of the material was stored in nine wooden crates, one of which showed considerable signs of water damage. Several bundles of letters and financial records were destroyed, and still others were extensively damaged. Consequently, gaps in the records exist, especially for the mid-1870s.

Two of the Rionda brothers died before the turn of the century, but the youngest, Manuel, went on to become one of the most influential men in the sugar industry. The papers of Manuel Rionda comprise Record Group II and date from 1895 to his death in 1943. These papers include an extensive subject file and over 150 letterbooks that document his activities as founder, chairman of the board of directors, and president of the Czarnikow-Rionda Company. His files include not only correspondence with leading figures in the Cuban and U.S. sugar industries but a remarkable collection of documents and published material on such issues as tariffs, U.S.–Cuban political relations, and labor and social strife in Cuba. He also kept detailed files on the operations of his sugar estates, which include firsthand accounts of conditions in Cuba made during frequent visits there in the harvest months.

A chronological gap in the collection exists for the years between 1885 and 1895. During that decade, the brothers had purchased property near the town of Sancti Spíritus in the province of Santa Clara. This property eventually became the site of the Riondas' first modern raw sugar factory, the Central Tuinucú (incorporated in New Jersey in 1891 as the Central Tuinucú Sugar Cane Manufacturing Company). Sometime in the late 1880s or early 1890s, Manuel Rionda returned to New York. In 1897 he entered the firm of Czarnikow-MacDougall & Company, which was then the New York branch office of the well-known British brokerage house, C. Czarnikow, Limited. Gradually, Rionda was able to loosen the hold of the London stockholders and eventually establish the company as an independent firm. In 1909 the company was reorganized as the Czarnikow-Rionda Company.

In 1899 Rionda again turned his attention to the production of raw sugar. During the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1899–1902), he was instrumental in constructing the Central Francisco in the province of Camagüey. In 1911 Czarnikow-Rionda and allied interests established the Manatí Sugar Company in the province of Oriente as the third house estate. Two other mills, Central Elia and Central Céspedes, were acquired in 1920 and 1924 respectively.

Manuel Rionda played a leading role in the formation of the Cuba Cane Sugar Corporation in 1915, an ambitious move by Rionda and allied interests to merge many of the older mills in established sugar-growing regions of Cuba into one corporation. Among those involved in the venture were Miguel Arango, Walter E. Ogilvie, Horace Havemeyer, the law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell, and the financial house of J. W. Seligman. At its height, Cuba Cane controlled over 15 percent of Cuba's annual harvest. Its properties included seventeen mills, over five hundred thousand acres of leased and purchased lands, and five hundred miles of railroad. As a result of the collapse of the sugar market following World War I, Manuel Rionda lost control of Cuba Cane, but he remained a major stockholder in the company until the 1930s.

Unfortunately, Rionda's papers are the only presidential papers included in the collection. The papers of his successors, Bernardo Braga Rionda and George A. Braga, were not transferred to the University of Florida. Also missing from the collection are the official minutes of Czarnikow-Rionda. But despite the paucity of information from the uppermost levels of the company hierarchy after 1943, the material in Record Group III provides an unusually extensive look at the day-to-day operations of a modern corporation. Record Group III consists solely of records generated by Czarnikow-Rionda's Wall Street offices and is divided into two subgroups. The first consists of general reference files and the files of several officers in the company. Subgroup 2 reflects the activities of thirteen departments and sections, and because of the completeness of these records, it is an invaluable source of information on the production, financing, and shipment of Cuban raw sugar and molasses.

Record Group III begins in 1899, when the company was still Czarnikow-MacDougall. But only a few pieces for these early years have been preserved. The first four decades of records consist mainly of accounting books, with few administrative or correspondence files. Starting in the late 1940s, however, the number of departmental files increases substantially. Whether this situation reflects improved record keeping or the expansion of departmental functions is unclear. But most of the file material in Record Group III is concentrated in the years between 1948 and 1960.

Among the more interesting features of Record Group III are the records of the cash and export departments. One of the roles of a sugar brokerage house was to arrange bank loans for the mills to cover their production costs. In turn, the mills were obligated to sell the broker all or part of their output. The rather complex and highly regulated procedure by which this arrangement was accomplished is extensively documented in the files of the Cash Department. The Export Department was responsible for shipping machinery and spare parts to Cuba as well as provisions to Czarnikow-Rionda's six sugar mills.

The last record group in the collection consists of the corporate files and books of twenty-five partially or wholly owned subsidiaries. The documents for each company vary greatly in size and completeness, in some cases being limited to only a few items. All but four of the companies represented in this group were based in Cuba. But with few exceptions, these records were generated in the companies' Wall Street offices or were sent there from Cuba. Consequently, the Cuban materials tend to be at a secondary level of accounts and provide little day-to-day record of expenses and earnings.

Subgroup 1 of Record Group IV contains the records of the Francisco Sugar Company and its subsidiaries. In addition to the Central Francisco, the company also owned the Central Elia, the Port of Guayabal, an alcohol distillery, a cattle ranch, and was part owner of a factory that made wallboard from bagasse. Czarnikow-Rionda's largest sugar mill was the Central Manatí in northwest Oriente Province, and the records of the Manatí Sugar Company constitute Subgroup 2. This subgroup also includes the records of the Compañía Ganadera Becerra, a cattle ranch jointly owned by Manatí and King Ranch, Incorporated, of Texas. Although documents for earlier years are included, the records of both the Francisco and the Manatí sugar companies are concentrated in the last decade before the Cuban Revolution. Earlier and more extensive documentation for the two companies can be found in Record Groups II and III.

The remainder of Record Group IV is contained in a third subgroup and consists primarily of holdings for a number of auxiliary firms. These companies include several experimental projects such as the Cuba Self-Loading Cane Truck Corporation, Celulosa Cubana, S.A. (an early attempt to make paper from the wastes of cane grindings), and the Kenaf Corporation. Subgroup 3 also includes additional material on the Cuba Cane Sugar Corporation and a very small selection for the New Tuinucú Sugar Company, Incorporated.

The files of the W. J. McCahan Sugar and Molasses Refining Company, also in Subgroup 3, represent something of a departure from the rest of the collection. The McCahan refinery in Philadelphia was

acquired in 1920 and was Czarnikow-Rionda's sole attempt to enter the refining sector of the sugar industry. The principal McCahan papers are those of Vice President Louis V. Placé, Jr. Placé sat on the executive board of the Sugar Institute (a price-fixing refiners' cartel that was broken up by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1936), and he kept a file of correspondence with such industry luminaries as Earl Babst, Horace Havemeyer, and Ellsworth Bunker. The existence of these papers broadens the potential research interest for the collection beyond the realm of Cuban studies and provides an unusual look at the interrelationship between the leading figures of one industry.

An interesting aspect of Czarnikow-Rionda was the degree to which it restricted its trade to one country. It should be said that Czarnikow-Rionda purchased sugar from other Latin American countries—most notably Puerto Rico—at varying levels during its history, but the overwhelming majority of its trade was carried out in Cuba. (Limited reference is also made in the collection to the Dominican and Philippine sugar industries. The company's research and statistics departments kept records on every sugar-producing country in the world, but this information is undoubtedly available in other sources.) The fact that the company's activities were concentrated in Cuba allowed it to maintain a steady supply from the country that had been the United States' principal source of raw cane sugar. This situation obviously became a disadvantage when trade relations between the United States and Cuba were halted and the Cubans nationalized the company's properties.

In 1965 the grandnephews of Manuel Rionda, George A. Braga and B. Rionda Braga, sold their majority interest in the company. When the company was sold, the Bragas transferred the company's obsolete records to the Pioneer Warehouse in Brooklyn. There the records remained until they were donated to the University of Florida. The new owners of the company presumably retained the active files when the original transfer was made. Consequently, the last records for Czarnikow-Rionda itself tend to end circa 1960. The records of Francisco and Manatí companies, however, continue until the final dissolution of both in the late 1960s. Excellent documentation for the period of the Cuban Revolution is provided in Record Groups III and IV, which include papers related to early agrarian reform measures.

It would be no exaggeration to state that given its diversity and size, the Braga Brothers Collection will have a tremendous impact on Cuban studies and will stimulate new fields of interest in economic and social history. Each of the four record groups could serve as the principal source for several dissertation projects and papers, and it will be years before historians can exhaust the tremendous research potential

in the papers of Manuel Rionda. Current travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba and the uncertainty of scholarly exchange in the future make the Braga Brothers Collection all the more attractive to historians of twentieth-century Cuba.