Transcript of an Oral History Interview

with

Henry Capiz

June 24, 1975

Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

This interview was conducted as part of a series on the Mexican American in Minnesota.

Henry Capiz is the Chief Pharmacist at St. Lukes Hospital in St. Paul.

He has reached the rank of Colonel in the Air Force Reserve and State National
Guard, retired.

Henry is a living example of his belief in preparing oneself to qualify for a position, to acheive a goal. He is a self made man who has devoted a substantial portion of his time and talents to civic and social service organizations in the Twin City Metropolitan Area.

This a transcript of a tape-recording interview edited to aid in clarity and ease of comprehension for the reader. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

## INTERVIEW WITH HENRY CAPIZ

June 25, 1975

Interviewer: Grant Moosbrugger

MOOSBRUGGER: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing in St. Paul for the

Mexican American History Project, under the auspices of the

Minnesota Historical Society. Could we start out by asking

you to tell us a little bit about yourself; where you were born,

about your brothers and sisters, and your parents?

CAPIZ: I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota on February 18, 1926. My parents were living on the West Side at the time, on West

Fairfield across from Robert Street down by the old fire

barn. I am the oldest in the family. I have three brothers:

Al, Steve and Manuel; two sisters: Rachel and Gloria. Rachel's

married name is Salas, and Gloria's is Romero. I have lived on

the West Side all of my life. I attended Lafayette Grade School,

Roosevelt Jr. High and Humboldt High School. I didn't graduate

from Humboldt High School. I had to leave high school and

work one year. I made a deal with my father because we were in

pretty bad shape.

MOOSBRUGGER: You mean financially?

CAPIZ: Yes. So I went to work at Swift's at the time and never did finish high school. I went into the Army. I was drafted

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before I had finished high school.

MOOSBRUGGER: What year were you drafted?

CAPIZ: I was drafted in 1944, and I came back in 1946. I kicked around

like everybody else did and drew money from the 52-20 club. Fi-

nally, I went to work for the VA. I worked there for almost two

years. I decided that there wasn't too much of a future there,

because I was driving a truck, so I decided to go back to school and get my high school diploma. I did. I met my counselor,

Mr. Eckbergh. He was very instrumental in advising me and encouraging me to go on to college, so I did.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where did you finish high school?

CAPIZ:

At that time they had a special Veterans Program at Marshall Senior High School. It was a high school then, a night program, and we had a special Veteran Program going. I was receiving an equivalency certificate, and I was able to enter the University. I couldn't enter the college that I wanted, which was the College of Pharmacy, because of the requirements, so I ended up in the General College. From there, I transferred to Pharmacy.

MOOSBRUGGER: What year did you graduate from the University?

CAPIZ:

I graduated from the University in 1957. I interned nine months at Mount Sinai Hospital and stayed there for about four years. I was Assistant Chief Pharmacist. In 1960, it just happened by accident, like a lot of things usually do, I was at a fraternity smoker and somebody mentioned that there was a job opening as Chief Pharmacist at St. Lukes. So I hustled over the next day and sure enough there was. I have been here ever since. I've been here for fifteen years at St. Lukes.

MOOSBRUGGER: At St. Lukes Hospital in St. Paul. Very good, that covers

your schooling pretty well. Maybe we can backtrack, you mentioned that after you got out of the service you were drawing from

52-20. Would that be a VFW Post?

CAPIZ: No. A veterans compensation. It was an unemployment compensation. You drew twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks.

CAPIZ: There was always competition among all the veterans to see how

long they could draw it. I only drew it for twelve weeks. My

brother-in-law drew it for the whole 52 weeks!

MOOSBRUGGER: Those were tough times.

CAPIZ: Yes.

MOOSBRUGGER: Going back, maybe you can tell us something about your parents.

Were they born in St. Paul?

CAPIZ: No, my parents came from Mexico. My dad was born and raised in

Mexico City, he was one of three brothers. My mother came from

Irapuato, Mexico. She came from a large family. I never really

got it straight. I'll have to put it down on paper one of these

days. They came north separately. I think they crossed the

border about 1920. They crossed into Texas.

MOOSBRUGGER: That would have been right after the revolution?

CAPIZ: Yes, right after the revolution. At that time Mexico was in pretty

bad shape. They lost a heck of a lot of people. Since crossing

the border was relatively easy at that time, they just came across,

although they did have papers, they were smart enough to do that.

My mother still has her papers with her with my grandmother's

picture on them. There were other members of my mother's family

who had come up into Oklahoma. One of them actually made a great

fortune in cattle. He owned quite a big ranch, but for some strange

reason he decided to go back to Mexico with all his cattle. That

turned out to be a disaster because he ended up with nothing, but

that was something else. Anyhow, my dad lived in San Antonio

with his family for almost two years. My grandmother made a

living for everybody through cookings oshe made enchiladas and

tortillas which she sold on the street to farmers and other people. At that time there were just masses of people that slipped across the border, there was no unemployment.

MOOSBRUGGER:

That would have been in the early 1920's?

CAPIZ:

Yes, '21 or '22. Then my dad ran into some acquantence of my grandfather's who said, "What are you doing here? Why don't you go up north? There is a lot of work up there." He mentioned Mason City, Iowa. He said, "Go to Mason City, there is a lot of work there." My grandfather apparently sort of sloughed it off and they stayed in San Antonio for almost two years. He sort of struggled through. About two years later, he ran into the same guy again. The man was on his way back to Mexico. He said, "Are you guys still here? I thought I told you to get out of here! Look, I'm coming back. I have \$2,000 with me. I made it. I'm going back home. I already sent a couple of thousand home." I guess that encouraged my grandfather to move. So at that time there were various recruiting efforts going on by the sugar companies, or railroad companies, and a lot of the steel companies. Many of them out of Southbend, Indiana and some other towns outside of Chicago. They were recruiting and they would buy your ticket and tell you when and where to be. At such and such a time the train comes, and away you go. So my grandfather, my father, his two brothers and my grandmother, all cought one of those trains. They made it to Albert Lea, there they were met by a farmer and they were taken to Alden, Minnesota, which I understand is outside of Albert

CAPIZ: Lea somewhere. That's how they got to Minnesota.

MOOSBRUGGER: Then they stayed, working the crops?

CAPIZ: Yes, they worked the crops. They didn't work the crops too long because they moned to St. Paul in 1923 or '24. My mother also came to Minnesota on a very similar trip. They were also in Alden, and that's where they met. Then they moved to St. Paul. They didn't work the fields very long, only for a couple of years. My mother crossed the border in the same way, except she ended up in Fort Worth. Her mother worked for some lady. So they followed a similar pattern, in recruiting, the train. They came up to Albert Lea too, and that's where they met. They

married in Albert Lea and settled down in St. Paul practically

right away. I think my dad started working for Swift's, and

that's how they ended up in Minnesota.

MOOSBRUGGER: You are the oldest child. What year were you born?

CAPIZ: February 18, 1926.

MOOSBRUGGER: Perhaps we can cover a little information regarding you personal history, your marriage and children?

CAPIZ: I was married in 1952 to Bonita Lopez, who is also from a long time family. They came in the late 20's. I have two children. My boy is Paul. He is twenty-one. He works here at St. Lukes as an orderly. He is attending the University of Minnesota. I have a daughter: Roxanne, nineteen. She is a security officer for Dayton's and also works here in the cafeteria. She worked as a nurse's aide, but she didn't like that so, she thought she would get out of the business. Now she's a security officer at Dayton's and she enjoys it very much.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where did your children go to school?

CAPIZ:

Both of them went to Humboldt High School. I ended up doing a lot of educational work. I was the PTA President at Garfield; this was my entry into civic affairs. At Humboldt I was president of the Humboldt Band Parents Club. I like to think that I was instrumental in putting those uniforms on those kids back. I have also been Chairman for the Marine Corps Project. In the Marine Band we raised about \$4,000. I still work very closely with the school, although my kids are gone. I serve on various committees at Humboldt. Once you expose yourself to all this, you start getting calls on various things and you get really involved.

MOOSBRUGGER:

Yes. Maybe you could tell us something about your involvement with the military since your discharge. I understand that you are still a member of the military?

CAPIZ:

Yes. Lieutenant Colnel for the Air Force Reserve. Of course my career started with the Army. When I left high school, I went into the Army. Like most kids of Mexican background, I didn't have much of an educational background, so I ended up in the infantry. I applied for the Aviation Cadets, all I had to do was take and pass a test at that time, but they closed it down before I got into it. So I ended up in the infantry. I decided that if I couldn't fly a plane, I'd ride in one, so I volunteered for the paratroopers and fought with them throughout the war. I served with the Primary Federation Combat Team, which was one of the crack regiments in the Army. In fact, I'm a national officer of the Regimental Associates. We are having a reunion

next month down in Florida. I think I'm one of the luckiest guys in the whole world. I still see my first two sergeants, my two company commanders and my regular commander frequently. This is very unusual. My first sergeant is from Anoka, but I see these guys during the course of the year or at the reunion. One day my first sergeant walked in here, just like you did.

After I got out, I served one year with the Marine Reserve. I wasn't too crazy about it. I used to hang around with the Esparza brothers. One day we thought, "Why don't we join the International Guard?" It was right here on the West Side, right on Holman Field. It was based there since 1923. So we went down there and we joined. They are still with the Guard. Because of my pharmacy background, I was commissioned in 1959 in the Medical Service Corps, with the Guard's Air Force Medical Service. I seved as the Dispensary Administrator, Supply Officer. I originally was in the Guard in 1948. I servéd as an enlisted man. We were in supply, too. In ordinance supply. I served at the Dispensary, also, as an enlisted Medical Tech-Then in 1959, I was commissioned. Later, I commanded nician. the 133rd Air Medical Recreation Squadron. Then I commanded the 109th Air Medical Recreation Flight. I progressed through the ranks. From First Lieutenant, I was promoted to Captain, and then Major. Then I was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and I was assigned to State Headquarters. I'm no longer with the Guard, but I still hold a commission in the Air Force Reserve. When you are with the Guard you hold a dual commission; a state commission and a federal commission.

MOOSBRUGGER: What are some of the other organizations that you've been active in? Primarily West Side organizations.

CAPIZ:

Well. I've joined all the usual clubs. The kids belong to the Eagles Club, it's a social thing at the Neighborhood House. in 1948 we established the Mexican VFW Post Silva Newman #9624. Ralph Lopez was the first commander of that, and then I was commander of the Post from 1951-'52. It struggled for almost fifteen years, and finally when the redevelopment came in, it wiped out the neighborhood. That pretty well took care of it, because it scattered everybody all over. It was very sad in a way. Within the last three months another one has started up from the West Side, and it has the same number but it's called the "Cardenas, Coronado, Contreras Post" for each one of those who died or was in World War II, the Korean War, or the Viet Nam War. Hopefully we all are better off today than we were thirty years ago. Maybe it will go a little better. It takes a lot of people to do this. Like any small organization, you need a good corp of people to carry these things.

MOOSBRUGGER:

Do you have any strong feelings about, or attach any importance to, maintaining an awareness of appreciation of your Mexican American heritage? And do you share this with your children? Yes. It all depends, I guess, on what age you talk about. When I was younger, I felt it wasn't too important. I had a tendency to get lost. It's a society, like a lot of our people have, and it sort of disappears. It's fortunate that we can do this, although some people tend to congregate in a neighborhood like the West Side. I think we have the option to go one way or the

CAPIZ:

other. But as I got older, as I traveled through Mexico, I became very proud of my heritage and I try to teach it to my children. My children, of course, don't speak Spanish. They were brought up in an Anglo society, more or less, and that's the way they've gone.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you serve any Mexican dishes or meals? Do you observe any of the fiestas?

CAPIZ: Yes, we do some. We go to some of the fiestas and we do have Mexican dishes occasionally, like on Christmas or on a traditional holiday. The other traditional Mexican holidays sort of have fallen by the wayside now. They are not as big as they used to be, or as many. It seemed we used to have one all the time.

MOOSBRUGGER: Could you tell us about any other organizations that you've been active in?

CAPIZ:

I firmly believe that every professional person has an obligation to make his community a better place to live in. I'm very active in a lot of organizations. I'm on the Board of Directors of the United Way, it used to be called the United Fund. I have been on the various committees, one was the Health and Welfare Committee. I've been on the Legislative Committee and also on the St. Paul Planning Council. I'm also, this pleases me the most, on the Board of Directors at the Neighborhood House. I've been associated with the Neighborhood House for almost fifty years. My mother carried me in there to the Well Baby Clinic. I've been going there ever since. I practically live there now, and I practically lived there when I was young, too. I belonged to all the clubs and crafts and different teams that

were coached by Harry Gaston, who is still there. At the
Neighborhood House Board I belong to various committees.

A committee on ageing, I'm active on that, which runs the
whole gambit. I'm a member of the Committee on Research and
Planning, which takes care of the teenagers. I am a Trustee
on the Scholarship Fund, Currie Scholarship Fund. So I keep
pretty busy. I get called on various committees. I was President of the State Pharmaceutical Association. This was about
ten years ago. I'm not too active in professional affairs
anymore. I do mostly civic work.

MOOSBRUGGER:

You have had a lot of opportunity, no doubt, to think about a philosophy of life. Your level of achievements has been high. Is there any personal philosophy or recommendations that you have given to those you cared for or that you would like to give to anybody who is willing to listen?

CAPIZ:

Yes. It's very difficult to give advice in this area. My philosophy has been: work very hard, be qualified so when the time comes you are ready. I once beat a couple of Anglos out of a job because I wan better qualified than they were. Discrimination always exists, though I've never known anyone being discriminated against. I feel that you should work hard, set a goal for yourself, set a good high goal, and try to achieve it. I don't know if the average man can do this anymore. We seem to have technology by the tail and we can't let go. So I have no doubt that it is more difficult to achieve some of your goals now than it was thirty years ago. There was a time when you only needed a high school education, then there was a time when you almost needed a college education, now you almost need a Masters or a PHD degree. So it's getting up there. But I still feel that for

those who want to do it, hard work and a bit of ambition plus some "stick-to-it-iveness", will be all it will take to accomplish your goals. In my dealing with teenagers, they all want to make it right away without any of the hard work. They all want a big car, and they all want to make \$20,000 a year. This is fine, if you can do it. But you first have to show a marketable still or a marketable need to someone before he can give you these things.

MOOSBRUGGER: Was this the message, more or less, that your parents gave to you? Your parents wen through some difficult and frightening times, being pioneers not only to a new country, but to a new way of life.

CAPIZ: Yes, they encouraged me. They didn't push, but they did encourage me. My dad was a great philosopher. He helped me go in the right direction, but it was up to me to do the right thing. I try to do this for my two children too, but they, like all children nowadays, are greatly influenced by their friends. When I'd tell them what to do, what to take, they would always come back with: "Well, I talked to Joe Blow and he said that that's not so because this, that and the other." He might be wrong of course, but it's too late then.

MOOSBRUGGER: Are your parents still living?

CAPIZ: Yes, fortunately. They were married very young. My mother was seventeen years old and my dad was twenty. I remember when I was young I always had my mother and my sister. But they are still around and they are in pretty good health.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you or your parents ever have the opportunity to go back to Mexico and visit? Perhaps with relatives or friends?

Yes. For many years my mother and dad went every year. four years ago my mother, well, it all started back in World War II. My mother asked the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos that if we came back safely from the service, she would make a pilgrimage with each one of us. So she was pretty nervous. was the last one to go. I finally decided to go with them. made the pilgrimage. That's the first time that I've ever spent that much time with either parent, I think, for a long time. enjoyed it very much. We still have relatives, both on my mother's and dad's sides. Some are in Mexico: Guadalajara; and other places. We visit them whenever we can. My mother and dad are thinking about going to Mexico this fall. My mother had surgery on her leg, she can't walk like she used to and that held her up you very werk with the standard of the standar a little bit.

I want to thank you very much for this interview. MOOSBRUGGER: