TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MATTHEW CASILLAS

JUNE 23, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

Matthew Casillas is a West Side St. Paul businessman. Matt, known and loved by all on the West Side, keeps attuned to prevailing thoughts and attitudes in the community. He is a thoughtful man and keeps his finger on the pulse of current events as they affect us in our daily lives.

After a ten year sojourn in California, during which he picked up a bachelor's Degree in teaching, Matt returned to St. Paul to be with his family and friends, and to enjoy a full life in the community he knows and loves so well, the West Side.

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

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INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

Moosbrugger: This is Grant A. Moosbrugger interviewing Mr. Matt Casillas, owner of
The Mohawk Tire Shop on Concord Street, for The Minnesota Historical

Society Mexican American History Project. Maybe we can start out, Matt,

by asking you, where were you born?

Casillas: I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on August 24, 1931.

Moosbrugger: And you went to school in St. Paul?

Casillas: Yes, I went all the way from grade school through high school. I graduated

in 1950 from Humboldt High School.

Moosbrugger: Which grade schools did you go to?

Casillas: I went to Lafayette, and Roosevelt Junior High School.

Moosbrugger: Can you tell us a little about your family? Are you an only child?

Casillas: I come from a family of ten, twelve with my mother and father. I am

the oldest of the boys, there are four boys. I am the fourth child, there

are three girls older than me and three girls younger than I am.

Moosbrugger: Did your folks come to St. Paul, or were they from St. Paul?

Casillas: No, my folks came to St. Paul shortly after the turn of the century. I

think it was either 1920 or 1919. They came from Mexico. My father was

born in Aguascalientes, Mexico, and my mother was born in Villagarcia,

Mexico.

Moosbrogger: Do you know what brought your folks to St. Paul? Did they have friends

or relatives here?

Casillas: My folks, after having a hard time looking for work, heard this was the

land of opportunity. They came to St. Paul to look for work and a better

way of life.

Moosbrugger: I see. Did they hear from friends?

Casillas: My aunt and uncle were living here. Her name is Francisca Zamora, and his name is Calletano Hernandez. They wrote to my parents and told them that

there was more opportunity here in St. Paul. That's when they came up.

Moosbrugger: are most of your brothers and sisters settled in and around the Twin Cities, or have they moved to other states?

Casillas: No, all my brothers and sisters are living here in St. Paul.

Moosbrugger: What type of work did your father do here? Who did he work for in St. Paul?

Casillas: My father was a laborer and he worked on the railroad. He worked at the packing companies, and he also worked for the City Transit. During the depression we did a lot of sugar beets. The family went out and worked in the suger beet fields.

Moosbrugger: Are your folks still living here?

Casillas: Yes. They live at 140 E. Delos.

Moosbrugger: It really would be a great pleasure to talk to them. Hopefully we will also be able to talk with them. You mentioned you graduated from Humboldt in 1950, what did you do after high school?

Casillas: After high school I went into the service. I was inducted in 1951. After the service I went into business for myself for about a year. In 1954 I went to California. I went to college and stayed in California for ten years.

Moosbrugger: Now, you had a business here for one year, was that the Tire business?

Casillas: No, I had a delicatessen and sold ice cream and things like that. I went to college in California and worked more for pleasure, than out of necessity, in the fields picking grapes, peaches and plums. I generally drove a truck. I was very fortunate that I was liked out there. I didn't really do hard work, the kind that is normally done in the fields. I went to Reedley Jr. College and to Fresno State. I thought I want to teach, but, I found out that teaching wasn't my ah...

Moosbrugger: Cup of tea?

Casillas: Cup of tea is right!

Moosbrugger: So you finished up, you went all the way for a teaching degree?

Casillas: Yes, I went in for teaching. I taught a little bit in Reedley.

Moosbrugger: Is that Reedley, California?

Casillas: Yes. That's when I found out that teaching was not what I wanted to do.

how I wanted to make a living.

Moosbrugger: The rewards just weren't there?

Casillas: No, they were not.

Moosbrugger: That's interesting. So then you lived in California for ten years? What

made you decide to pick up and come back to St. Paul?

Casillas: Well, the truth of the matter is, I was in a rut over there and I wanted to

come back. I was living with my uncle. My uncle had supported me and I

lived with him. I wanted to come back, but I didn't want to leave him. He

didn't want to give up working and he couldn't take care of himself. I had

been with him through school, I just stayed there, I couldn't get away and

I always wanted to come back. Then he became very ill and I finally talked

him into coming to visit here. We came to St. Paul and we never went back

to California.

Moosbrugger: Oh, that's great! So your uncle had been living in California? Had he lived

in St. Paul before?

Casillas: Yes, he had lived in St. Paul. He went to California during the war in 1942

to seek his fortune and was going to work in the ship yards in San Francisco.

He got as far as Reedley and stayed there. He felt that he could make a

living there and that's what he wanted to do.

Moosbrugger: That's interesting. So then both you and your uncle came back; that would

have been about 1964?

Casillas: 1965.

Moosbrugger: In 1965, you came back. Was it then you decided to go into the Tire business?

Casillas: Yes, that's when I decided to go into the Tire business.

Moosbrugger: And you've been here, in this building, since 1965?

Casillas: Something like that, yes. Well, I think a year later, after I got here I made it.

Moosbrugger: In 1966. You've been here a good long time. Could we investigate a little further some of your feelings when you were out in California? What were some of the things that drew you back to St. Paul, other than perhaps, having gone to school here and having a lot of friends?

Casillas: Well, I had only gone to California to visit. I was kind of restless after going out of business and coming out of the service. I went to college as an afterthought. The opportunity was there and I had the G.I. Bill paying it, so I felt that I could go and that I might learn something. I think a lot of the young people that were going to college while they were working in the field the first year I was there, gave me the motive and incentive to go to college. I didn't feel that I wanted to go, but then, I felt that these young people didn't really have an outlook on life other than going to the field to work. They look toward bettering themselves a lot more than we do here in the city. I think we have too many outlets. Out there, there is only field work and that's it. So, you have to go to college or be in the field the rest of your life.

My family ties were always good. I think I've mentioned my uncle, my not wanting to leave him. And I think this is the way I feel about my family. I don't want to leave them. We're very closely knit. Even as a child we'd always visit our relatives. My mother talked to the parents in Spanish. The kids always hung together, even when we worked sugar beets during the depression. They'd travel miles just to go visit one another, always stuck together, always helping one another. I think even today we find that we have something, we all go to together. We all have a get-together and we are all

family. We talk about cousins and everybody who is related. I think that we still have a tremendous family tie. We just built a new home for my parents. It didn't cost my parents anything. It cost a bundle, but we were very, very fortunate to be able to do that for them. They got new furniture and everything. My dad is very, very old and very sick and weak. We know that we're going to lose him some day, but, I feel we have to do all that we can for him. The family feels the same way. It's hard to put it into words, how we feel or how we act. You have to see us in that respect.

Moosbrugger:

You have to see that the person's actions, more or less, show loyalty. A fantastically strong loyalty is a phenomanon that we see commonly, typically, amonst the Mexican American and amongst the people of Mexico. A tremendous selflessness amongst family and a desire to help one another.

Casillas:

I think from that point of view. Even today, my father has a birthday on St. Patrick's Day and we get him all decorated up in a St. Patrick's costume. He looks forward to it. He can't stand the noise of the kids but he tolerates them for that day. Christmas is the same way. He looks forward to this. So does my mother, on her birthday. Everybody goes over and sees them. So, I do know we have tremendous family ties. I feel I can call any of my brothers or sisters, nieces or nephews, and ask for help and they will give it to me without one moment's hesitation. I say that about my family because I really feel that's the way it is. I also have tremendous friends here that do just as much. It's not my personality. I think that they do it for people when the people need help. And of course, if you haven't gotten in too much trouble, or kept your nose clean, I think there's respect for people. This is what counts. I was in a hospital a little less than a year ago. I had many people who rushed to see me and I think that was tremendous. Like I say, it's hard to explain, people pour out their heart to one another. I'm saying this of my own family and of my friends. It's great how we can help each other. Moosbrugger: Yes, it is heartwarming.

Casillas: It is! You really know who your friends are and you really realize how nice they are.

Moosbrugger: Could you tell us some of the things that are done to keep alive the Mexican heritage and the Mexican tradition in your family? "Family" meaning cousins, nieces, and nephews too.

Casillas: During Christmas, or the holiday season, the family gets together and we all make "Tamales". We do the whole thing; starting by grinding the corn. It is a family project. Everybody does this, my brothers and sisters too.

Another thing we do is whenever we have any kind of social event, like a baptism or a wedding or a confirmation, we all get together. We are all expected to go and participate, and we all do it.

Moosbrugger: It's just a matter of doing things together. There's nobody that's holding back or holding out.

Casillas: Right. That's what I would say. I like to feel that we do it together and we are all better for it.

Moosbrugger: Matt, being in business here on Concord Street, you get an opportunity to talk to a lot of people eve-y day as they come and go in their daily business and daily lives. Perhaps you could tell us about the philosophies of the Mexican American Community here in the West Side?

Casillas: Well, it's hard for me to think of myself as a Mexican. I've always been a "Matthew" and that's it. I never thought of myself as a Mexican. I never thought of myself as being Indian, Aztec, or anything like that. I've always been American as far as I was concerned. I think the first time somebody made me feel a little different, was when I was in high school. My senior year someone referred to me as a "Mexican". "How do you feel being Mexican?" He said. I said "I don't know, are they supposed to feel differently?" I

had never thought of it. That was the first time this happened to me. After that you do find prejudices, but none that ever interfered with me. I always felt part of the community, part of the people here, whether they were Mexican, Jew, Polish, or German. I never thought of myself as a Mexican, but I am a Mexican. I never denied it. I think one of the things we did to keep that in mind was that, my parents, and a lot of people on the West Side, would have Mexican skits. We celebrated very strongly and with a lot of diligence. Not I, but I'm sure my folks celebrated our independence, the 5th of May. We celebrated tremendously the 15th and 16th of September. We had all kinds of celebrations of Mexico's Independence. And of course my family spoke Spanish, though I speak it very badly. So, I knew that I was a Mexican, but I always played outside of the house, and I always spoke English. I never thought of it until I went to a function that pertained particularly to the Mexican Culture and we sang the Mexican Anthem. I remember one day my mother scolded me for not taking off my hat in the gymnasium when they were singing the Mexican Anthem. I said "Oh, I didn't know that." It never occurred to me that as a patron, you'd take off your hat. But, I think the Neighborhood House, where we had the gymnasium and a lot of the functions, and the church Our Lady of Guadalupe had a tremendous influence on me, on my life. We had a tremendous priest, and we had a tremendous Director, at the Neighborhood House. She seemed to sense our needs and everything.

Moosbrugger: The Director at the Neighborhood House?

Casillas: At the Neighborhood House. She did a lot to keep the young boys and girls occupied and off the streets. They formed clubs; a Spanish young people's group, a sewing club for the ladies.

Moosbrugger: Who was the director that you mentioned, what was her name?

Casillas: Mrs. Constance Currie, everybody knew her. We had all our dances at the Neighborhood House. Whether they were weddings or baptisms. WE had

tremendous social gatherings there. Our church, I say "our church" because I think it's the only Mexican Church in the state of Minnesota. We are very, very fortunate to have built it. My parents, and every parent on the West Side, gave out of their pocket to help the church. We needed it, and we got Today, it's unbelieveable how the church has grown in proportion to the people that go there and where and how it started. Less than forty years ago, Father Ward, who had a tremendous influence on me, always talked very kindly to me. He was a good listener and nobody could pull the wool over his eyes. He believed in the faith and he taught that. He set the example, always set the example. I think there were a lot of differences of opinion, there were a lot of different ways of wanting to do things. Father Ward was very, very good, in that he did what he thought was best for the community as a whole. The elders of our church would always be guiding our functions, whether it was the 15th of September or any other function we had. membership did take an active part in all these functions. In fact, it was later on that the church's membership took over celebrating all the Mexican functions. We left the Neighborhood House. I think we were better for it too, because when we went to the downtown auditorium, Stem Hall. We had gotten to the point where we couldn't get all the people who wanted to go into the building.

Moosbrugger: It got too packed at the Neighborhood House, to the point where you had to hold the dances in the auditorium downtown?

Casillas:

Yes. We started on Harriet Island, and from there we went to Stem Hall. The functions were handled by the church's Men's Club, and the Anahuac Club. They did the planning for whatever function was going to be. The women were very active in the selling of food. Alcohol was never sold at these functions at the Neighborhood House. At Christmas time every year we would have a pinata at the Neighborhood House. To me, the pinata looked as big as a

building! We also would have a pinata at the church. We always had these customs. But, going back to what I feel, and how I am, although I had these things as a Mexican, I never felt myself a Mexican. I wasn't confused about it either. I was just Matt. Unlike today, when we have a lot of young militants who feel that they're Mexican Americans. I never thought of that. I never think of myself as a "Chicano." I despise the word. Militance is not my cup of tea. I think what is happening to our country is that our young people, because our fathers had worked so hard in getting us so much, now they feel they can go out and get it free. Their parents owe them a living, the community owes them a living, and the government owes them a living, this is how I think the young people feel. There's always some way we try to get money out of the government for, I hate to say it, our own little projects. I can see that more and more people are organizing, not so much, I would say, to help others, but more to help themselves in something. I see disobedience being taught indirectly by "If you're having trouble in school, come over here and we will help you." They're being disobedient to the authorities, and to their parents in this respect. They are telling the young people, "If you are arrested by the authorities, just give them your name and we'll get a lawyer for you. That is all you have to give them, and then they have to charge you." We don't have civil obedience like, "My name is Matthew, I was here, I didn't do anything", or "What happened?" Now it's, "We'll get you out."

Moosbrugger: These are supposedly legal aid societies?

Casillas:

These are people that are "doing good for the community." Actually, they aren't doing any good. These are people that are supposed to be our leaders, which aren't our leaders. These are people that come new to the community, whether they come from Texas, or from another part of town. These are people that really don't understand the family background and the family trust. These

are people that want to help you, as they say, "Oh my, you poor people, you have never had a chance, you've always been down." Yes, but so have the Irish, the French, the Polish, the Jews and everybody else. We talk about things like bi-lingual, bi-cultural education. To me, I can't stand it because we're in this country. We are American, and we ought to first teach our children good English. Yes, keep up the Mexican customs. But what is bad about it is that we force it upon everybody. The Jewish had a little Jewish school. After school they all went to Halder. The French had their own little school and on Saturday they all went to French School. The Polish had their school too. But we are forcing the Federal Government to do this. Not "we", but the people that want to "do so much." But, they don't want to do so much. They are helping themselves, too. Ninety-nine percent of the people that have been living here would pay for their own child to go to school and be educated. But then we get a lot of outsiders and they say, "My child doesn't know how to read because you don't know how to talk to him. We are Mexican and need our own people." That is a bunch of bologna!

Moosbrugger:

r: Would you say that most of the people that push these projects are those that come in from other states, rather than people like yourself who were born and raised here in Minnesota?

Casillas:

I can't speak for everybody of course, but I can speak for my family. I have a sister, Alberta. She has children and they're married. She never push a thing like that. My sister Lupe, she never pushes a thing like that, she doesn't like it. She had a few children that are now married. She doesn't like bi-lingual education. I know Catherine kind of has mixed feelings, I don't think she really knows what she wants. But I know that she doesn't push it. I know that my brother Felix, who doesn't even want his children to belong to any of these radical groups in school, where you take them out of a class to teach them Spanish or Mexican History. He says he went to

school to Humboldt to learn. Let them teach his children the curriculum, not any of these other functions. Generally speaking, I think people don't want it. A lot of people are misled and say, "There's an opportunity." I think Spanish or a foreign language is beautiful. You learn more about your own English language by learning a foreign language. I believe this. But to force it on everybody, I think that a lot of it comes from outside, not from within.

Moosbrugger:

Do you think that any Spanish American heritage or any Mexican history is something that would be more properly taught by the family and at home?

Casillas:

Yes. I think there's room for formal education in the foreign language. What I'm trying to say is: Do we need it as a project? I can think of an organization down here who uses the name of "Our Lady of Guadalupe". Everybody thinks they're with Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. They make pottery and sell it under that title, Our Lady of Guadalupe. She doesn't belong to our church. She is building a false economy. She'll go and preach, and beg for money for a Mexican American, for a West Sider, for a parishioner of our church. I don't want it, but, when she goes out and begs, this is what she does. She asks that you buy these things. She does represent me the moment she says, "These are for the poor Mexicans down here." Yes, I'm poor, but I'm better off than a lot of other people are. I'm happier, too, for it. I think we have to help one another. Like I help my brothers and they help I'm not talking about "soul" brothers either. I'm talking about my immediate family. It's just something you do. It's like if you see a man out in the street, you go and help him. You see a man get hit out there, you call up the authorities, "Somebody has been hurt here." This is my way of thinking. Not to give an impression that I am doing this for somebody, and they really need it. We don't need it because we're causing the wrong influence in the community. We're giving a false impression of the needs.

What we actually need is for the parent to give the child more attention, rather than the material things. As I see it, too many parents, in order to make a living today, give their children material things rather than spendo time with them. Of course, maybe my father didn't give me material things because he didn't have them, but he had more time to give me. So in a way, it's understandable. People are really trying to better themselves. I think in doing so, they are ruining their children.

Moosbrugger:

I think what I hear you saying then, is that by moving in and creating a need for themselves, so that they are creating a slot for themselves, they're perhaps instituting a wrong mentality amongst the people that they are supposedly working for. In other words, the kids, instead of learning survival tactics in school, learning the things that they need to "make it", are learning instead, ideas on how to get around doing that hard work; getting out and digging for a living. Is that right?

Casillas:

Our group of people on the West Side associate and have a feeling of be-Moosbrugger: longing due to a variety of reasons. We'll call it The Mexican American

identity that excludes other people; that keeps them to their own kind, so to speak? Is that a healthy situation? Could you comment on our community?

Yes, I'm in business here. I rent from a non-Mexican. He's Lebanese. My

Community. Do you see any need, Matt, for the Mexican American to have an

I think that's one way of putting it, yes. That's exactly what I'd say.

Casillas:

business consists of about seventy-five percent non-Mexican. I make a living.

I don't think that we need a Mexican Representative. I think that people know people and they respect one another without having a Mexican spokesman.

Mexican people are no different than any other nationality, in the sense that

we all try to help one another. I grew up with Jewish kids and German kids.

I didn't think of them as a "dirty Nazis" when the war was going on. We went

to school, Howard Feffer and I, and were the greatest of friends. We still

I could go on and name other people. What I'm trying to say is that

I think Howard has the same love and respect for my parents as I do for his parents. Every time he sees my mother he hugs her and is very happy to see her. I think it carries over. We were like a big happy family, the community, and nobody takes advantage of another person whether he is a Mexican or an Italian, or any other nationality. That is, to make a malicious, hatred, wrong on someone, is not permitted within the community. Everybody would go to help that person be saved. They won't permit it. They won't permit it anymore than a parent abusing a child. It's not a Mexican quality. It's a community feeling as a human being. If I didn't feel this way, if it wasn't this way, I couldn't rent from a Lebanese. The customers that I do have wouldn't come to me because I want to rent. The attitude is that if I became a "hot dog", then everybody would hate me. Nobody likes a "hot dog", regardless of what nationality he is. I'm trying to say I'm loved for what I am, not for what somebody else is. This is the way people are within the community.

Moosbrugger: So you don't see any need to unite for defense purposes, is that right?

Casillas: That's right, yes.

Casillas:

Moosbrugger: Is there any one single thing that this community can be proud of?

think one thing that I'm very, very proud of, and I think that anyone who is a Mexican who's been here would say, "We have a lovely church." We have our

Mexican tradition of going to church, of praying. We don't pray any different and we don't pray any harder. But, we can honestly say, "This belongs to the Mexican American, or the West Sider, who's lived here all his life." This is one thing the community has built; a place of worship. I don't want to sound like I'm pious, or we are holier than thou, or anything like that, I think we have as many hypocrites going to our church as any other church. But, we do

have it, if nothing else, for our children. So that they can have something.

I think that there are many things. From a Mexican point of view, I

It's up to the individual to love and respect and support their church or community. I think that this is one thing which we have. If I remember correctly, we went from nothing, to the church we have today. I'm talking about an old pool room that was converted into a church for us. And then we grew and grew into what we have now. This is ours. Nobody can take that Nexical Americal Historical Society

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Nexical History away from us. It was built on dimes and nickles and a lot of hard work later

Moosbrugger: Thank you very much, Matt.