

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

LEO CASTILLO

July 2, 1976

INTERVIEWER: RAMEDO SAUCEDO

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

Mr. Leo Castillo was born in Venadito, Texas, August 19, 1945. He discusses his experiences as a field worker, truck driver, and welder. He also tells how he decided to settle in Litchfield in 1969 and outlines his future hopes. Mr. Castillo talks about how the Mexican American holidays used to be celebrated in Brownton, where they can get Mexican food and finally, the Eagles Club.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded 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.

Mexican-American Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society

INTERVIEW WITH LEO CASTILLO

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Interviewer: Ramedo Saucedo

SAUCEDO: This is an interview with Leo Castillo, on July 2, 1976, for the Minnesota Historical Society. Do we have your permission to tape this interview?

CASTILLO: Yes, you do.

SAUCEDO: What is your name and where were you born?

CASTILLO: I was born in Venadito, Texas. My name is Leo Vigildo Castillo.

SAUCEDO: What year were you born?

CASTILLO: In 1945, on August nineteenth.

SAUCEDO: What were your parents' names?

CASTILLO: Silvestre Castillo, and my mother's name is Felipa Garcia Castilla.

SAUCEDO: Where were your parents born?

CASTILLO: My father was born in Santa Librada, Tamaulipas. My mother was born in La Rosita, Tamaulipas.

SAUCEDO: Did you study in Texas?

CASTILLO: Yes. I went for a few years, because there were younger children in the family. My father was still in Mexico, until 1961, when he crossed over. My older sister and I had to leave school to help my mother work, so the younger children could go to school.

SAUCEDO: How many children are in your family?

CASTILLO: There are six children in our family.

SAUCEDO: Where did you start working?

CASTILLO: We worked in Venadito for Mr. Jose Geruza. He was the "Justice of the Peace" there.

SAUCEDO: What kind of jobs did you do?

CASTILLO: We picked and cleaned cotton, cut squash, picked tomatoes, and cut bamboo.

SAUCEDO: You and your brothers?

CASTILLO: My oldest sister and my mother.

SAUCEDO: What year did you leave Texas?

CASTILLO: We left the state of Texas in May of 1964.

SAUCEDO: With your parents?

CASTILLO: Yes.

SAUCEDO: Was this the first time you left Texas?

CASTILLO: It was the first time. Before, we used to go to West Texas to pick cotton.

SAUCEDO: In 1964, what state did you go to?

CASTILLO: To Nebraska, to work in the beet fields.

SAUCEDO: Did you return to Texas after the beet work?

CASTILLO: No. From the state of Nebraska we were contracted by a man to work in Arlington. It was for the "Mel Nigel Packing Company", packing corncobs.

SAUCEDO: So you worked in Arlington with your parents?

CASTILLO: Yes, sir.

SAUCEDO: Did your parents return to Texas?

CASTILLO: Yes. We returned to Texas the next season.

SAUCEDO: Was that in the summer?

CASTILLO: We returned again in the beginning of November, because when we finished the corncob work we went to Bird Island, to work for a man named Parks Dogger. He was a farmer who planted lots of beets. He asked us to work for him. We had our own trucks. He wanted us to haul the beets to the dumping grounds, where they were put on trains to Chaska.

SAUCEDO: So when did you decide to stay here?

CASTILLO: I came and went until 1968. Then I decided to stay.

SAUCEDO: When you worked with your parents in the beet fields in Arlington, how was your life?

CASTILLO: It wasn't a life of socialization. But we liked it because we made a lot of money. We worked by contract, so we made enough money. The houses weren't fit to live in. They were almost ready to fall down. One time my father said, "We came to work, not to live in anything classy. When we make more money, we will be going home and it will be different. Then we will rest in our own beds. Here we sleep in what we can, because this is only temporary, until we go home."

SAUCEDO: How did the farmers treat you? Was there ever any injustice?

CASTILLO: The first year, yes, because there were some changes in worlds. We returned home early. There were some misunderstandings with the farmers. The next year, the man asked us to return. We were good workers, and he needed our help. We worked for him, until the last year.

SAUCEDO: So from 1968 on, you stayed here?

CASTILLO: Yes.

SAUCEDO: How did you decide to come to Litchfield?

CASTILLO: In 1969 I came to Litchfield. A man who worked for "Jenny-O", which was "Farmer's Produce", would go to Texas to contract people. He would tell them that "Farmer's Produce" had turkeys, gave you a place to stay, and paid so much. He was a contractor. He went to Arlington once in 1967. He told us that "Farmer's Produce" needed a lot of people, and that they wanted to hire Mexicans.

CASTILLO: If we wanted to go and see if we liked the work, we could. But we were making enough money in the corncobs. It wasn't fit to leave, because we had a contract to work. In 1969, I turned over my truck. I thought I would stop driving a truck day and night. I went to Willmar and I looked for Mr. Nelson. He was the one who spoke to us in Arlington. I spoke to him. He took me to the office. He remembered that he spoke to me in Arlington. He asked me where I was coming from. I told him that I worked for Parks Dogger, in Bird Island. He said he knew Parks Dogger well because he had a lot of turkeys too. He sold the turkeys to Litchfield and "Farmer's Produce", that's now "Jenny-O." He sold all his turkeys to them. That's how I got my job.

SAUCEDO: What job do you do now?

CASTILLO: Now I am welding. When I started to work for this company, I started as a helper. When I went to look for a job, the superintendent took me all over the whole company. He showed me all the jobs, and asked me if I knew how to do this or that. I answered, "No, sir. I never did that." Then he would take me to another job, and ask me the same questions. I never saw any of the jobs they had because I grew up on a farm.

SAUCEDO: They showed you how to weld there?

CASTILLO: The superintendent showed me how to weld on Saturdays. After a month, I went to him. I told him I wanted to learn how to weld. He said, "If you want to, you can come in on Saturday mornings and punch in. I'll show you how, because there is a lot of scrap metal you can use. I'll show you how to use the machinery."

SAUCEDO: What is the name of the company?

CASTILLO: The company I am working for now is "Ranky Sheet Metal."

SAUCEDO: Are you happy there?

CASTILLO: Yes.

SAUCEDO: Is it better work than truck-hauling?

CASTILLO: No. It's not better work. The reason why is that I turned over my truck, and the truck really had been used. It was a 1961 Ford. I started this job and I liked it, so I stayed. They sent me to Willmar a year ago, to Vocational School, to learn how to weld aluminum. I never saw it being done. Then the superintendent, Bud Miller, said that if I wanted to go, they would pay everything. It would be of benefit to them, because they wanted to start making windows that go behind the house of the tractors. What we use are the "Cozy Cabs". That's where I work. We make all the windows that go in the back. That's the job I do for them.

SAUCEDO: Could you tell me your plans for the future? Your desires for your family?

CASTILLO: The only plans I had, were that I wanted to move to St. Paul. My friends told me that the pay was good, but that the rent was too high. It is better to live in the country than in the city. I changed my mind, and I am going to live in Litchfield for a while. I put in an application with the city a month ago, because they pay well. They have a good retirement plan. If they call me, I'll change my job and work for them. I also have an application with "Johnson's Construction", right outside the city, on Highway 22 South. They make railroads and they pay well.

SAUCEDO: What kind of celebrations do you have on the 15th and 16th of September, of the 5th of May?

CASTILLO: We used to go to Brownnton with Mr. Luis Campa. He had a restaurant there called the Brownnton Inn. Now it's called the Red Pepper.

CASTILLO: When he had the Brownton Inn, we used to go every year for the 15th and 16th of September. They had a guitar and a violin. We danced until the next day. We don't go anymore. The man who played the violin, and his son, who played the guitar, don't come up here anymore. They stay in Kansas. Only when someone has a birthday do we get together and go to the lake. We drink beer and talk, or they come to my house and my wife makes food: tacos; tamales; and mole. We drink beer, dance and talk to pass time.

SAUCEDO: Do they sell Mexican food here, in the stores?

CASTILLO: Yes. At the Super Value they sell a little, like Chile Jalapeno. Everything is in cans: tortillas, flour, and corn. We go once a month to St. Paul. We buy cheese and things we can't get here. We get a lot so it will last.

SAUCEDO: What organizations do you belong to?

CASTILLO: The only organization I belong to is the "Eagles Club".

SAUCEDO: Why did you become a member of the "Eagles Club"?

CASTILLO: I used to go there with a lot of friends of mine, to drink and talk. One day, they started telling me about activities that they had, and what they did with their money. When they have dances, they give money to the crippled children and the Red Cross. Now that I am a member, we have dances to help the poor people.

SAUCEDO: How do you get along with your neighbors?

CASTILLO: We only have Americans for neighbors, because there are very few Mexicans living in town. I have always lived here, renting my house and having American neighbors. They have never made any faces at me, or me at them.

SAUCEDO: Have you ever had difficulties renting a house in Litchfield?

CASTILLO: No. I never had any difficulties renting a house. They have always rented to me. They have told me that they knew I was a good man. I have never been late in paying my rent, and I am a good worker. They always speak well of me.

SAUCEDO: Thank you very much for this interview. We are very grateful for this information. Hopefully, this will be beneficial to the people in the future who are going to listen to this. We will send you a copy of the information, so that you will see what we are trying to collect.

CASTILLO: Many more thanks.

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