

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

FRANK CHAVEZ

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

This interview was conducted as part of a series on the Mexican American in Minnesota. Frank Chavez, was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on February 4, 1928. He came to Minnesota with his parents when he was four years old.

Mr. Chavez owns his own printing shop. He is very active in the Hamline Post #418 of the American Legion as manager of their Legion Baseball Club. Mr. Chavez is also a member of the Knights of Columbus.

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 FRANK CHAVEZ

JULY 7, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

Moosbrugger: I'm interviewing Mr. Frank Chavez for the Mexican American History Project, under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. Do I have your permission to record this interview, Mr. Chavez?

Chavez: Yes, you do.

Moosbrugger: This interview, then, will belong to the Minnesota Historical Society. Could you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself, your brothers, sisters, and parents?

Chavez: I was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1928, February 4th. It was kind of a chilly morning as I remember. My father came over from what I still refer to as the old country, Mexico. So did my mother. There are thirteen kids in the family; seven boys and six girls. It's kind of interesting in that I have three older brothers, three older sisters and three younger brothers and three younger sisters. I'm always referred to as the odd one in the family.

Moosbrugger: The one right in the middle?

Chavez: Exactly in the middle, there's no give or take. From what I can remember my father came from Guadalajara and my mother was from a little outlying village of it. I don't recall specifically what village it was, but it was right outside of Guadalajara. My parents moved to Texas and were there for a half dozen years or so. From Texas they moved to Omaha, Nebraska. They became residents there, and my dad worked as a section man for the railroad for a number of years.

Chavez: Very early in my youth, I can recall the family moving to Southern Minnesota for the summer. We would work in the beet fields.

Moosbrugger: Do you know about what year it was that your parents moved out of Mexico?

Chavez: I would have to say it was in the real early 20's, 1919 or 1920, because as you've notice, I have a plaque hanging on my wall. It says he won this in 1926, and I know that my sisters were fairly small at the time. All the kids were born in this country. I know that my oldest sister is like fifty-five, so they would have had to come in early 1919 or 1920.

Moosbrugger: So at least by 1919 they moved to this country?

Chavez: Right. As I remember, they continued moving back and forth from Nebraska to Minnesota every summer until I was four years old. I can remember starting grade school in a little country school around Beauford, Minnesota, which is between Mankato and Mapleton. We lived in the country. I can recall spending our first winter here in Minnesota which was kind of, well, interesting, I suppose would be the word.

Moosbrugger: Did you do that in the winter?

Chavez: We lived on a farm that first winter, and started school in District 194. I think it was in Blue Earth County. I can vaguely remember when we started school that the teacher was an old maid school teacher, the epitome of an old maid school teacher. At the time everybody spelled my name with a "Z". I still do. But most of the kids never did. She told us that we should spell the name with an "S" because it was more Americanized. To this day some of my brothers still spell it with an "S" so since then I have used a "Z".

Moosbrugger: C-h-a-v-e-z?

Chavez: Chavez. I can remember going to grade school; there were 17 students in the grade school and nine of us from one family. You know, if we had wanted, we could have taken over the school. It wouldn't have been much of a problem. But that wasn't really what we were raised to do.

Moosbrugger: You probably weren't too interested in taking over a school.

Chavez: Compared to what it is today. Why, at that time, I don't think it would've occurred to too many people.

Moosbrugger: Right.

Chavez: If you read any of the Mexican history books, or you think of the patriarchal family where the father was the head, there was no question about it in our family. To the extent that if we were in school, and anyone of the brothers got in some kind of mischief, which is normal, the teacher would write a note home saying: Pete, Rudy, Amador, or whoever it was, did such and such. When we got home he would line us up and we would get it. This is because we should've been watching each other and making sure that everyone behaved. Not only that, if you pleaded innocent, he would say, this is for the time that I didn't catch you. So it all worked out fairly good. I remember now, it had to be trying to raise thirteen kids. There had to be some philosophy. We all respect Dad for that. To this day we think very highly of him. There are many times when I can think of him as being completely fair in his justice, the way he was, in that he treated everybody equally and there was no favoritism. Unless of course where the girls were concerned, because he was from the school that under no circumstances were you to strike a woman. No matter what the girls did. I mean, if there was a girl with

Chavez: a hot poker jabbing you in the leg with it, why, you would say, "please don't do that because it hurts." But it would never pay for you to strike her back, unless you were darn sure you weren't going to get caught at it. If she decided to squeal on you, why, then you got it worse than she did. So it's kind of an interesting way of life. To this day I feel very strongly about striking a woman. I have a son now that just turned eight years old. His cousins come over to play with him every now and then. One of them is about a year younger than he is, and she likes to pick on him all the time. I still catch myself saying, "Billy, you don't strike a woman." I think that comes from the old...

Moosbrugger: Your up-bringing?

Chavez: The old up-bringing, the background.

Moosbrugger: Could you tell us about your brothers and sisters? Starting with your sister who's 55. Could you mention their names, or their married names, and where they are living?

Chavez: Well, her name is Delores. She is married to George Smith. They have one boy, Loren. They are living in Fridley. Her husband is a sales manager for a mobile home company on Highway 65 towards Cambridge. The next younger sister is Jan, she lives in Detroit Lakes. She is married to Everett Garner, who is from Mapleton. They have lived there for about twenty-eight years, and are getting ready to retire. They have two boys, Dick who is 25 years old and Joey who, I think, is 18 years old. Mel is the next one, Manuela, she is married to Harlem Dooden, a good German name. They live in Burkhart, Wisconsin. She has a boy and two girls. Next is Pete, he lives in White Bear, and he has four boys, Gary, Paul, and the twins David and Danny. Arnie Amador is the next oldest and

Chavez: he lives in Blakely, Minnesota. He is a Gravel Contractor. He runs a construction company in Blakely. Rudy is the next youngest, he lives in Bayport and runs the C & PX Excavating Company. He does excavating work; digging basements, sewers, this type of thing, for the local construction industry in and around Stillwater and Bayport. Rudy has five children; Steve is the oldest, Elizabeth, she's my godchild, Denise, Nick, the last two I can't remember, because it starts to become quite a project. I am the middle one. I am the seventh one and I'm 45 years old. I have two children, a daughter, Deborah, who is 17½, will be 18 in December, and Billy who was just eight years old July 5th of this year. I own and operate my own printing business, as you can tell, and incidentally, I was the first one who went to high school in our family. Having spent what I figured was my share of time in the beet fields, my father gave me the choice of staying on the farm and working. We had changed from beet working to running a farm, so he gave me a choice of staying on the farm and working, or going to school. I decided to go to high school. Then he threw in a clincher, he said, "Well, if you go to school you will have to work your own way through, because there is no way in heck that I can support twelve other kids and pay your way through school also." So I can say that I have been on my own since I was thirteen years old.

M-osbrugger: Where did you go to high school?

Chavez: Mapleton High School.

Moosbrugger: You were living at home then, near Mapleton?

Chavez: No, we lived seven miles out of Mapleton. I rode my bicycle, the bicycle

Chavez: that all the brothers had accumulated from here and there, parts that we'd put together and made our own bicycle. I rode that into Mapleton on a Saturday morning and I found a place to stay. I used to go to my sister-in-law's, which was no big deal. I got a job lined up the same afternoon, went back home packed my things and moved into town on Sunday. I started school on Monday morning and started my part time job. It's been kind of like that ever since.

Moosbrugger: What year did you finish high school?

ChavezL 1945.

Moosbrugger: Maybe we should finish up naming your brothers and sisters.

Chavez: Joe has his own business as a heavy construction repairman, in Lakeland, Minnesota. Next is Mary, she is married to Jerry Roth. They live in Coon Rapids. Mary was the only one who carried out the tradition of the large family. She has something like eleven children. I'm not about to start to remember all their names. After Mary we have Connie, who is married to Melvin Mattler. They live in Mankato. They have two children, Patty and Terry. After Connie is Raymond. He lives in Lino Lakes, and works as a mechanic at St. Paul Cement. Benny lives in St. Croix Beach, and he is a sheetmetal worker. Benny has six children. Then Beatrice, she is the youngest, and lives in Hammond, Wisconsin. She is married to Warren Wolfe, and they have four children. That's the whole family.

Moosbrugger: Yes, that's a big family to keep track of.

Chavez: At the last count, I had fifty-nine nieces and nephews. I haven't taken a survey recently, within the last month or so. But I don't think there is any more yet.

Moosbrugger: It would be pretty rough to give them a hundred dollar Christmas present

Moosbrugger: every year, wouldn't it?

Chavez: It would be rather rough!

Moosbrugger: Could we go back to 1945 after you finished high school? Tell us a little bit about after your school years.

Chavez: Well, I finished high school just at the time that World War II was tapering off. Starting school at a very early age, I was just barely 16½ when I graduated from high school. So, I was contemplating joining the Navy when I was 17, and getting under the GI Bill. My brother Pete, was just returning from the service at that time; he convinced my father that the service wasn't any place for a kid. My father said, "You can go into the service when you're eighteen years old, because then you can go in without my signature, but until that time I just don't feel that I can do that."

So I waited until I was 18, then I went into the Navy. I spent about three and a-half years in the Navy. I enlisted with the thought in mind that I would be under the GI Bill. Three months after I went in, they passed a law that I had missed it by about two weeks. I spent the better part of three years in the Navy, which I enjoyed throughly. I learned a lot. It's helped me, probably as much as the GI Bill would have, or I wouldn't have the formal education. Before I enlisted in the Navy, I took an Electronic Technicians Test. I passed the test, so I spent at that time a thirty-two week course in Electronics. Each one would be like a first class or third class Electronic Technician. Of the thirty-two weeks, I went about 23 or 24 weeks.

Then they had an opening for machine record installation, IBM punch card accounting, which is the rage now. At that time it was just being introduced. Two other fellows and I took the opportunity. We went down to

Chavez: Pensicola, Florida, to take training in the machine records installation, as it was called then. Now it's quite sophisticated. The computers and programmers are a far cry from what they were in those days! At that time they made mechanically run machines that processed about 150 cards a minute, that was consider really going to beat blazes. Now they do that in a fraction of a second! In fact, they don't even play with them if it's less than 150 thousand.

After getting out of the Navy, I stayed with the machine record installation or punch card accounting. I went to work for Industrial Credit Company, that was in the fall of 1949. In fact, I remember I started to work for Industrial Credit Company the day after Christmas in 1949. I set up the IBM Installation for the Industrial Credit Company. I worked for them for 10 years, 1949 through 1959. I left there in 1959 and worked for a printing company for one year. Then in the fall of 1960 we purchased American Easy On Labels. The fellow that worked over here took care of it the better part of the year, then in 1961, I came over and took over the operation. I have been here ever since.

Moosbrugger: When you say "we"...

Chavez: There were four of us at the time; two brothers, myself, and another gentleman started with the corporation. About five years after that, I bought off the other three participants, and then took it over wholly myself.

Moosbrugger: You took a jump from working with IBM type cards for Industrial Credit to a print shop. Was there anything that got you moving in that direction?

Chavez: Well, I was setting up the punch card installation, getting it operating good, being kind of nervous, energetic, and full of the old malarky, I started looking for other areas to get interested in. We opened up what

Chavez: they call the Office Services Department. This included the IBM installations, purchases, printing, records, retention, performance procedures, and time study. This was all placed in what we call the Services Department. I headed that department and I was in charge of setting up the printing installation, purchasing the equipment, evaluating the timing, whether or not it was economically feasible to put in a printing plant in the company. Through studies we would determine if we could save money by putting in our own printing equipment and processing most of our own forms. Subsequently we would have had to purchase the equipment. That's how I got involved with the printing end of the industry. So when I left Industrial Credit Company, a good friend of mine, in fact, one of the owners of this company at that time, was looking for some help. He was ill and his pressman had just left him. So even though I wasn't an expert pressmen, I had enough knowledge of the equipment to be able to run it effectively. I started working for him. I worked for him for about six months. I figured after that, that there wasn't any reason why I couldn't run my own shop.

Moosbrugger: What organizations have you been active in, Frank?

Chavez: The American Legion for one, being a veteren from the Navy. Through the friends I accumulated through the years, they convinced me to join the American Legion. My friends thought that it would be beneficial for me to join the Legion. I think it was beneficial to them, not necessarily to me, in that they needed somebody to do the work. I became quite active in the Legion, Hamline Post #418 of the American Legion. I have gone through the office from Chaplain, Sgt. at Arms, to Commander of the Post. After serving my term as Commander of the Legion Post, I offered to get involved in Legion Baseball for Hamline Post. Hamline Post has been sponsoring Legion Baseball since the early 1940's and is quite

Chavez: active, which is a very good basis for Americanism and for the Legion programs. So becoming involved in that, I started managing the Legion Baseball Team. I have been doing that for about six or seven years now. I find it quite interesting and rewarding. I get a lot of personal satisfaction from it. I have had to cut down on my golf, fishing, and that type of thing during the summer time for two or three months. I think the personal reward I get from it more than pays for the sacrifice that might be involved, if any. I mean if you really evaluate what you put into it and what you get out of it in personal satisfaction, I don't think you could call it a sacrifice. At least I don't think I can honestly call it a sacrifice.

Moosbrugger: Have you been active in any other organizations?

Chavez: I just belong to the Legion and the Knights of Columbus. These two I have been really active in. I might have belonged to others momentarily, or for a short period of time, but I wasn't really active in them.

Moosbrugger: Going back to your early days, your childhood, did your folks speak Spanish in your home?

Chavez: No, my father and mother spoke it between themselves. They were of the opinion that as long as we live in this country, we should speak English. Although they did not discourage or forbid us from speaking Spanish, they did encourage us to speak English more than Spanish. Now, I kind of wish it would have been the other way around, because now, if I would have had more use of the language, I would have retained more than I have at the present time. Not affiliating myself with many Spanish speaking people to any large degree, I have maybe a half a dozen friends that speak Spanish and speak it well. But I'm not in that much contact with them, so that I can't keep up my use of it.

Moosbrugger: Is that pretty much the situation with your brothers and sisters, both older and younger?

Chavez: I think so, yes. The majority of them speak very little Spanish. I think there is only one other brother and myself that speak well. I wouldn't say that we speak it that well.

Moosbrugger: Do you know how many of your sisters married other Mexican Americans?

Chavez: None.

Moosbrugger: So then I suppose if any of their children speak Spanish, it would be by virtue of taking it in school?

Chavez: In school, yes.

Moosbrugger: When you were in the Navy, most of your family was living around southern Minnesota in Blue Earth County. Did your parents ever move to the Twin Cities? How did so many of you end up living around the Twin Cities and it's suburbs?

Chavez: The oldest sister, Delores, and her husband had moved to Anoka. When I got out of the service, the type of work that I was interested in was not found around Mankato or Mapleton. I wasn't really that keen about going back to farm work. I don't mind the work, and I can work hard. Even to this day I have a big garden, just about an acre. I still go back to Blue Earth. I can recall after getting out of the service I spent maybe a week or two living in Anoka with my sister. I was looking for a job in the Twin Cities. Once they were located up here, the other brothers came up when they grew older. They started looking for work. The work on the farm wasn't that colorful, so they got into other areas of work. This is what I think made them come to the Twin City area.

Moosbrugger: Did your folks then stay for the rest of their lives?

Chavez: They stayed. My father stayed in and around Mankato, until he passed away. My mother passed away in 1940. I was ten years old at the time, so that's some thirty years ago.

Moosbrugger: What year did your father pass away?

Chavez: He passed away in 1957.

Moosbrugger: And left a wonderful legacy of children and grandchildren.

Chavez: It was interesting. I think when my father passed away his total assets were probably what he had in his billfold. He didn't leave a big farm, or a big house, or a lot of money to the children. I think all the children got together and paid the funeral expenses. As a matter of record, he had one of the longest funerals in the area. The funeral procession went from Mankato to Mapleton where my mother had been buried. They figured the funeral procession was between three and a-half to four miles long. That had to be all the neighbors and just about everybody in the large area that came to the funeral. It was very impressive. I have thought about it on occasions. Some day I'd like to be buried like that.

Moosbrugger: There are a lot of ways of measuring wealth. Perhaps he was a very wealthy man when he died, he left a lot of friends behind him.

Thank you very much Mr. Chavez.