

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

GREGORY L. GONZALEZ

JULY 24, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

Gregory L. Gonzalez was interviewed while in the hospital recuperating from a serious illness. He has worked all his life and has achieved a high degree of success only through considerable and consistent efforts. The reader may see in Mr. Gonzalez a tendency towards low tolerance for people who expect a lot from life without working themselves. He has met many different types of people through his work with the Guadalupe Credit Union. He shares with us his work experiences there, with the VFW, and within the community.

Mr. Gonzalez sums up his philosophy with a parable towards the end of the interview. It stresses the wisdom of saving for the future, working hard, living conservatively and preparing for the proverbial "rainy day."

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.

INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY L. GONZALEZ

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Interviewer: Grant Moosbrugger

Moosbrugger: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Mr. Greg Gonzalez for the Mexican American History Project, under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. Could we start Mr. Gonzalez by asking you perhaps when and where you were born?

Gonzalez: I was born in Oklahoma in 1920. My parents were field workers. They worked in the cotton fields in the winter and in the sugar fields in the summer, for about four years. My brother was born in Texas in 1923. We settled here in 1924. My first sister was born in 1925.

Most of us started on the railroad, and then some of us shifted to the packing house. Between the packing house and the railroad, it was the most that could be found. Since then some of us have shifted to the factory, like Whirlpool and Minnesota Mining, and that is where we got our original start. We just didn't want to go back and make that trip again. After making the trip for 1500 miles. The rickety old tracks and the beat up Model T Ford. It was quite a trip for all these people.

Moosbrugger: Your father, your folks, moved to St. Paul in about 19...

Gonzalez: In 1924, I think. My sister was born in 1925. My other sister was born in 1926.

Moosbrugger: You have lived here steadily for...

Gonzalez: 50 years.

Moosbrugger: Could you tell us something of your educational background? What schools you went to?

Gonzalez: Well, that was a struggle. I went to Lafayette School in between working. We worked the fields from 1925 to 1938. In between there I went to Roosevelt High. I finally graduated from Humboldt High in 1938. I graduated on a Friday and on Saturday morning I was out hoeing green beets in Renville, Minnesota. That's how much the green meant at that time. Then I floundered around. I wouldn't go out to the farm anymore in 1941. I just wouldn't go out there. I stayed in the city and drove a truck for a dollar a day, five days a week. Five bucks was my total income. I got by on that. Then I got a job with the National Income Administration, as a Clerk Typist, at seventy dollars a month. The boss made \$100 a month, and the superintendent made \$250 a month, and I thought that that was big money.

- Gonzalez: Then the war came along. I got drafted and I went into the service, in January, 1942. The war was declared in December. The Japanese attacked the United States in December of 1941, and I was drafted in January of 1942 at Fort Snelling. I was in Texas in February of 1942. I was in California in March of 1942, and I was over in Australia in April of 1942. Then we spent three and a half (3½) miserable years fighting this war. I came back and everything had changed. My job was gone, so I wound up going to Swift Company packing house. Then I had obligations which are inherent upon the oldest of the family, you must support the rest of them. So I was supporting three or four people, including my mother, my sister with a kid on the side, my brother, and myself. I worked in a packing house from 1945 to 1950. Then one day, out of the blue sky, I decided that this was no place for me to be.
- Moosbrugger: At this stage of the game, in 1950, were you married yet?
- Gonzalez: I was married, with one kid.
- Moosbrugger: When did you get married?
- Gonzalez: In 1946. So I quit the packing house, and I went to Macalester College, in September of 1950. In January of 1954, I got a degree. I had to wait until June to graduate. When I graduated I didn't have a job. I had a job with Parks and Playgrounds and two days before I graduated they layed me off. I went and got my degree and was unemployed. Through the years I have been working at several places. The last steady employment that I've gotten was the State of Minnesota Department of Public Welfare, as a Field Auditor. Now I work for the Department of Revenue as a Special Agent, a Special Investigation Agent. It's been very good for me. I'm the only Mexican fellow in 1,000 people that's got a degree and is working as an accountant.
- Moosbrugger: You're working as an accountant for...?
- Gonzalez: Primarily, I'm an accountant. I do a lot of other stuff. They call us "gum shoe", they call us "fuzz", but primarily I'm an accountant. I list the fraud cases, tax evaders, and so on.
- Moosbrugger: Did you work, were you holding down a job, while you were going to Macalester?
- Gonzalez: Yes. I worked part time for the Parks and Playgrounds, and I set up an accounting office during the mean months. I rounded up a few dollars to keep going, because the government only paid me \$120 a month, and my wife's salary wasn't that big either. She was getting \$75 a month, as a teacher. It was slim pickings. Then while I was going to school we had our second kid. Now we had two kids, we bought a house, and a car,

Gonzalez: we also had my mother with us, and bills galore! Nobody believes how many bills we had. We finally polished them off. I got my degree in 1954. It took my wife fifteen years to get her degree. She didn't get it until 1960. We have two girls, 27 and 23. They're both graduates. One from the University of Minnesota, and one from the Anker School of Nursing. The one from the University of Minnesota has a degree in radio broadcasting journalism, and the other one has a degree in nursing, an RN. My wife has died since, and we are, at least I am, very proud of myself. People criticize me for this and I say, "Look, I earned this, nobody is going to take this away from me. I'm proud of myself, maybe you're not proud of me, but I'm proud of myself." I have many, many fights over this.

Moosbrugger: I can hardly imagine anybody arguing with that.

Gonzalez: Well, they say you're a show off, you're a big shot. "No", I say, "I'm not a big shot, I'm what I am. If I don't want to drink with you, it is my privilege, if I want to drink with you, this is my privilege also. I don't have to be with everybody and buy everybody drinks." They feel you should buy drinks for everybody because you can earn more money than they or you're better grass or whatever. All the time I have these arguments, all the time. So I stay away from some of these people, to avoid arguments.

Moosbrugger: You have been very active in some of the organizations in the community. Would you like to tell us a little bit about that? How you found yourself involved with the VFW, and perhaps Our Lady of Guadalupe Credit Union?

Gonzalez: Well, Our Lady of Guadalupe Credit Union, which now has been changed to Guadalupe Credit Union, started in 1948. It was a cold, miserable night in February. These ideas were brought in by our traveling priests from Canada going to Mexico. Father Ward got the idea and he came over and he asked me about it. I said, "Well, Father, I don't know much about Credit Unions, but I think it would benefit our people to support a people's bank." And I said, "Well, we can try it." So a couple of weeks later we met upstairs in the old church on the West Side. We had about fifteen or eighteen members. There was Augustine Rodriguez, Pomposo Guerra, Alonso DeLeon and my brother who was the first member of the Credit Union. He was member number one and has the first book issued. We started that night. We collected \$38. I left the credit union in 1968 and we had over \$100,00 in assets. Now, of course, we've more members, we have more problems, more insurance and more of everything. It's been growing and it's been helpful to a lot of people. The first loan we made was to a fellow named George or Gregory Hernandez. The first loan was \$50. That was big stuff for us. Now we are talking about thousands. We borrowed \$10,000 on a ninety day note. Now it's

Gonzalez: \$20,000 on a ninety day note. But at that time 50 bucks was big stuff for us. VFW started in about 1947, a year earlier, and it involved mostly Mexican fellows who were in need. They were in need of education, they were in need of jobs, they were in need of loans on their homes, and they were in need in collecting bonus that was due to them. Of course, there were some social aspects of this.

Moosbrugger: What kind of bonus was due to them?

Gonzalez: The bonus of World War II, that's in the State of Minnesota. We had a post of seventy eight (78) members at one time, seventy eight strong.

Moosbrugger: What was the number of that post?

Gonzalez: 9624.

Moosbrugger: What did you call it?

Gonzalez: Silva-Newman. It was named after a Polish fellow, a German fellow and a Mexican fellow. Silva was the Mexican fellow, and Newman was the German fellow. The post went on for many years without to much trouble. In the last ten or fifteen years it started fading out. Finally we took their charter away because the charter requires ten people and they just couldn't scrape together ten members, they only had nine. We took away their charter and I suppose they took away their assets, to see if they amounted to 100 bucks. The post was really going to stay. There was a need for the post, and when the need disappeared, the post disappeared. This is the way it looks to me. I did a lot of work for these people, a lot of bonuses, a lot of GI homes, and loans to cover jobs. These weren't technical jobs, they were college graduates getting a job at Seegers, Honeywell, 3M, or packing houses someplace. We put in requests and we asked and other people asked for us, and finally we got this guy a job. Once he got a job he did alright. When you're unemployed, you do nothing.

Moosbrugger: Right, you could starve. Do you know what the basic reasons are for reviving the post at this time, in making changes?

Gonzalez: Well, I think the basic reason for it is to try and build up the membership nationwide. They are not too concerned about this one little post. All over the country these posts are going down. This includes the American Legion. They're trying to revive. I know a fellow that's very active with the American Legion in Baldwin, Wisconsin. He says, "Greg, every other night I'm doing something, but there's nobody around." Sure, they have a lot of members but they don't show up. They go to work. So they're trying to revive their membership. They say, "We're a strong influence in Congress." Well,

Gonzalez: I don't know how strong an influence they are. People don't even attend the meetings or join or pay dues. They're trying to revive to increase the membership. Of course the fellows that tend to gain are the paid officers of the VFW and the paid officers of the American Legion.

Moosbrugger: Like you pointed out these organizations certainly have fulfilled the parent needs, this is nice to know. They had to be run by someone, and somebody had to do the leg work. It looks like you've always been there to help out. I understand that you were active with the Torre de San Miguel Project. Could you tell us a little bit about inception of that?

Gonzalez: Torre de San Miguel is a Public Housing Project, initiated by the Federal Government, Title II. I didn't want to join that, but the local "padre" (priest) said I had to join that. "We have to have somebody there from the church," he said.

Moosbrugger: Which priest was that?

Gonzalez: That was Father Cyprian.

Moosbrugger: Cyprian.

Gonzalez: Father Cunningham also said, "Greg, we've got to have somebody representing the Credit Union." So after a while I went representing two organizations at their request.

The first week I was there, I knew it was a mess. We started the planning and it took two years. The plan, direct, required land, sewer and whatever. There were 142 units to be built, then the financing of it, how much they were going to charge and all the details. The contract is very thick. The architect felt sorry for us. He even gave us a free dinner and party after it was all over. He got a nice fee. I think he got \$100,000 out of it. Anyway, we planned this primarily for poor people, for low income people, with the idea of helping them live a better life. In some cases it has worked and in some cases it has not worked. We have people that are on welfare and these people don't give a damn. They don't give a damn for you or for anything. They think that they are entitled to this. Under Title II you have to accept a certain portion of the total population of welfare people as clients. You have to accept them. This is what hurt a lot of people. They think that the welfare people shouldn't come in there at all. They are not appreciative of the property. They have no respect for people or respect for anything. It is still going, but there are a lot of problems there.

Moosbrugger: Was it set up so they could either buy or rent?

Gonzalez: You could buy or rent. Primarily they want to sell them. They figure that if you sell it to them, the people would take more pride in them and take better care of them.

Moosbrugger: How many units are there?

Gonzalez: There are 142 units, with from one to four bedroom in each unit. Naturally the four bedroom units cost more than the two bedroom or the one bedroom. It's a nice project. If I were poor I would move in there, you can't rent or buy that cheap in the city anywhere. The apartments cost \$20,000 a piece. You can't buy a house like that for \$20,000.

Moosbrugger: The price of the units has been frozen all these years?

Gonzalez: No, the fact that they bought in lots, the fact that they bought 800 windows instead of 20, the price is cheaper. With your dealer you say, "Look, I want 300 washing machines." "300?" "yes, what price can you give me?" He starts figuring he is not going to make as much on that then if he would sell one at a time, but if he sells 300 all at one time, he's going to sell at a lower price. This is where you think of effective economy. You just don't buy 800 windows for the price they bought 800 windows. They had money left over. They built a little shed and a little rec. room.

Moosbrugger: Are you active in any other organizations? LULAC?

Gonzalez: LULAC, I can't tell you too much about it. I was just a member. I worked with Art Coronado and Jesse Velasquez. I didn't do any of the big stuff. I was just a flunky, a helper. I didn't take over leadership. I had nothing to do with the officers of the executive board. The movie that LULAC sponsored was a good thing. They made a little money on that. I have no idea which way it was heading. I didn't participate.

Moosbrugger: You had a wide range of experiences. You know what it is to work in the fields, to pick sugar beets. You know what it is to work hard, and go to school at the same time, and not buckle on to the responsibilities. I noticed that many of these organizations that you belonged to, and the activities you participated in, have been primarily by and for Mexican American people. Do you have any special loyalties, any special identity with your people, that you could count in on that?

Gonzalez: Well, I have devoted my time and energies to help them with tax returns, affidavits and this kind of stuff, at a very modest price. Even there I get criticized. I gave up. After I spent all this

Gonzalez: time, I took care of a transcript title with a piece of land in Texas, for three bucks. It cost me ten dollars just to take care of it. So, I charged a woman three dollars because she didn't have any money. I got criticized for it, so I decided maybe I just shouldn't bother with these people in the first place. I was doing this for them because they didn't have the funds. For anybody else it would have been \$15. I transferred titles on cars for 50¢ or a quarter. Everybody else was charging a buck. They only charged them a dollar and the people cried and cried. Everywhere they went it cost them a dollar, but if I charged them a dollar they said, "You're trying to rob me blind, 'Me estas robando' ." I say, "Well, O.K., you want it free?" He says, "No." I said, "See that adding machine right there? The company gave it to me for nothing, free of charge. See this desk I'm working on? You can have it, you're a good fellow. See that notary seal up there? Do you know what the insurance cost on that? They gave me that too. I'll give it to you." "No," he says, "that must have cost you." "You're damn right it cost me," I say, "That's what I'm trying to get across. I think that there are some people that can be helped, and when you get them on their feet, they're proud that you gave them a hand. They will never forget that you gave them a hand. Some people however, will never be able to get on their feet with or without help. I know one family right now, we have, my wife and I, hundreds of dollars on this family. We've spent time, talent, clothes, food, given them beds, and everything to eat and I get the third degree from the recipients.

Moosbrugger: Mr. Gonzalez, you have two daughters, is that right? In raising your children, did you and your wife try to enrich their lives with the Mexican heritage?

Gonzalez: Oh, yes. They are aware of the history and the language of Mexico, the costumes, food, and of course the religion. They both speak Spanish. They learned a lot from their grandmother. Their grandmother was there all the time. When they were small they didn't know any English at all.

Moosbrugger: So you taught them through the religious activities?

Gonzalez: Religion is part of it.

Moosbrugger: The heritage: "Cinco de Mayo, el 15 y 16 de Septiembre"?

Gonzalez: I have been to Mexico Twice.

Moosbrugger: Do you think that some of the traditions and customs of Mexico helped here in the Mexican heritage, such as respect, loyalty

Moosbrugger: to parents, to the church and to authority, play a significant role in raising children amongst the Mexican Americans?

Gonzalez: Well, it did at one time. I think it's slowly fading away. I think there are a lot of them that don't even speak the language. A lot of them don't eat the food, and a lot of them don't go to the fifth of May and the fifteenth and sixteenth of September. A lot of them don't go to church, if they're independent, free and so on. It is slowly starting to fade away.

Moosbrugger: Are there any aspects of the community, of living in a Mexican American community, that might give a little extra vitality or an occasional shot in the arm perhaps, to somebody marrying somebody from the old country and coming up here?

Gonzalez: Well, some, but they try to Americanize themselves quickly because they feel out of place, not knowing the language, not knowing how to drink their beer stright, or a shot of booze with a beer chaser, this kind of stuff. The cultured people, the educated people, there is now problem there. It's the wet back that you have the problem with. The educated person, there is no problem. He keeps his tradition, he keeps his religion, he keeps his customs. That has been my experience. With the educated Mexican, there's no problem. It's with the donkey that sneaks across the border that you have a problem with.

Moosbrugger: What kind of a problem?

Gonzalez: Well, he is coming here to look for work. He's desperate. There's nothing. So, if you have nothing, how can you part with anything? If you have nothing, what can you part? The cultured or educated Mexican, he is no problem. He is an asset to this community. A lot of them, they don't associate with these kind. They go away to the suburbs. I know two or three of them that live in the suburbs. Callasos, remember Callasos? He never associated with those people. They say you're different. With a packing house worker and an engineer you're not going to have anything to talk about after the first two or three weeks. Very little to talk about. You could talk about last week's storm, or how you beat up the old lady, or what have you. Naturally we run out of words. But if we could talk about national politics, talk about Viet Nam, President Ford. the Middle East situation, there would be something else. You see if you narrow it down to a small subject area you're sunk. You have nothing to talk about, really. I was at a party last Saturday and that is what happened to me. We talked about fishing and touching up the roof of the house. It was very boring.

Moosbrugger: After a while you got bored, huh?

Gonzalez: I was bored. I was bored and I know I'm never going back to that kind of a party. I am never going back. I'd just as soon go to George's Bar and meet some drunk there and get a better conversation than these people. It's a little group and they center right around their own selves.

Moosbrugger: To sum this up, is there any general philosophy of life you would like to share, any ideas you think are sound?

Gonzalez: Yes, I would say that saving is the key to many problems in this society of ours. There is a story being written that was written thousands of years ago. A young fellow, about fifteen years old, who used to carve letters on a stone. He recorded at the court house. He could only carve so many a day. He was working in the shop, there were three or four of them in the shop, and this wealthy trader came in. He had to have three tablets carved by morning because he was in a hurry and he was late. He couldn't get any of the fellows to carve them because at four-thirty they ran out the door. He asked this young fellow, "How much do you earn a day?" The fellow said, "I get a penny a day." The trader said, "I'll give you two cents for each carving." "Oh, gee, that will take me all night." Well, said the man, "I've to have them by morning, otherwise there is no sense in even talking about it." The young fellow said, "I'll carve them."

He went home and ate supper and came back and started carving and carving, through the night, in the store. At five o'clock in the morning he fell asleep at the bench. He was so tired. At six-thirty a.m. the merchant came in and looked at the carvings and they were just the way he wanted them. He paid the boy six cents, two cents for each one. That was more money than the boy had made all week. The man went to the court house and he left town with his entourage. He had donkeys, camels, perfumes and silks. He was a wealthy man.

A year later he came back. He said to the boy, "What did you do with that money?" "Oh, after you gave me that money, I had a good time," he said, "I went out and got drunk, I took out my girl, I was just a 'good time Charlie'!" "Oh, said the man, "you can't do that, you should have saved 10% of all your earnings, otherwise you'll have nothing."

So, again there were some carvings to be done. Of course by now the

Gonzalez: boy's wages had gone up. He was making two cents a day. The man said, "I'll give you six cents a day for three carvings." The boy carved them out and delivered them. This time he saved his money and gave it to a merchant that was going east to get some fine silks. He was going to save these silks, and sell them at a good price. Well, the merchant took off and never came back.

The old merchant came for the third time. He told the young fellow, "Don't trust your money to someone else," he said, "You control the money, you do the buying." The boy carved his third set of stones at three cents a piece. Three of them gave him nine cents. He worked all night and got his nine cents. This time he saved his money and earned a little interest. When a trader came through there, he bought some silks from him personally, and he sold them for a good price to someone else. He made more money and he bought some more silks. Pretty soon he was making more money trading his silks than he was in carving.

The old man came through there again. This boy was nineteen years old now. The man offered him a salary of thirty or forty cents a week. He was to manage all the man's affairs, and he would have to travel. He started traveling, and he was handling all the accounts of this man, all the rich ornaments, all the silks, and all the donkeys. Finally after two years he said to the old man, "Well, you know sir, I'd like to go home and get married. I'm now 21 years old, you know, and I don't have a girl. I'm making all this money but the money doesn't mean anything." So the old man allowed him to go home and get married. The young man came back with his new bride.

Ten years later the rich, old man died. He left the fellow 10% of all he owned. He inherited all this money and let it grow for him. He had donkeys of his own, camels of his own, and a trailer. He went back to his home town and celebrated. He had the finest liquors and the finest foods. He called all his friends, all his "compadres" to his house. Then he heard his "compadres" saying, "Well, he should give us some of his money, he has so much of it." "No," he said, "you have to save your own. I saved mine and this is where it brought me. You save your own and some day, you will have some too." The title of this booklet is "10% of All You Own is Yours."

Moosbrugger: It's put out by the Credit Union?

Gonzalez: I haven't seen that booklet since, but it's a real good philosophy. This guy saved and he was way ahead of his drunken "compadres."

Moosbrugger: Well, thank you Mr. Gonzalez