

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

SEBASTIAN RAMON JARA

This interview was conducted as part of a series on the Mexican American in Minnesota. Sebastian Ramon Jara, was born in 1906 in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. He spent his youth, from ages one to eighteen, on a ranch in Texas. He and his mother left the ranch after a feud. He worked as a chauffer in Edinburgh, Texas, until another disagreement forced Sebastian and his mother to leave. He worked in North Dakota for a year; in the beets and at a mill. On their way back to Texas, Sebastian and his mother stopped in St. Paul. His mother liked St. Paul so much, they decided to remain here.

Mrs. Jara discusses his family history, the various jobs he has held, his marriage and children, personal experiences with the Anahuac Society and the church. He closes with some of his own philosophy and advice to the younger generation.

This is a translation of a tape recorded interview in Spanish. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

INTERVIEW WITH SEBASTIAN RAMON JARA

AUGUST 8, 1975

INTERVIEWER: VICTOR BARELA

Barela: This interview is with, Mr. Sebastian Ramon Jara, who lives at 1213 Bradley, St. Paul, Minnesota. This interview is taking place at the State Historical Society, the date is August 8, 1975. We appreciate your giving us this interview. To make this interview legal, I must ask for your permission to do this tape. I will start by asking for your full name.

Jara: Sebastian Ramon Jara. I have a son who is named after me, so I sign my name Sebastian R. Jara. I am retired and I used to work for the railroad.

Barela: Where were you born, Mr. Jara?

Jara: I was born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, in 1906.

Barela: What date?

Jara: February 29, 1906. So, my birthday is every four years. But I think, with all the confusion that leap year causes, I was registered as being born on the 28th of February.

Barela: Are you registered in Monterrey?

Jara: I don't really know, because I had lawyers looking for my birth certificate and they never could come up with it. I have heard that during the Mexican Revolution, the building where the birth certificates were, was burned down. Then I went to Mexico City to see if they had a record of my birth there, but there wasn't any record. I finally had to ask my mother, she was living here in St. Paul until her death in 1934. She gave me my life history; telling me who my father was, where I was born and all the other facts. I was raised from the age of one year, until 1924, in a place called "Los Quinientos Acres" in Edinburgh, Texas. In 1924, we came up north. I didn't have a father. When I came up here, I didn't know any English. I had gone to private school

Jara: in Edinburg, Texas. After learning Latin, I was transfer to study in Spanish, which wasn't difficult for me, until the sixth grade. My mother took me out of school because she said that the information I knew was sufficient. She never gave me the opportunity to learn English because she had sworn, that during her lifetime, she would never change her feelings about white people. She didn't like them at all. My mother was a Tarascan Indian.

Barela: Can you tell me something about your parents?

Jara: My father was born in Los Angeles, California. He was also raised there and later in his life, he went to Mexico, where he met my mother. They were married in Mexico and then my father was killed. After my father's death, my mother did not know what to do. A man told her that he would bring her and me to the United States, and he did. He took us to a place close to Brownsville, or Corpus Christi, Texas.

Barela: Where was your mother born?

Jara: In Arrio de Rosales, a small town in Michoacan. I remember that one time she sent me there to visit her relatives. I didn't like it at all because their customs were very different. Also, they only spoke in Tarascan, so we couldn't communicate.

Barela: What was your mother's name?

Jara: Her name was Luz Jara.

Barela: What was your father's name?

Jara: Avaristo Jara.

Barela: What was your mother's maiden name?

Jara: Ibarra.

Barela: Do you remember your childhood in Mexico?

Jara: No, I was just a year old when we left Mexico in 1907.

Barela: Then you were raised in Texas. Where did you spend most of your life as a young man?

Jara: On the ranch, about ten miles from Edinburgh, Texas.

Barela: Do you remember your life as a young man in Texas?

Jara: Life was very rough because we were isolated from the rest of the world. I didn't go to school until I was about eight years old. During my childhood and throughout my life, I wrote a diary which I hoped would someday be published. I left this diary with a friend when I went into the service. When I returned, it had been destroyed. I have tried to remember as much as I can, but you know how easy it is to forget very important things. I am even forgetting what little I knew of the Tarascan language; I haven't spoken it since 1934.

Barela: Do you remember your mother?

Jara: Of course I do. I supported her until she died. I was about nineteen years old when I came to St. Paul. Now I am almost 70. When I came here, my intentions were to educate myself some more, to get to know the people around here, and find a life better than just working in the beet fields. I didn't like to work in the beet fields at all.

Barela : Did your mother live with your step-father and you?

Jara: Yes, until there was some sort of feud, which I never knew what it was about. Then my mother and I went to Edinburgh. I worked for John Sims, a very wealthy Texan. I was his private chauffeur, until another incident occurred. His family was having a feud with a very wealthy Mexican family. I was accused of having fathered a girl's child. My mother asked me if I was sure I wasn't responsible, and I told her that I wasn't. Then we left as quickly as we could and wound up in North Dakota.

Barela: Did you travel by train?

Jara: Yes. My mother had signed a contract so that we could work in the beet fields. I forced myself to work there for that one year, but I didn't like it at all. I wanted to receive more education, like I mentioned before. Since I had to

Jara: take care of my mother, I was never able to do so.

Barela: Do you remember when your mother was born?

Jara: Well, according to the date on her grave, she was born in 1850.

Barela: So your mother was pretty old when she died?

Jara: Oh, yes. She gave birth to me when she was in her fifties, that is what I heard, in those days a young boy didn't talk to his parents about such things. Anyway, I decided that I was going to find a job that I wanted. There were a lot of people who were interpreters for me when I was looking for a job. I found a job with the packing company, the railroad and others. In those times, there were a lot of jobs available than, and there are still jobs now, except now people are lazy.

Barela: When you came to North Dakota, did you come straight through or did you make some stops?

Jara: We came straight from Texas to Aminia, North Dakota. We stayed there for a year. Life was pretty good to us. I worked at a mill and the people there were very kind to me. After seeing that I could make it on my own, I told my mother that it was time for us to move on. I said that we could go back to Texas. In a small town in North Dakota called Kelsington, North Dakota, I bought a car. It was a Model T Ford and it cost me about \$600. Then we came to St. Paul.

Barela: So you didn't return to Texas as you had planned?

Jara: We were going back to Texas, but we didn't make it. Let me tell the story to you. While we were here, I would take my mother out to the lakes and as many places as I could. When the date to go back to Texas got closer, my mother told me that she really liked the city and that she would like to die here. I told her that I didn't know any English and that it was going to be very difficult for me here, but seeing that she really wanted to remain here, I decided that I was going to do my best to learn the language and get a good job. We

Jara: went to the YMCA and both of us learned English. She learned it faster than I. This was in 1928 Or 1929. I didn't like it at the Y too much, because there was a lot of discrimination. This I have never liked, because I feel we are all equal and that we are all sons of God or sons of the devil. Each one of us is destined for one thing. Some of us are poor and others are rich. Then I decided that I wanted to see what the Anahuac Society did as far as regulations and what the organization was all about. I really liked it and the fact that it was recognized by the State of Minnesota made me like it even more. I think that it was in 1927 or 1928, when I decided that I wanted to make things better not only for me, but also for my mother.

Barela: You were very young when you did all this. Do you remember who the people or who were the members of the society?

Jara: Mr. Agustin Rodriguez, who is my compadre, and others that are still living. By being a member of this society, I was able to meet people of La Raza. In 1928, there was an argument in the Neighborhood House. I had to memorize a speech and it took me about two months to do so. This speech was for a patriotic feast. Well, at that time I was an honor guard for the speakers. A young man was going to be presented with some honors. This young man came up to me and told me that he didn't care for such a thing. I got so upset that I didn't even give my speech. I swore that I would never again get involved with that society or with any other, I never did! I get letters to participate in the different organizations for senior citizens, but I will not take part in anything. At about this same time the church was being organized. We rented a hall for ten dollars a month to have our church there. I spoke to several people about becoming members. Then I went to St. Thomas College to see if they would help us, and they did. When the first priest came to our church I used to help him during Mass. Then came Father Dicks. I got into an argument with him and he threw me out of the church. He even

Jara: excommunicated me. Our argument started because I told him that all these religious people, like priests, thought they were the only ones who could read the Scriptures. Then I said other things which I shouldn't have said. What he said to me made my blood boil, that was in 1932. Both my mother and I remained in the church for one more year. I remember that I used to say to myself, "I have done so much to get the church started and on the go, and this is how I am repaid." Then I started thinking that it was about time that I found a woman and got married. I also thought that I'd like to know more about getting other priests that understood the Mexicans better, than the one that came to say Mass for us. We had something like a church at m- home. A priest from St. Thomas would come every Sunday to say Mass, hear confession and give communion. Meanwhile I still helped out at the other church. After I was excommunicated, I went to all the churches of all denominations to see what their beliefs were. I wanted to find a church because I expected to get married and I wanted to give some religious guidance to my children. Finally, I came upon a Baptist Church that is located on 9th and Wacouta. I really liked it, and I am still a member of it now. I was married in that church and my children were baptized there.

Barela: Whom did you marry?

Jara: Balbina Jara.

Barela: What was her maiden name?

Jara: Estrada. She was born in Granada, Minnesota and was raised by her grandparents. She was born in 1925.

Barela: She is not from Mexico?

Jara: No.

Barela: Is her family from Mexico?

Jara: Part of her family is.

Barela: Where did you meet your wife?

Jara: At the church.

Barela: What is the name of the church?

Jara: First Baptist Church. I am a member of the American Baptist, which is a very large organization. I believe that it has between twenty and thirty thousand members.

Barela: What are the names of your children?

Jara: The oldest is David. He is thirty-two years old. Then Sebastian, who is thirty. Rachel is next and she is twenty-seven years old. Lastly, Pablo, who is twenty-five.

Barela: What year did you join the Baptist Church?

Jara: I believe somewhere around 1929 or 1930.

Barela: Did you look for this church for a long time after you had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church?

Jara: I think that it took me about two years to find this one. I really liked it. I went to a church for one year and that is how I got to know Christ. The people from that church sent me to this one, which I liked.

Barela: Did you get married after that?

Jara: I married my wife one year later. I had been living with a woman before I met my wife and this woman became pregnant. It was because of this that I had problems with the church. I had to wait until this child was born before I could get into this church and come in with a clean record. David was the child born of this woman. Up to now, I am still a member of that church and I hold the office of Deacon.

As far as work is concerned, I worked for packing companies and the railroad. When I returned from the army, I worked for Horsack's Iron, Incorporated, where I made molds. This corporation does not exist anymore. A short time after I started working there, I began losing my vision. This was because I didn't use my goggles and all the machinery started affecting my eyes. I quit as soon as

Jara: this began to happen and I went to work for the railroad. There I put fire into the locomotives.

Barela: When you first came to St. Paul, where did you work?

Jara: For the first year and a half that we were here, we were supported by a Jew, who used to sell fruit. His las name was Seduay. Mother used to keep house for them. After I had been working for the railroad for thirteen years, I accepted the job the church had offered me as janitor. I worked for the church for thirteen years as relief man. It was very easy to get the job because I had the license of a maintenance engineer from the railroad. I still have this license.

Barela: When did you serve in the army?

Jara: I was drafted in 1940. I was sent to school to learn English.

Barela: Where did they send you?

Jara: I went to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Not the prison, the fort. Then I was asked if I wanted to enlist and I said no, so I was sent back here as a 4F. My first child was born then and another one was on the way. I went to work for the packing company and from there, the army called me again. This time I went to basic training.

Barela: Where did you receive your basic training?

Jara: I went to Camp Hood, Texas. Then I went overseas. The first place we landed was in Africa. We couldn't get in through there so we had to enter through the mediterranean. We went to Sicily and then to a big seaport in Italy.

Barela: Did you return from the army in 1943?

Jara: I was discharged on December 20, 1945.

Barela: Did you work at the packing company when you returned from the army?

Jara: No. I lost my discharge papers after I got out of the army and no one would hire anyone unless he had his discharge papers. I had to wait for seven months until I finally received my new ones.

Barela: Where did you work when you finally got your papers?

Jara: For those seven months when I didn't have my papers, I sold junk from the junkyard. I had to work because I already had two sons. Then after I got my papers, I began to work for the Horsack's Iron, Incorporated, as a welder. Then I went to work for the railroad.

Barela: For how long did you work at the railroad company?

Jara: For thirteen years, and then I worked as a janitor for the church. That was the last job I had. Then I retired.

Barela: Did you and your mother come to St. Paul to work in the beet fields?

Jara: No, it was for the agriculture. Like I said before, I only worked in the beet fields for one year because I didn't like it. For the years after that, I found other ways to make a living.

Barela: Why did you choose to come to St. Paul?

Jara: My mother chose it. She really liked it and she said that she wanted to spend the rest of her life here. After my mother died, my brothers and sisters wanted me to go back with them, but I told them that I didn't want to. Ever since then, I have never been in contact with them.

Barela: When you and your mother were first looking around the city, was the Mexican community, the West Side, already established?

Jara: Yes, it was already established.

Barela : Who was the first person you met?

Jara: Alfonso Galvan.

Barela: Did you rent a house or buy one?

Jara : We rented one. We lived on Chicago Avenue first, and then Indiana Avenue. I didn't like the people or the customs that they had when we lived on Indiana Avenue. I became isolated from everyone. Then I rented a house on Mounds Boulevard. We lived there and on Mounds and Fifth. We had the church, or

Jara: the services like I told you before, in our house. After my mother died, the people of the church started talking about me, saying that I was committing adultery. That was when Father Dicks and I said a lot of things which neither of us should have said.

Barela: Did you participate in the patriotic feasts on the West Side?

Jara: Yes, for one year. I was a shepherd in a "Pastorela" at the Neighborhood House.

Barela: Was this with the Anahuac Society?

Jara: Of course.

Barela: So then you got away from the church and settled on your own beliefs?

Jara: Yes, and I still do.

Barela: Did your family get educated here in St. Paul?

Jara: My wife was in school here. I married her when she was very young. Right now, she is only fifty years old, and I am going to be seventy.

Barela: Were your children educated here in St. Paul?

Jara: Yes, all of them.

Barela: What schools did they attend?

Jara: Lincoln was the first school that they attended and they graduated from Johnson High School.

Barela: Did your children do well in school?

Jara: Yes, they all did well. I used to drive myself like a slave so that I could support all four of them, and my wife and myself. I was very happy that all of them had finished high school. Then I asked them if they wanted to go on to the University. I told them that I would pay their way if they wanted to go. I wanted them to have the opportunity that I didn't have. The eldest one said that he didn't want to go. The next one did, but he only went for one year. Then he found himself a girlfriend and colleged ended and they got married.

Barela: Did you ever feel like going back to the community and your friends after you isolated yourself from them?

Jara: No, I never went to see my friends, but I always hoped that one of them would be interested in knowing more about the Raza and Mexico. When I went to attend night school, I had a lot of problems, so I quit. I said to myself, "I'll find and make my own life and I won't have any problems with the law." And that is the way it was.

Barela: Did you ever visit any friends on the West Side during this time?

Jara: After I left the West Side, I never went back again.

Barela: Did you have any conflicts?

Jara: Very much. My intentions were very different, but in those times there wasn't anyone who attempted to help me. I was supporting my mother at the time so I just got away from everything.

Barela: Do you maintain Mexican customs with your family? For example, do you attend any of the patriotic feasts?

Jara: No.

Barela: Do your children speak Spanish?

Jara: Yes, they understand it and speak it. That was one one of the things that I demanded of my children. I would tell them that they would be very proud to know two languages.

Barela: What about the foods?

Jara: We eat Mexican food. My wife makes me tortillas and I like to eat chile (pepper).

Barela: So then, you haven't lost the cultural and traditions?

Jara: No, it still exists. I do respect all the festivities and all of us have to respect each other, so that we can help each other.

Would you believe that in the fifty years that I have been here, I never did go to school to learn English? My mother said to me, "I will not put you in a

Jara: school here to learn English so that you will never learn to bark like a dog. All the Anglos take advantage of us." That was the hatred that she felt. Probably I have that hatred too, but I have never discovered it.

Barela: Your mother had bad experiences with the Anglos?

Jara: Yes.

Barela: What part of your philosophy has affected your personal life the most?

Jara: Since I am a very religious man, the church has had a lot of influence on me. My mother was not a Roman Catholic, she was an Orthodox. That religion still exists in Mexico. But on Sunday, it was a must that I go to church. I was twenty-nine years old and my mother slapped me because I was parting from many old traditions and beginning my own beliefs. I developed these beliefs way before I was old.

Barela: What advice would you give the younger generation on how to lead a good life?

Jara: It all depends on their way of life. If they are going the wrong route, they have got to be stopped, if possible. I would try to tell them my experiences. I had no school, no society and no one to support me. The experience that I have, I got on my own. While I was working at the church, many young girls and boys, about seventeen years old, would come and ask me if I could teach them Spanish. That was my obligation. It was like Benito Juarez said, "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz." (When you respect others, you have peace). I like to read a lot. In 1946 or 1947, the church had an open house in the Minneapolis Auditorium and I took my sons and daughter. I prepared a speech in Spanish, and my children sang hymns in Spanish. They were all baptized in the church that I attend. While I was giving my speech in English, I, all of a sudden began to speak in Spanish, and had to continue doing so because I just about forgot all the English I knew. Everyone in the audience began to laugh. While this was happening, I prayed to God to forgive them for not knowing that I had a different native tongue than they did. I finish my speech

Jara: anyway. When I met with a group of people from the church, I asked them if there was ever another speech for me to say, if I could say it in Spanish? They said that of course I could. Up to now, all my speeches have been said in Spanish.

Barela: What advice would you have for me?

Jara: It would depend on what you would like to know.

Barela: Advice to live happily.

Jara: Find your own happiness and the happiness of those around you. Don't criticize anyone, no matter what race they are. Be active and be frank. Your happiness not only comes from what you do, but also from God. Christ himself said, "Come to me if you are tired and I will show you how to be rested." If one confides in God through Christ and the priest, everything will turn out all right. Have faith, hope and confidence. If any of your friends give you problems, ignore them. You look for your future. This is what I have always been looking for. I always ask God to help me guard against blasphemy toward him and the hatred for my people.

I always had my children with me until they got married. I always told my wife the first thing we have got to do is to have harmony at home, with your neighbors and others. If ever there are any problems with neighbors, ignore them. Have faith in God because he will always look after you. I will never forget what my step-father said to me, "Son, when you are a grown man, never play with money, because money never stays in your pocket, it is always spent. Never play with fire, because one day you will get burned. Don't play with women, because women are firm believers of vengeance. And a woman will get her revenge." These are a lot of the things I can talk about because of experience. There are many more. God has always blessed my eldest son. Ever since he got married, I told him, "You are going to be responsible for this woman, don't treat her as your slave, she will be your companion." I spent two hours in the

Jara: basement of the church telling him all this just before he got married.

Barela: Mr. Jara, we would like to thank you very much for your kindness in permitting us to have this interview.

Mexican-American Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society