

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

DAVID LIMON

INTERVIEWER: VICTOR F. BARELA

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

David B. Limon was born in Encarnacion de Diaz, in the State of Jalisco in 1886. He came to the United States in 1913. He arrived in St. Paul in 1923. He worked for the Burlington Northern for thirty-eight years and retired in 1961.

Mr. Limon speaks of his job experience in the railroad as well as picking cotton in Texas. He married his first wife, Refugia in 1907, she was twelve and one half years old at that time. In 1916 while he was working in the United States, his father, mother and his wife died in Mexico. He went to Mexico to bring his son back with him and while there, he married his second wife Amelia. They had five daughters and two sons. His second wife died in 1961.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded Spanish interview edited and translated 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 DAVID LIMON

August 5, 1975

Barela: This is Victor Barela, interviewing Mr. David Limon, on August 5, 1975, at 496 Ada Street, St. Paul, Minnesota. This interview is being conducted for the Minnesota Historical Society's Mexican American History Project. Do I have your permission to interview you for this project?

Limon: Yes.

Barela: What is your full name?

Limon: David B. Limon.

Barela: What does the "B" in your name stand for?

Limon: It stands for "Billegas" which was my mother's maiden name.

Barela: What was your father's name?

Limon: Silverio Limon.

Barela: What was your mother's name?

Limon: Cristina Billegas.

Barela: Where were you born?

Limon: On the Santa Maria Ranch, which is in the town of Encarnacion de Diaz, in the state of Jalisco.

Barela: When were you born?

Limon: On February 18, 1886.

Barela: Where were your parents born?

Limon: My mother was born in Encarnacion de Dias, Jalisco, and my father was born in a ranch in the town of San Juan de los Lagos, in the state of Jalisco.

Barela: What did your father do for a living?

Limon: He worked in the ranch.

Barela: Did you have any animals?

Limon: No.

Barela: What did you plant in the ranch?

Limon: We all worked at the ranch, every year they gave us different types of seeds to plant.

Barela: Do you remember your father?

Limon: Of course I do. He was a short man, light complexion, and heavy bearded.

Barela: Was he very well know in the town?

Limon: Yes. He was an orphan, he didn't know his father. He was raised by his uncle.

Barela: Was he a very strict man with you?

Limon: He was a very good man. He never scolded us for anything.

Barela: Did you help him in the ranch?

Limon: I worked to help support the family until I got married. I was married when I was twenty-one years old.

Barela: Can you describe your mother?

Limon: She was kind of dark complexion.

Barela: Did your mother have many children?

Limon: She had four sons and one daughter.

Barela: What were the names of your brothers?

Limon: Ramon, Francisco, myself and my sister Maria.

Barela: Are your brothers and sister still alive?

Limon: Only one brother is alive. He is Roman.

Barela: Where does he live?

Limon: In McGrow, a town close to St. Paul, Minnesota.

Barela: Do you remember your life as a youngster or as a young man?

Limon: I remember it more or less from the age of eight years till now.

Barela: Were they all happy years for you?

Limon: We were very poor, but we lived pretty well. Of course, the poor people were always looked on badly by the rich.

Barela: Did you always work?

Limon: By the time I was fifteen, I was a very hard working man, and I continued to be so until I retired.

Barela: Did you attend school in Mexico?

Limon: No, the poor did not receive any education. Some learned from others in the ranches and there were some women who could read a book called the "Silabario".

Barela: So then you never studied?

Limon: No

Barela: Did your brothers and sister study?

Limon: No. It's like I said, the poor did not receive any education.

Barela: Do you remember what your father earned?

Limon: He used to make 25 centavos which is two cents. That was the pay of the laborers.

Barela: With what did you buy food?

Limon: In those times, life was very rough. After harvest time, we used to collect dry leaves and we would make brooms from them and my father would sell them. We also raised pigs and chickens, so that is why we always had something to eat, but like I said, it was pretty rough living.

Barela: Did your brothers work as hard as you?

Limon: Ramon and I were the ones who worked the hardest. Then in 1916, my father, my mother and my wife died of influenza.

Barela: Were you still living in Mexico?

Limon: I came up here to work so that I could send them some money, so when they died in Mexico, I was up here. While I was in Mexico, I learned how to make pottery, and I used to earn a peso (8¢) a day. I also worked with the oxen. But since the money I earned was not enough to help my family, I decided to come over to the United States in the hopes that I could earn more to send them.

Barela: When did you come to the United States?

Limon: My brother and I came in 1913.

Barela: So then by 1913 you were already married? When did you get married?

Limon: Approximately in 1907

Barela: What was your wife's name?

Limon: Her name was Refugia.

Barela: Was she very young like you?

Limon: Oh, yes, she was a lot younger than I. She was twelve and one half years old when we got married, but she was very much a woman. Now, one does not see that.

Barela: When you came to the United States, in which border town did you cross?

Limon: Through Laredo, Texas.

Barela: Do you have any memories of the Mexican Revolution?

Limon: I was there for only a short while. I returned to Mexico in 1916, but just to go for my son, and I returned that same year.

Barela: When you came in 1913, in which town did you arrive?

Limon: Well, my brother and I signed a contract with the railroad and we travelled from Texas to Kansas City.

Barela: How much did you earn?

Limon: We would make thirty-eight cents an hour.

Barela: Where did you go after you travelled in Texas and in Kansas City?

Limon: Our jobs would end when winter came, so in 1913 we spend the winter in El Paso, Texas. After the winter was over, we would go back to work for the railroad.

Barela: How long did you work for the railroad?

Limon: I worked for the Santa Fe, and then for the Burlington North here in St. Paul. I arrived in St. Paul in 1923.

Barela: So you said that in 1916 you went back to Mexico?

Limon: Yes, but I was also working in Texas that same year. I picked thirty acres of cotton. But you know, the ranchers would rather kill a worker than pay him. I owed the rancher \$900.00 and he owed me \$1,200.00 from the time that I worked for him, but since it was so hard to collect, we went on to Fort Worth, Texas, to work on a ranch.

Barela: So from the railroad, you went to pick cotton?

Limon: Yes, then we went to work in Fort Worth. Meanwhile, there was a strike in the railroad and when things were finally settled, we came out worse, because now

Limon: they were only paying twenty-five cents an hour.

Barela: When did you return to Mexico to bring your son with you?

Limon: I went for him in 1916 and while I was over there I remarried.

Barela: Was the Revolution over?

Limon: No, it was still going on, but it wasn't as bad as it had been before.

Barela: Did you see a lot of the Revolution?

Limon: Well, in that ranch of Santa Maria, about 40,000 soldiers stopped. They stayed there for fifteen days, because they couldn't continue on because "Pancho Villa" was in Aguascalientes. These were the "Carranzistas." They would take from the poor and not do anything to the rich, while "Pancho Villa" and his group took from the rich and not from the poor. I was in that ranch when the "Carranzistas" were there and they killed some men so that they could have their tortillas, wheat, and corn. I think that "Carranza" went to hell. A lot of poor people were killed by the "Carranzistas" so that they could take what the poor had.

Barela: Did you have any relatives who died in the Revolution?

Limon: No. I was asked to fight against the government, but I didn't want to. I feel that the people who fought were very ignorant and didn't know what they were doing.

Barela: What was the name of your second wife?

Limon: Her name was Amelia.

Barela: Was she from the same town as you?

Limon: Yes. When I went to pick up my son, I decided to look around the town and to have a good time.

Barela: In what year did you marry for the second time?

Limon: In 1916.

Barela: When you returned to the United States, where did you go to work?

Limon: We were in Texas for quite a while. Then I got a job in a small town.

Barela: What was the name of the town?

Limon: I don't remember the name, but it was in Texas. I earned \$1.50 a day at that ranch. I worked there for quite a while. The people of the town did not really like us. The foreman of the ranch bought a tent for us and we set it up about a mile from the town. I suppose that the people did not like us because we were Mexican.

Barela: Where did you go from there?

Limon: From there we went to Texaco, New Mexico, where we worked in construction for the railroad. We stayed there for about eight months. We were putting up the tracks.

In those times, each of us had to have certain papers which explained that we had certain vaccines so that we could remain in the United States. If we did not have them, then they would send us back to Mexico. Aside from vaccinating us, they also gave us a bath.

Barela: This paper would indicate the company that you were working for?

Limon: Yes, it showed that I worked for that company of the railroad.

Barela: Where did you go after you left Texaco, New Mexico?

Limon: My brother Ramon was working in a packing company in Saint Joseph, Missouri, So I also went there. I remained there for two years. I worked wherever I could find a job. Life was pretty rough there too. Then we went to ^EImperia, Kansas, and I worked for the railroad there. By then the pay was increasing. Then there was a job in Nebraska, where they were building a cement factory. I worked there for about three months.

Barela: In what year were you working in ^EImperia?

Limon: I don't remember. I always had the habit of asking the foreman of wherever I worked for a letter of recommendation, but when our house burned down, everything went with it, except for the clothes which we were wearing. All these papers, plus my wife's and son's papers and our wedding certificate, were kept in a trunk in a room behind our house. Well, everything burned down.

Barela: Where did you go after you left Imporia, Kansas?

Limon: From there to Nebraska and then to Minnesota.

Barela: Were you still working for the railroad?

Limon: Yes.

Barela: Which city in Minnesota did you arrive at?

Limon: Here, St. Paul. My brother was working here and he was the one who brought me to St. Paul.

Barela: When did you arrive in Minnesota?

Limon: In 1923.

Barela: Did you work for the railroad all the time that you were in Minnesota?

Limon: Yes, just for the railroad. I worked for Burlington Northern for 38 years.

Barela: So then you worked for them until 1961 when you retired?

Limon: Yes, I had high blood pressure and the doctor told me that I couldn't work anymore. I had wanted to work for the full forty years, but it was impossible.

Barela: Did you have other jobs in Minnesota?

Limon: No, just for the railroad.

Barela: Were the salaries better here in Minnesota?

Limon: Well, it was better here because I was making 38¢ an hour, whereas in Kansas they were only paying 30¢ an hour.

Barela: Were there a lot of Mexicans in the places that you worked?

Limon: There were only Mexicans working at the railroad then. There weren't any Anglos. The secretary of the railroad used to tell me that the least number of people they had ever hired were 80,000 persons and all of them were Mexicans. In those times there weren't any machines so everything had to be done by hand.

Barela: What about your wife and your son?

Limon: My wife loved my son Juan very much. When we came here to Minnesota, my wife and I already had a small daughter, but she was killed in an accident. She was struck by a car.

Barela: Was that the only child that you and your second wife had?

Limon: No, we had five daughters, who are all married, and two sons.

Barela: What are the names of your children?

Limon: Catalina, Lupe, Amelia, Maria, Agapita, Antonio and Jose.

Barela: Are they all alive?

Limon: Yes.

Barela: Do they all live in St. Paul?

Limon: Two of them live in St. Paul. Catalina is married to Roberto Gonzalez, and Agapita is married to Mike Rodriguez. Lupe lives in Iowa. The rest live in other places.

Barela: Did all your children marry Mexicans?

Limon: All except one. The youngest one.

Barela: When you arrived in St. Paul, where did you first live at?

Limon: I lived on Indiana for ten years. Then I bought the house which burned down. I lived there for twenty years. I was close to Penn Ave. I was very happy there. After the house burned down, we bought a ^uhose close to a park and we lived there for about eight or nine years. Then my wife died in 1961.

Barela: Which families were already living on the West Side when you arrived?

Limon: There were very few. I have always been a person who has never liked to have many friends. I like to talk, but only to speak the truth.

Barela: Did you get to meet the Rangel family? Were they already here?

Limon: Yes, they were already here and I did know Mr. Rangel.

Barela: Were you ever a member of the Anahuac Society?

Limon: No. I was invited to join, but I felt that it wasn't convenient to me. Like I told them, "I need something that will be worthwhile to me," but what they had to say wasn't worth my time.

Barela: Did you make friends with any of the Mexican families?

Limon: Yes, there were some acquaintances of mine like Mr. Federico Saucedo. When I

Limon: lived on the West Side, Mr. Saucedo and I were neighbors. There were many others, but if I were to see them now, I wouldn't recognize them, because when I knew them, they were all very young.

Barela: Did the community already get together for festivities when you arrived in St. Paul?

Limon: Well, they did and I helped them out a bit, but I was never really interested in dances or things of the sort.

Barela: How did you help them with the festivities?

Limon: I helped them with money.

Barela: Did you ever attend the patriotic feasts when speeches or other things were given?

Limon: No, I never went.

Barela: Do you remember your first years in St. Paul?

Limon: Yes, I do. I think that when I began to suffer was when I became ill and could not work anymore. My job served me more as a diversion.

Barela: Were there other Mexicans working for Burlington in St. Paul when you worked for them?

Limon: Practically all the employees were Mexican. During the time when Roosevelt was president, there were more than forty Mexicans working there.

Barela: Do you remember some of the Mexicans who worked there, which are still alive?

Limon: Most of them were from Mexico and they all went back. They would work for about two or three years and then return to Mexico.

Barela: Did you go to church?

Limon: While I could, I went to church.

Barela: Would you participate in the church festivities?

Limon: No, I would just go to Mass there. During the time that we lived close to Penn Avenue, we would go to an Italian church.

Barela: You didn't go to Guadalupe Church?

Limon: It did not exist at the time. Later, it came about in the West Side.

Barela: What was the name of the church which you attended?

Limon: I don't remember except that it was a "Templo de los Italianos." There were two Italians which I remember and they were very good to me.

Barela: Did you ever go to weddings or baptisms here in St. Paul?

Limon: No. The only baptisms I went to, were the ones of my children.

Barela: Did you have a party to celebrate the baptism of each of your children?

Limon: No. I never liked parties, not even when I got married in Mexico.

Barela: Which priest was here when you came?

Limon: I don't remember the name of the Italian priest. When our house burned down, the Italian priest helped us with a hundred dollars. When I have had money, I have returned and given the priest ten dollars.

Barela: When did your house burn down?

Limon: I don't remember.

Barela: Did your family go to school here in St. Paul?

Limon: My wife went for some days. She went to the one on Penn Avenue.

When the temple (Guadalupe Church) was built and I was still working, I once gave them \$50.00. Now that I am on a pension, things are very different and I can't afford to give them as much. I have sent \$10.00 to them three times with my son-in-law Roberto.

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

Limon: They just went to school.

Barela: Which schools did they attend?

Limon: The one on Penn Avenue.

Barela: Did they finish school?

Limon: Just to the eighth grade. At that time I had a very large family and I couldn't continue to send them. The youngest one had more of an opportunity, so she went to high school.

Barela: Does your family still practice Mexican customs?

Limon: Some. Sometimes my children eat Mexican foods and other times they don't. As far as I am concerned, I never forget the customs. The only thing I don't eat is "Chile" but that is because I get sick on it.

Barela: Do you still travel to Mexico?

Limon: No, I would like to, but I can't. I wanted to go to Iowa to see my daughter Lupe, but the doctor told me that I couldn't go. He said that I couldn't travel by car because it would be hazardous for me.

Barela: Did any of your children ever have problems in school?

Limon: No, they were treated very well.

Barela: Did your children start to work after they quit school in the eighth grade?

Limon: They worked for some time in a restaurant. Both Amelia and Agapita worked there for some time. Then they started to get married, and the intentions that I had of returning to Mexico diminished. I had planned on taking all my family with me.

Barela: Do your children speak Spanish?

Limon: Lupe speaks very good Spanish. Amelia speaks a little of it. Maria doesn't speak it at all. You know most people here forget it. I think that it is just beautiful when a person can speak two languages. Antonio, who lives in Chicago, doesn't speak any Spanish. He went to the army before he was of age and the government educated him. When he returned, the government continued to pay for his education. He received money for food and to study.

Barela: Have your children gone to visit in Mexico?

Limon: No.

Barela: What did you do for entertainment here in St. Paul?

Limon: I never had time for entertainment. I worked all the time. I had to work at whatever time I was called and whether it was snowing or not, I had no choice.

Barela: What did you do for the railroad?

Limon: Mostly repairing. I had to change the old tracks with new ones.

Barela: What was it that most influenced you in your life?

Limon: I always lived my life the way I felt was right, even up to now. I have never been a prisoner here or in Mexico. I don't want to change my way of life.

Barela: Who taught you this?

Limon: I did. I have never changed. I would observe the lives of my uncles and how they forgot about working so that they could be with their wife. I didn't like that. I got married and I worked too. One has to do as much as he can to make the best of life.

Barela: If you had to advise the younger generation on how to lead a good life, what would you say to them?

Limon: I would say, because of my experience, to be close to their family.

Barela: If you were to give me, a man of little experience, some advice, what would you say to me?

Limon: Throughout my life both here and in Mexico, I never went to dances or to bars. I drank liquor, but only at home. I took "Aguardiente" in my coffee every morning, just before I went to work, but I just had a little bit. I never approved of the idea of getting drunk. This was and is my way of living. Both of my wives were very good and we never had any problems. Neither of us had any big ambitions.

Barela: Would you advise that this is the way to lead a married life?

Limon: That is the way that a married man can live happily. For example, if the man or woman is very jealous, only problems will arise.

Barela: Have you been happy all your life?

Limon: Yes, all my life. Thank God for that. I have never needed anything. I can't work because of my health and a broken rib and an injured foot.

Barela: When and where did your second wife die?

Limon: Here in St. Paul, in 1961. All of a sudden she had diabetes and high blood

Limon: pressure. She had always been a robust person.

Barela: Where do your sons live?

Limon: Antonio lives in Chicago and works for a tobacco company. Jose lives in Minneapolis and works for the government.

Barela: What about your daughters?

Limon: They work, but I couldn't tell you where.

Barela: Who did your daughters marry?

Limon: Amelia married Frank Brown, he is a policeman in St. Paul. Catalina married Roberto Gonzalez. Lupe married Serafin, he is from Iowa. Maria married a man whose name I can't remember right now.

Barela: We were talking about medicinal remedies and you said that your mother was kind of strange about them. Will you tell me a little about that?

Limon: She would make some sort of a syrup. She would get a thorn from a cactus, from a mesquite tree, and from a lot of other tress. She would boil them until barely anything was left. Then she would make something of an ointment, which was very good for a cough. In those times the poor did not go to a doctor. They had to use herbs to cure themselves.

Barela: What did they use for a toothache?

Limon: Something that they made which looked like butter. There was a man in the town and he removed our molars free.

Barela: What did they use for a headache, what would they give you?

Limon: There was a kind of black paper that they would cut into a small round circle and put some "Nues noscada" (nutmeg) on, then they would put it on the temple.

Barela: What would they give you for a cold?

Limon: They would give some herbs, and tie a rag around the head. Then they would rest and they would start to perspire and wake up well.

Barela: Did they use brandy or liquor for remedies?

Limon: Once nothing would stay in my stomach. I was a little boy, my mother told me to

Limon: go to the slaughter house and bring back a pound of beef and then she soaked it in brandy and put it on my navel. That was my cure.

Barela: For stomach pains, what did they use?

Limon: Well, if it was something you ate, they would give you a laxative.

Barela: What kind of a laxative did they use?

Limon: Castor oil.

Barela: For gas, what did they use?

Limon: I don't know.

Barela: What did they use for diarrhea?

Limon: My mother would make a drink of flour and let it set over night. You would drink it in the morning and it would go away. Once my mother took my little brother to a place called "Lagos", where a doctor examined him. He gave him some medicine and said that it would not cure him, but that it would help him. But when he would reach twelve or thirteen years of age, he would have some problems. That is what happened. One day he woke up and his feet were turned around. He couldn't walk. The doctor sent my mother to the slaughter house to get some beef feet and to make a soup without salt and give it to him every-day. His feet straighted out after a while. The doctor was a good man.

Barela: What did you do for cuts or wounds?

Limon: They would use brandy. There wasn't much a poor man could do. If a doctor was close he would walk to the doctor.

Barela: Were there herbs for everything?

Limon: There was one called "Quebra plata". There were two kinds, white and red. Once a man was throwing up and they sent me for the white herb. They gave it to him and the man died. The man who gave it to him said he would chalk it up to experience and he never gave it to anyone else.

Barela: Are there any stories you remember from Mexico, that your parents told you?

Limon: No, but there was a man named Pablo. He would tell the children jokes and

Limon: stories. He once told me that women are like flowers, but how they can make hell for men.

Barela: Don Pablo told you that?

Limon: Yes, and it is true!

Barela: Well, I thank you for permitting us to interview you.

Mexican-American Oral History Project
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