

Transcript of an Oral History Interview

with

Leonard Lopez

August 4, 1975

Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

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

Leonard Lopez was raised as an only child by his mother, after his father died when he was eight years old. Together they struggled through the years of the depression. In 1942, Leonard had completed the training and obtained a hairdresser's license. Working as a police officer and part time hairdresser, Leonard has managed to provide his family and loved ones with a good life in which they could enjoy the security and opportunities he never knew, due to the difficult times of his childhood.

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 LEONARD LOPEZ

August 4, 1976

Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

MOOSBRUGGER: This is Grant A. Moosbrugger interviewing Officer Leonard Lopez, at the West Side precinct. Today is August 4, 1975. Do I have your permission to record your history for the Minnesota Historical Society's Mexican American History Project?

LOPEZ: Yes, you have, Grant.

MOOSBRUGGER: Thank you. Can you start by telling us who you are, where you were born, when you were born, and some of your background?

LOPEZ: I am employed with the city of St. Paul. I have been a police officer for 26 years and I have been in St. Paul since 1933. I went to grade school in St. Paul from November to April, and then from April to November we were migrant workers in the western part of the state, Hector, Bird Island, Stewart, Lake Lillian, Olivia, and Brownsville.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where were you born?

LOPEZ: I was born in Bass City, Kansas on January 24, 1921. I am 54 years old.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you have any older brothers and sisters?

LOPEZ: No, no older brothers or sisters. My dad died when I was seven or eight years old. I did have a sister, but she died. She must have been about two or three months old when she died. I was born a year or so after she was born.

MOOSBRUGGER: So now there is only your mother and you?

LOPEZ: My mother and I, yes. Then, of course, my children and my grandchildren.

MOOSBRUGGER: Was there anyone besides you and your mom that was working out state?

LOPEZ: Well, yes, an uncle. In 1929, my dad died, I was eight years old. My mom and I went to live with my grandparents, who were my mother's

LOPEZ: father and mother. In 1932, during the depression, my grandfather was laid off from the railroad in Horton, Kansas. We came up north in 1933 and we stayed with my grandfather. My mother's maiden name was Martinez. We worked in the sugar beet fields in 1933 in Lake Lillian. In the winter we would come to St. Paul and go on Welfare. Of course, that was pretty common in those days. If there was no work, you had to go on Welfare. I was only twelve years old. I'd go to school from November to April. In April we would go back to the farm and the next year we would probably go to Bird Island. Every year we would be at a different place, wherever we worked as migrants.

MOOSBRUGGER: What school did you go to in St. Paul?

LOPEZ: Franklin. The old Franklin down on 10th and Wacouta. Then I went to Mechanic Arts High School from November to April.

MOOSBRUGGER: How old were you when you stopped going to work in the fields?

LOPEZ: The last year was in 1939. I dropped out of school. I figured, "What the heck is the use? You can't go to school really, so..." In those days there were a lot of drop-outs. I went to work and I saved enough money to take a barbers course in 1939-1940. I got a barber's license and a hairdresser's license in 1942. That is the year I got married. I was married in July of 1942. In October of 1942, I went in the Marine Corps. I was gone for four years. My wife and I went to high school together.

MOOSBRUGGER: What was your wife's maiden name?

LOPEZ: Granger. That's of English descent. Our first girl was born in January of 1944. She is thirty-one years old now. Gee, no wonder my wife is getting old!! I started in the police department in July of 1949. My second daughter was born in June of 1951. They are both

LOPEZ: married and have their own families. One of my daughters is out east and she has three children. The one who lives here has one little boy. Her married name is Anderson now, and my grandson is a little red-head with blue eyes. Then we have a boy who's twelve. He is an adopted son, a little Mexican boy who we adopted when he was a week old, in 1962. We have had him since he was a week old, but it took three or four months to have papers written out by the attorney and through the court. Legally we adopted him in January of 1963.

MOOSBRUGGER: Was he born in this country?

LOPEZ: Yes, he was born here. He was born in St. Paul. He knows that he is adopted and everything is fine. He goes to private school and he is going to be in the eighth grade now. We plan on sending him to the Concordia Academy when he goes to high school. That is why I want to stay at my job for at least another five years, until he gets out of high school. After he finishes high school, we will see what happens about college. Well, that's about the extent of it. I have been on the job since 1949.

MOOSBRUGGER: What moved you towards police work?

LOPEZ: Security, and the fact that I was an MP while I was in the Marine Corps. Also, maybe because it was a different type of work, a little excitement. It isn't like regular routine office work or barber work. I could never stand barbering. I'm doing barbering work at an average of twelve hours a week, and that's part time work. I work from 4:30 to 8:30 three times a week, but I wouldn't want to do that eight hours a day.

MOOSBRUGGER: I'm sure it's been working out fine. Len, I know that you have had interest in taking time to do some reading about Mexico and about

MOOSBRUGGER: some of the history as it relates to your ancestry. Do you want to tell us a little bit about some of the things you discovered?

LOPEZ: I would like to trace the ancestry of our family. As far as I know I come from the "Tarhumara Indian."

MOOSBRUGGER: How would you spell that?

LOPEZ: T-a-r-h-u-m-a-r-a. That's on my father's side, Lopez. His name was Crisencio Lopez. They were born in Mexico. I don't remember exactly what part of Mexico. He was born in 1870. He married my grandma who's name was Loreto Francoso. Her parents were Spanish. Her grandparents came right from Spain, back in 1840, 1841, 1835, perhaps. My grandfather's parents worked on the hacienda for the Francosos. That is where he met my grandmother. They were married in 1887. They were about sixteen or seventeen years old. They came to the United States after they were married. When they came to the United States, they came to Dodge City, Kansas.

MOOSBRUGGER: Is this when they were about sixteen years old?

LOPEZ: Yes, they were about sixteen or seventeen years old. That was back in 1887. From there they moved to New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and as far west as California. During all this time they had, well, they had children on the way. They settled in Dodge City in 1903.

MOOSBRUGGER: Dodge City, Kansas?

LOPEZ: Dodge City, Kansas in 1903. They both died in Dodge City. My grandma died in 1956 or 1957, and my grandpa died in 1959. They had thirteen children. My grandpa worked for the Miller Ranch in Dodge City. It was one of the biggest ranches in Kansas at

LOPEZ: the time. In fact, there is a school named "Miller" in Dodge City. It was named after the Miller family who my grandpa worked for. And the funny part, Grandpa used to say that when he started working for Miller, Miller told him, "Why don't you go down to the south part of the ranch and build yourself a home and raise yourself a family?" And Grandpa did. He had thirteen kids. My mother and father were married in Dodge City. I think they were married in 1918. That's on my father's side of the family. My mother's side of the family comes from the Azteca Indian tribe and perhaps they had a little Spanish in them, too. But I figure I have at least 3/4 Indian blood in me and 1/4 Spanish which, of course, makes me a Mestizo. At the time of Cortez, in 1519, they called Mexico "New Spain". Nine months after they arrived there they started having children with the Indian women there, so, they had to name the country all over. So, that's where the name Mexico came from, the word Mestizo. This means that I'm of mixed blood, you know. Sounds kind of logical, too, doesn't it? It seems that way.

In the book written by Bernardo Castillo, the "conquistador" with Cortez back in 1519, there was a Martin Lopez who came with Cortez. He was a carpenter. That's the first place that I can pick up the name Lopez in Mexico. In fact, Lopez was the one who built those sloops in order to defeat the Aztec empire. At the time Mexico, "Tenochitlan", was on an island. The only way you could get there was by canoe, boats that the Indians had to communicate from the mainland. At

LOPEZ: that time it was, of course, Tenochitlan. Lopez was the carpenter in charge of building these thirteen sloops. They were bigger than the canoes and they would ram into those canoes. They were navigated by the Aztec Indians. According to Bernardo, that's the way that Cortez finally defeated the Aztecs.

MOOSBRUGGER: It was due, in part, to the boats that they had?

LOPEZ: Yes. The sloops are bigger than the regular canoes. They would ram the sloops into the canoes. Of course, they had the animals and the horses, but they were never seen by the Aztec Indians or the Indians who they encountered first in Vera Cruz. As they came toward Mexico City they encountered the other tribes. As they went along, they migrated. Cortez conned these Indians to come along with him because at the time they were dominated by the Aztec empire. They were highly taxed by the Aztecs and so they wanted revenge. They figured that Cortez was their leader and they joined Cortez to get to the Aztecs. Consequently, this is how Cortez had managed to recruit thirty, forty-thousand Indians to fight for him against Montezuma. That's the first time I came across the name Lopez. But now, whether that was related to the Lopez or not, I don't know for sure, but I had to start somewhere.

MOOSBRUGGER: At least we know that there were Lopez' in Mexico dating back to the time of Cortez.

LOPEZ: That's right. Then, of course, Grandpa Martinez, who was my mother's father, his name was Manuel Martinez. He's the one that comes from the Aztec Indian tribe and he also came to America back in the 1880's or 1890. They also settled in Kansas,

LOPEZ: in Dodge City. Some of the kids were born there and some of the kids were born in Arizona.

MOOSBRUGGER: Did the Martinez side of the family mostly stay around the Southwest?

LOPEZ: No, they all migrated to Minnesota during the depression. The Lopez' went from Dodge City to the hot cities of Illinois. We were in Rock Island, Walline, and Silvis. This is where most of the Lopez' lived. They still live there. My uncle, my father's brothers and sisters and their families, are all in Rock Island. We have a family reunion every couple of years in Rock Island, Illinois. That's where my ancestry comes from. The two Indian tribes, and my grandma being Spanish.

MOOSBRUGGER: The influence also, then, from Spain?

LOPEZ: Yes.

MOOSBRUGGER: I guess that's it. Thank you very much for the interview.

LOPEZ: You're welcome, Grant.

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