TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

JESUS JOHN MERCADO

AUGUST 5, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

Jesus John Mercado, was born in Spareville, Kansas. He came to St. Paul, Minnesota with his parents in 1935. He served in the Marine Corp for thirty-six months from August 1942 to August 1945. He has been a Policeman since 1948.

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.

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INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

Moosbrugger: This is Grant A. Moosbrugger interviewing Mr. Mercado at the St. Paul Public Safety Building where he has his office. Today is August 5, 1975. Do I have your permission to interview you for the Minnesota Historical Society?

Mercado: Yes you have.

Moosbrugger: This interview will belong to the Mexican American History Project, which is a part of the Minnesota Historical Society. Could you start out by telling us your name, and where and when you were born?

Mercado: I was born on December 19, 1921, in Spareville, Kansas. S-p-a-r-e-v-i-l-l-e.

My name is Jesús John Mercado.

Moosbrugger: What rank were you in the family?

wheat fields during the harvest.

Mercado: I am the first in the family, the oldest. We lived in Spareville, Kansas for a short time. My father worked for the railroad. He was transferred from Horton, Kansas, approximately in 1925. He worked for the railroad also in Horton, Kansas, for the Rock Island. We lived there until approximately 1935. Then we came up to Minnesota. The reason we moved from Horton, Kansas to Minnesota was because of the depression. In Horton, Kansas there wasn't any work available. When the shops closed, the Mexican people used to work for the railroad. They migrated from Horton, Kansas to different parts of the country. My grandfather had been in Minnesota, prior to this. So he convinced my father to come to Minnesota. We came here in 1935, I'm not certain of the exact year we came. It could've been 1933. We worked on the farm, in the

Moosbrugger: Which towns would that have been?

Mercado:

Lake Lillian, Minnesota. Then we returned to Horton, Kansas. The work there was scarce, although my father was fortunate because the railroad gave him a piece of property for his use. He was able to raise a few cows on it, approximately sixty; hogs; chickens; and of course we had milk and meat most of the time. So he was more fortunate than other people. Besides that, he used to moonlight. In 1935, after coming to Lake Lillian in the summer time, he finally decided to come with the whole family. Then we moved to St. Paul. He had other friends that had moved here before him.

Moosbrugger: Between 1930-1935 it would be a matter of spending the summers up around Lake Lillian.

Mercado: No, between 1933-1935, only two years

Moosbrugger: OK, only two years. Then you traveled back and forth to Horton, Kansas?

Mercado: Horton, Kansas. Then they moved here and for the next two years, I don't know if he went for the next two years, he might have, but the boys did, including myself. The three of us went every summer. Then we came back to St. Paul and went back to school.

Moosbrugger: Could you mention who your younger brothers and sisters are?

Mercado: Well, the brothers who went to work with me were; John Jr. and Boniface. The other brothers and sisters weren't old enough to work. So they really didn't do any work. It was just the three of us. My other sisters and brothers are: Elvira, Casper, Margarito, Irene, Alice, Richard and Helen (Helen passed away a couple of months after she was born.)

Moosbrugger: When did your folks come across from Mexico? Or was it your grandparents?

Mercado: Yes. I believe it was in 1915 when my grandfather came.

Moosbrugger: 1915. Right around the time of the revolution.

Mercado: Yes, 1915. They mention it on this paper that I am giving you. The revolution was in 1915, when he came to the United States. But my father didn't come. My grandfather sent for my father in 1919 and that's in that paper too. My mother came in 1916, but they came and lived in Dodge City, Kansas for a while, which is near Spareville, where we lived.

Moosbrugger: O.K., that will be contained on a supplementary paper. So that brought us up to, say, 1935. You were living in Minnesota and your family had moved to St. Paul on a permanent basis. What schools did you go to in St. Paul?

Mercado: When we first arrived we lived for a short time on the East Side of St. Paul, Hoffman and Kellogg. It was the Third Street at that time. I attended Van Buren School, and so did my brothers, for approximately three or four months. Then my folks moved to Grove Street. I attended Franklin School, and I graduated from Franklin School and went to Mechanic Arts High School. I graduated from Mechanic Arts High School in 1941. In about 1938 or 1939

months. Then my folks moved to Grove Street. I attended Franklin School, and I graduated from Franklin School and went to Mechanic Arts High School. I graduated from Mechanic Arts High School in 1941. In about 1938 or 1939 I started working here during the summer months. I didn't go to the farm anymore. I worked for the street car company as a laborer. I was fortunate at that time to get a job. My other two brothers still continued going to the farm on their own. In 1941, when I graduated, a friend of mine made an application for me to a fur packing place. I was able to get employment and I stayed there from 1941 to 1942, when I went into the service. Between 1941 and 1942 I fractured my right ankle, so I wasn't able to do much during that time. I entered the Marines in August of 1942, and I spent approximately 36 months in the Marine Corps, in the South Pacific.

Moosbrugger: Why did you choose the Marines? Did you enlist?

Mercado:

I enlisted. Some of my friends joined the Marine Corp and they convinced me that I should join, so I did. Leonard Lopez went into the Marines before I did. In fact, that's one of the reasons I joined the Marines afterwards. I was fortunate enough, though I went through Bogenville, Guam and Iwo Jima. I was wounded twice but I came back. When I came home I went to Superior Packing for a short time.

Moosbrugger: Back to where?

Mercado:

Superior Packing. But I didn't see any future in that so I went to Dunwoody Institute and took up refrigeration under the GI Bill. When I graduated from there, they placed me at whirlpool. I worked for Whirlpool for a short time as an inspector. But the job was not related to air-conditioning or refrigeration at all. It was just an inspection job that I had to do. Anybody could have done it without attending school.

Moosbrugger: When was this, about 1945 or 1946?

Mercado:

It was approximately 1947 or 1948. In the meantime, we had a place where we used to work for a man by the name of Joe Sagrin.

Moosbrugger: Sagrin?

Mercado:

Sagrin, S-a-g-r-i-n. He convinced some of the fellows in the neighborhood, including myself and Leonard Lopez and the Renterias, to take the exam for the Police Department. Well, I didn't take it the first time it was open. I didn't have any intentions of being a policeman at all. Pete Renteria was the first one to take the exam. He passed it and after he passed it he was on the job for a while. He convinced us to take it also. The next time there was an opening in the police department, and the examinations were posted, we applied

for it. We took the exam and passed it. That's the only reason I got on, I was still working at Whirlpool at the time, still as an inspector. I decided to be a Policeman and I have never regretted it.

Moosbrugger: You and the Renteria brothers and Leonard Lopez have been buddies since childhood, right? Played ball together and so forth?

Mercado:

Played ball, and came from Horton, Kansas. All of us came from Horton Kansas. We were good friends than and we are good friends now. Like I say, the job has been good to me here. I have no regrets. I raised my family.

Moosbrugger: Maybe you could tell us a little bit about when you got married, who your wife is, what your wife's maiden name was, and your children?

Mercado:

I was married in May of 1945, to Mary Salas. She was born in Mexico. came to the United States approximately in 1930. I really don't know exactly when she came, but it was around that time. She was just a young girl and she attended Van Buren Harding School. Dale, our first son was born in 1946, March of 1946. In October of 1949, our daghter Rose Mary was born. They both attended St. Bernards High School. The boy had a handicap, he's hard of hearing, so he had permission to have his education in High School. Now he's working at Union Grass as a coremaker. My daughter graduated from St. Bernards also. She continued her education at the University of Minnesota. She's now teaching at Highland School. She married a young boy by the name of Guy Peterson. They have no children. My son married a girl by the name of Ronnie Brown. They don't have any children either.

Moosbrugger:

Would you say, John, that your parents have played a role in helping you form your philosophy of life and your goals and value system? Would you say that your Mexican American heritage has influenced your life by making you the type of person you are today?

Definitely. As a child I would always hear my father say; if nothing else, get an education so you will never have to work like I do. Be honest, stick with the family when they are in trouble, help each other. I used to complain once in a while about my brother who would come over and say, "Lend me a five dollar bill." I used to complain to my dad, "He is always borrowing money from me." One of my dad's favorite expressions was, "That's what brothers are for." After my brother and I were married, Johnny used to bring his daughter to the house and my father and my mother would have to babysit. Dad used to complain once in a while. He would say, "Inhave to babysit today." So I used to reply to him, "That's what grandfathers are for." Now I think that my parents did play a definite role in my up-bringing. In whatever I endeavor to do. I agree that we were poor and we worked hard in the wheat fields when we were young for three or four years. But as a youngster I never heard a lot of people complain about migrant workers. We were fortunate. We worked with a farmer by the name of John Aspes, in Lake Lillian, Minnesota. That's the only farmer that we worked for. We stayed right there with him. In fact, I spent a whole summer with him.

Moosbrugger: What was his name?

Mercado: John Aspes. In Lake Lillian, Minnesota. He was a Norwegian. Even after we lived in St. Paul he used to visit us, he and his family. He used to live in White Bear Lake.

Moosbrugger: Do you feel that you are a better person for having experienced poverty, or lesser person?

Mercado: No. I think that taught me what work really is, the hardship that other people encounter, even now in my own profession. When I see people or hear people complain, people on welfare and so forth, I think that makes me a better person. I can understand why they are in that situation. It might

be sickness in the family, or it might be something else. Not all the people that are on welfare are lazy or cheap. Some people do need help.

Moosbrugger:

Right.

Mercado:

During the depression, nine out of ten persons here in the city of St. Paul, were on relief. Especially around the neighborhood that I was brought up in. It was not just Mexican people, but other nationalities too. We use to call it the "Lower Town."

Moosbrugger: Lower West Side?

Mercado:

Right here on the East Side. My family never lived on the West Side. We moved to where the markets are right now.

Moosbrugger:

Oh, by the farmers' market?

Mercado:

Right where St. Paul Ramsey Hospital is right now. That's Yes, Grove Street. There were only three homes in that area, the last one was where my home was. on Canada Street. I forgot the address. In 1953 or 1954 we built a new house on Iowa and White Bear. Of course, we never got to live there. My folks, my mother and the rest of my brothers and sisters, did live there for a while. Then they got married and moved out of there.

Moosbrugger:

Just to sum it up could you tell us about some of your earlier educational experiences. The schools you went to, what kind of experiences you found yourself in, in an early grade?

Mercado:

Well, in the period when we came to Lake Lillian, we use to leave school in Kansas early to come to the farm or work in the beet fields. At the time that we arrived, school wasn't over yet, so my folks sent us to school in Lake Lillian. We went to a country school, one room, first through eight

grade. Some of the kids that were attending this school were in the same boat we were. As far as speaking Spanish, speaking nothing but Spanish at home like we did, they spoke nothing but German or Norwegian. So they were in the same boat.

Moosbrugger:

They were learning English as a second language?

Mercado:

Yes, English as a second language. As we were. It all came about for the betterment of the pupils. For the simple reason that everybody was in the same boat. I don't think anyone made fun of anyone else, as far as not knowing the English language when they started school. The teacher commended us as far as we were concerned. They made every effort to assist us, and our language.

Moosbrugger:

To go to a school like that, where you have a bunch of kids with different language background, grades 1-8, was there just one teacher for the whole school?

Mercado:

One teacher for eight grades.

Moosbrugger

For all eight grades?

Mercado:

Yes, 1-8.

Moosbrugger:

How could they keep order with all those kids?

Mercado:

The teacher had the respect of the pupils. Besides that, the parents really backed the teacher up one-hundred percent. If there was any mischief she would call up the parents. Or she went to the farm itself and talked to the parents. They would take care of their children so they would be well disciplined when they were in school.

Moosbrugger: Do you have any hopes for your children for the future?

Mercado: Well, not anymore. They are grown now and they are married.

Moosbrugger: Grandchildren?

Mercado: No, not yet. But the children are married now and they are on their own. I

think I have...

Moosbrugger: Given them the talents?

Mercado: Well, I don't know if I've given them the talents. I think I have lead them

down the right path. So far so good. I hope it just keeps up that way.

Moosbrugger: Anything you would like to add to this interview?

Mercado: No, I hope I was helpful in assisting you.

Moosbrugger: Yes, you have been.

Mercado: But if I'm not, this tape should sort of help you.

Moosbrugger: It sure will fill in.

Mercado: If you have any other questions, feel free to call me.

Moosbrugger: We'll follow up. Thank you very much.