TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

the REVEREND JUAN L. RIOS

June 21, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

The Reverend Juan L. Rios outlines for us the personal history of his calling to the ministry, his various assignments in different locales, and how he came to St. Paul, Minnesota in response to a group of citizens who felt a need for a congregation and a minister. Reverend Rios shares with us the accounts of difficulties and set backs he personally and his church have suffered but overcome. He shares, also, his hopes and plans for the future in attending to the spiritual needs of his congregation.

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 JUAN L. RIOS

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INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Rev. Juan L. Rios for the MOOSBRUGGER: Mexican American History Project, under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. Reverend Rios, how long have you been in the state of Minnesota?

For fifteen years. RIOS:

MOOSBRUGGER: Then you came here in 1960. What church are you a pastor of in St. Paul?

The Latin American Gospel Mission. RIOS:

Is that here on St. Paul's West Side? MOOSBRUGGER:

Yes. RIOS:

Can you start out by telling us your history as a minister? Where MOOSBRUGGER: were you born and raised?

I was born in Kalin, Texas, Locality 19, County 2. My dad was a RIOS: farmer and I was raised on the farm. In 1935, my mother died. My father decided to move to Michigan in 1939. We worked the sugar beets for the Michigan Sugar Company, which is one- hundred miles north of Detroit, Michigan, in a little town named Sundusky. My dad died in 1941. I had four sisters and a brother, and there was our aunt, my father's sister, who lived in Detroit. When my father died, I was in the service, or you could say I was working for the government in the CC Camps. My dad died in April and my time wasn't up until July. So my aunt took my little sisters into Detroit, Michigan with her until my time was up. When my time was up, I went to Detroit, Michigan.

MOOSBRUGGER: This would have brought you to the year 1940? RIOS: 1941.

MOOSBRUGGER: No doubt your experience in working in the fields with other workers,

made you feel the need to enter the ministry?

RIOS: No, I didn't have any idea I'd be going into the ministry.

MOOSBRUGGER: Up until that time?

RIOS: No.

MOOSBRUGGER: When did you start to feel the calling to the ministry of Christ?

RIOS: After we went to Detroit. Where my sisters and I were living, there

they were having a "revival" meeting and they had a loud speaker.

was a mission just about one-hundred yards from our door. One time

They had a minister by the name of Rev. Schwartz speaking and I

listened to the word of God. At that time I had a great need

and I didn't know how to solve it. As I listened to the minister

preaching, I thought that what I was hearing was a good practice.

Of course, a long time before that, I used to go to Sunday School.

I remember the Sunday School teacher used to tell me, "John, you

can talk to God just like you would to your brother or your father

or some good friend. You aren't going to see Him, you are going to

feel Him." When I had that need, I remember, I had tried all kinds

of sources to solve the problem and didn't get any place. What the

minister was preaching through the loud speaker brought back what

the Sunday School teacher used to tell me; all of a sudden I start-

ed to feel something. I was a changed person. I used to start

work at midnight and get off at 8:00 a.m. The reason I had this

shift was that I was living alone with my sisters and my little

brother and they were going to school. If I worked days, I wouldn't

know if they went to school or not.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where was your first congregation?

RIOS: My first church was in Detroit.

MOOSBRUGGER: What year would that have been?

RIOS: It was in 1949.

MOOSBRUGGER: Then you had a parish in the state of Michigan between 1949 and

when you came to St. Paul in 1960?

RIOS: I had one in Toledo with the mission there, and one in Ambus City,

Michigan. I also had a parish in Saginaw, Michigan, Alma, Michigan,

and Fort Wayne, Indiana.

MOOSBRUGGER: I see. Were you sent here to Minnesota? Were you assigned to Minne-

sota by the church?

RIOS: Well, not exactly. I came voluntarily.

MOOSBRUGGER: There was a need here in St. Paul. What denomination are you

affiliated with?

RIOS: It's Pentecostal. Through the Assembly of God.

MOOSBRUGGER: When you came to Minnesota, did you have any idea where you would

be able to establish your church? Whether it would be a feasible

facility?

RIOS: No. I just had a letter. A letter from ta lady by the name of

Carlota Verdeja. She was living at 125 East Indiana.

MOOSBRUGGER: She let the church know that they had a need for a church and a

minister.

RIOS: I was in Fort Wayne, Indiana at the time. I remember it was Thanks-

giving Day. The place where I work had given us a turkey. We cook-

ed the turkey and ate it on the way here.

MOOSBRUGGER: It sounds like a fond memory.

RIOS: Yes.

MOOSBRUGGER: When you got here, were Senora Verdeja and some of the other members

of the congregation able to help you? Were they able to help you

find a feasible place?

RIOS: Yes. When I got here I was surprised, they had been praying for

RIOS:

someone to come. When they saw me and my family, they really felt with all their hearts that God had answered their prayers. rejoiced and they didn't want to let me go back.

MOOSBRUGGER: Great. "Ilt's been fifteen years. So it looks like you are here to stay. We are happy for that.

RIOS:

A small group, Eusebio Montez, his wife Cuca Montez, she has since passed away, Carlota Verdeja, she also passed away a few months ago. Then there was another couple named Gonzales, Tomas Gonzales and his wife, and several others. They all rejoiced. I was working in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and I had to go back there and quit my job. They said, "You don't have to go back, we'll take care of you here." I said, "I must go back." So I went back New Year's Day in 1960. I quit my job over there, and I came here.

MOOSBRUGGER: About how many parishioners would you say there were at that time, fifteen or twenty?

RIOS:

Yes, something like that.

MOOSBRUGGER:

How many parishioners do you have today, in 1975?

RIOS:

About the same. We are not all together again yet. A couple of years ago I got sick and I was in the hospital for a couple of months. I thought my health was never going to be restored again. I told them that they'd better look for a place where they could worship God, because I didn't think I would be able to get back to work for them. Now, about a year ago, I started getting back my energy.

MOOSBRUGGER:

That's wonderful!

RIOS:

Then our church was torn down...

MOOSBRUGGER: Was the church reclaimed by the Urban Renewal Project?

RIOS:

Yes, the Housing Authority. Instead of buying a church building, we decided to buy a house where I can live. Then last February we started again together at this church. We asked the minister

RIOS:

if I could use it on the days that they don't use it. He said it was alright. I told him that I would be able to pay rent, but he said it wasn't necessary. So we gather offerings, and whatever we get, we give to him to help them with the expenses. They were very happy about it and we are too.

MOOSBRUGGER: Does your congregation today consist mostly of Latin Americans?

RIOS: Spanish Americans, Spanish speaking people. That's why we named it the Latin American Gospel Mission, in order to make it more centrical. I work with Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and all Spanish speak-

ing people. Most of them are Mexican people.

MOOSBRUGGER: Most of your services are conducted in Spanish, so perhaps you fulfill the special needs that the Mexican American of other Latin
American people have.

RIOS: Yes. I take it by experience, what happens to me. A lot of people say, "Do you help these people with clothes, or do you have a soup line?" I say, "No, we do distribute clothes and shoes. Some stores give us shoes, like the Kenny's Shoe Store, they are brand new shoes, but they are out of style. I don't see any difference."

MOOSBRUGGER: No, they just change the styles arbitrarily.

RIOS: We distribute them all. I met a family that there are twenty-one members in. You can imagine how hard it must be to feed and clothe that family. They work out in the field and really have a hard time getting along on what they make. Many times we meet large families, we askithem to send their children to Sunday School so that we can teach them the Word of God. They'll say, "Well, they don't have shoes or clothes." We say, "Don't worry about that, we have shoes for them," and that's the way we work.

MOOSBRUGGER: Then the vast portion of your ministry is doing social work and giving social help?

RIOS:

As I said, I believe in giving a person a pair of shoes, or some shirts, but when he wears them out, he is ready for another one. However, if I put something inside, he looks more to the As the story says, "You give a fish to a Japanese and future. he will eat one day, but you teach him how to fish, and he will be able to eat all his life."

Right. So it's best to give both lasting and non-lasting MOOSBRUGGER: things. Rev. Rios, perhaps we can sum up this interview by your telling us at what point your ministry, your church, and your congregation are now. What are your activities and your hopes for the future?

Well, we are gathering here at 145 East Congress Street. RIOS: arily, it's called the Riverview Westland Methodist Church. We are going to build a bigger building that is better equipped. I know it's costly, so we want to gather enough down payment so the payments later won't be so high. Our hope is to extend ourselves as much as possible. I'm planning on having a Spanish

> all I need is the money. You would like to have a Spanish radio program, in other words, for Sunday School teaching?

religious radio program. I have the radio station all lined up,

Yes, teaching and sermons. It will cover quite an area. I've had RIOS: this in mind for a long time and now it looks like it will become a reality. It is really in my heart.

MOOSBRUGGER: Now it looks like it's a possibility, a clear possibility, to establish a radio program.

RIOS: Christian radio stations have offered mettime before, but somehow or another I just didn't feel like going on. I felt that I couldn't continue.

MOOSBRUGGER:

MOOSBRUGGER: You weren't ready to take it on?

That's one thing with me, I don't like to start something and RIOS:

then stop.

You want to start something only if you can carry it through. MOOSBRUGGER:

That's reasonable. Well, thank you very much, Rev. Rios. We will be looking forward to putting your records and photographs Acan A Project Annaican Oral Historical Society Annaican Historical Society Annaican Historical Society Annaican Historical Society Annaican Annaic and other realia into the colleciton of the Mexican American