

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

FRANK RODRIGUEZ

JUNE 27, 1975

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

Frank Rodriguez, born in Sheridan, Wyoming, moved to St. Paul, Minnesota with his parents at age two. Throughout his life, he has actively participated in athletics, maintaining an appetite for wholesome activities and a lively spirit of competition. Frank is in his thirteenth year as an officer for Construction and General Labor Local 132. His influence in the community and in the entire State is affected by behind the scenes political activity. His recent or current membership in organizations include: Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Knights of Columbus, Neighborhood House Association, St. Paul Civil and Human Rights Commission, and the Minnesota Press Club. He is the first Mexican American from the State of Minnesota to serve as a delagate to the D.F.L. Party National Convention.

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 Frank Rodriguez for the Mexican American History Project under the Minnesota Historical Society. Could you start off by telling us who you are and where you were born?

RODRIGUEZ: My name is Frank J. Rodriguez. I am a home owner, residing at 239 East Robie Street, St. Paul, 55107. I was born on March 28, 1920 in Sheridan, Wyoming. I am the second of ten children, nine of which live today. My parents, Augustin Rodriguez and Dolores Vasquez de Rodriguez were both immigrants from Mexico. They were Mexican Nationals. My mother has passed away, and my dad is in his 84th year. He is still living. My dad had no formal education. My mother had a Mexican formal education, but they were not educated in English. My dad took us, my older brother Manuel, my mother, and myself, to Wyoming to work in the sugar beet fields. He had, some time prior to that, been employed by Swift and Company in South St. Paul, Minnesota. After I was born, in March of 1920, he worked that season in the beet fields, and then migrated to the state of Minnesota again. I believe we moved to South St. Paul when I was two years old. We later moved down to the lower West Side of St. Paul, where I have resided for over fifty years. Educationally, I went to Lafayette Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and I attended Crowley School for a brief time. I also went to St. Matthew Catholic School. I ultimately graduated from Humboldt High School in 1940. That was the extent of my education. I never went to college. When I was a young duffer, I had occasion to sign up

RODRIGUEZ: in the Civilian Conservation Corps. You were supposed to be sixteen years or older to be in the CCC. I signed up when I was fifteen, so subsequently I did lose some time. Ultimately, I graduated from Humboldt at the age of twenty. I went to CC Camp in 1936 because there weren't any jobs to be had. I earned the whole amount of \$30.00 a month, of which my folks got \$25.00. I was given \$5.00 a month for my personal needs and that permitted me to come every other week to visit my folks. I was up on the Canadian border, up near Ely, Minnesota. Upon returning to St. Paul again there weren't any jobs. I enrolled in Humboldt High School, so that enabled me to get through high school. I had to go to night school to get the necessary credits so that I could continue to go to high school during the day and play athletics. I think I have a degree in athletics behind me.

MOOSBRUGGER: What sports did you play, Frank?

RODRIGUEZ: I played football. I was a regular in football and basketball during the years I went to school. I played baseball for over 25 years, and softball for over 30 years. I have bowled for 30 years and I am now golfing in my old age. I spent an awful lot of time playing ball, sometimes playing four evenings a week, and playing every weekend out of town. So I think athletics is a very good thing for our youth today. As far as employment is concerned, up to this point, I had only worked in the CC camp. Immediately after I got out of school, I went to work for Construction and General Labor Local #132. Back in 1941, in the fall. Because there were an overabundance of jobs, I was not required to join the union. I worked as a "permit" in May of 1942. I formally joined Local # 132 on July 3, 1942. I am still a member in good standing. So actually, my employment revolves around Construction and General Labors Local #132. I may qualify that by

RODRIGUEZ: saying that during the times that I went through high school, I worked at the Neighborhood House as a coach and an umpire. I was a teacher in classes and clubs. I worked out at Carver Lake at their Owendigo Camp. That was, more or less, an odd job. I have worked for the Construction General Labors Local #132. I have worked for over twenty years with a pick, shovel, and jackhammer. Finally, in June, 1963, I sought office. For the first time in my memory, a non-incumbent defeated an incumbent on the first time, without ever having run for elective office before. I served some seven years as the Recording Secretary. Then my predecessor in my present position, Secretary-Treasurer, unexpectedly passed away. I was appointed to fill the vacancy. I have run two terms and then been re-elected to the office of Secretary-Treasurer. I have, in the last two weeks, been re-elected, un-opposed, for another three year term. I am now starting my thirteenth year as an officer.

As for organizations, I am a charter member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, a member of the Knights of Columbus 3rd degree, Council 4186 of West St. Paul. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Neighborhood House Association, a member of the Men's Club at Our Lady of Guadalupe, and various other civic organizations probably too numerous to mention. I will note that I served for four years on the St. Paul Civil and Human Rights Commission. I am a member of the Minnesota Press Club. I have, until recently, served on the Governor's Advisory Board of the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee, of which the Governor has made some changes and dissolved the participation of the citizens. I believe the work will now be done by legislators and people within the commission itself, or the people working in that group. They feel they will do a better job.

MOOSBRUGGER: Government employees will be doing this?

RODRIGUEZ: No, the people who work in the program. To get that involvement of the people who meet with the people, to see the problems. They feel they can relate better than some citizens that meet every other month or so. I agree with that. I agree whole heartily.

MOOSBRUGGER: I see. If you are on the Board of Directors at the Neighborhood House you must be meeting with them quite frequently these days?

RODRIGUEZ: We have a meeting once a month. The second Monday of every month we have a luncheon meeting. I have served on almost every committee that they have there. Whether it is the scholarship committee, which is very important, or one on the aged. I suppose I'm getting old! I have also served under nursery and various other very unpopular committees that are very important for our community. We do get involved. We scrutinize and interview and appoint, with limitations, people who are coming on so that we avoid politicizing in that area. It has proved to be quite successful. A lot of decisions are made, most of them involve the Mexican Americans and they are very important. We now have citizens' participation, and I think that's a wonderful thing.

MOOSBRUGGER: When you say unpopular committees, do you mean that they are a lot of work?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. People don't give a damn about the aged until they get old themselves, or they have an aging father. This society doesn't do enough for the aged. Not until our father or our mother or our grandparents are being denied something that you would like them to have, or they have been accustomed to have. People don't give a damn. When you are going out there, fighting for reinstituting funding for day care centers, the average person doesn't give a damn about them. And the same thing when you are going out there on social issues.

RODRIGUEZ: They have this clinic down there, sure it's unpopular! Whenever people are going, raising questions about trying to get some funds for something where they can relate to people of their native tongue; people just don't care! Let me emphasize another area that involves the Mexican American that I'm very, very disturbed about: As a member of organized labor, we have had, from time to time, requests from the United Farm Workers. They are an affiliate of the AFL-CIO, of which my union is a member. We have endorsed their program and we have been supportive. Yet, when the people from the farm workers group come, they do not relate to the Mexican American in this community. They go to big business in the unions. That is not the Chamber of Commerce but the Trades Labor Assembly and the state AFL-CIO. That's what I mean by "big business" within the union movement. They ask their support and they want money, but I feel they should go and meet with the troops down there. Today I see Mexicans who, because of the problems in California, are thousands of miles away. They don't even recognize that when they buy the "scab lettuce" and "grapes" that they are hurting the very people who have the heritage and background that they themselves have. They fail to recognize and acknowledge it. So, this is what I'm saying, that we don't want to recognize something that is going to be hard. I used to buy grapes by the lugs and my grandson says, "Grandpa, where are the grapes?" He can't understand that we are supportive of the farm workers. That's what I'm saying here, that a selling job to get the full participation of the Mexican American has been lacking. It's my fault, your fault, and everyone's fault.

Getting back to the religious, I'm a Roman Catholic. I attend Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. I did go to St. Matthew's School as I've mentioned before. I am married. My wife's last name was Reyes.

RODRIGUEZ: She also came from a large family, as I did. We have had eight children. Two have died, and six are living. We have two that are married; our oldest daughter Shirley Marie, and our oldest boy, Frank Jr. We have four living at home now, two who we are supporting and two who are self-supporting. John and James support themselves. Anna Marie, who is fifteen, and Michael, who will be twelve next week, are the ones we have at home.

MOOSBRUGGER: What is your daughter's married name?

RODRIGUEZ: She is Mrs. Joseph Elizondo, Jr. She has one child who is four years old. He was my first grandchild. Frank Jr. is married and has two children; one boy, David, three years old, and one daughter. When I went to school, I happened by coincidence to be the only Mexican in the class. When I went to Crowley, St. Matthew's, Roosevelt, and Humboldt, somehow or another I got rather defensive about my heritage and maybe a little bit ashamed. About seven years ago, when Our Lady of Guadalupe phased their Mexican school out and went into Project Discovery, I realized how much it is to lose your Mexican heritage. I am proud of the fact that I was one of the three people who voted strenuously to retain our own identity. Yet people voted to enter into Project Discovery and today it has been the largest "flop" around. We no longer have our own Mexican identity. Now I'm rather proud of my Mexican heritage. I'm ashamed of my position in the past because I realize now, the great cultural heritage that we have. I was not given that kind of educational information when I was growing up because I was in a middle room with all Caucasians, except myself. I would hope that my children will be proud of their Mexican heritage and that they will, on their own, seek to take up Spanish in school. My children do not speak Spanish. I was taught to speak English first. I still speak Spanish every time I meet with

RODRIGUEZ: Mexicans. We were brought up to be courteous and respectful, and I think that that's one of the fine things that I can remember. When I was a little boy, that was one of the things that I was the most proud of. But, now I am afraid that we are in a day when we are not emphasizing this enough. I see great efforts on the part of a handful of people trying to emphasize our heritage. I would extend whatever support I could to keep that kind of identity for our people.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you think that Our Lady of Guadalupe Church still plays a vital role in keeping some kind of cohesive Mexican American community?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Father Raymond Mansour, who recently returned from South America where he spent several years learning to speak, write, and read Spanish is trying to bring about more and more of the Mexican customs. And yet, in just the last few days, I have heard criticism of that, that we are going to the past. I don't find that criticism valid. I think that one of the nicest things is that part of the Mexican community still plays the role. Unfortunately, it's mostly with elderly people. Our youth today is a different kind of cat all together. Our society today has made more of an effect on the young than the church has. I see now that the Latin Masses that are said in Spanish are really crowded, because we only get one once in a while. So, yes, I think people recognize what we have lost, and I think we all regret that very much. But, we are living in a society that in years to come they'll be phased out eventually. I'm sorry to see that. Spanish is not spoken in my home. Only between my wife and I, my mother-in-law when she comes over, my father, or when some Mexican people come. We still have an old custom of taking the Blessed Mother out on Novenas and they go out to different homes. It's a beautiful custom. We have not done it for several years, but when



RODRIGUEZ: we did, we had many Mexican people come. They pray in Spanish and then you keep the Blessed Mother for one day. The next day you pass it on to another family.

MOOSBRUGGER: Is this the statue of the Blessed Mother?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, it is. This is done so that on the anniversary of our Blessed Mother, the 12th of December, the greatest religious day in Mexico, it is returned to the church. Then they go into another Novena commemorating her, all the great accomplishments that she made, not only for the Mexicans, but for the entire Americas. Everybody in my family has gone to Mexico since the last time that I went. The last time I visited Mexico I was in a train and the Revolution was going on around us. They were shooting windows out of the train and I thought it was a lot of fun. My mother later told me that they were shooting real bullets.

MOOSBRUGGER: How old would you have been when you were in Mexico?

RODRIGUEZ: That would have been about 1924 or 1925. It was during the height of the Revolution. We no longer observe the Mexican traditional holidays as we used to. As the President of the Men's Club, we used to sponsor dances at Stem Hall. We sold beer and cleaned up the hall, made arrangements with tickets and did all of these things. We used to make quite a few dollars for Our Lady of Guadalupe. But consequently, at some point in time, a social organization has taken over these. Now the church has no involvement whatsoever, they get nothing of the proceeds. So while some people observe these celebrations and fiestas, I don't recognize them in the sense that I used to recognize them.

Mexican food has always been one of my favorites. Being on a golfing team, I invited my team over last evening. I am the only Mexican on the team. They were all bragging that they ate a dozen tacos or more, along with other Mexican food. My wife has a special knack for

RODRIGUEZ: being able to make Mexican dishes. They are very much a delicacy and our favorite.

Mexican music has always been one of my favorites. However, I don't have that many Mexican records. My children do, though. We do not play the stereo often. My personal schedule keeps me away from my home four evenings a week and most every weekend. It's very rare that we play our Mexican records. However, all my sisters and brothers have many Mexican records. When I visit them, they play them extensively.

I had parents who did not have a formal education. But I thank almighty God that they gave me the kind of direction and counseling that encouraged me to continue my education. I cannot be critical of them because my father was making \$17 a week at Swift and Co. at the height of the depression, or the depth. He had ten children to support and there was no room for putting any money away for education of his kids. It was hard to mouth, the way we were living then. So they had a great effect on my outlook on life and my positive approach. My church has played a very prominent role. They gave me a sense of responsibility and to be able to realize where we came from and who we owed what we had to. So I have never forgotten, through my dad's leadership, and seeing the involvement of the church, and how it related to the people. I like to believe, without getting personal, that I have a personal check every week. I wish it could be more. I think the church today appears, in my humble opinion, as possibly the only solution to the many, many complex problems that we have in our society today. I am overwhelmed at the politicians who tell us what we are striving to do, and then turn around and make very little effort to bring about those changes. Those changes that are

RODRIGUEZ: necessary for the working people who are not making as much money to support a family, the people who are underemployed, and the people who have no jobs. Our President today says that the end of the depression is in sight, that we have hit the bottom and everything is on the up and up. He fails to recognize that millions of people, and many Mexicans included, have no jobs, and find that they are supposed to celebrate the bicentennial when they have no jobs and no money to put the food on the table. I don't know if our society is really headed in the right direction. I have many questions on that.

MOOSBRUGGER: You testified that perhaps the church is our hope. Keeping on a personal level, would you care to comment on what your feelings are on the role Our Lady of Guadalupe Church plays in the Mexican American community in St. Paul today, or has in the past?

RODRIGUEZ: The role that Our Lady of Guadalupe plays in our Mexican society, and indirectly in the lower West Side and St. Paul, isn't something that you can measure. It is just, how much effect have I had on my child when I try to give him some sense of direction? And, you know, we can't tell our children what to do, we show them how to do it. So how much influence does something that you have no way of measuring have? However, I do see many things there that I didn't see before. I see the desire of the Mexican American, the one who I knew in the cradle, or I used to run around with their fathers and mothers socially. They're striving to continue on into the educational field, to go to high school, to go to college, to graduate, to seek out a diploma. So they are now becoming teachers, attorneys, doctors, and engineers. I think that the future of the Mexican American is much brighter than some three years ago when I was asked to speak at the University of Minnesota. They asked me to speak on

RODRIGUEZ: fifty years of progress in the Mexican American community. I walked in and I said, "The first thing I want to do is apologize because you have been misled. I have been asked to speak on something, and I'm going to. The topic of my speech will be Fifty Years of Frustration in the Mexican American Community." Because when I weighed the progress in fifty years of the Mexican American I could put it all on a sheet of paper and it was merely lip service. But now, in three years, I see the degrees coming out of colleges. I see they are going extensively into the educational field, I see them going into engineering, and I see that the Mexican Americans are finding their place in the sun. I happen to feel very strongly that this is through the efforts of various different pastors of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the kind of effect that they had, and you can't measure it. Motivation is one thing I found very apparent in the Mexican American back in the 20's, 30's, and 40's. I was part of that. I have to recognize it. I didn't qualify for any apprenticeship program, and I sat at the curb and felt sorry for myself. But then I figured it didn't get me anywhere, so I did the only thing I could. I got a job handling a jackhammer and through the blessings of Almighty God I have the job that I have now. But, I do believe that the priest and the Neighborhood House have played a predominant role. They have encouraged kids to seek out. You played all kinds of different sports and some people ventured out and got scholarships on their athletic ability. When they got out of school they were availed with an opportunity to work within their programs, they were able to qualify for better jobs in that way. The church, I can't again, measure, except giving responsibility and bringing motivation about, I think they have played a really important role. Yet today, the church, for all that it has done for the Mexican American community, is a victim of the times. Because now I find that the Mexican American is no

RODRIGUEZ: different than anybody else. And they, in a sense say, "If the Catholic religion lowers it's standards, I could consider remaining in the Catholic faith." And that is the gospel truth! Anything else?

MOOSBRUGGER: Yes. Do you remember any folk stories, legends or traditions that your folks might have handed down to you, or that you know by word of mouth?

RODRIGUEZ: No. I have a brother, the one who follows me, Pete. He remembers everything, I remember nothing. I want to be honest about it, when they tell jokes at parties, the next day I forget them. No, I can't tell you any traditions other than some of the things that my American friends didn't do. When I was four-seven, I would go to these wakes at homes and to Novenas. At the wakes they would pray all night and then finalize it by going right to church and to the cemetery with the deceased person. Then they would have the Novena. They would have it in the room where the person was laid out at home, for nine nights. They would have candles there and that was a little bit different than the Americans. They had what they call a "piñata". Now, the piñata has taken root here in this country. A lot of the Americans in their schools and churches have taken it up. I thought it was a lot of fun and slowly people accepted this. These are some of the things. I felt the Mexican people were much closer than the American people. This is a tradition. I was brought up in what was called "Jew Town", it was a Jewish settlement of people who had migrated here from the old country. They were very close, and the Mexican people also became very close. At that time there wasn't too much migration. So for twenty-five years there were only about 200 Mexican people living on the West Side. It wasn't until after World War II that great migrations came from Mexico, Texas, and other parts of the country. As far as any other traditions, no, I again say that

RODRIGUEZ: my brother remembers all of these things vividly and he is three years younger than I am.

MOOSBRUGGER: Thank you very much for the interview, Mr. Rodriguez.

RODRIGUEZ: You're welcome.

Mexican-American Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society