

TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

JOHNNIE RODRIGUEZ

INTERVIEWER: RAMEDO SAUCEDO

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

Mr. Johnnie Rodriguez, worked in the fields since he was eleven years old (1941); migrating to Minnesota every year and returning to Texas at the end of the farming season. In 1954, Mr. Rodriguez, decided to remain in Minnesota. He has worked on a farm in Sabin, Minnesota since that time. He describes his duties and responsibilities on the farm. He discusses financial arrangements with the farmers. He also indicates why he insists that his children learn Spanish and what he wants for his family. Finally, he outlines why he settled in Moorhead.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded Spanish 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 RODRIGUEZ

JULY 14, 1976

INTERVIEWER: RAMEDO SAUCEDO

Saucedo: Can you give us your full name?

Rodriguez: Johnnie Rodriguez.

Saucedo: Where were you born?

Rodriguez: Crystal City, Texas.

Saucedo: Where was your father born?

Rodriguez: Vigenos, Texas.

Saucedo: What was your father's name?

Rodriguez: Mateo Rodriguez.

Saucedo: What kind of work did your father do?

Rodriguez: Agricultural work.

Saucedo: Where did you work? Did the whole family work?

Rodriguez: All the family worked when we arrived here. There was a lot of agriculture work in the beet fields and grain and wheat. We would work by the hour. The last thing we did for the season was topping the beets.

Saucedo: In what year did you start working in agriculture?

Rodriguez: In 1941.

Saucedo: How old were you when you started working?

Rodriguez: I was eleven years old.

Saucedo: Did you come to Minnesota every year?

Rodriguez: My family came every year from 1941-1948.

Saucedo: What place did you come to?

Rodriguez: To Moorhead, Minnesota. We worked for a farmer named Emo Calstrum.

Saucedo: Do you still work for him?

Rodriguez: No. From 1941 to 1948 I worked for him. Then I went into the service for four years. I returned in 1952. I worked for the same man, Emo Calstrum

Rodriguez: in 1952-'53. Then I got married. I moved away from my family and went to Texas with my wife. For one year I didn't have a permanent job. Then in 1954, we returned to Minnesota from Texas. I started working in this farm for Henry Schroeder, in Sabin, Minnesota.

Saucedo: Where did you meet your wife?

Rodriguez: Here in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Saucedo: How many years has it been?

Rodriguez: Since 1946.

Saucedo: Did your wife's family work in the fields also?

Rodriguez: Yes, they came to work in the fields.

Saucedo: How many children do you have?

Rodriguez: There are seven children. We are nine all together.

Saucedo: What jobs do they do, during the summer, or after school? What are their names?

Rodriguez: Johnny is the oldest. He is twenty-two years old. He worked for Stogers, in Fargo, Minnesota. They make tractors and agricultural tools. He is laid off, now. Cristela is a part time teacher with the Migrant Day Care Center. She is twenty-one years old. Blanca is twenty years old, she works for the Eagan Heights Lutheran Homes. Gerald works in agricultura with me. Bobby is thirteen years old, and he goes to school. Alonso is ten and goes to school. Our baby girl is one year and seven months old.

Saucedo: Where were all of your children born?

Rodriguez: All of them were born in Moorhead, Minnesota, except for Alonso, he was born in Carrizo Springs, Texas.

Saucedo: How did you decide to live in Moorhead, since most of your life has been spent living on a farm?

Rodriguez: Well, the change was because of the rain fall that we had last year. It

Rodriguez: caused a great flood and we had to move out of our home. We had to move for a week, to trailer homes for the migrant workers. Then the water rose even higher, so the farmer told us we had to move into town. We stayed in Gilbert, Minnesota, at the Starlight Hotel for a week. The farmers paid for everything. We returned to the trailer homes because the water had gone down. Then they sent an inspector from Canton, Ohio to inspect our home. The water lasted two weeks. The basement was full of water, and there was water in the living room, too. The inspector said that it was not fit to live in the house.

Saucedo: You said you were in the service. What year was it, and where did you serve?

Rodriguez: It was in 1948. I was one of the first volunteers from the Fargo/Moorhead area. I worked for H. A. Groves Construction. We were building Highway Eighty-One, north from Grand Forks to Fargo.

Saucedo: More or less, how many years have you been living in this area of Minnesota?

Rodriguez: From 1941 until now. That would be twenty-five years.

Saucedo: What desires do you have for your children? Would you want them to continue in farm work?

Rodriguez: I wish that my children would follow the careers that they want. I have told them, and the farmers too, that I want them to advance and study. I don't want them to have to work like me for the rest of their lives. When they finished high school, the oldest didn't want to go to college. He went to work for Stigers. The oldest girl wanted to go to school for the mentally retarded and crippled children. She is now in college, at the University of Crookston. She has one year to go to become a teacher.

Saucedo: You speak Spanish very well. How do you retain your culture and language up here in the North Pole, there isn't too many Mexicans here to keep in practice, is there?

Rodriguez: There are some people, who live up here in the north, who don't want to use their Spanish. The children don't want to speak it either. I feel that Spanish is the family language, and my children have to learn it, so that when they go to Texas they can talk to their grandparents.

Saucedo: What other customs do you follow? For example, in Mexican foods. Can you find Mexican food here in Moorhead?

Rodriguez: Yes. There is the Mexican Village and Taco John's.

Saucedo: Are there a lot of Mexican families here?

Rodriguez: Yes, there are a lot of Mexican people here. There are more in Fargo than there are in Moorhead.

Saucedo: What kind of work do you do with or for Henry Schroeder? How do you get along? Do you show him how to do things, or does he show you?

Rodriguez: He is showing me. When I started working for him in the sugar beet agriculture, he had two years of experience. We got together in 1954. Until now, he has shown me all the agricultural work that has to be done. We are learning new things every day.

Saucedo: Do you have any desires to buy a farm, perhaps the farm that you are now working on?

Rodriguez: That's a pretty difficult question, because now the value of land is high. I would have liked to buy a farm before, but now the cost of land is too high.

Saucedo: How many acres does the farmer you work for, have?

Rodriguez: The man I work for has about 1,200 acres.

Saucedo: What do you grow there?

Rodriguez: We grow mainly grain, barley, and two kinds of wheat.

Saucedo: Do you know them all?

Rodriguez: No. More or less I do, because I'm the one who plants the different kinds of seeds.

Saucedo: Do you know how to use the machinery?

Rodriguez: The machinery we use is new. Since 1955, he has bought only John Deer.

Saucedo: What organizations have you belonged to here in Moorhead, or in the state of Minnesota?

Rodriguez: The only organization I have belonged to is the Migrant Health Service, Incorporated.

Saucedo: Are you a member of it, or an official?

Rodriguez: I am a member of the Board of Directos.

Saucedo: What kind of work does that organization do?

Rodriguez: The organization does medical and clinical work in different locations.

Saucedo: Who do they serve?

Rodriguez: They serve the Mexican migrants who come from the south to work in agriculture.

Saucedo: How many Mexicans come here during the summer, do you have any idea?

Rodriguez: That's a hard question.

Saucedo: I have heard that it's about 15,000 in the whole state. Have you heard differently?

Rodriguez: That's hard to say. When they sign up in Texas, there are many different offices to sign a contract to work for a farmer up here in the north. It's very hard for me to say 15,000 people come to Minnesota, because they also go to Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska.

Saucedo: Mr. Rodriguez, can you tell me how much they paid for an acre of sugar beets? How did the farmers pay the workers? You were involved from 1941 until 1954.

Rodriguez: I can only explain what I saw while I was growing up. The workers would hoe the beets. Then they would go over the beets twice, to clean and cut down the weeds. That was called "crossed-beets". It paid eighteen dollars and fifty cents an acre. They had "straight-beets", which were many different plants that grew from one seed. They grew in rows of many sizes, from a

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Rodriguez: half a mile to a mile or longer. That beet work consisted of putting the beets in straight rows, hoeing, then going over and weeding the beets twice. It paid twenty-one dollars and fifty cents an acre. Then they also worked by the hour cleaning the onions, beans, and wheat. After that, they would start topping the beets, by putting the beets in one row from two rows, that was called topping, it took a total of twelve rows. That paid \$3.00. They would also pay \$1.75 to 1.85 for the first five tons, it would go down to under \$1.75 for the next three tons. If a person did twelve tons, that would be tops, really good work! That is why the price would go down.

Saucedo: When did the farmers pay the people?

Rodriguez: When the work was finished, the topping consisted of: taking one or two beets, depending on the person's strength; hitting the beets, to shake the dirt loose; and putting them in rows. Then you could top the beets. The farmers wouldn't pay you, until all the work was done on the farm. My father had me take care of all the money matters, and speaking to the farmers. The payments were made to the ones that had the most land, they would get their money and they had to pay whatever bills they had here. After that, the workers would make a contract or agreement with the farmer, who would then send them their money to Texas. After they paid their bills here, he would send them a second payment, a little before Christmas or around New Years, with that payment, he would send a letter, telling you how many acres you did, and the contract or agreement that you made with him. Then you would get another check, your third payment, after the New Year. That was the total of the payments.

Saucedo: From 1954 until now, do you still work the same way?

Rodriguez: No, I don't work that way anymore. I started working for Henry Schroeder. He pays me by the hour. The reason I get paid by the hour, is that I would see a lot of us that came from Texas get paid by the week or month.

Rodriguez: Payment by the hour was good pay. Payment by contract was still very low pay, it was pretty good, but it didn't have as much value as it did by the hour. When I started on the farm he paid me by the hour. I was making .50 cents an hour in 1954. When I started working for him, he showed me how to work everything on the farm. We started changing our machinery every two or three years. We have four tractors, when we started we only had two tractors to do all the work. Now we have two 4230's, one small tractor 3020's which are diesel. We also have one big John Deer 8630 four wheel drive. I started working on the farm for 50 cents an hour in 1954, now I am still with the same farmer and I make \$4.50 an hour.

Saucedo: Does the farmer give you any other benefits?

Rodriguez: He provides Insurance for the whole family with the Farm Bureau Insurance, or some other insurance for the last ten years.

Saucedo: Does he give you paid vacations or anything else?

Rodriguez: I get bonus, if the farm has a prosperous year, the bonus is naturally bigger.

Saucedo: Are you familiar with the housing conditions for the migrants, have they improved? I am asking this question of you, because you have been around here a long time, and I feel that you can give me the answer to it.

Rodriguez: Yes, they have improved up to 90%, in fact I think it is safe to say that housing has improved 95%. The people also have better benefits now, compared to years ago.

Saucedo: Thank you very much for the interview.