

SUMMARY - ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

BILL VILLARREAL (1909 -)

Interviewed by: Grant Moosbrugger
on July 27, 1976

Born in Sabinas, Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, Mr. Villarreal came to the United States in 1923. He describes his employment in this country and mentions his children's occupation.

He outlines his participation in social and civic organizations. He praises L.U.L.A.C. (League of United Latin American Citizens) for its goals and objectives and was proud to be a member of that organization until he moved to Minneapolis in 1964.

He believes in three basic rules handed to him by his father:

1) Always work hard and do your very best at what you undertake; it is the price you will pay for successful employment.

2) Never lie; especially when a serious situation is involved. If the truth can't save you then for sure a lie will condemn you.

3) If you go out with a beautiful woman, if you become seriously interested in a beautiful woman, others will also find her attractive. Be careful in what she says, for she will only tell you those she doesn't like, not those men she likes. Respect her, but be cautious.

The cassette tape is in Spanish and is approximately 45 minutes in duration.

This interview does not contain a refined English transcription; it does however contain a rough 1st draft translation.

Transcript of a taped interview
with Bill Villarreal
July 27, 1976
Interviewer: Grant Moosbrugger

Moosbrugger: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Bill Villarreal in Albert Lea, Minnesota. Today is July 27, 1976.

Would you please tell us where you were born and your background history?

Villarreal: I was born in Mexico in the city of Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico on April 21, 1909. I came to the United States in 1923. I didn't want to go to school. Since then I worked at different jobs in the United States because to get a good job you need a education.

Moosbrugger: What are some of the states you first worked in when you came to the United States?

Villarreal: Well my first job was in the state of Texas. I worked on a farm walking a plow with a team of mules. I worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day for one dollar a day. It wasn't even nine cents an hour. I thought a lot about going back to Mexico to study like my parents wanted me to. No one made me quit school. So I had to work at hard labor. In 1931 I met my wife, We got married in 1932. We continued working on farms, my wife and I raising a family. In those days there weren't any jobs for Mexicans who came from Mexico. If you were from this country you could have hope in finding a job. Otherwise you looked for work in the farm fields.

After World War II there were more jobs. I started working at packing plants and foundries. At the same time I had to go back to the farm, because I was registered as a farmer. I don't

know why they did that. The government extended my permit. Every six months they would send me a permit called a D-form. I would fill it out and send it to Washington. This way I couldn't stay at any one job. I had to go back to the farm by force.

In those days I was working at the packing plant. When I told them I had to go back to the farm they said, "No, you're not going back to the farm. You're going into the Army." They had orders that if anyone who doesn't work has to go to the Army. I said, "No, I am not going into the Army. I'm going back to the farm, because that's what my papers said. I showed them my papers. They couldn't send me to the Army because my papers said I was to go back to the farm. I had to do what the government said. That's how it was, I worked many different jobs. In 1948 I came to Albert Lea, Minnesota. I always worked on the farm fields. I planted a little vegetables and when I could I rented land. I planted and worked for many different farmers.

In 1949 there was formed a baseball team in Maple Island, Minnesota. The team wanted to form an organization. We had our first meeting to name president of the organization. For the short time that it was in existence it was called Club Alegre. Most of the team was from Texas. When they went back to Texas I was left alone.

In the winter of 1949 some of the Mexicans asked me to organize the Mexicans in Albert Lea. I told them that all that I could do is help them organize themselves. I invited them to my home on the first Sunday. There were a lot of people because they brought their families. I told them the ideas that I had for organization to help the Mexicans, our children, our families and our community. It sounded good to them. I gave them a week to think it over.

The next Sunday we met at my home again. We had thirty-eight members. Later we choose the name Club Azteca. For a number of years I was in charge, I really didn't want to be. I was afraid

that if I quit the club would go downhill and that's what happened. I quit the club so that they would have to get a new leader and it went downhill. I joined again and brought the club back up.

Then the Sociodad Lulac, United Latin American Citizens they said they wanted men like me to join their organization. I didn't want to leave the organization that we established here in Albert Lea. I asked them to tell me what they were doing for the Mexicans in the state. They told me that education was the most important thing. So we changed to Lulac. We worked hard and I'm proud to say that our chapter of Lulac was the strongest in the Midwest. In 1964 I moved to Minneapolis because of my job. When I left the Lulacs were working.

After ten years I returned to Albert Lea and found nothing. It hurts me to say that after so much work in organizing the society we ended up with nothing. Why? Because we don't want anyone to tell us what to do! We don't want to take orders from a Mexican but we can take orders from somebody else, but not from another Mexican! There are so many intelligent Mexicans that could lead us to the highest level. We could be equal to any other race. As long as we don't think about getting organized we will never be or reach anything.

It doesn't matter how powerful or rich you are, you can't do anything unless you are organized. When you are organized you have everything. I have spoken to a lot of my friends that bring home good checks and they say they don't need any help from anyone. That is absurd because sooner or later you're going to need somebody. It would be nice to have your door open to any one of your brothers who need help.

In another way it could get you enemies because being proud of yourself because you are lucky and your life is good. Being proud will get you enemies. When they need help they'll say, "All right you bastard, now you remember me." It's very sad.

For example we have the black families. When I came to this country the poor black person was separated from everyone

in everything. They were lucky, they got their freedom. They thought and worked together. Their black capitalists donate money to black colleges so that other blacks can have the same opportunity to educate themselves. We could do the same thing if we were organized. We could work side by side to work for the education of our children.

I'm happy to say and give thanks to my God for giving me the energy to work hard so that my children didn't have to work like I did to make a living. This makes me very happy.

Moosbrugger: In what condition was the Lulac Club when you left to move to Minneapolis?

Villarreal: The club was left in good conditions. We had the opportunity to save money in the treasury for education so that children with good grades could get money from our club to continue their educations. We would go to the high school and check their grades to see if the boy or girl met the requirements. Unfortunately some of our members wanted their children to receive a scholarship but wouldn't take under consideration their children's grades. When their children didn't receive a scholarship they would quit the club.

When my youngest child was in college, I didn't have a job for three months. I asked the Lulacs for help. All my family had been working for the Lulac Club. They didn't give my son and help. Nevertheless I didn't stop working for Lulac. We were lucky because my son finished his studies without help from anyone. But that's not the reason why I quit Lulac, just because they didn't help my son. My family continued working for Lulac because I believe that's the only way we will get things done. We have got to get involved. Like in the out organization I told them, "I want you to bring ideas on how to make money. I will choose the best idea. I don't want the other ones to get mad because I didn't choose their idea and then quit the club." That is not how it should be. If you want an organization to work, you have to work together. Naturally in

any organization enemies and friends will be together. As long as they're together they must treat each other as brothers. If after the meeting they don't want to talk to each other that is up to them. But as long as we are in the meetings we will treat enemies and friends equally. In other words if you have an enemy at a meeting and you don't want to go because your enemy is there, then don't go to the meeting because there is work to be done. We all have to be united to work for a common cause.

When I returned to Albert Lea I came with the attitude to work. Not because we lost what we lost. I can understand why we lost our organization. I am still ready to work if there are people who want to get together again.

Two weeks ago I was called on by some older members celebrating their gold caps. Later I went and spoke with the priest at our Catholic Church. He is a new priest. He asked where I was from. I told him I was from Albert Lea. He asked me why the Mexicans aren't organized here in Albert Lea. I told him we were organized, but since I have returned there is no organization anymore. He told me that one day soon he and I will get together and organize the people. I hope it is true. I would be very proud if in my last days of my life, I could leave the town of Albert Lea organized.

Moosbrugger: It seems that up to this point the Mexicans aren't too interested?

Villarreal: No, now we are more apart than ever when we should be closer than ever before. Maybe I am wrong, but now that everyone has a good job and making good money they think they don't need anyone. But that's not idea they should be willing to help the organization. Many say, "What am I going to get out of this?" It's not what the organization can do for you but what you can do for the organization.

Like what President Kennedy said, "It's not what you

can do for your country or the country do for you. It's what you can do for your country." You don't join an organization to see what you can get. No, you try to see how you can make it bigger for the benefit of yourself, your family, your community. In other words, we are sitting down. We have to stand up and be responsible for our people.

Moosbrugger: What kind of advice did your father give you?

Villarreal: Sure it is a beautiful thing. I will never forget it. I am sixty-seven years old thanks to God. After I left my home for two years, I went to visit my parents. They told me, "Now you're going to be stable and stay with us." I said, "No, Papa. I am going back to the United States." He said, "You know you're going to have to work hard to live." I said, "I already know that because I have been working for two years. Maybe I like it."

Then my father said he was going to give me three rules to live by. First of all, you are going to have to work to live. Be complete in your job, as if it were your own. When your boss is around take your time. When he is not around work. Work hard so that they will see you don't need someone to watch you. When you finish your work don't brag about it. Secondly don't lie. It doesn't matter what kind of circumstances you are in, don't ever lie. If the truth doesn't save you, the lie will condemn you.

I don't say I have never told any white lies, like the Americans say. But when it comes to something serious I do everything possible not to lie. The truth has saved me in many occasions.

Thirdly my father told me, "Someday you will be a man. You will find a young lady that you will want as your wife, to spend the rest of your life in her company. But if she is really beautiful you are not the only one who will be interested in her. There are going to be others who are going to be

interested in her and attempt to court her. If she likes the man she won't say anything. But if she doesn't like him she will tell you that so and so is bothering her. Why? Because she doesn't like him. So don't put too much attention to what she says. Respect her in certain situations, but ignore others."

Moosbrugger: Yes, they are good rules. It's very beautiful.

Villarreal: I have worked at different jobs in the sixty-five years that I have worked. It seems that the advice my father gave me helped me. I have retired and it's an honor to say that there isn't a man who can say he wasn't satisfied with my work. I always did my best.

Moosbrugger: You have a good family. Would you like to tell us their names and their order?

Villarreal: My son Alberto is the oldest. He is a policeman. They offer me the job as a policeman. I tried it for two summers on the auxilliary police force. It didn't appeal to me so I left the job. Then my son asked me if he could have the job. I told him he had to pass a test and to put in his application. He put it in and got accepted. He has been on the police force for fifteen years.

My daughter, the oldest of the girls, she didn't want to go to school like me. She's only been a mother, caring for her children. The third continued her studies. She worked for the printing department for the Albert Lea newspaper for six years until she got married, and her husband didn't want her to work any more. They moved to Reno, Nevada. They have been there for fourteen years. They have established themselves and they're very fine. My grandson, is a musician. He plays with a well known orchestra in the United States for the past seven years. He has come to the Minnesota State Fair. His profession is a music teacher.

My third, she lives in Crystal, Minnesota. She went to

school to be a beautician. She didn't like it, and she went to work for the telephone company.

My last son is the youngest. He is a teacher and coach. He coaches football and wrestling in Northfield, Minnesota. He also likes to golf. He has won a few trophies. My wife and I are very happy with our family. They have never been in any gang or jails to this date.

Mexican-American Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society