TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

DIANA VILLARREAL

INTERVIEWER: GRANT A. MOOSBRUGGER

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

As President of the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club in St. Paul at the time of the interview, Diana Villarreal outlines the philosophies, goals and activities of the Club. Her own activities that led to her involvement with the Club are also discussed in the interview.

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 DIANA VILLARREAL

August 6, 1976

Moosbrugger: This is Grant Moosbrugger, interviewing Mrs. Diana Villarreal, on August 6, 1976, at her home in Shoreview, Minnesota. Mrs. Villarreal is President of the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club. This interview is being conducted for the Minnesota Historical Society's Mexican American History Project.

Do I have your permission to interview you for this project?

Villarreal: Yes.

Moosbrugger: Can you tell us who you are, and where you were born?

Villarreal: My name is Diana Villarreal. I was born in Laredo, Texas. I have been in Minnesota for ten and one half years. I have been working for the St. Paul Public Schools for ten years. I work on the West Side. My background in in elementary education. At the present time, I am working on my Master's Degree, in Special Learning and Behaviorial Problems.

Moosbrugger: What are some of the activities you have been active in which have led you to the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club?

It goes back about four years. Anytime that there was a parent, who's kid Villarreal: was going to Roosevelt Elementary and Junior High; and they needed someone to interpret for them, I was called upon to do it. Consequently, I got to meet Mrs. Nena Medina. She went to school one day. After I had talked to her two or three times, the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club was going to have a meeting and she wanted me to go to it. At first, she was very hesitant to talk to me, this is what she said to me, "When I first saw you, I thought that you were White. Little by little, after I started talking to you, and getting to know you a little bit better, I realized that you were different, and that you took an interest in me." That afternoon, when I came home and told my husband about it, my husband and I decided to go and see what it was all about. Prior to this, I had met a lot of people in the community. I guess it really goes back to 1967, when a group of students came from Mexico. There were twenty-eight students, who couldn't speak a word of English. Their grade-level was

Villarreal:

from kindergarten through ninth grade, or five years old to sixteen/seventeen years old. At the time, I was the only person they could communicate with. They took me out of my SLPB assignment, and put me in a classroom. that for a year and one half. The parents couldn't speak very good English. They started coming to school. They wanted to know what was going on, and who the teacher was. I became very involved with these parents. There were about five different parents, mostly the mothers. Little by little, they started asking me to their homes, and talking more about the work I was doing for their children. That was, to me, one of the best year and one half that I have had. It was a lot of work. It was very, very challenging. The older students were sixteen to seventeen years old. They were very inquisitive. Anytime that I explained something to them, they wanted me to explain everything in Spanish, too. I became very, very close to those students, and they became very close to me. Most of them I had about one year and one half. After that, the school administration felt they also needed the classroom experience, so they could interact and mingle with the rest of the students. This is what happened. The last half of the year I had them, it was on a half-day basis. They were with me a half-day, and a half-day in a regular classroom. After that, most of them did very well. They didn't need anymore help from me. But I still kept in contact, not only with them, but also with the teachers. Anytime they felt they needed an explanation, they felt comfortable coming to me. I am very pleased, because quite a few of them have continued their education. Some of them are very, very active and creative. One of them, who I just talked to last week, is going to the Minneapolis School of Art. Another one is going to college. He wanted to go to Humboldt, which is a Senior High on the West Side, to teach Spanish. After that year and one half, I went back to my SLBP position. This is where I met Mrs. Medina. I had one of her children in my class. My husband and I went to that

Villarreal: meeting. There were only three or four people there. Those four people, were the ones that started the club. The club was started in July of 1971. It was in March of 1972, when my husband and I became involved in it. The reason we hadn't gotten involved before, was because, our plans were to go back where our families are, in South Texas. At the time, my husband couldn't find a job down there. We decided to build a home, here in Minnesota, and stay here. I am glad we did, because we really like it here. At that time, we decided we really wanted to get involved. We wanted to help as many Mexicans as we could, if they wanted our help.

Moosbrugger: Can you remember, by name, any of those people?

Villarreal: Yes. Felipe Ramirez was the President. Nicha Coates, was one of the people that started the Club. There was Jose Estrada, and Mrs. Nena Medina. That's the time we got involved. They were meeting at the Neighborhood

House. The purpose of the Club is to meet the cultural, social and educational needs of the Spanish speaking communities. Just because we call it the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club, doesn't mean that only Mexicans can join the club. We have people from El Salvador and Brazil. We also have Anglos who are interested in maintaining the Spanish language, and who are very sensitive to the needs of the Spanish speacking people, who have joined the Club. The Club has become very involved in issues that affect the education of Mexican Americans. I am sure you have heard of the Mexican American Cultural Resource Center. We have that center, not because the school district felt that a center such as that one was needed, but because of community concerns. A group of people from the community went before the school board and talked about a need for such a center. Consequently, the center was finally opened in October of 1974. I was the first teacher in charge of the center. This September, I will be in charge of the Resource Center. I feel that another person can come in and take over.

Everything is already set up. It was a lot of work. It took a lot of

effort, not only from me, but from other people. The West Side community Villarreal: was very involved in planning and offering some of the cultural and educational values. When I first heard I was going to be in charge of the Resource Center, I met with different community people. The district had nothing to do with the setting up of the Resource Center, or with any of the ideas. It was the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club. It was Felipe Ramirez, President of the Club. He was really the one. I am sure that Mr. Saucedo had something to do with this, too. Felipe went before the school board, and asked a member of the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club. Since then, we have gotten involved in other issues that affect the education of the Mexican American. There was a teacher at Humboldt Senior High, who was teaching Spanish. She had taught there for quite a few years, and didn't even know the Spanish alphabet. Some of the Club members got together with other parents and went to the superintendent. They applied pressure on this teacher to quit. She retired.

Moosbrugger: What are some of the Latin activities you participate in to retain cultural values and heritage?

Villarreal: We usually participate in the 16th of September, and in the parade. The Club has big posters and we usually have one or two trucks decorated for the parade. We have quite a few community people. Some of them dressed in costumes from Mexico. On the 12th of October, we celebrate "El Dia de La Raza", which is Columbus Day here. That is the beginning of the mingling of the Spanish and Indian Cultures. We have a big program that day. We usually have somebody explaining the significance of "El Dia de La Raza." We have dances and poetry-reading. We try to involve as many people as we can. We have done that for the past four years. The first two years, we had it at the Neighborhood House. Then we outgrew that place, so we went to Our Lady of Guadalupe's Church hall. Last year, we had about 250 people present at our celebration. We hope to continue that, from day to day. In

Villarreal:

December, we have a big luncheon for the Spanish Speaking Senior Citizens. We have been working quite a bit with the Senior Citizens. We feel that a lot of programs are geared towards youth, but very few towards Senior Citizens, especially to Spanish Speaking Seniors. We have done a lot of work with them. In December, we have a big fiesta. We provide a big luncheon, transportation, and bingo games for them. Sometimes we have about fifty Senior Citizens, from all over the city. Just to see them, and see how happy they are, really makes my work worthwhile. We also celebrate the 5th of May. We get involved in the different activities that are planned by the schools of the West Side, or in other areas of the city where they need people with expertise in that area. If some of us can't give that help, then we get other people to go to the different schools, and talk about the significance of the 5th of May. I think right now, the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club is sponsoring two programs. We have Gary Gorman, Director of the Bilingual Services for the Spanish Speaking Seniors. Then we have Nicha Coates, working in the field of Social services for the Spanish speaking. There is a meeting every first Wednesday of the month and we get a report of the meeting from Nicha and Gary. At the present time, the Club is also sponsoring a "Needs Assessment Survey". Very often we are turned down by different agencies, because they feel that we are duplicating services. We really don't know just how many of these services are needed. Nicha is still doing the survey now.

Moosbrugger:

Through the West Side community?

Villarreal:

Yes. This is not only for the West Side community, this is for the city of St. Paul. We are going to try to interview quite a few Latinos from the city of St. Paul. If the people can't speak English, then the interview will be done in Spanish, or vice-versa. We are also coming out with a bilingual directory. Anytime you want to find out what Mexican American teachers there are, you can look it up in the directory. It will have

Villarreal: names, the type of work they do, the name of the agency, or the company they work for.

Moosbrugger: A type of resource book for people?

Villarreal: Right. We do get a lot of phone calls like: "How many engineers do you have" "How many lawyers" etc. This directory will take care of that.

We are hoping that it will be out in November.

Moosbrugger: How big of a roster do you have for club membership?

We have about twenty paid members. In July we had an open meeting. We Villarreal: invited other people so we could inform them about us and what we do. We had about fifty different people show up for it. We had our monthly meeting this past Wenesday. The weather was pretty bad. We only had two new members join us. I am hoping that for the September meeting, all the people who went to the open meeting, will be called to take part in the organization. I hope that we do get more people, because we do need help. I forgot to mention before that for the past three years, we have been taking part in the Festival of Nations. The Club became involved in selling Of all the nationalities that participated, ours was the most popular. We took in the most money. This past May we got involved again. The reason we do that, is not only to expose our food, but also the dancing, which is a part of our cultural. We had nineteen couples participating in dancing. Most of them were from the West Side. Maria Moran is our dance instructor, she has decided to keep the group going, so we practice every Sunday afternoon. We have bookings for September and December. We are doing it just to have an adult group who can expose that aspect of our culture, again, we were the most popular booth. took care of the kitchen.

Moosbrugger: This was the last festival?

Villarreal: Right. It is to the point where the club needs us. They rely a lot on the money that we take in. They keep telling us that we always take in

Villarreal: the most money.

Moosbrugger: Is that at the International Institute?

Villarreal: Yes. From the money that we take in, after the expenses have been deducted,

80% goes to the International Institute, and 20% goes to the Club. When

we had this July open meeting, I explained this to the people who were

present. They were not aware of that before. They thought that all the

money we made went to the club, and that we didn't need anymore money.

We made about 550 dozen tacos and we also sold tostadas and bunuelos. We

only made \$282.00, for all that work. We met two months in advance, once

a week, to make tacos. It is a lot of work. We have very hard working

people, who are very interested and dedicated. They want to do more for

the Mexicans. Really, that is what it is all about. We want better

things for the Mexicans. We are tying to meet the social needs of the

Latinos on the West Side, and around the city of St. Paul. Rebecca Rojas

is the Vice-President of the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club and Rebecca

Garay is the Secretary. Aurelio Rojas is the Treasurer. The reporters

are; Angie and Francisco Rivera. We have three charter members, they are;

Jose Estrada, Nicha Coates and Margarita Corral. The membership committee

is made of Becky Garay; Angie and Francisco Rivera; Gary Gorman; Nicha Coates;

Rebecca Rojas; Roberto and Diana Villarreal. Right now, our main concern

is continuing the bilingual services for the Spanish speaking people. The

program is federally funded. The project has been in operation for a year.

Gary projected that seventy-five Spanish speaking senior citizens will be

involved by the end of the first year. Well, the year just ended the 26th

of June. He serviced Seventy-six Spanish Speaking Senior Citizens. We

have been criticized because we are not meeting the needs of the Spanish

Speaking Senior Citizens in Minneapolis. But to meet thoes needs, we need

more people, more staff and more money to continue that program. This year

the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club has \$1,664.00 to continue the project.

Villarreal: That was the reason we got very involved in the Festival of Nations. coming Sunday, August 8th, we are having a taco luncheon to raise money. Every four months we have to give Gary \$417.00. I will do everything in my power to continue the program. We have been going to different agencies, and sent in a proposal to get funding. We would like to hire one of the Senior citizens to be a driver to pick up some of the other seniors. That is where most of the time was going, picking up some of the seniors at their homes. I would like to see the program expand, if possible. If we can get the money. Next year, the club will have to come up with 50% of the budget. Right now, the budget is twelve or thirteen thousand, and out of that we are committed to almost \$1,700.00. All our efforts are being geared to raise that money to continue the project. We sent our proposal to NSP, to see if they could give us \$900.00 for this coming year. I received a letter from NSP about three weeks ago. It said they were sorry they couldn't help us. They felt there were other governmental agencies we could tap for money or funds. They also thought that we were duplicating services, that there were other agencies that were providing services for Spanish Speaking Seniors. This is a very unique situation, where you have seniors that can't speak English. I don't know of any other program that is addressing itself to the needs of the Spanish speaking seniors. We did go before them and expressed our opinions, our views, and some of the things we do. I guess they got a better understanding of the project. They are going to reconsider; he said he would get something, but we are not going to get \$900.00. However, I think every little bit helps. If we could get \$400.00 or \$500.00, that would really helps us for next year.

Moosbrugger: Who had he thought was providing those services for the Spanish speaking seniors?

Villarreal: He couldn't tell us. He just felt that there are a lot of programs for

seniors, right now. He didn't understand the fact that a lot of them were Villarreal: mono-lingual. We have a lot of problems. We have seniors who Gary and Nicha have to take to the doctor or to interpret for, and to lawyers. Any type of service that they need, somebody has to go with them to interpret. A lot of people do not have bilingual personnel. A lot of the agencies don't either. I think the jub Gary is doing, is fantastic; with the help of Nicha and Margaret Corral plus some other volunteers. There is a Mr. Medina who helps Gary quite a bit with transportation. They do a lot of social activities, and recreational tupe activities. I have been to some of the activities when I can get there. I feel so good that we are doing something for them. In August, on Senior Citizen's Day, we take them to the State Fair. The club provides their transportation and lunch at the State Fair. For future activities, we do plan on continuing our involvement in the Festival of Nations. We are going to keep on seeking funding for the continuation of the present programs. We would like to continue with Nicha. She is under the CEDA program. We would like to get involved with other educational needs or activities that deal with the Mexican Americans. The more members we have, the more involved we can get. Right now it is to the point where the same ones are doing almost everything. We would like more members. We are trying to get as many members as possible, so that we can have other fund-raising activities for whatever we need.

Moosbrugger: Your meetings are the first Wednesday of every month, plus committee

meetings as needed, to carry out your projects and goals? You are serving
the community through education, and by giving attention and service to
the senior citizens? Are those the two main branches?

Villarreal: No. We also try to meet the cultural and social needs of the Spanish speaking community. We applied for a grant in the first part of the year from the Minnesota Bicentennial Commission. We received \$4,000. Two

months later, we had to come up with two-thirds matching money. We had Villarreal: to get a commitment from somebody by the 15th of April. If that didn't happen, then we would lose our grant. This is eventually what happened. We lost our \$4,000. But we have not given up hope. We have an advisory committee now. They haven't met yet, because it is a new committee. We are doing what we want to do. This is through Nicha's efforts, on behalf of the Cultural Club. We want to do a documentary film on the contributions of the Mexican American in the State of Minnesota. We have sent a proposal to a lot of agencies. There are two or three , right now, that seem very interested. In order for us to do a good film, it will cost us \$60,000 to 65,000 thousand. We want everything in film, slides, or tapes. A lot of our older people are dying. Nothing has been recorded, outside of the project which you are doing right now. I feel that human relations workshops, or people who need human relations, would benefit from the film. The libraries, schools, and even our own people would benefit from it. We have a lot of positive self-image, which is good. We are working very hard, especially in getting that money, so we can do that documentary film. We have people who have expertise in different areas, and are willing to work with us. Eventually, I hope we can get it done. We wanted to have it done this year, during the Bicentennial. But, we haven't had that much luck. Money is hard to come by, especially

Moosbrugger: So that is one of the big projects, or hopes, for the future?

There is no way the Club could come up with \$65,000.

Villarreal: Right. If we can get funding from other sources.

Moosbrugger: The Federal funds that you are receiving to serve the seniors will have to

through agencies. Very little has been done for the Mexicans. Now all of

a sudden, there are quite a few groups that are coming up with proposals.

They need money for one activity or another. I just feel that now is the

right time for that film. Hopefully, we will get the money that is needed.

Moosbrugger: go on fifty percent (50%) next year?

Villarreal: The Club has to come up with fifty percent (50%). When we went before to the Metro Council for the aged, we asked for Twelve to Thirteen Thousand Dollars the first year. They were asking us, "How come you are asking us for such a small amount?" Well, we didn't want to ask for too much because this was our first experience with the project. This year, we went for a little bit more. They only gave us Eighty Percent (80%) of the total grant. Next year, it will be 50/50. We need more money. We are planning a masquerade party, for October 30th. We will get a lot of publicity, hopefully. The executive board has been directed by the general membership to go ahead and plan this dance, and to get different committees set up, so that perhaps we can make a little money. Three years ago, at the Festival of Nations, we cleared almost \$1,000. Up until this coming Sunday, we hadn't had a fund-raiser. For three years we worked with the \$1,000. We gave a small contribution to a migrant worker to go to Washington to learn more about the federal government and how the government was run, to talk to the two senators from Minnesota and meet with congressmen. Sometimes people need help, and they come to us. There was a Chicano conference two years ago. They asked us if we could donate fifty dollars to it, we did.

Moosbrugger: The Club will be into fund-raising activities, in the future, to keep up their good work?

Villarreal: Right.

Moosbrugger: Well, we certainly wish you the very best of luck. It sounds like a fine organization. Thank you very much for the interview.

Villarreal: Thank you!