

**Catarino “Ken” Mendez
Narrator**

**Abner Arauza
Interviewer**

**February 25, 2013
Ken Mendez’s Home
Crookston, Minnesota**

Ken Mendez **-KM**
Abner Arauza **-AA**

AA: This is Abner Arauza. It is February 25, 2013. I am in Crookston, Minnesota, interviewing Ken, actually Catarino Mendez. And we are conducting the interview in his home at 504 South Ash Street, in Crookston. Catarino, thank you for giving us the time for this interview. If you’ll state your name and ethnicity, please?

KM: Hi. I am Catarino Mendez. I am Mexican, born and raised here from Crookston. And I’m just glad to be doing this interview with you.

AA: Okay. Thanks. Thanks. Give me your parents’ names.

KM: Sure. My parents’ names were Jesus Mendez and Ramona Dominguez Mendez.

AA: Okay and where were they born?

KM: My mother was born in Texas and my father was born in Mexico.

AA: Okay. Do you know the town or city?

KM: I would say my mother was born in Malakoff, Texas.

AA: Malakoff?

KM: Yes.

AA: How do you spell that?

KM: If I had to guess, it would be M-A-L-A-K-O-F-F.

AA: Okay.

KM: I know where my father was born, but without a map and with it clearly on my mind, I'd have to guess, and I don't want to guess.

AA: Okay. Okay. Where is Malakoff? What's it close to? What's a large city close to it?

KM: I want to say El Paso.

AA: Oh, so that direction. Okay.

KM: Yes.

AA: Way, way east.

KM: Yes.

AA: Okay. Tell me the number of siblings, their names and ages. [Chuckles] If you remember their ages.

KM: Okay. It might be easier to start from the youngest.

AA: Okay.

KM: And there are ten of us. My little brother Paul, he is forty-eight. And then it's me, I'm second to the youngest, and I am forty-nine. After that, it's my brother Raymond, and he is fifty-two. After that, it is Rachel, she is fifty-four. After that, it is Vincent, and he is about fifty-six. After that, it is Angel, he passed away in 1983. After that, it is Alice. I'd say she's around fifty-eight, sixty. And then there is a sister, Diane, she passed away about 1985, 1986. And then Ruben, he is about sixty-three or sixty-four. And then I have a sister, Eva, and she is the oldest, and she is sixty-five.

AA: Okay. Wow. So Ruben already retired. So he retired early?

KM: He did retire. I want to say he retired at sixty.

AA: Okay. Yes, because I know he's been retired for a few years now.

KM: Yes.

AA: Okay, so you have given me your age. The date of birth?

KM: My date of birth? It is March 5, 1963.

AA: Okay. And what is your level of education, Ken?

KM: I have a bachelor degree in communication from the University of Minnesota on the Crookston campus.

AA: Okay. When did you complete that program?

KM: The summer of 2011.

AA: Oh, okay.

KM: Yes. Recent.

AA: Good. Name and ethnicity of your spouse if you are married?

KM: Not married.

AA: No?

KM: No.

AA: Okay. Okay, do you have children?

KM: I have two children. I have a twenty-eight year old daughter that lives in Chicago. And then I have a fourteen year old son that lives here in Crookston.

AA: Okay. And what are their names?

KM: Jessica and Dylan.

AA: Okay. By the way, your brothers and sisters, do any of them live in this area?

KM: My sister Eva, the oldest, lives in this town. And then I have another sister that lives on the north end of town.

AA: Okay.

KM: So there are two of us out of three of us out of the ten that live in town.

AA: Okay.

KM: And then the closest would be my brother Paul in Minneapolis, and Ruben in Cannon Falls.

AA: Okay. How does he like it over there?

KM: He likes it. Yes. So it's a little bit south.

AA: Yes. What year did your family come to Crookston?

KM: You know my father, I recently discovered, came in the 1927, 1928, 1929, 1927-28, and 1929.

AA: Wow. Okay.

KM: My mother came in the 1930s, for sure the 1940s. I want to say 1943.

AA: Okay. So they weren't married when they each came here then?

KM: Nope, they weren't married, but they each came separately.

AA: With their families?

KM: Yes, with their families. And [sighs] my father and mother were interviewed for the Historical Society, too.

AA: Oh. Okay.

KM: The Minnesota Historical Society, too. And I remember my father telling the person that he was in Texas at the time, and there was advertising, you know, whether by paper flyers or however. That they were looking for jobs up north to work in the factories.

AA: Okay.

KM: And I'm pretty confident to say my father came up here the first year that the factory for sugar beets was in its operation. The very first year. And I want to say that's 1927-28, 1927, 1928.

AA: Wow. Okay. And now and when were they interviewed before?

KM: They were interviewed just like I am being interviewed right now.

AA: Yes.

KM: In 1976.

AA: Okay, so it has been quite a while ago.

KM: Yes.

AA: Thirty-four, thirty-five years ago.

KM: Yes.

AA: So he came here with his family. How old would he have been at that time?

KM: My dad would have been fifteen to the eighteen year old range.

AA: Okay.

KM: My dad was born in 1910.

AA: Alright. And when your mom came here, she came with her family.

KM: Yes.

AA: And how old would she have been at that time?

KM: I think my mom would have been there's thirty-five years difference between my mom and me, so 1963. You know, I remember reading from that Historical Society interview that the year 1943 comes to mind. And if I was born in 1963, you have to subtract twenty-five years. So I think my mom was born in 1925. So she was in her teenage years.

AA: Okay.

KM: I remember her saying she was a teenage girl when they were coming on up here.

AA: Okay. Now so when your parents came here, your dad came, they came to work because there was work.

KM: Yes.

AA: And did that involve field work?

KM: That I remember from that interview, that my dad said in the interview that it was factory work.

AA: Yes. Okay.

KM: Working for the factory.

AA: Okay.

KM: Now whether that was contracted to work in the fields.

AA: Also or not.

KM: You know I don't know how that went then. But I know once they decided to stay here that they did work in the fields.

AA: Okay.

KM: They were laborers.

AA: How about your mom's family?

KM: My mom's family was basically the same story as my dad's. For some reason, they found out that there was work up here.

AA: Yes.

KM: And so my mom's family and all their kids came up here.

AA: Wow. And your mom and dad met here then.

KM: Yes, I want to say in Waseca.

AA: Okay.

KM: Yes.

AA: Oh, so when they came up here to work, they weren't working in Crookston?

KM: No.

AA: They were working in Waseca.

KM: Yes.

AA: Oh, I see. Okay. So they met there. Did you ever find out the story of how they met?

KM: I haven't heard the story.

AA: Yes.

KM: [Sighs] A lot of what I have just said in the last few minutes has been based on what I have heard my mother and dad in the historical tapes that they taped.

AA: Yes. Yes.

KM: Other than that, I have not.

AA: Sure.

KM: You know my sister Eva who lives in town might have that knowledge, you know, might be aware of how they met and all that.

AA: Yes. It would be interesting.

KM: Yes.

AA: Okay, so how do they move from Waseca to Crookston? What precipitated that?

KM: I think it was just based on work more so than, you know, let's just go to another city. I think work dictated where they went. And that's the short and simple answer.

AA: Okay. When they came up here, since they came in separately, maybe there you can tell me the story, if you know it, for each one of them. How did they actually come? Did they come as one family; did they come with a group of families? Did they come in their own vehicle? Did they come with a trucker? I know that there was some of that going on.

KM: My father, based from the interview that he did like we're doing right now, he talked about taking the train, and taking the trains up here from Texas.

AA: Okay.

KM: And it was like a train of: let's go to work. You know, and my father spoke as best as you can about the conditions of those trains. You know, he said they got fed and, you know, it just looked like a good opportunity is what I took from how he spoke of it. My mother, I think they just came up here, you know. I sensed by vehicle. And, you know, I think, ultimately, I would be guessing on how they got up here for with my mother.

AA: Okay. Okay. Now do you know if there was a support network in place when they arrived, of any kind, informal among friends, family, or formal through some agency?

KM: I don't know of agency, not until the later years. But I think, informally, because I have seen pictures recently. And I think it was more of an elder, you know, it was a hierarchy of elderly.

AA: Sure.

KM: You know, where the elderly were the ones that, dictated might be too strong of a word, but it went by the elders, it went by the father, it went by the grandpa. Were the ones that had the wisdom about: should we stay here, should we work here, is this the right thing to do?

AA: Okay.

KM: I think a lot of trust was put on. Ultimately, I think it would be the males, you know, the fathers, the grandpas that, you know, laid the foundation for them to keep coming here.

AA: Sure.

KM: And then to stay here.

AA: So and was there a network of support in terms of, let's say, helping them find jobs, or helping them find housing, or how to buy groceries, where to access medical services?

KM: The medical services, I wouldn't know. Back then, I know that when it comes to the housing, I think when it comes to the English, it's kind of like it is now. If you know it, you know, you are the one that kind of overlooks everybody.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, because I have seen that just recently where the father and the mother don't speak English, and the daughters come into the store and they do the interpreting, and I think it was like that then.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know.

AA: Okay. But there weren't agencies that helped them?

KM: No.

AA: Okay. Now so they saw flyers, and so they were kind of recruited.

KM: Exactly.

AA: Whoever recruited them, did they help them either by providing housing, or at least helping them find housing, or anything of that sort?

KM: Right. I believe that like with my father, I think the trains ultimately were trains from the factories.

AA: Oh. Okay.

KM: You know. And hmmm, just like he said, they were fed, they were taken care of. And, you know, were they perfect conditions? Of course not. You've got to remember the times.

AA: Right. Yes.

KM: You know they weren't perfect conditions for a lot of people back then.

AA: Yes.

KM: So I think what my father saw when he saw them flyers down in Texas, was he saw an opportunity, you know. And an opportunity is not the same to two different people, even though the pay may be the same.

AA: Sure. Sure. What were the thought processes when your mom and dad decided to stay here? I mean, was it already home so they just stayed, or was it a conscious process of there's opportunities here that aren't elsewhere?

KM: I think, just remembering the interviews, and I think it was just what had developed for my father, and what had developed for my mother. And then to how and when they met, you know, they have already had the rapport with people up here. It's where, number one, they felt comfortable.

AA: Okay.

KM: And it must have been a comfort level to even say, "Wow, let's stay here."

AA: Sure.

KM: You know, and I've never heard my mom say anything about prejudices, or we're not wanted here. That doesn't mean that there wasn't any. But it must have not have been as strong as maybe we might want to think it was, otherwise they wouldn't have stayed.

AA: Right.

KM: I mean that to me is just a logical common sense thing. That, you know, not everybody welcomes everybody. But they must have felt welcome enough to say, "Wow, there's an option, a possibility to stay here."

AA: Yes. Sure. Now do you know if there were other Latino families in Crookston at the time?

KM: Oh, yes. Yes.

AA: When they decided to stay?

KM: Yes. Yes, I mean, I can think of three or four families. But then, you know, you've got to remember my mom or you don't remember, but my mom's family was very large.

AA: Okay.

KM: So, you know, when they married, they all stayed up here.

AA: Oh.

KM: So, slowly but surely. It networked out just by one family. One family's kids get married.

AA: Sure.

KM: Husband in that family stays up here, and then a couple of other families. So there were core families that stayed up here in Crookston area. And I'm sure that was followed everywhere, you know.

AA: Sure. So did some of your mom's brothers and sisters remain and still live here?

KM: I know of; one, two, a handful.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, my sister that stayed here all these years with my mother passed away. So I mean, now we're talking about, I have an uncle that pretty much stayed here. They were in the military, too. You know, our family has had a lot of people in the military.

AA: Okay.

KM: And that goes with my mom's family, too. There were people in the military, so it wasn't just come up here and work, and that's what we did and that's what we're doing.

AA: Right.

KM: You know they took advantage of other opportunities.

AA: So the family didn't just come to work, they came to set roots and just be part of the community?

KM: Right.

AA: Yes.

KM: There are six brothers, and I had four brothers that were active military.

AA: Wow.

KM: So that's a good way to put it.

AA: Yes.

KM: They just didn't come here to work, they were a part of the city, and they were a part of the state. And obviously, by turning their services over to the military, they were part of our country.

AA: What are some of the first memories that you remember of living in Crookston? One, as just a kid, you know, this was your home, and the other one as a Latino child.

KM: My first memories were of just being with my dad and in the station wagon. I mean, those were one of my first, earliest, earliest memories. I remember my sister purchased that vehicle for my mom and my dad. And then that was always a memory, was riding around in vehicles.

The swimming pool in Crookston, just five blocks up from here, was an early memory. As far as, you know, being a different color, or felt like I was being a different person based on my color, I can't say there wasn't any distinct moment, you know. Because the innocence of youth, you know, didn't skew my thinking. You know, I think it might have been in my elementary or middle school years then that's where I realized that color made a difference.

AA: Sure.

KM: It made a difference in the way jokes were made. It made a difference.

[Brief recording interruption]

AA: Okay. So, in middle school when, you said, how jokes were handled.

KM: Yes.

AA: So that's when you became really aware there's a difference.

KM: Yes. Yes, because I mean, just for me.

AA: Sure.

KM: I mean here was an age difference, a fifteen year age difference between my sister and me.

AA: Okay.

KM: Thirty year age difference between my mother and me.

AA: Okay.

KM: And a fifty year age difference between my father and me. So my experience in the late 1960s, early 1970s, which is my adolescent pre-teenager years, was different than my sisters and brothers.

AA: Yes.

KM: My sister is fifteen years older than me.

AA: Okay.

KM: So just by default, you know, she had fifteen years on me.

AA: Yes. Sure.

KM: That by the time I knew what my sister was she was already out of the house going to college. I knew just my immediate circle of my younger brothers and sisters. And so, growing up, for me in my school, which was located right across the street here, you know, there was only one other Mexican family.

AA: At that time.

KM: At that time. So there was one girl that was in my class at this school. So then my younger brother there, you know.

AA: Yes.

KM: An older brother and sister went there, too. So when I went to that, I think it was more middle school is when I felt that my color was different.

AA: Now you said that it was different for your sister. Was that just a sense that it was different? Or were there specific things that you can remember that were different?

KM: Well, I think the camaraderie was different for them. I remember my sister telling stories about when they were working in the beets. They would take my sister and some of my other brothers, potentially. And send them off to school for a week. A week at a time. So the families could go and work.

AA: Sure.

KM: You know. I didn't have to see that, I didn't have to face that.

AA: Okay.

KM: And I wouldn't know what that would be like.

AA: Okay.

KM: So my sister's years of growing up were different than mine.

AA: Sure.

KM: Just by circumstances. She was living in the thick of being the oldest child of kids working in the beet fields and, then, I was at the lower end of families working in the sugar beets, the dying years of true laborers.

AA: Who would send them off for a week?

KM: The families.

AA: Okay.

KM: My mom and dad.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, because you were more productive when the kids weren't around, because you didn't have to worry about them. Because they went off to school.

AA: Okay. And I know that the Catholic Church did something like that at that time.

KM: Yes.

AA: So is that what you're talking about?

KM: Yes. Yes. Yes.

AA: Okay. And they would go out of Crookston, or here in Crookston, but elsewhere away from the family?

KM: I believe it was here in Crookston.

AA: Okay.

KM: But I think at times my family lived out in the country.

AA: Oh, okay.

KM: Lived on the farms.

AA: Sure.

KM: With the, you know, the migrant houses, at the farms.

AA: So they'd go for a week and then come on the weekend?

KM: Come back on the weekends. And then I just remember my sister saying how it was. That was difficult.

AA: Okay.

KM: That was difficult, you know.

AA: Even when she was with other brothers and sisters.

KM: Yes. And I won't say traumatic, but it was difficult, you know.

AA: Yes.

KM: You couldn't really, as a child, sense why was I being, you know.

AA: What did I do?

KM: Yes. Yes, so that was one thing that I didn't have to see, but I have heard my sister talk about.

AA: Since you didn't move here yourself, you were born here, you grew up here, there wasn't like the adjusting of, let's say, somebody who comes here from South Texas.

KM: No.

AA: And then they settle here, there's a lot of adjusting, you know, in relationships and culture and the food and so on and so forth.

KM: Not for *me*.

AA: Yes.

KM: But that's because I'm the ninth of ten kids.

AA: Right.

KM: Whereas, my upper half of the family experienced that. So there are a lot of families in Crookston that are first generation here in Crookston.

AA: Yes.

KM: And I don't know if first generation is the right word, but my father and my mother being here as long as they had. By the time us younger kids came along, their roots have already been settled here. And there are some families that are experiencing that right now.

AA: Sure.

KM: But then the families today are experiencing a lot different things than what I experienced. In high school, thirty years ago.

AA: Sure. Sure. Now you said that the older children did experience moving here.

KM: Yes.

AA: So your family kept going back and forth to Texas?

KM: Yes. And then I think there was a set year when they finally decided to stay.

AA: Okay.

KM: And I want to say 1949, 1953, right around that time.

AA: Okay.

KM: Is when they decided to stay.

AA: Yes.

KM: And so by then some kids were born. And I think I had some brothers and sisters that were born in Texas.

AA: Yes. Did they ever talk about whether they wished they were going back to Texas, or thank God we're living here?

KM: Yes. I think they were too young to know the difference.

AA: Okay.

KM: And they all became accustomed to here. I mean, this is what I know. But it's my older brothers and sisters, and it's my mother and father that know what a lot of families are going through right now.

AA: Yes.

KM: But what my mother and father didn't have was the networks that are out there today. You know, that's no fault of nobody.

AA: Sure.

KM: But there are means for assistance today.

AA: Yes. Sure. So how did they do it? What would they rely on?

KM: I think my father was a hard worker. And you can't mask a hard worker. And I think you can't pretend to be a hard worker. I think his work ethic gained and garnered respect. And who wouldn't want someone that worked hard? And I think with the right person, or the right farmer, or the right company, when they see that, they see beyond the skin color, they see beyond anything, and realize this is a good man. And I think, you know, it just means a good thing.

AA: How about other families as you were growing up? How did they find jobs? How did they find housing? Like for example, you said that your family lived out on a farm, but eventually moved into town.

KM: Sure.

AA: How was that transition of finding jobs in town and, as they settled down and housing in town instead of farm work? Or the schools, of the children moving into the schools here instead of a little farm school or something?

KM: Yes. Yes. I think my parents bought this house in 1959.

AA: Okay.

KM: Purchased it in 1959, contract for deed by a good lady. By a good family. And prior to that they lived on the southwest side of town. So they do have roots of living in town before they finally settled down here. But, I am a strong believer in that my father and other people, they didn't *show* that they were good people, but you couldn't not help but *notice* that these were good people. You know, and not every apple is a perfect apple. And I think this area didn't see the Mexican culture as a bad culture. They accepted it because they knew one thing, that they were hard workers. And I think it's that simple. You know. And when it's that simple, who doesn't want to help their fellow man? Now is that looking through the lens really skewed? You know, it probably is. But at the same time, you know who does not want to help somebody else?

AA: Sure.

KM: And, you know, it's not like my father barreled into Crookston and said, "I want a place to live." Well, you know if you're going to have that kind of bravado to do that, you've got to have work; you've got to have a job. And you've got to build trust. And I think my dad did that.

You know, and my mother proved to be a hard worker. She worked at many businesses in this town, and she was fortunate to get a good job at the university. So I mean good things happen when you do the right things. And that only helps when you know or you've worked for good people.

Now, I'm sure there are bad farmers that abuse some workers. And, you know, maybe not physically, but took advantage of them. You know, didn't pay them properly or look out for them. But, you know, there's pictures of my brother Ruben working with the farmer's children.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know there was no barrier. You know, I know them families today, you know. And are they well off? Of course, they are. But are we well off? From where we started, we were well off. And I think that's because of the work ethic. It's the bottom line. You know.

AA: We talked briefly a little while ago about the Catholic Church and the things that it did as far as the schools. Were there other churches? I mean the Catholic Church or other churches, what was their relationship with Latinos that were settling here?

KM: I'm not going to say there wasn't, but I think the Catholic Church was the predominant church that looked out for the Hispanic. And in a sense they still do, but now you have other churches, too. And you know the Sisters have always taken care of, you know, the Mexican culture.

AA: Okay.

KM: The Mexican people and the Mexican heritage. So, yes.

AA: Now your mom was from East Texas somewhere.

KM: Yes.

AA: And your dad was from Mexico. Do you still maintain relationships with all of that part of the family, or no longer?

KM: I maintain relationships with my aunts.

AA: Okay. Ken, what language did your family speak at home with family members?

KM: My mother and father spoke the Mexican language amongst themselves and to my older brothers and sisters. That's how they conversed.

AA: Okay.

KM: With me, personally with me, and I think that goes along with my little brother and a couple others, is the next two older than me. So we have that halfway line in our family. And it was exclusive, my mother spoke Mexican, you know, Spanish, the Spanish language to us. And then we answered in English.

AA: Okay.

KM: So, you know, we knew what she was saying, but we didn't respond back in the language that she was speaking. Nor did she ever try to tell us to speak back in that language, you know, the Mexican language. So, good and bad. I kind of regret it today. You know, I know enough of the language to get by, but I don't know enough to even consider myself fluent.

AA: How about when guests came to the house? What was spoken?

KM: The same thing. If some of the Mexican families came over, that they spoke the Mexican/Spanish language. But if some of the white folks came over, there was no interpreting; my mom could speak good enough English to carry the conversation and to fully comprehend it.

And I think for my dad, on the most part, too. Not as well as my mom. But yes, that's how that went.

AA: So when they were out in, let's say, a grocery store. And they run into friends. What then?

KM: My mother never, and my dad, too. It's, you know, dependent on who was at the grocery store. If it was the Mexican friends that my mom or dad knew, they did not shy away from saying what they wanted to say in their native tongue. But if it was the next door neighbor who happened to be an elderly white lady, they carried a conversation. There was no "can you say this for me to them."

AA: Okay.

KM: You know we were fortunate that way. And where my mom got that skill, and my dad was able to carry on, you know, I think it was just a matter of all those years of being bilingual for them. They, for whatever reason, knew the value of being bilingual, I think my father as early as a little child, and same with my mother. And I think that was probably passed on from their mom and dad.

AA: So your brothers and sisters, what did they speak at home or among themselves?

KM: They spoke the older ones spoke English. And I think it was more of when my mother and father spoke to them in the Spanish language that they spoke it. But predominantly, the English language was used. And I know for us, the bottom half of the family, were never deterred to not use it. You know.

AA: Sure.

KM: It was like it was okay what we did or it was okay who we are and what we spoke. There was no, "you know you are this, so you have to talk like that."

AA: So even at home.

KM: Even at home. And that even goes with the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church, when we were kids, my mother asked all of us kids to come and sit one day because the Sisters wanted us to come to the Catholic school. And my mother asked us kids what we wanted to do. And we all wanted to go to the public school, it's what we knew. And so that's how my mom based her decision.

AA: Okay.

KM: Was what *we* wanted to do. You know, that was pretty fortunate and pretty insightful for my mom. You know, to ask what the kids wanted to do.

AA: Did your family embrace Mexican culture?

KM: Oh, yes!

AA: Specific traditions?

KM: Yes. Yes. *Everything*. Everything that my mom did.

AA: Give me some examples.

KM: New Year's Eve, making the fried *tortillas*. I don't even know what . . .

AA: The *buñuelos*. [In Mexico and parts of the United States, *buñuelos* are made from a white flour dough spread like a tortilla and deep fried until crisp. Then, they are sprinkled with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar.]

KM: Yes.

AA: Okay.

KM: That was the New Year's Eve tradition. And *only* on New Year's Eve. It wasn't hard to do, but it was only done New Year's Eve. We didn't ask for it on Halloween, we didn't ask for it June Fourth, we just knew New Year's Eve meant that that was going to be done.

The Feast of Guadalupe is something that we did. [The Virgin of Guadalupe is considered the Patroness of Mexico and the Continental Americas. She is popularly invoked as *Patroness of the Unborn*. On December 12, Mexicans and other Latinos observe La Virgen de Guadalupe, an advocate of the downtrodden.] And then my mother didn't start it, but she was really active back in the 1960s and 1970s with the Catholic Church.

AA: Sure.

KM: To make that a nice, festive occasion. But Christmas was *tamales*. [Tamales are a traditional Latin American dish made of *masa* (a dough made from corn) wrapped in a corn husk and steamed. Tamales can be filled with meats, beans, fruits, vegetables, or any preparation according to taste. Tamales have been traced back to the ancient Mayas] And that was another thing. I mean, now you see *tamales* being made any day of the week, any month of the week. Back then, that was only around the holiday time.

AA: Yes.

KM: So that was a tradition of my mother's for our family. But yes, nowadays when you see *tamales* everywhere, it's just become part of. . .

AA: Food.

KM: Food, yes.

AA: [Chuckles]

KM: And the appreciation level has gone down. And things like that. I grew up on it's like I tell people when they ask me, you know, "What did you eat?" Well, you know, every morning it was the eggs, the *chorizo* [Mexican sausage], the flour *tortillas*, and there was no spoons, there was no silverware at the table, we used the *tortillas*.

AA: Yum.

KM: And my mom made *tortillas* every day. You know, Sunday was the Mexican meal at lunchtime, the *arroz* [rice] and the *enchiladas*. It was whatever she made, you know, everything was predominantly Mexican for the menu for our meals. Was that all we had? No. You know, she knew when St. Patrick's Day was, and we had corned beef, you know.

AA: [Chuckles]

KM: So, as the years progressed, my mom's, you know, wisdom did, too. It wasn't all, you know, everything was Mexican, Mexican, Mexican. You know, we did other things, too, you know. But yes, the food was one thing that my mom always prided herself on.

AA: Great.

KM: And yes, when people talk about having big Christmases dinners, ours were pretty simple. It was the cheese *enchilada*, the *arroz*, and so it was pretty simple, but it was something that we knew it was going to happen every Christmas.

AA: Now and your parents had a little store.

KM: Yes. My mother did. My dad passed away in the 1980s.

AA: Okay.

KM: 1983 or 1984 or maybe even 1985, but my mother retired from UMC [University of Minnesota, Crookston] in 2001.

AA: Okay.

KM: God was it even 1990... I want to say 2001 is when my mom retired. But that does not sound right either. It might even have been 1991. [Pauses] Yes, she retired.

AA: Okay.

KM: And the year is important. What happened I had a sister that lived in California. And she would send my mom VHS tapes of some Mexican programming from the TV stations down there. So that's why kind of the year was important when my mom retired, because that tells us, or tells me that there was no satellite dishes yet, there was no cell phones yet.

AA: Sure.

KM: And we were still stuck in the VHS mode. So my sister would send VHS tapes. And my mother would welcome other Mexican families, since as long as I can remember, being a child. You knew when the workers were hitting the fields, because generally that one of the first stops they did was stop here in the spring. And come to the house and say hi to my mom. And a lot of that is because of my father.

AA: Okay.

KM: So then just going back and forth with this story. So my mom had developed rapport with a lot of these families.

AA: Sure.

KM: So it would be very common for me to come home in the afternoon, in the evening and there would be some families here. Or a family here with their kids, having coffee with my mom, having cookies. Very, very common. Almost on a regular, daily basis. And you never knew who that family was. Well, after a while, these VHS tapes were getting shipped from California, that my mom all of a sudden was getting tapes pretty regularly. And people would come over and say, "What are you watching?" "I'm watching this tape. My daughter sent it to me, and so my daughter was pretty timely." You know, if something was on Monday, my mom could theoretically have it by the weekend.

AA: Yes.

KM: So, "Well, can I have that? You know, can I take it home?" And then pretty soon my mom, for a dollar you can have it for a couple days.

AA: [Chuckles]

KM: So something as simple like that, my mom retired on a Thursday. And after a few months of doing this sideline business of renting out these VHS tapes. Theoretically, say my mom retired on a Thursday. On Monday, she went down to City Hall and talked to the people that whoever you need to talk to, and said, "How do you? I want to run a business, I want to start a business, and I want it to be legal and legitimately." And so they told her what she had to do. Her and I went and did it. And by the end of the week she had Ramona's Mexican Video Store.

AA: Sure.

KM: And commonly known as the Mexican store. And, you know, at the heyday, she had over two thousand VHS tapes, Mexican movies. And you know that's not all she did. She continued to bake. And one day she was making cookies. Kids come in, "Can we have those?" And it's like, "Yes, I'll sell you cookies." So I mean there was nothing that my mom did not see a profit in. And, you know, we sold pickles, we sold pop, we sold pops, everything. Jewelry, gold,

cowboy boots, belts, cowboy hat, shirts, blankets were one of the biggest things that she sold. And she made really good connections, really good sellers from California, Chicago. And all of a sudden we have a retired business lady that is doing really, really well. And this is when phone cards, really, when the phone cards first came out.

AA: Okay.

KM: And then it wasn't enough just to have a phone card. All of a sudden, there are phone cards for international calls. So people could call in Mexico. So my mom was busy, you know. And my mother was a good business lady, you know, and I remember doing it myself. People would call at eleven o'clock at night. "I got to call my friend in Mexico." So my mom would scratch off the phone card number and give it to them over the phone, knowing that they would come and pay in the morning.

AA: Sure.

KM: So I mean, it wasn't a business like you people would run it. But it was a business that was based on trust.

AA: Yes, this is actually not uncommon in the Mexican culture.

KM: No. No.

AA: So now you mentioned some items like the blankets, cowboy hats, etcetera, that I see in Mexican stores now, so that, and like the videos and the items that you were talking about are Mexican-themed. So then was that the case with your mom? Or was it just cowboy hats and just blankets of any kind?

KM: Everything that my mom did sell was Mexican-themed.

AA: Yes. Okay.

KM: You know the blankets were as Mexican as you could get. There would be the lady of Guadalupe on a blanket, you know, anything.

AA: Sure.

KM: But it wasn't always what my mom thought, it was what people requested.

AA: Yes.

KM: There's this man in town that says, "Boy, I miss your mom's store because I could just go start singing her a song, and she would know who sang it, and then she could get it by the end of the week, too."

AA: [Chuckles]

KM: You know.

AA: Yes.

KM: And my mom didn't fly around, but she developed good rapport with sales people on the phone, and a really good gentleman out in California. And, you know, for some reason, the store did really, really well. And a lot of us didn't know how well until my mom passed away, and we saw the financial records.

AA: Wow.

KM: So not only was she a good saleslady, she kept a very secretive bank records.

AA: [Chuckles] So your parents, your mom in particular, passed a lot of that culture down to the children then.

KM: Yes. Yes. I mean, yes.

AA: Was it just to daughters and sons or and also to the grandchildren?

KM: Grandchildren. You know, I mean just the way that life is today, it's hard to immerse yourself in one culture. Because you step outside your house and it's not like your house is or was.

AA: Sure.

KM: That's just natural. But I mean, my daughter, she grew up, when she was here, she ate like we ate. But now that she doesn't come over here that much, it isn't that she doesn't appreciate what she had here. It's hard for her to carry that tradition on when she doesn't know how to make *tortillas*; she doesn't know the ingredients for *sopa*. [A soupy dish often made with pasta (such as vermicelli), like noodle soup. Also, it can be a soupy casserole.] She doesn't know all those little details. And that's nobody's fault, but that's just part of, you know, losing part of your culture.

AA: So it's not being passed down to your children?

KM: No.

AA: Is that by choice?

KM: I think yes, it's by choice. When my daughter moved to Hawaii for five, six years. You know, it's hard to put yourself in her shoes.

AA: Sure.

KM: How are you supposed to keep the culture alive when you're moving to a whole different culture? You know Hawaii is not like Crookston, Minnesota.

AA: Yes.

KM: And it's not like East Side Saint Paul. You know, so I mean it is by choice, but then it's by the choice you make. You know, she followed a dream of education, and that's what led her out there.

AA: What kind of work did Latinos do in this area? As far back as you can remember has that changed? Or do they naturally revolve over to certain kinds of jobs, or certain kinds of businesses, like the sugar?

KM: Yes.

AA: You know, American Crystal Sugar factory, or farms, or are they just all over the place?

KM: Well, you know, my answer would be different than my sister's answer.

AA: Okay. How?

KM: Because I knew my father worked for the City of Crookston.

AA: Yes.

KM: My father worked for the rest stop area.

AA: I see.

KM: My father was a foster grandparent out at UMC. [University of Minnesota Crookston] And my mother, I knew her to work for the state of Minnesota, in the housekeeping unit at UMC. That's a good job. No matter what that job she did, it was a secure job.

AA: Okay.

KM: And my father did, I think, good things. And he worked for City. But that ended because of his health, and then he did a couple of things they weren't for the money, but it was more for volunteerism. And so if I didn't know my family's background, you know, how could I not be any more proud of what my dad stood for?

AA: Of course.

KM: But then I think back of how he worked his tail off as a teenager, paid his dues as a young man. And then he ends his life in the work history as a volunteer. Now that's a fortunate ride for anybody in business.

AA: Sure.

KM: Or anybody that's living the work ethic. You know, because some people aren't fortunate enough to volunteer as a means to just to give back, and you know, my mom was very fortunate to get a job at UMC, and secure. Now, that's what I knew. Now my sisters that are older than me saw the hard work that my mom did. But employment aside, she raised ten kids.

AA: Wow.

KM: You know. So how do you do that? You know, I can only guess how hard my ma worked. You know, but my mom held all kinds of jobs. You know, she worked in restaurants; she worked in stores, she wasn't afraid to work. And I think hard work pays off in the end. I think that's going to be the tale of my mother and father was the hard work that they did.

AA: Sure.

KM: So, you know, that would be my answer to that is just, they earned their keep.

AA: Now you said that your sister was able to see the other side of work, the harder work.

KM: Yes.

AA: Which would have been what?

KM: Working in the fields.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, I've always heard the story from my mother, or one of the stories that I heard from my mother was everybody just takes it for granted that they work. And that's all there is, you know. If you work eight to four thirty, a person's work day is usually done at four thirty.

AA: Sure.

KM: But I've always heard my mom say that it was especially when they traveled from Texas to up here.

AA: Yes.

KM: You know, my mom had to stay awake during the day to make sure, number one, the kids were okay, and number two, the brothers, my older brothers and my father were taken care of, you know, they were fed properly, and dah, dah, dah, dah, and all that stuff. And then, at the end of the day, my mom stayed up all night and was like the security guard. Why was she doing that? So my dad could sleep so he could drive in the morning, so that my brothers could rest so they could work in the morning. And I think about that story about my mom, and it just is like, when did she sleep? You know, when did she rest?

AA: Yes.

KM: You know when did she garner? You know. I mean, she was too busy always doing the next thing to help out the family, but everybody kind of forgets what mothers really, really, really do. And I didn't see what my sister saw, is kind of what I'm getting at there.

AA: What is the ethnic composition of Crookston's Latino community?

KM: I knew that number. [Pauses] I want to say there are over three hundred families.

AA: Okay. Has it grown through the years?

KM: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes.

AA: Has it been about the same?

KM: If it's slowed down at all it's been in the last five, ten years. But I mean it's huge. You know, the makeup of the population in the high school is dramatic compared to when I went to school.

AA: I see.

KM: I looked at a picture in the Crookston Times the other day, and it's like, wow. You know. Impressive, you know, there's a lot of Mexicans in the school systems.

AA: Are these families basically families that have been here for now generations or are they newly arrived? And if they are newly arrived, where are they coming from?

KM: A lot are coming from the Crystal City area. [Texas]

AA: Okay.

KM: Now does that mean everybody? Of course not.

AA: Yes.

KM: But I know that a lot are from the Crystal City area. And what I see now are a lot of families that are staying here that I knew their mom and dad's. When they came to this house with their kids. And now their kids have kids and are in Crookston.

AA: Okay.

KM: I mean, there are a handful of families where I knew their mom and dad's better than I knew them, and they may be within the age range of me.

AA: Okay. So there are two, three generations here now.

KM: Yes.

AA: And most of them are from Texas anyway.

KM: Yes.

AA: What kinds of issues do the newer families arriving face? Is there anything? Housing, medical services, education, food?

KM: I don't know if I'd be a good one to ask, because I have been born and raised here.

AA: Right.

KM: So my view is different than theirs because they are seeing it by coming up here. They might not *feel* welcome.

AA: You're seeing it, they're experiencing it.

KM: Exactly. And I never had to experience it.

AA: Yes.

KM: Where my father and mother and my older brothers and sisters experienced it. I don't know if reaping the rewards is the right way to put it. This is my home, this is what I know. And I don't make apologies for that. But then when I see other families come here, do they struggle? Yes. More importantly, can they make it in this town? Yes.

AA: Of course.

KM: Now I think what goes on between those two is a good barometer. I mean, if you want to have a chip on your shoulder and think everybody is out against you, that doesn't mean you can't make it. But then you're not doing any favors, you know. [Pauses] I don't think I'm the best one to answer that. But you know, I wholeheartedly believe that if somebody wants to come to this town and find a good job, and move on from that job, it can be done.

AA: So you're saying that anybody who comes here, if they want to establish a good relationship with the rest of the community, Anglos and just to the community in general that's determined by how you approach it.

KM: Right.

AA: And what you do.

KM: Now with that said, if you want to come here and live off food stamps, you can. I mean, you can its fact. You can come here and get food stamps, you know. But if that's all you want to do, you know, it's going to be a miserable life.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, and people do that, of all colors, you know.

AA: Sure.

KM: I mean, this state has been notorious for, you know the food stamps and handouts that they give. But I think if somebody comes here, and really need and that's probably another thing that I should say about my family, is when I grew up as a kid, and literally, as a child, you know, that's what I knew. That's the monetary value that I knew, was a food stamp.

AA: Sure.

KM: You know, I knew what they looked like, I knew what it represented, and I knew that it wasn't real money. But it had the value of money. And to see my father and my mother drift away from that dependency is a huge, huge thing for us. You know, so I know that you don't have to be dependent on the government.

AA: Yes.

KM: You know my mother and father were a perfect example of that. But I think some people, for whatever reasons, tend to think that that's okay. Because it's there, I'm going to use it, and abuse it, and use it.

AA: So you're saying that your parents moved away from that, did something to you and how you saw things and how you did things.

KM: You know, my dad, when I think of a couple of things about my dad is, number one is his work ethic, and when he didn't have to work at all, he volunteered.

AA: Okay.

KM: And just the financial aspect of our family. You know, to know that food stamps are what we grew up with. And then to realize my ma left us pretty okay.

AA: [Chuckles]

KM: That didn't happen from, you know, she found a lucky job that paid her an enormous wage.

AA: Sure.

KM: That came with blood, sweat, and tears. You know, and that's why I was telling you a couple stories, it is about, you know, taking care of dad, taking care of the brothers and the sisters to make sure they're rested to work.

AA: Are there any organizations, Latino organizations in this area?

KM: You know there's the Migrant Council.

AA: Okay.

KM: And my father was a part of that in the 1970s. And that's still going. I think that is the main one.

AA: What's the name of the organization?

KM: I believe it is Migrant Health.

AA: Migrant Health, okay.

KM: Yes. And then there used to be, back in the 1970s, early 1980s, you know, they used to have school during the summer for these kids, which was the equivalent of probably what my sister went through.

AA: Okay.

KM: But on a daily scale versus a weekly scale. The kids would go to school, and then they'd go home at the end of the day.

AA: Just like summer school for the kids.

KM: Yes. Yes. And, you know, my sisters did that, my father was a recruiter. My father would go out to all the families and recruit the kids. And that's when I was telling them the story about my mother coming, everybody coming here during the summer, in the spring that was one of the main reasons why, is because my father, if he didn't know every family, or if he didn't personally meet every family that was here, he knew of every family.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know, because he went to the farms to recruit the kids. And that only was done by the parents, so my father knew everyone, literally, that came up here.

AA: Are any Latinos involved in political activities, like running for office or just publicly speaking on behalf of or against politicians or political issues

KM: Well, you know, I have in the past. And, you'll see a duplex right next door, gray building?

AA: Okay. Sure.

KM: I don't know if elected is the right word. But he is a councilman, he's a city councilman.

AA: Oh, okay.

KM: And he is from Mexico.

AA: Okay.

KM: He is from Mexico; it's not like his family. He's been here maybe ten years.

AA: I see.

KM: And so he's a councilman here in the city.

AA: Oh, great.

KM: And so, you know, those are two. I know some others that are active. I know some others that are fearful, you know, for whatever reasons. But, by and large, when I said myself, I said him.

AA: What position did you run for?

KM: I didn't run for any position, I just I'm not afraid to raise crosshairs with people.

AA: Okay.

KM: And when people speak, I'm not afraid to question why they believe in this or that, or why this isn't done or that is done.

AA: So more as an activist than a politician?

KM: Right. Right.

AA: Describe how things are between newly arrived individuals and those who have been here many years. Is that good? Is it kind of like seamless transition into the community, or there is friction?

KM: I think what you just described about coming into the community isn't so much happening anymore as it was ten years ago, fifteen years ago, twenty years ago.

AA: Okay.

KM: I think now when you see it, it's because a family that's been here fifteen years, all of a sudden their brother might want to give this a shot. And I don't want to say they're welcomed with open arms, but they're certainly not going to deter them from making it here.

AA: Okay.

KM: You know. I think that's probably the best way to put it. But yes, we don't see the influx as much as you did anymore. And it's like I said, if you see somebody come up here, it's because it's a brother or a cousin.

AA: I know that there's a constant influx of people into a community including Latinos.

KM: Yes.

AA: I know that you said that they're coming like from Crystal City area or Texas, certainly. Are there other areas outside of the country?

KM: There used to be. In town here, we have the Care and Share Center.

AA: Okay.

KM: And we used to have a Sister. Oh, what was her name? And we used to have a lot of Guatemalans come here.

AA: Okay.

KM: Sister Justina.

AA: Okay.

KM: Was a big figure. A small lady and a big figure. And she opened the doors to everybody at the Care and Share. And I know that she helped a lot of Guatemalans come up here. So it wasn't just Mexican families that came up here, there was Guatemalans and there was a few others.

AA: Okay. And those families, some did really well?

KM: Yes. I know that there are some here and yes. And I'm friends with some and their families still.

AA: Yes. Good. Now if a friend of yours from another part of the country, like let's say somebody was to call, you said you had a sister or brother in Colorado.

KM: Yes, family.

AA: Or Texas.

KM: Yes.

AA: And one of their friends or one of them calls, says, “You know, hey, I’m thinking of moving north somewhere. And so I’m checking out some towns. Tell me about Crookston. How is work, how are race relations, how are the schools, how’s education?” What do you tell them?

KM: I think I would tell them everything’s positive. The simple answer is, Crookston is a positive community.

AA: Sure.

KM: I wouldn’t give glowing remarks on the education here. I think that’s one thing that has fallen back in the last few years. But I think there’s hope with the education system here in town. But there is employment. There’s an excellent community, there’s an excellent university on campus.

AA: Okay.

KM: There’s excellent community relations. You know, Leticia Sanchez, I don’t know if you know her.

AA: I think she’s a . . .

KM: She works for Migrant Health.

AA: Sure.

KM: She works and has good relations with the community by being a part of committees. You know. So there is that barrier you don’t have to break anymore.

AA: Sure.

KM: You can come here and feel pretty welcome. There is no stigma of there’s a Mexican family moving in next door.

AA: Okay.

KM: Because I think every part of the community has a different ethnic background in their neighborhood. In their neighborhoods.

AA: Okay. If you had to think into the future, let’s say ten years, how would you describe Crookston at that time?

KM: I think the best way for me to say that would be I hope Crookston could feel comfortable in their own skin. And what I mean by that is we’re always battling against Grand Forks. It’s twenty miles away, for every one restaurant here, they’ve got twenty.

AA: Sure.

KM: For every store we have here, they have thirty. So Grand Forks is always better, better, better. They've got more, more, more. Well, there's nothing wrong with having just enough. You know, there's nothing that I can't get here in town to keep me going, you know. And that's what I mean. And in ten years, I hope Crookston can feel comfortable in their own skin, that the education department can grow, you know, the high school department, or the high school education can be better than it was now, which is where they can actually feel, well, wow, we're progressing.

AA: Yes.

KM: You know, and right now it's kind of stagnant I think that's the best way for me to put in the future you know, we don't *have* to worry about Grand Forks. I don't *have* to worry if I have somebody of a different color living next door to me. I am comfortable with who I am. So that's, I think, a good way for me to put it.

AA: So Crookston is headed that way.

KM: You know what? I think so. I think so.

AA: Would you like to add anything else to this interview we haven't covered?

KM: You know, there is one thing that I haven't said that, there's one thing that I do because I was asked to do it, and that is I work on a fiesta in Crookston. And every year we've had one now for five years. So this'll be the fifth year that I've done it. And it's called Fiesta in the Spirit of Cinco de Mayo.

AA: Okay.

KM: And so it's generally held in April, just because we can't do things on campus in May. So it's easier to do something in April. It's easier to get performers to come up from the Cities in April than it is when they're busy with Cinco de Mayo down there. And we spread the culture through food, through song, and through dance.

AA: Yes.

KM: And the first year it was eight hundred people. And last year was just over a thousand, so about eleven hundred.

AA: That's good.

KM: It's probably one of the biggest Hispanic events this far north.

AA: Wow.

KM: And someone said that Fargo-Moorhead doesn't even have an event as big as ours. And why do I do that? Because I want to do what I can to say, you know, we are all of the same. You know, there's no reason to distrust us, to not like us, but more importantly, it's to teach the kids, be proud of who you are and what you are, because we're all the same, you know. And I get a good turnout there. It's not all Hispanic and Mexican people there, and it's not all white people there.

AA: Okay.

KM: There is everybody there. And the university is a very multicultural campus. And you go to that event and its like, Wow! But another thing that I do, there have been three of us, three to five core people that have been on every committee, and Leticia's been one of them. And Anna Corona has been another one. She's been one. And so it's nice to see it keeps going. But there's one thing that we did from the very first meeting was that we are going to make this a free event for everybody, you know. And we've been able to do that every year so far.

AA: So UMC sponsors it but it's not on campus?

KM: UMC sponsored it, it's all on campus.

AA: Okay.

KM: There's a lot of faculty and staff that donate many, many hours.

AA: Okay.

KM: I think the last three years we've met at least nine months out. And I know last year's event; we already started the thinking of it the night after the event.

AA: Sure.

KM: So a full calendar year of planning. And this one's already started and, last July and August. And now we're down to forty-some days. So I mean it's a huge thing, a lot of people come, and the food is quality. It's as good as we can get.

AA: Do you have the dates yet?

KM: It's April 12th.

AA: Okay.

KM: And then another thing that we do is Anna Corona and Leticia Sanchez; however they did, they said, "You've got to get it. We should get a scholarship in your mom's memory."

AA: Sure.

KM: And so that was really nice of them ladies to think like that. So right now this is our third year of trying to get a twenty-five thousand dollar endowed scholarship.

AA: Wow.

KM: We have a little bit way to go. You know, we're making progress.

AA: I see.

KM: I'm at a number that I'm comfortable with for the third year. But to know that somebody's going to be endowed, that she's my mother, like what I say, we were on food stamps growing up. You know. But then to know that her work never stopped, whether if it was changing diapers, whether it was working in the community, you know, whether it was anything that my mother did, it was her vision was always the same. It's about the kids. So I want to get to that twenty-five thousand endowed mark, and then that memory of her will live on for, you know, eternally.

AA: Wow. That's great.

KM: And that's going to be for Mexican kids. That's not going to be for my kids. It won't be for my kids, it'll be for the Hispanic family down the street. If they want to send a kid to school, you know what? This scholarship's going to help them. Not everything, but it'll give them a good boost.

AA: Sure.

KM: So and that's the intent of that.

AA: Wow. That's great.

KM: So I hope that that can get done. In my lifetime! [Chuckles]

AA: Yes, that's great. So who do they contact if they want to put some money in?

KM: They can contact me, they can contact Leticia. I also have other information.

AA: How?

KM: Leticia. I don't have her number.

AA: Okay.

KM: But through Migrant Health in Crookston. If that's one thing that I'm going to do with you is I'm going to email you that information. Just so, number one that you can physically have what we're going to be doing. We made a beautiful brochure explaining this, explaining who my mom was.

AA: Okay.

KM: About the event. We're having a silent auction this year. So I'm doing my part. But the message isn't about my mom; the message isn't about the scholarship. The message is for a youngster in this town to say, you know what? I can make it in this town, because there is no reason why any child can't make it. You know, and that's beyond color to me.

AA: Well, great.

KM: Yes.

AA: Anything else?

KM: No, just thanks for contacting me and I'm glad we connected and got this done.

AA: Well, I just thank you. Thank you very much, Ken.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society