

Transcript: Adolph Orpeza, tape #1 Laurie Bretts

Laurie: (UNCLEAR)..Having an interview for the project Trabajo y Cultura, Mexican labor and culture. Mr. Orpeza, would you say a few words? When were you born Mr. Orpeza?

Orpeza: I was born in 1911, September the 12th.

Laurie: Where were you born?

Orpeza: In Mexico, Michocan.

Laurie: When did you come here to the United States?

Orpeza: When they brought me. (LAUGHS) I was two years old when they brought me over here. (TAPE STOPS)

Laurie: When you came here to the U.S., or to Kansas City, where did you live. What was it like growing up here in Kansas City?

Orpeza: ...well...let's see... (PAUSE)

Laurie: Where did you live?

Orpeza: I lived on 26th street, right off an old wooden bridge. It went over the Santa Fe RR tracks. I lived there for about 2 or 3 years.

Laurie: What were the houses like?

O: They're still standing.

L: Did you go to school at Clara Barton?

O: I went to Clara Barton and Emerson. Mostly Clara Barton.

L: Did you go to high school?

O: No.

L: How old were you when you started working?

O: I was about 16.

L: Was that pretty young?

O: No, we'd go out on the farm for 10c an hour, maybe a dollar a day, all day.

L: How old were most of the kids when they started working?

O: They were young kids, most of them. We'd go 10 or 15 miles just to go to work.

L: How did you get there?

O: Walk.

L: What kind of work did you do?

O: Truck farming, helping the farmer raise vegetables. Dig potatoes and everything.

L: You were pretty young when your father died, right?

O: No, he died in '36.

L: So how old were you then? 24?

O: (MUMBLED) years old.

L: And you're the oldest of the family, right?

O: The oldest.

L: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

O: I got...5 girls and 1 boy...one brother, (UNCLEAR)...

L: How did your family make a living?

O: Go to work, take care of them until they got out of high school. Then I got married in '41. Then about 3 or 4 years after, he died.

L: Where did you go to work at?

Orpeza: I worked for the Santa Fe...and ice plant,... Columbia steel tank...Rock Island.

And the city. ...(UNCLEAR)...I was maintenance in trailer city for 2 years. Two years in Oklahoma. Then I came back and went to work at the Santa Fe again. I got my pension 6 years ago.

Laurie: When you started with Santa Fe, what kind of work did you do?

O: When I first started, labor.

L: What kind?

O: Hard work and labor. One time they put me on loading and unloading tools off the engines. That was eight hours work and I mean work. When they laid me off, I was glad.

L: What were you loading and unloading?

O: Tools off the steam engines.

L: What kind of tools?

O: Tools for going out on the road.

L: Were they pretty heavy?

O: Some of them were. I had to get on the engine, go all over it and see that everything was on there. then take tools off the one one that come in. The light tools, not the big heavy tools. Like the wrenches and hammer and oil.

L: Why was it such hard work?

O: Heck, didn't get no break in eight hours.

Orpeza (cont.): Alot of times I'd come way out from the round house to give them some tools. Then in '41 I quit the Sante Fe. They wanted to keep me as a laborer forever. (LAUGHS)

Laurie: What other kinds of things did you do as a laborer?

O: That was only about 1 or 2 years that I done that. Later on it was easier. There would only be 1 or 2 coal burning engines in eight hours; I'd knock the fire out of them. Put them inside the round house. That would only take me 15 or 20 minutes. The rest of the day I'd fool around. The foreman wanted me to keep busy but my job was just to put the engines out. so I told him off in '41. Went out to Rock Island, got on as a machinist's helper. I worked 2 years there and I quit and went to Oklahoma.

L: Why'd you quit?

O: I just wanted to go to Oklahoma.

L: What was it like working at Rock Island?

O: Rock Island v/as good. Good money and easy work.

L: Are most of the RR jobs pretty easy?

O: No, none of them. Not like the gandies out on the track.

L: Have you ever done that? What's it like?

O: Well you dig one side of the track and pull a tie out that way and stick another one in there.

Orpeza (cont.): Pull out the rotten one, put in a new one, spike it and go on to another one.

Sometimes unload that rock all'along the mainline. Sometimes unload ties.

Laurie: How much did ties way?

O: I think a tie weighed about two to two-fifty. Two hundred to two hundred fifty. The switch tie were three or four hundred. Took three or four men to handle them.

L: So how many ties would you put in a day?

O: Depends on how many rotten ones. The worst part was that they always put me with a great big guy and I was one of the smallest ones. I had fun with the big guy, he'd do what I couldn't do.

L: That's not a bad deal. Did most of the Mexican workers there work as Gandies?

O: Out in the section gangs. They used to have about 15 or 20 out here in the Argentine district. maybe more. Now they only got maybe one section. They used to do everything by hand now they do it by machinery. Some of them already have the spikes put in them. Some of the tracks run for miles and miles with out any joints, all they do is weld them. They do everything with machines now.

L: What happened to all those workers replaced by machines.

Orpeza: Most of them are dead now.

Laurie: What other departments did the Mexican workers work in?

G: Some of them worked at the Roundhouse, rip track freight house later on. Later they got better jobs.

L: When did people start getting better jobs?

O: After the war. In forty one I decide they wanted me to go to war, they didn't want me to work for the RR, so I got out.

L: So you didn't go to war?

O: No, I was just about ready to go when. They quit fighting.

L: After you went and farmed in Oklahoma.

you came back and got another job with the Sante Fe? What were you doing then?

O: Working in the Freight house. Handling freight.

L: Clerical work?

O: Some clerical and some transferring freight from one car to the other.

L: So there was some manual labor in that too.

O: Yeah, there was manual labor.

L: Was that pretty, hard work?

O: No, just steady all night.

Orpeza: That was the hardest work I ever had, except for picking beets, in Lyman, Nebraska.

Laurie: How old were you when you were doing that?

O: About 25...

L: Tell me about how you do that.

O: Five of us went to Nebraska to Top beets. Me, Tony, Chief...Jeffy...

L: How do you top beets?

O: You get a row maybe a mile or two long, you're with a team to dig them up. The beets are 5, 10 or 15 pounds a piece. You dig them up and put them all in a row, then you go back with your knife, cut the top off and throw them off to one side. We'd do it from daylight til dark. A lot of times it was freezing.

L: How much did they pay you for doing that?

O: They paid you by the ton. I didn't know what I was getting until we come home and the sugar company sent us our check. We was working for another guy who had the contract and we was just helping him.

L: When you went to Nebraska, where did you stay?

O: Old shacks, sleeping on the floor. No blankets, just your coat or whatever you have on. That was work, all day long, no mercy for the Mexicans.

L: What about eating?

O: We didn't take time to go eat. We'd eat in the morning, then at noon, then at night. We used to get five meals a day when we were working for the Belgians, when we were kids. Some of those farmers, they'd give you breakfast, then work 2 or 3 hours, then a snack, some more work, then lunch. Three o'clock another snack, then a supper. So they'd give you plenty to eat and plenty of work. Keep you in good shape! (LAUGHS)

Laurie: Why did they do that?

O: They're used to eating five times a day.

Most of those Belgians do.

L: I wanted to ask you about the unions at Sante Fe.

O: When I started there, there was just the company union. It didn't represent the laborers, just the guys making the big money, like the engineers, foremen and machinists.

L: Is that still true today?

O: No, it's better now. They go out on strike any time somebody wants a raise. If the clerks go out most of everybody else goes out. If the engineers go out, everybody goes out.

L: How did the Mexican workers feel about the union?

O: We didn't pay anything to the union because they wouldn't represent us. Now they have the AF of L-CIO in there.

L: Was there a lot of difference after the war?

Orpeza: Yeah, there was a lot of difference. We had somebody to raise our grievances with.

Laurie: Do you remember any activity during the depression to try and organize the people?

O: One day me, Tony Alvarado and some others were going to hear a guy from Missouri talk about organizing the union. We went down to the place, and the police raided it. They claimed that they were communists. (LAUGHS) They took some guys in, but we got there too late to be raided.

L: Who was organizing it? Was it the IWW?

O: I don't remember who it was the paper said. We had it in Spanish.

L: Was it El Cosmopolita?

O: I don't know.

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O: Do you remember when that paper came out about the Clara Barton school? I called some of the people and everybody was interested. But it was too much, I couldn't do it all by myself.

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L: What was it like living in the depression?

O: There wasn't hardly anybody working.

L: How did you eat?

O: We had cows and pigs and chickens.

Orpeza (cont.): Then the depression came and everybody had to lose their pride and go get their food order. They'd give so much for each kid. I think that was after Roosevelt got in.

Laurie: Were there bread lines?

O: You'd go to the welfare and get your grocery order. You'd go to the Parrish house and get some surplus food that they had. It wasn't complete starvation.

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O: During the depression Roosevelt put in that program to send the kids to work.

L: What did you do during the depression?

O: I didn't do nothing, I was too young.

My dad was still working two or three days a week.

L: How much school did you have?

O: Eighth grade.

L: What was the discrimination like?

O: They wouldn't let you in the drug store to drink a soda pop. They wouldn't let us in the restaurants, we had to eat it out side or at home. They segregated us in the movies. I don't remember ever seeing any colored going in the show, I don't think they'd let them go in. I think the blacks were worse off than we were.

Laurie: When did things start getting better as far as discrimination?

Orpeza: After WWII. I think it was worse in Texas. They didn't worry about us here very much because there weren't too many of us.

L: How did things start getting better after the War?

O: They'd sue them if they didn't serve them. I remember somebody wanted my sister to go and sit in the drug store, and if: they'd throw her out, they'd go and sue them, so a lot of them were afraid of getting sued. I never had much trouble with them. Why would I want to go someplace where I wasn't wanted?

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L: If you were to write a book about your life, what kind of things would you write about?

O: Well, like the experience when we went hunting one time. Me and Sam Ruiz and Tony Orpeza and another Mexican. We went around Olathe and we stayed over night. There used to be a lot of guys from around here go hunting out there and some of them wouldn't get permission from the farmers. They'd shot squirrels, rabbits or whatever. The farmers didn't like it. When we went this time, there had been some guys breaking the fence to get in. We killed a possum. One of the farmers saw us and he notified the guys around there and when we tried to go home they held us until the the shefiff took us. The Sheriff wanted to charge us with everything they could think of. This was around the time when two Mexican students had been killed in Texas. Sam Ruiz, he was eighteen. I told him to say he was 16 and still in school. Tony knew how to speak english but I told him to pretend he couldn't. The other guy couldn't speak English anyway. That way they couldn't take us for interrogation one at a time and confuse our stories. I was the only one talking to the police. We were in jail close to two months.

Laurie: For what?

O: They never told us. The prosecuting Attorney told us if we plead guilty we'd only get thirty days and we wouldn't have to pay no lawyer. I told him to give it to us in writ mg and he said he couldn't do that. The next day they took me out to show them where we'd been. I showed and he said he didn't see no signs. I said how could you when it rained all night last night? On the way back he threatened to beat me up. He slapped me, but I didn't start to fight back, so he didn't hit me any more. I told him do what you want, we'll see what happens in court. We plead guilty and they gave us 45 days. I counted all the days and we got time off for good behavior. We didn't have no hard time. One time they were taking us from the jail to the rock pile. We had to break up rocks and load them into a wagon. It was fresh air, better than sitting in the jail. One time, one of the guard went to the toilet, a little shack. He must of been drinking, 'cause he left his 45 in there. My cousin went in after him and found the gun. He showed it to me and I

figured it would be better to give it back to the guard. Boy, he turned red, "don't you guys ever say nothing about this, because I'll get in trouble." That guard never did bother us any more. One night that sheriff had that jail full. He raided some party and the jail was full and they had new mattresses. The next morning my cousin and I got ourselves two new mattresses each to sleep on.

Laurie: Did the Mexican folks here drink during the depression?

O: Yeah, they made their own home brew.

Here L. asks questions about labor organizing, communists, and problems for Mexicans during the past, but O. doesn't seem to want to talk about them.

Laurie: Do you think we should keep the same kind of political system? How would you change it if you could?

Orpeza: My opinion of the inflation is that they let the millionaires take all the profit they want. The big companies have no control over their profits. What are the poor people going to do? The oil companies are charging us what ever they want to. I know a guy working for a oil company, and he says the first time they had that gas shortage, they had plenty of gas, but they wanted to hold it until the price went up. Did you read about the Hunts the other day? The Hunt Brothers from Texas made the price of silver go up, but it dropped again. The government has the laws to step in, but they don't want to do nothing.

L: What can you do about it?

O: Revolution. That's all. Somebody will start some kind of revolution if the rich people don't share with the poor people. Eventually if they get too greedy, the poor people going to fight and do something.

L: You think that might be a good thing?

O: Good for some people, not good for the people who get killed. (LAUGHS)

Orpeza (cont.): I don't think the rich people will ever share with the poor people. There's always a lot of people who won't share.

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ORPEZA INTERVIEW TAPE #2 ADOLPH OROPEZA LAURIE BRETZ

ORPEZA INTERVIEW, TAPE #2 Laurie Bretz

Adolph Oropeza

Laurie Bretz: Do you think that other people have come to the conclusion that some day there may well be a revolution here? That that's the only way to make things better?

Adolph Oropeza: Well... something has to break. Somebody's going to have to give somewhere.

L: Why do you say that?

A: People aren't going to keep paying more and more. Right now they're starting a depression. You see how many Ford is laying off? Chrysler's going to fold up, maybe. Rock Island folded up. I think Chrysler's going to fold up.

L: Do you see things happening now like you saw things happening in the 30s?

A: No, in the 30s, the rich people got their money, put it away and wouldn't let anybody get a hold of it. The stock market was the one that messed up everything. Our trouble right now is

that we're bringing in too much cheap stuff to this country, from all those foreign countries. All the going out of work and cringing those foreign cars in here. How come the government can't do nothing about that? They don't want to break the relations with Japan and all those countries!

L: Why are so many of the factories that used to be in the United States going to places like Taiwan and Korea?

A: They can get cheaper labor! What are the people going to do here? Just buy it with nothing? Bringing all those immigrants from the other countries...where you going to put them to work?

L: What do you think about the people that keep coming from Mexico?

A: LAUGHTER We was here first!

MORE LAUGHTER

L: Who is we?

As The Aztecas. The Indians.

L: So what do you think about all the white folks who keep, on coming?

A: There ain't no more white people coming, just Orientals now.

L: Here in Kansas City, the first people were Indians, then some of the people came from Boston some of the white folks, and then came some of the European immigrants, some of the Croations, and the Poles. Then the Blacks came. Then around the first of the century some of the Mexican people came up to work on the rail road. Ever since then there have been people coming up from the Old Country.

Adolp Oropeza: A lot of them feel they're going to where they're supposed to be. They say they bought the land from the Indians, the Mexicans and the French, but you read that book, you know what the gimmicks were.

L: You think the Mexican folks have as much right to be here as anybody else?

A: All that land that the United States got from Mexico, they should not say a thing about people immigrating to that part of the country.

L: A lot of folks will say that the mujados are taking from them, living off the system, and getting welfare. What do you think about that?

Oropeza: Some of them get welfare... But a lot of them, if they can get a better job than working in the factory or working in the field, they'll go and get it. A lot times, people here don't want to those dirty jobs. And a lot of the trouble is, if they can get away with hiring wetbacks, they'll do it. If they can pay them less. But if the government said, if you hire them you must pay them full wages, they'll hire somebody else.

Laurie: Have you ever seen any activities to indicate that people are ready to change things

A: We're better off now than we were before. Getting educated and getting in there where you got pull, When we started, very few were going to high school, but now there are more and more of them.

L: How was it that more Mexican kids started going to high school?

A: A lot of them wanted to get ahead. Some of them don't care, there's a lot of them just satisfies with living from day to day.

L: When do you think people are going to step thinking about just themselves?

Oropeza: They're going to have to get together and start another party. What are we going to call it?

L: What would you like to call it?

A; I don't know. I don't think there's any difference between republicans or democrats. Who cares about the poor people?

L: If you were going to make a new party, what would it be?

A: Poor party. (LAUGHS)

L: And what would you do?

A: Limit the amount of money you could make.

L: For the poor people?

A: For the rich people.

L: What other kinds of things would you do?

A: That's the only thing you'd need to do. Don't let anyone get richer than the government.

L: Then who would run the government?

A: Everybody.

L: Rich folks, too?

A: They wouldn't be rich like they are now.

Laurie: Oh, so what are you talking about doing? Taking away the rich folks money?

A; No, no, don't take it away, just spend it, do something with it. Not send it to some other country.

L: Who would run the factories and the railroads?

A: The guys on top. Let them share the profits.

L: What do you think about conditions down in Mexico?

A: Some people claim that there are only two classes in Mexico, the rich and the poor. I don't think so. There ain't that many rich people in Mexico. Some of them are well off, but they're not rich people, not like there are here. They think they are, but they're not that rich.

L: What do you think about the political system in Mexico?

A: It's getting better. But they still got those guerillas who want to do away with the government. I don't know what their aims are.

Laurie: What other types of things would you like to put in your book?

Oropeza: Let's see...

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Laurie: Do you consider yourself to be a radical?

Oropeza: No.

L: What is a radical?

Oropeza: People who want to make trouble all the time. We used to have a few bad Mexicans, but they didn't last very long. Bullies and stuff like that.

L: What kind of things do you want people to remember about Argentine?

Oropeza: A lot of them come to the United States because of the revolution over there.

END OF TAPE