

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY

LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY  
LVV 6

Carlos Ramirez  
Interview  
By  
Brea Tinsley  
On  
July 26, 2019

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
LATINO VOICES OF THE VALLEY  
LVV 6

INTERVIEWEE: Carlos Ramirez

INTERVIEWER: Brea Tinsley

SUBJECT: Life as a Latin American Immigrant in Youngstown, OH

DATE: July 26, 2019

BT: This is an interview with Carlos Ramirez for the project, "Latino Voices of the Valley" for Youngstown State University. The interview is on July 26, 2019 at the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor. My name is Brea Tinsley. Hi Carlos, how are you?

CR: Hi, I'm fine.

BT: Ok. Where were you born?

CR: In Copandaro, Michoacan, Mexico.

BT: Ok, and how old were you when you came to the United States?

CR: [Twenty years old.

BT: Ok. Why did you decide to come to the United States?

CR: Family issues. My family had already immigrated here. They had all come. I had stayed behind in Mexico to further my education, to finish my teaching degree. So that was the reason. Two years later, I met up with them [my family].

BT: So when you arrived to the United States, did you experience culture shock?

CR: Yes, a lot.

BT: Can you think of any examples?

CR: Everything. The way houses were built, the language, the food, the weather, especially the weather.

BT: When you came here, did you already know how to speak English?

CR: No.

BT: No? Was it difficult for you?

CR: It was difficult because I couldn't go to school to learn it properly, how it should be. Instead, I learned more by reading, listening and talking with others, little by little.

BT: Do you prefer to speak English or Spanish now?

CR: It depends on the circumstances. If I am at a Mexican—Latino—social event, of course I'm going to use Spanish. But if I am with Americans, where I can't speak Spanish, I don't mind speaking English.

BT: Do you identify more with Mexican or American culture?

CR: Mexican.

BT: Why?

CR: Possibly because I came here from Mexico when I was twenty years old. And my whole childhood, my youth, I was there. Upon coming to the United States, I think it was—when I moved for work... But also, because of my age, and that I never had the opportunity to live with an American. I think I still feel more Mexican than American.

BT: So, what Mexican traditions or celebrations do you preserve and still practice here?

CR: Well, I think I try to celebrate more Mexican things, except for the fact we are here. But if we don't want to lose the identity we bring from Mexico and it's—for example, Cinco de Mayo, which is popular nowadays, [and] Mexican Independence Day. When I have the opportunity to watch TV, I can see exactly what is happening over there. There is another celebration that we have also tried to preserve religiously, which is Our Lady of Guadalupe. Those are the cultures or celebration we have tried to keep.

BT: How do you celebrate Independence Day and the Lady of Guadalupe?

CR: Mexican Independence Day is celebrated in Mexico in schools, by marching, folkloric dances for parents—in bigger cities. Of course there is everything that they want to show, which is the Air Force, the Marines, the Army—they also march on this day. And traditionally on this day, when in Mexico—and I was eighteen years old, I automatically had to serve the country for a year. So it was something that was necessary to do... to fulfill our obligation to our country... by marching, too.

BT: And the Lady of Guadalupe?

CR: The Lady of Guadalupe is more the faith that was instilled in us as children, to believe in the mother of God, right? And I think that because I was more often alone than with my family, involuntarily, that religious belief always stuck with me. I always believed she was with me, even when my birth mother couldn't be. It's something that I hung on to. I always have, since I was young.

BT: Do you have children?

CR: I have three.

BT: How have the traditions changed since your generation?

CR: Well, traditions have changed in the sense that when someone already has family in the United States, you don't necessarily get what you want from them. [Your children] will try to conform more with the American culture for the simple fact of that is where they live. We are in a region without many Mexicans or Latinos, so as time goes on, we have to deal with more Americans. So yes, the family has lost some traditions that we wanted to preserve.

BT: What traditions did you practice that your children do not?

CR: Well, they still know them... but practicing them... I love them but... I think where we run into problems is with religious traditions and also cultural [traditions].

BT: So, they were lost?

CR: They are lost little by little. Although right now my children, I try to involve them a little more, and if they don't do it, I'd think it would be a little harder [to do] with my grandchildren. It's the third generation that will lose the tradition, that's where we will have a problem.

BT: What do you think about those changes?

CR: The changes are inevitable. My father said it himself, "You are going to see changes that will happen in the family."

BT: Ok. Do you children practice any traditions or celebrations from this country that you really like?

CR: Well, I think, there really aren't any traditions that come from them, where they say, I have to go, because they like them. I mean, they are becoming a little more distant. For the same reason, they don't—they don't live amongst other Latinos or other Mexicans that encourage them to do it—to gather with them. And it's because of that I think they won't say, "Dad, let's go celebrate the Independence of Chicago or Detroit," or anything like that. But I would like to tell them, "Let's go," but I think if I tell them, they would go, but it's only because I told them, not because they wanted to.

Now, soccer is different. There, they [take the initiative and] say, "Let's go see a team that you like," or "Let's go see La selección mexicana when they come to town." They are the ones that bring those things up. But culturally, it's not the same. But with sports, yes. We just came from Chicago. We went there on Tuesday to see a soccer game there in one of the stadiums in Chicago. It was—it is a very popular team in Mexico; it was my favorite when I was younger, when I still lived in Mexico. They were playing there, and my grandson was there with me. It was as if we were in Mexico, excited, watching the game. My son wanted to come, but he couldn't for the fact that he owns a restaurant. Through sports, we can continue [traditions] – I think, I carry them on, I feel [them].

BT: Do you eat Mexican food?

CR: Of course?

BT: What is your favorite Mexican dish?

CR: Mole

BT: What is that?

CR: Mole poblano... was created when the Spanish culture mixed with the Indians and the French. During that time, the story was that the people always wanted to get along with whoever was in charge, which was the Spanish at the time. During the time when they wanted to take over Mexico, they wanted to give the best that they could. So, they made a dish that was a combination of French, Spanish and Indian [food]. It is made with six or seven different chili peppers, sauce. It also has chocolate, which gives it a sweet flavor, which is the Indian part. The French part, it has ground nuts in it. Before, they ground the nuts by hand. And of course, today, it can be bought without having to do everything that was done before. But it's a sauce that people have to acquire a taste for first. It goes with whatever you eat. I try to tell Americans that in our culture, Mole is seen at weddings. [Here,] they have pasta, right? Spaghetti and meatballs or whatever, they serve mostly Italian dishes. Mole is like that [for us]. It is very popular for big family gatherings, like parties.

BT: What do you miss most about Mexico?

CR: Well, I've always missed my friends. I couldn't continue growing up with them since I left them in my youth. Although when I go back to visit, I try to contact them and try to maintain the friendships that we had before. But also, I think it's something that one loses because, yes, we see each other and talk about whatever, but we go back to 30-40 years ago, when our group was separated. That being said, we know that we've lost a lot. They've moved on with their lives, like I did with mine in the United States.

BT: Do you still have contact with the Hispanic community here in the United States?

CR: Yes. I served the community for about twelve years on the Eastside of Youngstown, Southside, Northside, more than anything. I always forget about the Westside, but I get together a lot with Puerto Ricans. They were the ones that were dominant, in schools, sports—I was always with them.

BT: And Mexicans?

CR: There were very few Mexicans. We were going to create a volleyball team to compete with them, like a championship [between] Latinos. There were people that belonged to the church, they made their team, but there were more Puerto Ricans than anything. Our team was mostly Mexicans and a couple Americans. On that team, one of the judges here played with us—Kerrigan, I don't know if you've heard of him, Judge Kerrigan—I'm talking about the 80s, the end of the 80s, beginning of the 90s.

BT: What do you appreciate most about the United States?

CR: What I appreciate most about this country is that there are always opportunities, and you just have to take advantage of them.

BT: Ok. What do you like least about the United States?

CR: Mmm, what I like least, you could say the wars, that we are always involved in wars, and sometimes, I don't know if they are justified. But I think the country is always on the alert, continual alert. Compared to Mexico—and of course besides the narcos that have come in the last twenty years—for years after the Mexican Revolution, the country was calm. The country [Mexico] never wanted to invade other countries, but also other countries never wanted to invade Mexico, so it was very calm during my childhood, my youth. And then I came to the United States when I was twenty years old. So of course when I immigrated here, they make you sign something that states you'll do what the country wants you to do. And one of the things they wanted was for me to serve the country. If the country drafted me, I had to go. They called me to go to Vietnam, the Vietnam War. I didn't serve because I didn't know how to speak English. I didn't pass the test they gave all of us. They rejected me twice because I didn't know how to answer the questions. That was enough to deny someone, not knowing how to write the language. But anyways, my brothers, one of them went to Vietnam.

BT: What was your first job in the United States?

CR: There was a factory close to where we are. It was called Penn-Ohio Power Supply. So it was a factory where they cleaned and ironed what was needed in hospitals, hotels, kitchens, all the restaurants. And that was my first job when I came, like within a month. Within a month of arriving here, I came in February and in March I applied for and got a job here, nearby here. It was located where YSU is now. Now none of it exists anymore.

BT: Could you describe a typical day on this job?

CR: Well, in this job, when they gave me the opportunity to work, they asked me if I wanted me to take clothing, iron it, wash it and all that, or if I preferred to unload trucks that had everything piled up in them, all dirty. So I asked which one paid more. They told me unloading trucks, and that is when I told them I'll do that then *[laughter]*. But the salary was \$1.25 an hour and there it was \$1.75, so the fifty cents more made me want to work there. And of course, it was harder. Later, I had to unload carts filled with clothes, take them to the washer and organize and distribute them afterwards. But that was my day—it was unloading trucks—that was a typical day for me.

BT: Ok. Could you tell me about your experience working on the railroads?

CR: Over time, you can start to see how a train car moves. And there were many parts that had to be working. Some of the parts broke down and had to be repaired. Over the years, I learned all about working on railroad cars on the job. There were two tests done: as the mechanic, I had to do everything manually, like change parts, put on the new ones, take them off and all that; then the other job was inspecting them. Of course, inspecting them was cleaner, while changing them was dirtier. But at first, seniority ruled, and sometimes we weren't able to do what we wanted. For years, I was always doing the manual work. But when I was able to do inspections, on a typical day of inspecting trains, well, it was the same, I had a lot of responsibility because I had to make sure that every car was rolling perfectly on the train tracks. And there were a lot of defective parts that could cause accidents. And you have to be very careful to make sure everything sounded right. And there were times when a train would pass and you would know there was a car that sounded different than the rest, and you could tell...

BT: Wow!

CR: ...which part probably had the damaged car, right? They were so good that when the train entered the yard with the cars and they were close to them, they would say, "Go and inspect this train which has arrived from that place," knowing that the train was defective and we had to find the problem and verify if it was that or not. But that was the experience that I had in this job.

BT: It seems a little stressful because there is no room for error.

CR: No. Because of that, there were times when I would inspect cars—long trains, and I would go home, still with a doubt that maybe something had happened that I didn't catch, but I just gave my trust to God and hoped that everything turned out okay. But it's—there's a lot of stress in those jobs.

BT: Ok. You are the owner of a Mexican restaurant, right?

CR: Yes, the restaurant grew because—well, let me try to explain to you my situation at the time. I worked on the railroads, right?

BT: Mm.

CR: I was working and then the economic depression hit here because of the recession that was big in the Valley, in 1980. It started in '79 but they closed all the steel mills at the beginning of the 80s, well they let me go from the railroad.

BT: Ok.

CR: And I wasn't working on the railroads for almost fifteen years. So, in those fifteen years, I was working as a social worker at OCCHA [Organización Cívica y Cultural Hispana Americana] and a truck driver—and it was because of me trying to juggle two jobs, because I didn't have family benefits to get by on. So at the end of the 80s, I met a friend who I had played football with and we had a soccer league, and he had a little restaurant which was in a building across from Phar-Mor where they had different foods: Italian, Chinese, and I don't know what else—and he asked me, "Why don't you put a Mexican restaurant there?" I convinced my wife to go with me to serve lunch at least—Mexican food here downtown. So, for two years, two, almost three, we were more or less fine. Now, at that time, the people had gotten a little used to Mexican food. So, when I decided to look for another place—because the other place had closed down [and] they made us leave—my wife didn't really want us to leave—I simply told her that one day, we will find a place. We achieved it and it was like—we decided to create a restaurant where we are now, Casa Ramirez.

BT: Ok, why do you believe your restaurant is so successful today?

CR: Because since the beginning, we wanted to cook like my wife cooks at home, and many people have told me that that's what distinguishes our food from that of other [Mexican] restaurants. At the time, there were no more than two or three chains: Chi-chi's, Taco Bell and another one—because I always tried to tell her that what we were offering was something that we have had since coming from Mexico. It's like, my wife saw her mother cooking, and I watched how my mother cooked. Well, we wanted to combine that in the dishes we would make. So, it was because—I always tell people, "By eating here, you are eating the food that I eat at home." There's no difference, it's homemade.

BT: Ok. [Nods]

CR: I think that's why people continue to come.

BT: Ok. I understand. Could you tell me about the education system in Mexico when you lived there?

CR: What do you mean?

BT: The differences between the school system here and there.

CR: Well, what I can remember, when I went to school—I didn't go to private school. I went to a boarding school in Morelia, which is a city, the capital of the state of Michoacan—where they gave us classes. But also, they gave us food. Everything was paid for by the government...it was what backed it. Everything that was required, they provided it. Now, I see others sending their children to school, and they struggle to provide what their children need. And now, I think to myself, well, since my father decided to put me in [boarding school] and I moved away from my family to Morelia at nine years old (I was very young, right?), so I really couldn't experience how others grew up. [I can't] really compare my school life to that of others, because they always gave us everything: pencils, paper, books, the government provided everything.

BT: Ok.

CR: Here, well I think the school system is organized by district. So every region has its own way of providing everything. But anyways, even though there are many funds that are going toward those expenses, they still demand a lot from families because they have to give economically. They go around saying "You have to give me fifty, one hundred more dollars so your kid can go to school." In order to

participate in programs or other activities, there are [fundraisers]... I did not have to experience that because everything came from the government.

BT: Ok. What does education mean to you?

CR: Education means success in the future, because without education, people are always going to struggle, especially when someone isn't educated, or doesn't have something to prepare them for the problems that they will encounter in life. I think it indirectly helped me to be able to survive for fifteen years of my life. Well, of course things happened that weren't planned. Many people tell me, "Hey, you always wanted to open a restaurant." And well, I'm not going to lie and say yes, but sometimes, necessity was what made me do it, because I said, "Well, in this country, there are so many opportunities." Now, if you lose control when things get bad, well it will get worse. So, I came out of fifteen years of not having a steady job like at the railroad. What I didn't want was to end up in the same situation again. I wanted to have something that I could control, and said, "Well, if I can't find work anywhere else, at least I can work for myself, for my family. We'll see how it goes." I said, "It's never bad to be prepared. What's better than having an education?" So I always instilled that in my children, and also I made them go to school with that in mind.

I've always told my daughters, "The old-fashioned mentality was that you grow up and at a certain age, you get married, but there isn't any guarantee that your marriage will work out." So I always told my oldest daughter, "It doesn't matter what you say or how you do it, if you just finish school, I will be happy, because if you get married and if your marriage fails, you will have something to fall back on." So with that in mind, do that and you will see that you will not struggle in life." Thank God she did it and she finished. She was one of the first ones. Before, there weren't many women in Electrical Engineering, and that's what she studied. When she was going to YSU, a friend that I knew gave her a job as a camerawoman.

BT: Mm.

CR: So she was always working in that area. When she knew she was about to graduate with a degree in engineering, she started looking for jobs to apply to. I told her to go to GM and all. She is bilingual, which helped her. They created a position for her there at Channel 33, so she didn't leave. Well, she didn't leave until she had a family. When she had her second child, she left that job. But she has her career, and thank God her marriage is going well, so I'm am satisfied. But I've always thought that there is no guarantee that your marriage will work out. When I was in the bilingual program in OCCHA, I always emphasized that to women and girls. I always tell girls the same thing, "Prepare yourself for the future, don't just move in with any boyfriend or get married young. People separate and that is where all the problems start."

BT: And what are you most proud of?

CR: Well, of my family in general, of everything. Thank God that with all the delinquency there is, especially now, my family has always tried to do the right thing. I'm not sure if it's related, but the example one sets for them is important. What my wife feared the most was that they would have friends that wouldn't be a good influence. [She feared] that we could have problems with some other family. It means nothing to tell them, "Don't go," if later I'm going to be heavy drinking with my friends. That won't work. But I think that when they see us drinking socially, but in moderation, they too,



without even thinking about it, do the same. I mean, it's not bad to drink, it just depends how much you drink. Sometimes, that is what—well, another thing my wife feared was drugs. And even now, recently my son commented to my wife that indeed he had a lot of experiences where his friends pressured him to try drugs, but he said, "No, no, I don't want to do that, I've never done that." I don't know. The truth is that it could also be the prayers, but, yes, it's all challenging.

BT: Well, thank you for your time and thank you for helping me with my project and nice meeting you.

CR: Thank you so much!

BT: Thank you.

CR: Like I told you, I hope your project is a success and you have a good experience with all of this. I don't think everyone comes with the same situation. Everyone comes with their different problems or there are different reasons why people did what they did, and you will see that in your interviews. Like I've told you, in my case, it wasn't easy for me in the United States, but everyone has their ups and downs, but you have to prepare for things like that.

BT: Well, thank you.

CR: And you know, we will come out ahead, right? It was nice talking to you.