Transcript of an Oral History Interview

with

DIONISA CARDENAS COATES

July 10, 1975

Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

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

Dionisa Cardenas Coates, also known as Nicha C. Coates, was born and raised in Minnesota. Educated in St. Paul schools, she enjoyed a career working for the government for several years, after which she has dedicated herself to her marriage and motherhood.

She has shown a keen interest in civic and social services, holding membership in organizations including: The Mexican American Task Force on Education; The Spanish Speaking Culture Club; West Side Health Center; The Wilder Foundation; Board of Directors of the Neighborhood House; member of the Metropolitan Council on Ageing.

Dionisa's great concern for the ageing and the young people will doubtless lead her to continued contributions to our society.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview edited to aid in clarity and ease of comprehension for the reader. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
INTERVIEW WITH DIONISA "NICHIA" COATES

July 10, 1975

Interviewer: Grant A. Moosbrugger

MOOSBRUGGER: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Mrs. "Nicha" Dionisa Coates, also known as "Nicha" Cardenas Coates, for the Mexican American History Project for the Minnesota Historical Society, on July 10, 1975. We're at her home on Dodd Road. Do I have your permission to record this interview so that it will be the property of the Minnesota Historical Society?

COATES: Yes.

MOOSBRUGGER: When and where were you born? Can you tell me about your parents, and how many brothers and sisters you have?

COATES: I was born on October 9, 1928, in Cambria, Minnesota.

MOOSBRUGGER: Cambria. In what part of the state is that?

COATES: I think it's in the southwest part of the state.

MOOSBRUGGER: And you are one of how many children?

COATES: One of five. I have two brothers: Joseph and Theodore; two sisters: Margarita and Jovita.

MOOSBRUGGER: What are your sisters' married names?

COATES: Margarita is married to John Corral, and Jovita is married to Duane Souter. My brother Joe is married to Rose Jimenez. Ted is single.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where were your folks originally from?

COATES: My parents were from Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico.

MOOSBRUGGER: Both came from the same town?

COATES: Yes, from the same town. Although my father was born at another village near Sabinas Hidalgo.

MOOSBRUGGER: What are their names?

COATES: My father's name was Jose Cardenas. He was born in Bustamente, Nuevo Leon. My mother's name is Refugia Ramirez Cardenas, and she was born
COATES: in Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you know approximately what year they moved to the United States?

COATES: It must have been in 1920.

MOOSBRUGGER: Where did they first live when they came to the United States?

COATES: At the time that my father crossed over to the United States, they used to allow people to walk across to work. They just walked over as a family. They worked in Texas. I just remember some of the names of the towns where they lived; Bridgeport, Austin, and Dallas, Texas.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you know what type of work your dad did in Texas?

COATES: I suppose labor. I think he worked at one of the hotels. Hotel Adolphus in Dallas, I think. He probably worked in the kitchen. He also picked cotton.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you recall their telling you when they moved North, or under what circumstances they moved North?

COATES: Well, the living was pretty meager, and they were kind of desperate. Then a "contratistas" asked them if they wanted to go somewhere where they could earn a living. I think they came by railroad car, like a box car. I'm not sure. You would have to interview my sister or my mother for that information.

MOOSBRUGGER: Are your folks still living?

COATES: My mother is still living.

MOOSBRUGGER: So your family probably came under a contract to work in the fields?

COATES: Yes, to work in the beet fields.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you recall what part of the state they first lived in?

COATES: I think they first lived around New Ulm, because I was born in Cambria, which I believe is southwest of New Ulm.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you know approximately what year they moved to the Twin Cities?
COATES: I was about five or six years old at the time.

MOOSBRUGGER: That would have been about early 1933 or 1934. Are your sisters and brothers living around the Twin Cities now?

COATES: Yes.

MOOSBRUGGER: What schools did you go to?

COATES: I went to Lafayette. We lived in Chaska, Minnesota before we moved to the Twin Cities. There was a big hotel owned by the American Sugar Company, and a lot of Mexican families lived there. I remember one of the families was Cruz. I went to kindergarten in Chaska. When we moved here, I went to first grade at Lafayette. Then I went to Roosevelt Jr. High, and I graduated from Humboldt.

MOOSBRUGGER: From Humboldt, that would have been what year?

COATES: 1946. I think I was the only Mexican that graduated that year. There were some before me, a few of them, but, I think that year I was the only one; because there isn't any other Mexican in my year book.

MOOSBRUGGER: You mentioned that you were the only Mexican who graduated from Humboldt in 1946. Did you have any experiences that made you feel isolated or different?

COATES: Well, yes. I felt different because, although I hung around with a lot of Jewish kids from the West Side, I think I was the only Mexican and the only Catholic that belonged to a Jewish group. It just didn't work out because on Friday nights they could do things and I couldn't even eat meat. It was kind of hard. Eventually, I dropped out of the group. I think Ann Richker and I were the only ones from the West Side who were Gentiles and Catholic. I went to school mostly with the Jewish kids. Most of the Mexican kids who were my age went to Mechanic Arts High School. So, I did feel isolated. I never went to any of the games or anything like that. We lived on the lower West Side and we had to walk, it just wasn't convenient to walk that far.
COATES: I felt that had there been more Mexican kids in my class, it would have been a little easier to attend different things, especially school dances. Yes, I feel that I missed out on some things.

MOOSBRUGGER: I know that you have been active in a lot of organizations and activities since high school. Could you tell us something about your activities and organizations?

COATES: Right after high school, I went to work for Group Health. From there, I went to Washington D.C. to work for the government. I was in Washington for three and a half years. I came back to St. Paul and continued working for the government. I was never really active in anything. I always wanted to get involved in politics, but because of the Hatch Act I couldn't get involved.

MOOSBRUGGER: Maybe we should clarify that the Hatch Act is the law that stipulates that government employees of a certain designation cannot actively get involved in politics.

COATES: So, I never got involved in that. I did belong to a couple of Catholic, single adult groups. Then in 1969-70 I became involved with the Mexican Community. There was some kind of meeting at the church, and I joined an organization called "Chicanos United". I dropped out of that because our political views and philosophy were not the same.

MOOSBRUGGER: The group and yours. What are some of your philosophies?

COATES: I'm an activist, not a militant. Does that make sense?

MOOSBRUGGER: Yes.

COATES: I actively work for things, but not in a militant way. At least I don't think you can be a militant when you've taken every other course of action and it fails. Then I think you might have to use some militant tactics. But, I don't believe in being militant for the sake of mili-
COATES: I think that a lot of the members in the Chicanos United were that type.

MOOSBRUGGER: You couldn't abide with that type of thinking?

COATES: No. I don't like mob rule and that sort of thing.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do we still have a Chicanos United group that is an active one?

COATES: They were active for a couple of years, up until two or three years ago. I think most of the older people who belonged to it dropped out. It was a younger group that got involved. They just seemed to care about themselves, more that they did the total community.

MOOSBRUGGER: Have you found your philosophies changing during the course of the last few years? Or have your philosophies, your outlook, remained rather stable?

COATES: I think in the past few years my philosophies have changed, because I am getting involved with people. Now I'm more socially conscious about things that are happening, especially what is happening to the Mexican Americans. I think you have to get away from things. We had lived in a total Mexican community. We thought everything was great because we were all there. It isn't until you get away from it, and then go back that you see all the laws, or that life could have been better.

MOOSBRUGGER: Things have a better perspective when you are in the midst of it. We haven't touched on the things which are very central in any person's life; your marriage, and children. Would you like to tell us?

COATES: I'm married to Curtis E. Coates. We were married in October, 1966. We have one son, Erin, who is almost eight years old.

MOOSBRUGGER: How did you meet Mr. Coates?

COATES: I met him in "Riza", which is a Catholic Adult Club.

MOOSBRUGGER: Did your marriage move you from living on the West Side and give you a chance to get this new perspective of life; by moving out of it?
COATES: We moved out of the West Side community when the Urban Renewal took over.

MOOSBRUGGER: This was when you were still living with your folks?

COATES: Yes, in the early fifties. I think we moved in 1951. The area had been flooding, and they were buying the homes. Supposedly they were going to tear it down, so we really had no choice but to move out. I think my philosophy really changed as I've matured more. I've gotten more involved and grown more conscious about the things in the world, and things around me.

MOOSBRUGGER: What are some of the organizations, the activities, that you find compatible with your philosophies? Some of the things that you're doing now?

COATES: Now I'm active with the Spanish speaking and I'm the volunteer director of the Spanish Speaking Senior Citizens, which is an outgrowth of the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club. When they were thinking of starting the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club, it wasn't going to be a group to work with senior citizens. It was Felipe and Felipa Ramirez who worked with the seniors. This started out very small. She worked with them while she was going to college. She asked me to help her and I would help her when I wasn't working.

MOOSBRUGGER: When you refer to "her", whom are you referring to?

COATES: Mrs. Felipa Ramirez. Then I took over the group. I asked RAP, Ramsey Action Program, for help. They sent me Gary. Between Gary and I, we enlarged the group.

MOOSBRUGGER: Is the Spanish Speaking Seniors the main club? Are they primarily social organizations?

COATES: The Spanish Speaking Culture Club or the Senior Citizens?

MOOSBRUGGER: Either.

COATES: The Spanish Speaking Culture Club is more of a social welfare type organization. Their main objectives are social and educational. Therefore, one
COATES: Of our primary units was to work with the Seniors. Since I had the time, I devoted most of my time to really getting the group going. At the beginning, Mrs. Ramirez just had a few seniors; when you have one car and you're going to school, you just try and get some people together and do the best you can. Then when Gary and I had a chance to work on it, we enlarged it. At times we had twenty or better Seniors. It's kind of hard, when you don't have transportation, to get as involved as you'd like to get. We have about fifteen active people.

MOOSBRUGGER: So one of the problems is getting the people who have transportation, getting all the older folks together?

COATES: Yes. We meet once a week on Wednesday, which is our social day. We've taken the seniors to educational and social events. A lot of our seniors have worked since they were very young. They did have a little social life on the old West Side through their dances, but they hadn't really been aware of what's around them. They had never been to the Capitol and other different places. We have taken them to the Alexander Ramsey House, the Gades Farm and the Griggs House. We take them to see something different every week. It is really great to see how much they appreciate it and how well aware they are in spite of the lack of formal education that a lot of them have, in our eyes.

MOOSBRUGGER: The Griggs House on Summit?

COATES: Yes. It has a lot of French influence in it. These Seniors were very up on things. It's surprising how much they do know.

MOOSBRUGGER: Yes, it can be. Where do you meet?

COATES: During the winter, we meet at Guadalupe Area Project, GAP. Sister Govanni has been very good about allowing us to meet there. During the summer, we meet at the Neighborhood House. It's been about two years now, and
we're really active with the group. Ramsey Action Programs took care of
the transportation and paid the Neighborhood House. We did quite a bit of
traveling. Then after that, their budget didn't have enough money, so we
had to rely on our own. We just had our cars. Gary and I drove. Some-
times it's just me.

What's Gary's last name?

Gary Gorman. This past year we've had DART, which stands for Dakota
Area Referral and Transportation. It is a group funded by the Governor's
Council for the Ageing. They have been very good, and we have been using
them a lot.

Good. Do you have any fund raisers?

For the Seniors, yes. We haven't had any lately, but they have done a
lot of hard work: crotcheting and different things. We have sold them
at the church and we did take some out to St. Cloud. They work with other
Seniors and they sold some other things. We are going to be involved,
hopefully, in the Aquatennial, selling something. Most of the funds will
be for bus transportation and that sort of thing.

Can you recall what philosophies, on the part of your parents, helped you
to develop your own philosophies?

My father was a very outgoing person until his health bothered him. I
guess I like people and I got that from my father. I like being around
people. I've always communicated with people. Even as a child, I commun-
icated well with the older people. I think I especially like working with
these people because I have known them all my life. I really like working
with people. There is more satisfaction. I worked for the government for
22 years, or something like that. I had a good job. The money was good
and I would like to go back when Erin is older. I would maybe like to go
back to government work and collect a pension, but yet at the same time
I'm not sure, because the government doesn't permit you to do that type of
COATES: work. Social Services are what I really like, because I see what I'm really doing. Government work, you don't see right away.

MOOSBRUGGER: Under the Hatch Act you wouldn't be permitted to work for the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club?

COATES: Oh, I'm sure I could. What I mean is that I couldn't get politically involved. When Senator Mondale was running, we had a group of Mexican Americans for Mondale. That was the first time some of us had gotten involved.

MOOSBRUGGER: Was there any particular reason why you got involved with a group for Mondale?

COATES: Well, first of all he's a liberal. I'm a liberal more or less. And he stands for social welfare. His philosophies have been more or less the same as mine. I felt that he might be able to help Mexican Americans as a group. So I felt committed to him.

MOOSBRUGGER: Could you tell us some of the areas in which services should be provided for the Mexican American, that have not been provided in the past?

COATES: There are social services for everyone. But the Spanish speaking people need a different thing. It's difficult for them to ask for different things. If they just wanted medical care, it might not be too much of a problem. All of these things are difficult for people who can only speak one language. I think that agencies; Government, State, and Federal; just haven't responded to these needs. I think it's about time they were made aware of it. That's one of the things I want to see happen.

MOOSBRUGGER: Many of our citizens', who are limited in their abilities to communicate in English, needs are not met equally with those who are able to communicate in English?

COATES: That's right. They have culture differences, too, that sort of set them apart. I think people have to be aware of these differences to be able to understand them and communicate with them.
MOOSBRUGGER: Nicha, could you tell us some of the things that have been done by our public institutions? Educational institutions, primarily Roosevelt Jr. High and Humboldt High School. Things that have been done specifically or primarily for the Mexican American? Or perhaps things that haven’t been done, that should be done?

COATES: Well, some of the things that have been done, but haven’t been done by the schools, is the bilingual program at Roosevelt, Cherokee, and Riverview schools. It was the idea of the Mexican people themselves. They worked very hard to get it approved and get it going through the schools. I think it really hasn’t started. But it will start this fall. I think that it will be very good for the community because it’s going to give some type of identity to the children. They are going to be able to identify themselves a Mexicans and start to be proud of their language; whereas in the past, when I was growing up, we all lived in the same area and we all spoke Spanish. We were all in a ghetto. But as people kept going to work, and as they moved away, some people lost the language. The reason we kept the language is that we were all together. Some of the people who had to move away as children lost their language and culture. I don't think that's good for any kid. If you're a visible minority, like a Black, Indian or Mexican...If you are a Mexican kid, and you are the only Mexican kid in the school, you know they are going to know that you are different. You aren't going to understand what makes you different. I think children need to know what makes them different and what makes them unique. The thing that bothers me is that when I lived on the West Side, the schools never taught us what the Mexican American contributed to the society in America. We always talked about cowboys and Indians. We all went to the cowboy and Indian movies, but nobody said the cowboys were brought in by the Mexicans, or the rodeos, or any
of these things that are as American as apple pie. The kids never learned this. They were never aware that some of these things were their contributions. If they know these things when they are little, it would make them proud. If they want to be different, then they can say, "I can afford to be proud, I've given the same thing." But when they didn't, it made a lot of kids ashamed of their Spanish. First of all, our parents weren't educated. We thought that the Spanish they spoke wasn't very good, and it really wasn't that bad. We were ashamed to be different. We wanted to be like everyone else. So we tried to put away the Spanish, and that wasn't necessary. We spoke Spanish at home or in the community because it was necessary. But when we got away from it, we wanted to become Anglos. We didn't want to be different. Even though we were dark skinned we wanted to say, "I am Nicha Coates." or whatever they wanted to call me. But you didn't want them to say, "She's a Mexican." You wanted, at that time, to think back and be accepted all the time as just another person and not because I had a brown face. Even now, I want to be accepted for myself, rather than for my nationality. I want to be able to share those things with others. I want to be accepted first of all for who I am. I don't want people to say, "I don't like her because she's a Mexican," without them getting to know me as an individual.

MOOSBRUGGER: Will this bicultural/bilingual program be mandatory for any group of children or is it 100% voluntary?

COATES: It's voluntary. The parents are allowing their children to take the program. It seems that there are quite a few parents, a lot of Anglo parents. So the strange part of it is, a lot of the Anglo parents want to have their children enrolled in the program. But the Federal Government can only afford to give you so much money, because there isn't that
COATES: much money available. Naturally that means it's only going to the ones who really need it. That's unfortunate, because it seems to me if you are going to put a system of education in, that it should be for the benefit of everyone. It would also be enriching the Anglo children, as well as the Mexican children, and they would be able to understand. You know, if you had Anglo children in your class, they will be learning about your background, about your cultural differences. They are going to accept you easier. And not only that, I think that they are going to be enriched culturally.

MOOSBRUGGER: The way it looks now, this program will be over subscribed. You're predicting that some will want to take the program, and will want to enroll their children in the program, but will have to be turned away.

COATES: I'm sure, because there isn't going to be that much money for it. As far as I'm concerned, the district had promised a bilingual program and they should have funded it. They should have started it on their own, funding from their own district. They should have waited for Federal funds, because Federal funds can come and go. I think that they should increase the budget and put their district's money into the program, so that everyone can benefit at the school where the program is being served. Then those Anglos, Blacks or anybody else who wants to take advantage of the program is able to do so. What annoys me, is that this program wasn't initiated until the Mexicans made an issue of it. But there were cultural differences. There was language difficulty, and they never bothered to teach that. In the suburbs, children in grade school were taking Spanish. It wasn't a necessity for them, it was an enrichment. But there was a need on the West Side, and the Mexicans themselves had to prove to them that it was needed. I'm annoyed because the people have been taxpayers all these years, and they entrusted the school district with the education of their kids, and their kids were getting the worst education possible.
The Mexican American Task Force on Education, which I am a member of, has been bringing a lot of issues to the school board. As far as reading scores, the Mexican American children's were very bad. All these schools had bad grades. And so the kids got short changed. If a kid can't learn how to read to begin with, whether it's English or Spanish, if he isn't going to learn in his early years, he's just going to be a failure. It's just geared that way. You have to learn how to read and follow directions. Even to be a janitor and know how to operate some of the janitorial equipment, you have to know how to read. Our kids are reading far below level. I think the people have to bring up the issues and fight for these things. Hopefully someday their kids will be getting an adequate education.

Very good. You mentioned, just now, a Task Force on Education of which you're a member. Perhaps you could enumerate for us some of the organizations in which you are active?

The Mexican American Task Force on Education, the Spanish Speaking Cultural Club, of which I was secretary, and the West Side Health Center, of which I am Vice-Chairman. I am a member of the Guadalupanas. This past year I have helped with the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine at Our Lady of Guadalupe. I'm a volunteer Director of the Spanish Speaking Senior Citizens Group, I'm on the Board of the Neighborhood House, and I'm on the Metropolitan Council's Advisory Committee on the Ageing. I'm a member in the Corporation of United Hospitals and on the Advisory Committee at the University of Minnesota for Chicano Studies.

Sounds like you keep plenty busy. What's your pet project? Your fondest hope for all of the organizations and all the movements you are involving yourself with? If you had a magic wish right now, what type of progress
MOOSBRUGGER: would you see done in what area? Would it be with the old or with the children?

COATES: Both of them are equally important. I think our kids have been deprived of so much. The legacy that you can give or leave to anyone, is a wish for a good education. I would like to be able to see Mexican kids get the best education, as far as quality is concerned, so that they can be prepared to go into life and make choices. Like if they want to become doctors or lawyers, or if they want to be a bum, let them. But they should be allowed to make a choice. That can only be done if they get a good education. That's what I would like to see. They should be able to get help if they need it, good counseling and scholarships for those who really want to get ahead. Let them become plumbers or electricians if that is what they want. If a Mexican wants to be President, why stop him? Why not let that kid have what other kids have? If he wants to be an astronaut, why shouldn't he be one? We shouldn't say, "No you can't." I mean, if his education is proper, and if he has a desire and physical ability, he should be able to go ahead. You shouldn't have to stop any kid because of lack of education. Then of course I would like to see a lot of work done with the elders, the seniors. I don't know how the seniors will work out. With the group that I work with now, I know that these people have been completely deprived of a lot of educational and social things that have been taken for granted by others. Even going to a park like Koposia Park in South St. Paul. It isn't that far away from the West Side, but a lot of people have never been there. They've just never had that chance. Mexicans have always been the extended family type and I hope that that doesn't break down. To me, it's really great to see more of that influence in all of our society.
MOOSBRUGGER: Can you mention, for posterity, what you mean by extended families?

COATES: By extended family, I mean a kid just doesn't have a mother or father. He has a grandfather, grandmother, his aunts, uncles and cousins. Everybody is interested in his present and his future. They are all going to take part in enhancing it. It's always nice to get advice or get help, or just to be loved by all these people. That's one thing I hope we don't lose. There are some things I'm sure we will lose. But this is one thing I hate to see lost. That and the language, the food, different customs, some of these things I just can't see living without. I think that they just add so much to a person.

MOOSBRUGGER: What are some of the things you do to keep your customs alive for your son? The Mexican heritage and this extra support system that extended family gives?

COATES: Well, I'm married to an Anglo and my child is half Mexican and half French and English. I think he's more aware of his Mexican heritage. He doesn't know Spanish very well. He knows phrases and certain words. I'm going to keep at it until he learns it. My child says that we don't live in the same school district, he won't be able to take advantage of the bilingual program. I probably will have to send him to Mexico for the summer so he can learn the language. He has relatives there. We went two years ago. It was hard for him to communicate and hard for them. He wanted very badly to communicate. They played a lot, but still he missed a lot and I want him to really get to know who they are. I want him to really get to know and enjoy all of his background. He likes the Mexican foods and he's around a lot of his Mexican relatives. So I think the Spanish Mexican influence is going to be greater in his life.

MOOSBRUGGER: Do you ever have Mexican music playing in the home?

COATES: Yes, yes we have.
MOOSBRUGGER: Do you cook Mexican food?

COATES: From time to time. It's a mixture of everything, but I do use Mexican foods.

MOOSBRUGGER: Very good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

COATES: I'm glad that this project is finally being done. This is one of the things that I've thought about for years, and I've tried to do with my seniors. I've tried to get them to tape. Except when you get all these people, they all want to talk at the same time. I have wonderful memories, and I've learned so much by being with the seniors. I don't speak Spanish in the home because my husband doesn't understand Spanish, and I'm really sorry about that. But I do speak it with my mother and the other seniors. You know, you get away from it, and the tongue has to come back to it. You have to keep speaking it continuously. I've learned so much from being with the seniors. It's really been a wonderful experience for me and I dearly love them. I do as much as I can for them. Social services for the Spanish speaking, especially for the elders, is one of the things that is going to be my goal the rest of the year and in 1976.

MOOSBRUGGER: That's great. Thank you very much, Nicha.

COATES: You are welcome.