TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
MANUEL CONTRERAS

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

Manuel Contreras, was born in Durango, Mexico in 1904. He was raised by his sisters because his father was shot in a fight and his mother died in childbirth. He and his sisters had ranches which were taken away during the Revolution. At the age of ten, Manuel fought in the Revolution. He recalls many of his experiences as a young boy in the troops. He escaped Mexico in 1924 because he feared for his life. He and his sister came to Minnesota that same year, after working in Texas for a short time. He worked in Lake Lillian and Chaska, in the fields. In 1933, he came to St. Paul.

Mr. Contreras discusses his life in Mexico, experiences in the Mexican Revolution, life working in the fields, his employment record, his family, life during the Depression, life in St. Paul's Mexican American community, and a car that sold for $2.50.

This is a transcript of a tape recorded interview in Spanish translated and edited in English to aid in clarity and ease of comprehension for the reader. The original tape is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
BARELA: This is Victor Barela interviewing Mr. Manuel Contreras, who lives at 619 Gorman Avenue, St. Paul, on July 16, 1976, at the State Minnesota Historical Society. Do I have your permission to interview you? Do you agree then that this interview will go on to the Minnesota Historical Society?

CONTRERAS: Yes, you do.

BARELA: What is your full name?

CONTRERAS: Manuel Jesus Contreras Prieto.

BARELA: What were your parents' names?

CONTRERAS: Manuel Contreras and Marina Contreras Prieto.

BARELA: Where were you born?

CONTRERAS: I was born in Durango, Mexico.

BARELA: What town?

CONTRERAS: Durango is the capital but I was born north of there, on a ranch.

BARELA: Do you remember the year?

CONTRERAS: 1904

BARELA: Where were your parents born?

CONTRERAS: To tell you the truth, I don't know where they were born. I guess they were born someplace around there too.

BARELA: What did your father do for a living?

CONTRERAS: He was a rancher.

BARELA: How many brothers did you have?
CONTRERAS: I had four brothers, Ausedio, the eldest; Emiliano, Vicente, Benjamin, and myself.

BARELA: And sisters?

CONTRERAS: My sisters were Tifania, Abelina, Amada, and that's all.

BARELA: Are they all alive?

CONTRERAS: No, only Abelina, she lives here. She is about 74 years old.

BARELA: Do you remember your parents?

CONTRERAS: To tell you the truth, I don't. I was very young when my mother died and my father was killed.

BARELA: In Durango?

CONTRERAS: Yes, in Durango. You know how Mexicans like to fight? It was in a fight.

BARELA: How did they kill him? Did they shoot him?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they shot him.

BARELA: And your mother?

CONTRERAS: She died.

BARELA: What did she die of?

CONTRERAS: I don't know. She died in childbirth.

BARELA: Do you remember the year your father died?

CONTRERAS: No, I don't remember anything. I really did not know them. I was an orphan.

BARELA: So then who raised you?

CONTRERAS: My sisters raised me.
BARELA: Do you still have relatives in your hometown?

CONTRERAS: I don't know. It has been a long time.

BARELA: What do you remember about the revolution?

CONTRERAS: I do know that my brothers were in the war. One was a lieutenant Colonel. He died about a month ago.

BARELA: What was his name?

CONTRERAS: Ausedio Albar. He was the oldest of the family. Emilino also died about two years ago. All the rest died too. They worked for the Mexican government. They were retired.

BARELA: Do you remember much about your childhood?

CONTRERAS: Oh yes, my life history is very long.

BARELA: Did you go to school?

CONTRERAS: No, I did not, because of the revolution.

BARELA: Did the Revolution affect you much?

CONTRERAS: It affected all of us. Even the people that were in good positions. The Revolution destructed everything. That was when the rich peoples' haciendas were divided among the poor. Those that had haciendas, like my sisters did, lost it all.

BARELA: Did you get to see much?

CONTRERAS: Oh, yes. I can remember all the dates because you remember more when you were younger than when you get older. When you are young it is the time to study. I have plenty of stories to tell. When I was ten years old, I was in the war.
CONTRERAS: We suffered a lot because of the war. It finished a lot of things. There were colleges before but only for those who could afford them. The government would not let the public attend the colleges because they did not want them to know what was going on in the country. All the degrees were beyond the reach of the poor. I know the story well because I held some of the high offices. I had a little ranch that my mother left me. There were 1,500 acres of land and cattle and some pigs and chickens. Everything was lost, so that is why I came to the United States.

BARELA: Did your brothers lose everything too?

CONTRERAS: Everything. The government took over everything. But they kept working for the government, so they had good positions. They wanted people to work in Texas, so they had a lot of property. They were well off.

BARELA: Do you remember the day the government took over all your property?

CONTRERAS: It was 1914. The fighting was still going on.

BARELA: What did they do? Did the troops come in and take over?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they were fighting. The troops would come from all over, then they would return. Then another troop would come and another. It was very sad.

BARELA: Do you recall some of the generals?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I remember a lot of the generals. I got to meet all of them. Not only me, but there were many other children.
BARELA: How did you live?

CONTRERAS: The life of the soldier was to be destructive. They would kill and eat the cattle. Tear up the world, that is what they did. The poor were at the bottom and the rich and the government were on top. So they were free to kill the cattle and eat them and do whatever they pleased. They did not know the crisis they were causing and later they came here. We even ate horses.

BARELA: What is some of the suffering your family encountered?

CONTRERAS: Oh, after they took everything from us we suffered a lot of hunger. All of us. The Revolution did not leave anything. You could not even farm the land. The Revolution did not give us a chance, because one side would come in and then another. So there was always a lot of fighting going on in the hills. There were so many people. The dead bodies would be laying all over. Some of the soldiers would be hung, others shot. It was awful. After the fighting would stop the poor people would make tortillas to sell to the soldiers. This is how some of the people made their living. There were many groups that came and went. I don't know how many of them.

BARELA: Did the women hide when the revolutionaries came?

CONTRERAS: Yes, there were some soldiers that would take advantage of the women. We lived in the hills of Durango and they did not do that in our area, but some of the soldiers along the coast would.
CONTRERAS: In the small ranches and towns when they heard that some troops were coming, they would hide the women in holes in the houses because of the danger. There were some that had a conscience and would not take advantage of the women.

BARELA: Who were some of the troops that you remember?

CONTRERAS: Oh, first were Carranzistas. When I was younger, they were Maderistas. Madero went to the United States, from Mexico, during the war. From there, they were Villistas, Zapatistas, and Huertistas. When they beat Vill, they had a convention somewhere in Zacatecas. There they had a fight so they were all divided. They all wanted to be in charge; all the generals, Huerta, Zapata, and many others. I met many of them. It was sad.

BARELA: What did you do when you saw the troops of another group?

CONTRERAS: We would get down and start fighting or running. I was lucky because I was young and many of the other soldiers would look out for me. I was taken prisoner two or three times. They could not execute me; there was a law to protect me because I was a child. From there my brothers freed me and took me with them. They only fought in Oaxaca, in the southern part of Mexico. The state of Durango was the only one that fought all over Mexico. It's soldiers were all over Mexico. They would sometimes leave me with the soldiers because I would have suffered if I had been by myself, but with the soldiers around, they protected me.
CONTRERAS: They would put me behind them so I would not get hurt. Sometimes it could not be avoided and I had to fight. Death is something we don't want. Even if you are scared or brave, death is for everybody in the world.

BARELA: Did your brothers worry about you?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they were scared because when they went to help out some of the other soldiers, they would leave me alone with the rest of the troop.

BARELA: How old were you then?

CONTRERAS: I was about 10 years old. I wasn't the only one there, there were many others. They were very brave boys.

BARELA: Did you sometimes have to use your rifle?

CONTRERAS: We had to fight.

BARELA: Where did they put you?

CONTRERAS: With the troops, but they watched out for us. We were very ignorant of death. We did not know what it was all about. Sometimes with a little encouragement, the boys would fight. They took more risks than the older men because the older men would take precautions.

BARELA: So mixed in the troops were young boys and men?

CONTRERAS: Everything. Old men, blind men, and lame men. They were all fired up and ready to fight. Well, there was nothing else to do. Everywhere you saw the crisis of the needy. The soldiers would come into the grain storage areas and burn everything up.
CONTRERAS: This created a lot of hunger.

BARELA: Did women accompany the men in the fighting?

CONTRERAS: Yes, there were a few fighting. Some of the women would follow the soldiers. It was a hard life because one day they were here, and the next day some place else, but they followed anyway.

BARELA: Did you ever get to Mexico City?

CONTRERAS: We were there for one occasion. This was when the Diaz government, the Federales, were in power. We fought there for about five days.

BARELA: So did the troops come to your home town?

CONTRERAS: No, they came through our town in the mountains to go down into the ranches and towns to fight. They would meet one another and start fighting.

BARELA: How did they know who was who?

CONTRERAS: I don't know. I think there were some men whose job was to find out. Others had telephones. I didn't understand those things. There were many days when we knew a general was coming with so many soldiers. I don't know how they knew. They knew exactly how many men were with him and who they were coming after.

BARELA: Were there some towns that supported certain groups?

CONTRERAS: No, you could not do that. You had to support whoever was there. There were so many groups we did not know who was who. When I came in 1924, I had an uncle who had fought in the Revolution, but he had stopped fighting. His name was Diego Contreras.
CONTRERAS: We also had a general that was a relative; his name was Caliso Contreras. They were still fighting in 1926. There was a group of rebels who were fighting against the government and were hiding in the mountains so the government removed all the people from the mountains so they could not feed them.

BARELA: Were these the mountains in Durango? What are they called?

CONTRERAS: The Sierra Madre.

BARELA: Did you ever have to kill someone?

CONTRERAS: I would shoot. I could not tell if I ever killed anyone or not.

BARELA: Were you ever wounded?

CONTRERAS: A bullet brushed my leg.

BARELA: Were there any troops that did not do any damage to the towns?

CONTRERAS: There were some. The General Villa was the only one that did something good for the people. He did not tolerate any abuses from his troops. He was the only one. The others were a bunch of animals. They committed such atrocities. When they arrived in a big town and there was money they would rob the people. They would settle in the town and at night they would shoot and rob the people. The generals were the ones that profited, but that was a Revolution. Civil wars are worse than a declared war because in a civil war if you are a pacifist and you see that someone is taking all your things or destroying them, you get to the point where you would rather do it yourself than having to watch someone else do it.
BARELA: How did you escape?

CONTRERAS: We came from the mountain on horseback and went down to Durango to take the train. They killed a lot of them. Some were not on the list but they killed them because the people said they were.

BARELA: Did they kill young boys then?

CONTRERAS: No, they could not. Only men that were 20 years old and up.

BARELA: What did they do with the young ones?

CONTRERAS: They were taken prisoners.

BARELA: Where would they take them? To the Capitol?

CONTRERAS: Yes, to the capitol of Durango or Mexico City, to punish them.

BARELA: Were any of your young friends captured?

CONTRERAS: When I was fighting, no. Later on, when they had the list, they were.

BARELA: So from there, you took the train to where?

CONTRERAS: I took the train north; to here, in Minnesota.

BARELA: Where did you cross the border?

CONTRERAS: I crossed the border at Piedras Negras.

BARELA: Did you have to pay to get across?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I paid $8.

BARELA: Did they require some kind of identification?

CONTRERAS: No, all you did was pay the money and you had to have other money to support yourself.

BARELA: How much money did you have?

CONTRERAS: I had about $200 (pesos) or $16 American dollars.
BARELA: So you came into the United States in 1924?

CONTRERAS: Yes, 1924.

BARELA: Where did you go after you crossed the border?

CONTRERAS: From the border I went to San Antonio. Then I went to Sonora, Texas. There was another boy that I travelled with. We went there to shear sheep. They paid us a dollar a day plus meals. We were there for a month, and then I went to Corpus Christi. In 1924, I came to Minnesota to Lake Lillian.

BARELA: Did you shear sheep in Texas then?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we got paid a dollar a day. I did not like it so I went to Corpus Christi to pick cotton.

BARELA: How long did you shear sheep for?

CONTRERAS: Four about a month.

BARELA: Did you make a lot of money?

CONTRERAS: No, I never made any money. From there in Texas, I worked on the tracks—laying tracks. From there we worked the beets, in 1924.

BARELA: How did you come to Minnesota?

CONTRERAS: From a man I met and became friends with. After the railroad laid us off, we went to work in the fields, clearing the land. There we would only make 75 cents a week. We did not make any money.

BARELA: Where was this at?

CONTRERAS: Cisco, Texas. We would do all the clearing in the fields. They paid us $8 an acre.
BARELA: Did you use a saw or how did you do this work?

CONTRERAS: No, we used an axe to dig out the roots of the trees and we would also cut them down and burn them. The work went very slowly.

BARELA: What did you clear the land for?

CONTRERAS: So the ranchers could plant cotton. We had to do it by hand because there were no machines to do it at that time.

BARELA: Were there only Mexican people doing this work?

CONTRERAS: Yes, many Mexicans. There were very few Anglos doing that type of work.

BARELA: Did you ever get to meet any people in the fields in Texas that later on you met here in Minnesota?

CONTRERAS: Of the ones I met in Texas, no, I never met any of them again.

BARELA: Did you do all those things in one year?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I tried a little bit of everything.

BARELA: From Cisco, then you heard about the beet in Minnesota?

CONTRERAS: Yes, Eligorio Zapata, an older man, told me about it. He had been here before and he spoke English, so he was the one that told us about it.

BARELA: Was he hired by the companies to recruit people?

CONTRERAS: No, but he had been here and at that time the companies gave the opportunities to those who wanted to work in the beet fields.
CONTRERAS: He would call or phone the company and the company would give him a paper saying he could take any train he wanted. And also to bring people from Mexico or wherever. And this is how we came to Minnesota.

BARELA: Do you remember the date?

CONTRERAS: I don't remember. I think it was around May.

BARELA: Were you uncomfortable in the train?

CONTRERAS: No, they took care of us. They fed us well. The train was full of people. Once we got to Minnesota the train would stop at different places to leave some people off. The ranchers would come and pick them up in the trucks. You signed a contract saying how many acres you wanted. When the people got there the trucks were waiting for the families.

BARELA: Did you come by yourself?

CONTRERAS: No, I came with my sister.

BARELA: What is her name?

CONTRERAS: Abelina.

BARELA: So you contracted?

CONTRERAS: Yes, it was the same contract but it was only for a year. When you work the beet you leave around this time (July). You work for August, September and October. Once you are through, you can go back if you want to. It depends on what you can afford. Some cannot afford it, so they stay.
BARELA: So when you came to Minnesota, you came directly to Lake Lillian and you went to work on the beet?

CONTRERAS: Not on the beet right away because it wasn't ready. The rancher gave us other work to do. Such as cutting trees or tending the fields. They paid us very little.

BARELA: Do you remember how much you made a day?

CONTRERAS: We earned 10 cents an hour, and the most would be 20 cents an hour.

BARELA: About a dollar a day?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we could not make any more than that. The life is very hard here. I worked 12 years in the beet. After I left the beet, I did other work. We could not settle because all work was temporary. I would work the beet and in August, when we were through, we would look for other work. Whether in town or in the fields picking corn or onions or in North Dakota, until it was time to go back and finish the beet. So we went where ever we could find work. It was very hard.

BARELA: What kind of work did your sister do?

CONTRERAS: She would also work the beet with her eight children. We were in Chaska around 1927, 28, or 29--something like that.

BARELA: From Lake Lillian you went to Chaska?

CONTRERAS: Yes, Chaska is nearby. There was a company that had a sugar refinery. They provided homes for the people that worked for them. Sure they gave homes and whatever they needed, but when they got paid, they had to pay for everything.
BARELA: They gave you credit?

CONTRERAS: Yes.

BARELA: When you first came to Lake Lillian did you have a home?

CONTRERAS: Yes, houses that the ranchers provided. Sometimes they would put the chickens with us, too. Some of them were better.

BARELA: Was it poor housing?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we had an outdoor toilet. Fortunately there was a lake nearby so we could take baths there.

BARELA: How many years did you live in Lake Lillian?

CONTRERAS: In Lake Lillian, I only stayed one or two years. From there I walked and came to work for the company in Chaska.

BARELA: And your sister?

CONTRERAS: She came, too.

BARELA: Was your sister married?

CONTRERAS: Yes, she was married to Soto.

BARELA: So you went to Chaska in 1926?

CONTRERAS: Yes.

BARELA: And then you started working the beets again?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I worked the beets until 1933, when I came to St. Paul.

BARELA: Were the people really poor?

CONTRERAS: Oh, yes. There was much misery among them.

BARELA: How old were you when you got married?

CONTRERAS: I got married in 1927. I was married in Wilmar.
BARELA: Who did you get married to?

CONTRERAS: My wife's name was Maria Dolores Vega.

BARELA: Was she also from Mexico?

CONTRERAS: I really don't know. They came to work in the beets from Chicago. People came from all over to work the beets. She spoke English and I never visited her home, so I don't know.

BARELA: Did you speak English when you were in Chaska?

CONTRERAS: Yes, when I first came I was very young and I learned English very fast. Now, I have forgotten much of it. I spoke English without going to school for it.

BARELA: You told me you played ball. Did you play baseball?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I was a pitcher.

BARELA: Did you have a team?

CONTRERAS: No, it was only to pass the time.

BARELA: Were any of your children born in Chaska?

CONTRERAS: Yes, two of my children. My son, Guadalupe Contreras and my daughter named Hermina. She lives near here and she has grown children. My son was killed in the war. He was born in 1928. He was killed in 1952, the Korean War. I could tell you the sufferings in this world. I don't like to talk about it. My wife died in Chaska. She left me with my son who was three years old and my girl two. During the depression we lived in a car. We suffered so much and then he was killed in the war. These are the sufferings parents have.
CONTRERAS: At least if he would have had a mother, it wouldn't have been so bad, but I was mother and father to him. I raised them without help from anyone.

BARELA: What year did she die?

CONTRERAS: In 1931.

BARELA: So you travelled with both of your children?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they went with me all over. I would work, cook and send them to school.

BARELA: Was there anyone that could help you?

CONTRERAS: My sister helped me for a while, but she could not help me because she had 12 children of her own.

BARELA: Did your sister stay in Chaska or did she come with you here?

CONTRERAS: She came to St. Paul, too.

BARELA: Her husband, too?

CONTRERAS: Yes. He died here.

BARELA: How long did you live in Chaska?

CONTRERAS: We lived there from 1927 to 1933.

BARELA: Did your children go to school in Chaska?

CONTRERAS: No, they did not because they were too young to go. They did not have a kindergarden and the town was too far. It wasn't until we came to St. Paul that they went to school.

BARELA: So you did not live in the town of Chaska, but in the outskirts?

CONTRERAS: Yes, outside of the town in company houses. The stores were far, too.
CONTRERAS: Some of the things that people will never see again were the Buicks that cost $2.50. They had a canopy top. They were good cars with pedals, all American, three of them. Those were the gears. It had a "Magnetic Needle"; and I knew how to fix it. You would start it with the battery and then you turn the "magnetic needle" and you would not need the battery.

BARELA: Did they have four wheels? And were they sort of small?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they had four wheels and were small. But, very strong. They cost up to $2.50.

BARELA: Did your family have one?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they had theirs and I had mine.

BARELA: Was that the All-American model?

CONTRERAS: Yes.

BARELA: What year was this?

CONTRERAS: In the 1930's.

BARELA: Did they run in the winter time?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we did not need any alcohol. When you wanted to start the car, you would put in a bucket of hot water and it would start. Once the hot water was in the car, it would not freeze. When you got where you wanted to go, you had to take out the water. When you wanted to start the car, you added the hot water again. You did not need any antifreeze or any of that stuff. To start them you would also put a jack on one of the wheels, but once it started, you could take it off.
BARELA: Do you remember the cold winter? Did you have sufficient clothes?

CONTRERAS: No, we were very poor, but when one is young, you don't feel the cold. I guess I was a healthy person. The ranchers would wear some heavy coats and big gloves but I could not feel the cold.

BARELA: Were the houses fit for the cold weather?

CONTRERAS: When we were in Chaska, the houses were good because they had the means to help us. They would give us a heater, coal heaters. But when we came to St. Paul, we rented some old homes without windows for $5 a month. They were very thrifty. It was sad. To rent a fairly good house it cost $10 a month. Nobody had any money only the rich.

BARELA: Did your children stay by themselves during the day when you went to work?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they had to because I could not afford to hire a woman. In 1944, my children were a little older, but I had to leave them alone at night because I worked nights at a government plant making gun powder for the war. I had to work to support us.

BARELA: So from Chaska, you came to St. Paul? Did you come to work?

CONTRERAS: I came to look for work. There was no work, but people came in the hopes of finding something.

BARELA: What type of work did you find?

CONTRERAS: The first place I found a job was working at the packing plant--Armours.

BARELA: What did you do there?

CONTRERAS: I was a butcher.
BARELA: How long did you work there?

CONTRERAS: For about five years. After that I tried other places. I worked at everything. The last job I held was as an inspector in an ammunitions government plant, in New Brighton. I worked there for eight months.

BARELA: So you came from Chaska and started working at Armours and your children started going to school here. How old were the children when they started going to school? Were they six years old?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they were six years old.

BARELA: Did your children speak English?

CONTRERAS: Yes, and Spanish too.

BARELA: Did they do well in school?

CONTRERAS: Yes, because they knew both languages. They could read and write in Spanish.

BARELA: What other families were here when you came?

CONTRERAS: Jose Trejo, Federico Saucedo, Francisco Rangel, Manuel Capiz, Pomposo Guerra, Jose Arenas, and Francisco Cruz. I don't remember some of the other names, but I knew all of them.

BARELA: Was everyone poor?

CONTRERAS: All of us. Now we are rich in comparison to what we had then. There were no opportunities for the people to better themselves. There were no jobs. It wasn't until the war that we had more opportunities. Now the young people have a chance for a good education. People do not want to work in the beets anymore. I don't even want to work in the beets.
CONTRERAS: The work of the beets is something most people should know about. Because all they know is that they get the sugar from there. They don't know that we had to be on our knees making sure the plants had about 12 inches to grow. I think my bones are still healing from work. I must have gone and come back from Mexico on my knees. There were no other opportunities.

BARELA: Did you do all the work by hand?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we thinned out the beets with a short hoe.

BARELA: What did you do with the beets that you thinned out?

CONTRERAS: They would plant a lot of them in a row. We had to cut off all the little plants so they would not be crowding each other. It all had to be the same. It took us forever to do 20 acres. Now they have machines to do that and they called it blocking.

BARELA: After you thinned out the beets, what did you do?

CONTRERAS: We had to go back and pull out the weeds. After we were done, I would get paid. But it wasn't much. It was barely enough to pay the store. When we came to St. Paul, it was much better. Here we got work and we received other help. Minnesota is the state that treats Mexicans the best. There are some bad people, but most of them treat us well. Some of the people would tell us that Mexicans were dumb, but that wasn't true because if they gave us a chance to educate ourselves, we could do a better job. It is just like a plant, if you don't water it, it won't grow. This is what has happened to us.
CONTRERAS: We have not been given a chance to develop our capabilities. Here I am, I have been a plumber, an electrician, mechanic, I can fix any machine you give me and I never went to school to learn any of those trades. What I know I learned myself. It hurts me to know that some people don't know anything, but that is because they haven't been given a chance.

BARELA: Did you like the work at the packing house?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I liked the work there. The same at the other plant. After the beets, I enjoyed working at the other places. I also worked for the railroad. In 1945, I left the packing house and went to work at the government plant. I worked there for 8 months and after that I worked for the railroad. That is where I retired from. I worked for them for 12 years.

BARELA: What was the name of the railroad company?

CONTRERAS: The Milwaukee.

BARELA: Laying rails?

CONTRERAS: Yes, laying rails.

BARELA: Did you ever remarry?

CONTRERAS: Yes, this is my second wife. I married her in 1951 after my son was killed. Her name is Petra Ojeda. She is from Mexico. She was born in Villagracia, Zacatecas.

BARELA: Do you remember the year.

CONTRERAS: Around 1906, something like that.
BARELA: Did she come with her family?

CONTRERAS: She came with her mother. But her mother returned to Mexico and she died there. She was married before, but her husband died. She had two children. Later she married me.

BARELA: Do you know her first husband's name?

CONTRERAS: Nicolas Mauricio.

BARELA: When did he die?

CONTRERAS: Around the 1940's

BARELA: Do you remember what the West Side community was like when you first came to St. Paul?

CONTRERAS: All the Mexican people lived in the West Side in little houses that were falling down. And, of course, my family lived there, also.

BARELA: Where did you first live?

CONTRERAS: Here on Robert Street.

BARELA: Did you rent there?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I rented there. It is amazing how things are because when we first came we rented the houses that were falling down because that is all we could afford. Now people are buying old houses and fixing them because they like them.

BARELA: What did you do in your pastime? Did you get together?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we got together. They had dances at the Neighborhood House. Then the people were more united and they cooperated with each other. Now we have all the luxuries, and people from my own family do not recognize me.
CONTRERAS: We have all gone our ways. Then we had more friends and we enjoyed each other's company. Back then seven or eight families would live in a basement and everybody got along. Some of the people have changed just because they have a little more than someone else. How foolish people can be. I don't like that, I like to get along with all the people regardless. There is nothing more beautiful than knowing how to get along with others.

BARELA: So you appreciated your friendships?

CONTRERAS: Yes. We were all growing together towards the same thing. Now each person stays in their own cubby hole.

BARELA: Did you belong to any of the organizations in the community?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I was a member of the Anahuac Society.

BARELA: Was this a popular society?

CONTRERAS: Well, they organized to try to do good things, but as it usually is, problems occur. One would get distracted from the original plans. At one time it accomplished a lot of good things. When I joined, Francisco Rangel was in charge. He organized the people and we had many celebrations. It was very nice. I liked all the people. When some started to get ahead of the others, that was the end of the friendships. The harmony was gone.

BARELA: What holidays did the Anahuac Society celebrate?

CONTRERAS: We celebrated Christmas and New Year's. We had pastorelas.

BARELA: Did your family attend the celebrations?
CONTRERAS: Yes. I hadn't remarried yet, but I would take my children.

BARELA: Do you remember the Christmas festivities?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they were beautiful. The Mexican Indians and the pastoreles would dance and sing. They would also recite. It was nice.

BARELA: Was Mrs. Bosquez, from Minneapolis, one of the ladies that helped with the festivities?

CONTRERAS: Yes. There were many ladies from here, too. Mr. Casillas, his wife and my wife's first husband were a few of the many who helped. I was not directly involved with any of it because I had to take care of my children and could not run around as though I was single. I had my children. The life of single men with children is sad because he is not equipped for it like a woman is. It is very hard.

BARELA: Did you have any relatives that could help you?

CONTRERAS: Yes, I had relatives but they had 12 children and barely had enough for them, so they could not help me. They were in the same situation.

BARELA: Did they celebrate patriotic feasts?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they also celebrated them.

BARELA: Would you also take your family to these celebrations?

CONTRERAS: Yes. Here is a letter from Mexico.

BARELA: Yes, from Durango, Mexico. Do you still have relatives there?

CONTRERAS: Yes, and they still write to me.

BARELA: Did you participate in any of the church festivities?

CONTRERAS: In the church festivities, I did. We had the old church on the West Side.
CONTRERAS: It was a very small church. Half was a church and the other half was a bar. After they were going to tear down the old West Side and the church, I was appointed to go around asking for funds for our new church. We had to get a certain amount of money before they would start building the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

BARELA: Who was the priest?

CONTRERAS: Father Dicks was the first priest I met. He was very short and was of German descent. Father Dicks was the one who stopped the hatred between the Anglos and the Mexicans. This existed because a Mexican killed an Anglo. Father Dicks was the one who settled the whole thing.

BARELA: Did your children participate in the celebrations?

CONTRERAS: No, they were too young.

BARELA: Were there a lot of people who attended the church programs?

CONTRERAS: Yes, everybody. Some of them would help out.

BARELA: Did you have a mass every Sunday?

CONTRERAS: Every Sunday.

BARELA: For the holiday celebrations, did you not go to work to help out, or did you help out after work?

CONTRERAS: No, we went to work and we helped out at night. But if there was an important meeting you could get an excuse from work.

BARELA: So your celebrations were very traditional?

CONTRERAS: Yes. All the holidays were celebrated. The people enjoyed these.

BARELA: Did they ever have any benefit dinners?
CONTRERAS: Yes, they sold food. Enchiladas, tacos, all kinds of things. Anglos attended some of these because they like the food. The only thing they liked were tacos and enchiladas. If they went to Mexico they would see that there is more to Mexican food than tacos and enchiladas.

BARELA: Did you have a good turn out for these?

CONTRERAS: Yes. People would come from Minneapolis and other parts to by the food. There was unity and respect for others. In 1945, I went to Montana, my son was about 14 and somewhat wild. I wanted to get him out of here, so I bought a motorcycle; I paid $800 for it, and left. I was working but I came all the way from Montana to attend the 16th of September festivities.

BARELA: You were very loyal.

CONTRERAS: Not only that, but they rationed the gasoline and you could not buy tires. I barely made it here. Well, they were my people and we were very united. People would make many sacrifices to attend these festivities.

BARELA: Did all the other Mexicans come, too?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they would come from all over. Just as I came, they would also come.

BARELA: You must have had big feasts?

CONTRERAS: Yes, they were big feasts. People would come to distract themselves and also to see other Mexicans. Some of them would come and would not know anyone. Once they got here, people would talk to them and they would make friends.
Did the young people enjoy the festivities as well as the older people?

Yes, everybody liked them. There was unity.

Did you ever get to go back to Mexico?

Yes, I have gone three or four times to see my sisters. I have also visited Guadalajara, Aguascalientes, Saltillo, Durango, all over.

Has your family gone back, too?

Yes, my wife has gone about four or five times to visit her family.

How about your children?

No, they have never gone.

And your wife's children?

Yes, they have. We did not have any children together.

Did your children graduate from high school here in St. Paul?

No, my children did not graduate from high school. They went to school and they know how to read and write, but that was all.

Your son that was killed in Korea, did he join the service after school?

Yes, he got married and joined the service. He went to battle and came back. He and his wife had a fight. He enlisted again and he left. Then he was killed.

And your daughter?

She has a lot of children.

What does her husband do?

They are divorced. Her husband comes to visit me.

Do you still maintain your Mexican traditions? How about Mexican food?
CONTRERAS: Yes, we also eat Mexican food.

BARELA: How about the celebrations?

CONTRERAS: Yes, we celebrate Christmas, but for us everything has passed. We enjoyed those things long ago. It is like a carnival; if you've seen one you've seen them all.

BARELA: Do you still like to go see the patriotic feasts?

CONTRERAS: Yes

BARELA: Do you still get together with your friends?

CONTRERAS: Oh, yes.

BARELA: In your life time, what has been the one thing that has influenced your life style?

CONTRERAS: The most important thing for me is to lead a happy life, without making any enemies along the way.

BARELA: What influenced you to think that way?

CONTRERAS: I have suffered a lot because of the injustices in the world. These are things that I don't agree with. Anything that destroys humanity so that man is pinned against man for survival, because sooner or later you could be the one. There was a time when the rich were on top and the poor at the bottom of the social scale. During the Revolution, the rich were in the same boat as the poor. Then the poor came up because the land was divided among the poor. So the roles were reversed. This is the way things are. Changes will always occur. Like now you are young, but someday you will be old like me. The experiences I have learned through my own life!
CONTRERAS: I try to trust people and be good to them regardless of who they are. Life has been good to me. I like my life style. I am not afraid of anyone.

BARELA: If you were to give some advice to the youth of today, or to anyone to help them lead better lives, what would you tell them?

CONTRERAS: Love of life. Use your head. Always look ahead, never look back. If I wasn't working and the government was supporting me by force, or I was in the war killing someone, I know that the roles would someday be changed and I would be at the other end of it. You must proceed with caution.

BARELA: How do you get paid back?

CONTRERAS: You proceed with caution by thinking and observing. You try to understand and to be understood. You should listen to people who give you advice because they have been there. You should not go ahead and jump into things without knowing what you are doing. Once you are in trouble, it is too late to listen to advice. For instance, when I talk to the young people and try to set them straight they get very upset and tell me to mind my own business. That is no way to be. If on the other hand, they would think things through carefully and admit that maybe they are going the wrong way and mend their ways, they would be much better off.

BARELA: You have a very fascinating life history. You show such enthusiasm that it seems as though you are at ease with yourself.
CONTRERAS: That is true. I have always had a lot of spirit and along with my beliefs sometimes I can predict what is going to happen because I have lived through so much. It is like an education, it is good to read but to experience things is better.

BARELA: Thank you so much for your time. We appreciate your cooperation.