TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

ALFONSO DE LEON, SR.

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

Alfonso de Leon, Sr., was born in Antila de Nopales, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosi, Mexico, in August of 1902. He is one in a family of fourteen children. He remembers the Mexican Revolution, during which he traveled with a Carransista military band. He came to the United States in 1918. He worked at various jobs in Texas, one of which was mining in the Dalls-Fort Worth area. He married in 1922, in Bridgeport, Texas, and there his first child was born. In 1923 he began working in the beet fields which was to take him to Wyoming, Colorado, Iowa, and Minnesota. He worked with the Armour Packing Company in St. Paul from 1929 until his retirement in 1965. He remembers many of the first leaders of the Mexican American community in St. Paul. He was involved in many of the activities of the first Mexican American organizations.

This is a translation of a tape recorded interview in Spanish. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
INTERVIEW WITH ALFONSO DE LEON, SR.

JULY 8, 1975

INTERVIEWERS: VICTOR BARELA & RAMEDO SAUCEDO

Barela: This interview is with Mr. Alfonso de Leon, Sr., who lives at 1481 Blossom Lane, St. Paul Park, Minnesota. Today is July 8, 1975. Interviewers are: Rameo Saucedo and Victor Barela.

Barela: Where were you born?

de Leon: I was born in Antila de Nopales, in Real de Catorce. It was a mining town. It still exists. I was born in August, 1902, in the State of San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

Saucedo: How many brothers did you have? What are their names?

de Leon: I still have two sisters and two brothers that are living. I came from a big family. There were fourteen of us. The way the story goes, they died. The ones that lived, are my two brothers and my two sisters. They live in Mexico. Two of them live outside of Matehuala, in a small town called Sedral, in the state of San Luis Potosi. One of my sisters is a nun, she lives in Mexico City, because those were the orders from the Mother House in Mexico City. Another sister, who is married, lives in Fresnillo, Zacatecas. There are only five of us left, out of the fourteen.

Saucedo: At what age did you leave Real de Catorce?

de Leon: When I was nine years old. During the 1910 Revolution, I was eight years old. We could still have stayed there for one more year. But the situation was critical, because there wasn't any work. My father was a mechanic and he worked in the mines. There wasn't any work, so we moved to Matehuala. It was our first move from there. From Matehuala, we moved to San Luis Potosi. I was just learning my alphabet. It was the custom of the parents to try to give their children some education. There are parents, who insist that you get an education. Many times, even though people had the time, the circumstances of
The Revolution made us move a lot. We couldn't establish ourselves. For example, the migrant laborers, who come here for years and years, had to have their children leave school early, and they didn't get a complete education. It's out of necessity that people live that way, there is no other way to live. It is harder to support a family like mine was. In those years, you didn't have any charity or helping agencies.

From Real de Catorce, you went to Matehuala? From there to San Luis Potosi. How many years did you live in San Luis?

My father, mother, and younger brothers and sisters stayed in Matehuala. I was the oldest. I went to live with my uncle, who was a director of a band. It was during the Revolution, and because of his profession, he got a job as the director of a military band, under the order of Jose Santos, who was a Governor and a General in Monterrey. In 1912, he offered me a chance to continue my education. I went from San Luis Potosi to Monterrey. I stayed in Monterrey for two years, away from my parents, and lived with my uncle, who was interested in my education.

Do you remember any dates of things that happened to you or your family during the Revolution?

No. To me nothing. The only thing that I lost a brother in the Revolution. He was anxious to join. He was older than I. He thought it was easy to join the army. He was lost or died, somewhere in Toluca, Mexico. I continued my ambition, to learn and know more about life. In 1916, I returned to my family in Matehuala. The Revolution was still going on. There was no stable government. There was no guarantee or opportunities for jobs. I remember traveling with the military band. They traveled a lot. I traveled through many states in Mexico. When we were in Monterrey, which was the center, the governor was Jose Santos, a Carransista General. So we had to travel to El Paso, Parras, Coahuila. We went all over. In my youth, I saw many awful things.

How did you get from place to place?
de Leon: The generals had their own train. They also carried their own staff; cavalry units; musical bands; and all their people. It was a splendor to see how this could run, because there was no government at this time. There was no one to make a mark. Everyone printed their own money, like Villa, Zapata, all of them. There wasn't a central government that people could follow, like a president or dictator. It's been Mexico's luck to have presidents and not dictators. It's always been a Republic.

Saucedo: At the age of twelve, you returned to Matehuala, after having lived two years in Monterrey?

de Leon: I returned, when I was thirteen years old. I went to work in the mines. I began working in the mines, operated by foreign investments, in the outskirts of Pachuca. I went to work in a mine on the outskirts of Real de Catorce. There was a mine called La Luz, which was a very rich mine at the time. That's where I found employment. I had learned from my father, who was a mechanic in the mines, how to work and earned my money. It wasn't much, but it bought my corn. I lasted there three years. I saw I wasn't advancing, because of the Revolution. There was a time when they would come day and night, you didn't know who was in charge. At any time, there could have been a battle. I saw the changes that happened. Nothing was secure at the time.

Saucedo: You must have been about sixteen then?

de Leon: Yes, sixteen years old.

Saucedo: Didn't the Carransistas or Villistas try to enlist you?

de Leon: No, naturally I hid myself. I didn't stand in the light where they could see me! Those that wanted to enter, were abused. There were a lot of young boys, as young as twelve. There were a lot of generals, they were given titles according to their ability in battle. For example, Antonio Cerrillo of San Luis, was well known all over the coast, so was Adolfo Gomez and Jose Serrano of Oaxaca, close to Mexico City. They were all generals. The generals I met, when
de Leon: Carranza had the towns, were: Francisco Villa; Jose Santos; General Murilla; the Gonzalez of San Luis Potosi, Luis Gonzalez, I met them all in person. I mingled among them. I was a kid and I thought it was a great thing. Nothing ever happened to me. The only thing is that I saw a lot of things. But because of my age and height, I think, they didn't think I was big or strong enough to handle a rifle. Because of that, there wasn't anyone who would try to enlist me. My ideas were different, I wanted to advance professionally in something. Because of the times, I blame the bad government of Mexico. When the United States was in the World War I, in 1914, that ended in 1918, after the armistice was signed, I decided to come to the United States. I wasn't scared or afraid to try anything after having gone through so much.

Saucedo: Where did you go? To Texas, Los Angeles, or somewhere else? How old were you?

de Leon: I came to Texas first. I was sixteen years old. I was alone, like an orphan, without knowing anyone. Of course I wasn't the only one crossing, there were a lot of Mexicans crossing. At that time it wasn't difficult to come across. It wasn't until 1929, then passports were needed to get across. In 1918, I started to look for a job in Puerto de la Vaca; Victoria; Cuero; Yagos; all those places. I'd work at what they would give me. I was sixteen, what kind of a job could I get? I took whatever I got. I lasted there for a year and a half. I was corresponding with my father, but I didn't want to tell him my adventures and problems, because I was the one who wanted to go on my own and have some adventures. He had told me that I was going to be in a strange country and I was going to have problems, I'd had no time to listen to him. In one of his letters, my father said he had a brother in Texas, working in a mine, close to Fort Worth, Texas, in a town called Bridgeport. My father said, "Now that you are over there, it wouldn't be a bad idea to go and meet your uncle, since you have never met him before." He sent me the address. I liked the idea, from San Antonio to Fort Worth is about 375 or 380 miles. I went to meet my uncle and his family. I was still very young. They wouldn't
de Leon: accept me to go down in the mine. There were certain requirements. You had to be man enough and strong enough, because the job was hard to do. My uncle accepted me and I stayed with him. I started looking for field work. There was a lot of work with the farmers, they paid very little, almost nothing, but some of them would feed us. From there I went to Bridgeport and to other places around the area, like Dallas and Sherman. They were like the Twin Cities. At the time they were only small towns. Now they are great cities. That's what I saw in those years. If I went there now, I would be lost. I traveled for two years. During this time, I worked in a rock quarry, making roads or I worked according to the climate until I decided to work in the mines. This was in 1920. I got accepted, because my uncle was mining there. He started me and helped me. I worked there from 1920 to 1922. In 1922 I got married.

Saucedo: Is that where you met your wife?

de Leon: Yes. By then I had two years of experience in mining the ore.

Saucedo: Was this in Bridgeport, Texas?

de Leon: Yes. This is where my bad luck began. The same year that I got married, in May 1922. In October we were left without work. We were newly weds. I had managed to save some money, so I decided to take my wife to Mexico to meet my parents. We stayed there for six months, because I couldn't find a job. At that time, Mr. Calles was in power, but there weren't any guarantees in any profession. Calles was aware of what was happening. But there wasn't complete stability, there were many changes. We returned to Bridgeport. The mines were opened again. But the union was broken up. The company offered to pay us eight dollars a day, to keep us working, a dollar an hour, those that wanted to did. I returned to work, but only temporarily, because during that time, toward the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923, the families started migrating to the beet fields. After the beet fields were finished, the Sugar Company offered us a place to live. They asked us to stay, because it cost so much to go back and forth. Those that wanted to accept, were given the material to
de Leon: build a house. I was young and I decided to stay. This is where Vicente, my oldest, was born. My father-in-law was interested in making adobe bricks to build a house and I helped him, this was in 1924. After finishing up with the beets, I went to Mexico to see my parents. I went alone. My father-in-law stayed with my wife. When I returned, I brought two of my bothers with me. They lived with us for two years. They worked in the beet fields and I worked in the mines, from 1922 to 1929, I would come in the summers to work in the beets, but in the winter, I would go back to Texas and I worked in the coal mines, for about ten years, I would be coming and going. I worked in Colorado; Iowa; here in Minnesota; doing the same kind of work the migrants do now. The migrants come in search of life, even at fifty cents an hour, it is a good salary, if they don't have anything better in their own country or state. At least something that is worthwhile. There are many poor people that wish to earn a dollar a day. That's very scarce. The Mexican Government is still unstable. Now it has changed many things, it has improved, but there are still many poor people. I have heard that there are still many people who cross the river to the United States.

Saucedo: In the winter you would return to Wyoming?

de Leon: No! to Texas, Bridgeport. In the summer, I would go work the beets. I was a regular employee of Northwestern Company, in Lowell, Wyoming, for two years. The company put me in charge of signing up workers from Fort Worth and dispersed them over the territory in Iowa and places where they needed workers. I would also stay and work, they also had to pay me for bringing the workers, after they were in their places and the contracts were signed. I did that for two years. 1929 was the last year that I worked the beets. It was in a town a hundred miles from here, named Prinsburg, west of Montevideo. In 1929, we already had Vicente and Felix.

Saucedo: Where was Felix born?

de Leon: In Iowa. Unfortunately there was an accident. Vicente broke his leg. We
Were almost finished working the beets, and almost ready to return to Texas, this was planned. It was impossible to go back this time, because I had to put Vicente in a hospital in Willmar. We were almost finished with the beets and ready to go. The doctor told us we had to be very careful with Vicente's leg, because it was a very bad break. Someone advised me to stay. My compadre Angel Medina told me, "Stay, because then the child can get better and you can establish yourself here. I am sure you'll find a job here." Jobs were scarce in 1929. By then there were a lot of Mexican families here, not as many as there is now, but there were many.

Who were some of the people who were here?

For example, your father, Federico Saucedo, was already here, so was Margarito Campo; Pomposo Guerra; Gabriel Avaloz; Juan Silva; Juan Galvan and his father George Galvan. They were all here; that kid named Portugal that lived in Inver Grove; Munoz, the father of all the Munoz' children; Chavez, he was killed in a plant in Rosemount. He changed his name to Charles, but it was Chavez. All of those old timers were here. Mr. Aparicio was here. Don Martin Vasquez, there were many others: Porfirio Diaz. There were many who worked in the packing houses! Francisco Rangel; Pomposo Guerra; Jose Garcia... all those men were veterans here. I started to work in the packing house. I had to wait a week, because jobs were difficult to get. I came here in November 1929 and by December I had lost my job at Armour's. It was only temporary, but I did not know that, so I had already contracted my family to work in the beets. They called me back to work, so my wife and children went to the farm and I stayed to work in the packing house. I worked very hard in 1930, because I wanted a steady job.

How many years did you work in the packing house?

Thirty-seven years.

Which department did you work in?
de Leon: I started in the same department that I finished in. I started in cleaning boilers, containers where all the lard waste was. My job was to clean them. Later, they gave me a more responsible job, driving the pumps to clean up the waste that didn't drain. I always worked in the same building. That's where I met your father, Federico Saucedo. He worked in the high cellar. I would go visit with the other Mexicans that were there: Margarito Campo; your father Federico Saucedo; and Jose Ramirez' brother. They worked in the high cellar and I worked in the tanks. I was a weigher, when I retired. During the war, around 1943, I worked at mixing the grease and filling the tanks. I had others to help me connect all the tubes, receive, and turn in. That was the last job I had. The company was satisfied with my work. I did not do any other jobs. I retired after thirty-seven years. The company insisted that I retire. I wasn't sick, they made me retire.

Saucedo: Was Felix or Vicente born in Wyoming?

de Leon: Vicente was born in Lowell, Wyoming; and Felix was born in Iowa.

Saucedo: Who were the children that were born here?

de Leon: Jose was born in Texas. From there, I came here and the rest of them were born here, after 1930. The oldest of the girls is Chole. She was born here, in 1930. We had two others, but they died. We lost three girls and one boy. We had twelve children, six boy and six girls. Of the three girls that died, the one that lived the longest, lived only for seven months. They all died here in Minnesota. The children are: Jose; Chole; Alfonso; Margarita; Salvador; and Juan's the one that died. They were all born here in St. Paul. Two of the boys live in California, three: Salvador, Alfonso; Jose and the three girls: Antonia; Margarita; and Chole, live here. They are all married and have their own families. The last to get married, was about six years ago, was Margarita.

Saucedo: Do you have any grandchildren?
Oh, yes. I don't even know how many I have. I think there are about forty grandchildren, and twelve great-grandchildren. Our family has produced many. I couldn't tell you the order they are in. Vicente has eight; Alfonso seven; my daughter has six; Jose has four; Salvador has the least, two; and Felix had two, we have a great granddaughter, she is big now.

So the only ones that do not live in Minnesota, are Felix and Vicente?

Yes, Felix and Vicente left in 1961.

Where do your other children live? Close to your home?

Jose lives in Inver Grove Heights. He's after the oldest. Alfonso lives on Butler in West St. Paul. Salvador lives in St. Cloud. He is a printer. He has moved three times. He lived in Grand Rapids, for three years; then in Madison, Wisconsin, for two years; and now in St. Cloud, where he works. The oldest of my daughters lives in Savage, this side of Shakopee, on Highway Thirteen going to Le Sueur. Antonia lives about four blocks from here. Margarita lives in West St. Paul. The rest of my family, my brothers, are living in Sedral, Mexico, one sister lives in Fresnillo, Zacatecas, and the other in Mexico City.

When you lived in St. Paul, did you own a home, or did you rent?

When we first came, we rented a house.

Where did you live?

The first house we rented was on State Street, which no longer exists. They tore it down. Later, I bought a house on Minnetonka Street, that was around 1934. We lived there until the floods made us leave in 1952. From there, I moved to Robie Street. We lived there for about ten years, until 1963. That's when I moved here, and here I am, maybe I'll moved again.

Did you belong to any organizations that you can tell us about?

Well, my life here in St. Paul, hasn't been of of making noise. We did not organize ourselves personally. We would get together and discuss things. We
de Leon: didn't keep any records. That's how we started the "Comite Patriotico." The Anahuac Society, already existed when I came here, your father, Federico Saucedo, could tell you more. They would meet at the Neighborhood House. When they started to buy the building in 1931, for the church, I became interested in organizing, not taking on any responsibility, only to encourage and give strength to the people who had started it.

Saucedo: What was the purpose of the organization? To help the people?

de Leon: No. The object was to help those in the Catholic League to rent a place for our religious services. The Catholic Ladies League started that. Father Jose Guillemette was a professor at St. Thomas College; he was the first priest that started to go from house to house to get us interested in participating and starting the Sacred Heart of Jesus Society. We didn't have much money, so we made food to sell and help pay the rent. Farmers would donate potatoes, corn and rabbits to the Catholic Ladies League. They were also the ones that helped to organized Our Lady of Guadalupe Society. Father Jose, was still teaching at St. Thomas. He only came to say mass on Sunday, until 1938. In the same year, the people that became interested in the Catholic Ladies League, were interested in making improvements. It cost us plenty to acquire what we have now, but we also had help from the Archdiocese. In 1938, Father Dicks came. He was the one who purchased the building from Nicolas Varos, the owner. Tiburcio Lucio; Pedro Medallin; Margarito Campo; Vega and myself, were the members of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Society. We accompanied Father Dicks to look for a place that would be convenient for a church. This is how we came to purchase the building. There was the church on one side and a bar and billiard hall on the other side. Those were the circumstances. All this happened, it's ugly, but it's true. When we purchased the whole building, everything needed fixing. All the Mexican people who wanted to help, I won't mention names, helped dig up the basement, because it was full of ashes. We
de Leon: received some publicity in the papers in 1938, but I lost most of the newspaper articles during the flood. They are easy to find, if you care to look them up. Father Dicks incorporated the church in 1939. Also in 1939, we started to get more ambitious and patriotic, we started celebrating the fiesta for the Mexican Independence and with the help of Father Dicks and the people, we were able to celebrate. This was accomplished through mutual cooperation. It was celebrated in the hopes that we would not alienate ourselves or forget Mexico. That is why this is celebrated all over the country, wherever there are a lot of Mexicans. This is how the Independence Day celebration began. Each year we try to expand it more and more. In 1939, '40, and '41, other organizations joined us: Boy Scout Troops; Girl Scout Troops; a children's choir; and a band that Father Dicks organized. We lost Father Dicks in 1942, when he died. I met Father Ward in 1934, because he used to come to the church to give catechism classes. He was ordained in 1936. In 1942, he became our pastor. We were very good friends. The people became more enthusiastic about the celebrations, improving the programs and national colors.

Saucedo: In the beginning, did Father Ward know much about the Mexican Cultural and History?

de Leon: No. He was born in Minneapolis and had been educated here.

Saucedo: Would he ask you things?

de Leon: Yes, but what could I tell him, about my liberated life? I appreciated the fact that he would consult me about many things. And I had a lot of confidence in him. The festivals were held at Harriet Island, from there we went to the Civic Center Auditorium. There were two organizations, the Anahuac Society and the Comite Patriotico. The Anahuac Society started to lose members, because they started joining our organization. Pablo Martinez was the president then. The rest decided that there was no reason for separation within the Mexican Community, so they started cooperating in all the activities. Both
of the groups relied on the donations from the community. We started making buttons and selling tickets, because the rent of the hall jumped from Twenty-five dollars to Two hundred dollars, and the orchestra charged Three hundred dollars. These were things that needed the cooperation of all the Mexican people and their friends. The last festival I attended was in 1961. This is due to my health. Now I don't have any ambition. Now the young people have taken over, I don't have any ambition anymore and I can't help in anything. I want to see them work together. We weren't worth anything then, and we're not worth anything now. I am mostly interested in keeping my health. My satisfaction is knowing that I helped when I could. I also used to belong to the International Institute. I was the Chairman for the Festival of Nations; Pan American Day; and the Latino Americano Club. The Mexican people weren't well known in the city at that time. They were only known as people that worked in the fields. There are so few of us, that we have to work together and make ourselves known. I was the secretary for the Latino Club, for three years. They still invite me to their meetings. Legally, I could not be a member, because I was a resident here. But nevertheless, they accepted me. Later I studied at the Institute to become a United States Citizen.

Saucedo: When did you become a citizen?

de Leon: In September of 1938. That was when I received my second set of papers. The first papers were given to me in 1931. It took them a long time to accept me, but in 1938, I became a citizen of the United States.

Saucedo: You have not lost any of your Mexican heritage. You speak perfect Spanish.

de Leon: No, there is no way that I can deny that I am a Mexican. We have to continue to get ahead and reach for the sky. But what is good for one person is not good for another. You have to be partial. I started at the bottom, but you have the attitude and the energy to do better. Times change and the opportunities are there to take advantage of them. Years ago, there were many doors
de Leon: that were closed to us. There were no equal opportunities. It was a constant fight, those that didn't, were lost. Experience will improve things and things will get better. As a result, the Mexican American will get ahead. None of you should forget your ancestry. You should be proud of being Mexicans, because your native country should not give you any shame. You should be very proud of your ancestry.

Saucedo: Is this the same philosophy that you tried to teach your children?

de Leon: Yes, to all of them. Only to a certain point, because I have always said that experience is the best teacher. We have to experience certain events and make mistakes, otherwise we stay the same. But experience makes you grow and advance. The ones that are ahead have to slow down, and the ones behind, have to speed up. The same thing I told my children, when they lived with me. When each of them left me, which is natural; "Each one of us looks for the best way to live. Not all of us are going in the same direction. Some of us accept one side or the other. We have to know our beginning, our origin."

Saucedo: Have your children visit Mexico?

de Leon: All of them have, except for Alfonso. Every trip I made, I would take some of my children. I have even taken some of my grandchildren. Mexico has progressed immensely in the last few years. The University of Mexico is very competent, but I am sorry to say that most of their scientists are foreigners. Do you remember Carlos Garcia Galarza, who came to teach at Macalester College? He is now one of the outstanding professors at the University of Mexico. I met him. And once I visited him in Mexico. All of these are my memories. I had no valuables to tempt my acquaintances with. All of them were rich. Everything that I participated in was by chance, not professionally. I give credit to those people who inspired me to continue in my endeavors. Do you remember the Festival of Nations they had at Macalester? I appreciate the fact that they recognized me for my knowledge and abilities. I thank Professor Moore;
de Leon: Galarza, and Cabasos. It's been a long time since I talked to them. What's important to me now is my health.

Saucedo: How many of your children graduated from high school?

de Leon: All, except Alfonso and Felix. Vicente graduated from Macalester College, after the he got out of the service. He graduated as an engineering-draftsman. Jose also graduated, as a commercial artist. Salvador also went to school, after he got out of the service and is now a printer. They had an advantage in having a chance to prepare themselves for life. I am very proud to tell people that my sons had a chance. Not all people have a chance to better themselves. We went through bad times, without any hope of advancement, because it was hard during those times. I did not have to spend much on my son's education, because they took advantage of the GI Bill.

Saucedo: Did they all join the service?

de Leon: Only two, because Jose did not pass his physical. Felix didn't pass the test either. Alfonso was too young. He didn't like school and now he wishes he had applied himself in school. You have to take advantage of your education when you have the opportunity. Later when you have a family and children, it is very difficult to do it. Now, kids have many opportunities to get a good education. But during my time, there was no such thing. Now they even have dormitories and you can live and study there, for men and women.

Saucedo: Which of your sons and daughters married people of Mexican heritage?

de Leon: Chole married a Mexican, Juan Perez. Antonia is married to Dick Morgan. He is German and something else. Margarita married Voltz. I think he is of Dutch background. Those things do not make any difference to me, because they are the ones that have to live with the person. The most important thing is their attitude. Of my three daughters that are married, they are all still married. This is something that I am very proud of. None of them had any trouble before they got married. Once you are married, you should stay married.
de Leon: This is an old Mexican tradition. If he is a "macho", you know, "machismo"?
I got that from the Women's Liberation Movement Conference in Mexico. But the
movement didn't originate in Mexico. All those meetings women are having are
gaining popularity, because you know how that saying goes, "One bad apple,
spoils the barrel." I don't think the Mexican woman has gained her freedom,
because she is not anxious to compete. I think that someday she might liberate
herself, but only when men don't want to be superior anymore.

Barela: Thank you. You have answered our questions very well. Before we turn this
interview to the Minnesota Historical Society, we need your permission to do it.

de Leon: You have my permission to use and to transcribe the tape in the way you think
is best.

Barela: Thank you again for a great interview.