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

Angel M. Fernandez, was born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico on September 29, 1932. He discusses his life in Mexico and his family there. In 1956 he answered an ad put in the newspaper by the American Consulate in Mexico which said that there was an opportunity for single males to come to the United States. He enlisted in the Air Force and a short time later was stationed at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis in April of 1957. He gradually became acquainted with the Mexican American community in St. Paul and in 1959 he married Anita Morales Liscano.

Mr. Fernandez, compares the educational system of Mexico to that of the United States. He also discusses the adjustments he had to make to American life, language and marriage. Angel has worked with the problem of alcoholism in the Mexican American community and discusses this work. He also mentions religion, the importance of maintaining the Mexican culture, his employment record, and his experiences in the U.S. Air Force. He closes with some advice for the young.

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 recording is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
This is Victor Barela interviewing Angel M. Fernandez, on August 8, 1975, at the State Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. This is for the Mexican American History Project, under the auspices of the 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?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, you do.

BARELA: What is your full name?

FERNANDEZ: My full name is Angel Fernandez Martinez. Fernandez was my father's last name and Martinez was my mother's. When I came to the United States in 1956, I spoke to the Immigration Department about changing my name to Angel M. Fernandez and it was granted. The reason I did this was that there was no one else in my mother's family to carry on the name Martinez and I wanted to conserve it.

BARELA: Where were you born?

FERNANDEZ: I was born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon on September 29, 1932.

BARELA: What are your parents' names?

FERNANDEZ: My father's name was Lisandro Fernandez Gonzalez. My Mother's name is Juanita Martinez Vda. de Gonzalez, because my father passed away some years ago. (Vda. = Vuida = Widow)

BARELA: Where were your parents born?

FERNANDEZ: My father was born in Marin, Nuevo Leon, a small town close to Monterrey. My mother was born in Zuazua, Nuevo Leon, also a small town close to Monterrey.
What did your father do for a living?

While he was young, he was a carpenter. All the boys in my father's family were carpenters. My grandfather was probably the only carpenter in Marin. In my father's family, there were nine children: six boys and three girls. One of my father's hobbies was music. At the age of nineteen, he began to learn to play the violin. By the time he was 22 or 23, he had formed his own group and they played for parties or gatherings in town. They also played in the main plaza during special occasions; such as the 16th of September, the 5th of May, and other celebrations in town. When he met my mother and married her, he held other jobs. They lived in Monterrey because there were more job opportunities and because they wanted to progress.

In my mother's family, there were nine children too, but there were six girls and only three boys. My grandparents lived in Zuazua, Nuevo Leon and they raised their children there. My grandfather was a merchant and he had a lot of cattle and also raised crops. All the members of my mother's family became merchants; some were small merchants while others had big businesses. None of them have had any special type of training, yet they have all succeeded in their businesses. One of my uncles who passed away recently, established one of the biggest shoe industries in Mexico. All the members of my uncle's family are therefore dedicated to the shoe business.

Is the name of the industry "Canada?"

No. They started with a name called "EMICO" which stood for Escamilla, Martinez, and Company. My father and my grandparents were all very dedicated to the industry.
BARELA: What were your grandparents names?

FERNANDEZ: My paternal grandparents were Aurelio Fernandez and Josefa Gonzalez. My maternal grandparents were Donaciano Martinez and Venustiana, whom we called "Mama Tanita" for short.

BARELA: Your father is not alive, is he?

FERNANDEZ: No, he died in 1955.

BARELA: Do you remember him?

FERNANDEZ: Oh yes, I was 24 years old when he died, and it was after his death that I decided to come to the United States to see if I could make a better living. You see, at the time of my father's death, we were in a bad financial situation. I felt obligated to pay the funeral expenses and other expenses at home. My oldest brother and sister were already married, so it was up to me to take care of things.

BARELA: Did you bring your mother with you?

FERNANDEZ: No, my mother still lives in Mexico, but she visits us frequently and stays as long as three months sometimes, so long as it is not during the winter time.

BARELA: Does she live in Monterrey?

FERNANDEZ: Yes.

BARELA: You may not remember, but did the Revolution affect your family?

FERNANDEZ: I'm sure it did. My grandparents were very involved in the conflicts. My mother's father, who was not very rich, but did have some money, helped out as much as he possibly could. Two of my uncles fought in the Revolution, but only one returned. The other one was killed. I remember that when I was little, my parents, uncles, and relatives would get together and talk about the incidents that occurred during the Revolution.
FERNANDEZ: Cont. When the soldiers came to the small towns and fought, the lives of the people of the towns were really affected.

BARELA: Did your family lose any land or businesses?

FERNANDEZ: Fortunately, no.

BARELA: Which side were your parents on?

FERNANDEZ: Well, to begin with, those who were against the government were called "los Rebeldes" or "The Rebels" and they came from the northern states of Mexico like Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila. Included in the list of rebels was General "Pancho Villa." All these states were a great distance from Mexico City and the terrain was good for organizing groups like the rebels, so the government could not control them. First of all, the government of Mexico was under the dictatorship of "Porfirio Diaz" and he was in control for some thirty odd years. Then after the Revolution of Madero, Mexico had another dictator whose name was Huerta. On these two occasions when Mexico was undergoing Civil Wars, the armies of the rebels were formed in the northern part of the country.

BARELA: Did you receive your education in Mexico?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, I received all my education in Mexico.

BARELA: In Monterrey?

FERNANDEZ: Yes.

BARELA: Did you attend Catholic schools?

FERNANDEZ: No, except for one year when my older sister was teaching at a Catholic school. My parents did not want to send her off by herself so both of us would go together. I must have been about eight or nine years old. The rest of my education was received in government schools.
BARELA: Do you remember the names of the schools which you attended?

FERNANDEZ: I attended elementary school at "Francisco I. Madero School." After that, I wanted to become a mechanical engineer so I went to "Escuela Industrial Alvaro Obregon," but just for one year because I soon changed my mind on what I wanted to become. Then I enrolled at a school called "Escuela Moderna de Comercio, Administracion, Contabilidad, Asuntos Administrativos." I spent three years in secondary school before I went to the University. I went to the "Universidad de Nuevo Leon" for two years. Education in Mexico is a bit different from that of the United States. Kindergarten did not exist in Mexico until a few years ago. Elementary School is for the first six years, and the next three are spent in secondary school. That would be the equivalent to school in the United States. After those nine years, the person decides what it is that he wants to become, whether it is that he wants to go to the University to become a physician, architect, or lawyer. Or whether he wants to pursue a career such as civil or mechanical engineering, agronomy, or some other vocation which takes a shorter time to complete. Usually, the boys and girls of Mexico know by about age twelve or thirteen what they want to pursue while those in the United States don't. Boys who decide that they want to have a vocation such as that of a plumber or electrician usually finish secondary school and then spend some time in a factory or with a person who has specialized in a profession which they intend to pursue. In the instance of a plumber, the boy will spend two or three years with a person who has been a professional plumber for 25 or 30 years.
FERNANDEZ: This is how many professions are passed down from generation to generation and they are very acceptable in Mexico. Plumbers in Mexico have very good jobs.

BARELA: What influenced you to pursue a career such as accounting?

FERNANDEZ: Ever since I was young, I was intrigued by numbers, mathematics, algebra, trigonometry, and all the things that are related to the science of mathematics. The career of Public or Private Accounting requires the constant use of numbers and since this is what I've always liked, I pursued it. Now I am an accountant for the State of Minnesota.

BARELA: Was your life as a youngster a happy one?

FERNANDEZ: Oh, yes it was! My family was not rich, but we were very happy. I remember that when I was little, I only had one pair of shoes, just as the rest of my brothers and sisters. After we came home from school, we took them off. The same with our clothes; we used old clothes to play with. We'd get together and play baseball and other games out in the streets or yards. It was a very happy childhood. We never had any grand commodities, because even up to now, my mother does not have a washing machine. She enjoys washing clothes by hand. A few years ago, we bought her a refrigerator. When I was growing up, and we were living in the home in which my mother still lives now, we did not have natural gas. She had a wood stove and when the natural gas was introduced to our community, none of us knew what to expect. Our life was not primitive, but it was very simple.
BARELA: Do your brothers and sisters still live?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, they are still alive.

BARELA: Do they live in Mexico?

FERNANDEZ: All except one brother who lives in Los Angeles, California. I haven't seen him in thirteen years. I have a sister who is eight years older than I, and I have a brother who is four years older than I.

BARELA: What are their names?

FERNANDEZ: My older sister is called Estella, and my older brother is called Lisandro, just like my father. My younger sister, Hermelinda, is four years younger than I. The youngest in the family is Americo, who lives in Los Angeles. Each one has their own family. Estella has seven or eight children, Lisandro has five, Hermelinda has five, and Americo also has five children.

BARELA: How many children do you have?

FERNANDEZ: I only have four, three boys and one girl.

BARELA: What are their names?

FERNANDEZ: The oldest is Miguel Angel, then Leoncio (I named him after my father-in-law), then Victor Manuel, and my only daughter is Claudia Anna, who is seven years old right now.

BARELA: You told me that right after your father's death you decided to come to the United States?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, in those times, I used to work for a North American Company which was located in Monterrey. It is called "American Smelting and Refining Company." I worked for them for eight years and was making good money, but it was not sufficient to cover all the debts that one encounters when someone dies. I decided that I would come to the United States to see if I could make better progress.
BARELA: What did you do to come to the United States?

FERNANDEZ: In 1956, the American Consulate in Mexico put an ad in the paper which said that there was an opportunity for single males to come to the United States. There were some requirements which were that the man had to be between the ages of 18 and 26 and that his record with the police had to be clean. Not many papers were required, so I went to the American Consulate and told them that I desired to come to the United States and they accepted my application and gave me a visa to come to the United States.

BARELA: Did you have to go to Mexico City to do this?

FERNANDEZ: No, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of the Secretary of Foreign Relations in Mexico is in charge of providing the necessary documents for its citizens who wish to emigrate. Sometimes, it takes up to six months to complete the transaction and get everything legalized. But in those times, young men were needed in the United States, so everything was arranged very fast. Hungary was in conflict and the United States Army was in need of young soldiers, so that's why I came to this country.

BARELA: Did you enlist in the Army?

FERNANDEZ: When I came to this country in 1956, I lived in San Antonio, Texas for eight months and then I had to register with the Office of the Armed Forces. I enlisted in the Air Force and was a soldier for four years. This took place in 1957, 1958, 1959, and 1960.

BARELA: Did this take place in Texas?

FERNANDEZ: No. My basic training did take place at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.
FERNANDEZ: Then I was transferred to Fort Snelling in Minneapolis, where I remained for about three and a half years.

BARELA: When you entered the Air Force, there weren't too many Mexicans, were there? Did you know how to speak English?

FERNANDEZ: No, there weren't too many Mexicans and I didn't know how to speak English. I consider my four years in the army as the most interesting part of my life, simply because I had to adapt to the language, customs, and philosophy of the people of this country. When I was at Fort Snelling, I knew of two or three Mexican soldiers, but since we were working at different sites of the base, I never saw them and consequently was not able to speak in Spanish to anyone. Little by little, I had to learn the language.

BARELA: What did you do at the base?

FERNANDEZ: I did office work, like working on documents, papers, typing, etc. Mostly administrative types of things. I did have the opportunity to fly on special missions close to the base. I went to Canada, Chicago, St. Louis, and other places.

BARELA: What types of problems aside from the language did you encounter?

FERNANDEZ: first of all, I really missed Mexican foods, since I was not used to eating the food from here. I remember that when I'd go to a restaurant for breakfast, I'd have to eat Cheerios or some dry cereal, and bacon or ham, or whatever. Well, I was not used to having this for breakfast. Then the taste of the milk was different, even, though the milk in Mexico was homogenized too. Once a week we would eat turkey, but I wasn't used to it so I didn't like it. The same went for the ham or steaks and vegetables. Before too long I began to lose weight. I also longed to hear Mexican music.
FERNANDEZ: When I came to Minnesota, not too much Spanish music was heard by anyone. Even though these things affected me, they were experiences which helped me to get accustomed to the ideas of this country.

BARELA: What about your friends?

FERNANDEZ: Well, when I left Mexico, I left a part of me with my friends and relatives. The majority of the people that I met when I joined the Air Force, were very nice and friendly. The experiences I had then were very interesting because I met people from all over the country. I was constantly going out with guys from Alabama, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee, Iowa, Idaho, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Virginia. I knew someone from everyone of these states. One gets to know and experience many things through the Armed Forces, and also through the fact that one meets people from all around the country. It's amazing, but one can learn about the original thirteen colonies, about their Independence, about the customs of the people from Massachusetts, Main, New England, and one learns all this through friends.

BARELA: So then you didn't have any problem making friends?

FERNANDEZ: No, never.

BARELA: When did you arrive in Minnesota?

FERNANDEZ: In April of 1957. I had to report to the base on the 27th of April, so I decided to come about five days earlier so that I could begin to feel my way around. I recall that I stayed in a hotel in Minneapolis.
FERNANDEZ: When I arrived, all the snow had already melted, and I mentioned to my friends that I had never seen snow. One morning at about two o'clock, after about two weeks of being here, my fellow companions woke me up to tell me that it was snowing. I got up and observed it, and about two inches of it fell.

BARELA: Did you speak English when you arrived in Minnesota?

FERNANDEZ: Very little. You know, some people have the gift of learning English in a very short time, but it took me a very long time. Even after I was discharged from the Air Force, I still had difficulty speaking and understanding it. Now, after nineteen years of living in this country, I don't have any problem.

BARELA: What was your reaction when you came to Minnesota?

FERNANDEZ: First of all, when I was handed my orders saying that I was assigned to Fort Snelling in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I could not imagine where that state was. I spoke to the sergeant at the base in Texas and asked him to tell me something about Minnesota. He said that it was a beautiful place which I would really enjoy. He also told me that the people here were very warm and friendly and that they really went for sports like hunting and fishing. He mentioned the fact that most of the people here were of Norwegian, German, and Swedish descent and that there were also quite a few Italians here.

BARELA: When you came, did you know anyone here?

FERNANDEZ: No, I didn't.

BARELA: Did you decide to stay in Minnesota right after you completed your tour of duty?

FERNANDEZ: Well, in 1958 I met my wife. At that time I began to go to the Mexican community to attend Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. I did this mainly because I missed my people. I would go to Mass every Sunday morning and I began to meet the founders of the Mexican community.
FERNANDEZ: These old people would invite me to their homes to eat soup, "tortillas", beans, chile, "carnitas", etc., so I started to like the place a lot. Another reason I decided to stay was because I met my wife. We got married on April 11, 1959.

BARELA: What is your wife's name?

FERNANDEZ: My wife's name is Anita Morales Liscano.

BARELA: How did you find out about the Mexican community?

FERNANDEZ: Well, after being here for some time I began to ask around about the Mexican people and if there were any restaurants where I could eat Mexican food. Then, at the Naval Base, there would be dances for the soldiers and officers every Friday night. There was a group of musicians who played Latin music and I decided that I wanted to meet them. The director of this group was Francisco Rangel, better known as "Kiko" Rangel. We became very good friends and he told me that if I was ever around the Mexican community, to go visit him and his family. Kiko's father, Mr. Francisco Rangel, may his soul rest in peace, was a very good man and he was the first person I met when I came to Minnesota. So every Sunday morning, I would see Mr. Rangel at Mass and he would always invite me to go eat something at his home. I would always go and listen to music and constantly be meeting people. Kiko played at the Naval Base for a great length of time and I would always be meeting new people through him.

BARELA: Did you marry before you were discharged from the Air Force?

FERNANDEZ: Yes. My wife and I were married in 1959 and on the 17th of March, 1960, our first son was born. I was discharged on the 1st of December, 1960. At that time, I wanted to go back to work in San Antonio, so I left and my wife and son remained here. I worked in Texas during 1961 and 1962.
Fernandez: My second son, Leoncio, was born on the 21st of August, 1962, in San Antonio, so one of my sons is a "Texan." In January, 1963, we returned to St. Paul.

Barela: Did you find a job as soon as you returned to St. Paul?

Fernandez: Not really, because we arrived during the winter. I didn't find a job until sometime in May or June.

Barela: Where did you work?

Fernandez: I worked for Brown and Bigelow for a short time. It is a big company located on University Avenue. Later, I worked for the Ramsey County Welfare Department for about two or three years. Then I worked at other places for short periods of time until 1967, when I began to work for the State Hospital in Hastings. I worked there from January 1967 until December 1971. Then I began to work where I am now, which is the Minnesota State Department of Public Welfare.

Barela: What new adjustments did you have to make when you were recently married?

Fernandez: Well, first let me tell you that when I came to this country I had to adapt to the customs and ideals of this country, and it took me a long while before I could do this. Let me give you an example of what happened to me when I returned to Minnesota in 1963. I found that if women were wearing slacks, it seemed to me that these women were not decent at all. My ideas have changed as compared to what they were then because with time, people change. But I was a person who had grown up in very traditional and conservative ways, so if a woman did not wear a dress, she was considered indecent.
The customs of the Mexican American people in St. Paul are very different from those of the people of Mexico, so I have also had to adapt to the ways of the Mexicans here. Many times I have caught myself speaking in English and then all of a sudden, bringing in a few words in Spanish or else vice-versa. This is very common of the Mexican American. The Mexican American of St. Paul cannot be compared to the people of Mexico or any other Latin countries, or for that matter, to the Mexicans of any other big city in the United States. For example, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are big cities where the Mexican American population is very big and the people have retained more of the Mexican customs than the people of St. Paul. But, it is just beautiful to see how many people have kept the customs and language of Mexico. Even though there are many young people of Mexican descent who cannot speak the Spanish language, deep down, they are just as Mexican as their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents who came from Mexico. We have a young girl who works where I work whose parents came from "San Luis Potosi" and other parts of Mexico. She knows of all the customs and traditions of her parents and she speaks of these even though she has never experienced them! There was a time in the late 1950's and 1960's when it seemed as though all the Mexican traditions were disappearing, but then a group of people who wanted to retain all the customs and traditions began to get together to conserve the music, dances, and the food of Mexico. It is just beautiful how we in St. Paul celebrate our festivities. I remember that in the late 50's, the Mexican people began to name their children with Anglo names, for example, Scotty Rodriguez, Mandy Fernandez, etc. But now one can see that names such as Carmen, Martha, Pedro, Francisco, Laura, Josefina, Juan, and Jose are still very much in existence in many families. The English equivalent for these names sounds very nice, but they just don't sound too good with a Spanish surname. For example, the name Herman Gonzalez doesn't sound too good, but if one were to say Hernando Gonzalez, then that makes a difference.
BARELA: Have you ever wanted to return to Mexico?

FERNANDEZ: I've always wanted to go back to Mexico. Never have I lost the love I have for that country. One thing I have always said though is; that, in order to be a good United States citizen, one must be a good citizen of his native country. I love the United States very much, and I feel it is because of the love I have for Mexico. I have realized how one lives in this country, so I feel nostalgic for Mexico. I hope that with time and when all my children have married and have their own children, I will return to Mexico.

BARELA: Do you go to Mexico to visit your relatives?

FERNANDEZ: Oh, sure. I especially like to go during the winter time, to get away from the terribly cold weather we have here during January, February, and part of March. We go visit our family for about three or four weeks, leaving the extreme temperatures of Minnesota behind. I enjoy going back to Mexico not only to visit the family, but also to see the changes in society, the government, the customs, the ideas, and the educational plans for the future of the country.

BARELA: What were the problems you encountered when you came to Minnesota?

FERNANDEZ: Most of the problems I encountered were related to the language. I couldn't find a good job because I couldn't express myself in English. For this same reason, I changed jobs many times. You could say that this was a critical period in my life because as you know, when one doesn't have a job, there is no money coming into the household and this creates many problems. A person who doesn't have a good stable job usually winds up with many psychological problems. Well, I was able to solve that problem, but then came a smaller one.
FERNANDEZ: In many parts of Minnesota there has been racial discrimination. I, being somewhat lighter than most Mexicans, was lucky in that the problem was not so bad for me. I suppose that for that reason, of being lighter complexioned, I had more opportunities to find a job. But, I did find out that discrimination does exist. Though the discrimination is not shown openly, when one is applying for a job, he is asked to fill out an application giving all the information required, and then told, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

BARELA: Because of your language problem, did you ever lose a job?

FERNANDEZ: I couldn't hold a job simply because of the lack of the language. I would get a job but I couldn't keep it for long because of that same reason. This little problem began to increase in size and pretty soon I began to feel inferior to others because I couldn't hold a job for long.

BARELA: What helped you change?

FERNANDEZ: I believe that there is no better teacher than life itself. With time, people began to adapt to the ideas and customs of other societies. When one develops his capabilities, he is able to prove what he is capable of doing, and thus, places himself at the same level of the others. I think that maybe because of mental suffering, many people are able to become superior. It's the experiences of life that make one progress. The intellect is never stagnant, not even in old age, unless one wants it to be, and thus prevents it from progressing.

BARELA: What changes did you have to adjust to when you married?

FERNANDEZ: One thing which really bothered me at first was that everyone wanted to change me.
FERNANDEZ: Everyone tried to tell me how to talk, how to walk, how to behave, how to cut my hair, what kind of clothes to wear, where to go, etc. I felt as if I was subjugated to many people. It wasn't until I began to understand the people and they began to understand me that I was accepted into the community. They finally accepted the fact that I am me and that I do as I pleased. Now no one tells me "You are from another country and you must do as we."

BARELA: What was it that they told you that made you different?

FERNANDEZ: For example, if I said a word that was not correct for them, they were constantly trying to correct me. Many times I noticed that some people would pronounce a word one way and others would pronounce it another way, and so there was always that conflict. I had to learn that some words are pronounced two or three different ways and that there are several meanings for each. After many years, I noticed that one thing which I could never lose was my accent, and that, I consider all mine; I pronounce words differently, because I received my education in Spanish. I've been able to learn the English language very well, but I still express myself differently than others.

BARELA: Did you notice the difference in the fact that the Mexicans here are more open than the Anglos?

FERNANDEZ: Well, the fact is that Latins are more violent temper-wise, but the things we do are more passionate. We see things differently, but that is because we are that way.

BARELA: Since you didn't marry a girl from Mexico, was there a change in your life?
FERNANDEZ: Well, yes. My wife is a hundred percent Mexican, but since she was born here, there are many differences amongst us. She could never get used to the idea of speaking in Spanish to me, so we speak mostly English at home. Though we both have the same culture, they are still different, because she was brought up here in the United States. She pertains to a new generation of Mexicans which had changed a little from her parents who had come from Mexico. We are two different cultures, though we still belong to the same one. You will always find that difference in the people of such origin. For example, in Mexico, we are 35 million people, and we are all Mexicans, but still, the people of Chihuahua are different from the people of Yucatan. When a person from Chihuahua meets up with a person from Yucatan, they usually talk about their cultures; though they are still Mexicans, they are different because they come from different regions. It could be that they are descendents of different tribes. In certain parts of Mexico, there were tribes such as the "Chichimecas," "Toltecas," "Otomias," and in other parts of the country other tribes such as the "Tlascaltecas," and others. The people of Jalisco are descendents of Spaniards and a certain tribe of Indians, while the people of Coahuila are descendents of Spaniards and another tribe of Indians. So all the people of Mexico are different.

BARELA: Did your wife have to change her ways?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, she did.

BARELA: What was it that she found very different about you?

FERNANDEZ: Probably it was the customs and traditions that I brought with me from Mexico. She had never really associated much with Mexicans. Though her parents were originally from Mexico, she never had anyone her age to converse about this with. So at first it was difficult for her, but after many years of married life we both learned much about our cultures and how to adjust to them.
BARELA: When you and your wife were sweethearts, did you follow the Mexican traditions of the "Noviango" (sweetheart's relationship)?

FERNANDEZ: Many of the things we did were in accordance with the ways they were carried out by the people of the Mexican community here. When we went to buy our wedding rings, we didn't do it in the Mexican tradition. When we were going to be married, I was supposed to buy the wedding dress and take care of certain expenses, but my wife also took care of some things, which is not part of the Mexican tradition. For example, my wife's family took care of the reception, which in Mexico I was supposed to take care of. These things were strange to me, but I had to adjust to them. I remember that when we'd go to speak to the priest, he would tell us who was supposed to pay for what, and at the end he said "And when you are married, the groom pays for everything." That struck me very funny.

BARELA: What priest was that?

FERNANDEZ: Father James Ward.

BARELA: Were you afraid when you married, since both of you possessed a different culture?

FERNANDEZ: Yes, but we accept marriage for a lifetime. Both our cultures are in firm agreement of that. We began to adapt to certain ideas and customs in which we both felt comfortable. She changed and I changed.

BARELA: What happened as far as friends are concerned when you got married?

FERNANDEZ: My wife has always been very popular in the Mexican American community. At first it bothered me when people would say, "That's Anita Morales' husband." After a while, the people noticed that I had a name and that I just wasn't my wife's husband. With time, we began to have not only very intimate friends, but also "compadres." I began to participate a lot in community activities.
FERNANDEZ: I noticed that people wanted to know more about the culture and traditions of Mexico, so this was my opportunity to let other people know me. In 1966, the priest asked me to read from the scripture, so that also allowed me to expose myself. In 1971 and 1972, I worked at a radio station, this also helped others to know about me. In the last ten years, I have been Master of Ceremonies at patriotic festivities. Even though I feel that my contribution to the Mexican community has not been too much, the people still appreciate it, and it is passed on from one generation to the next. I have also participated in many other realms. For example, I am very much involved in education, and also the problems of alcoholism and drugs. I became involved with other groups to do something for the community.

BARELA: Do you find that the problem of alcoholism is due to the change in environment or is it the same in other places?

FERNANDEZ: The problem of alcoholism in the Mexican American community is very different from that of any other community in the Twin Cities. Many efforts are made by the State of Minnesota and the Federal Government to rehabilitate alcoholics, but the people of the Mexican community don't know anything about it. The result is that they continue to live with their affliction without ever having known that there was help. I try and help as many people as I can. Whenever there is a possibility of helping a person who is an alcoholic, the people at the hospital call on me.

BARELA: Is this part of your job?

FERNANDEZ: No, it's not part of my job. I feel that I owe something to the organization that helps alcoholics since they helped me. I was an alcoholic from about 1961 to 1966. I was able to get cured and since I am very grateful, I try to help them by helping others.
FERNANDEZ: The Mexican American community does not have any centers in the community to help the alcoholics and their families as do other communities.

BARELA:Did you get treatment here in Minnesota?

FERNANDEZ: Yes.

BARELA:What centers did you go to?

FERNANDEZ:The only two centers that existed at the time were in Willmar and Moose Lake. I was in Willmar three times. I feel that this is a very intimate part of my life, but I am not embarrassed to talk about it. I consider alcoholism an illness that can be controlled just as other illnesses, such as diabetes, high or low blood pressure, etc.

BARELA: Did you feel that your faith in God had a lot to do with your being cured?

FERNANDEZ: Well, I think that a person who drinks in excess has no faith in God or in a supreme being who has the power to create our destiny. When one finally opens his eyes to reality and he asks for help and that help is obtained, then he realizes that some superior being is in charge of that person's destiny. Then one begins to develop tremendous faith in God and holds on to this faith day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year. As the years pass, the person's faith grows stronger and stronger.

BARELA: Do you feel that you have stood out as a religious leader in your community?

FERNANDEZ: No. I don't consider myself a very religious man. I go to church every Sunday, and I have my beliefs, but I don't consider myself very religious. I believe that a very religious person is in constant contact with God. I try to do that as much as possible, but I still find it hard to tell the imaginary from the divine. My religious life is quite simple and I know that I was put on earth for a special purpose. I try to be a good person and I hope that someday I will find out my purpose in life.
BARELA: Do you think that this is very much a part of Angel Fernandez or is it very Mexican?

FERNANDEZ: I feel that it is very much a part of both. I feel that in Mexico, religion is very fanatical. Many people try to show their gratitude to God by making pilgrimages to a certain place on their knees. I believe that if God helps me to solve a problem, I can find some way of showing Him my gratitude through some act of kindness, and not by having to walk seventy-eight miles on my knees to Mankato. The simple, uneducated people of Mexico, and some in the middle class, do such things as I have described. I think that the religion which the Spaniards brought to Mexico is very pagan and fanatical. I don't think that if I say twenty rosaries in one day and then die the next day that I will go straight to heaven, especially if my life for the last forty-five years has been that of a miserable person. All the rosaries in the world wouldn't help me if I was under such a condition. So, I believe that my way of thinking as far as religion is concerned is a part of both Angel Fernandez and also very Mexican.

BARELA: Do you still follow old Mexican traditions in your home?

FERNANDEZ: Let's talk about food first. I love to eat. I like both Mexican food and the food of the United States. The Mexican food that my wife prepares at home is a combination of both. For example, if she is preparing steak, she fixes it the U.S. way. Instead of potatoes, she serves beans; instead of bread, she makes tortillas; instead of steak sauce, I like to put chile (pepper) on it. In all the years I lived in Mexico, we used to eat corn tortillas. My wife has always been used to flour tortillas, so I've grown accustomed to them and now I really like them. So like I say, it's a combination of both.
FERNANDEZ: Sometimes my wife makes fried chicken, and she makes the best, but I like to put chile on the chicken; instead of having a salad, I like to eat rice. During the winter my wife likes to make soup. It has beef, certain vegetables, rice, celery, carrots, beets, and cilantro (coriander). My children also like to eat Italian food. One of my sons could eat pizza at every meal and he wouldn't tire of it. But, he also likes to eat tacos, and he likes to prepare them himself. There is great variety in the way food is prepared in Mexico, but it is not known here. It's not true that when one goes to Mexico all there is to eat are tacos, enchiladas, rice, and beans. In many restaurants in Mexico, no such things as tacos or enchiladas are served. Both of those are considered more as appetizers or things one can eat out in the street.

BARELA: Does your family participate in the patriotic festivals?

FERNANDEZ: Oh yes, they all do. It's a beautiful thing to recall the culture.

BARELA: Do you have Mexican music at home?

FERNANDEZ: We always do. My children have a record player upstairs, but they like to play rock. When I feel nostalgic, I like to go down to the basement to listen to Mexican music.

BARELA: Do your children speak Spanish?

FERNANDEZ: My oldest son speaks Spanish and is taking a course in Spanish at school. My other children can understand it very well, but they don't speak it. We can say something to them in Spanish, but they will respond in English. That is one of the things I had to adapt to when I came to Minnesota. The majority of the Mexicans would speak to their children in Spanish and their children would respond in English.
What were the greatest conflicts that you had to adjust to when you came to live in St. Paul?

I would say that the greatest conflict which I had, which I don't have any more, is the language. I remember that for four years, I didn't speak Spanish to anyone. I felt like a fish that is taken out of water--dead, or at least as if a part of me had been torn off. But unlike a fish, a human being can adjust to the change, and I adjusted to the fact that there wasn't anyone to whom I could speak Spanish.

Do you help people who come from Mexico?

Yes I do.

What do you say to them? Do you advise them?

Yes, I advise them. For example, I have a nephew who is a chemical engineer, and he came a year ago. He is the son of my oldest brother and he wanted to see the United States and know the people of this state. Little by little, I have advised him on the things he should see, the things he should learn, and the things that should interest him. He and I speak Spanish all the time, but I give him the opportunity to be around people who don't speak Spanish so that he can learn to speak English faster. He is different from me because he has the capability to learn the English language faster than I did. In this one year that he has been here, he has learned to express himself in English very well. He has progressed very well and even though I don't know what his future plans are, I try and help him out as much as I can. He is a very active person and loves to play soccer, a game that is very well known in Mexico. Because of his interest in the game, I have become very involved in it myself. He is a member of a team on the West Side called the "Aztecas."
FERNANDEZ: At one time, I didn't know anything about the game, but I've learned a lot from him. When a person comes from Mexico and needs some advice, I give it to him, especially about the things I experienced.

BARELA: Do you do a lot to maintain the Mexican culture?

FERNANDEZ: Well, I feel that people keep their traditions but we need people who become actively involved in keeping these things alive, especially for their children so that the children will know where their parents came from and who they are. The Mexican people don't have an identity crisis, they know who they are, all they have to do is read the history of Mexico and it'll tell them who they are. Therefore, the Mexican boy or girl shouldn't have to look for an identity. The people in the community have a great desire to conserve all the traditions, which I think is really beautiful. I recall that about ten years ago I was at a Mexican restaurant with a friend of mine and he said to me, "You know most of the Mexican customs are disappearing. The youngsters are not like we used to be." I told him that I thought he was very mistaken because I think that what is very Mexican American or Chicano will be conserved forever. The reason for this is that we have something that many people admire. At that time there was only one Mexican restaurant and now there are at least ten of them in the community. That means that people of other races, customs, cultures, and traditions look for something different in our culture. In those times there was that one Mexican restaurant, and now there are many; in those times the parties were very small and now they have really grown.
FERNANDEZ: In those times, few Mexican youngsters finished high school, and now there are more and more who graduate; now more are finishing their college education and have their careers and are returning to the community not only to practice their profession, but also to help the Mexican people to progress.

BARELA: What advice would you give the younger generation in how to lead a good life?

FERNANDEZ: If I had the opportunity to give the Mexican youngsters some advice, I would first of all tell them, "Don't try to change, be what you are and be proud of it." If the Mexican people feel proud of what they are, they can make something good of themselves in the community as well as outside the community. When one is embarrassed of what he is, then he will surely fail. We see how people from other cultures progress, but that is because they are proud of what they are. Some of these people are the Germans, the Japanese, the Italians, and the French. The only way to progress is for the younger generation to maintain that tradition, that pride of being a Mexican. When one feels that pride, he can face anyone and say to them, "I respect you because you are Japanese or Italian and I respect myself and I want you to respect me because I am a Mexican.

BARELA: Mr. Fernandez, I am very grateful to you for this interview. Thank you.