TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL INTERVIEW
WITH
ALFONSO GALVAN

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

Alfonso Galvan, was born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, in 1898. He fought in the Mexican Revolution. In 1919, a friend brought him across the river into the United States. He arrived in Minnesota in 1923. Alfonso worked for the railroads, the meat packing industry, in the fields and as a butcher.

Mr. Galvan discusses his life in Mexico and the United States; his employment record, the first people on the West Side of St. Paul, the Anahuac Society, the celebrations on the West Side, his philosophy of life and advice to the young.

This is an English translation of the tape-recorded interview in Spanish. The original cassette recording is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
INTERVIEW WITH ALFONSO GALVÁN

JULY 30, 1975

INTERVIEWER: VICTOR BARELA

Barela: This interview is with Alfonso Galván, also known as "Monterrey" at 469 Ada St., St. Paul, Minnesota 55107, today is July 30, 1975. Before starting with this interview, I must ask you if you will give us permission to record this interview?

Galván: Yes.

Barela: What is your full name?

Galván: Alfonso Galván.

Barela: Where were you born?

Galván: In Monterrey, Mexico.

Barela: When were you born?

Galván: In 1898.

Barela: What were your parents names?

Galván: Miguel Galván and Antonia Galván Martínez.

Barela: Where were your parents born?

Galván: They were both born in San Luis, Potosí.

Barela: What did your father do for a living?

Galván: He worked in a foundry. The name of the company was El Funcion del Dos. He never worked in the fields. He was brought up by priests in a church in San Luis, Potosí from the age of 10 or 12. He married my mother when he was 24 years old and my mother was 16.

Barela: Do you remember your father?

Galván: Yes. In 1919 he worked in a foundry. When I left he told me, "Son I am sorry to see you go. I can't keep you anymore. Go out and you will find a better life than here." He said, he was sure of me and that I was not afraid to work. He was right too.
Barela: Do you remember your mother?

Galvan: Yes, she died here in the United States. I brought her here. In 1925 my father died. From 1919 to 1925 I did not see my family. We did not even write to each other. I got married in 1922.

Barela: Did your father come to St. Paul?

Galvan: No, he was afraid he would not find a job. He did not want to re-settle the whole family. He lived in Monterrey. I came to the United States in 1919 and stayed here.

Barela: Did you attend school in Mexico?

Galvan: Yes. Garzayala and Montemayor in Monterrey. The schools still exist, because I have met people from Monterrey that have told me so. When it gets cold, I am thinking of going to Monterrey to visit my niece.

Barela: Do you remember your youth in Monterrey?

Galvan: Yes, my first job was in the foundry. At the age of 18 years.

Barela: Do you remember the revolution?

Galvan: Yes, in 1910 I was only 12 years old. There was much fighting. One of my sisters was born in 1913. She was very young. My father made a hole inside our little home, because the houses are not like here. Well, not for everyone. Those that have money can afford good homes, but we lived in the outskirts of Monterrey. My father made a hole to shelter us from the bullets. The "Carransistas" and the "Federalistas" of Porfirio Diaz would shoot at each other. I would watch.

Barela: Did you get to see some of the fighting?

Galvan: Yes, there were many dead people in the outskirts of Monterrey by the "Cerro de la Silla" where the "Carransistas" came out. I remember all those things. I was afraid, that is why I came here. Even brave men are afraid, because if you are not afraid you end up dead. My grandmother, Fermina Castro de Galvan, my father's mother, gave me a lot of advice. She died when she was 85, in Saltillo, Coahuila. She told me when you see a fight, run, or else you are dead. I am still following
Galván: her advice here with all the Mexicans. Some of my friends tease me about it.

Barela: Your father did not have to fight in the revolution?

Galván: No, he was too much of a Christian.

Barela: Were you involved in any of the fighting?

Galván: Yes, I did until they discharged me. I did not want to but it was necessary, so I volunteered. My father was angry and he talked to my captain, Captain Ayala, and Lieutenant Rafael Cadena of the Cavalry Unit. They were both very young and brave men.

Barela: Was your family affected by the revolution?

Galván: Yes. They did not want me to be involved in the fighting. I was their only son. They did not know if I would come out of it alive. I fought in the last part of the revolution, when it was like they say here, a "cold war." In small battles. At the beginning of the war it was not like this because the fighting did not leave a thing standing. In 1910 it was something else. Mr. Porfirio Diaz was taken out of the government because he was a dictator like Castro. We needed the freedom. We had to work and earn money to live.

Barela: Did you ever get to meet any of the leaders of the revolution?

Galván: Once they had a convention, I was 12 years old. I saw Villa and Cárdenas on the balcony at the 5th of May celebration in Monterrey. Later when I was fighting I got to see more of them. I was older then, I was 18 years old. If I were to go to Monterrey now they wouldn't know me. No one would know me.

Barela: Why did you decide to come to the United States?

Galván: I had been discharged. I was in the service for four years. I was in Tampico trying to keep order. We also fought in the outskirts of Monterrey. Whenever someone asks if I fought in the revolution I just tell them that I walked among the dead. I got to see many dead bodies. This was in Coahuila and its outskirts. I went to San Luis Potosí to see my relatives on my mother's side. I also have an uncle in Dallas, Texas. He came to the United States to escape the revolution.
Galvan: He brought his three sons with him. I did not come here until the revolution ended. This was in 1916. In 1917, 1918, 1919 I was in Torreon, Coahuila. My mother travelled with my father and I selling food to the soldiers.

Barela: So your family followed you?

Galvan: We were in Torreon when the bells rang. My mother was selling food to the soldiers and she told my father that the revolution had ended. There were only small attacks going on. My mother said, "Miguel, the fighting is over. I am so happy. Let's stop selling food and go home to Monterrey with Alfonso." I had decided to go to the United States with some friends that had gone to work in the foundry where my father was a foreman. My father was an engineer. He learned a lot when he was with the church. Before they would learn in the streets. Friends of mine from the United States approached my father for a job. My father spoke English and Latin. My friend, Tejano, wanted a job so he could save some money to go to Minnesota. My father told him that I wanted to go too. So he suggested that my friend take me. I would like him to go with you so you can help him. He worked the beets and he said that I would be able to get a job. We came here in 1919. We swam across the border. I was a "wet back". At first I tried to come across the bridge, but they wouldn't let us, because we did not have the proper documents. We tried to cross a few times, then I met a group of poor people who told me they could get me across the river when the guard went to lunch. I crossed by myself. In 1923 they contracted all the illegal aliens and brought us to Minneapolis. From there they took us to Chaska, Minnesota, where their general office was.

Barela: What was the name of the company that they took you to?

Galvan: It was in Chaska, Minnesota. I don't know the name of the company. One of the men spoke English and he was our interpreter. We were all single men. The first jobs were going to the families. We were afraid they would not give us jobs. My two friends, who were from Guanajuato, and I left Chaska. We got a ride on a pick
Galván: up to Minneapolis. The first thing we did was go to a movie. Then we met a
group of men from Texas. We greeted each other and asked about jobs. They were
recruiting for the Milwaukee railroad and they hired me because of my previous
experience with the Monterrey National Railroad. I knew the work. The others
could not get a job, so they went to work in the fields. They worked at the camp
for about five months. When we finished working for the railroad we went to work
in the fields. There were about 300 men. Not only Mexicans, but there were also
Blacks, Germans, Russians, and other nationalities.

Barela: Do you remember your friends' names?

Galván: Yes. I think one of them lives here. Mr. Cervantes and Matías Patillo went back
to Mexico. When he finished working in the fields I had accumulated about $1000
dollars. They paid us about 55 cents an hour. They also gave us room and board.
After I made some money I was planning on going back to Mexico to get married. I
had a girlfriend, María Blanco. After the fields, we went to the depot to go back
to our homes. I was a hard worker, so even when others were laid off, I always
had a job. The ticket from here to Laredo was $55 dollars by train. I met an-
other man from Monterrey that told me not to leave because there was plenty of
work. He promised to help me find a job. I spent my money on clothes. He
showed me the town of Minneapolis. In about three weeks I spent most of my money.
I had $29 dollars in my savings. When the money was gone we all went our separate
ways. I went to the employment office. There I met Tomás. He spoke English. He
made a lot of money and went back to Mexico. He never worked the fields like I did.
He worked as a bartender and played billiards to make his money. He asked me to
give him three dollars and told me that he would get me a job at Armour's packing
house. He showed me which street car to take to get to Armour's. In the street
car I met the same men that had given me the job at the railroad. I did the same
work Mr. Federico Saucedo and Agustín Rodriguez did. I advanced to other jobs.
We were low on materials, so some of the people were laid off, but I wasn't. I
Galván: cleaned the floor during this time. When they found out that I had some experience as a butcher, they made me a butcher.

Barela: So they promoted you from janitor to butcher. What year was this?

Galván: This was 1919.

Barela: How long did you work for the railroad?

Galván: For about five months in St. Louis Park and Minneapolis. After that I was planning on going back to Mexico, but then I got a job at Armour's, so I stayed here. I worked for four years as a butcher. No high cellar for me! I also did different jobs at Armour's. I saw an advertisement in the paper for experience personnel, so I left Armour's to go and work for Swift's. I wanted to advance myself. Most of them stayed at the same jobs they first started. I worked six years for Swift's. Then in 1925 I quit and went to work for Cudahy in Newport.

Barela: How long did you work for them?

Galván: For 25 years. Like it says in the paper. We all have the same guarantees, but it is better when you can show a paper that says so. At Cudahy they wanted skilled butchers. I was one of the few that had the experience as a butcher.

Barela: Did you retire from there?

Galván: I worked until 1954 when the plant closed down. This is why they gave us a certificate. To show that we were good, reliable workers. After that I did other odd jobs here and there.

Barela: Do you receive your pension from Cudahy?

Galván: No, they closed down the plant. I receive Social Security. I started getting $120 a month, now I get $203 a month.

Barela: Were you married?

Galván: Yes. When I was moving around I lived in an apartment house. My girlfriend lived on the 1st floor and I lived on the 2nd floor.

Barela: Which company were you working for then?

Galván: I was working for Swift's Company in 1922.

Barela: Did your wife work at Swift's, too?
Galván: No. She was going to school. I was single and I had no intention of getting married. All I wanted to do was go back to Mexico because that was the land that I loved. Now I don't, because I know I'll be dying here. Other Irish and French families also lived in the building. She was Irish. One day I kissed her and she ran and told her mother. Her mother asked her if she liked me and she said yes. So her mother invited me to their home. We were married in 1922. Our daughter was born in 1923. My daughter is now 52. She speaks good Spanish, as if she had studied, but my sister taught her.

Barela: What was your wife's name?

Galván: Irene Cawa. My father-in-law was German. They did not like me. Even with our marriage papers. My father-in-law was afraid. He said the people were different in Mexico.

Barela: How old was your wife when you married her?

Galván: She was 16 years old. Now she is 67 and I am 78. After I got married, I wrote to my family in Monterrey. They wanted me to move back to Mexico but I did not want to because I had a two year old daughter and I wanted to stay here. My wife was a beautiful woman and my daughter is too. Our thinking is always changing. In 1925, my father was sick. He had a blood clot in his heart, that is what my daughter, who is a nurse's supervisor at University Hospital tells me. She is a big shot because she can speak both languages. She is married to a good man.

Barela: So your father died in 1925?

Galván: Yes. My sister wrote me telling me my father was dying and that he wanted to see me. I did not have much money, like I do now, but my wife insisted that I go. I borrowed some money and I left. My father-in-law and their neighbor, who later became my wife's second husband, took me to the station. When I returned from Mexico my wife wanted a divorce. All I cared about was my family. When my father died he told my mother and my sisters to follow me because I would take care of them. When I got to Mexico my father had already died. My father had a very modern home in Mexico. I received a letter from my wife saying that she wanted me
Galván: to return as soon as possible.

Barela: How long were you in Mexico?

Galván: For about two months. During this time I had been working in Mexico. I promised my mother that I would go back and bring them here with me. My mother was working washing dishes, my sister, Vita, worked making dresses and Lola was blind and Lazarita took care of her. I had to return. When I came back I gave my wife her divorce and started to work. I bought a car and went to get my family. We did not have much trouble getting them across because they did not require too many papers. I had taken three of my insurance policies to be safe. The Swift Company's insurance for $1,500 and two $3,400 travel insurance policies. I did not have a passport, but I went across anyway. There were others who could not come back because they did not have a passport. I came back through Laredo. I paid $18 dollars and showed my papers and came back. First I brought two of them and then the other two.

Barela: When was this?

Galván: 1925 was when my whole family came. I bought a house and furniture. Later, Vita, and Sara wanted to work so I found them work at Armour's. When I went to Cudahy, I took them with me. I took good care of them. They never had to work in the fields. Like I tell them, I did not support them, all I did was show them the way to a better life. All the people that came first spoke broken English because we are aliens. We are not European we are Mexicans. In 1933 there was a law that we either had to become American citizens or we would be deported. So we became American citizens. I went to classes in So. St. Paul and at the Neighborhood House.

Barela: When you first came to St. Paul, where did you live?

Galván: I lived in So. St. Paul. I rented a room for $3.50 a week. Now rents are very high. When I started working I got 55 cents an hour. After that I got 80 and 90 cents and then $1.80, all the way up to $5.00 an hour. I was not clever but my daughter is. She is a supervisor of a whole floor. When I was sick she talked to my doctor about me. He advised her to tell me to take it easy because I have
Galván: a serious ailment, and I am not supposed to drink.

Barela: When you first came, who were some of the families that were here?

Galván: About three or four families. Mr. Trejo, he did not have a family then. He has five sons now. Mr. Federico Saucedo, he married two or three times. I knew his wife and children. Don Agustin Rodriguez, I met him when he was a young boy. Now he has about eight children. Don Pomposo Guerra and his wife. She worked at Armour's with me. George Vasquez and Arturo Coronado, he was very young and single. Alfonso Bravo, he was my roommate.

Barela: Did the people get together?

Galván: Yes, we had parties for the 16th of September. We would have dances at people's homes. We also had musicians that played for the occasion. My brother-in-law is a musician. He plays the saxophone.

Barela: What is his name?

Galván: José Medina.

Barela: Do you remember some of the holidays you celebrated?

Galván: Only the 16th of September and the 5th of May.

Barela: You did not celebrate El Día de la Raza (Columbus Day)?

Galván: No, we did not.

Barela: How about Our Lady of Guadalupe's Day?

Galván: No, we did not celebrate that. The first church we had was on Wabasha Street. Father Guillemette was the one that started it. He died. He baptized my daughter. After that came Father Dicks and then Father Ward and now Father Monsur.

Barela: Did you participate in the feasts?

Galván: Yes, I participated. When it came to dancing I was number one. I went to the 16th of September celebration last year.

Barela: Do you still dance?

Galván: No, this was when I was young. There are about four or five women that live in the building that knew me as a young man. The other day when my daughter came to visit, two women asked me who she was because they did not recognize her. When I
Galván: told them she was my daughter, Florence Mauricio, they remembered that they had held her in their arms when she was a baby. I was always very proud to show my daughter who her mother was. She does not like her mother but I tell her she has to love her mother because she was the one that brought her into this world. All I did was support her until she got married. I tell her she should listen to her mother. She has five sons and one daughter. Four of them are married now; but I ask her who's they are and she says hers. This is exactly how it is with your mother because even though she did not bring you up she is still your mother.

Barela: Is your wife still living?

Galván: Yes, she lives by my daughter's. She has her own home and car. Her brothers and sisters were very upset because we got a divorce. I still see her when I visit my grandchildren. I will not take her back because I don't want her to think she can leave and that I will take her back anytime. I have girlfriends but I do not plan on marrying again. My daughter also didn't want me to get married because then there would be too many complications.

Barela: You mentioned that you knew some of the members of the Anahuac Society?

Galván: Yes, all the ones that I have mentioned. They have all died except for Mr. Federico Saucedo.

Barela: You said that the Anahuac Society was not too successful, why was this?

Galván: The people in the society did not get along. Too many leaders and not enough followers.

Barela: Were most of these people from México?

Galván: Yes, they were all from México. We did not even have a Texan. Mr. Samora was the one that started the society. Mr. Trejo, Mr. Federico Saucedo, Agustín Rodríguez, Pomposo Guerra, and myself were some of the members. They were all older men, I was the youngest. They have all died now or are in their 80's and 90's. I am not there yet. We would get together at the Neighborhood House. We had an office and an interpreter, Esiquiel Moreno, (Brownie), Mr. Samora's son-in-law. He was born in Houston, Texas.
Barela: Did you have reunions at the Neighborhood House? Is this where you organized the celebrations?

Galván: Yes, then as more people got involved and the celebrations became bigger, we went to the auditorium. We could not have our celebrations at the Neighborhood House or in homes because there were too many of us. We also started having orchestras, not like before when we would have two or three playing the accordion and that was it. I like the celebrations we have now. Many people went to our celebrations. There were very few people when I first came.

Barela: Your daughter went to school here in the United States?

Galván: Yes, she went to Lafayette Elementary School.

Barela: Did she participate in any of the feasts?

Galván: Yes, we all went to the Neighborhood House. We would also go to the auditorium for the celebrations of the 16th of September. I never stayed too close to them because I liked to drink. Now I don't drink anymore because I am sick. My sister is a member of the Guadalupanas. We also had a society for the men, but it broke up. The Texans here are good people, but they don't spend the money the way we did all over Texas and California. We were never afraid to spend it, even though we might be broke the next day. The Texan women have their men so that they don't spend the money. When I was married I gave my wife the check because if I didn't give it to her we would not eat. I liked to go out. One time I had a fight with my father-in-law because my wife did not like me to go out. She wanted to keep me at home but I was used to going out and having a good time with other women in Mexico as well as here. It hurt me to leave all those beautiful women in Mexico. Before I left, I went out and had a good time and spent a lot of money. There is a story about a Jewish man that came to the United States he made ten cents an hour. He only ate bread and water and saved all his money. He thought he would never die. One day he was sick and had to go to the hospital. All he could say was "my money, my money." Death told him, "Someone else will spend it and have a good time, because you earned it, but you were afraid to spend
Galván: it. You should have spent it while you were alive, now someone will spend it without being afraid." I had many friends. Some would come and work the beets and then go back. I never went to work in the fields.

Barela: Do you still go to Mexico?

Galván: No. I would like to go and visit. I have been sick and I hope to get better.

Barela: Has your daughter ever been to Mexico?

Galván: She would like to go, but she has only been to San Antonio, Texas. She has two of her sons there. She asked if I wanted to go with her to San Antonio because that is where her sons are in the service. My grandson, José, is married to a Norwegian. Junior has a German wife, Billy is married to an Irish, and Martha was married to an Irish. She is divorced now. Four of them are married. She only has two sons at home. One is 19. Carlos Mauricio and Michael, he was named like my father, he is 14 or 15 years old.

Barela: What is your daughter's husband's name?

Galván: Isaac Mauricio. They had six children in their family. He is a good man. I tell her that if he ever mistreats her to let me know. If I did not mistreat her, why should he? I am still her father and I'll look out for her.

Barela: Do you still enjoy Mexican food?

Galván: I just made squash with pork. I have it once in a while.

Barela: Does your daughter still speak Spanish?

Galván: Yes, she speaks it better than I do.

Barela: How about your grandchildren?

Galván: No, they only speak English. My son-in-law is from Guanajuato and does not speak English well. He comes from a family of five brothers and one sister. They were all laborers.

Barela: You have a very interesting philosophy of life. What has influenced you the most in your life to arrive at such a philosophy?

Galván: The good life. Avoid fights. Like my grandmother used to say a good life keeps trouble away. Some people think that by fighting and robbing, others will have a
Galvan: better life, but that is not so. Some of my friends ask me if I would ever steal, and I tell them sure. But if I stole something it sure would not be clothes because I could get caught wearing them. If I stole I would rob a bank. I would also do it by myself because if I had a partner, the partner might get caught and tell on me and if I got caught I might tell on him. So if you are going to do wrong, don't involve others. And if you are going to steal, steal something big not just any little thing. One of my friends told me the story about the shepherd boy who found a sack of gold. Back in those days the people did not put their money in banks. He ran home and told his father but his father did not believe him. Finally he said, "O.K., we will go and pick it up tomorrow." The next day when they went to the spot where the sack was, it was gone. Someone else had come by and had taken it with him. He did not wait until tomorrow. So don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today. My grandfather used to tell me when you are hungry, eat, because if you wait until tomorrow you might not have any food. I eat when I am hungry. I learned how to cook a long time ago. I used to eat at the cafeteria at Armour's. We all ate there. There were many nationalities that worked there. There were some Blacks, and some of the people did not like them, but I didn't care because we are all human beings.

Barela: If you were going to give advice to people that have not had the experience you have, what would you tell them so they could lead a happier life?

Galván: I would give them the same advice my father gave me. When I was young I was very lazy, because I did not have to work. My father was wealthy. Then I fell in love with a girl from San Antonio, Anita, and I wanted to get married. I talked to my father about it and he told me not to settle for the first girl I knew because there were many others that I should get to know. They are all different. Another thing he told me was that I should learn a skill and have a steady job before I would think of marrying. He also said that if I wanted to keep on with my education, there was no room for a girlfriend. I should concentrate on my studies. He also said to first finish my studies and have a good job before I thought of getting...
Galván: He was not going to support me and a wife. That is why he was not afraid when I left home because he said that I knew how to work and that if I starved it was because I did not want to work. He did not feel sorry for me. This is what I would tell the young men and also the girls. Marriage is no good until you have completed your studies and are mature enough to handle it. Otherwise if you marry young you might end up getting a divorce like me. When I lived in Mexico all I thought of was girls but when I came to the United States everything was different. I did not have my father to support me so work became very important to me. I have never been on welfare. I took good care of my family.

Barela: We thank you for your help.

Galván: Me too. I have not had much education but when someone speaks to me I am glad to answer them. Don't talk to me about politics because I don't like to get involved in fights.