TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

LUIS MARTINEZ

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

Luis Martinez, was born in Raymondville, Texas, his family did migrant labor in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. He worked in his home state of Texas until 1953 when he moved permanently to East Grand Forks, Minnesota. He learned the automobile business by starting at the bottom of the pay scale and doing clean-up work in shops. As he became more experienced and gained confidence in his work, he received several promotions. He became Manager of an Auto Dealership and because of his command of the Spanish language, would sell to migrants.

He went into business for himself in 1973, and was doing quite well at the time of this interview.

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview edited to aid in clarity and ease of comprehension for the reader. The original tape recording is available in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
INTERVIEW WITH LUIS MARTINEZ
July 15, 1976
INTERVIEWER: RAMEDO SAUCEDO

Saucedo: Today is July 15, 1976. I am Ramedo Saucedo, and I am interviewing Mr. Luis Martinez in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. Mr. Martinez, can we begin with the date and place of your birth?

Martinez: My date of birth is September 6, 1931.

Saucedo: The number of children in your family?

Martinez: The number of children is six; five boys and one girl, the age range is from five to twenty-two.

Saucedo: Were your parents born in Texas?

Martinez: No. My parents were born in Mexico.

Saucedo: What part of Mexico were they born?

Martinez: In Caderita Jimenez.

Saucedo: How is it you came to Minnesota?

Martinez: I came to Minnesota when I was approximately four years old.

Saucedo: With your parents?

Martinez: With my mother. My dad passed away at a very early age. I don't recall what year it was, because I was so young. My mother was uneducated. She had no schooling, either in Mexico or the United States.

Saucedo: How was it that you came up to Minnesota?

Martinez: We came to Minnesota in the company of one of my older brothers. Nobody enticed us to come to Minnesota. We first started traveling north, looking for work. We landed in Moorhead, Minnesota, where we were told that there was work around the Crookston, Minnesota area. We came to Crookston and worked for various farmers. I don't recall who they are, because I was too young at that time to remember names. We went back home to Raymondville. Raymondville is a small...
Martinez: city, approximately fifty miles north of Brownsville, Texas and it's in Wilesey County. As I grew a little older we forgot about Minnesota and we went to Sundusky, Michigan.

Saucedo: What year was this?

Martinez: This was approximately 1939. I was about seven years old. We worked that summer, right around Sundusky. We met some really nice people that raised sugar beets. But they raised them in a small quantity. Some of them had four or five acres of beets. The rest was strawberries; cherries; apples; and peaches. We started in the sugar beets. I should say my brothers did, I only worked after school. I went to school three months at the time, in one locale, and then another locale. We were following the crops, just like a lot of our migrant people do today. Then at the age of twelve, I decided I wasn't going to do anymore field work. I took a job, cleaning a movie theater.

Saucedo: In what town?

Martinez: In Raymondville. My mother took very sick that year. I forgot what year it was, but I was twelve years old, say approximately 1940, '42, '43, we stayed home for two summers. In 1944, I remember very clearly, we came up to the Turtle Valley Area in Wisconsin, right around Delavan, we worked there. I was going to settle around the state of Wisconsin, then my mother got sick again. As I mentioned earlier, she was not capable of taking care of herself. I mean speaking English and understanding, she couldn't understand until later years. We again returned to Texas. We spend part of the winter in Wisconsin. In the spring, my brother, who is about three years older than I am, Tommy would be about three years older than me, came with a group of people under the leadership of a crew leader. At that time, we had crew leaders, people that owned a truck and contracted labor, up north. They enticed one of my brothers to come with him and when I use the word "entice", I use it very clearly and in some ways
Martinez: it can be misunderstood or not interpreted right. Some people can entice you
to do something that's for your own good, of your own free will. You do it out
of your own free will and you do it for your own good. Sometimes a lot of us
need a little encouragement. I use the word, "enticing", because I remember he
came to the house several times and would say, "Come on Tom, I know we can make
money". He came up by himself and within a period of six to eight weeks, we got
a letter. We had no telephone at home, so we got a letter urging us to come to
Minnesota, because they were so short of help. The work was getting too much for
him and there were other brothers involved down there. There was George,
Anastacio, who everybody knew as "Joe". There was Cruz, myself, and my mother.
My brother had just gotten married about a year or so before. We all loaded up
the car and took off for Crookston, Minnesota. We arrived about five days later.
They didn't have the expressways that we have now. We had two routes up here,
Highway Seventy-five and Highway Eighty-one. We weren't too familiar with the
way up here. When I first arrived here I was very young, only four years old,
I didn't remember. It was new to me. When we returned to Crookston again, we
actually didn't have any designated place. So we moved in with my wife's mother
and dad. We stayed there until the snow melted and conditions were permissable
to start working.

Saucedo: This was in what year?

Martinez: This was in 1953. In the fall of 1953. I started seeking work in town and I
couldn't find any in Crookston. I came to East Grand Forks, made an application
and I found work with the Pryrofax Gas Corporation, which no longer exists. But
that's what the name was. My job consisted of filling cylinders at the bulk
plant they had here in East Grand Forks, at the railroad sitting, and delivering
to people that used bottled gas. I was trained to hook up these tanks to the
outside regulator and remove the empty ones. It got to be hard for my back,
Martinez: because I always had kind of a tender back. I started meeting some of the people that settled here, earlier than us. Some of them advised me to go and seek work at local garages.

I worked at a service station for a short time in Raymondville. I got interested in cars. During the year of 1953, I did work one summer at a garage, that changed names about five different times. I can remember it was Northwest and Warren, and I kind of liked the work. This man that sold us a truck, I used to go over there and visit with on rainy days, or whenever the opportunity presented itself. He told me to pursue this car business, or work for a garage. He wanted me to become a mechanic. He thought I would make a pretty good mechanic. He said there were going to be more Mexicans. Everybody addressed us as Mexicans. There are going to be more Mexicans around the area as you grow older. You will be able to serve them better. He said, "I wish I had a Mexican working for me."

Sometimes he would do business with them in the summertime. He had a hard time communicating with them. Sometimes I was around at the right time, it made it so much easier for him, and he would give me three or four dollars. When I moved to Grand Forks, I waited for the opportunity to present itself. Then this other fellow, by the name of Martinez, was working for the Governor Motor Company, at the time, got into some kind of argument with the boss, and he went to another garage. He told me that this job was open. I went and applied. They gave me the job. I worked for approximately six weeks. Then he and the boss made up. He had been there for such a long time and missed him. This fellow told me, "I can say this today," and he's still alive, I am not dissatisfied with your work or anything, but we used to get along so well together, I kind of miss him around here. I did help the man a lot, and he did awful nice work for me. I'm going to have to lay you off, but I'm not going to do it right away. Besides, business is pretty slow right now. I can't keep both of you. But if business increases, I'd like
Martinez: to have you back and work for me. As it turned out, I found out where this other Martinez had been working. I lost no time, as soon as he quit to come over to the old place, I went and applied over there and they hired me. I mean, I needed the work and they were only a half of block away.

This took place at the old Plymouth City. Do you know where the old Plymouth City was? This was another owner. Then I said, "I can start work in two weeks, because this man gave me a two-week notice. He said, if I needed anymore time that I could take it, but I'd have to rotate, because his old employee was coming back." We did it, just like I'm talking to you now, with no bitterness or anything. I was grateful that I was hired. I went back just as happy as a boy with an ice-cream cone in each hand! I asked if I could talk to him, my boss, he said, "sure, come on in. What did you have on your mind?" "Well, first of all I would like to thank you for the opportunity that you've given me. Second, I want to tell you that I have found employment already, and you won't have to be paying this other man and myself, because I'll be starting in two weeks. But if it's okay with you, I can start next week, because they don't have anybody else. I would like to start as soon as possible, before somebody else applies for the job." He said, "Where is this place that you're so anxious to go to?" And I told him. He said, "Oh, no way!" I'll never forget this. He said, "You know, I don't care how people look at you, or how you feel people look at you. I can tell you one thing, you deserve a lot better place to work, than to work with those people." I said, "Well, what's wrong with them?" He said, "I just don't get along with them and they don't get along with me. "I don't think you'll get along with them." "Well, it's a job, and I need a job." He said, "I'm not firing you. I gave you time, now I'll ask you to give me time. I'll look for a job for you." "You mean I don't have to go? I don't want to go, but you haven't got enough work for us to do." "Well, you grab the broom and sweep around here. If you see snow in the
Martinez: front, go and shovel it, keep moving, so that the rest of the boys don't get the idea that you're sluffing off. But don't you go over there and do what you intend to do. You stay here. I'll find you a job."

Then for three or four days, it was really slow. He had his son, who was kind of the manager, he was getting nervous and was making us do things we actually didn't have to do, like cleaning the mud hole in the wash rack, when it had been cleaned two or three days before. So I went back to him and said, "Listen, I'm not that desperate. I'll tell you what I want to do. I'd like to advance myself. I noticed two of your salesmen quit, I'd like to get a chance at that job." At that time, he said, "What are you talking about? Why don't you get back and do what I asked you to do?" His dad said, "Well, why don't you let him finish what he is telling you, then he can go back." He and his dad got along really well, but his dad for some reason got to like both Martinez and myself. We didn't leave right at six o'clock. We'd clean up all the tools even when his own mechanics that had been there for years would drop them on the floor, we'd clean them up, hang them up, and put them away. He liked that. He said, "Louie was just telling me that we lost two salesmen, and he would like a crack at it." "Well, who is going to buy a car from him? He would never make a salesman." I always have been one to take a challenge when somebody tells me that I can't do anything. I don't want to prove that I'm better than anybody else, but it's a challenge for me. He laughed and walked away, and said, "You'd better get back to your job." So I did. Then about four or five days later, his dad called me in and said, "You know, Donny is giving you a bad time, isn't he?" I said, "No, not really." He said, "I know he is. You know he likes that other fellow so much that he can call him anything he wants and he'll take it. And you have a way of talking back to him, where you don't swear at him, you don't smart off, but if he asks you something you have some kind of an answer for him and he doesn't like that. He's always
Martinez: been like that, with all my family. The rest of the boys and even his mother just can't take him. He has to have his way, otherwise it's not right. I know he's giving you a bad time. Tomorrow morning, I want you to go to the Valley Motor Company. I want you to punch the clock in here. I want you to go to the Valley Motor Company and talk to a friend of mine. His name is Jake. He doesn't own the place, but he's the general manager. I'm pretty sure he'll put you to work because he needs somebody. The man that has the job there now, is not holding it up. He shows up some days and some days he doesn't show up. He wants somebody he can rely on and I already talked to him and I've given you a good recommendation. I would rather see you work for him than anybody else, but on one condition. When things pick up for me I want you to come back and work for me."

"Well, I couldn't ask for a better opportunity so I went and talked to this man, Jake. He was in his late 30's or maybe his early forties. I told him I was sent there by Mr. Trenta. "Yes, sit down, I'd like to talk to you a little bit. I'd like to know what you can do and what you intend to do. What time would you like to start in the morning and what time you would like to stop for dinner? What time would you want to quit at night? I want to know if you get along with your wife? If you don't, you're going to take it out on the customers here. I don't want that." I replied, "The only problem I have with my wife, is if I don't keep food on the table. I won't if I don't get this job. I already passed a chance to go to work for somebody else. I found out now the job is gone, because I went right back to the people and told them that my job was continuing at this garage and I couldn't leave anymore. Now it's gotten to a point where the man sent me down here, I think he wants to get rid of me. I can read between the lines."

He said, "I think you're wrong. He doesn't want to get rid of you. He just doesn't have the operations that he should have at this time of the year. Things slow down. This is new to you. I can tell you, in about two months, we are going to get busy."
Martinez: If you're one of these guys that's going to work for me, and then two months later, a farmer comes along and tells you that he's going to offer you three hundred dollars a month, it's going to sound like big money to you. You're going to have to leave me. If that's you, I don't want to hire you." I said, "I don't want to work on farms anymore, if I can help it." Then he said, "When do you want to start?" "When do you want me to start?" I said. "Next Monday." "Okay", I said.

Saucedo: How old were you then?

Martinez: I was nineteen. I just turned nineteen. I went back and told Mr. Trenta about it. He said, "You see, I told you, you would like it. I told him I was starting work on Monday. "Well, that's fine. I'll have your check ready Saturday."

Saturday he had my check for me. He thanked me, and I thanked him. "Remember when business picks up, I'm going to call you back. You can come back and work for me." So I went to work for Valley Motor Company and I started cleaning the trucks and floormats and sunvisors. They called the used car manager and told him to teach me how to go about cleaning the engines and so forth. I had done a few, but I never told him. I just followed the rule, three or four cars a day.

Then one day he said, "There is a lunch counter, a little place that is called Jacobe's. It has become a very successful place, as years have gone by. I'd like you to stay tomorrow and have dinner with me. I'll buy you a couple of hamburgers. So you can tell your wife tonight that you won't be home for dinner tomorrow. I'd like to talk to you." So I said, "Well, that's fine. I'll tell you one thing, I can't afford it. I can't afford to buy your lunch back. I mean not right now, maybe a little later on." He said, "Well, I've been telling you that, it will be my treat."

I told my wife not to expect me for dinner the next day. We left right at twelve o'clock. We punched our cards. We went over to the restaurant. I had a hamburger and coffee. "When you came down here, we had a long line of twenty-five
Martinez: cars. We have about eight right now. You're going too fast. They haven't noticed it up front but if they do, then we won't be putting any over time in. Our check will get a little smaller. "What do you propose to do?" I asked. "I want you to slow down. Yesterday you had three cars ready from eight o'clock in the morning, until five-thirty. I think you should slow down. The fellow I had working for me before, "this wasn't Jake talking to me, this was the used-car manager, the man that was way down under the totem pole, under the service manager, "I couldn't get him to finish one a day." I said, "I didn't want to tell you this, but you know ever since we were out on the farm, I used to clean my car and polish it under a tree there. I had a little advanced training before you hired me. But I didn't want to tell you I knew everything. I didn't want you to get the idea that you were hiring a smart-aleck." Well, he said, "I want you to slow down, and if you slow down in two months, you can have my job, because I'm going to be leaving. I put in an application for civil service, I have an idea that I'm going to get it. In two months I need to make more money. Now we're not cheating the company, because they weren't getting this kind of production before. We are going too fast. We are getting off at six o'clock. We don't get to work until six-thirty, and that's a half-hour after forty hours. We get time and a half. I want you to know, we are not getting that. If you keep this up, we won't be getting that, and you'll have my job. I promise you that. If you don't slow down, I'm going to let them hire somebody else." I said, "I don't want your job under those conditions. I'll slow down if that's what you want me to do. But if you're testing me for something, I'll get you and the boss together and I'll put five cars out, instead of three. If you're testing me for something, or if he put you up to something, I'll prove it to you." He said, No, nobody put me up to anything. Nobody's testing you out. I'm just telling you what's what."
Martinez: The following day, I did two cars, and the next day I found a good excuse. I started looking for things that I should have been looking for before, cracked fan belts and all that. I asked him, "Do you suppose if somebody bought this car and took it out on the road and they busted a fan belt, that they would come and buy another one, especially if they were stranded thirty miles from here?" He said, "No, I don't think so." I said, "Maybe we should replace them." He said, "Go up to the parts room and get them and put them on." So by doing that, it cut my reconditioning time in half. Then I checked the bulbs, there would be sand in them from the country roads. I would cleaned all the terminals out and put them back in and washed the inside of the base. Then I put the lens back on. I did all that cleaning up, things that I wasn't doing before. I was doing a lot of polishing and a lot of painting on motors and things like that. I was turning out one a day.

One day Jake came back, about a quarter to six and he said, "Jake, I want to show you something." Jake said, "What do you have?" "I want to show you the paint room," he said. He took Jake in the paint room and turned on all the lights. The car was sparkling. He raised the hood up. I had painted the motor and then I had matched all the motor up and taken the radiator and brushed all the corrosion out and I had painted the radiator. Then I had taken the vacuum cleaner and I had sucked all the bugs out of there. I had taken the hose and cleaned out all the dirt and corrosion and everything like that. I had taken a spray can and painted all that. "Gee, said Jake, "That looks like new." "Yes, that was Louie's idea," he said. What I called you here for is, I went home at noon and got my mail. I got the job that I told you about three months ago.

Saucedo: Were you standing right there with them?

Martinez: I was standing right there. "I mentioned it to you. Remember that? Jake said,
Martinez: "Yes, and you're going to leave us." He said, "Yes, I'm going to be leaving you, but I'll tell you what. If you intend to hire anybody to train any reconditioning men, I want you to know, I'll nominate Louie for the job. That's up to you people. But I'll be leaving in a month."

Saucedo: So he did recommend you for the position?

Martinez: Just as he had promised. "You were right in one respect, he said, I was testing you. I wanted to see what kind of work you did, because these people treated me pretty nice, when I started." He came from a farm, too, in Fertile, Minnesota. He worked the full month, from five in the morning until ten o'clock at night, for very little money. It was just a dairy farm. There wasn't enough to support him, so he came into town. He got himself a job cleaning cars. So, anyway, he started talking to these people about me. Right in from of me, not behind my back. Jake said, "Well, there's no doubt about it. It's about the best job we have ever had done around here. But I can't do anything until we have a meeting. We will see what happens."

He kept working there for a month, then they hired somebody else. I was doing my job as I was instructed to do. Then they hired another man to take La Valle's place. His name is La Valle, Lawrence. He lives in St. Paul. Some of this can be verified very easily. He works for the postal department. They bought a home in St. Paul. He was down here last year. He drove up here, and visited me. Whenever I get any mail that he happens to catch, he'll write me a little note on the envelope. I continued to do my work, then things got busier, and busier. Time for selling was just starting, for the season. They hired another clean-up man. They brought him over and he introduced me to him. We started. I continued to do the same thing I had been doing. Finally, one of the top-notch salesmen came up there and said, "I need this car cleaned up and I need it by tonight, because
Martinez: I have people coming to look at it." In the meantime, the sales-manager came over to me and he said, "How are you coming with this car that you started this morning?" I said, "I'll have it done by 3:00. I had it done at 2:15 or 2:30. I went to tell him that it was done. Then I started on the other one. Unfortunately, it was so dirty, I couldn't get it done. I got reprimanded from the salesman for that. I tried to explain to him that I was trying to do one car at a time. It was pretty difficult to work on two, with what I had, an untrained man and all that. He said, "you have been here long enough. Why don't you tell him what to do?" I said, "I can't do that because I am supposed to do my work."

Saucedo: You didn't have the authority?

Martinez: I don't have any authority. He can stand and watch me, but he won't learn anything from that. He's got to do it. He has his own department over there. I have my own department here.

The next day, I had two salesman. They had five salesmen there at that time. "Well, Louie, I want that done and I want this done. Gentlemen, I said, "I'll be real happy to work until midnight if necessary, I need the work. But I have to get one at a time. Now you have a car to show, I can do a sloppy job, but your customers aren't going to like it." Oh, he said, "Just wash it off." I said, "It isn't going to work that way." "Well, he said, "You better get some more help." I said, That's not my decision. We were on that subject when the telephone rang and I was called and I thought it was something that had happened at home. I went over to the phone and Mr. Trenta was on the phone. He said, "Louie, how is it going?" I said, "Oh, pretty good, sir. I'm working right now. I'm really in a rush. Is there something you want to talk to me about? Could I stop by and see you at noon or sometime?" He said, "No, I want you to come to work. I want you to tell him that you're done and start for me the first of the
Martinez: month. I said, "Well, when I came to work here, there were two people here. Now there's just me. They're treating me pretty well." He said, "Well, I don't care. I got you that job and I told you that when I was ready to hire you back, I'd call you. I am calling you now. Either come to work or I'm going to hire somebody else. But I want you to work for me, because we made an agreement."

I said, "Well, I'll see what I can do and I'll get back to you.

Saucedo: Did he offer you more pay?

Martinez: No. But at the end of the day, I tried to satisfy everybody. I went to the front and Jake was one of the gentlemen that stayed and reviewed every order the salesmen had written all day long. He stayed fifteen to twenty minutes or even a half hour after everybody left. I knocked on his door and he looked up at me and smiled and said, "Come in! What are you doing working so late?" I said, "Well, I had something to finish and I was wondering if I could impose on your time?" He said, "Oh, sure, sit down." I said, "You know, when I was hired here, I came down here on a recommendation by Mr. Andre Trenta. He might have explained to you how he wanted me to work." "Yes", he said, Mr. Trenta said, "that you needed a job and I needed somebody. It's as simple as that. I said, "Well, he called me today," "He called you today?" I said, "Yes, you see when he got me this job, he told me he was going to send me to work here, until business picked up. We had an understanding that I was supposed to go back." We got it straighten out very nicely.

Life is so short that if a person can't get irritated over something like this, not that I'm older I realize it. I'm not very proud of the things I have done. I went back to Jake, and I said, "When I needed a job, this man gave me one. He is the one that recommended your firm to me and me to you. I have done some work, if it's satisfactory, I'd like to know about it. If it's not satisfactory,
Martinez: I'd still like to know about it. I have two weeks left. You hired a new man. He'll work out fine, but the way things have been going, I think you should have two more men back there. I'm not telling you how to run your business, but, the way these salesmen are selling these cars, I think you should have two more men. They can turn them out faster. They can do a better job. I think the way the cars have been reconditioned, people appreciate them more. I know I appreciate a clean car." He said, "Well, how much are you going to be making at General Motors?" "Well, not anymore than I'm making over here." He said, "How come you want to move?" I told the man, "I'd consider it." "Well, while you're doing that considering, I've been considering something else, too. I might as well tell you right now, I want to put you in charge of that used-car department over there. I talked to the salesmen, just a couple of days ago. But I haven't had a chance to get back to you. It's up to you, I don't want to hold you back, Louie. But I was kind of hoping that you would stay with us. Then I was going to turn that used-car department over to you. You'd do your own hiring and train the men the way you want to train them. If they don't work out, you do the firing and the hiring. We'll work out a pay schedule for you, and some kind of slight raise for you." "How much of a slight raise are you talking about, Jake? I have been here for almost three months now." He said, "What are you making now?" "I'm making eight-five cents an hour." "How does a $1.15 strike you?", he said. "Well, good-gosh, it's pretty good money," I said. "Starting when?" He said, "Starting the first of the month. But then I don't want to hear anymore about any promises you made somebody else. If you decide to take it, I want you to take it and I want you to stay. You make up your own mind. If you want to leave in two weeks, that is up to you." Then Trent's's son called me and said, "We got a raise for you in mind. I think you owe us." He's dead now. He passed away two years ago, at the age of forty. I said, "Donny, I don't think I owe you anything. I really don't.
Martinez: Every time that you paid me it was for the hours that I put in there, I worked for them. I really did. I worked extra hard for you. I cleaned the wash-pit out twice as many times as the average man that you had. I was in your place the other day, getting some parts, I noticed it hadn't been cleaned for a while. But you sure had me doing it while I was there. I don't feel like I owe you anything. "We can use you and I'll give you a raise." How much of a raise? I was trying to be fair and square. We already had one child who was one year old. "Instead of being three of us, counting my mother, there were four of us now." He said, "How much do need, a dollar an hour?" "No, I am getting more than that." "How much more?" I said, "I can't tell you." He said, "Well, I'll give you $1.20 an hour. You come to work for us the first of the month. It'll start just when I am through talking to you, tomorrow morning. I said, "I'm in a spot, I'll have to get back to you. But if you need somebody really bad, you'd better hire somebody." "No, I'll wait a few days." We left it that way.

About a week afterwards, Jake felt in a very talkative mood. At that time, the migrant people started coming in. They found there was a Mexican working there. They'd come and ask me, "Do you know of a good car?" I'd say, "Oh, yes, I cleaned this one up, it's sitting out there in the far end, it's this and that color." They'd go and try it out. They'd come back, and say, "Gee, it sounds like a good car." I'd say, "I know, I heard the mechanic talking about it. I just put all new belts in and water hose. I changed the oil and filter and everything. The transmission isn't noisy or anything, so it should be in good shape." The guy would say, "Buy it." Then they would have a little trouble communicating. The salesman would have an awful time. They'd call me up front. I'd leave and go out there in overalls, filled with polish. I'd be standing there in the office talking to them. They were great at financing by the season: pay so much in August, pay so much in the fall; pay so much next August and then in the fall.
Martinez: They were really buying some stuff, and new stuff too. This lady that called tonight, from Steven's, her husband bought two new trucks there. It was not because I was there, but because he liked Dodge and he bought them there. We happened to be from the same home town. He used to brag about himself quite a bit and brag about our family a little bit and so forth. We had a very good relationship. Then, going back a little ways, Jake came back one day. He was very happy. Business was very good. He said, "Well, are we going to have a new used-car manager?" I said, "Jake, I thought it over. I appreciate the raise and everything. I really do. But you know they've been calling me from the other garage and it's so little, it's only a nickel. I'm not playing one against the other, but they do make me feel like I owe it to them." "Well, Jake said, I tell you what we are going to give you, a $1.30 raise, an hour, for this job." That's the way it started.

Saucedo: And you took the job?

Martinez: I took the job. I wasn't playing one against the other.

Saucedo: What did it involve?

Martinez: I even had my brothers working there. It involved reconditioning the cars. I made the decisions whether the two tires should be replaced in the rear, or if we should have the four replaced. I filled out a report. I filled it out really quick, just like what you have in that yellow stationary there. I made out a work order and called up. They had their own tire department. It was managed separately. I'd get the tires at cost. I'd figure the time involved for changing them. We didn't have all this automatic changing equipment. We did have some. We did have a tire changer. I computed it right away, just like adding two and two together, and six and six makes twelve. I got it all down. As soon as I'd get it all together, I'd run up to the used-car manager and say, "You know this new car you took in? Well, I drove it and it needs a set of tires. Now if we
Martinez: put two on the other two are going to look really bad. It needs all the belts, and all the hoses. It needs a universal joint." "My gosh, Louie, what else?"
I said, "There it is, all in black and white. I went to the top mechanic, to the service manager. We rode together in the car." "You know what I think it is, Louie?" "I think we have a bad universal joint." I'd have a clipboard, and I'd say, "How come you don't hear any clicking?" "Well, let's get her up in speed." We'd get her up in speed and she'd whine. He said, "I've got another idea." I'd say, "So have I, do you mind if I express my opinion?" "No, go ahead." "I think we have a bad rear end." "Well, I think we have that too." He'd say, "Let's figure out a bill for that." We came up with a three hundred dollar reconditioning bill. That included my time, his time and everything.

Saucedo: How long were you a used-car manager for that company?

Martinez: I worked for just about five years. As close to five years as anything else, as a used-car manager.

Saucedo: Then from there?

Martinez: From there I went into sales.

Saucedo: For the same company?

Martinez: Yes. I stayed with them until 1970. I left in 1970, to go back to the original man that hired me, reconditioning cars.

Saucedo: As what, a salesman?

Martinez: Yes. I went as a salesman for a month, then he wanted me to familiarize myself with the place. They had a different method of working, because they didn't handle any trucks, pick-ups, or vans. They were strictly in the new car and used-car category. I did sell a lot of trucks. I met a lot of farmers. I went in the field and introduced myself. A lot of them were surprised and a lot of them thought nothing of it. They just thought of another man, trying to sell them a pick-up or a truck. Where I started to gain more clientele, I don't want to use
Martinez: the term popularity, more clientele, because back in the years when I was a used-car manager, I started playing with a local group, playing the guitar for them. Then they no longer wanted to be active. So, I formed my own group. I started entertaining and people started asking me for my number. One thing led to another. They started calling and asking if I wanted to play for a wedding dance or nightclub, or something, and how much I'd charge them and if I was willing to do it for them, if I had the date open. At that time, I had a lot of openings. I did go and play for them. From there, we got to be recognized as the "Singing Car-Salesman."

There are a lot of things I have done prior to this year. This is something you asked me to explain, as far as the car business is concerned. But, I haven't explained about other things and how people have helped me get recognition. I was in Crookston. I was approached, where I lived, by a man named Butch Melby, and Ted knows him very well, because he belongs to the Eagles. Butch has been a sales-manager for as long as I can remember him, when he first came to Crookston for KROX radio station. He talked me into starting an all Spanish program, three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday. Opening the station up at six o'clock in the morning, with a half hour program. I started with three days a week and we got so much mail and so many responses that they decided to go five days a week, and then six days a week, and finally seven days a week. When I moved over to East Grand Forks, somehow or another the manager of KILO radio station got a hold of me and asked me if I was the same Luis Martinez that talked over KROX in Crookston? I said, "Yes. It got a little difficult for me to travel back and forth, so I gave it up." He said, "Why don't you start with us? I'll sell the time. We'll divide fifty-fifty." So I was supplementing my income by doing that. I was doing forty or fifty dollars a month, just talking on the radio.

Saucedo: Were you doing Mexican Music?
Martinez: Mexican music. I have all my tapes. I think I even have some from the first one. We started that radio program right above the Eagle Stand. That's when I was just barely seventeen years old. During the time that I was racking my head around the wall with this car business, I was doing that radio show.

Saucedo: So you have been involved with a number of activities?

Martinez: Yes. I've been involved with a number of activities. I became the home-base for the first migrant school that was originated in Red River Valley. It was originated at the Cathedral in Crookston. That building no longer exists, they tore it down. That's where my wife went to school and graduated from. I met her on the steps of the Cathedral. We had a priest here that was very, very active with the migrant people. We'd go and pick up the children, in an old school bus, that was loaned to us by some school operator, a private carrier. We'd go and pick up the children Sunday night and take them to the Cathedral. Instead of taking them everyday and taking them home every night, they stayed there all week. They supplied the bedding, the food and everything. The sisters taught them, and fed them, washed their clothes and everything. By the time these kids returned on Saturday or Friday night, back to the farm, those clothes were washed and pressed. When they came back on Sunday, we had a mass and we left them there.

Saucedo: Could we get to what year you started on your own? How was it that you went off and decided to go into business yourself?

Martinez: If was about two years ago, that I decided to pursue it on my own.

Saucedo: In 1973?

Martinez: In the fall of 1973, from the people that bought it out.

Saucedo: Bought what out?

Martinez: Bought the garage out from Mr. Trenta. They told me that I would gain by the generosity if I would help him out through the winter and stay until spring. Therefore I retained my license. I had a license of my own in the state of North Dakota.
Martinez: I called the State of North Dakota and told them that I wanted my license to stay active, but it would be inactive as far as business was concerned. They asked me to surrender my license. Then when I started back in business, to re-apply to them. It would be just as simple as this, putting them in the mail and mailing them back to me. They asked me why I wanted it retained, I explained to them that this new organization needed some help and help was hard to come by. I got to learn the capacity or the duties of a general manager from Jake himself and partly from Jack Trenta. The other son, of the man that originally hired me, because his older son left town and went for a dealership of his own. Then he sold it. He went to work as a general manager for a big chevrolet dealer in Kansas City, and Jack stayed there. Then the old man sold out. I called him "Old Man Trenta", so we didn't get confused. The young Trenta stayed there. He took me on and showed me how he set up the salesman's commission and what cars to order and not to order. Also, he showed me what to take from the factory and what not to take from the factory, how to call their bluff and things of that sort. Then he told me he was leaving. When he left, I couldn't see those two other gentlemen there. They were both over fifty and one of them was pretty close to sixty-five. Their general manager left them at the same time. I just couldn't see just walking out. So, I stayed, and helped him out. I told him I would help him for six months after those people left. They interviewed a lot of people, but they couldn't hire anybody. Finally they sold out.

Saucedo: Why didn't they get you to buy the business?

Martinez: I didn't care to, because the building was obsolete. Christ, they wanted a new building built. They didn't want the location. It was very difficult to get in and out of there. They wanted an operation like Chevrolet of Ford has. In other wards they wanted Chrysler and Plymouth to be recognized for the product
Martinez: they are. They wouldn't give them Chrysler, they only had Plymouth. They wouldn't give it to them, unless they built a new building. The fellow said, "I'm too old and I don't want that responsibility." I couldn't offer that much money. Even though I did have someone offering me the backing, but that would be the backing for the building. The stock I would have to put in myself. Probably stock it for three months.

Saucedo: Thank you very much for this interview...