TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

LOUIS MEDINA

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

Louis Medina, relates the memories of his childhood in Mexico. He was born there in 1907. He shares with us the adventure of moving to the land of promise, the United States. His struggles to overcome poverty here and to maintain his human dignity and that of his loved ones.

As the interview continues, we learn about Louis Medina's success as a family man, gainfully employed, providing for the needs of his wife and children, that they might enjoy a greater share of the opportunities that contemporary United States life has to offer. He tells of his experiences and participation in fraternal and social organizations. We can easily see how his efforts in this area reflect a respect and loyalty to his heritage and origins in Mexico.

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.
Moosbrugger: This is Grant Moosbrugger interviewing Mr. Louis Medina for the Mexican American History Project under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. When were you born, Mr. Medina?

Medina: I was born 1907, in Leon Guanajuato, Mexico.

Moosbrugger: Do you recall anything about your parents, or your family, your brothers or sisters?

Medina: Well, the only thing I can tell you about them is that my father was a railroad man, and my mother was just an ordinary woman and housewife. My brothers, they were just common laborers.

Moosbrugger: This was in Leon, Guanajuato?

Medina: Yes.

Moosbrugger: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Medina: I have two brothers and two sisters.

Moosbrugger: Are any of your family still living?

Medina: The only one living is my youngest brother.

Moosbrugger: And where does he live?

Medina: He lives in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

Moosbrugger: When did you decide to move to the United States? How did that happen?

Medina: During the Revolution in 1915-1916. We came to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico in 1915. We stayed there, the last part of 1915, then we moved across in 1916, in July. My mother and two brothers came across. They would not let me come across on account of my eye sight. I had bad eye sight. I was in the river swimming everyday. When it came time for me to come across my mother doctored my eyes the best that she could. She dressed us up and
Medina: and took us across. They said, "No, you can't go across." So they left me, and I had to go back. I made three trips trying to get across. The third trip, I met a lady on the bridge, I was crying because I was lonesome for my mother.

Moosbrugger: You must have been about...

Medina: I was about six years old. She met me on the bridge and she asked me what I was crying for. I said, "I am crying because my mother and my brothers are over there and I am over here all by myself. I am staying with some people that I don't know. I don't even know my neighbors." Well, she said, "If I were you I wouldn't cry. You get behind me, when we get to the end of this bridge and I tell you to go, you go, don't listen to anybody, just go". So I did. In those years ladies wore long dresses, so I hid behind her. She was a pretty heavy set lady, I'll never forget that. We came to the end of the bridge, and she said, "Go". I went and I hid down there until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. I could see them looking for me, they couldn't find me. I got out of there at night. Mother was there and I went up to greet her.

Moosbrugger: You were able to find your mother?

Medina: Oh, yes, I knew just about where I was. Everyday I used to get out and see my mother and wave to her late in the evening. That's the only way I kept myself living, waving to my mother everyday.

Moosbrugger: Keeping your hope alive.

Medina: Yes. We stayed in Laredo. I think it was in 1916 when we went to San Antonio. From San Antonio we went to Parkingberg, Oklahoma, then we went to Indianapolis, Oklahoma, and then to Arkansas, where we got together with my father, there
Medina: we were five of us, because my sister came along too. We traveled. Our life was like a gypsy, you go where the folks go, wherever they take you. We worked in the cotton field, picking cotton and we did a little of everything to help my father along with the family. Then we came to Kansas City. In Kansas City, my father got sick. My mother and father had some difficulties and the family got separated.

Moosbrugger: What year would that have been?

Medina: It must have been in 1925. In 1924 we went to Kansas City, from the state of Oklahoma. I was driving an old Chandler car, I don't know whether or not you know the name.

Moosbrugger: Chandler?

Medina: Chandler, an old Chandler Touring. I didn't know how to drive, but some people taught me how to drive. These people owed my father some money. They couldn't pay him any other way, so they gave him the car and taught me how to drive. That's how we came to Kansas City. On an old Chandler Touring. Oh Boy! That was the life. I didn't know how to patch a car or take the tires off, but I learned, you live and learn. Then my father passed away in 1926, July 4th. I didn't have a job. I was just 16 or 17 years old. I went from house to house to beg for money so I could bury my father. They told me the city would take care of him. When your dad died, they took him and that's all. You stayed there and they went away. They would get four or five persons together, and they just threw them in a hole and covered them up. I said, No, that's my father! I am poor and all that, but my father is not going to go that way. That's when I went from house to house. I gathered about $17.00. Then I went to see a lady from the funeral home, see if she could finance me, to take my father. She said, "Son we don't do that." Well, I have no other way of burying my father. I have this amount of money that I collected from
Medina: different people and that's all I have. Well, son I don't know. She looked at me and looked at me. Then she said, "Are you sure, son, you'll pay me?" Yes, yes, madam, as soon as I get a job I'll pay you every cent of it. At that time it only cost you $70 or $80 dollars for a half decent casket, but I got the casket I wanted. Right after that I got a job with a street car company. I was getting $18 dollars a week. I used to give that lady so much every week. I just kept myself alive. My mother had my brothers, and I was all alone. My mother and father separated in 1926, and I was alone since then.

Moosbrugger: Lost track of them?

Medina: Yes. Then I got a job in a hotel. I used to work in a hotel as a bus boy. Then I got to be a bell hop. Then I became a part waiter. Then I was working for Fred Harvey. You know the Union Stations have a big restaurant, Fred Harvey?

Moosbrugger: Oh, yes.

Medina: I worked for them. When we moved from Kansas City, I got a letter from Fred Harvey. It was a recommendation to go to New York. I was going to go to New York.

Moosbrugger: What year was that about?

Medina: What?

Moosbrugger: What year was that when you were leaving Kansas?

Medina: We left in 1929.
Moosbrugger: When you say "we", had you gotten married then?

Medina: No, no, just me and my mother. I got together with my mother and my brother again and we came to the Twin Cities. That was in 1929. We got as far as Owatonna. That's where we landed for the sugar beets. We started working in 1929 in the sugar beet fields. I didn't like that, so I got myself a job as a teamster, I learned how to drive a team in Oklahoma. Then I got myself a job as a teamster. I don't know whether you can remember, way back in 1929 they used to have these dump wagons? You pulled the lever and they dumped in the center? They left your dirt there.

Moosbrugger: I have never seen them.

Medina: You are a young fellow, I don't think you have ever seen them.

Moosbrugger: I seen them in pictures.

Medina: Yes. That's what I was doing there. I didn't like the sugar beet fields, so I got myself a job as a teamster. They asked me if I could harness up a team. I said, "Yes, I know how to harness up a team." We used to have three horses. We had to get up in the morning and hitch them up, carry them and clean them up. Get them ready to work. After that, the beets came along. My mother said, "Well, son, you have got to come over and help us." Well, I quit that. Then I went in with these sugar beet men. That was in 1929. Then we came to St. Paul late in the fall of 1929. That's when I got married, 1929. Well, I wasn't going to get married. We left Owatonna and then I met my wife. We weren't going together that well, but she was an orphan, her mother had died. She was staying with her two brothers and her uncle.
Moosbrugger: Was that in Owatonna or up here?

Medina: That was in Owatonna. When I left, I went up to visit her and I told her we were going. Anyhow, we came to St. Paul. Then I went back with my brother to Owatonna, I saw my wife again. She said, "I am going with you." That was something, no job, nothing, no money. I said, "I don't have any money." She said, "That's alright. I am not going to stay here any more. I am going home with you." "Alright!" I said. So she came home, and I kept her home. Within three days her family came over and tried to take her back. She said, "No, I have made up my mind. I am going to marry this man." I don't know why, I wasn't worth it, for goodness sake! But, here we are. We got married in 1929 and we had our children. Of course, there was no work. Every year we would go back to the sugar beet fields, she and I. She is a good worker, a wonderful worker. Boy, she'd put rings around me any day. So it was every year back to the fields until 1935, I think I got a job at the Twin City Railway, the Twin City Lines, I used to work there. They gave me a job all summer, so I didn't have to take the family out anymore. That was a heck of a job, to bring up children, when you go to the sugar beet fields. Terrible, I don't advise anybody to do it.

Moosbrugger: Was it too hard to get the kids into school?

Medina: Yes, yes, to take the children out, and the children can't go to school.

Moosbrugger: Can you tell us, Louie, how many children you have? Who is the oldest? When was he or she born?

Medina: I can only remember Claude. He was born December 20, 1930. We got married in 1929. In 1930 he was born. Like I say, I can't remember the dates.
Moosbrugger: That's O.K.

Medina: Then we had Frances, then Gabino.

Moosbrugger: Frances is the daughter?

Medina: Yes.

Moosbrugger: And then Gabino is the son?

Medina: Gabino is the son. Then we had another daughter. We used to call her Porky. I can't remember her name, she died. After she died, we had Stephanie. We have pictures of Porky and Stephanie, they look like the same child. After Stephanie, we had Arman, Diane, and John. That was it. Seven of them.

Moosbrugger: How many are living?

Medina: Seven are living. There would have been ten, she had two miscarriages, and one died. We have seven of them. That is pretty dog-gone-good!

Moosbrugger: Nice family.

Medina: Yes, it is a nice family.

Moosbrugger: So it was about 1935, that you started with Twin City Railway Company.

Medina: With the Twin City Railway Company. I used to work in the summer time. My wife would stay home. Sometimes she would get a part time job, working with the Jewish, taking care of their things, she would make $2 or $3 dollars a week. Enough for show money. I wasn't making very much. I kept on working with the Street Car Company until 1948 or 1949. They laid me off entirely. They just cut me off. Then I went to work for Swift & Company. In 1935 I
Medina: worked for the Twin City Railway Company in the summer and Cudahay's in the winter time.

Moosbrugger: What kind of business was that?

Medina: A packing plant.

Moosbrugger: Cudahay's Packing Plant?

Medina: Cudahay's Packing Plant. I worked for them, then I worked for Swift & Company. Most of the time I worked for Twin City Lines. After they laid me off from the Twin City Lines, I was working here and there, wherever I could get a job. I was working for the United Refrigerator outfit in Hudson. They had a branch here on University. I worked for them part time, when they moved to Hudson they wanted me to go. "No," I said, "It's too far for me to go." Then I got myself a job for the railroad, the Northern Pacific. I stayed with them until I got laid off.

Moosbrugger: Is that when you retired?

Medina: Yes.

Moosbrugger: What year was that?

Medina: That was in 1973.

Moosbrugger: Far from being inactive outside of work, Louie, I know you have been extremely active in some of the organizations. Could you tell us about that?

Medina: The first club I belong to was a ... Oh, what the heck is the name of that? My compadre, Joe Medina, Kenneth Garcia, and Joe Elizondo, they were all younger
Medina: than me, had an organization there at the Neighborhood House. They asked me if I wanted to join, so I joined. I forgot the name of it. Then afterwards I belonged to the Mexican American Club there, too. Like I said, we are all the same, regardless of what organization we belong to. There is always somebody coming in and busting it up or something. That is our history, we can't get away from it. It was the same thing when I joined the LULAC Club, of course the only thing about LULAC's is that we went to big conventions and things like that.

Moosbrugger: When did you join LULAC and how did you participate in it?

Medina: Well, I joined LULAC way back in '9... I don't remember what year, but I was in it for 15 or 20 years.

Moosbrugger: What did it stand for? What activities did they participate in?

Medina: It was the United Latin American Citizens. You just did your duty, whatever you wanted to be or whatever you wanted to do.

Moosbrugger: Were there always committees that you could join? For instance, social committees, and fund raising committees and things like that?

Medina: There was a fund raising committee, I did my share of collecting for that fund. We used to have little books where we had to record the name and amount given. With the funds, we used to have our big festivities.

Moosbrugger: Did they give scholarships?

Medina: Yes, we had a scholarship fund. We gave money to people. What I wanted was to give the money to the people that gave us the money, give them back their money. That was my biggest idea, to give it back to them. My idea was, "Let's
Medina: go and check with the families that have children, I said, "If they can't afford to send the children to school, that's the people you give the money to. They'd appreciate it." But no, I couldn't get it to go. That's the way they wanted it, there was nothing that I could do about it.

Moosbrugger: Were you an officer of the club?

Medina: I was just the treasurer. I was the treasurer for about two or three years. I liked it. It wasn't me that was doing all the figuring, my wife was helping me too.

Moosbrugger: Did they have an auxiliary for women as well?

Medina: Yes, they had a club for the women too. They were pretty big. Then they had one for the smaller generation, the younger kids. That's when George Galvin got in there, and my compadre Louie. My compadre Louie is the one who organized the younger generation.

Moosbrugger: You mean Louie Trejo?

Medina: Yes, he did quite a bit.

Moosbrugger: Louie, getting back to your family, I know you had to work hard all your life, and you didn't have time for formal schooling. Of course, you picked up your schooling through life. Were you able to encourage any of your children to gain a formal education?

Medina: Oh yes, I went to school, up to the fifth grade. In 1924 my sister passed away. After she passed away, my father said, "Well, son, you have to help us." Then I started working for the Santa Fe. That's why I said, "no, my children are not going to go through what I went through, and they haven't,
Medina: Thank God. School is an awful nice education. You can't beat that. Without an education, you aren't going to get anywhere. My first son went to high school, Cretin High. He graduated from there. He made up his mind that he wanted to go to college. I said, "O.K., son, you can go to college I am not going to put anything against you. The only thing we are going to give you is room and board, your washing and things like that. Your mother is going to do your washing for you. That's all we can help you with. In the summertime he used to work for the Street Car Company. He saved his money and went to college. The same thing with my other boys.

Moosbrugger: Which college did your oldest boy, Claude, go to?

Medina: Claude went to the University of Minnesota.

Moosbrugger: And what did he take up?

Medina: Pharmacy.

Moosbrugger: Is he a pharmacist today?

Medina: Yes, he is a pharmacist now. He has a nice home, a nice wife, and he is well-to-do. He is really not wealthy, but he is comfortable. He has a nice family of six children. It can't get any better.

Moosbrugger: Where does he live?

Medina: He lives at 318 Butler.

Moosbrugger: Butler is where?

Medina: West St. Paul.

Moosbrugger: So you have given your children a chance for an education?
Medina: Oh yes, I'd never take education away from anybody.

Moosbrugger: I know you have seven children living now, how many grandchildren do you have?

Medina: We have twenty-eight.

Moosbrugger: Twenty-eight. Are they pretty well scattered out, or are most of them living in the Twin Cities?

Medina: They are all living in the Twin Cities. We have one great-grand-son.

Moosbrugger: For the record, and the future, could you give us the names of your sons' and daughters'? And give us their married names and how many children they have?

Medina: Claude Medina, he has six children, Frances has four, Gabino has nine, Stephanie has three.

Moosbrugger: What are Frances' and Stephanie's married names?

Medina: Frances' is Lopez, Gabino of course is Medina, and Stephanie, she has three children.

Moosbrugger: What's her married name?

Medina: Stephanie Marsh. Diane is Hottinger, she has three children. Arman, well of course he is Medina, he has two girls. Then we have John, he doesn't have any children now, but one is coming up, we don't know what it is, or whether it's going to be dead or alive.

Moosbrugger: Your son John?

Medina: Yes, John is my youngest. I think I have them all there.
Moosbrugger: Well, you have had a rich and varied life, Louie. Is there anything in particular that you do to try to keep alive the Mexican heritage amongst your children and grandchildren?

Medina: I never tell them that they are not Mexican. They never regret the term Mexican. They always say that they are Mexican, nobody is going to take that away from them. They are Mexican and that's the way it is going to be, regardless of who tells them anything else. Not us. None of them regret the name they have. They are proud of their last name.

Moosbrugger: What are some of the things that you do? For instance, do you have any Mexican meals?

Medina: Yes. We have parties here, we have the baseball club. We give them parties. We give them tacos, enchiladas, tamales, everything. All the Mexican food is right there. All the American people and everybody loves it. That's the woman right there, she makes all of those things.

Moosbrugger: Your wife?

Medina: My wife.

Moosbrugger: Have you gotten back to Mexico lately?

Medina: I just went in March. I went to Mexico and I stayed for three weeks. I go down there to see my brothers, that's about all.

Moosbrugger: Do you take any of your family with you?

Medina: Yes, I have taken my grandsons, I take my wife, I have taken my daughters, and I have taken my sons. Every time they want to go, they go with me.

Moosbrugger: Do they maintain some Mexican traditions or heritage through their cooking?
Medina: I have a daughter that is married to a Polish man. He loves Mexican food. He'd rather eat Mexican food than anything else. All my children. My son, comes down here and has his "frijoles", and "tortillas" they love Mexican food. I haven't seen one of them that doesn't come here and has a meal with us., they love Mexican food.

Moosbrugger: Have your children studied Spanish in school? Do they understand Spanish?

Medina: Kimberly, my little grand-daughter, is taking Spanish. My oldest boy's kids are all taking Spanish. They love Spanish. I have a daughter-in-law, she can make any Mexican food that you want. She is married to a Mexican now. I don't know what she is, Irish or something, but she loves Mexican food. She can make anything. If she can't make it, she is going to learn right now. She makes up her mind that she is going to make it and she'll make it! They all like Mexican food, there isn't any getting away from it.

Moosbrugger: That's great. That will help to keep alive the heritage. Thank you very much for the interview. Right after you and I had finished recording we started chatting about the Revolution and the old days in Mexico. You started touching upon some fascinating facts. Could you tell us your early history, what you remember of the revolution, and how it touched your family?

Medina: I must have been about four years old. My father came from the United States to visit us in Mexico. They all got together and said they were going to visit my uncle. We were going on the road and all of a sudden the soldiers caught up with us, whoever they were, Carranza or Villistas. They stopped us right there. They said they were going to hang my father. Of course my brother, my sister and I were on a donkey. At that time, all you had was donkeys. The donkey wouldn't stop for us. So we kept on going. Finally he stopped and we went back. We were all crying, and trying to convince the people that my
Medina: father wasn't a soldier of any kind, didn't belong to any unit. If it hadn't been for my mother, I don't know what would've happen. She knew one of the men that lived next door to my grandfather's house. He recognized her. Then he told them right there, "You can't hang this man". I know this person. This man just came from the United States. He is not a soldier of any kind. Then they released him and we kept on going to the farm.

Moosbrugger: So, you actually witnessed this close break that your father had with the soldiers? You were how old?

Medina: I was about four or five years old.

Moosbrugger: It would have been 1911 or 1912?

Medina: Yes.

Moosbrugger: Well, that was a fascinating story. Thank you very much, Mr. Medina.