TRANSCRIPT OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MR. AND MRS. ANTONIO ZEPEDA

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

Antonio Zepeda Cardona was born in San Juan de Allende, Coahuila, México in 1902. He came to the U.S. in 1907 with his family and was raised in Rio Hondo, Texas. He married at the age of 16 in Mexico and returned to the U.S. three years later in 1923. He worked for the railroad for three months and then came to Minnesota to work in the beet fields.

Petra Treviño Zepeda was born in Cuatrocienegas, Coahuila, México in 1906. She helped her father harvest his crops and take them to the marketplace to sell in Piedras Negras. She married at age 13.

Mr. and Mrs. Zepeda each discuss their family and early life: Mr. Zepeda spent his in Texas; Mrs. Zepeda grew up in Mexico. The latter talks a little bit about the revolution. She also mentions some of the aspects of their courtship in Mexico. In addition they talk about their own children, some of the people they first knew in St. Paul, their job histories and festivals held on St. Paul's West Side. Mr. Zepeda concludes with some advice for the future generations.

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.
This is Victor Barela interviewing Mr. & Mrs. Antonio Zepeda, at 214 East Robie, St. Paul, Minnesota 55107, on July 31, 1975, for the Mexican American History Project, which is under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. Do I have permission to record your whole history, Mr. & Mrs. Zepeda?

Yes.

What is your full name Mr. Zepeda?
Antonio Zepeda Cardona.

And you Mrs. Zepeda, can you give me your full name?
Petra Trevino Zepeda.

Mr. Zepeda, where were you born?
San Juan de Allende, Coahuila.

When were you born?
December 2, 1902.

Where were you born, Mrs. Zepeda?
Cuatrocienegas, Coahuila.

When were you born?
January 31, 1906.

What were your parents names, Mr. Zepeda?
Jose Zepeda and Manuela Cardona.

Where were they born?
They were born in Mexico.

Do you know where in Mexico?
No, I don't remember.

Do you remember your parents? What they were like?
Mr. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: What did your father do for a living?

Mr. Zepeda: He did all kinds of jobs. He trimmed trees. He also planted for some time.

Barela: Did he have his own farm?

Mr. Zepeda: No.

Barela: Did he rent from someone else?

Mr. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: What did he plant?

Mr. Zepeda: Cotton, maguey, and corn.

Barela: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: How many?

Mr. Zepeda: Four brothers and five sisters.

Barela: Do you remember their names?

Mr. Zepeda: The oldest was called Candelario, I am the second, then Nasario, and the youngest was Francisco.

Barela: What about the girls?

Mr. Zepeda: The oldest was Emilia, then Matilde, Felipa, Maria, and Teodora.

Barela: Are they still alive?

Mr. Zepeda: Four of the sisters are still alive. Only two brothers aside from Mr. Zepeda are alive. My mother-in-law is dead. I never met my father-in-law.

Barela: Do they live in Mexico?

Mr. Zepeda: No, in San Antonio, Texas.

Barela: Do you remember your childhood? Did you go to school in Mexico?

Mr. Zepeda: No. I attended school for a while in the United States.

Barela: How old were you when you came to the United States?

Mr. Zepeda: About five.

Barela: Where were you raised?

Mr. Zepeda: In Rio Hondo, Texas.

Barela: What were your parents names, Mrs. Zepeda?
Mrs. Zepeda: My father's name was Severo Treviño García and my mother's was Juanita Cirlos Hernandez.

Barela: Where were your parents born?

Mrs. Zepeda: My father was born in Cuatrociénegas, Coahuila. My mother in San Buenaventura.

Barela: Did they marry very young?

Mrs. Zepeda: My father was thirty-six, my mother twenty-two.

Barela: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Mrs. Zepeda: Just one sister. She was older than I.

Barela: What was her name?

Mrs. Zepeda: María de Jesús Treviño.

Barela: Is she still alive?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, she died many years ago.

Barela: What did your parents do for a living?

Mrs. Zepeda: My mother never worked. My father was a laborer. In those times they also took wood in wagons to Piedras Negras, Coahuila, where they would sell it. With the money that he earned from this, he supported his home.

Barela: Did he use donkeys?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, they used mules.

Barela: Life was pretty harsh for him, wasn't it?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, he was the only one that worked. When my sister was alive, she would help him harvest corn, squash, tomatoes, watermelon, cantaloupe, and chiles.

Barela: Would he go to the market to sell his crops?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, he would sell them at the market place in Piedras Negras.

Barela: Did you ever help your father at the market?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, I never worked.

Barela: Are your parents still alive?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, they've been dead for many years.

Barela: Do you remember when they died?

Mrs. Zepeda: My father died in 1933 in Mexico, my mother died a year and three months later in San Antonio, Texas.
Mrs. Zepeda: My father didn't. After my father's death we brought my mother to live with us in San Antonio, Texas.

Mr. Zepeda: He worked for the railroad.

Barela: Mr. Zepeda, your family came to Rio Hondo, Texas. What did your father do there?

Mr. Zepeda: He worked for the railroad.

Barela: Did you help your father at the railroad?

Mr. Zepeda: No, I was still very young and going to school.

Barela: Do you remember your life as a youngester? Was it comfortable, happy?

Mrs. Zepeda: Really, it was neither, because life in Mexico is very different. When we became sweethearts, we didn't see each other much because it just wasn't permitted. A romance was considered a very delicate thing and it was treated in the same way. I had a lot of respect for my father so I never did anything that would be against his beliefs. One day my father caught me talking to Antonio and he didn't like it one bit. He told Antonio that he had no business being with me. He forbade him from seeing me. What my father did say to him was that if he had anything to discuss with me, it could be taken care of in my home. With that, Antonio would come see me at my house, but my parents were always sitting with us, we really couldn't talk about much. We were sweethearts for a year and three months and then I told him that if he wanted to marry me, he would have to speak to my father. My mother-in-law's brother went to ask for my hand in marriage. My father would give me a lot of advice on married life. When it was time for an answer, I never said no, so my father consented. A friend of my father's would tell him that even though I was very young, I would eventually grow to be a mature woman. Finally we got married, but then my relatives would say that Antonio would bring me to the United States and would soon run off without me. Well, look at us now, we've been married for fifty-six years.

So you were thirteen years old and your husband was sixteen when you were married?
Mrs. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: Then you came to the United States immediately?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, we remained in Mexico for three years. My first child was born over there but died at the age of five months. In 1923, we came to the United States. My oldest son, Jesús, was born over here.

Barela: In what city were you married?

Mrs. Zepeda: In Santo Domingo, it's not too far from Piedras Negras, Coahuila.

Barela: Then your first child died in Mexico?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, he was born in 1920 and died that same year.

Barela: And after that?

Mrs. Zepeda: Three years later we came to the United States, and our oldest son was born in Wisconsin. The rest of our children were born in St. Paul.

Barela: What did you say was the name of the town in Wisconsin?

Mrs. Zepeda: Prescott.

Barela: What is the name of your son that was born there?

Mrs. Zepeda: Jesús Zepeda.

Barela: Mrs. Zepeda, you say that you don't remember anything about the Revolution?

Mrs. Zepeda: I only remember one thing and that was that men in troops would come along and take girls with them. The girls would hide in the woods when the men were coming. This happened in a ranch called San Vicente, where I grew up. After the troops would leave the mothers would run to the woods, creeks or whatever calling their daughters to return because there was nothing to fear anymore. I also recall that these same men would also come into the homes and turn them inside out. They were looking for firearms, or whatever they considered valuable, and they would take them.

Barela: And your father, did he have any problems?

Mr. Zepeda: No, because my father was working in Crystal City, Texas.

Barela: So then, he wasn't in Mexico?

Zepeda: No, it was just my mother, my sister, and myself. But you'll have to remember that all the homes were very close together and everyone would help out his
Zepeda: The ranch was just like a small town.

Barela: Did your family suffer during the Revolution, Mr. Zepeda?

Mr. Zepeda: No, we were already in Texas.

Barela: Can you tell me about your children?

Mrs. Zepeda: Like I said before, my first child was born and died in Mexico. Then Jesús was born in Prescott, Wisconsin. María, Dora, Matilde, Rebecca, Herminia and Eduardo, they're twins, were born in St. Paul. Then we went to San Antonio, Texas and remained there for eleven years. During that period, Elvira, Petra, Antonio, and Emma were born. We returned to Minnesota and Lydia was born in Stewart.

Barela: You both were very young when you came to the United States. How did you cross the border?

Mrs. Zepeda: We came by train.

Barela: Both of you, then, wanted to come to the United States right after you were married?

Mrs. Zepeda: Well, we stayed in Mexico for just three years.

Barela: You never worked, did you?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, I didn't. My husband worked in the beet fields, at Armour's, the railroad, the streetcars, boats, and for twenty years as a garbage collector.

Barela: Did you have any problems crossing the border?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, all we needed was a passport, a picture, and money (eight pesos or forty cents per person).

Barela: Did you travel by train to the border?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, we went by wagon to Piedras Negras, crossed the bridge by foot and then we were in Eagle Pass, Texas. Then we took the train to travel to our destination.

Barela: Did you have a rough time with jobs and money?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, we never did. We made out well with what we had.

Barela: Mr. Zepeda, in "Las Minas", did you work as a miner?

Mr. Zepeda: No, I worked with the railroad.
Barela: Did you put up ties?
Mr. Zepeda: Yes, and it was hard work, but I only did it for three months. From there we moved to San Antonio and then to Wells, Minnesota. In Wells, we bought a car and that’s how we got around in Minnesota.

Barela: Do you remember the times when you worked at the beet fields? Did you live in a tent?

Mrs. Zepeda: We lived in a house which was very long. It kind of looked like a train but that was because there were six families living there.

Barela: Did you have running water inside the house?
Mrs. Zepeda: We had running water outside. We had a stove, beds, blankets, and dishes.

Barela: Did you have showers inside?
Mrs. Zepeda: No, we had to use tubs outside and put blankets around them.

Barela: Did you make your own soap?
Mrs. Zepeda: We always bought our soap.

Barela: Were there any doctors in case anyone got sick?
Mrs. Zepeda: No one ever got sick except me, and I had two doctors taking care of me.

Barela: Was the salary good when you worked at the beet fields?
Mr. Zepeda: We received $23.00 an acre.

Barela: What does one need to harvest beets?
Mr. Zepeda: We used a very small hoe and had to bend down all day long.

Barela: Who plants the beets?
Mr. Zepeda: The farmer does.

Barela: How do you harvest the beets?
Mr. Zepeda: You have to take it out with the roots and leave one plant so that it will grow big.

Barela: What do you do with the roots?
Mr. Zepeda: They throw them away, since sugar is made from the beet itself.

Barela: When you came to St. Paul, you worked for Armour's?
Mr. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: When you arrived, were there a lot of Mexican families?
Mr. Zepeda: No, there were very few. People used to stare at us as though we were something strange that they had never seen. The stores didn't carry any Mexican goods as they do now.

Barela: Did you have any problems finding a house?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, we didn’t have any problems.

Barela: How did you know where to go to inquire about homes?

Mrs. Zepeda: We used to walk through the streets and since my husband knew how to speak English, we were able to find a home. He doesn’t speak it much now. He had to be hospitalized for a long while because of an illness and also because he was hit by a car. Though he is still of age to work, he can’t because of injuries to his body.

Barela: Then, you say, you didn’t have any problems finding a home here?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, we didn’t. My husband, my brother-in-law, and myself came here. My son was not born yet. While we were in Prescott, we met Mr. Pastor Lucio, and Concha Huerta. She offered us a place to stay for that first night. Then Mr. Lucio took us to the farm where my son was born. The first job my husband had there was cutting wood and later with tobacco. That was the first time I had seen tobacco leaves. Then we came to St. Paul. My brother-in-law came first, found a job, and then came for us.

Barela: What was your brother-in-law's name?


Barela: Did you meet any of the Mexican people that were already living here?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, we met Mr. Martin Vasquez, who is now deceased, Bernardino Ortega, Vicente and Jose Cardenas and some of the store owners who were Anglos.

Barela: Did you have money when you came to St. Paul?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, we did. My husband had received his pay for his work in Prescott.

Barela: Where did you rent your first home?

Mrs. Zepeda: On State Street. We lived there for many years. Four of my children were born there.

Barela: Where did you move to from there?
Mrs. Zepeda: We moved to 158 Indiana. Where we lived for many years.

Barela: What is your grandchild's name?

Mrs. Zepeda: Reina. Well, we lived at that other home for several years and then sold it and bought one on Winifred. We lived there for nine or ten years and then bought this one. We've lived here for almost three years.

Barela: Did you like Minnesota when you first got here?

Mrs. Zepeda: Well, we did. I was seventeen when we arrived so I've spent all my life here. Since then we've travelled to other places like Mexico and San Antonio, Texas, but just to visit. We couldn't put up with the heat so we always came back to Minnesota.

Barela: What year did you say you arrived in St. Paul?

Mrs. Zepeda: 1923.

Barela: Were there families like the Rangel's already living here?

Mrs. Zepeda: We met the Rangel's here but I can't remember which one of us got here first. I think it was us.

Barela: What about Mr. Alfonso De Leon?

Mrs. Zepeda: We've known him for a long time. There are a lot of people whom we have known for a long time, but I can't remember their names.

Barela: When you arrived, did the Mexican people here get together for festivals?

Mrs. Zepeda: Oh, sure. One of the first organizations that my husband became a member of was the "Azteca Club". There were more Mexican people by then, so we used to have dances and parties. We used to celebrate the 24th of December and have festivals at the church. One of my daughters was a shepherd once. This would take place in the old church and then in Guadalupe Church. It was like a big hall where these Mexican festivities took place. The owner of the pool hall was called Nicolas, but he was not of Mexican origin. I believe he was Italia. The Anahuac Society would rent the pool hall. Both the Anahuac and Azteca Clubs would get together and have dances. The president was Juan Galvan. You might know his son George Galvan.

Barela: Did you like to go to the dances?
Mrs. Zepeda: We sure did. We used to have a lot of fun.

Barela: Would you take your children with you?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes. At that time I had only two children. I remember we used to eat at a big table on the corner and if any of the children went to sleep, we would lay them on the table. We did this for many years until finally the custom of taking children to festivities changed. It is not done anymore.

Barela: Would you make food for this occasion?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, at that time food wasn't sold at festival like it is now.

Barela: Do you remember the occasions for which dances were held?

Mrs. Zepeda: Sometimes they were held to celebrate the 5th of May and the 16th of September. We'd also celebrate the feast of the Christ Child on Christmas Eve.

Barela: Did that take place at the old church too?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes. At first it was a dance hall, and then it became the church.

Barela: Did you have a Midnight Mass?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: So then you added new members to your family in Minnesota?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: Were there doctors in St. Paul in case anyone became ill?

Mrs. Zepeda: Oh, yes. Once my son got the measles real bad and was very feverish. We took him to a physician in South St. Paul because we thought he was the closest one around. He gave him medication and told me to take good care of him.

Barela: Did all the Mexican people take their children to this doctor?

Mrs. Zepeda: Well, no, because some went to one doctor and the rest to others.

Barela: Do you remember your doctor's name?

Mrs. Zepeda: No, it's been so many years.

Barela: Did the Mexican people get together for anything other than patriotic festivities or church activities?

Mrs. Zepeda: I really didn't know of anything else. The only things I remember are the dances.

Barela: Both of you were very active in church functions, weren't you?
Mrs. Zepeda: Not really. It wasn't until recently that I started helping out in church activities. I became a member of the "Guadalupanas" and helped out with donations of food.

Barela: Who was the priest at the church when you came?

Mrs. Zepeda: The priest that we met was Father Dicks. There was another one whom we never met, but they say that there was a rock in his honor at a park close by.

Barela: Were the festivals of those times in accordance with Mexican traditions?

Mrs. Zepeda: The weddings and dances were.

Barela: Are Mexican weddings different than those in the United States?

Mrs. Zepeda: I would say that they are very similar in the type of dress as well as the profession of the Catholic religion. In those times there was a group of Mexican musicians, of which Salvador Martinez was a member, but when it was impossible to get these musicians, we would contract a group of Blacks from Minneapolis.

Barela: Were there others who helped Salvador Martinez or was that the name of the group?

Mrs. Zepeda: Salvador Martinez was the oldest in the group and he was attended by his son Jesús Martinez and his son-in-law Tomas. I believe that Salvador is not deceased but his son still lives in Minneapolis. We were Jesús' sponsors at his wedding.

Barela: Would you get together for baptisms?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes we would. They were just beautiful. There would be a big festivity and a dance, food and chocolate.

Barela: Was there a special ceremony for the sponsors since the "Compadrazco" is a profound and distinct affair?

Mrs. Zepeda: The only thing was the "abrazo", with the "compadres" (sponsors), and then the child was returned to the parents.

Barela: Is there something special that exists between the families when they are "compadres?" Does trust between one another exist more deeply?

Mrs. Zepeda: Well, it's like I say. One can respect a "compadre" and trust him like he
Mrs. Zepeda: would his father. Nowadays I have seen that respect between "compadres" does not exist. I say that it should be respected because when one chooses another person to be his "compadre", he possess love, respect, and good will toward the other. I tell my children that a "compadre" is a person whom they should respect as they would their father.

Barela: That is a Mexican belief, isn't it?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, but I have seen it differently here.

Barela: Did you as a family have any responsibilities for festivals? Would you sell anything?

Mrs. Zepeda: No.

Barela: Did sports exist at the time?

Mrs. Zepeda: In those times there weren't any.

Barela: Did all your children go to school here in the United States?

Mrs. Zepeda: All of them did go here in St. Paul.

Barela: Which schools did they attend?

Mrs. Zepeda: They started at Lafayette but also went to the Neighborhood when we lived at the other house. Only Herminia finished high school.

Barela: Where did she graduate?

Mrs. Zepeda: From Humboldt. Eduardo, Herminia's twin, finished school in the army.

Barela: When did he join the army?

Mrs. Zepeda: I believe it was in 1962. He was on duty for three years. When he finished school, he sent us a picture of himself and the rest who graduated with him. They were all dressed in their army uniforms.

Barela: Did you inspire your children to continue their education?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, but in those times, everyone went to find jobs and took their children with them. That is why many of my children didn't receive much of an education. It wasn't like it is today where parents are forced to send their children to school. All my children can speak both English and Spanish and there are some who can even write Spanish without having gone to a school where Spanish was taught.
Barela: You have a lot of decorations in your home.

Mrs. Zepeda: Some of my daughters have been to Mexico with their husbands. They have gone as far as Acapulco, and they are the ones who have brought me all the things you see. Those of my children which have been to Mexico are Lydia, who is married to an Anglo, Elvira, Emma, and Dora, whose husband is originally from Piedras Negras but who is now a United States citizen. My son Eduardo took us to "Cuatrociénegas" so that we could visit with our relatives. He did this as soon as he returned from the army.

Barela: It seems as though they like going to Mexico.

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, they enjoy going to spend their vacations there.

Barela: Does your family like Mexican food?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes.

Barela: Do you prepare Mexican food?

Mrs. Zepeda: I don't know how to prepare special Mexican platters since I never really learned how to make them. My mother was the one who took care of the cooking at home. I learned how to make tamales and tacos here.

Barela: Do you as a family still celebrate Mexican feasts?

Mrs. Zepeda: Because of our ages, my husband and I don't participate too much. Last year we did though. I enjoy going, but my husband has problems walking since he broke his leg and so I get discouraged. Even at my age, I love music.

Barela: So then all your children live here in Minnesota?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, all are married and live here.

Barela: Are all of them still alive?

Mrs. Zepeda: Yes, all of them. Some of my children's spouses are from here, others are from Texas, and two are from Mexico.

Barela: Do your sons and daughters work?

Mrs. Zepeda: One of my daughters has worked all her life, until recently when the doctor told her that she needed to rest.

Barela: What type of work did she do?

Mrs. Zepeda: When she was still at home, she helped her father out in the fields. Then she
Mrs. Zepeda: got married and worked at a place where they made army supplies. She left that job for about five years and then worked at a bakery.

Barela: What is her name?

Mrs. Zepeda: Emma. She worked there for many years and later went to work with peanuts until recently when she became ill. Petra works in a hospital. She has a very large family. When her husband gets off of work, she begins her shift.

Elvira got married and never worked. Lydia has always worked. She has worked as a secretary, in stores, in restaurants. Matilde had a large family and always worked in the fields. Now all her children are married except one so she doesn't work anymore.

Barela: And your sons?

Mrs. Zepeda: My son Eduardo, has worked driving trucks ever since he got out of the army. Antonio works in construction, and Jesús has always worked at Armour's.

Barela: What has influenced you the most in your way of living and thinking? Has there been someone who has influenced you the most?

Mrs. Zepeda: Well, all our lives, we've lived on my husband's income alone. Our children helped us out when they were still at home. After my husband was hit by that car, he could not work any more, so he started to receive his pension. Now both of us are also receiving Social Security Benefits and that is how we are making out. We bought this home with the money that we received when we sold the other one. We also bought another house close to Riverview Hospital. There was a lawyer who helped us get all the papers in order to get the house sold. He took care of everything for us. This home we live in now is all paid for. The only things we have to pay are taxes and insurance.

Barela: What advice would you give the younger generation in living life to its fullest?

Mrs. Zepeda: One can give advice on things which we have experienced in the past.

Barela: If I came up to you and told you that I had very little experience in dealing with life, what advice would you give me so that I could lead a good life?

Mrs. Zepeda: It would depend on the problem that you'd have to deal with.

Barela: If I were your son and wasn't married yet, but I wanted to go out and live
Mrs. Zepeda: I would say to him, "Look for a good job and have a good attitude toward people and make the best of it.

What advice would you give to a recently married couple?

Mrs. Zepeda: I would say that the best thing for them would be to solve any problems they have themselves. No one else should be involved except for the couple themselves.

Mr. and Mrs. Zepeda, I appreciate your kindness for this interview. Thank you.