

1 Washington County Museum
2 Oral History Interview with Lorenzo Rubio
3 At Washington County Sheriff's Office
4 March 7, 2001

5
6 Informant: Lorenzo Rubio
7 Interviewer: Michael O'Rourke
8 Transcriber: Ellen Rogalin

9
10 L= Lorenzo
11 M=Michael

12
13

14 M: Lorenzo, I thought maybe I'd just start out by asking you a few questions about your earliest
15 experiences in life, a little bit about your background. I understand that you were born just the other
16 side of the border in Nogales or someplace like that?

17

18 L: No, actually yes, in the state of Chihuahua

19

20 M: Okay

21

22 L: A little town called **Guadalupe de stito Bravo** which is about maybe 45 miles south of El Paso.

23

24 M: Okay. Okay

25

26 L: Along the border, heading east. So, yeah.

27

28 M: Okay.

29

30 L: Yeah, but I was born in 1952. My family and -- well at that time it was just my sister and I, along with
31 my mother, immigrated to Texas and we lived in **Secora**, Texas.

32

33 M: Okay.

34

35 L: And then we lived there . . .

36

37 M: This is, this is when you . . . About how old were you?

38

39 L: Ah, I must have been about two years old.

40

41 M: Okay.

42

43 L: Yeah. And we lived there for a few years, uh, and then we migrated to, to, **Artesia**, New Mexico
44 where, uh, we lived there since I was, uh, five years old til I was, uh, 16 or 17 I think it was.

45

46 M: Um, do you have any memories from the time you were living in the village in Mexico?

47

48 L: Um, very much so because

49
50 M: Really?
51
52 L: Because the distance from Artesia, New Mexico to Juarez, which is the town _____
53
54 M: That was the town _____, not Nogales but Juarez, yeah
55
56 L: Yeah, across the border from El Paso, it was only like about 140, 150 miles, so every other weekend
57 or at least once a month my, they would take us to visit our grandparents there and we'd spend the
58 weekend and we'd be back. It was only like a 2-1/2, 3-hour drive. Every summer we'd spend down
59 there with my grandparents.
60
61 M: Yup, okay.
62
63 L: My sister and I and then afterwards my younger brother. So, uh, we, or our summers we grew up in
64 Mexico, so
65
66 M: Okay. Was Spanish the language that you spoke in your household then?
67
68 L: Yeah, yes, all the time.
69
70 M: All the time, OK
71
72 L: Particularly of course when we returned to Mexico and once we got to my grandmother's house I'd
73 take my shoes off and run barefoot just like all the other kids around the neighborhood. So, I did what
74 they did. I have many cousins my age that were also running around and they would also spend the
75 summers with my grandmother. But yeah, primarily in Mexico, of course, we all spoke Spanish. Now,
76 when we lived, when we were at home in New Mexico, uh, mostly everything was English basically
77 because of the fact that all our environment around us was English-speaking.
78
79 M: Okay
80
81 L: As I was growing up, I remember our mother telling us to speak English so that, uh, we wouldn't have
82 the same problems that she was having. She never learned English, uh, so she depended on us, my
83 sister and I – I had an older sister – uh, to do all the interpreting and translating for her.
84
85 M: Okay. So when you were at home you spoke Spanish with your mom?
86
87 L: Only when we had to (laughs)
88
89 M: Oh, (chuckles) only when you had to?
90
91 L: (Laughs) Yes, you know, if we had to answer her or something, you know, she asked a question or
92 something, but most of the time you know as how kids grow up a lot times, you know, any
93 conversations with parents were just very limited and so it was mostly, you know, with each other or
94 with other kids um and some of the neighbor kids and my mom always had to work in the evenings and
95 so she was never really around until late, until after we were in bed. And then of course during the day
96 we were in school so, but when we had to speak Spanish we did it.

97

98 M: Well, would you say that Spanish was your first language or was it hard to tell?

99

100 L: Well, I think probably English was my first language

101

102 M: Okay

103

104 L: Yeah

105

106 M: Okay

107

108 **04:45**

109

110 L: In fact that's, I only spoke Spanish when I really had to, yeah. But, uh, yeah, some people have asked
111 me that and uh I've always thought about it and I guess when we first came to New Mexico I was still
112 young enough that I was still just learning you to speak, you know. In fact, one of the things I tell
113 students when I go to talk to schools to some of the students there about the importance of staying in
114 school and maybe career type of information, I tell them not to be ashamed or don't hold yourself back
115 from speaking English because a lot of times they feel ashamed because of an accent or they just don't
116 have the vocabulary and I say "well, don't feel bad because when I first came to the U.S. I didn't speak
117 any English at all." And I say, well, as a matter of fact, I didn't speak any Spanish at all, either, because I
118 was just learning how to speak (laugh). So they usually get a chuckle out of that. But I coach people to,
119 uh, to learn as much English as they can but at the same time don't forget, you know, your Spanish also
120 because, uh, I tell them that in today's environment, uh, having a second language skill, uh, can be
121 profitable and, uh, it can mean a higher rate of pay in some instances. So, it's beneficial.

122

123 M: Yeah. So, hang on to it. And, uh, you mentioned your mother – was yours a single-parent
124 household then?

125

126 L: Yes, yeah. In fact, uh, I remember when we would go back to Mexico to stay with my grandparents,
127 uh, we would get to see our dad, uh, at times, because of the fact that he would come see us and he
128 lived in Mexico and he had his own business down there. But, at an early age I would imagine right after
129 – I must have been about 2 or so when they got divorced and we moved up here to the US.

130

131 M: I see. And what kind of business was your father in?

132

133 L: He was, he had a ranch and he used to supply fertilizer, fertilizer equipment and that type of
134 environment to farmers in that area. So he operated huge trucks and that kind of stuff.

135

136 M: And what did your mother do in New Mexico?

137

138 L: In New Mexico my mother, uh, always worked in restaurants or as a waitress, that type of work.

139

140 M: And, well, you mentioned that you played with the kids in the neighborhood

141

142 L: Down in Mexico?

143

144 M: And also in New Mexico, I guess.

145
146 L: Mm, mm
147
148 M: And you went to school there, in New Mexico?
149
150 L: Yes, that's where I first started school. Although my sister who was two years older than me started
151 school in Mexico, actually.
152
153 M: Okay. And what was school like for you?
154
155 L: Here, in the U.S.? It was, uh, a little difficult. I must have been about six years old when I started
156 school and, and I remember specifically, just like it was yesterday, I remember my first grade, and I
157 remember, uh, my teacher and, uh, I mean, it was a different environment, I guess because I wasn't
158 used to any school at all. As you can imagine being the first year in school for any kid.
159
160 M: Sure.
161
162 L: I mean it wasn't – I had nothing to compare it to, whereas my sister did
163
164 M: Yeah, right; had a different school experience, yeah. And how much older did you say you sister
165 was?
166
167 L: Two years.
168
169 M: Two years, yeah, okay.
170
171 L: Although I do remember, um, one school in particular that we attended. Um, I remember that, um,
172 one teacher in particular making fun of me because of the fact that the lunch that we took were
173 Mexican style food, you know, like tacos and she would make fun of us for taking that type of food and
174 not bringing, you know, regular sandwiches and that type of thing.
175
176 M: Oh really
177
178 L: That's always stuck to my memory.
179
180 M: Did it bother you at the time?
181
182 L: Not at the time, but now years later to think about it, geez, that wasn't right, you know.
183
184 M: Right
185
186 L: So
187
188 M: Yeah. And so you ate mostly Mexican food at home?
189
190 L: Yes, in fact that's all we ate. Uh simply because whatever my mom would fix that's what we would
191 eat. Whether it was Mexican food or not we just didn't recognize it at the time, it was just food, yeah.
192 (chuckles)

193

194 M: And then you went to high school there too?

195

196 L: I started high school there, yes, in New Mexico

197

198 M: In New Mexico, right, yeah

199

200 **09:50**

201

202 L: And, uh, that was real interesting also simply because, you know, the whole . . . I mean if you can
203 imagine a small city – at that time there must have been maybe thirty thousand people in the city and
204 there was the typical divide in the city, you know, the Hispanics lived on the north side and the Anglos
205 lived on the south side and even though the schools were mixed, uh, you know, the residences weren't,
206 so once you got out of school you went one way and the other kids went the other way. But the
207 language remained. You know, that was the common ground, is that everybody spoke English. Most, I
208 would say the majority of families that lived there were probably second, third, fourth even fifth
209 generation of Hispanics that were there and so even their kids probably were very limited in English, or
210 in Spanish, rather. And so you grew up just speaking English to all your friends. Consequently, when we
211 moved to Oregon then I started speaking more Spanish.

212

213 M: Oh, that's interesting. And apart from this teacher who made fun of your lunches, did you ever feel
214 any sense of difference between you and your classmates that came from the south part of the city or
215 did you actually feel any overt discrimination?

216

217 L: No, not at all. I didn't feel any discrimination actually, I mean I didn't even know what it was. And it
218 was certainly there, but it wasn't something that was pointed out to you, especially at that particular
219 age. I remember particularly in my high school years being enrolled in a Spanish language class, our
220 teacher being Anglo, and I remember her not liking me and other boys who were Hispanic simply
221 because we didn't pronounce the words like she would want us to pronounce them. Now being that the
222 language was probably our native language and to a certain extent I suppose we would pronounce it the
223 way our parents would speak it.

224

225 M: Sure

226

227 L: For example, to say *pero* [with rolled R], which means dog in English, well, our teacher, who
228 happened to be Anglo, would not pronounce it like we did. She was not able to roll the R's, so she
229 would say *pero* [without rolled R] and we'd say *pero* [with rolled R] because that's the correct
230 pronunciation, and she didn't like that. She wanted us to pronounce it the way she did. Of course, that
231 wasn't natural for us and we would always get in trouble, always be sent to the office and, uh, even
232 though that was my second year of taking Spanish, um, I didn't pass it simply because of that.

233

234 M: You're kidding? (chuckles)

235

236 L: (chuckles) No, no. The previous year, in my ninth grade, we had a Hispanic teacher and of course we
237 passed that with really good grades. We didn't have any problems. So now thinking back on it I realize
238 that was some discrimination on her part.

239

240 M: Right, especially since yours was the correct pronunciation. (chuckles)

241

242 L: Yeah, and I remember her name, too, so I'll never forget that. But you know it's rather amusing now
243 when you think about it, but at the time you don't realize what's going on and of course when you're
244 sent down to the teacher's, to the principal's office they don't really talk about it. You were disobeying
245 the teacher and that's all it was, you know.

246

247 M: So you got sent to the principal's office just for not pronouncing things they way she wanted you to?

248

249 L: Yeah, yeah, and that was the only class that we had problems with, so

250

251 M: Okay. Um, and then you, uh, I guess at 16, age 16, your family, your mother and your sister and you
252 moved to uh or came up here to

253

254 L: Came to Oregon to

255

256 M: To harvest the crops

257

258 L: Yeah, to harvest

259

260 M: Was that 1969?

261

262 L: 1969, yeah

263

264 M: Can you tell me how that came about. How did you decide to come up here?

265

266 L: Well, if, I think I asked you if you were familiar with the Tankerslee family from North Plains. They
267 are, or they were at that time, a family of farmers who had many, many acres of strawberries fields
268 planted and every year they would send a couple of people to different parts of New Mexico and some
269 of the southwestern states to recruit and contract families to come up to Oregon and pick strawberries.
270 Well, it happened that Ron Tankerslee's wife or ex-wife now was originally from Artesia, New Mexico
271 where we lived.

272

273 **15:05**

274

275 L: And so they sent someone to Artesia and contracted. At that time there must have been about,
276 mmm, 12 to 15 families that he contracted, and once he sent his team of two people there they showed
277 us pictures of where we were going to live, that we didn't have to pay for housing, rent. We wouldn't
278 have to pay for food; they were going to provide the food. Clothing, and that and also, in addition to
279 that, that they would provide all the food during the trip up north. And so, and then of course they said
280 you'll make so much money, everything you make will be profit for you and, if you stay for the whole
281 summer season, we'll even pay you a bonus depending on how many, how much work you do and I
282 think it was like ten cents per flat, you know, at that point. So of course they painted a really good
283 picture to my mom about coming up here and working, and of course my mom said well, let's just go do
284 it for the summer, cause usually down there the only work that was available was, uh, working in the
285 fields, too, but, you know, like picking cotton and that kind of thing. Things that, um, people in
286 comparison here, if you remember, if you grew up here in Oregon, where kids would go out during the
287 summer and pick strawberries just for their own pocket and spending money – well, we used to do that
288 too, over there, in Mexico, I mean New Mexico, but just during the summer, so. We'd, I remember,

289 we'd earn like about 60 cents an hour at that time, and what you would do is, uh, these were the cotton
290 fields, and so when the cotton first starts growing you go out there and they called it, you used to call it
291 hoeing because the object was to take out all the weeds so that the plant would be able to grow, uh,
292 with no weeds surrounding it and stuff like that. And the rows down there – it would take us four hours
293 to, from the morning that we started, around six o'clock in the morning, at the actual site, but by the
294 time we got to the other side it was noon and by the time we got back, that was eight hours and that
295 was the whole day.

296
297 M: Uh-huh.

298
299 L: And the rows were that long, so. And it was really hard work, you know, lots of sun and . . . But when
300 you're young you don't notice the hardships so it was fun, you know, you'd see other kids your own age
301 there and so

302
303 M: And you'd get four dollars and eighty cents or something at the end of the day?

304
305 L: Yeah, and of course it would be my mom, it would be my sister and myself, and so then we started
306 combining the money and every cent that we'd make of course would go towards the household. I
307 mean there was no such luxuries there as well I get to keep even five dollars or whatever. Everything
308 went to the family. It was a combined effort.

309
310 M: And when you'd do this summer work, would your mother continue to work at the restaurant jobs
311 as well?

312
313 L: Yeah, she would work in the evenings and we would still go out in the morning and stuff like that, so.
314 And of course, um, once we came up here to Oregon and they painted, the contractors painted this
315 really pretty picture of, they even showed us a picture of the house that we would be living in and in the
316 background there was this one guy standing near a creek with a fishing pole fishing, you know, so who's
317 not going to like that? So we came, and of course it took us about three days to get up here.

318
319 M: And how did you get up here?

320
321 L: Well, it uh, let me tell you. (chuckle) It was an old school bus that they had brought to where we
322 were gathering in New Mexico

323
324 M: And this is the Tankerslee family?

325
326 L: Yes. And the bus was an old bus. There were just too many people for the bus, in fact I must have
327 ridden either standing or sitting on the floor because there was just not enough, you know, seats
328 available for everyone. And of course, if you can imagine, people were traveling in this bus 24 hours a
329 day, very limited stops for food or restroom breaks. They would only stop when it was time to fuel up.
330 You had crying babies. You had a lot of stink because of the soiled, you know, there was no other place
331 to put soiled Pampers or, well, diapers at that time, there was no Pampers. And, of course, not being
332 able to bathe for two or three days, that was another thing to add to the ambience (chuckle) and so just
333 being able to stop at gas stations and eat with whatever food was available at those particular gas
334 stations.

335

336 20:03

337

338 L: There weren't any AM/PMs back then so you didn't have the variety of food that you have available
339 nowadays. And of course the person that was driving or the contractor would say yes to everything and
340 of course the only thing we could buy was junk food and so that's what we subsisted in on the trip up
341 here.

342

343 M: And but the driver paid for it or there were members of the family . . .

344

345 L: Yeah, they would give us or they would ask us how much do you need. Ten dollars and they'd give
346 ten dollars and they'd write it down.

347

348 M: So it was sort of an advance against your salary

349

350 L: Well, that's what it really came down to. When we first got to Oregon and to North Plains, actually,
351 we got there and, of course, the bus on the way, being an old bus, breaks down. It must have broken
352 down two or three times on the way, and, when we got to North Plains and they opened the door for us
353 to get out we saw the huts, you know the cabins. Everybody was just so disappointed. And of course
354 we had to wait to be issued a cabin and to see it and look at it. And my mom was just so disappointed
355 because of the fact that it wasn't what it was . . . how it was pictured. And so that was the free housing.
356 And so then she said, well, what about the food? Well, at that time the government used to have a
357 program where they distributed government-issued food instead of, you didn't have the food stamps
358 back then. And so you'd have like commodity food – bars of cheese, um, cans of peanut butter, those
359 type of things, and so it was nutritious but that was what the farmer, or the rancher in this case,
360 considered the food that they were going to provide for us free of charge.

361

362 M: _____ the government was going to provide _____

363

364 L: Yes, government issued food. So then we said what about clothes, you said you were going to
365 provide clothes. Well, then they took us down to I think it was St. Vincent de Paul or something like
366 that. Which, you know, that is still not so bad but still it wasn't at all what they had pictured a painting
367 for us.

368

369 M: So things fell a little bit short of your expectations.

370

371 L: Oh, very short. And so we were issued the cabin, adapted to the living conditions. Of course the big
372 shock was having to share a communal bath and restrooms, you know. That was something we had
373 never experience in our lives before. So that was an eye-opener. And like I mentioned before, when
374 you're a young kid or teenager you don't notice the hardships. You just look for other kids your age and
375 try to make friends, so that's what we did. We made a lot of good friends. To this day, people who
376 were there at the labor camp I know and they work around this environment now. In fact, one of them
377 who happened to be, at that time he must have been about three or four years old, now he's a
378 probation parole officer here.

379

380 M: Oh yeah?

381

382 L: Yeah, so there's a long history.

383

384 M: Who's that?

385

386 L: His name is Melke Arroyo.

387

388 M: Okay.

389

390 L: He works here with community corrections. And so we were able to go out and start to work in the
391 fields, start picking strawberries, and of course we had never gone out as a migrant farmer group before
392 so we didn't know the first thing about working the fields in this type of environment and much less how
393 to pick strawberries. And so, and they didn't bother to tell us, and so our family started picking and we
394 filled something like four or five flats and you take them down to get them checked and of course at that
395 point they tell us oh, you're not supposed to leave the little green stem on, you've got to pick them all
396 out, so, you know, you go back and do that work over. But you learn quickly and, um, and of course
397 noticed that there were other families and the majority of the families that made it up here to Oregon in
398 that particular time were mostly from California, Arizona, and New Mexico and Texas. There were
399 hardly anyone, like they have now, coming from out of the U.S. specifically to work the crops. So, you
400 know, the majority of the people would come for the summertime and then go back to either Texas,
401 New Mexico or wherever they came from. Hardly did anyone ever stay and make Oregon their home.
402 So there was a few, and we were one of the few that stayed that year and when we settled in we looked
403 for a place in Forest Grove.

404

405 **25:01**

406

407 L: And we found a house and we were able to rent it. But like I said, there was probably at that time
408 just a dozen or so families, Hispanic families, that lived in the area. And of course you know you tend to
409 look for them for support and for information on where do you go for this and where do you go for that
410 and so it was a really close-knit Hispanic community albeit small but very supportive. And of course at
411 that time there was a farm worker program called Valley Migrant League who helped us a lot also, that
412 dealt specifically with farm worker issues.

413

414 M: And what kind of help did you get from them?

415

416 L: Uh, they would help us, in my mom's case, finding a job. They helped my sister get into some type of
417 vocational school and they also provided other types of counseling like educational sorts of things. If we
418 needed help with finding clothes, food vouchers, that type of things. So they were very helpful to us at
419 that time.

420

421 M: And why did your family decide to stay?

422

423 L: Because we needed to make enough money to go back. (Laughter.)

424

425 M: So the Tankerslee's wouldn't take you back on the same bus, I suppose.

426

427 L: No, no they wouldn't, and, um, the way it kind of ended also is because of the fact that they had
428 actually breached the contract. We, we as part of ten families filed a class action suit against Ron
429 Tankerslee and his farms. And through the help of, um, of I think it was Legal Aid, I don't remember it
430 exactly, at that time, I was a little independent because I was young. But some organization helped the
431 group of families file and class action suit and we were successful, but of course we weren't able to get
432 any money from the Tankerslee's because he claimed that he didn't have any money, so. But, um, and

433 consequently we lost our home back in Artesia and that's one of the reasons we just decided to stay
434 because we just didn't have any money to go back.

435

436 M: And nothing to go back to, huh?

437

438 L: Yeah, and

439

440 M: You lost it that same summer?

441

442 L: Shortly after. And we actually stayed one year, the whole family stayed one year and at that time you
443 know I got enrolled in school, at Forest Grove High School, and my sister was taking, um, some
444 vocational training, and then the following year, after the summer, this would be the summer of
445 seventy-one, seventy? Yeah, so after the summer of seventy we were able to save money to go back
446 home. And so we all went back home to New Mexico. And I dropped my mom off and my sister and my
447 brothers and I decided to come back to Oregon on my own cause I was already in school so I wanted to
448 finish school. And so that's what I did and I lived on my own since I was 17.

449

450 M: So your sister and your mother stayed down there, just for a while or for a long time?

451

452 L: They stayed down there for about two years.

453

454 M: And then did they return to _____?

455

456 L: Eventually they came back, yeah, and this was after I was married and so I had, uh, I met my wife
457 here and we were married probably a year or two and then my sister came up first and then we sent for
458 my mom and they lived with me until they were able to get their own place.

459

460 M: When you first came up and worked that first summer, you already said since you were a kid you
461 maybe didn't pay as much attention as perhaps your mother did to what was going on. Did she feel
462 pretty bad about what had happened or?

463

464 L: I think she did. And I think my mom was always an assertive type of person. She would never let
465 anyone try to take advantage of her. I think that because she fell into this scheme or scam, I think that
466 her spirit was broken and she kind of gave up after that and she just started to get sick from one thing
467 after another, and she was never that way, and after that she just kind of deteriorated and her spirit was
468 gone. She was just so hurt.

469

470 **29:54**

Part one ends here

471

472 **SECOND HALF OF TAPE RECORDING**

473

474 M: You also mentioned **Centro** a little bit earlier in connection with your driver education classes and,
475 uh, before we started the tape you mentioned that you're recently on their board. Uh, I suspect your
476 awareness at least of Centro goes back a lot longer . . .

477

478 L: Sure.

479