Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Liberal Memorial Library received an $8,000 Kansas Humanities Grant to record the immigration stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas. The Grant titled "Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community" will record and preserve the stories of 40 individuals and/or families who immigrated to Southwest Kansas from a foreign country.

The grant dollars from the Kansas Humanities Council allowed the library to record the interviews with both video and audio equipment and disseminate the information obtained during the interviews through our website and DVD recordings. Preserving the stories of immigrants to Southwest Kansas is important for many reasons, and if we do not begin to record them soon, the stories will be lost as families move on or individuals pass away.

Interview with Hugo Cano

November 12, 2005
Interviewer Miguel Giner

Miguel: *Good afternoon.*

Hugo: Good afternoon.

Miguel: *Can you tell me what your name is?*

Hugo: Hugo Cano.

Miguel: *What is your date of birth?*

Hugo: 03-18-71.

Miguel: *What is your place of birth?*

Hugo: Delicias, Chihuahua, Mexico.

Miguel: *And what is your race or ethnicity?*

Hugo: Hispanic.

Miguel: *Can you tell me how many brothers and sisters you have, and what are their ages?*

Hugo: I have four brothers and one sister. The oldest brother is 41. Next to him is my sister; she is 40. The next one is 38. The next one is 37. The next one is 35.

Miguel: *You are the youngest?*

Hugo: I am the youngest.

Miguel: *Are your parents still alive?*

Hugo: Yes, they are.

Miguel: *Who among your family continues to live in your native country?*

Hugo: My father does and one of my brothers.

Miguel: *And what about the others?*

Hugo: I have two brothers in Perryton, Texas, one brother in Wichita Falls, and my sister lives in Canyon, Texas.

Miguel: *When did you come to the United States?*

Hugo: It was June of 1978. I was seven-years-old.

Miguel: *Seven- years-old. You came with your family?*

Hugo: Yes.

Miguel: *Do you remember when you lived in Mexico, what were your living conditions? Can you tell me a*

little bit about that?

Hugo: For the most part, we lived okay. Both my grandparents were farmers and ranchers. They both had land. They both had livestock. My dad worked for his dad, and my mom was just a housewife. We made it by okay.

Miguel: What brought your family to live in Perryton?

Hugo: My dad had been here for, I'm not exactly sure how long, I would have to say probably about a year already. He came before the rest of us did. He was working. I think he was farming for a farmer there in Perryton, and we decided to join him finally, the rest of the family.

Miguel: What language did you speak at home when you were little?

Hugo: Spanish.

Miguel: What is your religion?

Hugo: Baptist.

Miguel: When you lived in your native country, were you ever subjected to harassment, or physical, or mental abuse or imprisonment or torture by the authorities, anything like that?

Hugo: I was not.

Miguel: How did you first learn about the United States? About America?

Hugo: As I stated, my dad was already over here. He had been coming over here. I remember, he had come over here repeatedly and kept getting deported. I think he had been up as far as Idaho and at one time worked for the Union Pacific, the railroad. He was up there by himself, and as I said, he kept getting deported. The very last time he came, which probably would have been in 1977, prior to us joining him. He seemed to be doing well up here. He was working up here, sending money to my mom so we could ends meet in Mexico. As far as how he found out what the United States was all about, I am not exactly sure, but because of him being here, that is why we decided to go.

Miguel: So your father was a migrant worker, basically, he kept coming and going until he finally brought the family in 1978?

Hugo: Yes.

Miguel: Do you remember when you immigrated? Do you remember that trip when you were seven-years-old?

Hugo: Yes. We were, as I said, there were six children and my mother. We came with one of my dad's sister. It was my aunt, her husband, and I believe they had four children at the same time, as well, and we all came in a single cab pickup. It had a camper in the back, so all the adults were up front, the three adults were up front, and about ten of us kids in the back.

Miguel: Ten children in the back?

Hugo: Ten children in the back, yes.

Miguel: Do you remember anything interesting, exciting, scary, anything about that trip?

Hugo: It was exciting when we finally leaving el rancho (the ranch) where we lived. I think we saw when we were finally exiting, it's not very big at all, it is very little, I think it has a whole four streets maybe there where we used to live. We were finally leaving and were all there in the back, and there was a certain man who had given us, the children, a hard time because we were pretty ornery, especially one of my brothers. He knew him on a first name basis and was repeatedly bringing him home and saying, "You've got to keep him inside. He's up on the water tower again. He's up on top of this building, on top of that building, beating this kid up, beating that kid up." He's the last person we saw leaving that place. I remember my brother, we used to call him Pinto because he had really dark hair, and then he had a white stripe on one side of his head. He hollered something to that regard, "Pinto, I will never see you again!" That is the last I remember. I was seven-years-old. I was very excited. I was very

anxious. I really didn't have any idea what the US was going to be. I just heard it was a big, big place, and we were very excited to leave that place.

Miguel: Did you have any idea where you were going, or what thoughts did you have about the United States? What did you have in your mind at seven-years-old where you were going?

Hugo: As I said, where we grew up, from infancy to seven-years-old, it was a very small village, if you may.

Miguel: What is the name?

Hugo: Colonias Peronce, it's a colony. My idea of the US, I really didn't know that were going to come to Perryton. We just knew it as "el otro lado", the other side (of the border).

Miguel: The other side.

Hugo: The other side. And that it was a lot bigger than we were used to over there and a lot more things to do, and people are friendly. It was just a really pretty picture that was painted.

Miguel: When you came, your father already had a house rented for the family, or where did you come to stay? What was the living arrangement when you came?

Hugo: When we finally arrived to Perryton, my dad had been living with one of his cousins, and his cousin's wife is my mom's sister. He had been living with him and their three children out in the country somewhere, and he was farming for this farmer. So our family of eight lived with their family of five in a two bedroom house.

Miguel: It was a lot of fun.

Hugo: Yes, a lot of fun. We were all very small, and we were out in the country, so we had the entire country to run and roam.

Miguel: What have been some of the most difficult adjustments that you had to make living in the United States? What do you think have been the most difficult adjustments?

Hugo: Initially it was the language. I remember trying to learn the language. Right now it would be like for me trying to learn Russian. It was totally different. We had zero knowledge of the language, had never even studied it or practiced it in Mexico. I only attended one grade over there in Mexico. That was the biggest challenge at first. Really, at school, at that time there were very little Hispanics attending school. That was almost thirty years ago, and I remember my brother and I, we started in the same grade with my cousin. We all started first grade in the same classroom. The biggest challenge we had then was being accepted by the Anglos. I could probably safely say every other day we got in a fight with some Anglos.

Miguel: Because you were…

Hugo: Because we were Hispanic, yes.

Miguel: Didn't speak English?

Hugo: No. My cousin spoke English just a little bit. He had been here. He was born here. He had been back and forth between Juarez and Perryton. He spoke a little bit, but the rest of us did not. That was probably the biggest challenge as children growing up.

Miguel: What has been your experience with Immigration Authorities? You told me that it took you a long time before you went back to Mexico.

Hugo: Yes. We arrived in '78, and I did not return until 2001 as a married man with my family of two children and my wife. Because of my status, I really didn't want to return for fear of not being able to come back to the US where I wanted to remain. As far as my experience with them, it was okay, but I really feared them because my dad had had so many run ins with Immigration when he was coming back and forth to the US.

Miguel: What do you do for a living now?

Hugo: I am a teacher, a physical education teacher, and I coach athletics.

Miguel: So, this question is about teachers in schools, and you might probably want to answer this in regards to your experience when you were a child. What was your experience as being a child with the schools back then? Would you like to tell me something about that?

Hugo: For the most part I had really good teachers. I think they were accepting of us. I think we were blessed. We picked up on the language really quickly. I don't feel that our teachers struggled with our learning. I was treated fairly. There may have been a few teachers who did not know me who I felt from time to time would discriminate against me and my brothers.

Miguel: When you were a kid?

Hugo: When I was a kid, yes.

Miguel: What do you think now about schools as far as immigrants? What do you think? What are your thoughts between schools and immigrants at the present time?

Hugo: I've been in education almost ten years now, and with my fellow teachers we converse about the population of the immigrants, and for the most part, unfortunately, we have labeled the Hispanics. We have stereotyped them as not being capable of wanting to learn. They have the capability, but they just simply do not want learn. That is the generalization that is being made in the education business for the most part, I would say.

Miguel: Where do you think that labeling comes from? How did this label develop?

Hugo: I think it is lack of education and trying to in essence keep up with the times. Times have changed. Times will continue to keep changing. More and more immigrants are immigrating to the US, as we did, for the simple fact of bettering their lifestyle and bettering their offspring's lifestyle, as well. I think the simple lack of education, to learn a different culture, to learn the ways of learning, and what impacts our life.

Miguel: What has been your experience with the police and other law enforcement agencies in this country?

Hugo: Really with, like, the police, it has been pretty good. Fortunately I have had my share of being pulled over, I have had share of citations, but I don't believe I've ever been discriminated against. One of my brothers got in trouble with the law, and I think at the higher part of the criminal system, if you may, like maybe the judges, the local judges, I think in Perryton, anyways, I think he may have been discriminated against to some extent.

Miguel: Can you describe any experience of racism? Do you think that you have suffered racism from the Americans towards you ever?

Hugo: Yes, both as a student growing up, later on, I guess I may have been ignorant of it when I was a child, and I really didn't know any better, but when I was in high school, that is when the name calling started, and I started being offended by it. At one point or another, I'll be honest with you, I would almost want to deny my race because we were so cast out.

Miguel: What kind of names were you being called?

Hugo: "Mexican" never really bothered me. It's the "spic" and the "wetback" that bothered me. It seemed like I was always in a fight because somebody was calling me a "spic" or a "wetback," "beaner," "greaser," all those kinds of names. I remember when I was working, and my coworkers used to give me a hard time. I was a senior in high school and working for a grocery store, and I had had enough. This group of boys was giving me a hard time at the work site, and we were in the back of the grocery store, and it was like three of them against me, and I told one of them. I said, "I've had it, I'm getting tired of you guys calling me "beaner" all the time." I said, "We're gonna settle this right now." And there was a little scuffle, but things were put into place.

Miguel: Did it change?

Hugo: As far as them calling me names ever again, it did, even though one of them, his dad was the manager which was very risky for me, but he was part of it, and I was willing to stand for what I am and to stand up to him regardless of who he was.

Miguel: It was three to one?

Hugo: Yes, it was three to one, and I remember they had a package of tortillas back there, and they threw them at me to further insult everything else. So that was pretty interesting.

Miguel: Since the time that you have been in the United States, have you returned to your native country?

Hugo: Yes, I did. As I stated earlier, I returned finally twenty-three years after arriving here in 1978. I returned in 2001, and my wife and family and I, we have returned on an average of maybe once a year now. We go visit my grandmother, visit my aunts and uncles down there.

Miguel: What did you find after all these many years and you went back? Was it the same? Had it changed?

Hugo: It was not the same. I was very shocked and almost -- I really can't describe the feeling that I felt. I had always given my wife a hard time about her being from el rancho and having chickens, and having livestock, and this and that, which in reality is the way I grew up. And when we drove up there, like I said, as a child I knew no difference. We had a great time. Those four or five streets that we have there, I ran the entire town probably every day, every night, and when we drove up there as an adult I was very shocked. I wasn't embarrassed. I was just very humbled to realize where my roots were, where I had come from, and how far I had come. It made me more appreciative of what I have become and what I have now.

Miguel: What did you children say?

Hugo: My children, they were young as well. My son was four-years-old. That makes my daughter nine. They were excited. It was open country to them. We've always lived in town, and where I was raised up, it was basically like living out in the country. When we arrived there, my dad, I think there was circus going on or something, and it there was like a five-legged sheep on his yard and a two-headed goat or something like that, so my children were very excited. They really didn't know any different. They were shocked, too, but as far as criticizing where I grew up, they did not.

Miguel: So you maintained contact with people in your native country, you keep in contact with them.

Hugo: Yes, I do. I probably speak to my dad, he comes up to El Paso with his sister, with my aunt, and we might talk maybe once, maybe twice a year. That is the extent of that.

Miguel: Do you send money back to your native country?

Hugo: I don't.

Miguel: Do you think that at some point in the future you would return to your native country?

Hugo: Yes, I'll keep returning, but I don't see myself residing in Mexico. I really like the lifestyle that we've established here. My wife and I have kind of talked about, throwing it up in the air, that we might retire down there, but if anywhere, it's going to be South Mexico where there is actually some clear water.

Miguel: You were very little, very young when you came. Did you have dreams when you came? Did you have dreams basically when you came? What expectations did you have? What was going through your mind when you came?

Hugo: The only life I knew was the life my dad had given us. Like I said, we grew up in the farm industry over there. Both my grandparents were farmers and ranchers. My dad was working for a farmer here. Just living out in the country. As far as a career when I was young, I really had no idea what I wanted to do. I thought I was just going to grow up and be a farmer like my dad. That's all I really knew, and it was not until high school age that I decided on my career.

Miguel: What do you like and dislike about American society?

Hugo: I like the freedom and the liberties that we are given here in the United States, the opportunities that we are fronted with.

Miguel: In what way is America similar or different from your native country?

Hugo: I think it is very different in the way that the government has more control at all levels of the system, on down to the legal systems and stuff like that. More control is given to the people, as well.

Miguel: What has been the most difficult aspect of American society for you to adjust? What was the hardest part for you?

Hugo: The hardest part for me has been to gain respect from the Anglos, that we are just like them despite our difference in skin color, that we are people just like they are. We can learn. We're not any less than they are. I guess just gaining respect from them and being accepted into their society, into their culture.

Miguel: Do you feel more secure or less secure in this country?

Hugo: I think there is more security here, and I have been blessed with the ability to live in not the best parts of town, where I've lived, but at least they have been decent. Every town, every place has its rough parts. I've never felt threatened where I've lived, and that is just a blessing, as I say, so I do feel secure. I feel no threats.

Miguel: Do you think the quality to your life has improved since you came?

Hugo: Yes, I do.

Miguel: In what way?

Hugo: Had I not come to the United States, I think with my grandparents both being farmers and ranchers over there, that probably would have been the extent of my life, as well. My dad did it. His parents did it. My mom's parents did it. I would have still been doing probably the same thing over there. My parents did not have much education, and they really did not expect much of us either as far as education is concerned. So, yes, for sure, arriving here and having to go to school, having to have education, that has been the difference maker in bettering the quality of my life.

Miguel: If you had the opportunity to talk to someone from your native country who was planning to immigrate to the United States, what advice would you give them? What would you tell them?

Hugo: I would let them know how fun it is over here, how everything, the economy is so much better. Education is everything over here. People over there struggle, I think nowadays not everybody can afford education. Mostly people who afforded education, they have had to meet their means by being allowed to go to private schools. Where here it is public education. I would tell them to go ahead and do it. This is the best place. I have only known two places, this and Mexico, and the United States is more up to me.

Miguel: If the President of the Untied States invited you to serve on an immigration committee, what suggestions would you give to the President to improve the immigration experience? What would you tell the President?

Hugo: I would probably have to focus, have him focus or target for secondary education. A lot of Hispanics, they come here, and they do really well, but because of their lack of status, they graduate from high school, and that is the extent of the opportunities that they have. If he could somehow extend at least another two years, maybe four years of education to them, I think that would better the society and better the economy as well. I think you are losing out on a lot of good people when you deny them post-secondary education.

Miguel: But right now that seems like something almost impossible or something really far in the future, but over the years, as time goes by, we'll know if what you tell me now might be a reality in the next generation. But it is a good thought. Do you consider yourself as an American or a Mexican or both?

Hugo: My family gives me a hard time about this. They say that I am a coconut, which means that I am

brown on the outside and white on the inside. My son probably gives the hardest time about it. He calls me a "guero" all the time which means "white boy." But, no, I personally see myself as Mexican, definitely. I still speak Spanish. I still want my children to learn Spanish, and I want to give them all the opportunities that I have had because I have reaped from being bilingual, just from that simple fact that had I not been bilingual that I wouldn't be where I am right now.

Miguel: Do you think it is important to maintain your national identity?

Hugo: Yes, I do.

Miguel: Why is that?

Hugo: I think we always have to know, and we should not let go of our roots, that is deep down who we are, deep down what we are, where we came from, whether I was born here, or whether I was born in Mexico. I am still a Mexican, that is what I tell my children. To let go of our culture would be a shame. I don't see any reason why we can't be a part of both cultures.

Miguel: Can you tell what way you have you tried to maintain that national identity?

Hugo: As I said earlier, I still speak Spanish. I taught both my kids Spanish. Right now my son and I, we are Spanish speaking only, and he understands that. He speaks English to his sister. He speaks Spanish to his mom. When he and I speak, it is Spanish only. Every now and then we'll throw an English word in because we don't know it or he knows it, but he knows what is expected of him is Spanish. Obviously with my parents I still speak Spanish and try to maintain that.

Miguel: What do you think about those children who no longer speak their parents' language, and the parents and grandparents don't speak the child's language. What happened? What do you think happened there? Have you seen that?

Hugo: Yes, I have. And I have very strong opinions on that. It is a shame really. You know, we have the surname. We have the skin color and everything. We have the roots. Our great-grandparents, our grandparents, our parents speak Spanish, but for us not to speak Spanish, I don't know. It is a sore spot for me because some of my brothers who have fathered some children, as well, their children do not speak Spanish, so I can't really go criticizing everybody else because it is within my family as well, but I really think it is a shame that we cannot teach our children our first language which is still Spanish.

Miguel: What do you think about bilingualism? Should American society and the education system foster bilingualism?

Hugo: Definitely, yes. With having the ability to think in two different ways at the same time, in my opinion, you are twice as good as anybody, as the monolinguals. My wife and I have two very bright children. They speak both English and Spanish, and I think because of that they are very successful academically.

Miguel: As an immigrant living in the United States, Hugo, what do you see as your greatest challenges?

Hugo: Being in the education business, that is probably my biggest challenge. First of all, I wish I could gain more education, more background, more research on what I need to learn and then consequently be able to share that with at least one other fellow teacher so he or she could understand the culture that we are dealing with here in Liberal, Kansas. That is probably the biggest challenge, to not stereotype the current immigrants and label them as not being able to learn.

Miguel: Do you think American society has become more hospitable or less hospitable toward immigrants?

Hugo: I think it goes back and forth at times. Certainly when I went through college because of my race and because of my immigrant status I was able to pay for my college courses, so really I was pretty high on that, how hospitable they were towards me then. It wasn't until after I got out of college and got into the teaching area that I felt and started working with these teachers and working with these administrators that I felt we were on a downhill slide again, so I believe that it does go up and down. We'll try for a couple of years, society will, and then give up, the trend dies, and we ride the wave for

two or three years, and then again we make the effort again. I believe it goes up and down.

Miguel: *In what ways do you think that American society could improve its treatment towards immigrants? How could that be improved?*

Hugo: I think education is the key, and I am partial to that because that is my field of expertise. We have to research, this goes back to the ‘40’s, maybe even the 1930’s. Since then we have been immigrating, and in essence everybody or 95% of the US residents were all immigrants, so I think education is the key and research and having a sound foundation to that, and having enough people by the system and start accepting the immigrants.

Miguel: *Before we finish, is there something else you would like to say, something else you would like to add, your experience as an immigrant?*

Hugo: My experience for the most part has been very positive. As I stated earlier, I am very blessed with everything I have been given here, all my accomplishments. I am very thankful that my parents decided to bring us here and pretty much set up free and teach us or help us along the way to take advantage of all the resources.

Miguel: *Thank you very much.*

Hugo: Thank you.