

# Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

## Interview with Raul Pena

June 26, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

This interview was conducted in Spanish originally.

*Miguel: Raul what is your date of birth?*

Raul: October 28, 1955.

*Miguel: Where were you born?*

Raul: I was born in a small town called San Francisco de Conchos, Chihuahua, state of Chihuahua, Mexico.

*Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity?*

Raul: Hispanic basically, or Latino.

*Miguel: And how many brothers and sisters do you have?*

Raul: right now in my family we were 13, 2 died, we are eleven left, my oldest brother was born in 1937, he is 68 years old, my sister is 66, another brother from 1941, he is 64, another brother he is 62, another brother, he is from 1945, he is 60, then there is a two year break, I am almost 50 years old, my sister, the youngest, is 43 years old.

*Miguel: So, she is the youngest...*

Raul: Yes.

*Miguel: You are the second from youngest to oldest.*

Raul: In my family we are three women and eight men.

*Miguel: Are your parents still alive?*

Raul: No, they passed away. My father died on May first, 1982, and my mother (died) on December first, 1986.

*Miguel: So, there was a total of eleven siblings, of whom there are still eleven alive.*

Raul: Eight men and three women

*Miguel: And, among your family members, who still lives in your native country?*

Raul: my brother, the one next to me, he is in Mexico City, and my sister, the second to oldest, she is 66 years old...64, she lives in Ciudad Juarez, also three more brothers.

*Miguel: And the rest?*

Raul: three brothers live here in Amarillo, Texas, and one sister

*Miguel: When you lived in your native country, what was your occupation?*

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.

Raul: I always went to school, I studied primary school, secondary school, preparatory school and later professional, I went to the Instituto Tecnológico de Chihuahua for one semester in 1974, pardon, in January of 1975 I switched to the Escuela de Agronomía in Ciudad Delicias, Chihuahua, I studied there for three semesters, there there was a students movement, we lost our recognition and in September of 1976 I went to the Escuela de Agronomía in Ciudad Juarez from which I graduated in December 1980 as an Engineer in Agronomics specialized in soils.

*Miguel: Can you tell me about the life conditions when you still lived in Mexico?*

Raul: I can say that my living conditions were very precarious, I lived in a place where...my siblings were studying, I was very little, my father worked by the day, on daily wages, he was also a fisherman, and when it was harvesting season of certain agriculture products he would go to work in the fields, I would go to school and it was a very, very...our way of living was very precarious, very elemental to survive.

*Miguel: And what is your religion?*

Raul: I do not practice any religion, absolutely none.

*Miguel: When you lived in your native country, were you ever subjected to harassment, mental or physical abuse, or jail or torture from the authorities?*

Raul: I never had any problems with the authorities.

*Miguel: OK. Let's talk a little about your experience as an immigrant. When it was the very first time that you heard about the United States, Raul? What is your earliest memory about the United States?*

Raul: Well, since I was very little, even before I went to grade school because my oldest brother took charge of the family, I was still a minor when there was still the Abracero program@ or farm workers and he would come to work in the United States and obviously that is something that you never erase (from memory), right? Return and help the family, basically the words "Estados Unidos -United States" have been in our home since I was very little.

*Miguel: What led you to settle or to move to Southwest Kansas, Raul*

Raul: There is a detail: in 1983 I arrived in Fairview Oklahoma, besides I-40 from Amarillo, about 125 miles from Amarillo headings towards Oklahoma City, besides I-40.

*Miguel: What year was that?*

Raul: 1983, at that time there was an oil field company and I met the foreman in that company and I called him from Mexico to ask if he would give me a job, and that is how I made it to that little town. Later, in 1986 when oil prices went down, many companies shut down because it was not profitable to keep them open and because I had a relative in this place, in the part, Liberal, Kansas, he was my contact and through him I came here and I started working at the plant and I am still there up to this date, almost twenty years.

*Miguel: What do you remember about that trip when you immigrated to the United States?*

Raul: Well, I was just married, I had a job in Puebla, my salary was not very good and I decided to come here to work, save some money, go back to Mexico and work that money in agriculture, what I had learned in school, but time went by, my daughter was born, in 1984, I came over here, the my son was born and my job gave us to live lets say, not too bad but more or less and we are still here.

*Miguel: What did you do in Puebla?*

Raul: I worked for the Ministry of Hydraulic Works in Puebla, for a regional sub direction that supervised hydraulic works in six states.

*Miguel: So, before you came to the United States you contacted that company in Oklahoma and they offered you a job...*

Raul: Well, what happened was that during vacation times I came to work in the United States and in 1980 I

was working in a small town where two of my brothers were working, in Walsh, Colorado and there I found a friend from my hometown and he worked in Fairview, Oklahoma, and he invited me and I went because those were very good years, those were years of fortune in the field of exploration and processing of crude oil.

*Miguel: How did you first find housing in this country?*

Raul: It was difficult, it was difficult because when I moved in 1980 to Fairview, Oklahoma, they had rented a very small apartment and there were like six people living there, then in 1983 we moved to Elk City, Oklahoma, we rented a duplex from the government, it was not hard to find housing and every thing was easier.

*Miguel: What have been some of the most difficult adjustments you have had to make living within the North American society, Raul?*

Raul: Obviously has been a very distinct culture, believe it or not, even when we are neighbors and we are only separated by a small stream of water, very small, but its principles and those we grew up are very different compared to how children grow up here (in this culture). I see it with my family, specially with my son who, well, we have an education and principles from another country different from this one, he is growing with the combination of both and we would want him to have those familiar principles from the country where I am from, very distinct from the ones from here.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with immigration and naturalization authorities, Raul?*

Raul: I have never had any problems, everything has been...how can I say, I can express myself positively about them.

*Miguel: As far as teachers and school officials in the United States, what can you tell me?*

Raul: I can tell you that there is a lot of prejudice over the Hispanic peoples, I have experienced that with my son, they abuse up to a certain point and they have a stereotype that we came to displace them and yes, I have had very negative experiences.

*Miguel: What has been your experience with police and other law enforcement agencies in the United States?*

Raul: Practically I have never had any negative experiences because I have never been in trouble with the law.

*Miguel: Have you ever had any situations or incidents of racism from the Americans towards you?*

Raul: Several times, several times. One of them, when I was attending the community college, it is notorious although very disguised racism but you can notice that Hispanics are relegated a little. As far as the municipal authorities from Liberal, Kansas, I had the opportunity to lead a base-ball league and it was overt discrimination against us, we were not given the opportunities that were given to teams of the Anglo leagues and we were always fighting uphill because there was a lot of negativism against us, a lot.

*Miguel: During the time you lived in the United States, have you had an opportunity to return to your native country?*

Raul: Several times on vacation but not with the intention to stay over there. Every year I go at least two times the country where I was born.

*Miguel: Do you keep in contact with people in your native country?*

Raul: Definitely.

*Miguel: And in what ways?*

Raul: Well, for example, with my direct relatives, my siblings, we keep in contact, we call each other by phone, some times they have the opportunity to come to visit us. I go to Amarillo, I get together with them, also with the rest of the family and also, when we go...

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

Raul: I used to long time ago. Now I am helping one of my sisters, the second from oldest.

*Miguel: Do you think that some time in the future you will go back to reside in your native country?*

Raul: It could be, it could be. I am not contemplating that in this moment but, probably, in the long run perhaps.

*Miguel: Lets talk a little about expectations and reality. What have been your ideals and your dreams about this country, the United States?*

Raul: It's very simple: I believe that we, all the people who come to the United States with one purpose, to have a better life, and in fact it's found here, a better way of life, having a job, in fact, I can't complain.

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

Raul: I would say that discrimination towards us, minorities, that is what I don't like, the way many times police acts against our people.

*Miguel: What do you like about this society?*

Raul: What I like...it's a very open society, there are opportunities for every body, there is employment, you live well, there are ways (for people) to study, and to live easy, right?

*Miguel: In what ways you think this country is similar or different from your native country?*

Raul: Well, it is similar in that, there are certain...in the sense that there are a lot of Latino people in this country, and that makes us feel like in the country from where we are, that is a considerable similitude.

*Miguel: And any differences? What differences do you see between this country and your native country?*

Raul: Opportunities, here there are so many opportunities, the economy around here, (we don't) have the shortages, there is less corruption among authorities, because the law is executed much better than in our countries, we are more protected here by the authorities.

*Miguel: Which has been the most difficult aspect in this society that you have had to adjust?*

Raul: The very first is the language. When I first came to the United States I signed up to take some classes in English and Spanish, and I improved a little, I learned a little. Later I got enrolled at the community college, I learned some English, and graduated with an Associate's degree in Applied Science and Associate's degree in Science. That has been the biggest obstacle I have had, the language.

*Miguel: And what has been the easiest aspect to adjust to American society?*

Raul: I have not been afraid; I have not been scared by the culture of this country compared to mine. I have developed myself without a problem.

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

Raul: Definitely one hundred percent more secure.

*Miguel: Why?*

Raul: Very simple: the poverty in our countries of origin cause more delinquency, and here the way of life is higher and criminality is smaller and that makes you feel safer.

*Miguel: Do you think that your way of life, in your case, has improved?*

Raul: Yes, yes.

*Miguel: In what ways?*

Raul: It has improved in the sense that I have had the opportunity to make many things, necessary for me so that I can live and some more superfluous, the fact that I have two or three vehicles without needing them, something that in our country it could be a bit difficult, right? I paid off for my house...

Miguel: *If you had the opportunity to speak with some one from your native country, thinking about immigrating to the United States, what advice would give them?*

Raul: To go ahead, to move on, to make the attempt, that simple.

Miguel: *If the President of the United States invited you to serve in an Immigration Committee, what suggestions would you propose to improve treatment to immigrants?*

Raul: It is a very important question. I would say that the agencies in charge of controlling immigrants could give a lot of value to the human rights and respect their physical integrity of each immigrant, without regard to whether they are legal residents or illegal; give them a treatment that every human person deserves, without abuse.

Miguel: *Lets talk a little about national identity. Do you consider your self, or see your self as an American, as Mexican, or both?*

Raul: In fact I am an American because I live in America being a resident originally from Mexico but as far as how I feel, I cannot change because I was born, I grew up with the principles, the culture even where I am in the United States, that is something very difficult to change, and I continue to feel almost 100 percent Mexican, even after living in the United States for many years.

Miguel: *Do you consider important to keep your national identity?*

Raul: I can't erase it, I was born with it and I am going to die with it.

Miguel: *In what ways you maintain that national identity, Raul?*

Raul: I think that it comes out on the skin, don't you think? My color, the way I behave perhaps, I do not try to pretend something I am not. I speak a bit of English but my accent unveils my precedence that I am not originally from this country.

Miguel: *In what ways have you tried to get integrated into the American society?*

Raul: Obviously that living here I have to accept to obey the laws that this country applies to all the people.

Miguel: *What has been your experience as far as language, religion, food, dress and other customs of the American Society?*

Raul: As far as food I don't think there is any difference; as far as dress I continue to dress as if I was in either side (of the border); Mexico is a country where religion is very deep, perhaps not as much around here, I do not sympathize with any kind of religion, I do not practice any religion.

Miguel: *As an immigrant living in the US, what do you consider to be your biggest challenges?*

Raul: Well, to defeat up to a certain point discrimination to which we are subject. One of the biggest challenges is to get an education here in the US, which is expensive, and to get my family ahead, to get them educated.

Miguel: *Do you consider that education and the American society should adopt a bilingual model, that bilingual education should be adopted? Yes or no?*

Raul: I am not in agreement with that because if we are people coming from another country we must take in mind that we have that barrier. We should force ourselves to learn the native language of this country.

Miguel: *Do you consider that law enforcement agencies like police should end racial profiling*

Raul: Definitely. Definitely because that involves a lot of prejudice involved with racism, not all the people that come from other countries, that are not from around here, are not bad (people), nevertheless they have the concept that the ones who come here come to create disorder, break the law and is not true.

*Miguel: In what ways the American society could improve its treatment towards immigrants?*

Raul: In what ways? The fundamental principle, as I said before, give the value (worth) to each person, obviously, if the law is broken, there are laws that have to be applied and in that moment make the people to return to their country of origin, right?

*Miguel: Do you think that American society has become hospitable or less hospitable towards immigrants?*

Raul: I say less hospitable to all the new anti-immigrant organizations that have been created recently, and these are organizations that many times badmouth and put more weight on immigrants in the sense that (immigrants and immigration) are negative to this country.

*Miguel: Any thing else you would like to add, or to comment from your experience as an immigrant to Southwest Kansas?*

Raul: I am very thankful with all that has happened to me. Obviously I have obeyed the laws, I have embraced what this society embraces, and I am thankful with what this part of the country has offered to me. I have lived around here for almost 20 years, and I like it.

*Miguel: All that time have you worked with the same company?*

Raul: All that time I have worked for the same enterprise.

*Miguel: Do you like living in this part of Kansas?*

Raul: Yes, a lot.

*Miguel: Anything else?*

Raul: Well, just to thank all the people I have met, to you, for giving me the opportunity to express myself, and that is all.

*Miguel: Thank you Raul.*

Raul: Thanks to you.