

Crossroads of Commerce, Culture, and Community

Interview with Willie Vargas

March 21, 2005

Interviewer Miguel Giner

Miguel: Would you tell us what your name is?

Willie: In Spanish or in English?

Miguel: You prefer to do it in English?

Willie: Let's do it in English, Willie Vargas. That's the equivalent to (inaudible)

Miguel: And Willie what is your date of birth?

Willie: I was born July 21st 1957

Miguel: And your place of birth

Willie: Mexico Juarez Chihuahua

Miguel: So you were born in Juarez? Across from El Paso

Willie: Yes

Miguel: What is your race or ethnicity Willie?

Willie: I'm I'm Hispanic

Miguel: And can you tell me how many brothers & sisters you have and what are there ages.

Willie: Yes – I have three brother and two sisters.
My older sister is Rahael she is 58,
and then Henry oldest brother he's 54,
and then Fred he's huh he's 52,
and then my little brother Tom he's a 45,
and then my little sister is 44.

Miguel: Uh and your parents are they still alive?

Willie: No there are both past away

Miguel: They both pass away. When was that?

Willie: My dad passed in Oct of 1998 and my mother in April of 1998

Miguel: Uh can you tell me who among your family continues to live in your home land?

Willie: Nobody in my immediate family. None of my brothers and sisters live in Mexico, we all live in the United States. My oldest brother lives Houston Texas, and a my older brother lives here in Liberal, and my little brother lives in Wichita, and my little sister West Virginia. My oldest sister lives here in Liberal so there are three, three of the families that still live here in Liberal.

Miguel: But do you have extended family members?

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.

Willie: Yes I have cousins, aunts and uncles that live in Mexico, Guanajuato.

Miguel: *In Guanajuato central Mexico and what is your religion?*

Willie: I'm a Catholic.

Miguel: *Catholic okay, and I understand that you came to the United States when you were two years old.*

Willie: We were living Juarez and my parents got the green cards for the whole family and we came to southwest Kansas.

Miguel: *And you probably don't remember living in Mexico, you were little.*

Willie: No I don't.

Miguel: *Ah, but later when you grow up you went back to Mexico and you lived for awhile.*

Willie: For a year, Yes. When I was 16 I was in 11th grade. My Mom & Dad always want to move back to Guanajuato and so they went down there for their 25th wedding anniversary and when they came back they said that they had bought a house and were wanting to move back. We moved down there and my dad couldn't make a living so he moved back to the United States to Liberal and a year later I followed him back up here. My Mom stayed down there for awhile but she eventually came back up here. So their dream was to go back to Layhorn guanta honta. They loved Layhorn guanta honta but the conditions were not good enough and the family had to come back again. Right.

Miguel: *Ok. When you lived in Mexico were you ever subjected to harassment or any type of physical or mental abuse or imprisonment or torture by the authorities any problems with the authorities down there?*

Willie: The only thing I experienced was when my dad, we always drove a new car down there and so the police would see the license plates that were American. And they seemed like they always pull us over and want more cash, a bribe, so we wouldn't get a ticket and I refuse to give them a bribe one time, and I still had to go to court and they gave me my license back but a small fine so.

Miguel: *You had that situation with the authorities when you lived there. So what moved your parent to move to Southwest Kansas, do you know why do you know why they ended up in Southwest Kansas?*

Willie: Yes. My dad. My dad had gotten in trouble with law down there in Layon, he was always in trouble, so they moved to Juarez and they were going to try to move to Oakland, California cause they met this guy and my Dad was a cook and so they were going to meet a guy in Juarez and move to Oakland eventually. While they were living there in Juarez I was born my mom was pregnant with me when they moved from Leona so I was born in Juarez. And they never met that guy from Oakland. Then my dad started working with Tony Lama boots and work in El Paso. And he met Henry Andrada, no I'm sorry, Jenzen Andrada, and he said he needed a cook at the 54 café here in Liberal.

Miguel: *Ah huh.*

Willie: And so he moved down here with the Andrada's at the 54 café and that is when he started working here.

Miguel: *Do you remember about what year was that? Do you have any idea?*

Willie: 1959

Miguel: *1959. That's when your father first came to Liberal to work as a cook? Okay. You were very little when you came. You properly don't remember much about the trip? Coming from Juarez too.*

Willie: No, but I heard my mom tell stories. They rode the bus or the train. All the way from El Paso to Liberal on a train. They got here February 1959.

Miguel: *February 1959. You mentioned before about green cards. Do you remember when was that? That was prior coming from Mexico? Or after?*

Willie: My dad always wanted to do thing legally. And so he got the green cards while we were living in Juarez and that way he wouldn't have to do any thing once he come up here. So, we were legal before we came here.

Miguel: *Do you remember any other stories that your mother said about the trip coming from Juarez to Liberal?*

Willie: When she showed up in February 1959, she had never seen snow. And she had seen it on movies, you know the American movies. And huh she said when they pulled up here they had a real bad blizzard in February 59 and she couldn't believe how cold it was, she hadn't packed for cold weather she just thought it was pretty little snow flakes and you know and it wasn't cold and she never realized how cold it was. She almost went back to her own home.

Miguel: *Uh did you ever have to go before immigration? Did you have to have any direction with immigrations service?*

Willie: The only time I did was when I got my citizenship

Miguel: *When was that?*

Willie: 1982

Miguel: *82 How old were you when?*

Willie: I was 25

Miguel: *25? That's when you became a US Citizen? And what was your experience dealing with Immigration Services?*

Willie: Very pleasant, very easy. I had to take...I had to do a test and an interview and then I went there and they swore us in. It was no big deal

Miguel: *Because you were born in Mexico became a resident and then became a US Citizen what has been your experience with the teachers with the school system in America in the United States.*

Willie: Well a when we first got here there was only 3 or 4 Hispanic families in Liberal. There weren't very many Hispanic or Mexican . A my first day of school my kindergarten teacher ended up slapping me several times because she couldn't understand Spanish and I couldn't understand English. I spoke Spanish at the house my own life and my first school was was really bad cause you know she would tell me something she didn't understand I couldn't speak English so it was a bad situation. After that everything got simpler I learned to speak English but I do remember my 1st day of school and after been you know like I've been everybody else.

Miguel: *But You had a rough start?*

Willie: I had a rough start.

Miguel: *What has been your experience with the police or any other law enforcement agency in the country Willie?*

Willie: Again, I said my parent there were only a few Hispanics here in Liberal and so my dad always followed the law and so I have never had any bad experiences with the police here in Liberal or any place else for that matter. I've always followed the rules, I've always obeyed the law, I mean other than a few speeding tickets. I've never had a bad experience with the law.

Miguel: *For the last forty some years you've lived here in Liberal. When did you see the population changes? When did you see a change in the demographics, the ethnicity changing in Liberal?*

Willie: About 1968 or 69 when National Beef opened up they needed unskilled labor and so, um the Hispanics, the Mexicans started migrating up to here and then Dodge City opened up their packing plant and so did Garden City so there was a lot, there was a need for unskilled labor at that time.

Miguel: *And that's why the population changed and started. Have you been in any incidents or have you ever*

had any occurrence of racism on part of the Americans towards you? Do you think you have ever been a victim of racism?

Willie: Only a few girls I've dated, their parents didn't like me because I was Mexican. But other than that, I mean when I was a little kid I'd...you know I'd go to the store and people would kinda look at you and make sure you weren't stealing something, but other than that, nothing.

Miguel: During all these years you've been in America have you returned to your native country?

Willie: Yes. I've been to Mexico several times.

Miguel: Several times. Do you maintain contact with people back in Mexico, extended family?

Willie: Not anymore.

Miguel: Not anymore.

Willie: Ever since my mom passed away I've kinda lost contact. My sister still maintains a lot of contact with cousins and aunts and stuff like that.

Miguel: And there is a question here; Do you send money back tot your native country? You probably don't.

Willie: No.

Miguel: You don't have immediate family there?

Willie: No, I don't have any reason to.

Miguel: Do you think at some point in the future that you will return to your native country and why you would or why you wouldn't?

Willie: I would like to, I really would. As a young adult when I lived there for a year during my junior year I made a lot of friends people were really nice. The country is beautiful and its up in the mountains, it never gets really super cold there. Someday I would like to retire up there if at all possible.

Miguel: What state is that did you say?

Willie: Guanajunta

Miguel: In central Mexico, right?

Willie: Right.

Miguel: Okay Willie, I'm going to ask you a few open ended questions. How are we doing? We're doing fine? Okay. Do you feel more secure or less secure in America and why?

Willie: I feel more secure in America because what I've seen in Mexico and what I've heard in Mexico that politics are really bad. If you have a lot of money you won't have any trouble in Mexico. Here in America you have more, more civil liberties. You know, I feel, I just traveling down the highways I don't worry too much, but in Mexico I know there is bandits and stuff like that. But if I flew down there I was always with a large group I probably wouldn't feel bad. But to ride across Mexico in a car by myself I don't know if I would do that or not.

Miguel: If you had an opportunity to talk to someone who was planning to immigrate to America what advise would you give them?

Willie: I would give them advice that when your in America, follow the American rules. You know follow the law of America. I don't know much about the rules in Mexico but you know here we have speed limits, we have drunk driving rules we have a lot of rules here that they should follow and that's the advice I would give them.

Miguel: That's good. Do you see yourself as an America or the nationality of your country of origin or both?

Willie: I see myself as an American now. When I was growing up, like I said, there wasn't very many Mexicans in Liberal I considered myself more Mexican then. Because people weren't as integrated then. I know on Sundays dad would take us to the park and we did things that typical Mexican family would do, but know I've lived here long enough in the United States that I consider myself more an American than I do a Mexican.

Miguel: Do you think that the American education and society in general should foster bilingualism?

Willie: I think that no they should not.

Miguel: Why not?

Willie: Because this is America and we speak English here. If we have to do that for every ethnic group then we would never get anything done. If everything's in English then you have to learn English. I just...this is what I believe that, that if you are in America you speak English. If you go to Mexico I know there is a lot of people who speak English people there and you can get around pretty good. You can get a taxi that speak English but just because of the tourism that here in America. I see a lot of kids falling behind because they are use to people translating for them so once they get out on their own they can't do it, they're dependent on someone else to do the translation for them.

Miguel: Alright. Let's get to the last question, unless you have something else to add. Do you think the American law enforcement agencies should end the practice of racial profiling?

Willie: No, no I don't think they should because...I don't mean to sound prejudice or nothing, but there are certain groups that cause more trouble than other groups...they...they don't. I'm not trying to sound prejudice, but you know like on TV if they describe somebody, they describe a Hispanic male, the describe a black male, or maybe an American Indian or American Chinese...that racial profiling in my opinion and if you are looking for a certain group and you say okay we...the police are looking for a male 38 years old, the first thing I ask is white, African-American, Hispanic.

Miguel: Okay, I see your point. So you've been here in Liberal long enough to see how the population has changed and how the life of the town has changed. Is there anything else you would like to add, Willie? Your experience or your family's experience as immigrants, anything else you would like to add?

Willie: I would just like to add that you know if you live in America you should follow the American rules. I use to be a bail bondsman here in Liberal and I use to be...Should we continue

Miguel: Yes.

Willie: What was I saying? Okay. I use to be a bail bondsman and I bailed out a lot of Hispanics and everybody else, but it just seemed that there was a lot of Hispanics being put in jail for small things and I would give them instructions that you have to be in court on a certain day and if you're not in court they're going to throw you back in jail. They're use to the Mexican ways you know and so if they go to court, or they're suppose to go to court and they miss they think it's no big deal. They have court there two or three days a week, so I'll just go tomorrow or next week and they don't think it's any big deal and it is because if they're not there a warrant is issued for their arrest and they're arrested and it's just a vicious cycle continues. I just wish that the people who come up here were more responsible on knowing what needs to be done and knowing that there are certain rules that you have to abide by while you're in America. I see them driving their cars real slow and slowing traffic down and it's this in your face attitude that I don't like from the Hispanic population. My parents raised us to follow the rules and respect people and I don't know if maybe the different age generation of Mexicans now is different than what my parents were, but I just feel like there's not enough rules.

Miguel: So basically we go back to the advice that you would give to people to immigrate, follow the rules. Well, Willie, thank you very much. I think that's all for today.