

Tape 16a: Interview with Israel Bermudez and Rachel Lemus

Interviewer: Helen Krische

Date of Interview: 2006

Length of Interview: 31:49

Location of Interview: St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church

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Transcriptionist: Emily Raymond

Israel Bermudez (Interviewee): ... Yeah, yeah. Some of the stuff she brought up I can just barely remember. But the first priest that was there, then a different priest... my God, how does she remember all that?

Helen Krische (Interviewer): She must have a good one. Are we ready to roll? We have tape in the thing here?

Unknown Male: Yep, it's ready.

HK: Okay. Alright, first what I'm gonna do is, let's see, we need to get two consent forms going here. Um, this consent form is just, um, to let you know that this is an oral history of Mexican-Americans here in Lawrence. And that, uh, we'll keep a copy at the Watkins Community Museum of History and we'll also probably give a copy to the Kansas State Historical Society and, uh, we will make a copy for you. And, um, basically it's just to kind of tell you that, um, in doing this that, that you will grant us all the rights and, uh, and intellectual property rights, uh, for this interview and that we can, um, make other audiotapes of it and we can use it for research and publications and also for, um, putting on the website if we choose to do that.

IB: [unintelligible]

HK: Oh yeah, sure! [laughs]

IB: All the stories –

HK: If you let us do movies, that would be great too. So, I'm gonna give this one to you to sign. We'll need your name up here at the top and then there are two options here that says that you won't have any restrictions on what we've recorded and then there's one underneath that says that you do want restrictions on what has been recorded. And then fill out the other information down at the bottom... I'll give you just a minute, Rachel... [long silence, picks back up at 2:18]

IB: So you want my name here again, and –

HK: Uh-huh, your address and everything so that we can contact you.

IB: In print? I print better than I can write.

HK: Okay, well that's fine. [laughs] Let's see.

IB: Cause I went to New York School.

HK: Here you go...Use that pen.

IB: What's the date today?

HK: 22nd.

[long silence, picks back up at 3:19]

IB: [unintelligible, maybe asks who someone is]

HK: Oh, it's Brian. [laughs]

IB: Okay.

HK: Alrighty.

IB: It's kind of legible [unintelligible].

HK: [laughs] True brother and sister. Alright, um, I'm Helen Krische, we're doing this for the tape, and this is Israel, um, Bermudez and Rachel Lemus.

Rachel Lemus (Interviewee): Yes.

HK: And they're brother and sister, we might add that to the tape. And, um, first of all I guess one of the, one of the basic questions is, what part of Mexico is your family originally, originally from?

RL: My dad was from the state of Sacatecas. And my mother was from the state of Torion.

HK: Okay. And how did they happen to, um, come all the way out to settle in Kansas?

RL: Well, it's the same thing they're doing now, they're looking for work, my dad, he...the way I talked to him one time, they came from Mexico and they went to Nebraska.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RL: G-e-r-i-n-g, Nebraska. That's where my first, my oldest sister was born. And then they came over to Kansas 'cause of the railroad was hiring Mexicans. And that's what I understand, I don't know about him.

IB: Most of, most of...work [unintelligible].

RL: And then they came here I think to Kansas City, then they came, I don't think they lived in Kansas City, but then they came here.

HK: Do you know around what time this was?

RL: Well, my oldest sister was, is, was born 1926.

HK: Okay.

RL: So that's about the time and the rest of us were born here in Lawrence, Kansas. And the next one was in the 1920s, I would say about 19, between 1928 and Ruben was born here too, he was born in February 1928. And they were already here in Lawrence.

HK: Did they join the St. John's Church as soon as they moved here, or –

RL: I don't remember. I'm sure they did. I mean, I'm sure they did. Very, very religious.

IB: Baptized [unintelligible] in the church.

HK: Did they work for the, uh, Santa Fe railroad or the Union Pacific?

IB: I'm not sure. I think Santa Fe. I'm not sure.

HK: Do you know where –

IB: Yeah, I don't think he worked with the railroad too long. 'Cause he had an injury and he had to quit that and then go to work somewhere else.

RL: At KU?

IB: Yeah.

HK: Okay. So, do you know if they lived in, um, any of the housing complexes that –

IB: [unintelligible]

RL: Santa Fe, I don't remember them...

IB: Um...I think...

RL: I remember being there but I don't think visiting, but I don't, cause we lived in New Jersey and 7th and the 8th.

IB: Mm-hmm.

RL: And then they...the last house was 810 New Jersey. It was same little vicinity.

IB: We all lived two or three blocks of each other.

RL: I don't remember unless somebody comes in [ad?] tells you that...[unintelligible] Older but better memory, but I don't remember living there.

HK: Yeah.

IB: [unintelligible] ...I can remember when I was about four or five, we lived on New Jersey street. 740 wasn't it?

RL: 19 New Jersey. Because then you would, I understood, the only ones that could live in them, they call it the yards was like, just a

IB: Two-row houses. Little apartments.

RL: And then I remember that the water, everybody used, the faucet was right there in the middle. The outhouses were over there, they had their side and they had their side. But I guess...like he said, my dad went to work, he worked over on the –

IB: I don't think, on the railroad he didn't work too long. So that's probably one of the reasons we never lived in those houses.

HK: Mm-hmm. Did you have, um, was it just your parents and, um, you kids, or did you have other extended family members living with you, or...?

RL: Just visit –

IB: Visit.

RL: Stay a little longer [when?] visiting maybe.

IB: Sometimes a couple of [unintelligible] [laughs] [says something about jokes, maybe?]

RL: That's, my mother stayed home, there was 12 of us.

HK: Wow. That's a big family.

RL: Well, after me there was three that passed, and I never really asked her if they were stillborn [“probably”?] But after I was born there was, there was I didn't know whether you wanted pictures but –

HK: Oh, yeah.

RL: I had these, I should have taken time [unintelligible] my mother. That's my dad and that's...

IB: That's Ruben...

RL: [We/You?] weren't even here yet.

IB: No, I said, Ruben...

RL: That was my oldest sister and my oldest brother. And my mom.

IB: Yeah, I think I was out picking up beer cans. [laughs]

RL: Huh?

IB: I think I was out, out picking up beer cans. That's why I'm not in that picture. [laughs]

IB: And the [unintelligible]

RL: And this is, that's, the twelve – the nine of us living here. But I think they were stillborn 'cause we had no pictures or my mother became a diabetic about that time, got pretty bad, so probably that's why she didn't, they didn't live, or something. I wish I'd have asked, but at the time, you know –

IB: Well, I think the, I think the gravestone was just the birthday –

RL: Well yeah, that's what I got off of the old ones.

IB: So there was, they must have been stillborn.

HK: So are they buried here at Mt. Calvary?

RL: Mm-hmm.

HK: Yeah, we'll probably scan these, and then...

RL: Yeah, they were, the time the father wanted them to, some of them to have markers, so the, I don't know that we were rich but important they, I remember my dad getting this, uh, Coca-Cola cart, wasn't it, Izzy? Put concrete in it and then he kind of, like, built up a cross and then just put the dates that I copied.

HK: Oh.

RL: And he said that everything had, should be marked up there. And after my dad passed away, I was executor and I thought: "The first thing I'm gonna do is buy them, um, their, so that's what they got now. Theirs is newer than all, all the rest of [unintelligible]. And that's the dates I got, 19, let's see, '41...

IB: '43, and '46.

RL: '43 and '46.

IB: [unintelligible]

RL: Yeah, he volunteers to cut the grass, that's why it always [unintelligible].

IB: Cut, cut grass over there, yeah.

HK: So, did you grow up, um, in your household, did, did you grow up speaking Spanish, or...speaking –

RL: Both.

HK: ...English also?

RL: Both.

HK: Both?

RL: And that's why I don't know how to speak Spanish good, or English –

IB: Mom and Dad never spoke English, so we had to learn Spanish and speak Spanish.

RL: Mother would never speak Spanish.

IB: And English rather.

RL: And English, she'd probably, she went downtown to pay the gas bill or Duckwalls [unintelligible] she didn't have to speak. She went to get thread and she knew [unintelligible], she knew how much, and for gas bill, whatever she paid, she knew how much, and...My husband tried to trick her one time. She wouldn't speak...so we, that's what we learned. They didn't go to – really probably grade-school level. So the Spanish I know, I get real embarrassed when I meet, I've met lots of people from Mexico. My husband hasn't had the schooling either. But the, the girls that I've met and worked with, they've gone to, let's see, high school level and I always tell 'em: "Don't laugh at me and, because the Spanish I know is..."

IB: Slim. It's slim.

RL: And then my mother and them didn't go to probably grade school level, [that's the?] Spanish, and I hesitate to, when I speak [I say?] "No, no, you go ahead," you know...

HK: So do, do your children speak Spanish, or...?

IB: Mine don't.

RL: Mine understand it, but more than they can speak it.

IB: When you start speaking Spanish, my kids, they start looking, 'cause they know something's going on. [unintelligible] they can pick up what you're talking about by...

RL: And I regretted not, not speaking to them, you know. Because now, my husband came from Mexico. And I got some friends and their kids, and they're just little you know, right now those little kids speak English and Spanish just like that. And I thought, why didn't I speak to, you know. It's [not?] too late. [unintelligible] or something, I feel awful. 'Cause you know, we didn't speak to –

IB: Well, that's like, we went to Mexico, all of us together. Brothers and sisters and [unintelligible]. And I was in Mexico, and down there they don't speak no English. And I was like, in a foreign country. I could understand them, but I couldn't speak, 'cause they speak fast. And I was in Korea and Japan during the service, and I, I could speak to those people more than I could speak to the people in Mexico, seemed like. I felt...I don't know why, I just felt different. 'Cause in Mexico they just rattle off, and I don't speak that good, so I, I was kind of ashamed trying to speak, I couldn't speak. But I feel really bad cause they were interpreting too, the people who were talking to me. He said this, [unintelligible] and I said that, couldn't speak. But I just didn't use it that much. If you don't use it, it just kind of goes away. So of course we was going to school, back then, back then they didn't want you speaking any Spanish in school, even to each other. So they always kind of frowned on it. Didn't speak it to other kids because they didn't want you to, so the only time you spoke it when you went home, the rest of the time you were speaking English. You learn both at the same time.

HK: Did you go to the, what schools did you attend here in Lawrence?

RL: New York School, for grade school, and then over here on 9th and, uh, what was that one-way street? Kentucky. There's a filling station.

IB: 9th and Kentucky. Oh, you mean Central.

RL: Central.

IB: Junior high used to be on 9th and Kentucky.

RL: There's a bank over there, and then there's a, the offices and then I think it's a gas place. There was three buildings and I can't remember all of them. Central –

IB: ...Ohio –

RL: [Manuel?]

IB: Ohio and Central.

RL: There was three buildings that we had to change classes, you know. That's where we went to junior high, and then we went to, um...

IB: High school.

RL: You went to –

IB: Central.

RL: Where did you go to high school?

IB: Central.

RL: Central. Central down Massachusetts was high school. But I didn't, I got to go to Lawrence High. And that was [unintelligible] graduated and that was it.

IB: And we had, they had St. John's when I was growing up [unintelligible] 'Cause I remember the nuns. They were, they were kinda strict, and they'd pull your ear, and...

RL: And my kids did –

IB: They're gonna have trouble enough trying to learn without somebody pinching, pulling their ear, so I said [unintelligible] public school.

RL: And my kids did go to St. John's, and my grandkids are in St. John's. And my daughter's kind of, like, you know, she lives way over there by Corpus Christi. I went to [unintelligible] and that's where I want my kids to go, unless there was no room. Then her boy, instead of going from sixth grade to wherever he had to go to the new schools. She's got 'em over here in Central because she went to Central. And then he would be going to Lawrence High. When he should probably be going, I don't know what the boundaries, but as long as there's room they can go. She said: "I went there, I want them to go there."

IB: Well, usually if they have a choice, the school system [unintelligible] Lawrence High, rather than Free State.

RL: Yeah, if there's any room.

IB: Yeah.

RL: As I say, as long as there's room she could do this.

IB: I said, hardly anybody get turned down going to Lawrence High, Central or other schools, anybody who wants to go to Central. The other way around, and it's in the system, it still is... [certain?] people somewhere. That's probably – like I say, if you want to go to Central and you live somewhere else, they usually let you go to Central. If you're here and you want to go to one of the other junior highs, most of the time, [unintelligible] unless they got a lot of room, or you got some reason [unintelligible].

HK: Well, what was it like growing up in Lawrence?

RL: Fun. I tell my grandkids, they got all these expensive toys, blah blah blah. We had, I said, we had, it wasn't Barbie doll then. I remember getting these dolls. I could never understand when did they buy them, we were with them when they went to town. My sister I remember had a big sack of these dolls, and you know, we just cherished that doll like it was made out of gold. Our kids, Barbie's in, next year it's something else, and it's, ah, well, you know. I don't think they – they just lookin' to see what's next and then they're gonna get it. And then we had all of, after supper was all over, we all lived, all the Mexicans lived in one section. We were Mexicans, black and white. Middle of the day if you were cooking and you needed [unintelligible] you needed three eggs and you just had two, you could go next door and, "Can I borrow a egg?" Now we don't even know who our neighbors are. In the evening we'd all get down on the street, Pennsylvania Street, 'cause there was, I guess cause there's not many cars at the end of the road there. And we'd play hide-and-seek, we'd play, the guys would make this thing, what is it, where you jump, you know, the, higher...the wood? thing you guys built. You know, we just –

IB: What do you call that, I can't remember.

RL: We were happy. That was our happy – we didn't, we didn't go to the parks. Walked everywhere, every Saturday we went to confession, walked from 810 New Jersey up to the church.

IB: Only time you crossed Connecticut Street was to go to church [unintelligible] Connecticut. The rest of the time you didn't. Only time we went over there was, there's people, trying to, I don't know, beat us up or whatever, but...you gotta be fast.

HK: So was there, did you experience any prejudice growing up?

IB and RL: Yes. Yes.

RL: Even up – I met my husband here. We came to – it was a friend in Topeka. And then there were dances or something, and he stayed in my sister-in-law's house which I used to remember was her younger sister, and that's how we met. But they started giving these Mexican shows and you had to go to Topeka. And my dad, you know, we didn't have that. We don't have what we got now, videos, we got a channel, I wish we had, my parents it was nothing, you didn't hear nothing, no music, no CDs, now you can go everywhere and...food, same thing, cause we, they made it at home. But back in '62 we, he says: "You wanna go to Topeka, take your dad and we go to the movies." So we were going to Topeka for the first time and we knew the day – the night, the night it was. We knew where, North Topeka. We got there like an hour early. So my dad, he spotted a bar [laughs] he told my husband, "Let's go have a beer, Frank." He says: "Your dad wants to go over there and even if I don't get one I wanna be with him." I said, "Oh, go ahead." "What are you gonna do?" I said, I'll just, they had kind of like a waiting area, you'd go in. I said: "I'll just sit here." Well they came back right away and they said "No..."

IB: Wouldn't serve them.

RL: “We don’t serve” – and that was in ‘62 in Topeka. And then the guys experienced a lot when they went into the service.

IB: Yeah, I went into the service in ‘53, and I came home and there was two of us that – that were on leave, and we was gonna have a little party, after – before we left. And so we went to, back then they didn’t sell liquor to the Indians. Specially in Haskell, ‘cause most of them were young, and they’d always get drunk and get in trouble, so they just wouldn’t do it. But we usually didn’t have – we usually didn’t drink liquor anyway. If we – but anyway, we was going to, we went to the liquor store to get something to drink, and ‘cause we was gonna leave in a couple of days, and the guy said, he wasn’t gonna sell it to us. So we said: “Well, why?” He said “Cause I don’t have to.” We said: “Well, you know, there’s gotta be a reason you don’t want to sell it to us.” And he said: “Well, I just don’t have to.” And, and back then like I said, they wouldn’t sell to Indians, so we said: “Well, we’re not Indians, we’re Mexicans.” And he said: “I don’t care what you are, you know, I don’t have to sell it to you.” So then my friend was getting kind of mad and he’s kind of a burly guy, and so I was trying to hold him back and, you know, I said: “You know,” I said, “we’re not gonna bother you. Just give us a bottle, we’re gone.” He said: “Well I don’t have to sell to you people.” So I thought, okay. So we went outside and of course we went somewhere else [unintelligible]. Course after you’ve had a few then you kinda start, you’re still boiling inside, and I can see why people go through life and they’re – they’re trying to live the right life and [faint sounds] intoxicated, go back and do something we shouldn’t have done. And then, after that you’re on the wrong side of the law all the time. And I can see why people do that, you know. But I mean, that was for no reason. We wasn’t, we wasn’t gonna sit in there and drink, you know. Like you couldn’t go to bars and sit and drink in bars, ‘cause they didn’t let you. You’d go in and buy your stuff and leave [unintelligible]. But the liquor store was the same way. You could go in and buy it long as you had an ID that you was old enough. In those days, and I used to get irritated, ‘cause I was in the service going to Korea and [laughs] I’m going out to war and I can’t even get a, you know, something to drink in a bar or liquor store or something. And there was a lot of places you couldn’t go in. And they wouldn’t, they wouldn’t have a sign up there, but they would, if you went in to get something they would just see you there at the bar or the counter and they would just ignore you.

RL: Ignore you, like you weren’t there.

IB: Anybody else come in there and you, you know, after a while, you know they’re not gonna serve you, so even – even if you want to get it to go, you know. It’s just like, I grew up with a lot of black friends and we had a Mexican ball club and they had a black ball club and we used to play each other all the time. And we’d get together and drink a few beers and stuff, and we was always teasing each other. And I was teasing this one black kid and I said [unintelligible]. He said, well yeah, he said, “You guys think it’s easy, you – you try growing up having to sit in the back of the bus all the time.” And I say, “You mean you guys got on the bus?” I said, “Why didn’t you get on the bus?” And he started laughing, he thought that was a joke, but that was, that was true. Most of the time you [unintelligible] the bus. If you had legs you could walk.

RL: Well, the movies, down here at the Granada...

IB: Yeah [unintelligible] –

RL: We could go in but we had to sit in the back row, we weren't allowed to go. And if you went up beyond... Well, you tell them about that incident with, uh –

IB: Well, I, I had two friends that were older friends. One was a black man and one was white. The white person was, he was like 17. He was a real good friend of ours, the family. Then the other guy was kind of in the service and he was a [unintelligible] but he used to take me to the movies on Saturdays. So every once in a while, that's the only way I got to go to the movies when I was a kid. They, one of them would take me, and when I went with the – and the movies had sections for the blacks that sat in the back, usually up in the balcony in the corner [in the back?] in a certain area, three rows or something like that. Every time I went with the black man, he always, he always, uh, bought my ticket for me, which I would [owe him for?] Every time I went with this friend of mine who was a white boy, he was 17 and he always gave me the money. Back then it was 11 cents, to go to the movie. He always gave me the 11 cents to go to the movie. And it used to make feel good so I'd get up there, put the 11 cents up there. I remember this one time I, I was going to put my 11 cents this gal at the door and she said: "We don't have no more colored seats." And I didn't understand what she meant, so I said: "What?" And she said: "We don't have no more colored seats." What's, I'm trying to think, what's a colored seat? And so finally he says, he was standing behind me, and he says, he said: "What's the problem?" And she said: "Oh, is he with you? And he said, "Yeah, why, what's the problem?" "No problem," and she gave me the ticket, you know. And I went home to tell, and I told my brothers. Of course, they just started laughing, all over the chair and, you know, I still don't know what it means or what it is. And then finally they said, they said: "Well, they thought you was a little black kid." 'Cause I was real dark anyway. And then they would laugh and then I go, "Oh, that's what it was." [laughs] But I mean, you know, you grow up, I grew up like that, with things like that. And even today there's still stuff.

RL: Yeah, I feel like it's coming. I don't know why.

IB: And I – I figure if I'm in a group of white people, you know and they're talking and they're talking about black people in a certain way, oh, I know if I'm not in the group they're gonna talk about me. I mean, not all people, but the people that are that way, 'cause you know I was in the [fire department?] and we had, like, maybe two black people on there. And every once in a while when they weren't around, these guys would be talking about them. And I'd get mad, because you know, I knew they were talking about me and I was – you know and I kind of get, get almost, you know, "Why are you talking about the other guys, you know, they're just people like anybody else." [unintelligible] But, I mean, that's how I felt. And I always told my kids, you know, "If somebody's standing there talking about another race in a certain way, they're gonna be talking about you when you're not there. And it is true. That's why I said, it still goes on. 'Cause I'm still around people who, who talk about somebody else, you know...and I know you're gonna say that about me.

RL: But like I said, we were in the neighborhood with black people next door, Mexican, another black, white person. We were all together, you know, all kind of like a family. All got along.

IB: And I remember growing up with people, too, that, I went to [Oregon?] on New Hampshire, there. And we had this, I worked with this, these voicers make the music and [unintelligible] and I, I worked for a guy named [Ricky?] who was from Arkansas. And he started working there sweeping floors when he was 16, 17 and he ended up, you know, doing things, he, he invented a lot of the stuff that they made. But he got to be what they call a voicer, he's the guy that tunes all the organs and stuff. And he had like a 11th grade, 10th grade education from Arkansas. But he wasn't dumb, he was smart. And then after that they uh, they got a union in there and the union, you know, they [fight?] for all the [bandmen?] in the union, and he ended up being president of the union. And so the – the company didn't like him because he was the president of the union, you know, he was – getting good money. And they had, uh, they, they didn't have no steps for how much people could – they just paid 'em, you know, nobody knew what the other guy made. So they decided to get a union, because there was some guys that came in [unintelligible] related to the supervisor, and they'd come and [unintelligible] everybody else started [unintelligible] And so when they got the union, they thought, you know, they made 'em have steps that you go up the ladder and you get paid, and all that. Anyway, so one of the deals with him they were, the company didn't like him because he was the president of the union, and he was getting big bucks, so they turn around and put one of the, one of the deals for a voicer, you had to have a college education in music. And of course, so then they try to get him out of there, but you couldn't do it because he was already there before this came out. And they were trying to get him out of there, and they, they couldn't. 'Cause it's against the law, you know. And so all the time he was in there, they hired all these college people with music degrees and stuff. And he was the only one...but he invented half of the stuff that was there. So he knew down the road, you know, something like [unintelligible]. So he, when he invented stuff he would put part of the stuff here and part of it here and part of it at home so they couldn't just come in and say, "Okay, this is what you do now." There was always something missing and that's the way he kept his security more or less. And I remember he had these other guys around him, they were all college people, he was the only one that was 11th grade education. And then he'd always, when they talked about black people he'd always bring me in there and say, "You know, he grew up with black people [unintelligible]."

All of them would always say: "Well, I have black friends too."

And so he said: "Well, who are they?"

"Well, some guy I went to college with."

And he said: "No, it was just somebody you got acquainted with." Said: "No, black friends are people that you, you know, that you know everything about them. Like you know their kids, you know where they live, you know their mother's name and all that." And that's the way I explained it to him.

So this guy says: "No, I have one. My best friend's a black man."

I said: "Where'd you meet him?"

"I met him in college, and then he went to our church and we played organs together and stuff."

And I said, I said: "Well, what's his wife's name?"

He said: "Well, I think her name's –"

"How many kids do they have?"

"Well, I think he has –"

I said: "What do you mean, you think he has?"

"Have you ever been to his house?"

He says: "No."

“Has he ever been to your house?”

“No.”

I said, “Then you, he’s not really a friend, he’s just an acquaintance.” I said: “A friend, usually you know everything about them, they know everything about you.” I said [unintelligible] Or smoke a cigarette and give ‘em, you know. I said, that’s, you know, those are friends, they’re not acquaintances. But that’s [unintelligible]. And there was a lot of, some, not a lot of – some still to this day. But I grew up, you know, prejudice was... The only thing I, where I didn’t see a lot of prejudice was when I went into the service. ‘Cause then if you performed [unintelligible] I remember, my life completely changed when I went into the service, ‘cause then we were all equal. You know, when I went and joined up, there was a bunch of Topeka, this area, we all met in Kansas City. And there was a group that came from Chicago or somewhere, where we all met in Kansas City, on the trains that went from Kansas City to California. We – I joined the Marines, so all the way out there, there was, like, gangs of guys from, you know, Chicago, and there was guys from the Kansas City area, and a lot of them were just from little towns like I was. And they were kind of like, you know, all the guys from Chicago would sit together, they had their big ducktails and their little, you know, back then it was ducktails and [pink? big?] pants and all that, and they all smoked and drank. Tattoos and everything, I was just, I was scared to death of ‘em. [laughs] And they were tough, you know, and they’d push each other around, and they had, they carried their knives, and they got out there, you know, and I’m sitting on the train, it took us three days to get out there [tape goes silent, then cuts off]

END OF TAPE 16A