

Tape 17: Interview with John Chavez and Helen (Chavez) Martinez

Interviewer: Helen Krische

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Helen Krische (Interviewer): We're gonna talk a little bit about your parents and when they first came into this area. Um, did they come directly from Mexico, or, um...were they already in the U.S.?

John Chavez (Interviewee): [murmurs] into Texas. I know my father –

HCM: Actually, we do have a whole history written down here. A little bit of – let's see here, now actually, we had a, well, our reunion, family reunion several years ago.

HK: Uh-huh.

HCM: My sister put an album together and so she did write down, actually, did put down a little history of when my dad –

[murmured sounds, difficult to distinguish from the static]

HCM: Because actually he...he was quite young, probably just a teenager when he did come to the United States.

HK: Mm-hmm.

HCM: How...let's see here. [murmured sounds] Okay, eventually, uh, after his parents, you know had passed away, well then he eventually made his way on into Texas and was alone. Uh, he worked in Pueblo, Colorado, and, uh, was working for the Union Pacific Railroad.

JC: I think when he was in Texas, though, he worked as a farmhand, not in Kansas, but maybe two years. In Colorado. [murmurs] eventually comes through here, the Union Pacific comes through Lawrence, uh, some way, he come into Lawrence.

HK: Right.

HCM: And then. Then lived in Williamstown.

JC: Well, he – he lived first in Lawrence –

HCM: In Lawrence.

JC: Then he moved to, uh, Williamstown for a couple, few years and then came back, um, to Lawrence.

HK: Do you know what year that was? Approximately?

JC: Uh, well, yeah, uh, I was born in 1936 and I was born in Williamstown. And my sister, she was a couple years older than I was, so she was born there also. We were the only two, so it had to be between '35 and '39.

HK: Okay.

HCM: When they moved to Lawrence?

JC: When they were, the time spent over there.

JC: Now when they came into Lawrence, I can't be sure.

HCM: '41, when I was born.

JC: Then came back [HCM interrupts] The first time they came –

HCM: Oh, okay, yeah.

JC: Let's see... '26, '27... My oldest brother was born in '28.

HK: Did he speak any English, or did he just speak Spanish?

JC: My father? No, he spoke English. I'm not sure how early he – he learned it, you know, but it was in Texas. I remember when we were young, he spoke – he spoke very little just in English, I guess he was ashamed of the way he spoke and he didn't want to mess with that. And, uh –

HCM: But our parents conversed with each other in Spanish.

HK: Uh-huh.

JC: Yeah.

HCM: The older, brother and sisters learned Spanish because they would speak to them, but when we younger ones came along, they would speak to us. My dad would speak to us in Spanish and we'd answer him in English [laughs].

JC: Yeah, well, once we started in school, you know, you just learn the English and just forgot about the Spanish.

HK: Uh-huh.

JC: Just forgot all the Spanish. If we didn't have to use it, we wouldn't use it.

HK: Uh-huh.

JC: My mother could understand very good English and she spoke to us in English [murmurs].

HK: Do your children speak Spanish? No?

JC: No.

HCM: Now they want to.

HK: Now they want to. [laughs]

HCM: Everything back then, was, they discouraged, you know, society really discouraged the Spanish.

HK: Yeah.

HCM: In fact, you know, when I started school, you know, my name is – is Elena. In kindergarten they changed it over to Helen. So it just stuck, you know. But, which is the translation into English. Everything was more or less encouraged to be English.

HK: Where did you live at, in Lawrence?

JC: When we first came to Lawrence, we lived um, 805 Pennsylvania.

HK: Okay.

JC: But, uh, earlier, I think my parents lived on New Jersey Street, maybe 801. And that may not be the only place they lived, but that was before they went to Williamstown. When they came back they bought a house on Pennsylvania there. And that's where we stayed until they, until my dad passed away. And then Mom got moved here. I remember that, uh, Haskell –

HCM: The Haskell –

JC: Happened in '74, [17?]74, you remember that?

HK: Uh-huh. Then what was it –

HCM: The city –

JC: The Haskell –

HCM: Yeah, the city was gonna, uh, make a Haskell loop and they – they had all the people that lived on the 800 block of Pennsylvania, they bought out the houses and they, and, uh, you know, they tore them down, now it's all gone.

HK: Uh huh.

HCM: And so –

JC: They were moving us to the 900 block too and I guess they got so many complaints that they stopped.

HK: Really.

JC: [murmurs] They never went through with it and I think there was supposed to be some kind of, uh, connection with Highway 10, not sure.

HK: Oh.

JC: Down, down by the depot in that area.

HK: Yeah. Was that in the '70s or was it in the early '80s?

JC and HCM: No. [conflicting voices]

HCM: '70s.

JC: 'Cause Mom moved out in '74 in Topeka, so that had to be about –

HK: Yeah, I don't remember that. I don't know where I was [laughs].

JC: Yeah.

HK: Having fun, I suppose.

JC: Yeah, I'm sure there's a record of that somewhere in the city.

HK: Yeah. Huh. So they just tore down those houses?

JC: Yeah.

HK: Huh.

HCM: The tree that my dad planted, when our youngest brother was born, is still there.

JC: Yeah.

HK: Oh, that's neat.

HCM: In fact, we have a –

JC: There's a picture of it in there, of our brother's tree. Uh, I think it might be in that section, I'm not sure.

HCM: But he just sketched, he had a drawing that he sketched, with, the tree and our house.
[murmurs]

JC: Yeah, Pennsylvania and New Jersey was about the only streets that Mexican people lived on, close to the Santa Fe yards. There's a few, very few who lived away from there. I know some lived in, uh, North Lawrence, that was the Garcias. And then there was, uh, some [murmurs]. New Jersey. [murmurs] I don't remember anybody else. Mexicans [murmurs].

HK: I know that, um, in talking to some people, that their father worked for the Union Pacific railroad, that they had lived in, like, converted cattle cars and stuff like that. Was that...?

JC: Yeah.

HCM: Yeah.

JC: Actually, that's where I was [born?].

HK: Really?

HCM: Yeah, the boxcars.

JC: Yeah. In Williamstown Square, they had, uh, they had two boxcars set off to the side of the tracks –

HK: Uh-huh.

JC: And there was two families that lived there. Ours and then the other one was Jimenez. I'm not sure if you're gonna [interview Fidel?] or not.

HCM: Yes, I have.

JC: Okay. His was the other family that lived there.

HK: Oh, okay.

JC: So that was kind of unusual.

HK: Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember anything about, did you, did they live in it very long, or...?

JC: No, I'd say maybe three years [murmurs], I don't remember a lot about it, except there was no light [murmurs].

HCM: No electricity. Carmen – well, Carmen would tell about how Dad, uh, made a bed for our oldest brother, you know, sort of uh, like a foldaway bed. And during the day it would fold up to the wall. I mean, but, at times they would put it down and they would use it as a stage to [laughs]. My sisters and John would – would use that as, you know, entertain a show to put on plays or whatever.

HK: How funny.

HCM: So there was a lot of entertainment [for themselves?]

HK: Did your, uh, parents have a garden?

JC and HCM: Oh yeah.

JC: I think everybody –

HK: Everybody did.

JC: Yeah.

HCM: Three gardens that my dad had.

HK: Oh, my gosh.

HCM: He had one in North Lawrence, he had one over by the yards, (that would be La Yarda) and then just a small one in our backyard.

JC: They weren't so small, they was pretty big too. [laughs]

HCM: Go out and get the cilantro, the onions, yeah...so he worked all three of them at the same time, and, uh, because when the harvest would come in, then you'd go take the car, help him, and then, boy, was that a joy to see Dad bring the bushel baskets, you know, lift them over the porch, that railing, put 'em on the porch. Oranges – not oranges – but tomatoes...

HK: Did he sell any of the produce to other people?

HCM: No, just, I just recall Mary and I once just took, uh, it was a red wagon and Mom had us just go around the neighborhood. As a rule, she canned – canned tomatoes, and we – we had enough in our family that we, for the winter, you know, she made hot sauce out of it. You know, just canned tomatoes, and [unintelligible] for family.

HK: How many children were in your family?

HCM: Fourteen.

HK: Wow.

HCM: So.

HK: Yeah.

HCM: Yeah, fourteen.

HK: So I guess that she, um, she did a lot of sewing, too?

HCM: Oh. Oh, yes. We have some stories in here that's, some – some of our, you know, brothers and sisters had written. In fact, Lupe writes about a story here. My mom, you know, she drew a picture of one of the dresses that Mom made. But we, uh, my mom did sewing and not with patterns, it was just cutting out, you know, cutting out the pattern out of the newspaper and measuring us, you know, stand right there and that old kettle, you know, sewing machine would just be going and she'd can. Gosh.

TC: [murmurs]

HCM: No, I don't think so.

TC: [murmurs]

HCM: Unless she did for Lupe and Carmen, because we came along...

TC: [murmurs]

HCM: So Coyo, like Coyo writes in one of her stories, she said: "Oh, the rickrack." [laughs] She said: "I didn't like the rickrack but I didn't wanna tell Mom." 'Cause that was, Mom would add to, rickrack everywhere. [laughs]

HK: How did she do her laundry?

HCM: Oh, gosh. Yeah, that. At first she did it, you know, I remember that old washboard that she used to have and then, uh, she would go to my grandma's, which my grandma lived just right across the alley from us, once a week she'd go there and she'd, you know, use Grandma's machine, come back and we'd hang clothes out on the line. And, uh...it was a while before Mom got her own washing machine. And then when she did, my aunt bought that for her and my aunt lived in Topeka and had a big family of her own, but she bought Mom a washing machine. But it was always hanging clothes out on the line. Oh gosh...I remember one year we got a dryer. [laughs] 'Cause in the wintertime, I remember those clothes would be stiff. [laughs] You know, when we'd go bring them in or, she'd just hang 'em inside the house, you know, [unintelligible].

HK: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Sure.

HCM: It was hard for her. 'Cause when she had, when she did get it with the wringer, type, you know, you have to put it through the...what was it, those rollers?

HK: The rollers, yeah.

HCM: Uh-huh.

HK: Yeah. Did she ever get her hand stuck in there? My mom used to get her hand stuck in there.

HCM: No, but my, but Trini did, our oldest brother did, one time. I remember that. [laughs] Oh, God...

HK: Well, what kind of, did your dad ever tell you any stories about, uh, his work on the railroad, or...what was your impression of his work?

HCM: Oh, gosh. Other than...not really, other than I do recall, we didn't have a telephone but our neighbors behind us, maybe, you know, every now and then they would call Dad of – of an evening or late at night. If there was a train derailment, or something, they would call him. But through the neighbors, the neighbors, you know, would let Dad know and I just recall Dad, then, would be, you know, a winter night having to dress warmly and we were all of course were worried, Mom, she worried about him. Because back then, I'm sure there were coyotes and things like this, you know, that were out, 'cause he'd have to be out by himself, you know. And, uh, there's really no protection, you know. I know it was, it was a concern and a worry for Mom. Dad didn't ever [someone clears throat], I don't think I ever heard any complaint.

JC: No.

HCM: Never.

JC: No, he was always happy to work all the time. [laughs]

HK: Little more money coming in.

JC: Yes, uh-huh. He did used to talk about his days in Mexico when he was a young boy, 'cause he used to be a sheep-herder.

HK: Oh, okay.

JC: For an uncle. The uncle didn't treat him right, he didn't even hardly pay him anything at all, so he didn't like that at all, but, he'd be out in the fields overnight with the sheep. And to keep warm, he would, you know, sleep right in amongst them.

HK: Uh-huh.

JC: And, uh, he said lots of time he would wake up in the morning all wet, and sheep, you know, sweating.

HK: Oh, no.

JC: He had a, he had a hard life before he came up here.

HK: Did he talk about, uh, about having enough to eat, or...stuff like that, or...?

HCM: Actually, whatever, what little we do know is, we learned from mom, you know, by asking her. Later in years we really didn't take time to ask, you know, about our parents' history. And of course Dad was so busy all the time, working, you know, if he wasn't working right after he got off work he go straight to the garden, catch the bus, you know, home. And, uh, back to the other garden he was, you know. Just a hard life.

HK: What did your family do during the holidays?

HCM: Oh, gosh. There, with so many of us, it was always a holiday, I think [laughs]. Yeah, we, like, like Christmas, I remember...a Christmas tree, a lot of times maybe to school, when we were in grade school, maybe the school would, uh, have a – where they would give the Christmas tree away after, you know, the Christmas break and draw straws.

JC: I got – I got to bring it home one time.

HCM: I got to bring it home one year too, so I'm wondering if maybe it wasn't, maybe on purpose [laughs].

JC: Yeah.

HCM: But we'd bring, drive the Christmas tree home. And then I do recall sitting there in the evenings, Carmen and Lupe would help us to cut out newspapers and we'd just cut 'em into strips, you know, and –

HK: Uh-huh.

HCM: They'd make paste out of water and flour, and we'd just make the chain things. And, you know, Christmas decorations. Until later on of course, then, you know, as the girls got older they worked and they were able to – to buy decorations. But you know, very early years [murmurs].

HK: Did you give gifts to each other, like homemade gifts, or...?

HCM: Um, let's see, I – I remember always we'd just receive, like, two gifts, you know, just two gifts. And always –

JC: We didn't actually give it to each other, the gifts.

HCM: No, we didn't. No.

JC: Mom.

HCM: Mom and the girls, the older ones, would all purchase the gifts and it was always – one item was always something to wear. Usually pajamas. And then a toy. But, um...

JC: One thing I remember. I'm not sure it was Christmastime, but I think it might have been. There was, uh, somebody that would come 'round in a truck and they would drop off, uh, large bags of stuff.

HCM: You know, it was, I think it was –

JC: School, or –

HCM: No, I think it was probably, uh, whether it was Salvation Army or somebody would donate the big bags.

JC: And they would go down Pennsylvania Street and I know they would stop at our house and they'd go on down and stop somewhere else, or, I'm not sure if it was –

HCM: But most of it was clothes.

JC: I don't remember what was inside 'em much, but I remember seeing the bags.

HCM: Sometimes the clothes weren't all –

HK: Wasn't that great.

HCM: No [laughs].

HK: Well, what did you all do for entertainment?

HCM: Oh, with each other it just seemed like, oh –

JC: Played ball.

HCM: Marbles for you boys, and –

JC: Softball.

HCM: Softball. We girls [conflicting voices]

JC: We would go to the park there, by the school.

HCM: We just had our own entertainment with each other, and well of course we had a brother, my brother Ralph, he was what, two years younger than John? He was our entertainment. Oh.

JC: Yeah.

HCM: He was a clown. He was, I mean, he provided us this total entertainment like – say for Halloween, well we really in younger years couldn't afford to get costumes, so they'd line us all up after school and we had our, that old wooden stove there, the soot and all that, you know, he'd make us all hobos, you know. Or clowns or hobos and just get, you know, a big shirt, that's what we'd, you know, a pillow or whatever. But he, he took care of our costumes and, uh, he would tell us stories or dress up, you know, and...always, always entertain us, but like I said, we got a lot of stories of him in here.

JC: We'd play hide and seek. Baseball, out in the street, football, same thing, just all the neighborhood kids get together and [murmurs]. And marbles, I think we played horseshoes I don't remember.

HCM: No, and then Dad would make a swing for us and [murmurs] for the tree that we had, we had a tree like this and you just got the rope and a tire and...and then it seems like we all, in our family had either a sibling that was close in age to us, you know, like we had Ralph. Together they did things, I had sisters, two years, you know, difference in age and so we were always together. So we all had somebody to, you know, to always share our time with and, you know.

JC: I remember when we were little too, we'd have a day where we got quite a bit of rain and the water would be running down the street. Everybody would get little sticks and pretend they was boats and race 'em down to the, down to the sewer, and we'd pick 'em up before they went down. Then we'd go back and do it again. That was our entertainment too, part of the time.

HCM: And always helping Mom, you know, always have the little ones to help out with. And back then, too, in our younger years we didn't have running water either so, went and go get water, you know, water was down a couple of houses away. There was access to, to water –

JC: It was in between two houses –

HK: City pipe? Was it city water that came through a pipe, is that...?

JC: Hmm...

HK: Or was it a regular pump?

JC: No, um...

HCM: Spigot.

JC: ...no, I think, you just turned it and –

HK: Spigot. Yeah.

JC: But it wasn't in anybody's yard, I don't think. It was in between two houses, and there was little fences there, so I couldn't tell one house or another. It was three – you know, two houses away from where we were. I'm not sure, but down the street [murmurs].

HK: Anybody get into trouble, with 13 kids in the family? [laughs] There must have been something going on all the time. [laughs]

HCM: Actually...actually, you know, no, we really didn't.

JC: No, I remember one time Izzy and Ralph had got into some kind of problem – I don't know if I should say anything – [laughs] – it didn't involve the police or nothing but they had done something ornery in the neighborhood there, caused a big smell, a big stink and all. You've talked to Izzy, haven't you?

HK: Uh, yes.

JC: Bermudez, with Rachel? If he didn't say anything about it, then I probably won't either [laughs].

HCM: Oh, gosh.

...[Passage from 23:26 to 24:21 redacted]...

HCM: I don't recall, you know, and then we had that popcorn, what was it, that was next to it, TNT –

JC: TNT? Or no, [Bartel's?], uh...I think it was [Bartel's feeder?].

HCM: But I do remember we'd always go get pop – the boys were Ralph and you probably did too – we'd get the kernels of corn that were to the side.

JC: Oh, yeah.

HCM: And, uh, and bring those, and of course we just, you know, get the kernels off, make our own popcorn, so it was –

JC: They had big wire bins, and they would have all the corn in there. And of course, you know, they'd rub against each other, and against the wire, and just fall to the outside –

HCM: So what fell, yeah, so what fell out, we'd, we'd bring home and that was –

JC: They weren't gonna scoop it up. They were just gonna use the kernels on the cob, take them off, so we got what was scraped off of them. Fell outside the bin and used that.

HCM: And then what about, the story about Ralph, do you remember? The time we thought he was lost?

JC: [laughs] Oh. How did that go, anyway?

HCM: When...when we were all younger, [Ralph playing?], and of course it was getting evening, dusk, and Mom called us all to come in. And, uh, everybody came in but Ralph. We didn't know where he was, we thought: "Oh no, where is he?" We all went out looking for him, couldn't find him. So she asked one of the neighbor boys, that was, you know, always hanging out with him, and he went looking for him, you know, Ralph. So back then I recall Mom got really worried. We have uh, we, my dad had built an [altar?] so Mom went back and back and went in front of the altar to pray. She was just really beside herself. So all of us just followed her, you know, right behind her, same thing, you know, everybody's quiet, but we knew what she was praying for, so we did too. The next thing we know, we heard it start thundering. And, oh... then Mom got really worried, 'cause then we could hear the rain. So there she goes from the [back?] room into the dining room into the kitchen to go out the door to see where Ralph was, and here he comes running in the back door, soaking wet. What he did, there was a ladder behind our house, and as you can see the roof isn't that big, so he had climbed up there and he fell asleep on top of the roof of the house, and of course the rain woke him up. [laughs.] So I said: "Boy, I think God does hear Mom's prayers, because here he comes, you know." She was always into all kinds of...

HK: What did you – what the family do for healthcare? Did you call the doctor when somebody got sick, or did your mom have a lot of home remedies, or – ?

HCM: Well, home remedies for one thing, but yes, uh, but also the doctors, when we were real sick the doctors would come, and uh, just to give you an idea, this is just a cartoon caricature of what Ralph drew when one of my sisters was sick, the doctor came to the house. And of course, you know, all of us in the back room, want to go peek and see what's going on. This is an idea of what...this is a sick person in the living room.

HK: All that noise and commotion.

HCM: Yes, commotion because, you know, only when you were really sick would Mom call the doctor, and other than that they would, uh, they would try to use home remedies.

HK: Funny.

HCM: Oh, I know.

HK: Whack him over the head. [laughs]

JC: Some of the remedies, cut, slice a potato in little thin slices and get 'em on –

HCM: Put vinegar, I think Dad would put vinegar on them? Whenever he had a fever real bad, I do recall once being real sick and Dad used a handkerchief or some cloth. I know he came home

from work and our fever hadn't left us, so I know he sliced potatoes, what he dipped them in, it had to have been strong for us to – but then he would wrap it up in this, you know, in some cloth and –

JC: Put it around your forehead.

HCM: Put it around your forehead. 'Course we're lying down. And we'd fall asleep. When we woke up, we were feeling a lot better, so whatever it was, the aroma or what, I don't know. But they did, you know, try. [someone clears throat] expense for doctors...

HK: Well, what was it like growing up in Lawrence, in general? Do you remember much about the downtown area...?

JC: Only going to the movies to see Cowboy shows at the Varsity. It was mostly the theater we went to, and, uh, that's about the only time we went downtown. Other than having a ball game at the South Park. Walk home and maybe stop and get some ice cream.

HCM: At the Velvet Freeze.

JC: Well, there, and there was another place closer to the park, and I –

HCM: You're right, I think –

JC: On the west side of the street between – I think 10th Street.

HCM: I think, [ten, hundred block?] I don't remember. I remember the, the store but I don't remember the name of it. But I do recall –

JC: Stopping there.

HCM: Mm-hmm.

HK: Do you remember experiencing any prejudice, you know, in the schools or downtown, or...?

HCM: I think, for my part there was some, but not as much as the older brothers and sisters experienced, because yes, they could tell you, I know, they were not allowed, you know, in some of the restaurants, you know, so...

JC: 'Course we didn't really go to restaurants much; we couldn't afford to. And, uh...

HCM: Or just to get a Coke or something. Carmen, my sister Carmen could probably tell you, 'cause she did it. She used to work for, um, I don't know what [murmurs] shop, the Eldridge gift shop, that she recalled. And my aunt Marge worked at [Gamell's?] and she said, you know, [murmurs] worked there. When she wanted to go in for maybe a Coke somewhere [murmurs, unintelligible]. And actually, my brother Carlos, and he was quite younger. Quite, he's quite

younger than I am. There was a swimming pool, the one right there. They didn't allow him to go in –

HK: Was that the Jayhawk [Plunge?] or whatever it was called?

HCM: Where the, yes, yes, that was back then, right. Uh-huh. I remember he went with friends and, uh, he wasn't allowed to go in there. Then when I came along, by then things were a [little fair?], so yeah we were able to, you know [murmurs] restaurant. Or the drugstores where they'd have soda.

HK: Where –

JC: I don't remember that much myself, but I remember my brother, when he went to rent a house – yeah rent a house or rent a room, can't remember which it was. He'd just got married, um, he was fairly light skinned, so when they, he went, they accepted him, you know and everything, but then when he took his wife – she was quite a bit darker – they wouldn't allow them to rent. It was some –

HCM: Honestly, that's happened to Andy and I too, when we got married, rent our first apartment. They didn't want to rent to us, either, come to think about it.

HK: What kind of – um, when did you get your first job?

JC: I got my first job at 14, working for the school district. An uncle of mine, somehow he heard about it I guess, talking about it I went up and got hired as a janitor –

HK: Oh, okay.

JC: At 14 and, I been working ever since. I never had a break in between where I didn't have a job. And before that, we worked at potato – picking potatoes for a, for a couple of farmers here in town, the [Hechts?]. And that was, uh, it was work, but it was a lot of fun too. You could be with all your friends, ride in the truck, up in the back, while you were there. The work was kind of, well, it was dirty. Kinda dirty and kinda hard on your fingernails, and fingers. But, I don't know, it was fun too. So that's we did, I can't remember what year we did that, but, I started working at 14, maybe two or three years before that.

END OF TAPE 17a