

## **Tape 20a: Interview with Valentin Romero**

**Interviewer: Helen Krische**

**Date of Interview: 2006**

**Length of Interview: 31:45**

**Location of Interview: St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church**

**Transcription Completion Date: November 20, 2020**

**Transcriptionist: Emily Raymond**

Helen Krische (Interviewer): Okay.

Valentin Romero (Interviewee): You probably have a number of questions.

HK: Yeah, well, um –

VR: Pre – Pre-made? Alright.

HK [laughs]: I do, but first we've got some paperwork to take care of. And, um, I'm gonna introduce myself first on the tape, and – and I'm Helen Krische, the interviewer. And, um, this is Val Romero. And, um, he's going to do an interview with us today. And first of all, I'm going to have – uh, this is our consent form. This, um, basically tells what we are doing; we're doing the, um, the oral history for, uh, Mexican-Americans here in Lawrence. And the tapes are going to be held at the Watkins Community Museum, and also possibly go to the Kansas State Historical Society. Um, and it's basically asking for you to grant, um, both of these entities all the rights for recordings, including the intellectual property rights. And, um, this may be, uh...all or parts of the interviews might be, uh, either in written form; they may be transcribed. Um, we have our audiotape, videotape, and they may eventually be put on compact discs. Um, they might be put on the website, um, all of these things, and this is asking for your permission to do this. And I also want to state that if at any time you want to discontinue the interview, um...if you don't want to answer a question that I ask, that's perfectly fine. Um, if you want to stop briefly for a rest break, that's fine, too. So, just let me know, you know, how you're feeling, what you want to do, and we can accommodate you.

VR: Well, I – I think my information is about as public as it can be [HK laughs]. I may, uh, say something that, uh, may not be quite right, but...um, as far as accuracy, just...from my experience [murmurs].

HK: Sure, sure. And if you could sign that for me, please?

VR: Where would you want the signature?

HK: First of all, I need your name up here: "I the undersigned."

VR: Alright. [Pause] I'll give you my real name.

HK [laughs]: Oh, okay. [Pause] What is your real name?

VR: Valentin.

HK: Oh, okay.

[Pause]

VR: Okay, that's – that's the way I spell it there. It's – it's just a good Russian name.

HK [laughs]: Okay, down at the bottom, there are two little things, it says, um: "I make the foregoing gift and grants of right with no restrictions." And then the next one says that there are some restrictions, so whichever one of those you want to...um, just put an "X" by it if you want to, or...

VR: Far as I know, the first one is applicable.

HK: Okay. And then below that, um, we have – there you can print your name and the date. And then your other information, um, we're gonna make copies of these tapes so that we can, uh, contact you and give you a copy, um, as soon as possible. And then today we'll also give you a copy of the consent form that you're signing.

VR: And you want my date on here?

HK: Yeah, what – what is today's date?

VR: 22<sup>nd</sup>.

HK: 22<sup>nd</sup>.

[Pause]

VR: My fingers are stiff nowadays. [HK laughs] Alright. You want the rest of it filled out?

HK: Yeah, the address and your phone number. So that way we can contact you when we have the tapes ready to give to you.

[Long pause]

VR: I don't write as fast as I used to.

HK: That's fine, just take your time.

[Long pause]

VR: I see in today's paper they have, uh...uh, where they want 'em to learn how to write again.

HK: Yeah. [Laughs] With some people, you can't really read their writing anymore, so...

VR: That's very true.

HK: Yeah. Alright –

VR: That's the way I was to begin with [laughs].

HK: Alrighty. So, um, Val, what part of Mexico did your family originally come from?

VR: My, uh, dad came from Leon, Mexico, state of Guanajuato (sic). And my mother also from, um, the state of Guanajuato (sic). A little town, oh, I'd say, maybe fifteen miles away. [Via?] Del Plato. Uh...Leon at that time was, uh...a village that the last time I visited, and that's been over twenty years ago. It was over 400,000 people.

HK: Yeah.

VR: And, um [clears throat], anyway, uh...my dad, at the young age of – I would say seventeen, eighteen – when the revolution was there of 1910, uh, was one of the compelling reasons that he might want to come to the United States. 'Cause everything was chaos around that part of the country.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: [Clears throat]: Um...they had, at that time, what they call a [unintelligible?] mass which is kind of a gathering or fiesta-type thing, and they'd invite the young people to come into the city square and they had music and what have you. Now this is being told, uh, this is repeating.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: This is – I think that I – and from there they would keep the young men who were eligible for conscription into the forces. Uh, now, I don't know whether it was for the federal forces or the revolutionary forces. This, I never understood. However, [clears throat], my dad supposedly was, uh, caught in one of those. And, uh, he was in the military of some sort, for a while. And, uh, the day that they found out that the railroad went north, which was quite a ways to go, they says, uh, we'll just drop our arms and go on. And, uh, he came into the United States by way of El Paso. Uh, permanent residents under the railroad. Uh...at that time, there was not just one railroad, but, uh, different people on the railroad were connecting. Uh...the rail systems. To make a rail system. So, uh, my sister Gladys was born in Wichita. She's – my brother Raymond is the older, he was born here in Lawrence. And I was born here in Lawrence. So there's a time there that, uh, they went from one railroad company into another company until they got to, uh...uh connect it with Santa Fe. And one of his first stations Santa Fe was Lecompton, Kansas. And from Lecompton, Kansas, this would be about 1910. Up when ex-president Teddy Roosevelt came to Lawrence to dedicate the water fountain. My dad got to shake hands with, uh, Teddy Roosevelt. And, uh, maybe I'm saying this wrong, but he – he said, "Hey, there's no other president [unintelligible] that's the one I met, Teddy Roosevelt." Uh, this was one of his things that he kept until age 92 [clears throat]. Uh, coming in...the, uh, railroad would, uh, bring the

people in and they would drop them at, uh, different, uh, sections. Uh, well, they'd come through Emporia, they'd come through, uh...actually, I don't remember the next town there. Then Osage City, um, Carbondale, Pauline, Topeka, Kansas. Topeka, Kansas, they'd come to Spencer. From Spencer they'd come to Lecompton. Uh, Lecompton to Lawrence. So my dad chose Lawrence for the last stop during his stop.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Uh, however, he spent time in Lecompton, working on that particular section. Uh...and, um, of course they came without any transportation. So, uh, when the railroads would have, uh, derailment or some need for one section to help another section, to help another section, uh, they would bring 'em together. In this way the men, the workers, laborers, would interact to find out where they came from, what year they may have come – came in, how old are you, how many chicos do you have, how many niños? Family. Uh...and that's the way they started to get, uh, acquainted with one another.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And the Santa Fe at that time, after you worked so long, you were eligible for a pass, which would let you board the train and you could go to Kansas City, Chicago, or wherever you wanted to, long as the Santa Fe was running there. Uh...that's the way my dad knew a few people in Topeka and – and he never did stay much in Kansas City, because he – he said that was just not, uh...it just wasn't his kind of town.

HK: Mm-hmm. So he worked for the Santa Fe railroad?

VR: Yes, he worked for the Santa Fe over 30 years. Mm-hmm. And, uh [laughs] then they had the lay off just before Social Security, so he didn't get in on – on that.

HK: Oh.

VR: But he later found a job, of course, and he did get Social Security. But, uh, during those, uh, earlier years, they had a union or – or an organization and they had medical hospital in Topeka, uh, for the workers, that is. 'Cause, uh, I was born at what would be, at the, before the 9<sup>th</sup> Street. That's where the original Santa Fe bunkhouses that were made out of ties, railroad ties, in Lawrence

HK: Oh.

VR: And, um, that was the housing for the workers. And then, however in '27, when I was born, they made the new houses across the tracks, east, but you had to get in by way of 8<sup>th</sup> Street to get to the real nice cement floors, brick, good windows, good doors, good roofs, just a real good place to be.

HK: This was in Lawrence?

VR: Yes, this was Lawrence. This was all Lawrence, east Lawrence. Uh, the yards, the Santa Fe yards were larger than what they are today. And Poehler Company was a wholesaler company that brought in wholesale groceries for the – for the area. And then they, redistributed it again, what I understand. I never worked there or [worked?] for there, Mr...let's see, Mr. Henshaw? That sound right? Kerchaw. Mr. Kerchaw ran the business at that time. Everybody knew one another, or knew *of* one another. So, uh, I went to New York School for, uh, all of us, you might say, all of us went to school except for a couple of 'em that went to Pinckney. And then some of the older boys went to the old Quincey High School, or maybe I'm wrong, high school. No, uh – Quincey School, uh, where the US Armory used to be on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. They're pretty near right across from, uh, Capitol Federal today.

HK: Oh.

VR: Uh...the Central Junior High, and – and the old high building which was the high school. And, um, [Manuel?], the other school, there's one on each corner. Uh, where the schools I went to for junior high. And then from there, uh, graduated or came to Lawrence High School at 1400 block Massachusetts.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And my brother was the first Mexican boy to graduate from – from the high school. I guess I was the second one [laughs]. Uh...it was Mr. [Weir?] was my, uh, principal. And, um, I got drafted, uh, let's see, I got out of school in – for graduation and then June the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1945, I entered the armed forces. Which happened to be Army for me.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: And I went to the European theater, everybody says: "Why do you call it the European theater?" ["Hey," addressing someone who entered the room.] That's just what it was –

Unknown Person: Excuse me, I'm gonna bring some stuff in, just in case y'all get thirsty, okay?

HK: Okay.

Unknown Person: Some ice...

VR: And then, after serving just a short two years in the Army, I came home at, um, I worked for Skelly Oil Company.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And a Chrysler Plymouth Agency. And I worked there maybe 20 years, and then after that I went into the post office. Um, but in the meantime I'd taken a couple of years at the University of Kansas. And I don't know if it's fair to say this or not, but I had a lady counselor that when I went up to the University of Kansas: "You don't belong here!" That isn't what I was there for. I

– I said: “Young lady, I’m here to learn. I – why do you tell me – tell me that I don’t belong here?” And, um, I just let it go at that.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: But she still continued the counseling, but it wasn’t any – any counseling that *I* would give to someone else. Uh...I never looked into the lady’s background or anything, but I’d see her running around campus and she had the hair braided around her head like that. And nobody spoke to her, so I suppose she was somewhat of a “I’m over here and you guys are over here”...

HK: Yeah. She wasn’t very encouraging.

VR: Not – not very encouraging, no. And, uh...those are the only few jobs I ever had with, uh, working for Chrysler. And working for Skelly Oil Company.

HK: You did get married?

VR: Oh, yes, yes, I – we would go to, uh, dances like, uh, Ottawa, Chanute. Uh, Kansas City occasionally, Topeka, and – and, uh, we – some of ‘em were weddings, you know, where couples married and you know one another and we actually, the old folks knew just about everybody around. And, uh, they’d say, come get together. Yes, I married in 1957.

HK: Okay.

VR: Mm-hmm. Um, my wife, Elizabeth, is from Osawatomie, Kansas. I met her in Chanute at, uh, what they call the Sixteenth of September Celebration, ‘cause, uh, Chanute had a big Mexican population working in the Santa Fe shops. And, the people from Oklahoma, Independence, Fredonia, Howard, Kansas, uh, Coffeyville, Newton, Wichita, El Dorado, they would all come in and take over the town for two days.

HK: Oh.

VR: It was quite a celebration, quite a get-together.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: That’s where I met her. [HK laughs] And, uh, the funny part about it was, the next time I met her was at Ottawa, and, uh, I was sitting right next to her and I really didn’t pay much attention to her. And, uh, I went out and danced and when I came back to sit down on the chair – when I sat down on the chair, the chair collapsed.

HK: Uh-oh.

VR: And I said, that’s when I really saw her. [HK laughs] And from there on, we became friends and later – then got married...and everybody says: “Hey, somebody just wanted you to see who was next to you.” [HK laughs] But the chair did break. [HK laughs]. Yeah...

HK: How many children do you have?

VR: Four.

HK: Four.

VR: Two boys and two girls.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Yes, and all the children went to high school. The oldest girl, she finished college. Of course you plan for the first one, and you don't really plan for the – the full commitment –

HK: Yeah.

VR: Of the rest, because, uh, well, to hear the prices of college now as to the prices of college then, um, I even kind of wonder how I got my first daughter through college.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Um, I wasn't making that much, and although I was very fortunate, I averaged about \$305 dollars a month, and, uh, that – that was a pretty good salary at that time.

HK: Mm-hmm. Could you describe – did you live in La Yarda?

VR: Yes.

HK: Could you describe a little bit about, um, what it was like living there and what it looked like, and...?

VR: Oh, okay, uh...the yard, if you take this container here, it was kind of an E-shape without the center. And then this other side was, say, facing the center. We had a community pump on the south side. And [clears throat] the toilets were on the opposite side. Uh, two sets, one for each side.

HK: Those were like outhouses?

VR: Yes, outhouses.

HK: Like the – mm-hmm.

VR: There were – there was an apartment here on this corner, apartment here, apartment here, and an apartment at this corner. And the – the ladies would plant flowers in front of their houses to equal the outer shape of the – of the “L,” you might say.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And, uh, then where the pump house – now this is City water – not City water, it was Santa Fe well water, which was made for the old steam engines to refill.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: I don't think the City was connected to that, but we had piped water –

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Not, uh, lever pump. Uh [clears throat] from there, uh...there was a big walnut tree. I would say that that walnut tree was half as big as this table.

HK: Wow.

VR: And under that tree on the hot summer days, lunch was under that tree. Picnic style, you might say.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And, uh, 'course each family brought enough for their, each family. That was one of the things there. And back here, towards, behind the outhouses, we made, a – leveled off some ground and we'd play, uh, something like tennis, only we had paddles instead of tennis rackets. And we'd build our own playhouse, uh...out of logs and what have you, kind of a little stage there, but it was on the ground.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And we would, uh, uh...dramatize, uh...we had the – uh, an older boy that was a little bit hard of hearing. But he had ideas. He says: "Let's do this and let's do that," and we'd, uh, we were actors. [HK laughs] We were actors. And I don't remember exact scenes or – they were strictly what little we knew there, and, uh, one of the scenes was: "Ahhh! I am a great hunter, I shall go out and hunt a rabbit." And that was the end of it. [HK laughs] And the next scene was, uh...what was it...oh: "I am a musician. I have a guitar but I don't know how to play it." [Laughs] Well – I mean, this is – is really true, what we were doing, we...uh, and then we'd say: "Well, up at school, we sit down and we write and we read and Mrs. Wood and Miss Overly, they tell us, they'll read a story to us." So one of the girls would – we didn't have books, like you might say, and she put her hands up like this and kind of read a – a makeup story, you know.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: I – I forget what the subjects were, but really, for not having material readings, we, uh, we were still competent at reading. And, uh, this particular family, the Romeros, were transferred to Humboldt, Kansas, which is south, pretty near to Chanute. So, us – my brother and mom and another family – decided to go visit them. Uh, one Sunday afternoon – one Sunday, whole day,



we left early and came back late. The thing was, we said: “Okay, what’s the name of your town?” “Oh...is it Hamburger?” [Both laugh]. So we...we said: “Well, write it out for us.” And – and, uh, that – that was one of the descriptions of the town Humboldt, Kansas. I remember that real well, and I said: “Hamburger? That doesn’t quite...” Well, however. Uh...then that particular family was moved back to Lawrence. Uh [clears throat], and my – now, if I go back to Lecompton, and my dad, like I said, worked on the railroad. But in the cold weather, they would, uh, uh, not give ‘em vacation, but they’d, uh, there was just time that they really couldn’t work.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: So he worked for a pipe company that was building a pipeline through one side of Lecompton.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: I don’t know whether it was gas or gasoline or what it was, but they...they said my dad was a smaller man, [murmurs] very muscular, very short person, very agile. He could have been a good gymnasium – you know, a gymnast. And they’d send him down at the bottom of the pipe, the pipe was to align it, cause they’d say: “Hey, Johnny! John, John! Go down there and check that pipe.” And I – I kept thinking back, I said: “You know, Dad, you used to take a lot of chances going down in those ditches, ‘cause they could cave in or something.” He says: “Yeah,” he says, “You know, I didn’t think anything about it; it just was a day’s work.” I said: “But, Dad, how come, uh...you did that?” And he said: “Well, I had to work. We had to earn money,” he says, “the farmer down the road wanted to sell me some land for two dollars an acre, and I was trying to make money.” But we never did buy that land, so...two dollars an acre is – compared to what it is today, that’s quite a...well, anyway. Then I look back and our Sunflower Ordinance work came out, some of the young ladies that were left here applied to work out there, and they were on that powder line, the mixing, that were highly explosive just like any [murmurs]. I said: “Did you guys work there?” I said, and they said: “Yes, even your sister was there.” I said: “How long was my sister working there?” She worked two weeks and that was all. [HK laughs]. She said the, uh, the explosion rate was too high.

HK: Yeah.

VR: Uh, for the flash, and I should – not explosion, but flash –

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: That place. But, uh...far as Lawrence, we would come to the concerts at South Park. We would go to the University, they had a summer school, uh, dances up there. We’d attend those. ‘Course we’d go to the museum, and we’d see Comanche Indians [HK laughs, tape cuts off].

**END OF TAPE 20A**