

11-28-1976

Interview no. 276

Maria S. Garcia

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Interview with Maria S. Garcia by Lydia B. Garcia, 1976, "Interview no. 276," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: María S. García (1928-)
INTERVIEWER: Lydia B. García
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 28, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 276
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 276
TRANSCRIBER: Lydia García
DATE TRANSCRIBED: December 4, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso resident. Born in El Paso in 1928; her parents came to El Paso from México; attended high school at St. Joseph's academy.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; social customs in the 1930's and 1940's; Prohibition; thoughts on the Chicano Movement; illegal aliens.

45 minutes.

16 pages.

[This is an interview with María Socorro García at her home. Today is Sunday, November 28, 1976. The time is 11:30a.m.]

LG: Mrs. García, will you please give me some background information, such as where you were born and what areas of town you lived in?

MG: Well, I was born in El Paso on June 27, 1928, at my home on Estrella and Alameda Streets. It was an apartment house. I remember that my mother used to tell me that when I was born, she had a very hard labor. Doctor Yanagawa, who was Japanese, slept outside in the car all night. He would go in and attend to her and go out and sleep in the car again until 6:00 in the morning when I was born.

LG: Are your parents from here too?

MG: No, my parents were born in México.

LG: What part of México were they from? How did they come here?

MG: My father was born in Chihuahua and my mother was born in Durango. They came to El Paso when they were very small. My father was born in 1898 and he came here in 1908.

LG: Do you have any idea of the kind of reasons that brought them here to El Paso?

MG: The only reason I know was that they wanted to better themselves, get better jobs, and make a better life over here.

LG: If your father was born in 1898 and he came over in 1908, he was 10 years old at the time. What kind of education did he have in México? Do you know if he continued it here?

MG: He didn't have a very good education. He went to school in Chihuahua up to the sixth grade. When he came here, he didn't go to school at all. He helped his father deliver milk. In the morning, he used to get up at 4:00 and help deliver the milk. During the day, he would help feed the cows and do other odd jobs like that. This was at El Paso Dairy,

which was on North Loop Road.

LG: What about your mother? What kind of education did she have?

MG: She had even less of an education. She was born in Durango in 1905 and she came here to El Paso in 1911. I don't really know if she attended school here or not. She learned English later on. She just got married when she grew up.

LG: After he grew up, what kind of job did your father have? Did he stay in the dairy business or did he change around?

MG: Yes, he stayed in the dairy business. He got a job at Hawkins Dairy. He worked his way to foreman of the plant. He educated himself by reading the papers. He used to read the El Paso Times and the El Paso Herald Post. He'd just spend hours reading it till he read everything. He said that's how he got his education.

He really learned a lot in the dairy business. I remember he used to make mayonnaise, gallons of it. He used to make sour cream, and all kinds of cheeses and eggnog. All kinds of stuff like that. The best was the azaderos he used to make, real big ones. They were very good!

LG: You say he made these products at home? Did he have a special room or did he just use the kitchen?

MG: Oh, he would use the kitchen all the time. Whenever he got in the mood for making anything, he would go into the kitchen. I don't really remember how he used to make the azaderos, but I think it was sour milk that he used to heat in the stove. He would stir it and stir it for a long time. When it got to a certain consistency, he would start making the azaderos. We would help him stretch them out all over the table and over the tablecloth. We would then leave them out to dry a little.

I liked helping him.

LG: Let's go on to the rest of your family. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

MG: I have two brothers and four sisters. I'm the oldest of the girls. I have an older brother and a younger brother. We were very close. We used to get into all kinds of trouble.

LG: What kind of trouble did you get into?

MG: Well, not really trouble. You know, we used to play and everything else like that. We used to be naughty just like everybody else. At times we were angels.

LG: Were your parents very strict or very lenient?

MG: My father was very strict. My mother was the lenient one. He wouldn't let me go out when I was older and wanted to date. I always had to carry a chaperone, my sister or somebody else, with me.

LG: Do you remember any specific instances where you had to take a chaperone with you?

MG: Once when all my sisters were angry at me, they said they wouldn't go with me so I wouldn't go out with my boyfriend. I took my two year old brother. He was still in diapers but I took him along. My father let me go if I took him along.

LG: Where did you go that time?

MG: We went to the Plaza Theatre to see the show. My little brother, now that he's grown up, laughs at us and says that we went and sat him in the front seat and bought him a bag of popcorn, while we sat in the back; but that's not true. My father was really strict. I remember once when I was eight years old, and I was going out the door. He was

sitting in the living room reading the paper. He says he called me twice, and I didn't hear him. He got up and really yelled at me. I came back and he took his belt off and hit me because he couldn't stand for us to ignore him. I really didn't hear him or I never would have done it. He was sorry afterwards and he gave me some money. He was strict, but afterwards he would be sorry and he would be real nice. He was very generous. Every time he would go to Juárez, he'd bring back a bag of apples, oranges, nuts, a bag of candy--anything like that.

LG: Would you say that your family was pretty well off during your childhood?

MG: Yes, I would say that. We had a house. I remember when I was in high school, I used to give the payment for the house and it was only \$11.19. I would buy a money order every month. We also had a car.

LG: What kind of car was it?

MG: It was a Ford. I don't remember what year, but we had a Ford and a Pontiac. We had a very big Pontiac. It had a big trunk in the back, but I liked the Ford better. That's the one I learned to drive on. It was weird, according to today's standards. We had a lot of good food to eat. We had pretty good clothing, and we had bicycles, roller skates, and all those things. I imagine we were pretty well off. Every Christmas, you should have seen our house. It looked like a toyland. My mother would go all out. She'd go into debt to give us a good Christmas. This was besides making a whole bunch of tamales, buñuelos and all that. We had it pretty good.

LG: Do you remember any specific Christmas experiences during that time?

MG: Well, I remember one Christmas morning, we had been up for a couple of

hours. My older brother mentioned that Santa Claus hadn't brought him his football. Boy, we were dumb. My mother said, "You know what? I think Santa Claus must have left your football in the car. You go outside and look." My brother did, and sure enough, there was the football in the car. We all thought Santa Claus had really left it [there.] The funny part of it was that I was about 11 years old at the time and my brother Victor, the one who went out to the car, was about 12. My mother would get angry if we told her we didn't believe in him. And we really did, 'cause she said "If you don't believe, you're not going to get anything." I remember when my youngest sister was born. I was almost 13 at the time and I really thought the doctor had brought her in his suitcase. I remember, we were outside on the front porch, and I knew the doctor was in there with my mother. When he left, we had a little baby sister. We didn't even know we were going to have one. My aunt told us that the doctor had carried her in his black valise, and we believed it. I guess we were very innocent or very ignorant.

LG: Let's move on into your education. Where did you go to school?

MG: I went to school at Zavala [Elementary School], which is on Rivera Street. I started there in 1935. I really had a hard time understanding the teacher because I didn't know English. The teacher didn't know Spanish, so it was really hard then.

LG: Were you allowed to speak Spanish in school?

MG: No, we weren't, [and] that's all we knew, so we had a hard time. We were always being scolded for it. Not like today when all the kids know English; but that's because of television, really.

LG: They didn't let you speak Spanish in school. Did this hinder you in

any way or did you manage to finish school all right?

MG: I guess it didn't really hinder me because I graduated when I was supposed to. I started in 1935 and I graduated in 1943 from Zavala School.

LG: Did you have any trouble keeping up with the rest of the students?

MG: No, not really. I guess I was a little smarter than some of them. Since we were all Mexican children anyway, we were all in the same boat. I guess if we had gone to a school where there were a lot of Anglos, we would have been hindered, but this way we were all the same.

LG: Did you go on to high school?

MG: After I graduated, I went to St. Joseph's Academy, which was on El Paso Street. It isn't there anymore. They made the freeway there. I wanted to go to Bowie High School but my father wouldn't let me. Oh, he was so strict. He wanted me taught by the nuns of Loretto. I cried, and I begged, and I pleaded, but he wouldn't let me go to Bowie.

LG: What did the population at St. Joseph's consist of?

MG: They were mostly Chicanos like I was. There were a few Anglo people, but the majority were Mexican students. After I was there, I really liked it. I liked all the sisters, they were very nice. I graduated in three years, in 1946. I did pretty good, I think, especially in shorthand. I was the only one in the class that got the 100 words a minute certificate.

LG: Did you go any further in your education or did you have any wish to?

MG: I wanted to go on to nursing school, but my father wouldn't allow it. So I just started working.

LG: He didn't allow it? Was it the fact that he was so strict that he didn't want you to go any further, or was there any special reason he didn't

want you to go?

MG: Mostly, the reason was financial. It cost so much to go and I guess he really couldn't afford it. And then he said he didn't like me to do that kind of work. He didn't consider it nice work. I guess it was both reasons.

LG: What kind of school activities were there?

MG: We had social activities--there were proms. I used to go to proms at the community center. We used to wear formals made out of net.

LG: You said earlier that your father made you take a chaparone on your dates. Did you have to take one to these dances with you?

MG: No, not /to/ these dances, 'cause he knew the teachers would be there. A lot of us girls would get together and go with our escorts, so he didn't mind that.

LG: Were there any other kinds of activities in the school, such as cultural activities honoring certain holidays, religious days?

MG: No, we didn't have any that I can remember, but we had one on our own, el Día de los Difuntos. We would always honor that day. We would make it a day long project. The whole family would go to the cemetery. We would take food to eat. We'd take flowers and arrange the grave real nice, and then water it. A lot of people would sell empanadas, buñuelos, or Mexican candy.

LG: This wasn't a family outing then, this was a whole community project. Would everyone get together and do this?

MG: Well, most of the families would go. I remember my relatives, my family, and my neighbors used to go. I remember especially, one time when I had to be absent from school in order to go with my family to the cemetery. The next day she made me a note saying that I had been sick.

The teacher knew that it wasn't true, I guess. She asked me, "You went to the cemetery, didn't you?" I said, "Yes." So she caught me.

LG: What was the purpose of these outings to the cemetery?

MG: Well, they were to honor our dead. To pay that day of respect to them.

LG: Was it just Mexican, or did Anglos participate in this too?

MG: Oh no, it was strictly Mexican, because I never saw an Anglo do that. I never saw an Anglo in the cemetery during that time.

LG: What exactly did go on? Was it solemn, or was it a happy occasion?

MG: It was both, because we'd have times of prayer when we'd kneel and pray. The priest would go around sprinkling holy water on the graves. If we asked him, he would say special prayers there.

LG: Does this mean that it was a Catholic idea?

MG: I guess so, because he would always go around. Still, it wasn't all that serious because we used to laugh and have a good time too. I looked forward to it.

LG: You were there all day long. Did the kids cause trouble? Did they get irritable staying there all day long?

MG: No, we looked at it as a holiday really. The kids would eat and have a good time and run around. The older kids could make money. My brother used to take a bucket to sell water to the people who didn't have water for the graves. He would sell it to them for five cents a pail. He would make a little extra money. We would really have a good time. We'd stay there all day. We'd start going home when the sun was setting.

LG: Do you remember any other specific religious events that you would honor this way?

MG: Well, the other one we would honor was San Lorenzo Day. We would spend

that day in Juárez, in San Lorenzo. We would spend it there all day too.

LG: Where is San Lorenzo?

MG: It's in Juárez, on the carretera, I don't know exactly where. It's near where the Dog Racetrack is right now. We would go to church and pray. There would be a kermés with a lot of booths, and they would sell all sorts of stuff. Then we would see the matachines dance; that's the part I liked. And oh, we'd eat all day.

LG: This was to honor San Lorenzo. What is he a patron saint of?

MG: Well, he's a patron saint of the poor people, I guess, 'cause they're the ones who are always over there. They ask him for all sorts of favors. I've seen people kneel at the entrance of the church, it's a big church, and they'll go kneeling all the way to the front of the altar. They get their knees all bruised, but they have a firm belief in him. If they ask him for a favor, they have to repay him in some way or else. Their belief is that he'll burn them in some way or another if they don't repay the favor.

LG: He'll burn them? Do you know of any incidences where this might have happened?

MG: No, not really, but I've heard stories of people who say he has burned them when they're cooking, using hot water, or in fire.

LG: This was because they failed to repay him?

MG: Yes.

LG: In what way do they have to pay him back?

MG: Promises that they would make to him. Some of them would promise him to light candles or some of them would promise to go kneeling. They would kneel outside and walk that way from the entrance gates up front.

They would end up with bloody knees, and all that. If that's what they wanted to promise him, they'd do it.

LG: So, what they promised they'd do for him was what they had to do?

MG: Yes, some of them would give him money.

LG: How could they give him money?

MG: Oh, by giving it to the church in his name.

LG: What kind of favors did they ask of him?

MG: Well, if they had a sick person in the family, they would ask him to heal that person. Some of them would ask for financial help and all sorts of help. If he really did it, they felt they had to repay him by doing what they promised.

LG: If they didn't feel that he had accomplished it, they didn't have to pay him back?

MG: No, not really. But I guess most of them do because they are afraid of being burned.

LG: Was he the only patron saint they honored or were there others? Did they ask favors of others?

MG: There are a lot of others. The main one they ask for is the Virgen of Guadalupe. She's the main Virgin saint of México. She's the Mexican saint.

LG: Isn't she called México's patron saint?

MG: Yes, she is. You should see how they honor her on her day, which is December 12. They start real early, a pilgrimage, walking up to the cathedral. About 5:00 in the morning, the mariachis serenade the Virgin while all the people bring her huge bouquets of flowers at the alter. It's really a beautiful sight to see. They really go all out for her.

LG: You say you saw that in México. Did you ever see it happen here?

MG: No, not here. People will pray to her, and go to church, and honor that day, but real quietly, not like over there. And that's not only in México City, that's all over México.

LG: Do you have any idea why they honor her so much more than the others?

MG: Well, they consider her the mother patron saint of México. She's dark like the Mexicans are. She appeared on Juan Diego's cloak. They consider her their saint.

LG: Prohibition was between 1920 and 1933. Do you remember anything special about that time?

MG: Yes, I remember when I was about five years old, my dad used to make beer in our house. He and my mother would make it. They would let me help pour the beer into bottles using a funnel. We would have quite a hard time because of all the foam, but I liked to do it. Then I would help put it in the icebox. And that's exactly what it was, an icebox. We didn't have any electric refrigerators like we do now. It was just a box. The iceman would deliver a block of ice and put it inside the icebox. There were a lot of men coming to the house to buy the beer. I remember some real old men, I guess they were drunkards or something. They would try to buy the beer on credit or trade something for it, but my dad only accepted cash.

LG: Did he make anything else besides beer?

MG: Well, he used to make whiskey too, but he wouldn't sell that. That was for his own use. I don't remember how he made the beer. I do remember that in making whiskey, I used to help him brown the sugar on the stove; well, burn it I guess is the word. Then he would add some extract to

the burned sugar and then add water. It would come out good whiskey.

LG: What kind of people purchased your merchandise?

MG: All kinds. I remember the old men because they used to be real nice. Respectable people [/purchased it/ too, and all kinds of men. I don't really remember any women buying it, but all kinds of men would stop and purchase it.

LG: How would they go about buying it?

MG: They used to go through the back door. We had a big yard, and at the end of the yard we had a big room. It had a door with a big lock leading out to the alley. They would knock on the door, but we weren't allowed to open the door to anybody or to sell anything either. We had to go inside the house and either he or my mother would sell it. I guess some of the people who went over there were my dad's friends. I remember some of them would take a guitar. They would play in the kitchen and sing and get all happy. I liked to hear them.

LG: Was anyone else involved in this operation, or was you dad doing it by himself?

MG: My Uncle Gilberto, we called him Beto, would help him. He would go over to the border, to the fence, where he would purchase some pure alcohol in big square aluminum cans. He would buy the alcohol and bring it over to my dad's house. He would have to be very careful with this and watch out for the federal agents who were watching the border. I remember sometimes he used to carry a pistol.

LG: Did anything ever happen?

MG: Yes, something happened to him; he was killed. He was in an empty house in the Lincoln area, near my grandmother's house, the police found him.

LG: Where was the Lincoln area?

MG: It was the area between Concordia Cemetery and Evergreen Cemetery, just across the railroad tracks. It was near Lincoln School and Calvary Church. Now it's called the Spaghetti Bowl area.

LG: Do you know why he was murdered?

MG: No, I don't know why, but I do know he was found in an empty house, lying across the table. He had been sitting at the table, I guess he had been drinking, because they found a bottle smashed near him. He was shot to death.

LG: Do you know anything else about what happened there?

MG: No, only that some people say that it was some men in a black car who did the shooting. They just sped away and were never caught.

LG: Did anybody else besides the police ever try to find out what happened there?

MG: No, not really. Except that he had a son, Beto, Jr. When he grew up, he fought in the Korean War. He found out about his father's life history when he got out of the service, and he came here to El Paso. He had been living in Fresno, California, before he went to the service. He said he was going to find out who did it and get revenge for his father, but he had to go back to Fresno. And less than a year after he came back from the service, he was killed in a car accident. So that ended that.

LG: Has anybody ever found out what happened there? Do you think that the murder had anything to do with the business he was engaged in?

MG: Yes, I'm almost sure that was it, because I don't know what other reason there could have been.

LG: Did you ever do any traveling outside El Paso as a child?

MG: Yes, when I was about 12 years old, I went to San Antonio to visit an aunt, who was a nun. She was assigned over there. I went with a grandmother, an uncle, an aunt and two cousins.

LG: What year was this?

MG: It was 1940.

LG: Do you remember anything about this trip?

MG: Yes, I remember I liked the trip a lot. We had a lot of fun. But what I didn't like was that when we had to stop somewhere and eat, we weren't allowed in the restaurants because we were Mexicans. My aunt who was lighter skinned than the rest of us would go into the restaurant and buy hamburgers and cokes for us. She'd bring them out and we'd eat them in the car.

LG: Do you remember any specific towns where this happened?

MG: I only remember it happened in San Antonio.

LG: When was the first time you ever heard the word Chicano?

MG: About a couple of years ago.

LG: You don't remember it ever being used when you were younger?

MG: No, never.

LG: What does the word mean to you right now?

MG: To me it means that we were born in the United States, but we were born of Mexican parents.

LG: Do you have any idea of where the word came from?

MG: No, I really don't.

LG: What do you think about the Chicano Movement going on now?

MG: I'm all for it. It's about time we had something like that.

LG: Why are you for the Chicano Movement?

MG: Well, because they're fighting for us, they're looking for equal representation for us, for better jobs, better pay, and better treatment all around.

LG: What's your opinion about the illegal aliens in this area?

MG: I pity them and I feel sorry for them because they're in the state they are in. But still, I feel that they're taking a lot away from us. Like in the downtown area, the merchants in the downtown area hire only girls from Juárez in order to pay less. The girls over here don't have a chance of getting a job there, because they have to pay them more. I don't like the way they are, they're very rude. I don't even shop in the downtown area anymore. They come and take our jobs away from us.

LG: So you feel that they should try and curb the problem now?

MG: Yes, I really do. I feel that México should do something to help their own people. They're a rich country. I think that if they wanted to, they could afford programs for the poor.

LG: In what way is México a rich country?

MG: Well, for one, they've got a lot of agriculture. Another way I feel the Mexican Government could help them is by making it a law that children should go to school just like they do in the United States. In México, if the parents don't want to send their children to school, they don't. The government doesn't say anything about it. If they would build more schools, the small children would get an education. That would better their lives. They could also pass health programs, they could inoculate the children and give them shots like they do here. They could have good health programs for the people in general, and have something like

welfare where they could help the poor people.