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Sosa, Juan A Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Juan Sosa
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

JS: I was about...15. It was about 41 years ago.

JO: So about...1950 about?

JS: '49, '50, yes, around there

JO: What was your first place of residence in Holland?

JS: I lived behind H. J. Heinz, in Zeeland. From there I worked in different jobs, mostly farm work, working for...I don't quite remember the name of the _____, used to have a celery farm... outside of Zeeland, where the _____ goes by now. It was all celery and I worked there, _____ how long. After the celery farm, it was John Blankenstein used to be a _____ in Zeeland. We lived in some of the, actually they were chicken coops, at that time either we did _____ resources or else we _____, I don't know. Now it's more convenient for migrants and people coming from anyplace. There's a lot of furniture, a lot of money, a lot of rent, a lot more help than there were in those days. [pause] It's hard to remember exactly, all the different jobs I had. I had quite a few, like I imagine everybody else.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

JS: Big Spring, Texas.

JO: Where is that?

JS: West Texas. Close to Midland, Odesa, out that way.

JO: Was it rural or urban area? In Texas? A small town?

JS: It was a small town. The place actually don't look any different than when I lived

there. It looks more deteriorated. It hasn't grown much, not like some of the other towns, 20, 30 miles away, like Odesa, Midland, some of those places. They've grown bigger because of the oil and so on. Big Spring, used to be an army base there, but even that's closed down. It deteriorated the town a lot more.

JO: In the place in Zeeland where you settled, was there a neighborhood established? And if there was a neighborhood, what kind of neighborhood was it?

JS: I wouldn't say it was a neighborhood, it was more or less like the back of a factory. Just little, where we lived was a little bigger than this room where we are now, about 12 x 9. That's was our home, probably 3 feet from the railroad, where the trains used to go by there and shook the whole house and all the plates and everything off the wall fell on the floor. You know how often the trains go by. But after awhile we got used to it, like you get used to everything. Right at 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock in the morning, the whole house shakes and it's done day after day after day after day, you know what's going to happen and you get to accept it. We just put up with it, that's all we have.

JO: Did you have any neighbors around you?

JS: No, it was just little _____ you could move that were put on there by H. J. Heinz, they were just put on there for the people that worked for the factory.

JO: So there were other people staying in this area?

JS: I remember other _____, I guess it is, maybe there were one more besides ours, but it didn't last long. I think our was about the only one left there.

JO: How many people came with you originally from Texas?

JS: Well, at the time I think it was just my brother-in-law and my sister. First I came with them. My feeling of the area, I like it. I was about the only Mexican person in Holland. I remember people saying to me, "Gee you got a nice tan." and I say, "Yeah, all year round." People were nice, I liked the environment. They treated me as an individual, not as one of the other. It was good. I seen a lot of positive things about Holland. I thought, "Gee, this would be wonderful for my mother." Not only my mother but my sisters and my brothers and their children. I was thinking a few generations, like we are now, I have nephews now that are preachers and I have a daughter working for the court system and two or three other nephews involved in the community, contributing. That's mostly my view of what I had for them more than myself. I thought, "Gee, this would be a wonderful place to settle down, and have my children have their children."

JO: Did you go back to Texas and get your mother and all your relatives?

JS: It took time, I was only 15, 16 at the most. This were my thoughts, my feelings. I said to myself, "How can I get them over here?" This was my plan. But how can I get them over here? It's not easy, especially adults to have them move, their environment, it's part of their life. I thought, "Gee, you worked for little chickens, why can't it work for us. So my greatest desire was to get mom out here. Once I got mom out here, every year one came and then another one came. Now they're all here.

JO: How many people from your immediate family, brothers and sisters...?

JS: Five sisters and 4 brothers, and they all have their children here, and their children's

got their children.

JO: Are you one of the older ones?

JS: I'm the youngest one, of the boys.

JO: You have a younger sister?

JS: One younger sister, she's also married and she's got her kids here. They're doing good.

JO: Let me backtrack again, back to Texas. What were the conditions in Texas that convinced you to come to Holland? Was there economic slowdown?

JS: Sometimes I can see when people make a decision, myself or anyone, makes a decision that a change in your life. If you have nothing and you make a move to, they say well you have nothing, where are you going, well you have nothing. If you have 1% of improvement in your life wherever you move, that's something better than what you had. So when I came here, the way things were in Texas, I didn't see anything for me, my parents, my future and the future of my generations to come. And I'm glad I came, it was the right move.

JO: What was your family doing in Texas at the time?

JS: Surviving. There's a difference between surviving in one place and surviving in another place. I was not _____ as far as I said to myself even now I would not live in the same town that I lived then or even now. They would give me what I have accomplished here. If they give it to me I would not move.

JO: Was your family a migrant family, did they work in the fields any?

JS: This is the way we came. We came as migrants. I guess we all our generations that's

how we all came here and we try to make it better for our children, and our children's children. And that's the way it goes. I'm sure my daughter would not do that and their kids would not do that. They would have a better opportunity. It was a big change. Not only for me, my family was a big step from where we lived and the way we lived to what it is now. As far as education, as far as being able to accept more responsibility and living a lot different.

JO: Your first job in the city was on the celery farm as you stated before. What was your first job out of agricultural work?

JS: When your just a kid you do all kinds of odd jobs and you remember certain people they _____ had a part of your life, I remember just one in particular Al _____ used to be downtown golf station. He treated me like a son, at times he'd scold me for things that I was doing that I wasn't suppose to. Going back to the question you asked me, my first job that had nothing to do with working on the farm, was for, there used to be a factory here on 9th street, 9th and Maple. Used to call it Wire Products, it was one of the first jobs I had there. After that I started working at different factories like _____, Sligh and _____ Clark.

JS: Did each job improve as you went up?

JO: Yes.

JS: Improve in pay?

JO: Improve in pay and improve in learning different trades. My schooling wasn't the best, part of where I lived before. I remember, I'm going back to Texas now, I would have loved to be a counselor, lawyer, doctor, but I'm not. Those things you

learn to accept. For awhile you kind of feel ashamed of it. I had nothing to do with that. It's part of the way you're brought up, part of your environment, your family, part of your mom and dad puts in to your mind so you become part of that. I don't know if I'm going out the question. I learned a lot of different trades.

JS: Had a bunch of experiences?

JO: A lot of experiences mostly and lot of finishing, refinishing stuff like that.

JS: Where are you employed now and how did you get to hold this position? How did you create the restaurant?

JO: Going back to ...'68...I worked in the factories, worked at the Sligh _____ and then the time when I was about 20, 21, I got married. I got a job _____ in Grand Haven and I went into the _____ with my brother-in-law. Well that didn't work out too good, disagreement. Gain a lot of experience but it didn't work out. After that I opened up a refinishing shop, it was going all right, at that time that we had just married and building a new home. I had my little girl. She was working at Heinz and I worked _____, and she said, "I would like to go to beauty school." I said, "Go." She said "What are we gonna do, you're used to making so much money, how can we live without that?" I said, "We'll manage." She said, "Oh." Then went to beauty school and she got her diploma and she wasn't making much at the time, _____ hairdresser not much. She hung on to it, she liked what she was doing, not so much for the money, she liked what she was doing. And I kept working at was I doing, doing some refinishing, working in a factory. Finally she said to me, "I've been working at this particular place a long time and this is what

they do." So she started showing me how businesses run. Sounds good to me. Then we decided to go into the hairstyling business. We did real good, really good. She employed about 26 girls and we were doing good, really good.

JO: Was this business in Holland?

JS: Two in Holland, 2 in Grand Haven. So we were doing good in the hairstyling business until well, things happen in marriages, happen to anybody, we had no control of it, and if we do, we don't know how to control it, whatever it is. Things didn't work out for us. So we divorced, she went her way and I went my way and for awhile I just, like all men that go through certain amount of pressure, or downs in their lives, you accept it one way, hey, "I gotta come out better or bitter, better or bitter. Or _____ - in pieces and see what we can do with it." Or some of us we just feel totally sorry for ourselves and continue life the same way. I guess I did that for awhile, like all people would do. And finally I said, "Hey, this is no good. I'm going to have to do something constructive instead of destructive." So I always like buying real estate so I bought some property here. At the time before I even got started at this I remember go to the bank and I asked for 1,000 bucks, I had nothing. I had nothing, I lost everything, she took everything, lost everything. Only the clothes I was wearing. I went to the bank, "I want one thousand dollars, I want to buy a car." The bank said, "Sure, we'll lend you the money. But first you gotta have a job." I said, "Okay." The following week I went and got a job working at the Holland Die-Cast. I went back to the bank. I said, "Yes, can I have the _____ , buy a car?" "Oh, well, you have to work there," and then they give you another big

long story. I said "Okay, I finally understand, why don't you just say no, and that's it?" Anyway, it was just an employee _____ like any place else I understand that, but when you're in need you don't take it that way. You're thinking, "I have a need and I need some help." It depends on the person, either you have to be more aggressive or convincing or whatever. I guess I wasn't either one of those, I didn't get the money. Then I borrowed some money from a nephew of mine. He bought a house, he fixed it up and sold and he kept buying and dealing with it. Finally that _____ so he _____ by himself. And that's what I kept doing, buying real estate, fixing it, renting it. Even now I have some real estate, buy, sell. If it's the right price, I buy _____ and I sold this restaurant. Something moved me in the real estate I wasn't interested in the restaurant. I'm interested more or less in opportunities, I'm sure most of us are that way. It's not the idea that sure, it's nice if you can do something in life that's constructive that you enjoy doing, then it's not a job. _____ feel bad when you have a job that you even think about Monday or work you get tired just thinking about that job, that it's a job just thinking about it. Imagine how frustrated it is to be there. Now this, I work 7 days week, 9 to 9 I'm over here all the time. I don't mind, I like it, I enjoy it. I like people, I love working with people. I worked at another restaurant in Grand Rapids and I was working at Holland Die-cast at the time. The guy who owns the Adobe _____. He came over and he's a friend of mine and he said, "Why don't you come work for me?" I was making...\$8 an hour. Would you believe I quit there and go work for \$2.50? Why? Like I told you. I'd rather work for \$2.50 and enjoy what I'm doing

than work for \$10 an hour or \$8 an hour. I went in there and worked so hard that after I quit, the owner of the Holland Die-Cast he came over and asked me three times to go back. He said, "You start working at 4, don't start at the bottom _____." I work hard. I didn't mind, but after a year, I went in I pushed a button and don't see nothing but a machine, hey if you're satisfied with not having to deal with the people, fine. Life is not just machines, life was about people. So after a year of that, the only thing I see the machine in the morning, saw the machine, came home and went straight to bed I was so tired. By 6 o'clock I wasn't there. I said this is not living. Finally I decided, I'm going to take that other job. And I enjoyed it, I was there 6 years, at the restaurant. I liked dealing with the people. When I saw this - good investment. I bought it for the property and after I got in I saw _____ here. So I thought, "Hey, why not?"

JO: Was it a restaurant before you bought it?

JS: About half the size as it is now.

JO: So you added on to the restaurant?

JS: I added about more than half.

JO: You didn't attend any schooling in Holland, did you?

JS: No.

JO: Can you get any impressions from the school system through your children attending the schools? How did you like the schools when your children attended? What were your views on it?

JS: I was very much for schooling. I knew what I lacked and I know how important it is,

education. But only certain amount of knowledge you can get from schools, the other you get through experience. If you have both it makes it a lot easier, for anybody. I would say, I liked it. I thought it was very important. I emphasized - I have one right now that is going on 12 years old, a little boy - I emphasize education on him very much. My ideal is having your children and saying to them, "Hey, you make up your mind, whatever you want to be." He becomes 30 years old he still hasn't decided what he wants to be. Myself, I'm saying for me, I think it's up to me to guide, to give him a direction. My boy, go back farther, my little girl...

JO: How many children do you have?

JS: I have a girl, married already and a little boy.

JO: My daughter rather, _____ .She was 14 years old and I kept saying to her, "You gotta go to school, you gotta get a degree, be a doctor or a lawyer." She kept saying, "Dad I'm a girl, I can't be a lawyer, I can't be a doctor." I said, "Because you are a girl, you'll be a better doctor, a better lawyer." So I emphasize things like that. She didn't become a doctor or a lawyer, but she's a Court Coordinator right now for Ottawa County. Six months ago, somebody just got out of law school. He took the _____, he took her job and she got the boss' job. I'm proud of her. And the same thing with my boy. I'm saying, "Hey, you gotta do good, you gotta be the best." I don't want to put too much pressure on him. When I think I'm over-doing it, pull back. But I do emphasize education, I emphasize professions and responsibility, and be responsible for himself. Things like that because, like I tell him, "I'm going to give you the best tools. What you make out of your life is up to

you."

JO: Do you think your children benefitted from the Holland school system?

JS: Oh absolutely, very good school system here. I wouldn't want them to be any place else.

JO: What schools did they attend?

JS: My daughter attended _____ in Grand Haven. She moved away when she was about 5. My boy attended Lincoln School, good school. Right now he's in, I moved from one part of town to the other, so right now he attended another year over here at Longfellow. He's doing good. Probably this year he'll attend another school here in town because I'm moving again.

JO: Did your daughter attend any schooling here in Holland?

JS: Not in Holland, no. Good school system over there too.

JO: Did you know much English when you first arrived here in Holland?

JS: When I first came to Holland, I could not say what time is it in English. I didn't know much of anything. I could speak Spanish and that was it. Like I said, you start to realize what's important for you. I start to realize that it was important for me to speak the language if I wanted to better myself. So I start, like I said the only way you gonna learn how to swim is get in the water. So now I give this advice to anyone. I remember clearly the Dean from Grand Valley, he's a friend of mine. And he said to me, "I can read English and Spanish fluently and I can read it in the book. But I can't really communicate. What advice would you give me?" This is what the dean of the college asked me. I says, "Wow, well I'd like to tell you one thing. I tell

you because I went through it, I came here. The only way you are going to learn anything is to be able to get yourself in an environment where, put it this way, if you're in Japan and you're hungry, if you don't know a word, let me tell you, it starts to hit your stomach, you start speaking any language - sign language, _____ language, Spanish language. You better talk otherwise you're gonna get very skinny.

JO: So basically you learned most of English through daily life?

JS: Daily life.

JO: Did you speak, you still lived with your family for a good amount of time.

JS: Oh yes, I lived with my family until, 20 years old.

JO: Did you speak English within the family or did you still speak Spanish?

JS: Mostly Spanish. Now, you find most of the Latinos here, they speak mixture. Five or 6 words in English and Spanish, they mix them all up. It's not that we, it just tends to be easier. To express yourself in English, find it more convenient.

JO: Your first impressions of the city were very positive when you first arrived, it was a pretty city and you really liked it a lot. Did those impressions change over time as you got to know the city a little more?

JS: I would say, yes. You can't actually blame the city itself. I can't blame anybody really. Maybe it's just me, once you get older you get different...some things have gotten better and some things have gotten different. You can't blame one or the other.

JO: What were some of the things that you didn't like about the city after awhile?

JS: Well, I tried to realize that it takes a long time for any outsider to be able to fit in,

especially when they start to realize that your not... Sometimes, I can't say it's them, when I say them, other people who lived here before I came. A lot of times it has to do with the persons who wants to be accepted. It's not those people that were here before us, but sometimes it's ourselves. You don't sit there because you don't give yourself a chance. Going back to when I worked in Grand Haven, people treated me as an individual. That's what I liked about Holland when I came, they treated me as an individual. Now it's minority, _____, Latino, Mexican, because I was me. Wherever I went I felt like, not like one or the other, but like me. And that's something that nobody gives you that feeling, you have to _____ that feeling. It's not something that you put in, it's something that you take out and _____.

JO: Can you remember any problems you had in Holland? Were you ever discriminated against, do you feel?

JS: I never feel that, no. That's why I said, I was one of the first Latinos to come here and I was treated as a person. That's what really turned me on to this community.

JO: Even through out, ever since you arrived in 1950?

JS: Even now. I think even now it's much more the same here than it was in Texas. In Texas, years ago - I don't have to tell you, everybody knows that - there's a lot of discrimination. I'm not just making this up, when my brother got out of the service, because he had a uniform he could go in any restaurant and eat. They take the uniform and _____ as an individual, "Hey, you're not allowed here. We don't allow Mexicans or dogs in here." That was the attitude, I'm not saying one or the other. It was not just white or Latino. I'm saying this is the way those people in that

generation believed.

JO: You never had those problems here in Holland?

JS: No, I can't say that. Laws change, people's attitude change. No, I can't say that.

JO: Did you feel there were any racial tensions? Did most Hispanics believe that Holland was an equal and open community? And if they didn't, did they ever try to change Holland? Was there a civil rights movement in Holland at any time, where the Hispanic community tried to stand up for the rights that it was being denied by the city?

JS: I don't know. I can't speak up for all Latinos. I'm Mexican _____ some of them do, some of them don't, I don't know. I really can't say. I can only speak for myself, how I felt.

JO: Did you ever see any civil rights movement in Holland?

JS: No, not to my knowledge, no.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland and what has it offered to Holland in the past?

JS: I think the same opportunities as everybody else.

JO: What organizations do you belong to within Holland or the Hispanic community?

JS: I really keep too busy to do any of them.

JO: Did you ever have an interest in joining any of them?

JS: I have, I've probably participate with, help out, so on. But as far as belonging to an organization, I don't.

JO: What would you like to see changed in the city of Holland? Is there anything you see

as negative?

JS: I would like to see more of the Latinos get more involved in the activity of the city. Like I said, I can only speak for myself. I'd like to see, the kids, they're trying to have the education and the training now. It's up to the parents to encourage them to get involved, be responsible for themselves. Not as a Latino, but as an individual.

JO: What do you for the future of Holland and its Hispanic community?

JS: I think that with time Holland is going to be...a greater amount of Latinos in Holland it's going to be, power?

JO: You think Holland will become more of just basically a Dutch community...

JS: Oh yes.

JO: ...more multicultural community?

JS: Yes, I think that it was as far as I can foresee, it will always be more like that. There will be more Latinos getting involved in all kinds of things, has to do with the city. As far as being more Latinos than the Holland that was here, I don't think so. And it shouldn't be either way. It shouldn't even be a conflict as far as that goes. Whoever does the most for the people themselves, that's the way it should be.

JO: I'm just going to go back to when you first arrived to Holland? You first arrived with you, was it your sister? And your sister's husband. What originally attracted you three to Holland? How did you find out about Holland?

JS: I came with them. I came to another town, some place, I don't remember I was so small, it was only, like I said when you're a kid you do what you're told, that's it. I was probably 14 or so. Saginaw, someplace on some farm or something. And we

would come into Michigan and like I said, when you have nothing and somebody says, "let's do something," just do it. Whatever it is. They say, "Let's go to Michigan." Fine, let's go.

JO: Do you remember what they were trying to look for in Michigan?

JS: They were trying to do the same as anybody else, trying to look for a better life. I came with the first few years, I came out Saginaw around there, Bay City around there. I remember sugar beets, put them in _____ right in my leg _____ forget that. I was just a kid, the only thing you got that was the scars. Things happen. For me when you're a kid, like I said you want to just do something.

JO: Can you remember how you got from Saginaw to Holland at all?

JS: The first _____ I think my brother-in-law came with another family and they _____ for five days around that area. The following time I guess some how or another he got involved with H. J. Heinz. And that's how I came to Holland.

JO: Was Heinz trying to attract Hispanics from Texas, migrants to work in the factories at that time?

JS: No, I wouldn't say that. It's like, if I put a sign in the window then whoever happens to come. Like right now, we got, what is it...one Mexican, and some white girls working, two older people _____. I tried to bring older people _____. Just whatever happens. That's the way it happens, he just happened to be there. I happened to be where my brother-in-law was. Just one thing after another, just things happen. Some things were planned and some were just not.

JO: So basically you came to Holland, you really enjoyed the city and you never really

thought of leaving, wanting to permanently stay and establish residence throughout your life?

JS: I did go, I did went back to Texas a few times, but I always came back.

JO: But you wanted to establish your life in Holland? Was that sort of a dream of yours?

JS: Yes, that was my idea for myself, and like I said before, for myself and for the generations to come. Because I thought it had a lot to offer, for them and for me.

I'm happy that _____.

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Sosa.