Puente, José and Lela Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with
José and Lela Puente

1993 Summer Oral History Project
Subject: The Hispanic Community in Holland, Michigan

Conducted June 24, 1993
by Andrea Peschiera
LP - Lela Puente - wife of JP
JP - José Puente - husband of LP
AP - Andrea Peschiera - interviewer

(Beginning of the interview - side A)

AP: The question that I will ask, I ask everyone I interview. They’re the same questions, but sometimes I ask in Spanish instead of English. But since you two have agreed to do it in English, it’s really helpful for me.

For reference now and in the future, I would like you to state your full name, each one of you.

JP: José Puente.

LP: Lela Puente.

AP: And your current address.

JP: 113 West 10th Street.

AP: And the date and place of birth.

JP: [date removed], 1927. I was born in Mercedes, Texas on the Suarez Ranch.

LP: I was born in LaFeria, Texas, on [date removed], 1931.

AP: So, where did both of you originally come from? Where did you live
most of your lives?

JP: In my younger days I was in LaFeria, Texas, which is a part of the Rio
Grand Valley, a real long stretch of small communities all along the
Mexico/Texas border, starting from Brownsville to Mission, Texas.
Mercedes and LaFeria are approximately seven miles apart. I went to
school up to the fifth grade. After that I quit school to help my parents
raise my brothers and sisters. At that time it was a very, very hard
living, being that it was during the depression. After that, I must have
been under fourteen years old when I was working by myself all night
form six o’clock in the evening to six o’clock in the morning in an
irrigation plant, in a place called Adams Garden. It was located between
Harlingen and LaFeria. It mostly consisted of irrigating orange trees and
vegetables, and whatever else they grew. I ran water pumps to throw the
water out through the big round pipes, and I kept the water going in the
canals so the farmers would have the amount of water they needed. Then
I worked in a service station in LaFeria, but quit that job to come up
north to pick cotton, all the way from the south to the north. Then as
migrants, we went back to Texas again. My dad and uncles had trucks,
we all stayed pretty much together. In 1947 I was 21 years old [so] I
decided to be on my own and that's when I first came up north to St. John, Michigan, as a migrant. I signed on to work for a sugar beet company, but I recall doing a very small amount of work because the weather was bad. So I moved onto a different kind of seasonal job, like picking tomatoes in Ohio. I then worked in a celery plant. Most of the time I worked in the plants, I hardly ever worked out in the fields.

So I then went back to Texas. We eloped, me and my wife. I came and picked her up in Hamilton, Michigan, where she was working in a celery plant. We went to west Texas to pick cotton. From there we met my father and went with him in his truck and we went to the south again. After I got back to Texas I got a job driving a truck over there in the south. In 1949, we went back to Holland, Michigan, where I have lived ever since.

AP: Was Mercedes, Texas an urban area or a rural area?

LP: Rural.

AP: And that's where you were born, in one of those towns?

JP: Yes.

AP: Can you tell me a little bit about the area where you're originally from?

LP: Well, I was born in LaFeria. My parent worked there. My dad's family
came from Mexico during the revolution. They kept coming back and forth, and then my grandmother decided to stay in Texas, and that’s where she raised her family.

My father served during World War I, and when he came back, he married my mom in 1920. They lived there in LaFeria for a long time, until 1942. The rancher had to sell his ranch, so we had to leave and find another way of living. That was hard for me, because I was only ten or eleven years old. So then we came up north. An uncle had written us that there was work contracted with a sugar beet company in Saginaw, Michigan. That was quite an adventure, because it was the first time that we had gone out as migrants.

We traveled from LaFeria in a pick-up truck with other families to San Antonio, and San Antonio we took the train all the way up to Saginaw. then form there the field man put us in different places to work on the sugar beets. It was hard at first because that was the first time we ever left our home.

We stayed there until the following year, travelled from place to place and ended up coming to Holland and worked during the summer. We then went to Muskegon and my father worked there in a factory
where they made parts for airplanes during the second World War. He worked there until the following year, and then we went back to Texas.

We stayed in Texas for probably three or four years, then in 1947 we came up north again, because my father had no work. So we came up north as migrants again, in a truck with other families, and that’s where Joe was too, in that same truck.

AP: And that’s where you met?

LP: No, we had already met in LaFeria. We were friends. The family that owned the truck, Joe and my family had all known each other. So, then we came up north in 1947 and worked in St. John, Michigan. Then when we were done there, my family went to Holland and Joe went on to different jobs.

My father worked picking pickles and different types of field jobs. Then, finally he got a job at Heinz. My mother still worked in the fields, until she got a job at Heinz too. They both retired from there.

We got married in 1947, and we lived in Texas for about a year or so. Then we had our first child that was born in Texas. When she was three months old, we came up north seeking a better life and employment. Although I never worked, I always stayed home and raised
the family.

At first, when we got here, Joe got jobs here and there, as a mechanic or in the fields until he was able to get into Heinz. He worked there at Heinz for a while and then we moved to Chicago heights and lived there for five or six years. Then we moved back to Holland.

Well, by then we had seven children, and we lived with my parents for a few years. We couldn’t find an apartment for rent because of the size of our family. So we had to buy a house. We bought the one where we are living now, and had five more children. Well, most of them were born and raised here in Holland and went through school here in Holland. They’ve gotten married and they still live here in Holland, except for two who live in the Detroit area. We’ve lived in our home on Tenth Street for 29 years.

During all this time, here we were raising our family, we would got to church and worked with the church for the community. When my children were growing up, I worked as a teacher’s aid in the Head Start Program for a few years, and then at the Haven Park Nursing Home in Zeeland for about three years.

AP: Do you remember what year you arrived in Holland?
LP: Yes, 1949. That was when our first child was born. We were married in 1947, we lived in Texas in 1948 and our daughter was born in January 1949. So then in April of 1949 we came up north and we’ve been here ever since. So, I have lived most of my life here.

AP: Doesn’t it seem, at least for me, that the first years where you live, kind of make a big impression on you? From living in Texas do you remember a lot of things from that time?

LP: Yes, I remember and miss a lot of things. I was always so busy with married life and raising children, that I never really stopped to think how much I missed my life in Texas, my relatives, school friends, and the ranch where I was raised and the different spring, summer and winter times there. I had never been able to go back and see them up until lately, because of my own family priorities and finances. When I had gone back to visit, I didn’t see anyone I knew very well because they had moved. Younger people that I knew are adults now with families of their own.

AP: Before arriving to Holland describe, if you can and if you like, what you expected to find, or what you wanted to find. I know that you said something about better employment.
LP: One of the reasons that we came up north is to find better jobs, or a better way to make a living.

JP: Going back to when we first got here, it was a very difficult time for us, especially in the beginning. When we first came here, I can recall we were living in a very small house that H.J. Heinz used to furnish at that time for their workers. My father-in-law was already living there and we went by what he knew. We moved out of that little house because it was too small for all of us to live in, then we moved to another farm just outside of Zeeland.

LP: The rancher there in Zeeland, didn’t have a place for us to stay except for the barn where he kept his horse, and so we were forced to live there with our first child. I remember we had to put sheets over on top of us, like a tent on my daughter’s crib, and on my parents, to protect us from spiders, insects and mosquitos. We lived there for about a month or two, helping the rancher pick pickles. It was quite a big difference from living in Texas in a home and then to come up here and live in a barn. It was an experience I had never gone through before.

I remember my mom use to cry all the time. Eating in those little coffee can lids, those were our plates. She used to cry all the time
because in Texas we were not rich, but we had plates and stuff. It was quite and adventure. To be a migrant is quite and adventure. We used to sleep on the side of the roads whenever it would get dark, when we were migrating. The truck would stop on the side of the road. We would sleep there. That was something very scary for me.

When we came up here, since I was home all the time, I never met any rejection. I guess we were looked at as different before.

JP: I don’t think, at that time, I myself knew what the word discrimination meant, but I think there was a little discrimination. I do recall in some of the places in the state of Texas we went to, when we were picking cotton or working out west, we were not allowed to go into restaurants at that time. That’s when I first noticed that we were discriminated from white people. Only white people can go in there. But that’s quite long ago, it’s changed dramatically.

But going back to the story that Lela was taking about, when we lived in that barn, now that I’m older and see it very plainly, that was the worst place that I could have ever lived.

AP: When you arrived in Holland, can you describe your first impressions of the city that you had?
LP: The only thing that I remember was that we couldn’t do anything on Sundays, everything was closed, no movement, and we were told that we could not smoke outside on the sidewalk. We couldn’t have any parties or anything like that, which I didn’t mind because I’m not a party person. That it was a very quiet place to live.

JP: Some of the things that I heard at that time, was for instance, ladies could not wash or hang clothes outside on Sundays. But they did play baseball on Sundays because that was the only day we had, but they were told not to be on the playground or on city owned property.

AP: So, those different practices that they had on Sunday, which you were restricted from doing, did that interfere with the traditions or celebrations you had?

LP: No, it didn’t bother me, but probably some other people. Well, I went to weddings, anniversaries or baptismals that I was invited to, but would only go for awhile, because I’m not a person who would stay until it’s over. But that’s why I guess I felt it didn’t bother me.

AP: Where was your first place of residence in Holland? Is that the same place that you’re living right now?

LP: Yes, it’s been our first place of residence, other than living with my
parents on west 15th Street for a couple of years, until we bought this house.

AP: You already talked about your first job in the city, didn’t you?

JP: Yes, well, I worked at Heinz for the first time in 1950. I worked there for a couple of years and then after that we went to Illinois for about seven years. When I came back to Holland, I worked for Scotts Incorporated for ten years. When they closed down, I left on a Friday, and on the following Monday I was back to work with H.J. Heinz. I never missed a day of work. I was pretty lucky as far as that was concerned. Then I got laid off from H.J. Heinz after seven years. From there I jumped into a job with the city of Holland. I worked for the city of Holland for 15 years, up to retirement in 1992.

I’ve always been very fortunate that I never had hard work. I just did my job like its supposed to be done, and I’ve always been commended that I was doing a fine job. I worked like I should, gave a days work before I could get paid for it.

I never worked hard, like the beginning as a migrant. It was hard, in a way, because the way we were living. We had to work out on a field where it was muddy up to your ankles with no boots.
AP: You have always worked, your whole lives?

JP: I have worked all my life, because we were raised in a family that the woman was only for housewife.

AP: You have always spoken English, your whole lives?

LP: In Texas we spoke Spanish. But when we came up north, and our children were growing up, I spoke more English that Spanish.

AP: So, you spoke English all your life, or did you learn it later on?

JP: No, we all spoke Spanish. But in school we were not suppose to talk in Spanish at all, but when we congregated in the back of the lot, or whatever, we spoke Spanish. As soon as we got into the classroom, or our teacher approached us, we would talk English, short English. They kept an eye on us to speak English. They told us, "You've got to speak English, in the school area."

LP: We were segregated.

JP: Yes, we were segregated, at that time.

LP: Because they had their primary school for the white and school for hispanics. In LaFeria we were segregated in elementary grades, in the 5th through the 12th grades we were also segregated but in the same school, "5A" was for the white and "5B" for hispanics, except for, I
guess, "5A" was for the more A's and B's students, and "5B" was more for the language disabilities. Probably one or two hispanics were in the "5A" class and probably one or two whites were in the "5B" class.

JP: That was only just to coverup segregation in our schools.

LP: I remember when I went back to school in 1942 and 1943, I was in Muskegon, Michigan, I was in "5A." When I went back to Texas they put me in "5B," and I was going to be in the "B" class until I got three A's.

AP: So, there was more segregation in the south. Is that right?

LP: Yes, we played together in the same school, you know, but we would still be segregated in school.

AP: But even though you were in different classes mostly, you still were not able to speak Spanish?

LP: Right, we were not allowed to speak Spanish on the school ground.

AP: Some things have changed. So you (LP) attended school in Muskegon and in Texas, in LaFeria, and then you (JP) attended school only in Texas?

JP: Just in Texas.

LP: I also attended school in Zeeland when we lived there in 1942, not for a
very long time, probably two or three months in the fall.

AP: So, Zeeland and Muskegon.

LP: Yes, in Zeeland it was a little school out in the country. I walked with
the rancher’s sons and daughters. I always got along with them, it was
not like they pushed me away or anything like that.

AP: For how many years did you attend school, and did you graduate from
high school? Through 8th grade?

LP: I went through the 8th grade.

JP: I went through the 5th grade.

AP: Your children have gone through the school here, yes?

LP: Yes, only my first child was born in Texas and all the others were born
here in Holland, and went to school here.

AP: What are your impressions of the development of the school system here?

LP: Now: Through the years?

AP: Well, through the years that your children have gone to school here.

LP: Well, our children attended St. Francis school in the elementary years and
public school for junior and senior high school. St. Francis, I believe,
offered comparable if not better academics than public, but found public
schools to be very well run and offered excellent extracurricular
activites.

(Continuation of the interview - side B)

LP: My three older daughters understand and speak Spanish well, but the rest of them don't understand or speak it much. I wish they would have learned it, and now that they're older and working, they wish they had too, because at work sometimes they need it.

AP: Do you think you can tell me a little bit about how you feel the Holland School System has fared in the areas of bilingual education? If they have ever encouraged bilingual education, or if they've provided assistance, in your own experience? Because I know that you were an assistant teacher for some time.

LP: I was only a teacher's aid for the Head Start Program.

JP: We did not come across any situations for bilingual education, only because our children knew and understood the English language, but maybe some other families who moved up here from Texas had more use of a bilingual education for those who need to learn from Spanish to English.
We do have one daughter who we thought was struggling through school, and seemed to be going backwards but after all, accomplished more than we ever thought, and is successful in her job.

LP: Well, when the children were going to school they had a Spanish class. I would help them with the Spanish work, but when they would bring it into class, the teacher would say, "Well, this is not right." Because some phrases or words are different in other Spanish dialects.

JP: They were teaching the words that we never use. Different words, but they mean the same thing. They caught onto Spanish, because we talk Spanish at home. My mother-in-law doesn’t talk any English at all, so she makes them speak Spanish.

AP: Would you like to say more things about the school system?

JP: No.

AP: Have you ever been members of organizations, previously, or are you members of organizations right now?

JP: I was the President for the St. Vincent de Paul Society for a good 15 years. Lela was involved with that too, but had to resign for health reasons. We’ve been involved with St. Francis Catholic Church for the last 40 years.
As far as civic involvement, we haven’t done too much of that. I was elected as a member of the Hispanic Task Force a few years ago.

AP: Could you describe some of the changes you have seen in the Hispanic community as it has grown over the years?

JP: It has grown tremendously. Other families that I can remember, that were here when we came were Inés Gonzales, he must of come here in 1934 or 1935. Blas Duran, he has passed away, but his family is still here. Longino and Augustine Escobar, their sisters Juanita and Simona. Another one was Daniel Hernandez, who I believe has passed away, he came from Mexico, by himself, no parents or family.

LP: My uncle was here too, way before we were. My uncle, John, my dad’s younger brother, was the one who wrote my dad and told him to come up north, that he would find a job here.

JP: The Arenas were here before us, Miguel Arenas passed away but his family is still here. John Silva came in 1945. When we first came here, there were no more than six families here.

LP: Others that came here didn’t stay long and moved away.

JP: The reason we had stayed was so few people were here at that time. We collected funds for the church, and that’s where we knew all the Spanish
people. I used to know where everyone was living. But in the last 25 years I lost track of where they all are. Now, I would say we got two or three hispanic people living on every block.

LP: It's grown a lot.

AP: What kind of effects do you think the growth has had on the hispanic community and the Holland community?

JP: Juvenile problems. It's way out of proportion now.

AP: Do you think that most of the problems that children are having, and the teens, has to do with the growth of the community, and maybe family traditions?

LP: It's hard to get adjusted to different kinds of environments, or things that need to be changed. It's hard to do it overnight, or in a few weeks, or in a few months. It takes a while to get used to it. If you don't, then you will struggle. It depends on how you want to live.

JP: I think that the city was developed by mostly religious people for nice smooth living. Then we had different denominations coming in or people without religious background, and people telling their relatives to move over here, it's real nice and quiet. They don't know what kind of family he's got and he brought some families whose children are more radical,
and that keeps on exploding a little more here, a little more there. It’s kind of real sad to say, but I think that’s what’s really happening.

LP: Struggling for their rights, for what they believe in from the type of environment they were raised in. It’s hard to change overnight I guess. The people here are already set in their ways, and if you come in here and find you can’t do this and you have to do that, it’s hard to get adjusted. So you’re gonna confront with another, within the family, schools, and the environment.

JP: In the south, you can see a difference from city families and country families. Country families are more reserved, quieter and more respectful. City ones are more outspoken, liberal, and aggressive.

AP: Over the years, how do you feel Holland has responded to the hispanic community?

LP: Well, responding some, I think. Although there’s struggle, but it’s responding. Like I said, you got to get used to living with different kinds of people, different ways of living. Getting to know each other is one way of being able to solve some of the problems. Get to know the people, get to know the person. I found that getting to know the person, not just by looking at them, but getting to know them personally, I think
we would understand them better and get along.

I know, because I have a family of 12 children. Even though they’re brothers and sisters, raised in the same house, same family environment, but have grown up and had to get to know each other, because each one is different in their way of thinking and their way of living. In living in your neighborhood, if you don’t get to know your neighbors, you won’t know them.

AP: It’s hard to get along.

LP: Yes, if you don’t know them. But if you get to know them, then you find out that they are struggling to live a better way.

AP: That we’re maybe more alike than different.

LP: Yes, right.

AP: Can you describe some of the traditions you celebrate as a family or as a community. You probably do some things with St. Vincent de Paul?

JP: Not anymore since I had to resign from that due to health reasons. But I can say that I feel that I have missed helping out in the hispanic community festivities.

LP: We don’t want our support to end.

JP: As far as our family is concerned, we get together a lot. At Easter and
weddings we try to gather everyone, aunts, uncles, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. But for Christmas, Father’s Day, Mother’s Day and our anniversary we gather only our family, but that in itself is a big gathering. My daughters organize them and has things for the kids and grown-ups to do, so we all participate.

LP: We have to rent a hall sometimes, because there are so many of us, and everybody brings something, potluck. We take pictures and record on videos when we can. I like the festivities because they’re very entertaining. My mom’s birthday was a big celebration, she turned 90 in February and we had an open house. She’s living with me because I’m her only daughter. I have two brothers which she goes to stay with them at times.

AP: Can you describe something about your life that you would like to share with generations to come? I know that you’ve told me a lot of things, but is there something particular that you would like to share?

LP: Well, to be yourself, to be what you can be able to be; to communicate; to be able to get along with other people; to know them, understand them; first of all, to educate yourself and study as much as you can. I know that’s what I like to do. I like to read all the time.
AP: Describe why the family and the extended family is so important to you. That’s a hard thing to describe.

LP: I guess it's trying to keep them together. Like I said before, get to know them, get to know each other. Their little ones, the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren that are coming, get to know who their relatives are; their uncles, aunts and cousins. That’s a very important thing, to be able to communicate with each other and know who they are.

JP: I can say that one of the things that, when my dad passed away this past year, we had relations come all the way from California with their families. After the funeral, we decided to get all together, all our families together, like there was a small reunion. It was not the appropriate time for a reunion, but it was a time for us to know who they were.

I was surprised to see the sons of my cousins grown up with families already. That was a big surprise for me because I never knew that they had their children. It was very nice, in a way. We just wanted to know who was who.

We all had, sort of, a little program like: I'm José Puente from, originally from, LaFeria, now live in the state of Michigan with my family.
AP: That was in Texas?

LP: It was in LaFeria.

JP: A few years ago we had a family reunion here in Holland at the park. Pretty much all were there from my side, my brothers, sisters, and whoever else we could get a hold of, and my family.

LP: It's important to have family get togethers; exchange pictures, or names, addresses.

JP: At Christmas and Halloween we have lots of fun, we all just congregate together in the house, eat, sing and play, for the kid's sake.

LP: So that they can sing and laugh and play when they grow up. I'm proud of them, all good values and good standings, that's important.

Once in a while my grandchildren say, "Grandma, it's boring." So I motivate them to do something around the house, or take them somewhere where I might be going, or do something with them. Because otherwise they're living too fast I think now a days. The younger generations are living too fast, they're so young and yet go along too fast.

JP: One of the things that I have been doing lately, for the last five years or so is have all my boys and grandsons get together in one place and we
discuss problems. What can we do to solve those problems, because we all got problems. There’s not a family anywhere in this country that would say I’ve got no problems at all with my family. That’s a lie. But we all got little problems.

This is one of my ideas to get congregated. We’re going to discuss what we’re doing wrong; what we should be doing; what is our goal; things like that. As far as I’m concerned, we brought them up as good as possible. They’ve got some ideas, probably better than mine or my brother’s. I think that’s real good.

LP: We don’t just gather to have fun, or a good time, but also to talk about our feelings and our problems. Because sometimes we say things that we don’t mean and hurt someone, so we get together and we talk about it. If they don’t want to go to that person, your brother or sister, they can come to see me. They know that I’m there for them. I can almost tell when they come, if they’re feeling low or something is wrong. So, right away I say what’s the matter, or what’s the problem, talk to me. So they do. Either I pray with them, or give them some advice, or just listen to them. So that way they don’t live with that struggle inside them. It’s bad to keep it all inside. It helps them a little, or talk to the other
person. Sometimes they say they didn’t realize that they said something wrong. So they talk about it.

(End of the interview)