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Soto, Antonio Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Antonio Soto

Conducted April 22, 1997
by John Maassen

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Antonio Soto
April 22, 1997
Interviewer: John Maassen

JM: Would you give me your name, please?

AS: Antonio Soto.

JM: Where were you born?

AS: In Mexico, Salamanca Guanajuato.

JM: When did you come to the United States and why?

AS: I moved here in 1965. My mother was here prior to that and she got remarried and she decided to bring us with her.

JM: That was you and your brother?

AS: Yes, me and my brother. My only brother!

JM: Why did you come to Holland, specifically?

AS: My stepfather felt that it was getting to be a hassle driving back and forth for about an hour almost every day, especially in the winter.

JM: What brought you to Pullman, first of all?

AS: My mother lived here and she brought us over here. We were minors at the time.

JM: Why did she bring you to the States?

AS: She wanted us with her.

JM: Why was it Holland? Did she have contacts in Holland?

AS: Well, she lived here in Pullman, and at the time Pullman was a rural area. When I came here, there were only two families in the whole area.

JM: Was your mother born in Mexico?

AS: Yes.

JM: Had she been involved in coming here as a migrant?

AS: No. We've never been migrants; we never worked the fields like most people have.

We've been lucky people. My hometown was already a pretty good sized town.

Probably about 80,000 people lived there.

JM: You said your first job, when you finished school at fourteen, was what?

AS: I started as an apprentice as home appliance repair. I worked there for three years.

JM: Then you came to the States and you had to find a job here. What happened then?

AS: What happened was we had to wait for a while. Not knowing any English it was kind of hard, like it is now for many people. We got into this nursery and we started working there, but only for about a year, a year and a half at the most. After that we moved to Holland and it was easier. We tried to find a better job, and more pay, too. I did make the move to go to Louis Padnos Iron and Metal and I started working there in the 1966 for about three months, and then I went to Mexico for a whole month on vacation.

JM: You earned that much that you could do that?

AS: (Laughter) Not really. I went with my parents, my mother and step-father and my brother. We went to Mexico and stayed there for a whole month. When I came back, I was hired back at Padnos in 1967 and I've been there ever since.

JM: What did you do there when you started?

AS: My job at Padnos in the beginning was to work outside in the yard sorting material,

cleaning up different kinds of material.

JM: Did you have equipment to use or did you do that physically?

AS: We had to do it physically. Machines will put the material into a machine, but we had to sort it by hand. After a few months of doing that, an opportunity came to move into the maintenance department, and they sent me out there to do some cleaning of the maintenance department. After that I was asked if I wanted to work there, and I said yes, if they gave me the chance to learn. I did already have some mechanical abilities because I worked three years in Mexico as an apprentice fixing home appliances. They said that they would give me a chance and I've been there ever since learning the trade of the mechanic in a way. Fixing trailers. In the beginning there was only three people there including myself. There was a German person and a Mexican person, and they both helped me. The Mexican guy did teach me a lot. I started doing whatever job they would give me. Sandblasting, steam cleaning, welding. I'm still doing that. Welding, doing brake jobs, electrical repair, hydraulics. We're moving into hydraulics.

JM: I understand that Padnos is really into the automotive recycling field. What does that mean when you're working with hydraulics?

AS: I do work with hydraulics, but just on the trailers. On my own, but with their equipment. They tell me that I'm part owner, but not really. I wish! They do take care of a lot of scrap in this whole area. They bring it in, and we provide the equipment to bring it back and forth. We do a lot of repair.

JM: With a limited formal education and having come to this country with Spanish, you

have certainly learned to speak, I would say, impeccable English. How did you do that?

AS: In the beginning, I did go to night school for a little while, we had this lady, her last name was Hernandez and she was Cuban. I tried to take some classes at night, but after a while they changed it and she left this area and they put somebody else in there and I didn't feel comfortable and I quit school. I guess I felt that she wasn't explaining things well enough. I was not well educated, but I felt at the time that she was not doing any good for me. I quit and never went back to school. I would say, from that experience, I would kind of push my kids to keep in school. Now, I wish I would have taken some schooling myself.

JM: It sounds to me like that has been a very good company for you.

AS: It has. I have no complaints. They give me the opportunity to learn. I wish there were more companies that would give people that opportunity. Just because English is a problem, or because there is a barrier between Spanish and English and people cannot understand each other does not mean that people are not capable of performing a job.

JM: You mentioned your children. You have two girls and a boy, right?

AS: Correct.

JM: Can you tell me something about them?

AS: My daughter, Jessica, attended Holland High School. She participated in sports; volleyball, basketball, soccer. Then, she went on to the University of Michigan, but then she had to leave. She continued her education at Eastern University, and she

graduated last year in 1996. She graduated in Psychology. She is trying to go for teaching in Spanish. I believe that in this year she plans on getting married, too. Marco Antonio went to high school here in Holland, too. All of them were born here in Holland. He graduated, too, and went on to Grand Rapids Junior College for about three years, but then he decided to move to San Antonio, Texas. NOW he's going to school there, and work at the same time. His field is marketing, hopefully someday he will get a career. He's still not done with it, but he hasn't quit yet. He is 24. Sonia came about eight years later. She still goes to Holland High School and she's in the tenth grade right now. Hopefully, she's planning on going into teaching, too. She's been picked up into a pilot program at Hope where they are looking for minorities to become teachers. She was one of the first three candidates that they selected. She could have the opportunity to go to college there.

JM: How did you meet your wife?

AS: We met here in Holland through dances that we used to go to. The Hispanics used to have dances almost every Saturday, and Sundays, too, sometimes. She had been here quite a few years before I came to the States myself. I can only tell you more or less after I met her that she was living here in Holland, too, on 16th Street, and her parents were here, too, and her two brothers. She used to work for Donnelly Mirror, and she worked there until 1980 when my youngest daughter was born. Then she decided not to go back to work, but now she works part time at St. Francis De Sales Church in Hispanic outreach. She works with the Church in relation to the Catholic religion. She actually enters the ministries. She is not a nun, but she does that kind

of work: preparing people for first communion, guiding quinceaneras, the celebration of their fifteenth birthday. She helps people out a lot. They ask her questions, and she works about thirty hours a week.

JM: How old were you when you got married?

AS: Well, I was too young to get married, but I did get married. I was nineteen years old.

JM: You say that she was more "Americanized" than you?

AS: Yes, more than I because she did attend a school here in Holland. She was younger and she's been here longer than I. I'm not exactly sure, but I think she was here in 1958 when her parents came to the States. I believe that she mentioned Harrington School that she attended. She knows English more than I do.

JM: Does she help you with your English?

AS: Actually, in the house, we usually speak Spanish more, but my wife and my kids speak English more. It's a funny thing because when my kids were five years, they spoke more Spanish than they did English, but as soon as they started going to school it switched. They started going to school, learning English, listening to the TV, and a little more English was picked up for them. Soon, I would say something in Spanish, and they will start answering in English. They all know Spanish, the youngest one probably more than the other two.

JM: How did Holland impress you when you first came here, first of all the city in general, what about it was good, and what was not good?

AS: Personally, I didn't see much wrong with Holland at the time when I moved in here.

The only thing is that it is a pretty quiet town and you see a lot of church's and nothing was open on Sundays. It was pretty quiet. When we first moved into 21st Street, one of the neighbors, as soon as we moved in, they moved out. They didn't want to have anything to do with Hispanic people. That's too bad, but we came and bought the house and we had to have a place to live.

JM: When I grew up in north Holland, that was of course the 20s and 30s, the Hispanics I knew of were migrants, so there wasn't much of a permanent Hispanic settlement here. What did you find in terms of the Hispanic population when you came here in the sixties?

AS: There were just a few families who had settled here. I started to meet some of them because some of them my in-laws knew. They were not all congregated in one area, they were scattered all over the place, some with better homes than others.

JM: Did you try to get together, or was it pretty much by circumstances that you would get together?

AS: Actually by circumstances, or sometimes we would get invited to either a birthday celebration or a wedding. Sometimes we would meet at other places.

JM: Not all these Hispanics were members of St. Francis either, were they?

AS: That's a funny thing. At that time I think that there were more Catholics in the Hispanic community than there is now, because before, at least I don't remember hearing, so many Hispanics being of different congregations, which now some even have there own affiliation with some major church.

JM: Is that a reflection of what is happening in Mexico, too?

AS: I can not tell you what is happening in Mexico because it has been thirty years since I left. At that time, rarely we would hear of some Protestants or Jehovah Witnesses.

JM: Is the St. Francis parish quite unified or do you feel that there is some racial division within the church?

AS: I do believe that, unfortunately, there is some racial boundaries. Especially when Father Steve tries to get us together, but I cannot see that neither the Hispanic nor the Americans get together. They do sometimes, but very few. There are times when I see two hundred or three hundred people go to a Hispanic mass, but you only see half of that when they mix together. Then we have to take into consideration that a lot of people here, when they see a large group, think, "They are migrants, they are not staying here."

JM: Because the Catholic Church is in the minority here in Holland, the membership's scattered, isn't it?

AS: Yes, it is. It's just like the Vietnamese, too. We have Vietnamese people in the church and they have their services separate because they would not understand the language, and I do not understand their language myself.

JM: You come from Mexico, but are there other Hispanic groups in town as well from other countries?

AS: Not where I used to live.

JM: There was one Cuban family here that I was asked to take an oral history of, but I wasn't able to because he had a sickness in his family, but there is a Cuban family.

AS: In my area, I hardly ever see that, and if I did, it would be two or three people.

Chinese people, a black person, once in a while you'll see one, but not big groups, but there are other areas where I hear there are German, French, American.

JM: Was your town in Mexico as Hispanic as Holland was Dutch?

AS: Oh, yes.

JM: Holland has gone through some great changes. The Holland that I remember was very strongly Dutch. The Holland that you came to was quite strongly Dutch. How has it changed in the years that you've been here.

AS: It has changed in a way, but it was a pretty tightly closed town. There were no actions on Sunday except go to Church. People go to work during the week. Saturdays you went to buy your groceries. The town was pretty quiet. In a way I kind of miss that. Now you hear all these commotions that people are stirring up, and that is unfortunate to be happening.

JM: Did you feel discriminated against?

AS: I think there was some, like when the family moved out next door.

JM: You were talking about the different types of Hispanic languages and how you can be speaking Spanish to each other, and not be able to understand. Is that correct?

AS: Right. That is correct. It is like when people from Michigan go to Arkansas. Sometimes they have a hard time understanding. If you go to Texas it's the same way. If you ask for a pop, they're going to give you a pop (smacking his fist), not a soda. Like in Mexico, it's a little bit different from one state to another. Sometimes they do say something that means something different to someone else.

JM: I'd like to pursue this discrimination factor a little bit more, if I may. You talked

about a family on your block moving away, and I think that has happened in Holland, or we wouldn't have had the community change that we've had around 14th, 15th, and 16th Street that whole area.

AS: In those years, I remember making my trip to the United States, and in Texas we tried to get into a restaurant and they had a big sign that said "No Mexicans Allowed." Then I get here and we started seeing a little culture difference. People sometimes look down on you because you are different than they are. Those people who do those things have move out somewhere and we're moving in, in a way, and now a lot of the Hispanics are moving towards the central part of the city.

JM: I have heard that Holland has the highest per capita Spanish population of any city in this state, is that correct?

AS: Well, it's growing pretty good. I'm not sure on those figures to tell you the truth myself, but it is a pretty good percentage. They have claimed that Holland has somewhere around twenty-percent right now. It may be up to twenty-five, but Hispanic means not necessarily people from Mexico. A lot of times people do confuse people from El Salvador or other countries and it's just because they speak Spanish, and they call them Mexicans sometimes. The way they say it, they want to insult the people.

JM: Can I assume that everyone thinks that you are a migrant?

AS: It's one of the assumptions that people do make because the majority came for jobs and then left again. A lot of the migrants have changed jobs, and they have changed for the better. If you are looking to better yourself, you've got to do something

different.

JM: How do you think Holland would compare to other cities as far as accepting minorities? Do you think that it has been better, or worse, or about the same?

AS: I don't know if it's worse or if it's getting better. Maybe people are getting more aware of other cultures, not necessarily the Hispanic people. That is one of the things that American people should understand, too. They are not only one culture. You have cultures from Germany, Italy, France; just because their skin is white doesn't mean that they are American. One thing that I always tell people sometimes, and they stop and think a little bit: Why do you say that you are only American? I'm an American, too! I live in this American country. North America, Mexico is part of North America. Get that in your head.

JM: Of course, you always have to keep in mind that this city began as a Dutch enclave, and that makes it quite unique. Maybe their religious faith did at least give them some sense of treating other people in a different way. I don't know, but I'm just suggesting that. What has been your children's experience here in the school system? They started from Kindergarten on through?

AS: Yes, they went to Jefferson School, then junior high, the older two had to go to the west side, but the younger one attended the east side. Now, she is at the high school. A lot of times they separate and don't mix together. Most people are more conscious and are more willing to mix, especially when they grow up together. My kids have friends who are American and they have friends who are Hispanic. They don't stay just with one group.

JM: My impression is that your children are good students...

AS: I like to think so.

JM: Has that helped them in terms of their ethnic acceptance as well?

AS: I am not sure about that. I said to them that they go there to learn. School years are a time for you to learn and that is why you are there. Do the best that you can. If you want to have a good job, this is how you're going to get it, not by trying to dress up better than anybody else. Talk to one person the same way you talk to the other. Don't try to separate yourselves because of race. At work I have to deal with American people and Hispanics. Sometimes I get asked to go and translate because some of these people do not speak English, or the other person doesn't understand Spanish. I feel that I went through that myself, and I asked somebody else to help me out. Why can't we help the other ones? Maybe some of the people here will learn Spanish. It is better that you understand a couple of languages than just one.

JM: How do you feel about bilingual education in the schools?

AS: I do believe that it enriches that person. He will learn that they are not the only ones here on this earth.

JM: In other words it has benefits for the non-Hispanic as well as the Hispanic person?

AS: Right.

JM: Some would say that we should preserve the Hispanic language at all costs. You don't feel that way?

AS: I think so. You cannot move into speaking only one language. The whole world is not made of one English. It's like they say in the Gospel, "The body is not made of

one part, you have many different parts and one doesn't work without the other."

That is how we should be looking at things ourselves.

JM: I think that the issue has been whether we should encourage young immigrants to learn English or not. I guess that's the big issue. You would perhaps say that they should, but then remember their own traditions as well.

AS: Right, exactly. Speaking of traditions, think how many years ago this town was formed. You don't see people dressed in Dutch! Only in May! So, this is our tradition. In the same way that I see people try to keep their tradition, some want to erase it. Some people, being Hispanics, do not want to speak Spanish at all. I know a few myself.

JM: You mentioned that when you first came here in the 60s, the Hispanic community was quite small. How has that changed?

AS: It has changed quite a bit in size. I guess one example is how many restaurants we have nowadays. Now we've got a couple stores selling Mexican items, Spanish products. Before, there wasn't that many churches where there would be all Spanish. Those changes are ones that I remember because before you didn't see that. The only Hispanic Church was actually Catholic. I know that a lot of Catholics have turned to other churches.

JM: You talked about the group that you were part of called the Latin American United for Progress. I've heard something about it. Would you tell me more about it, please?

AS: There's this group of persons that tried to bring up this program, in a way. One of

the things that we do emphasize is education. We try to encourage kids to go to college. Unfortunately, they don't have the means to provide for kids, especially, they don't have enough financial aid. That's what they try to do, help them out with scholarships. Years ago it used to be they wanted to celebrate their Cinco de Mayo. Then it changed that it was not only for the Cinco de Mayo, because there were more cultures being involved. Then they changed it, but it seems to me like it's going back again to the Cinco de Mayo Fiesta, because they celebrate it on the Cinco de Mayo, just before the Dutch parade.

JM: It may be the only festival that Americans are familiar with.

AS: Like I said, they do give out some scholarships.

JM: How do you do that? Where do you get your funding? How are you organized?

AS: Sometimes they try to raise money by doing some fajitas. The fiesta generates some money. Then they go and ask businesses for donations, including individuals, they ask them to donate, too.

JM: Does it have a staff or a central office or anything like that?

AS: Well, that's one of the parts, they don't have their own place. Right now I believe the meetings are at the Catholic Church, they have a little section that did not get burned, so they have some offices there and have their meetings.

JM: It's not so much a relief organization as it is an inspirational kind of thing, trying to provide challenges for young people and so on. How do you do that? What do you think the organization does to provide that challenge?

AS: Actually, I'm not sure if they do anything, but they advertise in schools.

JM: Could there be a networking agency?

AS: From my understanding, I'm not sure. But I hear that they sort of started up the Upward Bound program. Then, this is my opinion, that it got a little bit too big and they could not handle it. Also, they started the Casa Program which is for younger kids, which, I believe, Hope College does take care of that, too.

JM: You called it the Casa Program. Casa stands for house, does it not? How do you interpret that?

AS: I am not sure exactly what the Casa Program was, because these two programs were sort of before I got involved in them. But they do look for candidates, screen them, look at grades, see how they're doing, so they can give these candidates a scholarship so they can help themselves go to college. That not necessarily means that will pay for the whole school, it's just a scholarship they get.

JM: Have your children benefitted from that, or haven't they had to?

AS: Only my first daughter, the first year, she did benefit from it. After that, they don't help you, because they don't have the funds. They get you started.

JM: Is there a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Holland?

AS: I'm not sure about that. I heard something, but I don't know if they did form.

JM: How do you feel the city of Holland, the government, is doing in terms of inter-ethnic activity? Are they doing well? Are there many things that they should be doing still? How would you rate it, in other words?

AS: That's a hard question, because, I guess I'm not sure exactly what it can do. I know that being around the only time where sometimes the Hispanics do have to relax to

kill time or do some sports, which, the sports here, it is different the way they do than what people are used to. They just want to have fun in a way, but it's sad that sometimes it does create problems. What happens, they get kicked out of places. Personally, I would discourage that, because Holland was not prepared to open up and do something. Sometimes they say that they're going to do something, and they turn around and they don't do it.

JM: My impression is that Holland, right not, has so much on it's plate, and maybe more than they should have put on their plate. Everybody is dreaming dreams in every direction. The mayor happens to be a member of our church, and he is excited about the Windmill Island, about the library, about the city hall, about the arena.

AS: I personally don't believe that Holland is ready for an arena here. Then, they want to put everything down town. They've been trying to do so much about down town, spend so much money on it. Businesses don't seem to be what they used to be years ago when I first came to Holland. I remember going to J. C. Penny's, all the stores, and you see people all over. Sears used to be just a block away.

JM: You may feel the same way I do. I can't afford to go to the 8th Street stores.

AS: What happens to those businesses? Sometimes they do survive, sometimes they don't.

JM: Are there other agencies that you see particularly being helpful for the Hispanic population here in town? (tape ends) Things have changed in terms of the city and we talked about the fact that now we have to go out to the malls to shop. Down town is fine but not always for everybody. We were talking about what institutions or organizations have been particularly helpful. We had the Crop Walk last Saturday.

You know what that is of course.

AS: Yes. My daughter participated in it.

JM: So did I. It was a great day. I always think it's a marvelous thing. That of course is primarily for those who are hungry. That brings up another issue. Is there a great deal of poverty amongst the Hispanics in this area?

AS: Well, I do believe that there is not only on the Hispanics, but you know, all kinds of people. I do believe even though Holland has a lot of jobs and a lot of opportunities, you cannot do much with the minimum wages.

JM: Exactly.

AS: I feel a lot of people here have been laid off, like Tyson's. They put people out. People have been there for ten or fifteen years earning a better pay than what they would earn now today, because it seems to me like here no matter where you go they start you off at the lowest possible wage. Especially if you have family, it's impossible.

JM: Yet, at the same time, there's an abundance of that kind of opportunity here to pick up at least that kind of a job. Has that attracted many Hispanics to this community? What brings the average Hispanic person to Holland at this point.

AS: Well, I do believe that they hear from others that there's jobs here, but then in time they probably find out that there are jobs, but sometimes they are requiring more and more qualifications. Not necessarily are you going to do just labor work. That's where sometimes you come to a dead end. People come to a dead end.

- JM: The typical Hispanic in the 1960s... How would he be employed here in Holland?
Would he be working at Weller's Nursery?
- AS: Well, no, not really. A lot of people work at GE. There used to be Holland Furnace years ago and then after that it was Lear Sigler. My brother worked there.
- JM: So then you worked for more than minimum wage? (interruption)... I was asking what kind of job the average Hispanic person might have when he came to this town in the 60s and you suggested he might be working in the factories.
- AS: Right. A lot of people did work at GE, Heinz is another one but they only use temporary people. People who used to work there would be making good money by now especially if you spent ten or twenty years there but like I said if you stay with a company you probably in time would get better pay but if you go from job to job you'll never get ahead. They start at as minimum as possible unless you got some qualities or experience, then you may be able to get a better pay. That's one of the things that I try to encourage my kids. The only way you are going to get better if you continue on your education because otherwise you'll end up in a factory and nowadays like they say people that have worked ten, fifteen years they go out the door, they have to start at probably half of what they were making before. That's unfortunate because they have families. They'll never support them so what will happen? They'll go on poverty.
- JM: Have the Hispanics profited from the growth of companies like Haworth and Herman Miller and Prince and so on. Have they found good jobs in those organizations too?
- AS: Well, I'm not sure, because I cannot tell you how good they may have it in other

places because I never experienced going to those places. I just might know people who do work there so I cannot tell you how good they would be t here I just from hearsay. So I cannot tell you.

JM: Now if a person was coming to Holland now as a Hispanic where might he look for a job and would there be enough work for him to take advantage of in finding a job?

AS: Usually, when people come here it is sometimes because someone is here already and people do guide them to... You can go to, let's say, Heinz. A lot of people, they migrate, like Selenca (?), they usually have people contracted to come work there. So those people sometimes they call someone else, "Yeah, I can probably get you in there."

JM: Do most Hispanic immigrants come from Mexico to Holland or do they come from other parts of the country?

AS: Oh no. They come from all different places. It's not necessarily all from Mexico. People from Texas they come up here.

JM: Many of them are second and third and fourth generation Americans.

AS: Yes, I believe so. I know a fellow right now, he came from California and I'm not sure exactly whether he's better here or California. From what I hear that's a pretty expensive place to live. (laughs)

JM: Oh yes! I lived there. I know. You live right here on this block and you've lived here a long time. How do you get along with your neighbors?

AS: Well, I must be getting along pretty good because I lived here twenty-one years. (laughs) Twenty-one years? '76? '96? Yeah.

JM: Today people don't know they're neighbors like they used to but you do interact with your neighbors?

AS: Well, not really. You see unto the west it's a whole parking lot. To the east my neighbor passed away about a year ago, a little bit over a year. We used to have neighbors across the street too, the Lentings, and they were real Dutch people, nice but they were quite old at the time and when they finally... they sold out the place and Mr... I'm not really sure of his last name because unfortunately we don't see each other hardly. We don't speak to each other. (laughs) My wife does talk to his wife sometimes. But usually everybody kind of stays on his own place. My kids used to go with my neighbors in the backyard but... of course they used to go to school too, so they would play afterwards. But usually there was not that many kids around and still not because when we moved in here there was a lot of older people that lived in this area, and then we used to have four more homes in this block and they took them out and made a parking lot.

JM: What do you do for fun?

AS: For fun? Well, I used to, (laughs) not any more, I used to play soft ball, bowling. Sometimes I played tennis.

JM: Were you in leagues with bowling?

AS: Bowling, yes. I was in leagues for probably about ten years.

JM: What groups were they?

AS: I'm trying to remember what the league was, the name of the league. I think it was the Merchants League.

JM: Okay. It was a community league.

AS: It was a community league. We had like about ten teams in the league and I bowled myself with Seaway Bar. We were champions for like five years, three in a row and then we'd miss one and then we was champions again. My high game I had 289.
(laughs)

JM: Do you travel?

AS: Not too much. Usually... I used to... well I still do sometimes. I used to travel by car, go to Mexico like every two years, two and a half years but it's quite far and quite expensive and I cannot afford to be out there every year. The other problem was too that at work they only gave you two weeks vacation so you spend one whole week on the road you don't have much time to enjoy it. But lately it's pretty far and it gets tiring and we are fortunate enough that sometimes we have gone by air. But then we get up there and it's kind of hard because you don't get around and especially if you don't know how you can get from one place to another without a taxi. Sometimes you cannot find taxis, especially if it rains in my town, because everybody is using them and they're too busy.

JM: Now you're 48, right?

AS: 49.

JM: 49. So you've got quite a bit of time yet before retirement.

AS: Yes, I sure do. (laughs)

JM: What do you hope to do in those years?

AS: Well, I just hope God gives me the life to continue first I'd like to see my youngest

go to college. That's the one thing I would like to see. After they get married, well they're going to have to be on their own.

JM: That's right. I know. I have five!

AS: You got five! (laughs) Actually we do have five ourselves but we lost the first two.

JM: So your expectation is to finish with Louis Padnos if you can. You've found a home there.

AS: Yes, I hope so. I hope God gives me time and like I said I like the work that I do and one thing I'm pretty sure even though I never did work in a factory I don't think I would like that. But I guess I always was leaning or had the ambition to be a mechanic or an electrician. But I do sometimes some wiring and like this.

JM: So if you had the opportunity and gone to school you might have been an engineer or something like that.

AS: Well, I don't think so because actually I wasn't too good in school.

JM: I see.

AS: That's probably the reason I got out of school too early.

JM: Well, that surprises me, because I don't think that's particularly true. You speak so well. You have such an articulate way. I think you have very strong gifts!

AS: Oh well. One thing I guess I surprise a lot of people that I give the impression that I have a better education which I must say I don't have.

JM: Well, that's not a front... You have a good education. You're self-educated.

AS: Kind of. (laughs) In a way because what you hear me talking I actually learn most of it just by ear. I can almost read the newspaper, the whole thing. But don't ask me to

write. (laughs) I have too much difficulty. Because one thing I didn't put no emphasis or hardly even tried to learn to write.

JM: What would you say are Holland's biggest challenges today and you can look at it either from your point of view as a member of the Hispanic community or as a citizen of Holland, either way? What are Holland's biggest challenges right now as compared to the last thirty years that you've lived here?

AS: Biggest challenges.

JM: Or problems if you want to put it that way.

AS: Well, I think the drugs, gangs, which I do feel that for a few years they were trying to deny that they were here. Finally they had to admit it that they were here. That's two problems that we have clashes against, one group of people against another. Sometimes not necessarily the same race, but sometimes the same race.

JM: In other words, it's not necessarily united. You may be a leader in the Latin-American community, but that doesn't mean that everybody is going to follow you.

AS: Right. Exactly. Like I say, you've got people from all kinds of... all different countries.

JM: Regardless of who you are...

AS: You have Cubans, you have Puerto Ricans, you have from Columbia, you have from Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala. They're all from different cultures.

JM: They look at it from a different point of view and have had a different experience.

AS: One person cannot... or one organization I don't think can put them all together and keep them happy.

JM: What do you think of the police department here in Holland?

AS: I don't know. The police department, I think they're probably doing their job.

JM: Are you finding more understanding of the diversity here in Holland?

AS: Well, I'm not sure because I hear that a couple of years ago they were trying to teach them Spanish so they could understand some of the people. But how far it went I'm not sure. If they did and how much they learned.

JM: I think they also were being helped to understand the differences among various peoples. That's also a good part of the training they were going to receive. Who are some of the really prominent people here in Holland who are of Hispanic background. I know there is somebody on the City Council.

AS: We have Victor Orosco and we have Luciano Hernandez which is a commissioner. In order to be in office you kind of have to be like a politician and I don't know if a lot of people are inclined towards that. Politics is pretty hard job to do and there are sort of people here who have education. They have "brains" that you see them work in the hospital and different communities and...

JM: Are there any professionals in town like doctors, lawyers, people of that stature who are Hispanics?

AS: Not in this town. I never have heard of anybody. There is somebody from Grand Rapids who comes to help people that speak Spanish but I'm not sure what nationality he is.

JM: There's an assistant dean at Hope College who's Hispanic. I can't think of him.

AS: Alfredo Gonzales?

JM: Yes. Gonzales, yes. Unhuh.

AS: Yes, he's been at Hope quite a few years. I have known him for some time and he's an assistant to the Provost I think.

JM: Assistant Provost I think. I think he has a major responsibility for the integration of the...

AS: Integration of the cultures there? There's Dr. _____ I believe. He's from Columbia I'm not sure exactly. He's been here working with the hospital for a couple years. There's a couple people there in nursing. People working in schools. There's a couple of teachers here that I know. One is from Chile.

JM: What would be your dream for the Hispanic community here in Holland? Would you like to have it a strong entity or a part of Holland as a whole or...

AS: Well, my dream would be for the Hispanic community to learn more about how this community is run by and to be more involved. That's one of the problems we do have I guess.

JM: I suppose they first must come together to do that.

AS: Right.

JM: Then we have to remember that they come from, as in my cousin's church, maybe twenty-two or maybe even more countries.

AS: (laughs) Yes. Correct!

JM: Well, this has been great. I really enjoyed this. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this?

AS: Well, I just hope that all this research that you are doing helps to whatever the goal

you have in mind. Hopefully that people who are interviewed will help you put something together.

JM: We live in a different world. I think it was seventy-five years ago when Holland had a big celebration. In those days they had orations, these people would get up and speak for an hour, an hour and a half. Those orations came down as documents that we have in the Archives. Now they're depending on things like this. So somewhere along the line somebody will want to know what was the Hispanic community like in 1997. Then we'll be able to say, "Here's this Antonio Soto. You'll have to listen to what he has to say." This will all be transcribed, of course, and so that's why its there. All I can say is I congratulate you. You appear to be a good parent, you and your wife.

AS: We try to be.

JM: I'm totally delighted you're part of our community.

AS: Well, I've lived here for thirty years and I like the town. Its just that its getting a little to big now. Of course there's a lot of changes.

JM: Would you expect to live here for the rest of your life?

AS: Well, I surely hope so. My wife a few years back she wanted me to move somewhere else. I said, "Nope! I'm fine right here!" This area I like and now that its getting busier I don't know. I might change my mind!

JM: You sound just like a Dutchman! They complain about the busyness too.

AS: Well, you can't get our of your driveway. In fact, I'll have to move somewhere else I guess.

JM: Well, thank you very much, Antonio.

Initial Contact Form

Name: *Antonio Soto*

Date of birth:

Place of birth: *Salamanca, Mexico*

Mother's name (include maiden name): *Antonia Acosta*

Father's name: *SIRENIO*

Siblings' names (include birthdates if known):

Jose

Spouse's name (include wife's maiden name): *Carolina Salas*

Date of marriage: *Aug 27, 1967*

Place of marriage: *Holland, MI*

Children's names (include dates and places of birth):

*Maria Jessica
Marco Antonio
Sonia*

*Holland, MI
" "
" "*

Date of death:

Place of death and burial:

Religion and church membership: *St Francis Roman Catholic*

Schooling and/or other training:

Elementary School in Mexico

Residential history (list all residences chronologically, noting the dates lived at each):

*Pullman, MI - 1965
516 W. 21st, 1966
160 W. 19th 1969
516 W. 21st 1973-76
63 W. 32nd 76-97*

Occupational history (list all occupations chronologically, noting the place of work, the type of work done there, and the approximate salary):

*At 14 began to repair home appliances
At 17 came to States
Walker's Nursery 14r
Palmas Iron & Metal Co. 1967 - Present*

Membership in clubs and organizations (note dates of membership and offices held):

*None
Latin American United for Progress*

Other general information: