1-1-1990

Loera, Rebecca A Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Recommended Citation


Published in: 1990 - Members of the Hispanic Community (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, January 1, 1990. Copyright © 1990 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview with Rebecca Loera  
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

RL: We arrived in the early 1940s.

JO: How old were you when you arrived?

RL: I was younger than 8 years old, and then we settled here when I was 8 completely. We had been coming back and forth from the migrant stream for about 3 or 4 years prior to that.

JO: Did you first set up a residence in Holland or were you traveling to a different city in Michigan?

RL: No, we had been traveling to Ionia in the Lansing area for sugar beets, my dad did migrant work with sugar beets, potatoes wherever they were, and pickles, picking pickles. I remember that was before my 8th birthday. We settled in Holland because my dad did find a job here at a place called the Holland Sugar Factory which was located right here in this same area. They tore that down some time ago. He decided to go to work in a factory, although not learning any English at all, by signs and whatever, he did stay there for awhile until the place closed down. He wanted for us to settle because we were not getting our proper education.

JO: Where was your first place of residence within Holland?

RL: Right here on west 15th Street.

JO: Do your parents still live there?

RL: No, that was torn down quite some time ago. After I got married, my dad and mom moved away from that area.
JO: Was there a neighborhood established there at the time or was it sort of an isolated area?

RL: It was isolated because the factories are on this side, and the low income housing district type at the point. I think it's still generally is the west side down here on this side of town. We did get an older home then that we fixed up a little bit to live in at that time.

JO: Was it a Hispanic community or were your...?

RL: No, my dad and mom were probably one of the first families to come to Holland, Michigan. I think, in maybe the archives or something, there is a place where there was 6 Hispanic families and my mom and dad were probably one of the first of those 6 families.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

RL: I was born in Crystal City, Texas, that's about 200 and some miles out of San Antonio, Texas. My mom and dad are both from Mexico.

JO: Was that a rural area or an urban area?

RL: Crystal City, Texas, is a very, teeny, tiny town. It is the Popeye state of the United States, where Popeye is well-known for his spinach. That was sort of rural because there was hardly no families there living, it was a very small little town, clustered little town, mostly Hispanics.

JO: What did your folks do in Crystal City?

RL: My father worked in the factories, the vegetable factories, the spinach and some carrots and so on that they brought into Crystal City to harvest and then to can.
JO: What were the conditions that pushed you out of Crystal City and towards Michigan? Was there economic slowdown?

RL: The migrant stream was the economic thing. They were not working full-time year-round over there. It was just seasonal like it is with the Heinz pickle factories, etc. They could only work through so many months and the other months they would come to Michigan or to other parts of the United States to work. That is what, generally, he was doing for years and then decided to quit when I was 8 years old.

JO: Where was your first job in Holland?

RL: I was in high school and in my senior year I got to work at Holland Furnace Company in the office because I was on a training job. And I did work there for like 8 years after that, after I graduated from high school, in 1954.

JO: Where are you employed now and what position do you hold?

RL: I am employed presently at Community Action House here at 345 West 14th Street; I am a social worker here. I’ve been here since October 9th of last year.

JO: How did you come to this job from your original job?

RL: I had been working in Muskegon area after I graduated from Hope in 1984. I went on to a social service job up in El Centro Latino in Muskegon, Michigan. I worked there for 5 years and I applied for this job last year.

JO: Did you attend any school in Holland?

RL: Yes, I attended St. Francis de Sales Elementary, Holland High School graduated in 1954, and Hope College graduated in 1985, which were a lot of years in between.

[laughter]
JO: What were your impressions of the school system?

RL: At the time that I was in the school system, we were very few Hispanic families. There was some discrimination, but I didn't notice it as much as other people that had just come without no language. I had already learned the English language, etc., so it was more comfortable for me. I did enjoy the elementary school years at St. Francis because it's a parochial school and we were typical Catholic families that had been arriving were going into that school. Holland High School was also a good school, very much motivation toward students. I just happened to be, sort of like a pet in the classroom, head of the Spanish class, which I was very good at. Of course, we spoke Spanish at home, completely. We were bilingual, but had to speak Spanish at home with our parents. That was an easier class for me, but I had very good teachers in the Holland High School system at that time.

JO: So you didn't have any need for bilingual education?

RL: At the time we were here there were so very few of us and we had to either sink or swim you might say, so we swam a lot and we learned. At the time that I went back to school to work as a teacher aide or in the resource rooms to help Hispanics to just get by with the classroom work, I was much needed. There was a large number of them that needed that help. The bilingual programs were begun some time ago. A lot of people that were involved that I knew from the community, have really helped out in Lansing.

JO: So you did know a good amount of English when you first arrived?

RL: No, when I arrived I was not bilingual, I did not know any. I flunked kindergarten.
twice. [laughter] As I was in the schools here not in Texas and we spoke primarily in Spanish in the Texas schools. So it was very hard to make that transition, but the thing was that it came to me much more easier than to other people because I had to learn it very quickly. I was known as an interpreter for my family because my mom and dad did not speak English.

JO: Where did you pick up most of your English skills? Daily life?

RL: Daily life with my school friends and parents of my school friends also. No one knew Spanish at that time. And the school system too. Learning English in the school system was primarily my goal when I first begun to speak English.

JO: Can you remember your first impressions of Holland when you first got here?

RL: As they say now, Holland is a very clean town. A lot of good people in Holland, Michigan, a lot of supporting system things. Although my father could not speak English and he didn't get much help at the time that he was here with the four of us children. It was hard for him to do very many things and financially we were not well off. They struggled and they sort of made it, you might say. My impressions of Holland were that it was a very nice town. People were very kind and they loved to see someone that was different than they were, they knew we spoke Spanish and we made tortillas at home. All my school friends used to come over after school and we'd have snacks, Mexican snacks like burritos and tacos and enchiladas and all that good stuff, that are now so popular everywhere you go.

JO: Did your impressions change as you got older? Did you see the city in a different light?
RL: As I was growing up I saw it more and more. In 1954, when I graduated, there was only 3 Hispanics graduating with me. I made a goal for myself that as I got older and married and raised my children that I would try very hard to get the Hispanics to have more graduates in the Holland High School or Christian or whatever school was graduating. The numbers were very, very small and I could tell there was very many frustration points because it would be that you'd have someone that ______ had just begun in school and they would just drop out of the system completely. You never heard about them again in the school system. They just couldn't do it without the bilingualism and things like that.

JO: What were some of the major problems you encountered in Holland?

RL: As I grew up I think my first encounter was after I was married. We went to a restaurant in South Haven, Michigan, that's like south of town. And we had two Hispanic couples and one Anglo couple with us and they did not let the Hispanic couples into the restaurant. That was my first experience. I grew up here, being south of Holland I never had gone out that far so I was not aware that was going on. In Holland you did not get that much face-to-face. You got it more likely, you were trying to rent a place and my father always seemed to have these problems when other people told him that they were trying to rent a place, they would not be able to rent one. Once they found out you were not English speaking and you were not Anglo. It was very hard for some families, it really was.

JO: Was your family discriminated against coming into a housing situation?

RL: I think because we were way on the west side of town, we're the last house on west
15th Street, we were not that well know around town so it was not that type of thing. Not open like you see sometimes now with the blacks or the Hispanics or even the Cambodian people. We sort of kept out of people’s way and did not encounter that because my father and mother were not outgoing people, more to the family and stayed around and with the family and did not have many friends around.

JO: So it helped that you were sort of on the edge of the city?

RI: Right, and that we were not outgoing as you might say.

JO: Can you remember any other forms of discrimination that you encountered here in Holland or is that the only incident?

RL: Well, I think as I was growing up you sort of close your eyes to a lot of things and when you get older you realize that that had happened. Mostly in jobs, I would say, that that was one of the things that I thought as I was growing up. Phones were very nice and you could call people about jobs and interviews and so on, but you didn’t have the right background, the right church or the right something or other. I think it was discrimination, quite openly.

JO: You had problems finding a job in Holland?

RL: I did not because I was trained to go right into a job and I stayed there until I had my first child, after I got married. It was not hard for me. Later on as I approached new jobs it was always that people were really needed on those jobs, otherwise it might have been. Yes, I would think so.

JO: Did you feel any racial tension in Holland? Did you feel like there was a civil rights movement at any one point or the Hispanic community was going to confront the
Anglo community?

RL: Yes, after we started the Upward Bound program, was one of the first programs at Hope College that was begun by a person who really wanted to see more Hispanics or more minorities enter programming for the school. I was on their first board and I thought it was at the time that people really weren't open to anything like that because we were trying to group together and hold meetings for the bilingual program, for instance. They weren't too much for it. There were a lot of people that were for it, that were in the committee, that lived here all their lives and really wanted to see something positive for the minorities.

JO: So there was sort of a confrontation on Upward Bound?

RL: I think at the time that the first board was started, yes. It has developed into such a big program now and it's well known and the people who have run it are very good directors. So it's got very, very, good, positive things now and the goals were reached, at times, what we first begun just with the bilingual programs.

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

RL: We have organizations that have tried to sort of get together on some concerns of the community. I think that Al Serrano working at Human Relations helps, Al Gonzales over at Hope College for minority students, that helps a lot. All of those things that really come to be because of a lot of motivation by some certain groups. Latin Americans United for Progress, I have been in that for 25 years now, off and on when I wasn't going to school and so on, out of town. It's one of the few organizations that
have stuck together that really has some real good goals, which are education, a lot of scholarships go out and motivation for young ladies to really achieve their status in life as being beautiful and can run for Queen and then go on to college after that because college is stressed in anything that they do there. I'm very proud of being part of that. I'm still being the major part of it and I'm going back into the education system. I will be on the scholarship committee this coming year.

JO: What has the Hispanic community offered in the past to Holland?

RL: I think that they have, besides an awareness that the Hispanic community is here probably to stay, a lot of it has stayed and stayed and we have too. A lot of them think they're going to go back eventually, but they stay here because the community is a very nice community. I think that they have offered a lot to the community in itself because of their music and their culture and their fiestas that they have, the awareness that Hispanic students also want to achieve something in life.

JO: Add a little more diversity to Holland.

RL: Diversity to Holland, yes.

JO: Can you repeat the organizations you belong to?

RL: I have belonged to quite a few in the community. I have belonged to the ______ board, which is the drug, substance and alcohol abuse. We used to have a ______ program which is a drug alcohol abuse program for Hispanics, then that went into Child Family Services which is now very big there with some Hispanics have been hired that are very, very good counselors. The other organizations, of course Latin Americans United for Progress, which I have been in for at least 25 years. The other
ones would be right now, Women In Transition, I’m on their board and I’m trying right now to get into the League of Women Voters, which I will do very well once I start calling them up—I just haven’t had the time, we’ve been so busy. But I am interested also in the AAUW, that organization. And those are my future goals because I’ve been so busy lately since I started here. I have been involved in very, very many organizations here. Too numerous to mention, I did run for school board twice in certain years and I also ran for the City Council board too, of this board at some time.

JO: Did you win any those elections?

RL: I won the primaries in the ones that I had to win primaries in, but in the final elections I had not won any. We’re very happy that Mr. Hernandez finally did make the board too. [laughter]

JO: What would you like to see changed in the city?

RL: Well, I would still like to see the diversity that has come to Holland, Michigan, to always be here, that awareness that there are others besides the Dutch people. The Dutch people are very good people who have founded Holland, but really it should be open to anyone who wants to stay there, and it is basically. If we really want to stay I think that, that’s one of the things I am really proud of, to be a Holland resident, is that that is very open. But you have to seek it out also, you can’t just sit at home and wonder why they didn’t give you a chance at that thing or that job or whatever. You have to do a lot of things yourself to really get into being a part of the Holland community.
JO: Do most Hispanics share these views with you or do they have a different view for Holland?

RL: No, I'm afraid they don't, not everybody shares them. Majority of the people you've spoken to probably do, but a lot of them feel like they'll always be discriminated against. Knowing that they have to go, probably through the educational system for one, if they want a good paying job they probably have to go to school to college and so on. Some are not open for that, yet. It seems that there has to be a learning process and some people have not taken the time to learn it and some people have not taken the time to teach it. That's what's needed here mostly in Holland.

JO: Are these Hispanics that you're talking about, that still feel that they're discriminated against, are these newer immigrants coming in?

RL: Some are and some would be when my father and mother first settled here in the 40's. They are still having problems with the systems. They probably always will, and their children, their children's children. It seems like it sort of like an ongoing process in the families. Once you get to know that you want to be educated and so do your children, the world just changes, but you're still in the same community.

JO: What do you see for the future of Holland in the Hispanic community? What do you see their future together?

RL: Well, I think that their future together is very good. I think that with the people that you have spoken to and the people I know that are very good Hispanics and they want to do something good for the community itself, that that would help to just bring it together all the time. Always there should be also somewhere where you could go to
make a formal complaint or not a complaint but maybe a congratulations to somebody. That helps a lot and I think that's got to be done more in the Holland community.

JO: I want to ask you a few additional questions. What percentage of Holland is Hispanic? You would probably know since you active in the Action House right here. Do you know a rough estimate?

RL: Well as rough estimate in running for Council and school board and trying to get numbers of Hispanics there has always been that 20% and 22%. You could look at it the whole community or just the city inside. I really don't know what it is just inside Holland, but I think the outers, where you can count everybody, it'd be 22 maybe plus more. A lot more, that have not been counted.

JO: What forms of discrimination still are present within Holland, you probably see a lot by working here at the Action House. How are Hispanics still discriminated against?

RL: A lot of it's employment. Latins for Progress was begun because there was some discrimination in jobs a lot. The other one would be the school, the school does discriminate at times, even though they say they don't. Churches do. You visit, not mentioning names, but you visit other churches in other areas like Grand Haven and other places and they have a lot more discrimination sometimes. It's open, it's much more open than here. Here you don't get that, you get it afterwards. If someone calls you on the phone and wants to rent a place they'll show it to you, but if they find out you're black or you have a Hispanic name, you might have a lot of problems. I encountered that here with housing. I worked with the homeless, obtaining homes, apartments for the people. They let you know that they've been discriminated against.
I think it's a vital ________ It's something that has to be dealt with.

JO: What does the Community Action House actually do?

RL: The Community Action House begun 20 some years ago to help people who needed food and emergency help, who fell through the cracks, through the department of Social Services. At that time the Department of Social Services could not help everyone, a lot of who are getting their legal status here in the United States cannot get help because the Department of Social Service is a program where it doesn't help everybody. They have certain rules and some of it is that if you're not born here or a citizen or something, or you're not legal they will not help you. Community Action House was actually begun for that, but also for the ones who did get some help eventually but did not get it at the time that they needed it. It was sort of like, let's help you for 2 or 3 days until you get help from Social Services or from other agencies. A lot of it was translating also. A lot of people did not know English yet, and that translation was very much needed. We do a lot of that here.

JO: So do you basically deal with Hispanics most of the time?

RL: The larger part would probably not be all Hispanics, but it would be part of the community, whatever is in here. Right now we have the migrants quite a bit but they're here only through November. Some will stay, relocate.

JO: How many migrant families keep coming to Holland?

RL: This year and last year we saw less of them and I think you will get that from the farmers too who employed them, because they are going to be short on blueberries this year and they were last year. That is because of the amnesty program that they
had a couple years ago to help people get their legal status and some who could not be helped in that program can not come here any more because they're illegals. And it gets harder and harder for the farmers themselves because they are not going to get enough help. That has happened in the last two or three years.

JO: Thank you very much Ms. Loera.