

Oral History Interview with the Mendoza Family  
Washington County Historical Society

Informant: Mendoza: Rafael, Isabel  
Interviewer: Michael O'Rourke  
Transcriber: Jim Lundblade

O = Michael O'Rourke  
R = Rafael Mendoza  
I = Isabel Mendoza

O: ... with Rafael and Isabel Mendoza. Have I pronounced your names correctly?

I: Yes

R: Correct.

O: Rafael, I understand that you were born in Mexico, is that right?

R: Yes, I was.

O: Whereabouts?

R: Oxmendon[?], Tuacan[?], Mexico.

O: Okay. And where is that in Mexico?

R: It's real south of Mexico City, I believe.

O: OK. When were you born?

R: 1958.

O: OK. How long were you in Mexico before you came to this country?

R: I was nine years old.

O: Can you tell me a little bit about those first nine years? Were you living with your parents at that time?

R: Yes, I was.

O: And what did your parents do when you were in Mexico?

R: My father used to come to the United States every year and go back and visit us for a couple of weeks or so. Then sometime in '67 he got passports to come to the United states.

O: OK. And then would he work here and come back .

R: Yes. Yes he would.

O: What kind of work would he do?

R: Field work. Irrigation.

O: What part of the United States would he come to?

R: I believe it was Stockton. Stockton, California.

O: OK. What was your life like in Mexico? What do you remember growing up as a boy in Mexico?

R: I remember we were very poor. Very, very poor. I have good memories although we were very poor, we were a happy family. That's what I can remember.

O: Did your mother work in Mexico then when you were growing up there? Or was she just taking care of the family?

R: She was taking care of the family, and she would watch for other folks, and then my father would send us money to survive.

O: Did you have jobs as a boy to help your mother out?

R: No.

O: What sorts of things would you do as a boy in Mexico to play or to amuse yourself?

R: Marbles. I remember we'd play a lot of marbles. A game called a trumble[?] game, a top.

O: Did you live in the town?

R: No, we lived out in the country.

O: So you had a lot of open space?

R: Yes.

O: Did the family farm or raise you own food at all?

R: My father would start buying cattle. He would send money and when he'd go over there, he'd start buying cows, so he built it up to where he considered to be successful cow man in Mexico.

O: Would you help take care of the cows then? Or were the cows someplace else?

R: Actually, I remember the times we were really poor, then we came from Mexico from the age of nine to fourteen, we'd go back once a year. I remember at that time we weren't so poor, so me and my father would go out to the farm country and we would buy a cow. That was a lot of

fun. I think, when I go to California and pick up product, it reminds me of that. I believe that's a good memory I have of Mexico.

O: When you first came to this country it was to Stockton?

R: We came to Stockton.

O: You were there for how long?

R: It must have been about six to eight months. And then a came was recruiting to pick berries and we came to Jerry Stenker's[?] camp. In North Plains.

O: So that's when you came to Oregon. Which was within a year of when you were in this country. You were working in the fields at that time?

R: Yes. We worked very hard in the fields. Picking berries, cucumbers, raspberries. All the field work that there is.

O: The whole family was doing that?

R: Yes, the whole family.

O: And then you were going to school in North Plains.

R: You know to be honest with you, my father, at one time he thought he could, him and I really enjoyed cattle, and at one time we thought we would earn money here and then we would go to Mexico. All that I remember here was just work and work. He told me he wasn't going to give me an education because he just wasn't ready for .. he didn't feel I needed an education for work I thought I was going to be doing which was working on a farm raising cows. I can honestly say I did not have any education, because he was put me to school and then some job would come up and he would take me out. It was very devastating. It was really hard for me. So I learned to work. He talked me the basics of life, of hard work and I learned that well.

O: You didn't go to high school either then?

R: No, I didn't.

O: What about language? Did you speak English?

R: No I did not.

O: Was that difficult for you to learn the new language? How did that go?

R: Actually, it was very difficult since I didn't have an education. It was hard. I remember starting to communicate somewhat when I met my wife, Isabel. That was in '77. I believe that from there I started more to speak English. My English was very poor because it was all taught at jobs.

O: You had to learn to speak English when you met Isabel because that's what she spoke?

R: Yes, yes [laughs].

O: How did you two meet?

R: We met at a dance in Forest Grove.

O: You began to see each other after that?

R: Yes.

O: You were still working in the fields at that time?

R: At that time I was working for Hoodys.

O: You got a job at Hoody's in what year roughly?

R: '77

O: What were you doing there?

R: I was a machine operator.

O: And then the two of you got together. Did you start talking about starting your own business?

R: There was a fellow that asked us to go into a venture with him because it wasn't a whole bunch of money, I believe it was about \$500 for my part, we thought we would go for it. And we did. That's how we started.

O: He was having a store also?

R: Yes, there was a gentleman here in Portland by the name of Ijargoes [?] . He was ill and was selling the little store that he had.

O: Oh, I see. And you had to come up with \$500 to buy him out?

R: Yes.

O: Actually, before I ask you about the business, there's one other thing I'd like to ask about. When you first came to this country and came to Oregon, apart from the language, did you have any other difficulties being from another country? How did you adjust being in this new community with American people? Did you ever have any problem with discrimination encountered?

R: No, I just remember being real close and just working all the time. That's the memory I have.

O: And you think the people you worked for treated you well and fairly?

R: I believe that because we worked so hard, people had a lot of respect for my father and for the family. That's what I remember.

O: So you bought the business for \$500. Was Isabel working too at that time?

I: Yes, for Washington County Community Action.

O: How was it getting the business started?

R: To me, it was a hobby. I worked many hours and I had a lot of energy, and I'm glad that that opportunity came about because I felt at Hoody's I really didn't have any responsibilities, just an employee, so I'd work my eight hours and go home. It would be kind of boring, so when this came about, it was the perfect thing. I enjoyed it and I still do.

O: Where was that first store then?

R: It was on 127 Second Street.. 147 SE 2<sup>nd</sup> St. in Hillsboro.

O: How did you run the store? Was it just open hours you could be there or did you have employees?

R: We started off opening after work, and on weekends, we'd hire someone to help us. We kind of went with the flow.

O: Isabel, you were born in Wyoming in 1957?

I: Yes.

O: What was your family like in Wyoming?

I: My father worked for the railroad at the time, and I was real young, I was only five, when we moved to New Mexico with my mother's family.

O: Your father had left you?

I: Yes, he abandoned us. So my mother was pretty much raising the seven kids.

O: Was that a difficult thing for you?

I: Oh, very. It was real difficult at the time. Because of course we also came from a very poor family. We couldn't really depend on anyone financially other than just the moral support that our family brings, or should bring. I remember living with my grandma a short time and then my mother soon after started working. She went to the school district.

O: As a young child, did you have much of a relationship with your father?

I: Occasionally, meaning the summer. They'd send two or three of us to spend some time with him, for like a month at a time during our summer vacation. It was always the younger kids that went to spend time with him. The last time I remember going was about nine years old.

O: And you don't remember him to well ....

I: Oh, yes, I do. He was a wonderful man. He was a wonderful father, and he was a good provider, and very family oriented, but you know his drinking took him to the grave. And that was his main problem.

O: And the economic situation probably didn't help that.

I: Right.

O: So then you moved to New Mexico in 1962. You told me that you were your mother and you were involved in the food service business in New Mexico?

I: Yes. Acutally it was the family business. As us kids got older, another ..... there was me, my mother, set us up in a restaurant and between the seven of us we could help her and she would set up and we would help her through my lunch hour. We'd have to run to the restaurant to help her for lunch, and then after school we all participated. And it was three sisters and four brothers, and the sisters were space, so one would help mom in the kitchen, and two in the front with the customers, and the brothers did the pealing of potatoes into French fries and did the cleaning of the grills and the sweeping and mopping at night. So we took it on as a family. In my younger ages us kids where mom worked during the day and in the school in the evening, so that was the way to make ends meet at home and as far as us kids, my brothers would pick asparagus, and spinach and I don't know if you remember those buckets morelle buckets, mud buckets, and we'd sell them to make money to go to the movie and do stuff. And us girls would do housecleaning for people, and painting and ironing. I had a couple of elderly women I cleaned homes, eight hour job every Saturday, and I walked two miles every Saturday to get there. But it was fun. \$5 a day. I did laundry and clean house and actually polished wooden floors. Every Saturday they had a different assignment for me. But every Saturday I did laundry and hung up socks, and clothes dried. I'd do housecleaning or polish the pans or the floors, or whatever assignment they had for me. And before I left I did all the ironing for \$5 a day. And a piece of pie. [laughs] Because they always had home made pies. Peach pie and ice cream.

O: Where in New Mexico was this?

I: Mora.

O: What sort of place is Mora?

I: It's real small. We call it a valley. But it's real similar to Mexico. Real dry, like a little ranch. No supermarkets. All just small little stores and gas stations and taverns. Small school, population of about three or four thousand people.

O: Is it a Latino community?

I: I'd say 98% at that time. Now the park areas, the camping grounds .... But at the time it was 98% Latino.

O: Then you went to school there too?

I: Oh, yes. From kindergarten to graduation.

O: What was school like for you?

I: I loved school. It was a big part of my life. I had lots of friends. It was a good part of my life because I had so much fun. And I enjoyed going to school.

O: And you did well?

I: I did very well.

O: What were your favorite subjects?

I: Math and [.....]

O: You said you were running the restaurant? Was it a Hispanic style restaurant?

I: Again, you go back to that Tex-Mex. It's Mexican food and American food. We had a restaurant that sat 75 to 100 people when we started. That consisted of mainly full menu of Mexican American food: Hamburgers, French fries, enchiladas, tacos thing. But we had that place for about 3 years and then shortly after that we got another business and it was real similar but a little larger: a Dairy Queen, called the Dairy Mart. Of course, that included all the fountain drinks, and ice sundaes that we didn't have at the other place. It was more like a Dairy Queen, but bigger.

O: This was the place instead of the previous restaurant?

I: Right. After 3 years of having the first restaurant, we had the Dairy Mart.

O: I see here in my notes that one of your jobs was to make tortillas?

I: No, I made tortillas for grandmother when I was 4 years old. That's before we had the restaurant and every day after school, because we walked home from school, I'd stop and make her fresh flour tortillas for her next business day. I hated that. [laughs] But it was a job. She paid me and that put money in my pocket, but that was one of my first jobs, making flour tortillas.

O: Then at a certain point you moved to Oregon.

I: In 1975.

O: In New Mexico you have other family members?

I: Oh yes. I still have family in New Mexico. I have a sister that is a teacher. She has been teaching for 12 years. I have a brother that works for the State Highway Department. I still have like nieces and nephews that live in Mora County. Uncles and aunts that still live in Mora County. Lots of family in New Mexico, California, Colorado and Wyoming.

O: Why did the family decide to move to Oregon?

I: There was a family that was recruiting for berries. My mother came up with that family. I was at the university at the time. She moved up here with my brothers. I came up here for Christmas.

O: What university was this?

I: Lima, New Mexico Highlands University.

O: You had just started school?

I: Yes, I had just gone 2 quarters. My mother came up here for the summer and decided to stay. They went to work in the fields, because my brothers were so young and my mother had never worked in the fields, financially they couldn't make it. So they moved into town and through a SETA program [29:49.1] for adult and youth and they got job placements. They saw the opportunity they wanted and decided to stay.

O: So the opportunity in Oregon looked better?

I: Oh, yes, absolutely. And then I came up in '76 and the next day I started working at the mink(?) farm in Forest Grove, the Montanez Youth Farm (?) just to make enough money for Christmas.

O: If I remember correctly you had a daughter at this time?

I: Uh huh.

O: She was in Oregon?

I: Yes, I came up here to spend Christmas with her family. I came up for the holidays we were so poor we thought "Well, we've got to make money for Christmas." An opportunity came up to start at the beginning of the year at Community Action Washington County. And so I thought I'd give it a try and I liked it. [laughs] Never went back.

O: What did you do on the mink farm, before we get to Washington County?

I: We scrapped and stretched the minks, the hides, yes. It was nasty. I had silky hands, but I'll tell you, the first few days I couldn't eat. It was so nasty. I'd come home smelling like mink and they knew I was coming. They'd make me change clothes in the garage. I had all that stuff splattered all over. But, you get used to it. I knew it was temporary. I did okay.

O: What was your first job at Washington County Community Action?

I: Receptionist.

O: Can you tell me a little bit about that organization?

I: It's a non-profit, privately funded organization. It deals with client services, emergency. They have like a client service department where they deal with homeless and hunger, people in crisis, who have had their heat turned off. Help people to get themselves started. Provide food baskets, they work closely with the Child Services Center, Food Banks; at the time I was there they had a Youth Service, kind of like a summer SETA placement job placement. They had ... through a volunteer program. They worked real closely with ... in Washington County..... It was a wonderful place to work.

O: You worked there from '77 to '92?

I: Yes.

O: I assume you didn't do the receptionist job the entire time?

I: Oh, no. I started as a receptionist, and then a secretary, and I got an opportunity to work in the fiscal department..... [34:02.7 Tape change to 34:29.9] ..... was offered an opportunity to close the books for the one of the Albina [?] committee actions here in Portland, and so I was offered that temporary position for 2 years. So I thought this was the perfect time to learn the bookkeeping responsibilities here, so they sent me to a couple of night classes to learn the basics of .... I had worked in the fiscal department for 2 years, and then from there after the 2 years, I decided to work here part-time in the fiscal department, and part-time in the client service department. And when I started working in the client services department, I started again as a receptionist, and that led into screening the clients for eligibility and making appointments. Shortly after, I was an actual in-take worker. And then I moved into the supervisor position. I supervised for several years.

O: I imagine you got a pretty good view during those years of the class you served, and the kinds of problems they faced.

I: Oh, yes.

O: What kinds of things did you see there?

I: A lot of it hit home. Reality, people struggling. Saw a lot of people that needed more self-help, saw people that you actually have to go and do outreach so that they can come into assistance. Each situation is so different. I don't think in my years there I saw two situations a like. None were similar. That was what was so interesting and challenging about the job. Every case that came through was ... pretty much analyze the situation and work from the bottom up and really what I can say about working in client services was that you have to want to be there. To do a good job, you have to think a lot with your heart. If you don't have that, it's really hard to do a good job. I'd still be there. But you have to be, where you have to be. But you pretty much have to stand back-to-back and support each other. I'm thankful for the business, but I'd be there.

O: The two of you met at a dance at Forest Grove, and you were telling me about the first time you invited Rafael over for dinner?

I: [laughs] About the enchiladas? I invited him over for enchiladas and he came over and sat down and said, "I thought you were making enchiladas!". That's when I started to realize how different really our culture was and what we were raised in, and the actual months of culture here.

O: And you'd never been to Mexico?

I: Never. Well, I had been to the border: Juarez. That's as far as I had been. He has now taken us out to several parts of Mexico. And we've been around the Mexican culture so that we can appreciate Mexico.

O: The two of you started the business in '82, and both of you were still working your jobs. Can you tell me what you thought about getting involved in this venture.

I: I'd never saw myself as a business person, and I never thought I'd be involved to the extent I am today. I didn't expect the business to grow as it has. I always thought it would pretty much like he called it a hobby for him. I just figured it was his baby. I felt pretty secure where I was

doing. I was doing what I enjoyed most, although I always participated. We worked evenings, weekends, holidays. We worked many hours in the day. Sometimes we'd see the sun go down and the sun come up. We had to do it ourselves. We had an employee that worked during the day. He started working weekends. So we had one employee. I worked full-time at my job besides the business until '92. And you kept your job up to '90.

R: '90.

I: We both stayed in our jobs for quite sometime after.

O: And when you first started out in the business, was it profitable right away?

I: [laughs] There were times we had to put our paychecks in the business.

O: But was it growing fast enough? Or you weren't quite sure?

I: Well, no. As the business grew, we had very little understanding of where we were going. That we focused pretty much on a day-to-day as to be able to..... It was a whole different business at the time. We had very little understanding. All we did was invest, invest, invest in the business. Thinking we wanted it to grow.... That was our focus. You know. When it wasn't making it, we had to help it. It just kind of soured us. Like another member of the family we had to take care of. It's hard to answer that question because at that time, it was .... If we had the knowledge we have today of the business, then I think we'd be way out there. [laughs] We learned it the rough way. We had no leadership for many, many years. And we had, it took a lot of sacrifice, as with him going out, doing a lot a research, bringing back in information , and following up, and between him and I , and a lot of sacrifice having him away from home , and the business, which put a lot of weight on me.

O: What kind of research were you doing?

R: It was very difficult to get boxes here. We didn't know, so I would spend a lot of time in California, trying to find out where they were coming from, who was sending them, and it took a while.

O: So when you first bought the business, you assumed the previous owner had some relationship with whole-salers?

R: Very, very little. He was more into Spanierd items. We eventually got out of that.

O: What kind of items?

R: Like dolls...

I: He was from Spain. All his products were mainly from Spain. Certain seasoning, and gift items, music, a lot of that. We really did the initial purchase from him, but it really wasn't anything ....

O: You changed focus right away?

I: Yes, right away. The community in our area is more Hispanic then there, here in Portland.

O: So you go to California and try to set up supplies and connections?

R: I believe we now have the connections to do well. But I do, still go because it's a growing business and we found out, .... We've been successful by me going. I once say, "I can see myself still going to California for a couple of years".

I: Going to California you was always may new contacts. There are always new items we are looking for. We'd go and visit stores in the area and what items there were carrying there, what new items they have, and we'd bring stuff to the Washington area, and even I'd go with him to CA, and we'd pick up light things and look for the distributors. I'd bring them home and follow up and make the actual contact. Then he'd go and pick and meet the people. It's a whole cycle that we'd have to keep those contacts. Like before, we were buying in such small quantities, he go and make the pickups for those small quantities. And now, the pick-ups are ... because of freshness, because like we don't pick-up truckloads of blankets, we don't buy by the truckload, though one day we may have to cause he's had to get them every week. It's him going saves us a lot of money, and him having to keep that contact. I look out for new items, and new distributors and new contacts.

O: And when you go down to CA you drive?

R: I drive. I have a truck. And do it once a week. All the way to Los Angeles and back.

I: We use to do it in a 14-footer, and then he bought a 24-footer, and that has helped us out quite a bit, but we know we need a bigger truck. He accomplished getting his CDO set the other day ...

O: What's the CDO?

I: Commercial Drivers License. He's licensed to drive an 18-wheeler now. [laughs]

O: In the beginning, it was hard to find the contacts, but you were able to negotiate favorable prices?

R: Right.

O: I assume that has changed over the years?

R: Yes, it has.

I: They come to us now. There are a lot of brokers who come in. A lot of our products are the main brokers now. They are in the area. It's exciting.

O: Can you tell me a little bit about the different phases of growth of the business (Su Casa Imports?)

I: We started at 147<sup>th</sup> which was just a little bigger than this room. It initially started with one showcase but 12' of shelves that were half empty. Cash register with shelves behind us that were gift items. And that was it. The name of the business has always been "Su Casa". Then we moved to a space about 4x the space.

R: We took 3 moves in that area.

I: Remember the one with the paneling in the back? And we moved to where Western Auto used to be. On 2<sup>nd</sup> street. Now has Phil's dress shop. It started with 100' sq. ft. Not very big. Then the next one

R: The other was was 1000' sq ft. And then we went to one that had 3000' sq ft.

O: How did you build your clientel.

I: There was a need in the area. We also opened up the bakery, which was a brand new thing in town: a Hispanic bakery. The music and all the religious items were the traditional baptisimals and communion and religious celebration items needed, like for marriage and a lot of new things for me. We increased and expanded our music department.

R: The bakery was opened in '87 or '88.

O: You were still working your full-time jobs at this time?

I: Oh yeah.

O: You must have had several employees .

I: We had like 2 employees at the time in the store and we had 2 bakers at the time. We had an in house bakery. That needed to be set-up. It was pretty costly too. Permits, gas line, install the exhaust fans, anything else the building required. It's a big building, like 2 stories. It was pretty complicated.

O: At some point, you must have thought to yourselves that this is no longer a hobby.

R: In 1990, we moved to the space we are in now. It used to be .... Pizza. Since Mexico I decided to give it all I had, and be real focused. It happened that my landlord Cameron Warren asked me if I wanted to be in business. I told him I wanted to be like Fred Meyers. He talked to be for awhile, and he told me "You have the will, but you don't have what it takes, so I'm going to help you." He started teaching me as my father did, financial statements, he started teaching me certain things that have made us successful. If it hadn't been for him we probably wouldn't be here now. He was very important. He was my landlord, and he is the one who owns this park here. Cameron Warren.

I: He was our mentor.

R: He passed away in '96.

I: But his sons took over the business and they owns all of Parkrose...

R: Clackamas business center in Clackamas. And at the time he passed away he had bought 100 acres on Airport way. He was a very successful man that decided to teach me the ropes. I'll never forget he once said he was helping us so we could help our employees. Everything has come together. And I still want to say that I want to really dedicate everything I learned in the business to him because if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here. I think I was making all kinds of mistakes. But if I'm not successful. So if I'm not successful in the future, I didn't pay attention.

O: What kind of things did you learn from him?

R: Well, I think the financial part of it. I didn't believe in it. When he first came to me, he said I want to check his books and if your books look fine, I'm going to help you. What I did I took the books, my statement from the CPA I had, and went over to his CPA so that he could feel comfortable. Hard work is one part, but believing those financial statement is also a big part which I lacked. I wasn't paying much attention. One thing he always taught me was to pay attention to those decisions from the financial statements. That's what I do. I also teach all my employees the same thing.

O: So what kinds of decisions did you make based on the financial statements.

R: Comes down to this: If you're making money, good. If you don't, don't grow. [laughs]

I: Spend if you have.

R: It's very simple, but it was very difficult to understand that concept.

O: You make decisions on what kind of merchandise to carry based on the financial statements?

I: That's pretty much my department there. Cause I does the books. And it is based on the financial statements also. And of what we can buy and inventory. The financial statements tell us if we have too much inventory, our percentages are not up enough, or quit buying. Your merchandise speaks to you and to all of us and all our responsibilities.

O: And the Warren, was he your friend as well as your landlord then?

R: I truly believe.

O: I assume it didn't start that way, right?

I: He was our landlord, but he always showed interest in our business. And then when he saw the enthusiasm of Rafael, cause he used to speak much to Rafael, then they'd meet more. He saw that Rafael was a real sincere person, and he saw that he needed some leadership and therefore, offered himself. No matter how busy that man was, he always found time for Rafael. And I think the reason was Rafael too, looked up to him, because that man spoke straight. He told it like it was. He wasn't insensitive, but he was very direct, very direct. What he said was what he meant. When he saw that Rafael was absorbing his leadership and advice, he was more encouraged to help him. He came down on him a couple of times, when he felt Rafael wasn't listening or wasn't following through. I think it was a father/friend respect. But a great leader. Because we were able to see his success, and actions speak louder than words. We knew we were in good hands under his guidance. We really appreciated him. Still do. We will never forget Mr. Warren.

O: And so that was what you were referring to earlier when you said there wasn't really leadership in the business in the beginning, is that right?

I: Right. We had no sense of business. In my years when my mother had a business, I wasn't aware of financial part of it, or even how she ran grandmother's business. It was just her responsibility and that was all she did.

O: [ End of tape 1:06:03]