

Washington County Museum
Oral History Interview with Julia Ramirez
At Washington County Museum Library
January 17, 2001

Informant: Julia Ramirez
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M: Michael
J: Julia

M: This is Michael O'Rourke for the Washington County Historical Society. The date today is 16th, 17th, January 17th, 2001. And beginning an interview today with Julia Ramirez. Is that how you pronounce your name?

J: Yes, Ramirez.

M: Ramirez, okay. Julia why don't we start out at the beginning - when and where were you born?

J: (chuckles) You're going to make me give you my name, huh (both laugh). Well I was born south of Brownsville, Texas which is a little town called Rio Bravo Matamoros which is a border town.

M: Okay.

J: And I was born there in '52. We were living close to the river, the little, big Rio Grande, I believe it's called. And we were living there for about six years. And my parents - my mother was a U.S. citizen. My father was a Mexican, born in Mexico. And so they decided to take advantage of the holiday where they allowed the Hispanics, the Mexicans to go into the United States to go shopping or to go do whatever they want - like a free pass. I think it was called the César Chávez. So we took advantage of that - went to visit my grandmother and my parents made arrangements for us to go back, for my mother to go back to the States and bring us with her. So....

M: So you were living originally on the Mexican side of the border.

J: Mexican side of the border. My mother had four kids which I was the eldest of four, there in Mexico. And so we crossed the border and went straight to the immigration. And when my parents - my mother was a U.S. citizen she immigrated my dad and me and my three brothers. So we came into the States in 1968.

M: Okay, and you were legal U.S. citizens at that point or...

J: Well we were legal U.S. residents.

M: Residents.

J: Right.

M: Residents, right residents. Okay.

J: And we were residents and we started going to school there and we became migrant workers. We worked with the crops. We went from state-to-state so that's how I got all my traveling experience with my parents. We followed the crops all the way from Michigan to Ohio to Oregon, Idaho, Oregon back to California and back to Texas. So we made the big, big loop once a year.

M: Traveling as a family?

J: Traveling as a family with – you know how they use to travel before in the covered wagons? We use to, to we travelled in the covered trucks. Big trucks and they were all covered in the back and we'd all sit in the back and go from state to state.

M: So you and others, the Ramirez family as well as other people?

J: So we were – yeah we weren't the only family. We had other people with us. There was several covered trucks. I think maybe there was three. So we traveled in a caravan plus several station wagons and other smaller trucks.

M: And so you all worked and traveled together, pretty much the same?

J: (murmurs agreement) We did that. We traveled, we followed the crops. So everywhere from every vegetable and fruit you know, we covered all over the country.

M: Were you working directly for the farmers or were you working for somebody who was, who had organized this and the trucks.

J: We worked for, with a guy that organized all the group and he paid us. So he had a contract with the farmer to bring people into work so that's how we worked, with him.

M: Okay and how old were you when you first started traveling and following the crops?

J: I think I was about nine.

M: Okay.

J: And I was the oldest of four. So we started traveling when I was about nine – eight or nine, around there. Ever since I can remember we're traveling.

M: And what did your father do originally in Mexico. Did he work in agriculture there too?

J: No actually my dad was a mechanic.

M: He was a mechanic, okay.

J: An auto mechanic, yes. And so every time we had trouble with the trucks, dad would be taking care of them or the machinery or the tractors or whatever it was. Dad would be working in the field with us. However, you know in his spare time when there was need for him he would fix whatever equipment needed to be fixed.

M: And was he from the northern part of Mexico originally then?

J: Originally...yes, he was from northern part of Mexico. Probably... my mom was a Monterrey so my dad was right there from Tamaulipas which is the state where I was born.

M: And your mother would come to the States earlier? Is that....

J: My grandmother was born in the States – my grandmother and grandfather. And so they went into Mexico to live and so they had their children there. So at that time if you were a U.S. citizen, naturally born U.S. citizen and you had children, they would automatically be U. S. citizens.

M: Okay I see.

J: And that's how my mom was a U.S. citizen. That's why I couldn't be a U.S. citizen when I was born to my mom in Mexico because she was not, she was naturalized ?? She wasn't born a U.S. citizen. So then I was just a U.S. resident until later when I became a citizen by choice.

M: And when you were traveling around following the crops, what crops were they typically?

J: Oh, lots of crops. Let's say we picked everything from lettuce to chilies, hot peppers, onions, garlic, you know in different areas. We went up north, back east over like towards Michigan, we did cherries and Indiana we did tomatoes, Idaho we did potatoes. You know stuff like this. Oregon we did a lot of green beans and strawberries. So we did all kinds, everywhere.

M: And how did you like this traveling life as a nine year old?

J: Well I loved it. I thought it was fun.

M: Yeah?

J: It was really fun. I believe that the most, the most fun that I had as a child was when I was with my brothers and...my brothers because my sisters came around later. But I had three brothers and we had lots of fun in the fields. So that's lots of fun.

I go back to thinking about how my kids should have gone to do something like this but the furthest, I think the furthest we got to picking anything was blueberries and they hated spiders so they didn't like the blueberries (both laugh). Maybe they picked for about a week and "mom we don't want to go back anymore." They had a choice you know they could of if they wanted to.

M: Right. But you didn't have much of a choice.

J: I didn't have a choice but I liked it, I really did. And we picked cotton ? and that was lots of fun too.

M: And you'd go out what in the summer and fall? Is that what was the timing of it or...

J: (murmurs agreement) Yeah like usually right after school was out.

M: Okay.

J: And sometimes we wouldn't wait for school to be out. And sometimes let's say we would go like the beginning of spring, we would go and stay someplace for a couple of months and we'd go to school there. So we'd go to school during the day and then come home in the afternoon. The bus would drop us off in the fields where my parents were and then we would work with our parents till sundown. And then we'd go home.

M: Then you'd go home. And then, it sounds like you probably put in pretty long days.

J: We did.

M: Yeah.

J: I thought it was fun. It wasn't long for me (both laugh).

M: Was there ever any time for just relaxing or recreating when you were you traveling...

J: Oh definitely. We had lots of time to do that. When we were kind of younger we weren't obligated to work unless we wanted to and most of the times we just played. We were kids kids. So we'd work maybe for an hour and get bored and then start throwing tomatoes at each other, you know (both laugh) or just start playing with the kids, you know with the other kids around there. And we had fun. That's why I think we weren't obligated to do it but we did it because we wanted to with our parents co's our parents were working.

And then when summer came around and we were out of school our day started real early, especially if you were a girl and you were one of the eldest. You had to get up early and help prepare lunch. You know there was not hamburgers or McDonald's around there so we made flour tortillas from scratch and we made our own little burritos you know with potatoes and eggs and chilies and meat, whatever. And take those wrapped in foil and eat them in the field...

M: In the field.

J: During the rest time.

M: And then you'd come back to Texas in the fall and spend the winters there, is that.. ?

J: Yep. My last stop was picking cotton in Arkansas.

M: Okay.

J: So we picked cotton and I think we were in Arkansas for about three months – two months, about two or three months. And then we'd go back to Texas and do carrots. Believe it or not I remember carrots **real careful** because we use to love to eat them in the field. And so we did carrots and then we started school there. And we'd stay there for the winter and then start it all over again in the middle, you know, right when spring came along, right after winter.

M: And how did you like school in those days.

J: I loved school. I did, I liked it. I use to cry when they didn't let me go to school (both laugh). Mom says - your little brother's sick you got to stay home with him. I don't want to stay home.

M: That's great.

J: But I use to love to go to school. And my mother was a teacher in Mexico so by the time I got to be six years old I knew how to read and write in Spanish. And I also knew my math factors which is I know everywhere from adding to dividing, multiplying, **some** fraction, all of it. So I knew how to do that. So when I came into the States and we started going to school, I think I started going to school when I was about seven...seven or eight. So I did – seven years old I think and I did four years in two years. So I did first and second grade the first year and third and fourth the next.

M: Okay, I see, then you were...

J: Because I already knew everything. All I had to do was learn English.

M: You were sufficiently ahead, yeah.

J: Right. And it was great. I enjoyed it.

M: And how was learning English for you?

J: I don't remember it being hard.

M: Okay.

J: Because my grandparents spoke a little bit of English you know in Mexico, so they spoke a little bit of English around us.

M: So you were already.

J: So we kind of knew the yes, the no, the thank yous you know and the please, all the courtesy ones and we liked that. So we kind of blended in. My brother and I started school and we picked it up really quick.

M: And what would your – you mentioned you did carrots in Texas. Were there, what else would your folks do during those winter months or the family or the family, what did you do?

J: My dad would work as a mechanic...

M: Okay.

J: During the winter months there in Texas.

M: Okay.

J: And but you know the owner of the shop knew that come spring he had to leave. So he just gave him a job during winter and then we took off during the spring and didn't come back till fall, the end of fall.

M: And were you fairly well accepted in the community that you lived in in Texas then?

J: Oh yeah. You know a lot of people speak of how they were discriminated against and I don't remember being discriminated against ever. Ever, ever. I've seen discrimination with black people but not with Mexicans, you know being that we were Mexicans.

M: And so you've never experienced it anywhere in your travels then is that right?

J: No where (murmurs agreement) Everybody treated us real nice, And since we were migrant workers, we had treats and some of the churches would get together and hold like Christmas parties or summer parties and give gifts to all the people that lived in the labor camps you know. So we really enjoyed it. We had lots of fun. I have good memories of when I was a kid in spite of the fact that we didn't really grow any roots and stay in one single place, you know for more than awhile. But it was great.

M: And how would you describe your father's personality in those days?

J: My dad was very reserved, very quiet. He kind of kept to himself. Every once in awhile he would reprimand one of us but mom was the one that really reprimanded us. Dad didn't. Dad was quiet and ?? to himself. And he worked a lot when you know we were younger so he just didn't, he wasn't outgoing you know or overpowering or anything.

M: And how about your mother?

J: Mom was. Mom was like the leader. She would get up and she would do and she still is, you know. She was the one that brought us out of everywhere. They worked together as a team, mom and dad but mom was the one that pushed all of us. Let's do this and no we're going to go here or let's get going you know and stuff like this. And dad would go along of course. In Mexico, the man is the boss but in this case dad was the boss but mom did a lot of the work. And dad went along because mom knew what had to be done and so did dad so dad just let her do it.

M: So mom was the pretty ? partner.

J: That's right.

M: And so you had three brothers and sisters?

J: I had three brothers in Mexico and myself.

M: Okay.

J: And when we came into the States, we were in Indiana and one of my sister's was born.

M: Okay.

J: And then three years later we were in Burns, Oregon and another sister was born. We're still in the fields. And then we settled in California in '66 and that's when my other sister was born. So four sisters were born after in the States. So the last two were born in California and that's where we stayed. We stayed in California until I finished junior high school and high school there.

M: Okay.

J: And my kid sisters and brothers finished school and one of my brother's went into the Marines. The other one went into the army. And so we stayed pretty much there until my parents split up and then my mom decided to come up north and she came. She was in Idaho for about three months, I mean three years – three or four years and remarried. And then they moved here to Oregon.

M: Okay, and you were with your mom during those years?

J: Actually I went to school.

M: Okay.

J: When I was, since I was 21 when they split up, I was old enough to do what I wanted to and I've always wanted to go to school in Mexico. And they wouldn't allow me to do it before because I wasn't old enough they said. So when they split up I didn't want to choose. I didn't want to go with mom or go with dad co's I was one of the eldest. One of my brother's was in the service so there's only two at home, of the boys and then the young girls. So I went away to Mexico. I went the ??? to study.

M: Oh yeah.

J: That's where I acquired all my real good Spanish. I kept my Spanish but it was like with a real deep accent because I lost a lot of it, like a lot of the Hispanics the kids lose a lot of the Spanish when they learn the English. I knew how to speak it but I had my accent. I would speak it clearer. And when I went to Mexico they saw how Mexican I looked, they saw how I spoke like a Gringo, they say like a white person (laughs) so I decided to get rid of the accent and I did. I was going to school three years there so I could ? on my accent there.

M: Yeah, just by virtue of immersion and speaking the language all, yeah.

J: Yeah, right. Because the studies were in Spanish and I knew how to read and write Spanish so that was no problem.

M: Right.

J: But the problem was the pronunciation.

M: Right.

J: So that's – I bettered it there and I bettered my grammar and all my Spanish.

M: Did you – you said you wanted to go to school in Mexico. Did you, were you thinking of possibly living in Mexico or had that occurred to you or were you always planning to come back to the States?

J: I was thinking of maybe staying in Mexico because it's a Bible school, it's a Christian school where I went to. And the seminary's three years so I was there three years. And I was planning to get my diploma and then go to work as a missionary in Mexico. But things didn't work out that way. I finished my third year. I graduated, got my diploma but I also met my husband. And so I came back to the States to Oregon with my mom to Idaho actually and a month later my husband followed me and we made plans to get married. We got engaged and then we got married in Idaho.

M: And decided to make a life here in the States?

J: Actually in the States yes. We did so he immigrated when we got married and we went to live in California for 12 years.

M: And you were a U.S. citizen by this time?

J: No not yet.

M: Not yet, okay.

J: I didn't become a U.S. citizen actually until probably about 14 years ago.

M: Okay.

J: I didn't – not right after I was 18. I just, I just stayed. I didn't need to. I didn't feel I needed to. But later I decided I needed to become, you know part of this country, legally (laughs). I was here legally but I wanted be a citizen.

M: Right.

J: Be able to vote and do all of that.

M: Just, yeah. And, back now to when your family decided to stay in California before your parents split up – was there any particular reason for that instead of going back to Texas or...

J: Yeah there was too many of us already. There were eight kids and it was hard to take us out of school and put us back you know to keep us. Mom and dad felt that we needed roots. We needed to go to school more if we wanted to grow up to be something more than migrant workers. So my parents put us all in school and we stayed there. And we rented a house and stayed there. Dad worked as a mechanic and mom took care of us the whole while and during the summer we still worked in the fields though.

M: Okay.

J: Yeah.

M: But you didn't have to travel as far.

J: But I didn't have to travel.

M: Yeah...

J: Come the end of spring, like the end of school season we would get together and go straight to work. Straight, straight to work.

M: And what part of California did you say that your parents settled in?

J: In northern California, in San Jose.

M: San Jose, okay. And tell me a little bit about your husband. What was his background?

J: He didn't go to school much. He finished primary school which is one through the sixth grade. And he decided to go to work in Mexico because his parents were very poor. So instead of going to school, his three brothers – two brothers and himself – they decided to go to work for a body shop. There was a body shop close to the house and my mother-in-law got him the job as trainee when he was about 11. He was 11. My other brother-in-law was 10, was 9 and the older one was

13. And they started working in the body shop for free to get the experience. So mom would pack a lunch and this body man, this owner of the shop would keep them there for 10, 12 hours. Very, very hard work until they learned how to body.

M: And this was in Mexico?

J: In Mexico City.

M: In Mexico City, okay.

J: They weren't from the province. They were from the country.

M: Okay.

J: And then they went to Mexico City for a better life you know because the big city's always more work. And so their dad worked but he didn't make a whole lot of money so they decided to, the kids decided to work. Mom and dad didn't want them to work but they wanted to work to help the parents out. So they put them to work in the body shop. Every once in awhile the owner would give them a couple of pesos you know which wasn't much but at the age of 18 my husband started making money. And he was such a good son. He was the perfect son. He would come home with a paycheck which is you know, the whole, for the whole week and give it all to his parents. All of it, just so the parents would have enough money to support all of them. There were 12, of kids.

And so he worked and he was the middle child co's the older ones were married and stayed in the country. And so he was one of the older ones in Mexico City. So he would work and all he made he would give to his parents. And yet his older brother and his younger brother weren't exactly like that. They would give like some of their money to mom and dad but they would keep most of it. Ricardo was always, you know he was always very responsible. And you can ask any of his sisters. They're all, most of them are here and a couple of brothers are here. And they always said that Ricardo was like the oldest of their side, you know their half and he would always give them money and take care of the family. That was his major concern.

M: Yeah. And you met him at school or...?

J: He decided to go to the same school I was going to, to bible school in '77. No, I'm sorry, '75. So he went to his first year of school and then he met me and decided he didn't want to go to school anymore (both laugh). So I came back to the States and he followed me. He came but he says I'll be there and speak to your parents in about a month. And I said you know how can a person that has no money, has you know, no way, no papers, no legal papers to get into the States or anything, how can he come all the way from Mexico City you know all the way to Oregon, you know to meet with my parents and to see us you know, to see me, to get married and get engaged and get married. But when there's a will, there's a way and he did it.

M: He did it huh.

J: He did exactly – it was exactly 30 days he was there. And...

M: How did he do it, do you know?

J: Well yes I do (both laugh). He worked really hard at the shop in Mexico for a week and a half and asked for the money. He says I'm only going to work a little bit because I need to go to the States. And then he went straight to Tiapana/Tijuna you know. And then he has a sister in Tijuna and she, she didn't have papers but she lived with a white man. She was married to a U.S. citizen. So he went and picked him up and brought him in illegally. Just put him in the car and drove through the line and ??? he was illegal. And then he worked for two weeks in California as a body man. He told his sister get me a job co's I need to get to see Julie. I have to go down to see Julie. So his sister got him a job and he worked there for two weeks - auto body use to make lots of money then.

M: Wow.

J: They still do now but they use to make real good money. So he made the money, enough for the plane ticket and then he called, he sent me a telegram, he sent me a wire and he said - I'll be there tomorrow on such and such a flight – all the information. So I picked him up at the airport and we came home and he spoke to my parents, to my mom.

M: And your mother, you were living in Oregon at that time?

J: Yes. I came in from ? to Oregon. I'd only been here a month and a half.

M: And was it here in Washington County?

J: No it was, actually it was in Idaho.

M: Oh okay.

J: I'm sorry. It was in Idaho. And we got engaged and we had a real church wedding. We had, I had the pastor from where I grew up marry us, he did the ceremony. And the pastor where I was going to church did part of the ceremony and the pastor where Ricardo and I went to church for awhile because it was Spanish speaking one. So it was between Spanglish, English and Spanish. So it was a three pastor ceremony. It was really lots of fun. And so we got married in Boise, Idaho, actually Nampa, Idaho.

M: And was your mother there then?

J: My mom was there and all the kids – all my brothers and sisters were there except for one. One was still in the Marines. And then that winter in '76 we went to California with his sister. We lived, we started working there. My husband worked as an auto body in Idaho until he made enough money for us to get married. We got married two months later, three months. We got married in October.

M: Then did you say where in Idaho, I...

J: Nampa.

M: Nampa, that's right. Okay.

J: Nampa. It's about maybe what...

M: Yeah, near the border, yeah.

J: Half an hours drive from Boise. So we got married there. Then we went to live in California where my husband worked as an auto body technician there too.

M: Okay and was that also in northern California then?

J: No actually it was Los Angeles.

M: Oh it was Los Angeles. Okay. And what did you do in Los Angeles during those years?

J: I worked – first I worked for the migrant council. You know for all - the working with the migrants still. But before then I got my training when I finished high school then I went two years of college. So I did two years of college here and then three years of bible college in Mexico. So I had a lot of people experience. I did a lot of people **contact** so I worked with a lot of the Hispanics. And when I went to California I started working for a company that dealt, this organization dealt with Hispanics – like Centro Cultural. Something like this.

M: Okay.

J: And after awhile I got offered a better job and I, you know where I made more money and so I started working as a bilingual secretary, still with my bilingual skills you know my English and Spanish skills. And my husband was an auto body technician. We did pretty well. We had two kids – a boy and a girl. And they both went to school **where** they grew up bilingual so they know how to read and write ever since they learned how to read and write. You know both languages. So they went to school there. After awhile I started working using my bilingual skills again with Avon, Avon Cosmetics. They hired me as a sales manager, District Sales Manager where I took care of the Hispanic market.

M: Okay.

J: So I worked for them for five years.

M: Okay and all of this in Los Angeles.

J: Three years in Los Angeles and two years when we moved here.

M: Okay. Okay. And then what made you decide to move to Oregon?

J: Los Angeles was a – it's high density, you know metro, lots of crime, lots of you know fast moving and it wasn't really good for the kids to grow up in you know, all those gangs and crime. So we decided we wanted to come visit and see where we would stay. And we visited my mom here twice. Mom moved to here...

M: Moved to Hillsboro or?

J: Actually to Cornelius.

M: To Cornelius, okay.

J: She moved to Cornelius and we were still in California. So we'd come and visit her.

M: Right. Okay.

J: So we liked Oregon. And we liked the fact that it was really, really country you know, rural, not that congested with people. And we didn't mind that there wasn't that many Hispanics here. We just wanted to be close to the family and have the kids go to a school where they could be safe and a good school where they could learn good and not have the fear, you know of them going off with their ... or you know getting taken over by gangs and stuff.

M: Right. Yeah.

J: So we decided to do that. We brought them over here 12 years, in '88.

M: That's when you moved here? Okay. And what did you and Ricardo do here when you first arrived?

J: My husband went to work for an auto body place again and I was transferred with Avon. So I continued with Avon for the last two years after that.

M: Oh yeah, okay. Still as a Sales Manager?

J: (murmurs agreement) And it was completely different. I mean it was a culture shock for me because in California I had lots of people. I started out with 150 people and I ended up with over 400 people that worked under me - that they were sales representatives, they were Hispanics. And so I attracted a lot of Hispanics because I was Hispanic. Yeah. And then when I moved here there was not very many Hispanics. And so the English speaking people would work just for themselves. They didn't, they didn't need to work with Avon.

In Mexico, I mean in Los Angeles they needed to work. It was the woman that was by herself – the single mother, the divorcee, the, you know the people that needed money. And so Avon was a way for them to start making money, you know without having to go to work, you know from 7:30 to 4:00 or something. So they worked with their ??? and it was really good for me because I recruited a lot of people. But when I came here, it's rural you know and there's a house here and

a mile away there's another house and it was so bad for me. I just couldn't get use to it. You know after selling a \$1,500,00 of cosmetics, come here and sell \$500,00 you know, \$500.000. And it wasn't anything. I was just so, so depressed at times because I couldn't get my people to sell the way they did in California.

M: And your pay depended on the volume of it?

J: Well I had salary which is good but I also had bonuses. And I didn't make any of my bonuses here so I took a cut in pay – half, co's I made every bonus over there. I even won a trip to Switzerland, another trip to New York, another trip to Japan. I mean just you know because of our sales achievements. And here I couldn't win anything. I didn't meet any of my goals. I didn't – because of the change in population, the change in the culture, the people, you know. Over there you had to work because you needed the money. Here you don't have to work. I'll go to work with Avon so I can buy my cosmetics for me and maybe a couple of friends. It was really...

M: Not as serious on the sales representatives parts right?

J: Right, right. But I had my goals and I couldn't meet them because – but it was fun though. Anyway, that was what enabled us to move here.

M: Then you stuck with it for a couple of years. Is that what you said?

J: Yeah I worked with them for a couple of years and then my husband decided he wanted to go into business for himself. And so his brother and his brother-in-law said they'd go into business with him and they opened up a body shop. Because his brother was a painter and so Richard did two other things – two of everything. I mean he was a great auto body technician. He was a great painter. And my youngest brother-in-law was just a real good painter, just excellent but he did no body work. And the older brother was a great body man but he didn't do paint. Ricardo did both.

M: And when you say paint you mean auto paint.

J: Auto body paint, right. So when the decided to go into business with themselves, two of the brothers which is Ricardo and the younger brother and a brother-in-law decided to go in and work together we opened up a body shop in Forest Grove. It lasted a couple of years and it didn't work out. And so we closed it up in 1990.

M: Okay.

J: And Ricardo went to work for the body shop for a little while, for another body shop for a couple of years. And I continued to – what did I do? Actually I just worked there and then I became, I became an interpreter for Washington County. So I interpreted the English and the Spanish at the courthouse.

(tape issues)

M: And so you were saying – you were talking about what you did during that period that after the body shop failed I guess.

J: Right. After it failed we sold everything. We just closed it up. I became a translator for the Washington County. Interpreter for the courthouse and I did a lot of other interpreting ?? and I did translating of documents. And so I went to work for myself and Centro Cultural helped me a lot because they certified us. They gave us classes and we learned the legal end of it you know how we had to be certified. We had to make sure we knew what we were saying and what to interpret and what not to interpret. You know so legally we learned how to do it with Centro Cultural.

M: Okay.

J: And so I worked with them for awhile then I became a teacher with them too. I taught Spanish.

M: And who were the people that you were working most closely with then?

J: ? Savena Savena's still there. He's a director now but he use to be in charge of another department, the translating department before. And so I use to work with him with Druma. Druma use to be...Rumula Perez use to be the director then so I worked with him and I worked with Savena. And I worked for a couple of years, maybe three years or so.

M: In the early '90s then.

J: Yeah, early '90s. And after that...what else did we do? We decided, my husband kept working at the body shop and then we did several, there was several little happy days, little events in Hillsboro when you would put little stands of food.

M: Right.

J: So there wasn't that many Hispanics, that many Mexican or Hispanics, Latin people. They asked me if I would put up a little stand, a little booth at happy days. And that was I don't remember what year it was but it was awhile back. And so I did. Ricardo and I did a little stand you know, a little booth and we put it Ritchie's/Richie's? We put out Ritchie's, Mexican food.

M: Okay.

J: And so we did tacos and burritos and ??? did chicken and steak. Everybody loved it. They were so happy with it and they kept asking us you know – where's your restaurant, where's your restaurant? We didn't have a restaurant (both laugh).

M: This is it.

J: This is it. Just this. And we called it Ritchie's because my husband's name is Ricardo and our son's name is Ricardo and we use to call him Ritchie. And my daughter worked with me and so did my son. They were little kids you know then. But we had fun cooking and we enjoyed it so

much that when my sister-in-law decided they had – my sister-in-law was married to a guy from M'Amigo's restaurant? And they had a little catering truck they dabbled with. You know they just bought it and they started you know working in the nurseries and just didn't have any time for it. So they told my husband, how would you like to do this? How would you like to buy the truck?

And I love to cook. It's just, my hobby is cooking. I just love cooking at home. And so I knew all the recipes you know the Mexican food. And so my husband and I spoke it over, talked it over and we decided we wanted to do it. And we also saw that there wasn't very many, many Mexican restaurants around and the ones that were here were more Americanized like Taco Bell and Taco Time you know. They're Americanized food. They're not exactly authentic. So we decided not to go, not to do a little restaurant but to get the catering truck where we wouldn't have all the overhead. We'd just buy the truck and that's it.

So we got the truck and we started building a route for it around Hillsboro, Cornelius, Forest Grove, Gales Creek, all of that area – nurseries and different shops.

M: Places where Hispanic people were working and...

J: Well, Hispanics but actually just people - not Hispanics because there wasn't that many Hispanics – there was but not a whole lot, not as much as we have now, you know. And people says we love your food, we love your food. And a lot of people that I knew that weren't in those areas, the people that I got to know here in the community, they had been over to my house to eat co's we're always, you know we like to entertain. We like to have people at the house and we make great cremosa salsa and all kinds of carnitas and Mexican food at home. Says Julia I can't believe your cooking. Just come over to our business you know and bring your trucks so we can start eating you know.

And so they started contracting us for lunch, for breaks and lunches. So then it was too much for us. It was just too much for us. We had too much work and we didn't have enough trucks. So Ricardo decided, Ricardo and I decided to buy another truck. So we bought another truck from L.A., brand new truck in '95. So we started it in '94 and then in '95 we bought a brand new truck. It was – it cost us \$70,000 - lots of money for these things. And people thought we were crazy to buy a truck like that because it's, I mean in that case buy a house instead. You know but we had bought our house in '88 so we were settled. We had a house you know.

So we got the truck and we started working the second truck and I drove and cashiered and I hired a cook. And Ricardo drove and cashiered and we had another cook with him. Well we started bringing family into the business, not just us and it wasn't just people off the street. It was family. So he had a niece and a nephew and then later we hired a, one of his cousins. And so we worked that way, you know with us, with our family with our trucks, with our two trucks. Then we expanded and then Hillsboro started booming with construction sites.

M: Now were you the only people doing tacos out of trucks at that time or...?

J: There was one truck that was here before we were and they're from Mexico To Go. I don't know if you know who they are.

M: I have a note here that someone named Juan Cortez?

J: Well he is from M'Amigos. He's the one that sold us the first truck.

M: Okay. Oh he's the one that sold you the first truck. That must be a note from you then. So that's where you got your first...

J: You don't know (laughs).

M: Well I mean maybe I heard this from you over the phone earlier I don't know. But anyways.

J: Okay well he was the first one that gave us, that sold us the truck. And anyway, it started booming. Business started booming and the other company that had the truck only did the fields.

M: Okay.

J: So, Mexico To Go, they only did the strawberry fields. They didn't do much of anything else. They didn't expand but we did. We did construction sites. So we started doing every construction site that boomed up, we started doing it. So for the first few years we did real well, you know. We paid the truck off and we bought another one, another brand new one. So we had two of them are \$70,000 trucks. And the first one was not that expensive coz it was a used one. Then the other ones after that were not used. We got to a point where we had seven trucks. You know we hire all these people to work for us. And we trained cooks and cashiers. And the cousins and the nephews started working as cashiers and drivers because they're the only people we could trust you know because they were family. So we tried to stay with family.

But then everybody saw that Ritchie was doing so well that they started buying trucks too. And let me tell you it wasn't other people, it was our own people. Like Ricardo's cousin – she came out and said – well I'm going to have my baby. I'm going to go on maternity leave and she never came back. She went to L.A. and bought a truck and started working with a truck. See.

M: In competition with you, yeah.

J: Because she already knew how to cook. And then another nephew of Ricardo's went off and bought a truck and started working with trucks. Then there was three, four businesses you know. And then everybody started doing it. By the time you know it, now I think there's 30, 40 trucks in the area. So now everybody competes with everybody and tries to get there first. They see leveling of ground and they, all the trucks go in there to see who's there, who's going to take over there – the feeding of the employees.

But we do real well. We don't....

M: You've still done all right even in this more competitive environment?

J: In spite of that we sold our trucks to our family so they could start their own businesses. We figured they're going to buy them everywhere else anyway so my husband sold one of the trucks to one of his nephews and another one to another of his nephews and then we sold another out somewhere else and another one in Portland. So then we only stayed with three.

M: Okay.

J: So now we work with three trucks. In the meantime we bought another house. It's on 2nd. It's a very big, big area but it's big enough where we paved the back of it to park our trucks. So there's enough pavement and parking areas for about 10, 15 trucks. So we have our trucks there which is our three and then **name?** has their truck there and one of our other nephews has another truck there. So, right now we have five trucks parked there and we have two more coming in, three more coming in at the end of this month. They want to park there because you know it's not easy to park it at home, you know where you work. Co's a lot of these people they don't own a big place to park their trucks so they look for somewhere to do it and that's what we're doing.

M: Well tell me in those early days when you were developing the business, I assume that you had some things to learn that you probably had never cooked for lots and lots people and probably didn't have the contacts with distributors and anything else that you have nowadays. How did all that, how did you learn what you needed to know to really build this business?

J: Right, right. The Yellow Pages (both laugh).

M: The Yellow Pages, okay.

J: I started calling around and calling around and calling around and my amigos told me of one place and then I eventually learned of other places and a lot of the people helped us. Like amigos helped us a lot to tell us where to get the meats and tagines. And I developed my own recipes. So, everything I cooked at home I cooked at the trucks. And then I did everything conveniently so that people could come in and eat during their break. Like the burrito I wrapped it up in foil and white paper so they could just grab it and eat it on the go, you know. The tacos too – they just picked up the taco shells and they eat them so we did fast food – fast Mexican food. And so we did several, several kinds. We don't just have two kinds. We have - anything you can think of in tacos we make it. From steak, chicken, **?** pork roast, beef tongue, beef intestines, brains, everything. You name it. Everything that we normally cook tacos out of, we have on the truck.

M: And you have it there all, I mean all these different things all the time?

J: (murmurs agreement) See the trucks have big **steel table**. It's got different sections. And so you have all pots and pans full of food that you prepare every day. And then it's got a cool area where you have the salads and the condiments. See so it's all filled up and self-contained. It's got a sink and everything, so it's like a rolling kitchen, you know and you work out of it. So you go to a, let's say 9:00 stop, toot your horn, open your door, people come out, they eat, you close up and go again. So you're there five minutes. So that's what we do.

M: Okay. I was wondering how you covered all those different places with just a handful of trucks but you just make a circuit then.

J: That's right. We kind of make a loop. We start out in one area and go follow and come back another way until we come back home.

M: And have you always worked out here in the Hillsboro area?

J: (agrees) We've always worked in the Hillsboro area, before it was just downtown Hillsboro and this area Cornelius, Forest Grove and all. And then we expanded out of here because of the amount of trucks that were in this area. Everybody wanted to work here. So we went a little further. We went over by West Union, over there by the freeway you know, by closer to Portland. And I sent one of my trucks to Vancouver. And we licensed our truck in Vancouver so we could work over there. See so we worked in Vancouver for about a year. With some of the people that worked here in constructing buildings they went to Vancouver so they asked us to go over there. We made a route over there. We worked over there for awhile. And then we brought the truck back so we have two trucks working in West Union and I have one truck that's stationed there. It's parked in Beaverton.

M: Okay.

J: All day, from morning to 11:00 at night.

M: Whereabouts in Beaverton?

J: It's by the transit center.

M: Okay.

J: It's in Royal Manor apartments.

M: Okay.

J: We had talked to Mark Conard/Conner and he gave us two parking spaces and he charges us what he charges an apartment. But we're there all day – from 10:00 in the morning until 5:00. And then one of the trucks that works in the day comes home, makes rush food and fills up the truck again and relieves this one. And this one comes home. And then so that way we have enough food for breakfast and lunch and then when dinner starts the other truck takes over for dinner. It's a pretty good business.

M: Yeah, sounds like it. And in the beginning when you first decided to, well when they first asked to go and set up that booth and then it started to catch on, did, I mean, it must have felt a little uncertain to leap out and start your own business at that point.

J: Oh yeah.

M: Did you and your husband both agree that is what you should do?

J: Well we didn't think about it. For example we did happy days and that was it. And we didn't think we were going to do anymore, see. But when the opportunity came to buy the truck we decided to do it. And I continued to work for Washington County.

M: And did your husband continue to work the body shop at all?

J: No.

M: Okay.

J: No. I worked for Washington County like after hours, maybe at 3:00 or whenever they needed me. I was on call. And I worked in the truck in the mornings so I kind of needed to work outside the home so that I can bring in money and then at the same time, you know until our business developed into a profitable business. And then eventually I quit. I quit my work as a translator and I started working for myself.

M: And how did you and your husband divide up the work in those early days?

J: It was difficult because I was the cook and my husband's a Mexican macho man that doesn't even pick up a plate off the table where we eat (both laugh). He's the kind that I'm here to be served, bring me dinner. Bring me this, bring me that. I'm done, take it away. You know that's the way he used to be. But when we started working the trucks we had to prepare the food in the morning, early mornings. We were up at 5:00. So he used to stay in bed and sleep. And I use to get up and I use to chop meat and cook and prepare and everything. And I was really tired.

So one day I had a talk with him and I says - honey, the business is both of ours. I can't do it all. You either hire someone to help me or you help me. And we can't afford to hire anybody. So he said - okay I'll help. So we divided the work. Then he got up and he did, well he use to do the outside of the truck anyway. You know make sure we had pop and the outside of the truck has all kinds of goodies. You know like drinks and juices and chips and candy bars and all kinds of stuff. So he kept it clean, kept it maintained and kept it full, inventory full from the outside. And then he'd get up a little earlier this time and help me with the kitchen. I says - you either do the vegetables and condiments or you help me do the cooking. So he decided to do some of the fun stuff that he liked but he won't cut onions. I don't want to do onions. You do the onions (both laugh).

You know but we did real good. He helped me a lot. So he grills a lot of the meats. He helped me top them up and grill them. You know and I did the salsas and everything else like the rice and the beans and everything else we needed to complement our lunches. So we divided the work evenly.

M: And how would you - when you were in those early days building a business, how would you decide where to try next in terms of opportunities?

J: Ricardo was real good at that. He still is. Ricardo was real, real – he'd look at some place and he'd say – you know I think we should go here. And - oh no I don't think we should, we should go there. Come here. He didn't speak the English real well. And I was born, I was raised here so I knew the English so I was always with him. And he was like always thinking of new places to go to and he would say – come here. I want us to go here. And I says – I don't think we should. He says – I think we should. So I said – okay. He's the boss.

So I followed him and I did all the talking and the convincing and the people and the proposition and people liked it and they allowed us to work. Co's we never worked anywhere uninvited. We would always go in and say – would you like us to come in and take care of your needs for break and lunches. You know we would like to bring our truck in. And we showed them a book. We have a book about our truck. You know what it looks like and what we have in it and the menu and all that. So they liked it and they asked us to come in.

Ricardo's a real good prospector. He's real good. He'll take a truck and a cook and he'll go in the middle of nowhere and in less than a month he's selling just as much as the other trucks are because he's real good at finding out other places to work.

M: He has the sense of where a good location might be.

J: Yes, he does. He's very good. So he's kind of like the brains, kind of like half the brains of the operation co's we work together.

M: Yeah. And you mentioned this book so you had to create some sort of you know marketing materials I guess you'd call them.

J: Yeah we took a picture of the truck and we put a menu in there you know. And we took pictures of where we worked and what we did. And we have references. We have people that like our work and you know, they like our food. And so a lot of the times they don't even check them. They just see that we, you know that we have good food and our truck is very clean. Very, very clean. That's one of our pet peeves. It's got to be spotless inside. It's got to be really clean. You go in and it's all stainless steel and it's really clean. And the food is real well done, you know and everything is cooked fresh, twice a day. So that speaks for itself you know with the people when they come in.

M: Right.

J: Some of the guys are really tall and they look inside – wow, your rig is real clean. You know they like that.

M: Yeah.

J: So, so that's what we did.

M: And, you mentioned that you set up one in Vancouver for a year or so. And you mentioned I guess that one of your competitors now runs one of your trucks in Portland or what?

J: Here. Actually here.

M: Okay.

J: A lot of our competitors, they work here.

M: Okay.

J: And mostly in Hillsboro.

M: Okay.

J: So you know how Hillsboro's booming in construction in this area...

M: Right.

J: ?? and all that, we've allowed one of Richard's cousins or nephews – we sold him a truck and he took care of working in this area. So now he's expanding. He's got three trucks so he works all of the area, all of the Hillsboro area. And then one of Ricardo's other friends bought a truck. And he bought a couple of brand new ones just like we did. And he you know is in competition with my nephew and trying to work this area too. And also everybody, everybody, they've all been able to buy homes and buy new trucks and have good automobiles because of this business. This is a good business.

M: And it sounds like most of your competitors are...

J: Family.

M: Family, is that right?

J: Yes (both laugh). Most of them are so it's all good. And we don't fight or argue.

M: So this was really all sort of all sprung from the original Ritchie's Tacos.

J: Right. Right. And if you notice, everybody's like – we have our truck and it says Ritchie's Tacos, Rico's, Ritchie's Tacos. And then so my niece she did the truck just like ours, identical colors and identical signs and everything and she put Rico's Tacos, you know. And then another truck came along and they put Mr. Taco and Alex Tacos and Andy's Tacos and you know all kinds of – everybody's got the same font and the same idea of how to do the trucks. So you can, everybody – that's why everybody thinks that they're all my trucks. I saw one of your trucks driving down it says Rico's Tacos on it. I said that's not my truck. I saw another one that says **Richie's**. I said that's not my truck. Only **Ritchie's** is mine.

M: Do they all have the same menu?

J: Pretty much. Pretty much the same.

M: So it's your recipes that are being used for the most part?

J: Most of them. I told Richard I should have patented them. You know I should have licensed them or something (both laugh). Register them – they're mine only. No but they – a lot of people incorporate their own recipes into it.

M: Oh I see.

J: And so they have a little bit different. I don't think anybody cooks exactly like we do. They have, pretty much have the tacos, burritos, tortillas, quesadillas. Pretty much the same things we do.

M: I know there's a truck down, I think it's on 4th Street and Portland or 3rd or 4th Street. I don't know if it's all yours. Do you know?

J: It's not. I know who you're talking about. We parked one of our trucks in that little area. It's close to a bank I think.

M: Right, that's right.

J: ??? bank. We parked our truck that's over in Beaverton there for a little while but we were there during the winter and we didn't make any money. It was too many trucks there and people didn't want to come out and eat out in the open.

M: Yeah, right.

J: So we were just there maybe three months, four months and then we took off. We decided to leave because it wasn't profitable for us. So now we parked it over at Beaverton. It's been really good there.

M: And you still do special events like things for the Washington County fair etc.

J: I do. I do like the – like the animal shows. I do Cinco de Mayo, ??? which is different holidays, the Mexican holidays. They have animal shows like bird shows and I go take my truck, park in front of the bird show and sell to the vendors and to the people that come in. Take care of their needs because there's no time to go all the way to McDonald's or Jack In The Box to eat you know so (unclear).

M: And would you say that your business has met or exceeded your expectations when you started it?

J: It exceeded our expectations. Yes it did. It did more than we thought it was going to. You know we didn't have an idea, I mean that's our sole monies. We make a living that way. We

bought both houses that way. We've bought vacation with the money we made from the trucks you know. We did really good so I think it's done pretty good.

M: It sounds like it.

J: We enjoyed it and besides that we had fun too (laughs).

M: Yeah. And what do you think the future will bring? Do you plan to continue this business?

J: For awhile I think I will. My husband and I were thinking maybe we should open up a little restaurant. And everybody knows Ritchie's so we'll call it Ritchie's you know. And open up a little place. My son is now 19 and he says – mom it'd be great if you opened up a little restaurant but then put a dancing bar next to it. Like a lounge and have dancing. And you'd have real good Mexican music and disco and – not disco but Mexican music and dancing with a DJ and stuff or live music, whatever. But you'd have lots of fun doing that so. I don't know. We're kind of looking into setting up a little restaurant in the near future maybe or even in the middle of this year or at the end of it. Depends on how our finances go, so.

M: Okay. Anything else you want to say about your business that we haven't talked about so far.

J: No, not a whole lot about our business. It takes a lot of dedication. It takes a lot of time to work and it takes a lot of communication with your spouse if it's going to be a family business. And that's basically what it is. We work as a family and my son works with us. My daughter didn't want to work with us but my son did. My daughter says I don't want to smell like onions all the time (both laugh). And my son drives and cashiers so he's a people person. He just loves to talk to people just like mom they said (both laugh). Yeah so we have lots of fun.

M: So he's involved in the business too then.

J: And he knows that in the near future, in the future future when you know we decide to retire he's going to take over.

M: He's going to take over the business.

J: He knows how to cook. He knows how to you know get the inventory, count it and see how much and he knows where to get everything. He's pretty good with it.

M: And how old is your daughter?

J: She's 23.

M: And what is she up to these days?

J: She is and administrative assistant for a company.

M: Okay.

J: And so she works in an office. She went through high school and that's all she did and so she works. She makes pretty good money. And she's married to a Cuban boy that works for ??? And so he's a big tall guy that wants to do, wants to go professional boxing. He's only 23 also. So he wants to be a boxer. I've got two grand babies too, a two and three year old that my daughter had you know right away after they got married. They've been married almost five years.

And so the kids are just wonderful. They see our trucks and they know. They want to eat everything in the trucks and they're very, very ethnic. They eat real good. Everything we have they have. And most of the kids – oh I don't want onions or I don't want this. They eat everything. You name it.

M: Good eaters (both laugh).

J: Yeah, they're good eaters.

M: Okay Julia. Well I want to thank you very much for doing these interviews today. And it's a great story and thanks a lot.

J: Thank you very much Mike. I enjoyed it.

M: Okay.

Search Words:

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Brothers and sisters
Children
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