

Washington County Museum  
Oral History Interview with Father Arnold Beezer  
At 22<sup>nd</sup> NW  
March 19, 2001

Informant: Father Arnold Beezer  
Interviewer: Michael O'Rourke  
Transcriber: Kruthi Annigeri

A = Arnold  
M = Michael

M: This is Michael O'Rourke, from the Washington County Oral History Society, beginning an interview today with Father Arnold Beezer on March 19, 2001, and today's interview is taking place at, I'm not sure where'd you call it...

A: 22<sup>nd</sup> Northwest [**something here**]

M: [laughs] Okay, 22<sup>nd</sup> Northwest [**something here, White?**] at his home. So, um, I guess I'd just like to start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

A: In Seattle, 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 1934.

M: So you grew up in Seattle?

A: Right.

M: What did your parents do in Seattle?

A: Well, my father was an lawyer and my mother was a homemaker.

M: You went to school in Seattle?

A: Yes.

M: To, uh, public schools or Catholic schools?

A: Catholic schools.

M: Okay, um, both elementary and high school?

A: And secondary, uh-huh.

M: How was your early school experience there?

A: Good.

M: Did you like school as a kid?

A: Mm-hmm.

M: Um, and, then, your parents were both Catholic?

A: Yes.

M: I have a note here that you left Seattle at age 17 to enroll in the seminary at Sheridan, Oregon, is that right?

A: Yes.

M: What made you decide to go into the seminary, to pursue that as a career?

A: I had Jesuits as teachers, and, I was inspired by them.

M: Any teachers in particular that stand out as sources of inspiration in those days?

A: Oh, practically all of them.

M: What was it that inspired you?

A: To what?

M: Well, you said you were inspired by your teachers.

A: Oh, I just thought they were... good role models.

M: And then, when you arrived in the seminary in Sheridan, how did you find that?

A: It was quite rigorous.

M: Yeah.

A: It was, you might say, regiment.

M: Describe a typical day.

A: Well, we got up at 5 o'clock and had prayer time and mass and breakfast. Then we had, around 9 o'clock, we had a class, or lecture on the director of novices. Lunch came, we had a little bit of time off for siesta, and then around 2 o'clock we had work assignments or play order and then around four, we did some reading and mass, or rather, dinner around 5:30. Then we had recreation, conversation until about 7:30, and then some reading and reflection on the day, common prayer, and that was it.

M: Actually I meant to ask you before we went to the seminary, you said your father was an attorney, and your mother was a housewife? What did your parents think of your choice to go into the seminary?

A: We were in agreement.

M: So your father didn't want you to pursue a law career?

A: No.

M: And you didn't have any interest in that either? And then you were in Sheridan for how long?

A: 2 years with the bishop, which I described the day, and 2 years with like junior college.

M: Okay, so things changed a little bit then?

A: Well I'm not in Sheridan anymore; it's a lot more flexible.

M: Did you get out much in the community at large during all these years?

A: Not at Sheridan.

M: Not at Sheridan? Okay, and then in 1955, you went up to **[I couldn't make out the word here]** in Spokane? And you were there for how long?

A: Three years.

M: And you were teaching?

A: No, it was studies: philosophy and science.

M: Okay.

A: There's a place called Mount Saint **[something]**, which was part of **[place I couldn't make out earlier]**. Not on the main campus.

M: Oh, and I see, you taught after that.

A: Yes, after that. I came to Portland.

M: You came to Portland and taught where?

A: Jesuit High.

M: How'd you find that?

A: Oh, I enjoyed it!

M: But you decided not to stick with it?

A: Oh, no, I spend two years at Jesuit High in anticipation of doing some studying of chemistry, which didn't pan out. I went to Spokane **[something]** prep for one year.

M: And then you went to Toronto for four years, and that was also for studies?

A: Yes, theology studies.

M: What was it like in Toronto?

A: Oh, it was good. Good experience.

M: Was that your first visit to Toronto?

A: Yes.

M: And then you came back in 1965 to Port **Townson?**, and that was for more spiritual studies?

A: Right, third year, additional year with the bishops. There was [sic] more opportunities to serve in parishes. You weren't confined all the time.

M: So at that point, you started to interact more with the larger community out there? And what kinds of service did you do, then?

A: Oh, I'd visit; help out in the parish on a weekend.

M: In what ways did you help out?

A: Well, with the mass, confessions.

M: And then, you came back to Portland to Jesuit and taught for six years. What kind of courses did you teach? Theology?

A: Chemistry.

M: Oh, chemistry, okay. During those years... how were those years for you? What sort of things happened during those six years?

A: Well, it was good. I enjoyed the chemistry. But after awhile, the routine was setting in, and I had started making some contacts in Washington County with the

Hispanic community. Started celebrating a mass, and I think it was in Hillsboro, but the last year **[indistinct]** that I'd visit Jesuit. It seemed it was time to make a move, so after the six years, there was an opening at Cornelius, it was a way to sort of get me into the system. They decided to separate Cornelius, which was a mission of Forest Grove, and make it a parish for the Hispanic community of all of Washington County. But they also had English services offered for the people who lived in that territory, wasn't for the whole county, so it became sort of a bilingual parish. It took a little while to get settled into Cornelius, after 4 or 5 months there.

M: Now you said that you started making some contacts with the Hispanic community during those years at Jesuit High School, and of course that's out there in Beaverton. Was that your first sort of real interaction with Hispanics here in this country?

A: Yeah, I think so.

M: And... did you speak Spanish at the time?

A: Well, I started learning it.

M: And so you had an idea already that maybe you would take this direction? What was it about going that direction that appealed to you?

A: Well, it offered a little more variety than teaching chemistry. I think that was what was appealing about it dealing with a family.

M: Who were some of the people that you met during those six years when you were still teaching?

A: Oh, well, that's not much until the last couple, who was: Emilio Hernandez, the Garza family, Lionel Rosero and the... **Vaditraveño [don't know how to spell it]**

M: Sounds like you were in touch with a lot of the people that wound up founding Centro. Let me talk about some of these people individually, or as a group, either way, I guess, well, let's start with Emilio Hernandez, what was he up to in those days, was he... I believe he came like most of them did, as a migrant, originally, but what was he doing?

A: He was working for Tektronix.

M: Okay at that point he had his job, and the Garzas, you said you knew the Garza family too, what were they doing at that time, do you recall?

A: I don't recall.

M: And Lionel Rosero, that's the one name you mentioned that I hadn't come across before.

A: Well, he was always stirring up things.

M: What kinds of things was he stirring up?

A: If ever there was an issue, he was right in the middle of it.

M: Can you think of an example?

A: No.

M: When you said you started having contact with some of these folks in those last couple years prior to your actually making your move to Cornelius, what was the nature of your contacts? What sorts of things would you do with them?

A: Well we had the mass on Sunday and they just had visits, home visits.

M: So it was mostly regarding spiritual matters, would you say, or was there some community organizing already starting at that point?

A: No. But that's what several were like; they'd take it in a political direction.

M: And what about yourself, how did you feel about the relationship between the spiritual life and political life *at that time*? What were your thoughts then?

A: They were integral parts of human living.

M: Tell me a little bit of what happened once you made the move to Cornelius from Jesuit High School.

A: Well, first we were talking about the beginnings of the Centro. There was a Centro Chicano Cultural which is over at Jarvis? but it never really got to the people. It wasn't too based. So the idea for me for the Centro is here it be something that belongs to the community for expression of whoever they are, and so one day at church, the idea of moving out to that area was on the people's minds. I think it was Emilio, and he said, "We're going to take up a collection today, for you, to assist you in living!" I said, "Well no, I don't want any kind of collection or financial support but what I would suggest is that we work on a cultural site." And that's really where the idea of the Centro was expressed. People said, "Oh, okay," and they seemed to go along with it. So that, you might say, was the birthing of the Centro Cultural.

M: What was it about this idea that you felt appealing at the time?

A: Well, it was a goodwill, a good direction for a community to go.

M: And you saw a need for them to have this?

A: Well it was a unifying force.

M: How did you go about furthering this idea?

A: Well, we had dinners. Eventually, we raised money for the acreage. It was about 4 and a half acres down by Gaston as a site and then to get something a little more concrete we bought an old house where the Centro is today. Old yellow two-story house, and we raised enough money to buy that also. Then we started with the house, we started to initiate some programs, like sewing... I forget what else we had. We offered various classes; let me put it that way. Then, to facilitate those classes we had the Jesuit Volunteer Corps supply some people to us. It's sort of like a church Peace Corps group and they came and they lived in the building on the second floor. They had the classes down on the first floor. English to be more exact. We offered Spanish for the Anglo community.

M: When you mentioned the dinners and other types of fundraising you did, where did the money actually come from? Was it mostly from within the Hispanic community itself or was the Anglo community sort of involved in this as well?

A: Well the dinners, the funds mainly came from the Anglo community.

M: So, you'd do dinners, and the general population would show up.

A: Well we'd do it like we did church, you know, the publicity, and they'd hold it with their church. The meal was cooked by the Hispanics.

M: I assume the people you mentioned earlier, the Hernandezes, the Garzas, they were all working on this idea at the same time. And did you ever sense any resistance in those early days on the part of the larger community?

A: Well, it was a general attitude from the Anglo community, it was a little threatening, the fact that, "There's a group, and they're not part of us," because they were going over to Jarvis to find out what was happening from the Anglos who were very much against Chicanos having property in Jarvis and had a building and so forth. So they picked up those vibes, and for that reason, we had to get property down in Gaston because this fellow in Cornelius wouldn't sell once he knew what it was for.

M: What happened to the center in Jarvis then?

A: Well they sort of sputtered? a wall there. They never got great community support.

M: Was there ever an attempt to get them together with the Centro?

A: No.

M: What would you say was the condition of the greater Hispanic community at that time? I assume that most of them were migrants at that early stage or was there a fair-

A: There were some settling down.

M: There were some settling as permanent residents? And otherwise just all migrants? What were the problems that they faced, would you say? What sorts of problems did Centro have to grapple with in those early days?

A: Well, I don't think there was any problem. I think the people in the area accepted the presence of the Hispanics.

M: I was thinking more in terms of the economic problems or language problems etc

A: Tektronix opened up quite a bit for them.

M: So in the early days... Well you mentioned actually several things that happened, you purchased the land in Gaston, also purchased the house in Cornelius, and then started using the house for classes, etc. and this must have taken place over a period of some years.

A: It went off running pretty fast, I'd say it was about one or two years, it got incorporated and...

M: What did people think that the community center would eventually become, what were its purposes?

A: Well, it was our place, it was a sense of community possession, an enabling force for the Hispanics, not only their place, but it was a kind of a presence within the community, a force to be reckoned with.

M: In your ministry and/or your work at Centro, did you much work in the labor camps at that time?

A: Well in the summertime, yeah. We used to have visits, mass, in the North Plains, mainly.

M: What were the camps like in those days?

A: Well, they were less than palaces. There was a lot of criticism of the sanitary conditions.



M: Did you find the farmers generally receptive to the fact that you were coming into the camps?

A: Well they were receptive; they just didn't want us doing any organizing for unions. As a matter of courtesy, you'd go to the farmers; they knew we had a right to come in, they couldn't prevent us, but just to have good relationships and say, "Well the reason we're here is religious conversations, instructions..." and then this thing would come up: "Well, that's fine, but don't try to do any organizing here."

M: To what extent was Centro doing political organizing in those days?

A: Oh, it wasn't...

M: It wasn't too much?

A: They weren't interested in it.

M: What about Rosero?

A: [chuckles] He was sort of a gadfly, stirring up things.

M: Do you remember any issues that he was particularly...

A: Well, he would say, "Now we should go out and boycott Safeway®, are you gonna [sic] come with us?" And he'd sort of put an either/or, like you're with us or you're against us. If you're not out there with us then you're against us. He'd try to put me on the spot, you know, and I'd sort of take the position, "I'm here for the spiritual welfare of the people."

M: You wouldn't –

A: Well I didn't want to ... people, I wouldn't be for boycotts, I wasn't against them. It wasn't for me to take sides.

M: You figured your most effective path was to sort of stay away from that. I have a note here that you moved to Woodburn in '74, so you were just there for a couple of years?

A: Yes. There was some internal conflict with the staff which was getting to me.

M: At church?

A: No, in Cornelius, at the Centro. The volunteers, there was one in particular that was sort of boycotting his job. I should've fired him, but I let the thing go on, hoping it would just fizzle out, but it didn't. It was just wearing me out so eventually I just

had to bail out, but there was enough leadership to carry on, I guess the next step the Centro took was to establish the Garcia clinic.

M: You said that there was one staff member, paid?

A: No, a volunteer. He said he'd work for the church, but not for the Centro. I think he got in conflict with Rosero.

M: So he at least had different politics?

A: He had something going on.

M: So when you say he boycotted his job...

A: Well he just wouldn't do anything for the Centro, for which he was hired, but he said, "I'll be glad to work for the church."

M: You said, though, that it caused conflict among the staff at the Centro?

A: Well that caused conflict for me. I probably should've fired the guy, but I dismissed it, for not doing his job at the Centro.

M: And what was his job at the Centro?

A: [lightly chuckles] Well he was supposed to coordinate all the volunteers. He'd say, "Well, I want everybody up at 6 o'clock tomorrow." Then he'd show up around 8:00.

M: [laughs] That sounds less like a boycott and...

A: Well it was a protest.

M: So you just decided you needed to get away from it? You know you said you should've fired him so you were in that kind of position at Centro at that time?

A: As a director for the volunteers, I could've. As the volunteer corps [silence]

33:51 – 34:11 [silence]

A: ...causing me a problem was the director. Then, after I left, we'd set up a board, and they got a director. I believe I'm not qualified to comment on anything after I left because I really wasn't involved with it.

M: In those first couple years, they didn't really even have a board?

A: Well, they had a board after about a year.

M: What was the membership for that board?

A: I don't remember.

M: Any part would include some of the names you already mentioned earlier?

A: Yes.

M: So you moved to Woodburn, then, and were the pastor at the church there? And I assume you were still in touch with the Hispanic community there at Woodburn. Can you tell me a little bit about that time in Woodburn? What you were up to then?

A: I wasn't up to anything.

M: Just what you were doing then.

A: I was doing the regular duties of the pastor, but I wasn't working on starting another Centro or anything.

M: And you weren't really in touch with Centro during that time?

A: No, I never... once I visited them, but other than that...

M: So you weren't trying to start another Centro? Is that because you thought it wasn't necessary, or...

A: Well there was already one that was in Jervis, I wasn't trying to run competition with them.

M: So they were already there, sort of serving? To what extent would you say that your time as pastor... what was the congregation like?

A: It was large, much bigger than Cornelius.

M: Did it include a sizable Hispanic component?

A: Yeah.

M: Roughly, what percent?

A: Oh, I'd say, 60% Anglo, 40% Hispanic.

M: Okay, so a pretty big Hispanic fraction there of the congregation.

A: I concentrated more on home visits and getting to know the people, because it was so large.

M: When you say made home visits would that be to all the congregation or more of the Hispanic?

A: The Hispanics.

M: Okay, so you were still sort of oriented in that direction.

A: Well we had other priests there to visit the Anglo families.

M: Because of your past experience, you were the one administered to the Hispanics? Was that it, or was it your own choice?

A: It was my own choice.

M: What kind of experiences did you have with that congregation?

A: It was good.

M: Any specific examples of problems you helped people with at that time or anything that come to mind?

A: This material from Woodburn, Yakima, I don't understand how this relates to Washington County.

M: It doesn't directly, but as I said, we're just interested in any other experiences you might have had related to this, I guess. Well maybe we moved on too fast, anything else you wanted to say about your time in Cornelius, Washington County? Then, after Woodburn, you moved to Yakima? Still taking care of Hispanic community?

A: I was pastor for the first four years. Fifth year, I was pastor, sixth and seventh year I was co-pastor. Very divided up things like school, Hispanic ministry, those were two sectors.

M: By this time, you'd had the chance to minister to Hispanic populations in at least three different places?

A: Yeah.

M: Did you see any similarities or any differences in terms of the condition of those three communities?

A: They were about the same.

M: People tended to be involved in the same kind of work and etc. Was there a Centro up in Yakima?

A: No.

M: Do you have any inclination to try to organize one up there?

A: No.

M: Why not?

A: It didn't even occur to me.

M: Would that be because you didn't see a need for it there?

A: Yeah, it seemed like, the Yakima community was much more established on its own.

M: And then, you came back to Woodburn.

A: Yep.

M: Same church in Woodburn then? And I guess you were there for three or four years?

A: Three to four years, yes.

M: And were you doing the same sorts of things you were doing before?

A: Well yeah, I was assigned to work with the Hispanic community.

M: Were you pastor again?

A: No.

M: Okay, why did you make the move from Woodburn to Yakima?

A: Six years as pastor were up, term limit.

M: And that meant you had to move on to something else then. And was that the reason you also moved back from Yakima to Woodburn?

A: Yeah.

M: After Woodburn you became chaplain at St. Vincent?

A: Yeah.

M: And what was that like, that must have been a little different.

A: Well yeah, it was more... organized routine, like every day, certain hours. Pastoring is not defined by hours, whenever you're awake.

M: And I guess your **[don't know the word here]** at the hospital would be quite a bit different.

A: In and out, yes.

M: Transitory kind of population there. And you were there for three years, is that right?

A: About two.

M: Why did you leave St. Vincent?

A: Well, the director and I didn't see eye to eye and so, I got this offer to come to Honduras.

M: What were some of the issues between you and the director?

A: I talked too much about her over at Providence. I was taking the CPE (clinical pastoral education) unit there to Providence and if I said something then it got back to her that I was badmouthing her because... She didn't like the fact that I napped during the staff meetings and they would drone on.

M: In your opinion, were you badmouthing her?

A: Well for that.

M: You said that the opportunity came up to go to Honduras. What was that assignment?

A: Well, it was to work in an orphanage.

M: I suppose at this point you had pretty good Spanish?

A: Yep.

M: So you were there for...

A: So I went down, checked it out, and came back later.

M: So you took a trip down just to...

A: Yeah, check it out.

M: To see what it was like, and then you came back and decided to go.

A: Well, when I was down there, I was offered the job.

M: So then you came back, and resigned at St. Vincent.

A: Well I think I'd... see what I did was I did another one of these units of pastoral education. The issue, she would say, is, "You're not qualified because you don't have the certification." So I said, "Well, I'll go get the certification." So I went to Arizona for three months and took a CPE course in Phoenix at a hospital and got my fourth unit, but there was no guarantee that I'd have a job when I came back. She said that, "I can't guarantee you, if you go that I'll hire y'all up." I came back and there wasn't any job, so Honduras was the best vista of...

M: And what was it like in Honduras?

A: Well, it was a little different; I worked at this ranch, sort of out in a rural setting, nice climate. I liked the kids, but the director and I had little differences.

M: So you were saying you were having some problems with the director at the orphanage at Honduras, also? Was the director Honduran?

A: No, he was German.

M: Oh, okay. What kinds of problems did you have with him?

A: He didn't care for the fact that one of the girls who used to be at the ranch had left, that I would visit in the city. He sort of got the idea that she was a prostitute, and that that was the reason for my visits, which it was not. He sort of stirred up the troops and said that, well, he had been in some kind of similar situation before, and he had made a wrong decision. He wasn't going to do it this time, and come the end of the second year, he was not going to renew the contract. There wasn't any contract, it was an open-ended hiring, which was my understanding, but you know, if there was going to be that kind of tension, I'd just assume, "Leave the ranch." So, one day, knowing he had made up his mind about a month and a half before the second year was up, I just packed up and moved into Tegucigalpa, got a job at a local parish which had a large hospital population. So I figured, here I can use my hospital skills. But, I don't know, some way or other, this director, he wasn't going to let the issue die down, I think, I'm not sure, that he went to see the archbishop to get me out of the diocese. I was told in this parish that the archbishop was sending another priest to do the hospital work. That was my signal that it was time to move on. So then, Jesuit said, "You have the option of going up north to a place called Progressoth." So, I said, "What'll I be doing there?" And they said, "You talk with a superior there." I did, and he said, "Well I haven't got anything for you to do." Then I just decided it was time to go home, so I came back to Oregon and here I am. So I've

had to just work in this parish or that parish to help out, and then about six months ago, they needed a chaplain for the retired sisters at Marylhurst, so I've been going out there ever since. And there was a group of them that were over at Loyola Retreat House and they moved back to Marylhurst so it's a larger group now. So I go out there on Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays. And then I help at various local parishes, like The Madeline, St. Ignatius, St. Patrick.

M: There was a couple questions I wanted to ask you about that Centro period, too, that I forgot to ask about. You'd mentioned that the Virginia Garcia clinic, I'm not exactly sure what date that got started.

A: Well it opened, I think, in June of '74. But I was in Woodburn by that time.

M: Did you know its namesake, Virginia Garcia?

A: She was a migrant; she either died or was very ill.

M: Okay, but I was wondering if you knew the family personally.

A: No.

M: No, you never met them? Okay. You said by the time it opened you were in Woodburn, but were you involved?

A: I had nothing to do with it.

M: The other thing I wanted to ask you just a little more about was some of these early decisions that Centro made, with respect to investing in the land, for instance, so was that the first big acquisition that Centro made? What was the idea with the land?

A: The land was to build a Centro down at Gaston, but then this other building, the old house came up, and so it was more desirable to have something in Cornelius.

M: Just because it was closer?

A: Yeah, it was more of a center, too.

M: Who was involved in finding the land? Was that something you did?

A: I did it. Down by Gaston.

M: Do you remember who found the house?

A: I can't remember...

M: But you were involved in both of those situations?



A: Yep.

M: What were... Were there any problems in getting to either of those properties? Did you already have the money in the bank, so to speak?

A: Yeah, we had it financed.

M: There weren't any problems?

A: We didn't have to get loans or anything.

M: Oh, you didn't have to take out a loan on the property. You just paid for it in cash, then?

A: Yep.

M: Oh, that's pretty impressive.

A: [laughs] Well, the dinners paid off.

M: Sounds like it. How often would you have the dinners?

A: Oh, about once a month.

M: Of course, I guess back in those days, land wasn't quite as expensive as it is now. When you got the house, was there anything you needed to do to set it up?

A: Well, we had to remodel it.

M: Once you had the center, how did Centro become an actual working focal point for the community? Did you and the other founders do a lot of outreach to the community to let 'em know it was there, or did people just know it was there, already?

A: Well, they knew it was there.

M: But how would you get the message out, though, to people who didn't know it was there? [pause] Or did that just happen?

A: It just happened.

M: And you mentioned that there were classes there for English, and also for sewing, you said. I think you also mentioned the sewing in a fundraising context, no? Okay. So the main ways you raised money in those days were just the dinners, or were

there other things that were done as well? Were there other types of fundraising activities?

A: Not that I can recall.

M: I guess you were up in Yakima during this period, but you mentioned that you aren't really in a position to comment too much on stuff that happened at Centro.

A: Yeah, you know, like the new building and all, I had nothing to do with that.

M: Did you maintain some contact, though, with people that are involved at Centro? [pause] So you didn't have any close friends in that organization?

A: I didn't have the time or the energy to be going to Cornelius.

M: Well, is there anything else that you remember about Centro or about anything else in your career life that you believe we might talk about?

A: You've done well...

M: Any other specific stories that you might have about those early Centro days in terms of just... any kind of story?

A: No.

M: Anything else you'd like to say for the record? Well, thank you very much for the interview, and, as I say, I guess I should get your... well, I've got 2222 NW White? And the zip here is...?

A: 97210.

M: Okay, and is that all I need for an address for you?

A: Portland.

M: Portland, okay, I'll need to send you this form that I forgot to bring you today. They'll probably just drop it in the mail to you with a return envelope. It just indicates that you are willing to donate this interview to the Washington County Historical Society. Otherwise, I guess we're finished here, but thanks again.

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Search Terms

Christianity  
Community centers

Congregational churches  
Families (he worked with a lot of Hispanic families...)  
Migrant labor (many Hispanics were migrants)  
Oregon! (because it was in Oregon)  
Religious education of children

Science - study and teaching  
Religion  
Farms  
Rural families

Proper nouns:

Honduras  
Cornelius  
Emilio Hernandez  
Lionel Rosero  
Garza family  
Virginia Garcia clinic  
Centro Cultural  
Yakima  
Woodburn

