



*A float in the 1938 Garden City Fiesta parade.*

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# Mexicans on the Kansas Plains: Stories of Struggle and Resilience through the Testimony of Gregorio Mujica in Garden City

*edited by Marco A. Macias and D. Nicole English*

The Kansas Historical Society in Topeka is lucky to possess the research collections of Robert Oppenheimer, a former distinguished professor of Latin American history at the University of Kansas. Some of the oral history interviews he collected in the early 1980s were recorded in Spanish. To make these accessible to readers who do not speak Spanish, we are beginning a series in *Kansas History* that will share three of these interviews. These were translated and annotated by students in Marco A. Macias's Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans class at Fort Hays State University in the fall of 2023.

Mexican Americans have a long history in Kansas, with significant migration beginning in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> While a small number of Mexicans resided in the region during the nineteenth century, large-scale immigration came about thanks to the combination of economic instability in Mexico—caused by the Mexican Revolution and socioeconomic structural inequalities—and labor demands in the United States. In 1900, the Mexican population in Kansas, according to the census, was seventy-one individuals; in 1920, it was over thirteen thousand. Kansas, particularly cities such as Kansas City, Emporia, Wichita, Dodge City, and Garden City, became a key destination due to the availability of jobs in railroads, agriculture, and meatpacking. By 1920, the influx of Mexican transient laborers had gradually evolved into stable, family-oriented communities as these laborers brought their families and began establishing long-term roots.<sup>2</sup>

Mexicans also faced harsh labor conditions and systemic discrimination in Kansas. Railroad workers initially lived in dugouts, tie houses, or even tents, later moving into boxcar camps with minimal amenities, while agricultural workers in the sugar-beet fields were paid poorly and subjected to exploitative voucher systems. Mexicans experienced social segregation in housing, schools, hospitals, and public spaces and were sometimes categorized similarly to African Americans in terms of racial exclusion. Despite these challenges, they formed strong community institutions, such as mutual aid societies, churches, and cultural organizations. Events such as fiestas celebrating Mexican Independence Day played a crucial role in preserving cultural traditions and fostering solidarity. By the mid-twentieth century, these communities had laid the foundation for the modern Mexican American presence in Kansas, balancing the

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1. Michael M. Smith, "Mexicans in Kansas City: The First Generation, 1900–1920," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies* 2, no. 32 (1989): 29–57.
2. Henry J. Ávila, "The Mexican American Community in Garden City, Kansas, 1900–1950," *Kansas History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 22–37; Robert Oppenheimer, "Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1985): 431–34.

challenges of assimilation with the preservation of cultural identity.<sup>3</sup>

The first interview in the series, of Gregorio Mujica, provides valuable insights into the life of a Mexican immigrant who experienced many of the key historical events of the twentieth century, including the Mexican Revolution, Dust Bowl, Great Depression, World War II, and gradual social integration of Mexicans in the United States. His personal story mirrors the broader experiences of many Mexican immigrants during this time.

Gregorio Mujica was born in Michoacán, Mexico, in 1901. He came to the United States in 1913, during the Mexican Revolution. He ended up in Garden City, and he discusses the discrimination that Mexicans faced there and how mutual aid societies and other community organizations helped mitigate the impacts of racial segregation. Mujica also talks about the dust storms in Garden City during the 1930s and how the Dust Bowl, combined with the Great Depression, forced many people, including him, to leave and seek work elsewhere, particularly in California. His experience reflects the struggles many agricultural workers faced, especially immigrants, during this period of environmental and economic hardship. During World War II, Mujica's son was drafted and fought in Europe, and he discusses this military service. This oral history reinforces a broader narrative of Mexican Americans' role in agriculture, their military contributions during World War II, and the changes the war brought about in the perception of Mexicans in the United States, leading to gradual improvements in their social standing.

### **Robert Oppenheimer's Interview of Gregorio Mujica**

**Robert:** Is it working, yes, it's already working. This interview with Gregorio Mujica, on May 22, 1981, in his house in Garden City, Kansas, with Robert Oppenheimer. Are you ready, OK, let's begin. Mr. Mujica, how old are you?

3. Oppenheimer, "Acculturation or Assimilation," 432.

**Gregorio:** I was born on March 12, 1901.

**Robert:** And where were you born?

**Gregorio:** Before, it was called Hacienda Zurumuato.<sup>4</sup> Do you know what a hacienda is?

**Robert:** A hacienda? Yes, sure.

**Gregorio:** And then the Revolution broke out. So I came to the United States in 1913. My mom sent me with another gentleman. I had a brother in the United States who first went there as a young man, then came back, got married, and went back to work here in Garden City. So, as the Revolution began to unfold in Mexico, many young boys were taking up arms to fight against the government of Porfirio Díaz. So, seeing that, my mom said, "You know what, you're growing up. I'm going to send you with my son to the United States." My mom got remarried again to my dad, so my brother, who was in the United States, and I were half-brothers. Just from the mother's side, but not from the father, and so I came.<sup>5</sup>

**Robert:** Where were you born?

**Gregorio:** In the hacienda of Zurumuato.

**Robert:** Yes, but where is it?

**Gregorio:** In the state of Michoacán, México.

**Robert:** And was it a hacienda or a small town?

**Gregorio:** I'm telling you; it was a hacienda; there were many people there, but it was a hacienda, right? And then, I came to Laredo, Texas,

4. Ex-Hacienda Zurumuato is now named Pastor Ortiz and is in the state of Michoacán, Mexico.

5. The *Garden City Telegram* mentioned that Esiquio P. Rodriguez was born in 1887 and was survived by several daughters (among them Cipriana Rodriguez) and his brother Gregorio Mujica. He lived at 705 E. Santa Fe, Garden City, Kansas. "Funerals: Esiquio P. Rodriguez," *Garden City Telegram*, April 2, 1957.



Panoramic view of Laredo, Texas. Visible to the right is the Rio Grande, and on the far side of that, Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

because they were derailing trains in El Paso back then. So when the train from Mexico arrived at the border, it would cross right up to the edge of the United States. That's where families coming from Mexico would immigrate. So they didn't charge anything in Mexico, and people would just pass, only through U.S. immigration.

Then, an American who spoke Spanish got on board, and he knew that people coming from Mexico were "green" and didn't know English. So he started to see all the people on the train, and the man who was bringing me, he didn't tell me, "You know, they're going to ask you some questions . . . where are you coming from? Who is your father?" Nothing! He didn't tell me anything. I was a kid.

The man came to me after passing two or three seats. . . . He said, "*Chavalo*,<sup>6</sup> who is your father?" "No, sir, well, I don't remember." And when he asked a lady, she answered, "Well, my husband is in the United States." He said, "Ah, and where are you going, kid?" I said, "To Garden City. I have a brother there." And then, to the lady, "And you, where are you going?" "Well, to the United States." "No, which part of the United States?" "Dodge City," she said, "my husband and two little kids will be there." He turned back and said, you boy, "Do you have luggage or a suitcase?" "No, just a little suitcase." "Grab it, and you too, ma'am. . . ." They took us down.

There we go, heading to Laredo to enter immigration, and then I stopped there. And I went inside. He said, "You guys are going to stay here

and wait here." Well, on the street, people were passing between both Mexico and the United States. So I sat on the edge, watching people pass by. The hall where the U.S. immigration was located was open, but there was only one room where they put the people they detained. Well, I didn't know, and as I sat on the edge there watching people, a man said, "Hey!" in English ". . . come on, come on," he took me by the hand, "sit down!" So I sat down, well, I didn't know anything. So there I was, and the woman too. "So, listen, what are we going to do?" said the man who came; his name was Bren. Well, Bren is not coming.

At almost five o'clock, the man who came was arriving. I said to him, "Hey, what happened? Because they took me down from the train." I think they're going to detain us here in Laredo, Texas, United States. Because there was Laredo, Mexico. And it was there on this side, on the edge. The man, that American, was an *enganchador* [recruiter]; it was his business, but he was married to a Mexican woman. His businesses were in Laredo, Texas, but he lived in Mexico, where he had his wife, and at night, he would close his office. The next morning, he would get up and go to Texas.

So there I am; the American man spoke Spanish well, and he said, "Listen, kid. Where in the United States are you going to go? Who do you have there in the United States?" I told him, "I have a brother. And that's why my mom sent me here." The man responded, "Hey, do you have money?" "No, sir, I have like six or seven pesos." He said, "Give me three pesos, and I'll call your brother." So then he

6. *Chavalo* is a colloquial word meaning "boy."

asks, "Where does your brother live?" "Garden City, and he works *en el trake* . . . I don't know his house number or anything.<sup>7</sup> He works *en el trake*. His name is Esiquio Rodríguez." He said, "Then, I'm going to call him." The next day, he told me, "I found your brother. It's true; he lives in Garden City and works *en el trake*. But you can't pass until your brother comes for you. He's going to come," he said. "I already called to say that he would come for you because I told him that if he didn't come, you wouldn't pass."

I was detained in Laredo for twenty-three days. And then, there I was. Little by little, more people arrived; they arrived at that house, and he would help them. And then, another family arrived, a young woman. And he tells them, "Oh, and where are you coming from?" "Well, from Mexico," she said, "And where are you going?" "Well, to California." "Uh, well, why cross at Laredo?" She said, "You can't go through El Paso because the train is down there, so through here, and my husband is in California." Well, then, the lady who gave us food at the American's house would send me to do errands to the plaza with a basket. I brought her lunch and dinner. Well, it's just that with so much going back and forth to buy provisions and food . . . .

About a block away, there was a very decent house, and they watched me go by. Then, the lady said, "Hey, kid. Where do you live? I see you pass by here all the time to buy food." And I told her, "Ma'am, I was going to the United States, but they detained me; I'm here until my brother comes." "Hey," she said, "don't you have a father or a mother?" "No," I said. "My dad died when I was very little, and I barely knew him; my mom is the one I have in Mexico." "Hey, well, why don't you come here with us? We'll receive you as a son. Look,

come over here." No [wow]! Such a decent house! Oh, it was a nice house. "And if you stay, we'll put you in school; we'll educate you. I only have my husband and me," she said. "And with you, we'll make three." "No, ma'am, well, I'm going to the United States." She said, "Come here with us, and we'll arrange everything, papers and all." Well, I was starting to like Laredo, Texas, because the lady gave me money to go to the show. In Mexico, I had never seen shows. So I stayed there until my brother came.

**Robert:** And when did you arrive in Garden City?

**Gregorio:** How long did it take to arrive? We left at night, around 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening, and arrived in the early morning to San Antonio. Then, we took a transfer to Garden City. I don't know if the line was operated by Santa Fe or another line. I don't remember the name of the town and the transfer we made, but it took us to Newton, Kansas. We passed through Wichita and arrived in Newton. There, we took another transfer, I think that was Santa Fe. We went straight from Newton to Garden City. We arrived here at 10:00 at night. It took us all that day, that night, another day, and until another day at 10:00 at night when we arrived in Garden City.

**Robert:** And did you stay with your brother?

**Gregorio:** Yes, I stayed with my brother.

**Robert:** And what did he work in?

**Gregorio:** He worked in *el tracking*.

**Robert:** And you?

**Gregorio:** No . . . when I came, he didn't send me to school. But before, there was a slaughterhouse nearby. I didn't have any occupation at all. What was I going to do? I was thirteen years old and wasn't

7. *Trake* is a word that Gregorio uses occasionally to describe a type of work. I have been unable to identify the word, but I want to respect what he refers to. I also left "*en el*" since the translation would be "on the" or possibly "in the." Given the importance of the railroad in employing Mexicans and the fact that Gregorio's brother worked for the railroad, *trake* could refer to track labor.

a man to work in whatever they needed. The town was small, Garden City. There was a slaughterhouse about half a mile away. So I volunteered, and I started going to the slaughterhouse. I saw them kill the cows. There was also a water pump, and a man cleaned the blood there. So without knowing anything, no English or anything, I volunteered with a broom and helped clean up the blood there.

**Robert:** And how much did they pay?

**Gregorio:** No! I just went there of my own accord. Do you know why I went? I went, and he gave me the guts, the *menudo*, pigs' feet, and everything. And my brother said, "So where did you go to get this?" He didn't even know. "How did you do it?" Well, I started getting closer and making myself useful. I gestured to the man to give me those items because I would eat them. I think he understood that I wanted those guts. And there I am, taking them out, washing them, and bringing them with me. He said . . . "Hey, what do you need? Do you understand?" I knew little English. I think he told me to put the guts in a sack. He said, "Come on," and I got in the truck. And he brought me. Through gestures, I said, "I live there, in a crate house, in Santa Fe section housing"; I said, "Here I live."

**Robert:** What type of house was it?

**Gregorio:** Of wood.

**Robert:** And was it big or small?

**Gregorio:** There were two rooms where my brother lived. That house was in the Santa Fe section, and single men lived there. That's where he took me in.

**Robert:** Was there a kitchen?

**Gregorio:** I slept there, and there was a kitchen.

**Robert:** And a bathroom?

**Gregorio:** What bathroom? There was no bathroom.

**Robert:** How many people lived in the house?

**Gregorio:** Just my brother, his wife, a girl, and me. The American knew where I lived and would come for me. "Come on." He would take me. I think he liked me because I would salt the beef hides, and we would throw away the pig waste. So I helped him out.

**Robert:** So you worked at the slaughterhouse? For how many years?

**Gregorio:** So he taught me how to skin the cow's head. After I skinned the cow's head, he said, "Hey, the feet, remove them up to here." I chopped them off, and everything went well. And then he said, "Hey, the body, keep going." So I got the hang of it. Well, it wasn't long before he sent me to slaughter. And I started to understand a little more. Then, the main boss showed up, because the American was just a worker, and he saw how I worked. And he had a lot of cattle on the ranch during the grazing season, out in the field. And he had one of those big carts. And in the field, just by looking at the cow, he would say, "This one's good," and he also taught me how to shoot. And then he taught me in the truck. He bought a truck, and after years, he let me drive. That's where I worked the most. After being a butcher, I was a contractor, so they paid me when I went out there to slaughter.

**Robert:** How old were you when you did this job?

**Gregorio:** Well, I was about sixteen years old. Because I got married at seventeen; I got married very young. So when I was about seventeen years old, I was already driving, butchering was easy, I already knew well, and all was done by hand. So



*Photograph from between 1900 and 1910 showing a beet field belonging to Mr. F.A. Gillespie, manager of the United States Sugar and Land Company in Garden City, Kansas, together with a number of workers.*

it wasn't just one slaughterhouse; there were three slaughterhouses and three markets. They already knew that I was Henry's butcher. So I would slaughter with him first, and then later in the morning, I would go with another, and then another day with another, back and forth. I slaughtered every day; they trusted me. And then the boss, since he was on contract with the slaughterhouses, they paid me two pesos for the cow and one peso for the pig or a calf. Butchering was easy; I knew everything very well. And from there, the boss who first employed me got me a job at AT&T. The telephone company wanted two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon for sweeping. So I got it. I was doing well with that. I also worked in the beetroot fields, dehusking beetroot and in the field. I worked, but I suffered a lot when we arrived here in Garden City.<sup>8</sup> So I worked everywhere. But the ugly thing here in Garden City was that before, it was like slavery for the Mexicans.

**Robert:** So you worked in the beetroot fields also?

8. This was presumably the Garden City Sugar Beet Company, which began operation in 1905. Oppenheimer, "Assimilation or Acculturation," 433.

**Gregorio:** Yes, in the summer. All families did so. We didn't have much school. Because they didn't encourage Mexicans to go to school, just go to work in the fields as young kids to dehusk. Here, eight families suffered. When I arrived, there were only eight Mexican families in Garden City, and we grew up working on dehusking and field work. The ladies also went to work to help because if they didn't do that, we wouldn't sustain ourselves since there were only two seasons a year of dehusking and field work, and beyond that, there wasn't anything, and it was very difficult to ask for work in other places. Nobody employed you. So we were like ants; in the summer, we worked dehusking and doing field work, cleaning beetroot. They planted onions here and there and sometimes would hire us for a day or two. And I, blessed be God, was lucky because I learned how to slaughter. And why would I complain about Garden City? Garden City has been very good to me because I haven't been here just doing nothing. I mean, now my leg is amputated, but I've had such a good life in Garden City. Those eight families started to set roots. They used to go to the county offices in front of the AT&T building. There, they would give work for a day or two. As people gathered, I had just finished sweeping and would stand at that window to see the crowd. They also saw me there sweeping outside and would say to me, "Hey, Goyo,<sup>9</sup> how did you manage to work here at the telephone company?" Well, luck, and then as a slaughterer. In the county, they would give a piece of meat and two potatoes for provisions. The employers were so tough on us that we would start dehusking in June but get paid in August. They would also get provisions, but I worked, but all those people worked at the ranch. And they would ask, "When are we going to get paid?" and they said, "Tomorrow . . . I said tomorrow, what do you want?" Well, they did not have anything to eat, no provisions. They were provided with lard and flour. The most necessary. They were like ants. In March, there was nothing more to do. We suffered quite a bit here.

9. "Goyo" is a nickname for Gregorio typically used in Spanish.

**Robert:** And how many years did you work slaughtering?

**Gregorio:** As a slaughterer? I started shortly after I arrived from Mexico, for about five years. Then, when I got more work, I didn't go to the slaughterhouses anymore. Because I was lucky; I also got work fixing their sand greens. When winter came, I would take time, work at the telephone company, and still do some slaughtering. And when it started to clear up, I would work about two or three hours fixing everything with the sand greens.

**Robert:** You worked there for five years? And then?

**Gregorio:** At AT&T, I lasted about five or seven years. Then, the telephone company, AT&T, moved to Dodge City. There, it became bigger, and then they gradually started removing devices.

**Robert:** How many years did you work for AT&T?

**Gregorio:** About five or six years. When AT&T moved to Dodge City, someone who worked there called me because all the workers were moving. On the other hand, the manager found out. And they needed a worker. So he said, "Hey, well, if he is not going to do anything, we need a worker and I want him; where does he live?" So the telephone manager came, and he spoke with me. The Americans call me Tony, but my name is Gregorio Mujica. When I arrived at the slaughterhouse, they asked, "What is your name?" "Your name is Tony from now on." Well, everyone here knows me like that, and many Americans have already died. Some are still alive, some younger ones. They also know me as Tony, but my name on papers and everything is Gregorio. They call me Tony, and they know me.

But the manager here at the telephone company tells me, "Hey, you are Tony, right? I need a worker at the telephone company, what do you think? Do

you want to work?" I said yes, and I took it. "I'll come for you tomorrow," he said. The next day, he took me to the doctors for an examination. I think I came out fine; he said, "You're fine." And I worked for a while, nineteen years, four months. I worked at the telephone company until I retired. A letter from the company to the manager told him to let me know that my work was coming to an end at sixty-five years old. And they threw me a good party.<sup>10</sup>

**Robert:** Did you get married at seventeen? To whom?

**Gregorio:** Well, I got married on September 10, 1917.

**Robert:** Whom did you get married to?

**Gregorio:** Her name was Inés Ávila. My parents-in-law were Ceciliano Ávila and María Beltrán. In Mexico, it is not customary for the husband's last name to carry over to the wife. That is why my mother-in-law's name was María Beltrán.<sup>11</sup> So I worked for nineteen years and four months at the telephone company. But there was a time before when there was very ugly discrimination against Mexicans here. We couldn't be out in the town past 9:00 at night. The police were really bad with Mexicans: "Eh! What are you doing here?" Nothing. They couldn't stand seeing us; it was like slavery here. Well, it's one thing to be poor in Mexico, but here . . . the discrimination we faced here in the United States in the past . . . So my son was taken to fight in Germany. I had a family of eight, four men and four women. All living children from the same woman, all of them.

10. Information on Gregorio's retirement from Southwest Bell Telephone Company made the local newspaper in Garden City, confirming the story that he went by Tony Mujica. "Long-Time Southwestern Bell Employee Retires," *Garden City Telegram*, March 15, 1966.

11. Inés Ávila was born in April 1900 in Pastor Ortiz (ex-Hacienda Zurumuato) in Michoacán. She passed away in 1970. "Mrs. Gregorio Mujica," *Garden City Telegram*, July 30, 1970.

I did leave during the dust storms in 1935; there were ugly dust storms here. You couldn't see your hand here. All the ranchers left the fields, the tractors in the field; when they returned after the dust storms subsided, they found them all dusty. It was like fine flour. As the ranchers left, and many others were leaving, I went to California after I had gotten those jobs I had here. I had already worked at the telephone company, at AT&T, but I left it. The children were getting sick, and with ear problems. Their senses were blocked by the dust, and a lot of people were leaving Garden City.

I spent about three years in California until things got better, and by then, my children were growing up, so we decided to return. When we arrived here after a few days, the oldest received his draft notice. Three Mexicans from Garden City were the first to be taken to the war. And then, there was the war in Japan. There was a neighbor; they took him to Japan to fight, and mine and others too. They were the first. Until they won the war. My son spent a lot of time in London because he knew how to play very well, and they put him in an orchestra. He was also a sensation at dancing. He was number one, even though he was my son. And the soldiers looked at him, and they wanted to have him. And he danced and played in France until the end of the war with Germany. He was lucky that they only shot him in one leg, just a superficial wound, thank God he came back. And then they took the youngest. And my sons were ready, but they won the war. Others didn't make it because of something with the heart.

**Robert:** And when you were in California, what kind of work did you do?

**Gregorio:** Just field work. I liked the way of life in California, but one reflects back here, like me, well, I didn't lack anything here. I liked Garden City, but when we went to California, there was school for the kids; I just worked. There in Oxnard, California, was an adobe structure with about twenty-five to thirty houses, just two rooms, and they gave those

to the people who worked in the beet fields, and they didn't charge for water, they didn't charge for electricity, I already knew the field work, it was what we did, so when I went to California, I had a good time. There was a contractor there in the adobe houses. And he would get contracts for peas, tomatoes, beets. And I got along well with him; all of us from Garden City got along well with him because we knew how to work hard, and, well, in California, not many people did that. Well, when we arrived, two from Garden City preceded us, like my father-in-law. Tomorrow, Saturday, the kids don't go to school. Before, I worked Saturdays and Sundays with my boy, and we earned around sixty to seventy pesos. We had a good time, and a paycheck every eight days.

**Robert:** What did you do for recreation here? You couldn't go to the movies, right? Could Mexicans go to the theater? And the pool, could you use the public pool in Garden City?

**Gregorio:** No.

**Robert:** So what did you do for recreation?

**Gregorio:** What?

**Robert:** When you were with your family.

**Gregorio:** Oh, so what were we talking about?

**Robert:** We were talking about recreation. Did you spend your weekends at the park with your family; what would you do?

**Gregorio:** Oh, we'll get to that in a bit. When my boy was fighting over there in Germany, the former police chief set up a bar and a pool hall. I was already working at the telephone company. I had a fifteen-minute break, so I came out to catch some air. I went to the bar for a beer. The worker who served him was there. "What do you need?" "I want to have a beer." "Oh, you can't have a drink



*Louis Palenske made this panoramic photograph of Garden City's business district probably in the late 1920s.*

here." He said, "I'll give it to you in a bag so you can take it home." "No, I want to drink it here." "Oh no," he said. "Go drink it at home."

**Robert:** What year was that in?

**Gregorio:** I was angry.

**Robert:** When did it happen?

**Gregorio:** In the war.

**Robert:** The Second World War?

**Gregorio:** When my son was fighting. So I told him, "Hey, there are Mexicans who are dying for the American flag and for you, fighting in Germany, and we don't know if they'll return. And you're here in no danger. They're defending the American flag so that they don't come here to destroy the United States. I have nothing, but you have your businesses here." I got out. At a restaurant, they wouldn't serve us because of our color. There was a billiards hall on the corner, here on old Main Street. There were about four tables, and then my brother had a little girl, the first one. I would take the girl and bring her with me. I can still see that place; it was nothing but Blacks and Mexicans everywhere, so the girl would come out with a candy. She'd be there on the corner, and I'd go inside to watch them play. Then I would go early, help sweep. I'd sweep

there and they'd let me in; they wouldn't pay me anything, but I got to watch the games. Then when the little girl started to cry, she'd come for me. We'd come from the beet ranch, from working all that. We would go to a little cart on the corner, there on Main Street, to eat a little something. It wasn't easy. The show cost ten cents, all Mexicans and Blacks.

My children started going to school. There are some groups of kids. They have friendships with the Mexicans; I think they talked about what happens on the street. And then the police would come and "Hey! Get the . . . out of here, Mexican!" To make sure they didn't have friendships with the boys; the police were bad, bad! Once, there was a base, a big one. And on Saturdays the soldiers would come to the cantina to have their sodas, Blacks and Mexicans, it was for dark people. I went there once with a friend. And a black and a Mexican were playing pool but started fighting. I was near the table. They grabbed pool cues, so I got up and grabbed the pool cue from the Mexican so they wouldn't fight, because he was going to kill him. It was southern people, so I grabbed him, but the black wanted to fight too. The police came and picked me up right away. He said, "Hey, get up," . . . "So where are you taking me?" I had only had my first beer. He said, "Were you going to fight with the Blacks?" No, "on the contrary, I went to stop them." It cost me twenty-five pesos. So that's how police officers had us, and he told me that they were in competition to see who could arrest more

people.

Well, the truth is, Mexicans were the ones they would often arrest out of nowhere. When I arrived in Garden City, Main Street was in disarray. There were lines of water carts where people tied up the horses. Those cement roads to the north, west, and south . . . those brick sidewalks were laid by my brother, the one who died. So I went to Mexico and spent six months there because you still couldn't live well there. The Revolution ended, but Mexico was still very troubled.

**Robert:** Did you visit your mother?

**Gregorio:** I visited my mother; it was the last time.

**Robert:** And did you have other siblings there?

**Gregorio:** I had another brother. So he also died there in Mexico. So I visited my nephews; they were well off. They've already passed. They were businessmen, sons of one of my sisters. So I came here but did not want this life for my children. My children were used to living well, right? Eat well, you know? I said, "I won't stay here, no way." I bought pigs, and I bought corn. I sold them, but I already wanted to return, so I sold everything, I had a very good gun, and I sold it there, just to be able to come back. And then, my mom said, "I'm really sorry you're going to leave." Again, my children were accustomed to living in the United States, to their meals and all that. Then, crossing was hard in El Paso and everywhere. In El Paso, they were still passing through, so let me tell you a story. So there I was with three fellows that followed me from our village. In Juárez, a woman from there told us, "Look, boys, go to downtown Juárez, to the park. There, wait for the first ride that goes to El Paso. Get ready . . . wear a hat like ignorant people."

**Robert:** Were the women from there?

**Gregorio:** "Don't get off from the back of the line, get off from the driver's side and go straight to the bathroom." We went to the bathroom. We came out of the bathroom and went to the registration. So we lined up; then it was my brother-in-law's turn. Everyone speaks Spanish, then the American says, "Where in Mexico are you from?" "From Zurumuato." "Move back, yes, that's fine." Then, it was my turn with a woman. She said, "Sir, come closer. Where in Mexico are you from?" "From a hacienda called Zurumuato." There were some cards. And they said, "Read these cards." "Mexicans, don't be so dumb; go to school."

**Robert:** Did you attend school?

**Gregorio:** I had two years of schooling.

**Robert:** So can we talk a little bit about your family? When you got married, did you leave your brother's house?

**Gregorio:** When I got married? Oh, yes.

**Robert:** And did you have your own house?

**Gregorio:** When I got married, I paid for everything. I worked with some friends here.

**Robert:** So you left your brother's house?

**Gregorio:** Let me tell you. So when I wanted to get married, I asked for the bride's hand. And her parents gave me a deadline of two weeks, so we had already finished working in the beet fields. So I designated two representatives who went to ask for approval, but the bride rescinded the offer. That was on a Friday, I remember. So my brother had a little house, a modest thing. When we found out the next day, my brother went and bought wood to build a house.

**Robert:** So then, you and your wife . . .

**Gregorio:** No . . . I left my brother's place to work in *el trake*. The foreman was Mexican. And we went with other colleagues from there for about a month and some days. I came back, and then I talked to the lady . . . I talked to the bride. "Well, it hurt me to say no; we're too young to get married," she said. I was already seventeen years old. . . . "We were too young, my mom and dad told me," . . . and "now, can we continue as boyfriend and girlfriend?" Better yet, "Let's elope," I said. "I'm not going to ask for your hand again; we're going to run away together on the tenth of September, and we'll get married right away." Then, on the exact day, I went to check if everything was ready. I would hide in a ditch, where the toilet was nearby. Then she would come out very early. I was ready there, when she would get up in the early morning, and I would talk to her.

**Robert:** Where did you live with your wife?

**Gregorio:** Wait, hold on, you're getting ahead. I'm telling you the whole story. So a rancher found me lying in the ditch; the pigs got scared. And then I acted like I was sick. So the rancher alerted her brother; he said, "You know, there was a man lying there in the ditch acting like he was drunk," and then my brother-in-law came out. The brother-in-law knew that I was lurking around the house. He hadn't noticed me until the rancher told him. Afterward, he once told me, "I was armed; I had a very good pistol." Juan was his name. He served me a mezcal, ah! "I thought you were a lurking spirit." Oh, I think he did us a favor. Then, her parents got up, and I spoke to them: "Look, you already know me; I had already asked for her hand, and you knew we were boyfriend and girlfriend, but she hadn't officially introduced me. You know she's been my girlfriend for about six or seven years since we were kids." He said, "All right, I'll give you a month."

I used to work for a man named Refugio González. Then, when I asked for her hand, I was working with him. His wife's name was Francisca,

and she adored us. We set the same day for the wedding, and I had planned to run away with her on the tenth. Refugio González managed a lot of people. He had his family there in a house. And in other rooms, he had men, two-three-four, the most trusted ones. So when I got married, he arranged the wedding; well, I paid for it with my money, but he helped me a lot. So he removed the three men from a room and left the room for me now that I was married. So I stayed there for about a week or two. My father-in-law invited me to a big, empty house. "Gregorio," he said to me, "why don't you come over here?" I said, "Thank you very much." So I stayed there for about two or three weeks. Then my brother found out that I was wandering around, and he called me: "No, Gregorio, it's not okay, what will people say, come to the ranch where I am." It was all Mexicans at the ranch, with the beets. So I went with him. Ana stayed with my wife in the house they had. So I built my little house on my brother's lot.

**Robert:** A company house?

**Gregorio:** No, it was his house, my brother's property.

**Robert:** He was the owner?

**Gregorio:** And I built a small house on the lot there. And I lived here. So when I went to Mexico, I rented a house. There was no house here, sir; there was nothing here; it was all empty. So there was an American lady. She really liked my wife. I mean, she had known her since she was a girl. She liked me a lot, and they visited each other often. My wife was the only girl my in-laws had. Her brother was born in Mexico, but he had his own children, also born here; they went to school here and everything, and he went back when they started giving out land in Mexico. My father-in-law was very fond of architecture, and he got land, but he decided to leave it because of his children.

**Robert:** What type of house was it? How many rooms did the house have?

**Gregorio:** It had two rooms and a kitchen.

**Robert:** Did it have electricity?

**Gregorio:** Yes, I had a room that I made big, and yes, it had electricity. And then, my brother-in-law stayed. My in-laws lived here; they died here and everything. So I tell you, all that happened here . . . all the suffering we went through here. It improved a lot here when more people came to settle after the war. They had access to schools, then it was mandatory; back then, they didn't demand them. And we had to go to work; the kids had to help us in the winter . . . they would lose one or two months of school. But now, the children of my grandchildren no longer speak Spanish.

**Robert:** They don't speak Spanish?

**Gregorio:** All my children are married, and they do speak it. My daughter lives somewhere else, and she speaks Spanish. Another son who lives elsewhere speaks Spanish. My youngest son got married in Mexico, and he spoke Spanish at first, but now they don't. He understands it, but they don't speak it anymore.

**Robert:** And did all your children attend school here in Garden City; did they go to high school?

**Gregorio:** Oh, yes; two attended college. Two studied up to eighth and ninth grade. The opportunity wasn't there back then; they had to be taken out to work.

**Robert:** So what do they do for work?

**Gregorio:** The eldest lives in California and has a business in tailoring, cleaning clothes, and all that. But his sons have good jobs there. One works in the government. The other works for the phone

company. And here, he works . . . what is that company's name . . . they employ over one hundred men . . . they manufacture iron materials. He's been working there for about fifteen years now. And one is named Gregorio. He also works in the fields; he manages everything in the field. He had schooling.

**Robert:** And your daughters?

**Gregorio:** My daughters . . . one got to ninth grade and works at a store, and the other has already passed. Her name was Ramona. She worked in the kitchen at the hospital. They have all had good jobs, and even I had good jobs despite not going to school.

**Robert:** Do you believe they have a better life here?

**Gregorio:** Yes, as I say, all my children, I can't complain, they have good jobs. And now, the new generation, my grandchildren, all strive for school and even college. But as I say, the opportunity wasn't there, and now, since the last war, the Americans saw how brave the Mexicans were, how they also died on the front lines. And those men who went to war are the ones who are improving Mexicans' lives. Because the old men from before couldn't bear to see us, but they saw that many thousands of Mexicans died for the American flag. Everything has changed, and things are going well for us, even for the old folk. I praise the United States.

**Robert:** Do you think that the life of your children is better than the life of the elderly now?

**Gregorio:** Everything is going very well; my children are educated. The town knows well that the people who came first were good and that we who come now are good. They already know the people they have had here all this time for so many years. There are people who have done wrong now that make us ashamed. Well, as the town is growing and there have been factories that are growing, they

need people here. I'm saying they are Mexicans, but it's ugly. Because some Mexicans who come from Texas have other customs, maybe all of Texas? Of killing each other all the time. And here they have started; it has calmed down a little. In the dance halls, the locals don't go to the place called Las Palmas. There are many things happening, and those of us who have been residents here for years don't go to those dances. There, you can get killed. And the Americans know that the people who have done that are not from here; they are outsiders. People who go there are because they know them from Texas, but people from here don't go to that dance. Those people who are there are the ones who have . . . And I was president, two times of the Independence Day celebrations.<sup>12</sup>

**Robert:** And did you celebrate?

**Gregorio:** I was the president, and we celebrated the fiestas. I am so much a part of here. I got involved, and I'm still in the belief . . . that I am not against the United States; I'm grateful to the United States. I'm grateful that they took away slavery from the Spaniards, who ruled for 335 years over Mexico. I don't know how much slavery I would have lived through. And that gratitude came when I had knowledge from reading. There was a man called Remo Campus and Refugio González. They were the first founders, both of them, to raise funds to celebrate the Independence Day festivities here.<sup>13</sup>

**Robert:** And how did you celebrate? Did you have a dance? All the community?

**Gregorio:** Yes. You know, at that time, there was a difference here. Alfredo González was the

12. Gregorio was elected for the 1956 fiesta celebrations, which took place on September 14 and 15. "Fiesta Dates Are Chosen," *Garden City Telegram*, July 23, 1956.

13. Although the fiesta committee officially noted the first celebration as 1922, there is evidence that the earliest might have been in 1909. Interrupted only by World War II, it was one of the oldest celebrations held by the Mexican communities of Kansas. "Fiesta Here a Tradition Dating Back Many Years," *Garden City Telegraph*, September 16, 1976.

president of the honorary commission, which is not relevant anymore. Years ago, he was the president of the Methodist church. When he became president of the honorary commission, he didn't invite everyone; he only invited people he liked. And there was another man here; his name was Campus. He came from Mexico and lived in Dodge City, then came and worked here too. He established an altruistic society here.

**Robert:** When?

**Gregorio:** Around 1920 or so . . .

**Robert:** Were you a member?

**Gregorio:** I was a member. And, well, we felt like we weren't invited, so another committee was formed here. The Independence Day Committee was created, and both parties did the same thing. He put his altar there, and we placed ours here in the alley at home. Quite the crowd here. So we go with my father-in-law, González's wife, my niece, my mother-in-law, and everyone from the house. We joined with the Methodist Commission, but we didn't like the way he was handling things over there. So even my father-in-law turned; they were musicians. I was a musician too, and there we were, music here and there.

**Robert:** So did you have a mariachi and everything?

**Gregorio:** Yes. So then, they went to ask for permission from the town, from the mayor. The society went to ask for it. How are we going to do this? I think they agreed; well, let's give the license to both; they gave it to Refugio and Campus. Each one went around, and it was very amusing, I think.

**Robert:** And what happened to the committee?

**Gregorio:** Nothing.

## Party Honors Gregorio Mujica

Gregorio Mujica, 206 S. 1st, was guest of honor at his home on Sunday noon at a combination 65th birthday and retirement party. He had been employed for 18 years with Southwest Bell Telephone Co.

Special guests for the dinner were Mr. and Mrs. Jim Avila and family, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Avila and family, Mr. and Mrs. Mickey Samudio and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Leon and family.

Children of the honoree attending with their families were Mr. and Mrs. Alex Mujica, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Mujica, Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Mujica Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Tony Garcia, Mr. and Mrs. Mike Garcia, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Munoz and Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Leon.

Alex Mujica and his Dreamers played for afternoon and evening dancing for the gala occasion.

*The Garden City Telegram published this note about Gregorio Mujica's birthday party on March 16, 1966. Mujica lived in a small house between the railroad tracks and the river.*

**Roberto:** Does it still exist?

**Gregorio:** So we came out fine, them over there and us over here too. Food stalls and lots of people, all great, all the Mexicans here. So in the end, that's how it was for two years. By the third year, we had joined together. Then, we established regulations when the mutual aid society was

formed. What were the regulations in case the mutual aid society failed? What would happen with the funds? Because the society did accumulate over three thousand or four thousand pesos. The regulation stated that this money was to be sent to orphanages in Mexico. Well, that's how it was. Then, when Mr. Campos went to California, we continued, some here and some there. Without Mr. Campos, we did what we could, but we did not know how to manage something like that. But we continued because in the end, we lacked someone with education to manage the society. Many of us started to miss the meetings and all that.

So there was a very large meeting at the Catholic school. We all gathered, all from the society. And there, they agreed, what we were going to do with the leftover money. They agreed to give it to the clergy. But I told them that wasn't in the bylaws . . . that it was for orphanages in Mexico. Well, no, they said, it's for the clergy, for the church. Meetings, like two or three meetings. For the last meeting, I said, "Well, ma'am, I see that we are almost evenly split. I change my opinion, even though the regulations don't say that, but I think we'll all be more content on both sides if these ill wills among us don't continue, especially since we were so united." So I suggested that part of the funds go to the Red Cross.

**Robert:** What was the name of the aid society?

**Gregorio:** Benito Juárez Aid Society.

**Robert:** Benito Juárez?

**Gregorio:** Well, it seems like it worked out; they gave half to the church and the other half to the Red Cross. We were satisfied, and that was the end of it, and we all continued working.

**Robert:** And you still celebrate here?

**Gregorio:** Yes, and I was president twice before I lost my leg due to an ingrown toenail that I didn't

pay attention to. So, when I went to see the doctor, the lady who saw it said, "Look at your toe; go to the doctor." I went to the doctor, and he saw me, he got up and said, "You know what? I'm going to prepare the room for the hospital." Well, that's what the doctor told me, and he called my sons and told them, "Son, you know, Dad is in bad shape; they're going to amputate his leg." "His leg?" And then they told me, we are going to cut it off from here because they've amputated several legs here, and it's moved up to here. My doctor cared a lot for my family. The doctor said, "I don't want Gregorio to suffer so much," he said.

**Robert:** And what did you have?

**Gregorio:** I'm telling you, my whole leg got infected, and it was spreading. And they had to chop it here. . . . It's never been the same. There are some people that have had ongoing surgeries, and I did not want that. Since then, I've still been hobbling. I still continued participating in things like collecting payments for the stalls. But it had been ten years since I attended a party until last year, when the committee called me to a meeting. My son-in-law was vice president, and he said, "I'll come for you," and he took me. Well, everyone was there, I was surprised because I hadn't participated in a long time. I was really happy, with many people there from when I was still there. They took me to represent in the parade. "What did you think?"

**Robert:** And I have a question. You told me that during the Great Depression in 1930, many of the Chicanos from Garden City went to California.

**Gregorio:** Yes, and some stayed there. There are families and kids like mine who have gone.

**Robert:** To work in the fields over there?

**Gregorio:** Yes, I don't know what type, and my children don't work in the fields.

**Robert:** But during the Great Depression, when you went to California, did other people from Garden City go too? Did many Chicano men go?

**Gregorio:** Yes, many were eighteen, nineteen, or twenty years old.

**Robert:** Did they go to California for work?

**Gregorio:** They are still there, still having their cars and everything over there. The people I know also bought houses.

**Robert:** And they stayed there?

**Gregorio:** Yes, they stayed. I know someone named Felipe Porras. His father has already passed away. He was from here and went over there. And when he arrived there with his father, he came to my house and stayed with us. Now we are related.

**Robert:** So you are related?

**Gregorio:** We are relatives. And Antonio Ávila, who was the second son of my father-in-law, went over there and had children there. And he stayed there, passing away a year ago, with the rest of the family staying there. So, like I said, all the people who left from here, about three or four families went and they are still there.

**Gregorio:** So they went to work in the fields, but Felipe's sons—my brother-in-law—have really good jobs, earning very good money. One is a schoolteacher in San Diego; they no longer live in Oxnard but in San Diego. The other one also lives in San Diego and is an architect. He travels to Europe frequently to keep up-to-date. People in California frequently ask for his designs and the newest trends. He's doing so well that he bought a fancy apartment in Hawaii. He didn't like how it was, so he remodeled it himself. He had a lot of schooling; both of them did. So of those who left from Garden City, he's one of the most successful.

My boy, my nephew, my grandson—his son, the one who’s over there—is named Eliseo. He went to war, and my other grandson, named Vicente, went to Korea to fight. When he came back, he was very well educated. He works for the government now. He was promoted just two months ago; they gave him a higher position in the government. He’s doing very well, and he really likes it here. He came last year, and he loved it. And he says to me, “Grandpa, oh Grandpa,” he said . . . , “if there were more opportunities in the job I have with the government, I would move here.” Because he was born here. And they say how much they liked the town, “The town has grown a lot,” he said. Everyone I know and those who left from here are doing really well. The good thing is that everyone who seemed very humble here now has good jobs. Here, they are secretaries—secretaries at hospitals, secretaries at banks—having gone to school.

There has been a lot of change. People here are free now too. In that sense, it’s very different now. There’s no longer the discrimination that there used to be. Yes, there are still one or two older folks, but no, their vote hardly counts anymore. Instead, now everyone mixes here. Mexicans marry Americans, and it’s not something that surprises anyone anymore. We’re all the same. People don’t pay attention to that anymore. People invite each other over, and it’s all good. But before, it wasn’t like that. Now it’s very different, very different. Now many of us talk about this discrimination, about the braceros, about those without papers, or the wire crossers.<sup>14</sup> Well, all of them, wetbacks and all of that. Mexicans come to work. They don’t come to bother the government. They [immigration officers] catch

them at work, and they take them away. Man, they are braceros; they don’t have papers. The Mexican doesn’t bother the government, doesn’t bother anyone; he comes to work, hard jobs. Nowadays, Americans don’t want to work; they just want their check and food stamps! There are some who are strong and have nothing. One of my children brings me dinner and meals, then another day, I go to another daughter’s house. They work, so I try not to bother them. They bring me food, and I pay them for it. . . .

That president who left, [Jimmy Carter] he let so many Cubans in, thousands; he opened the doors. How is he supporting so many Cubans now? He opened the doors wide. Now, the bearded one [Fidel Castro] says he let the most vicious people out, that he let them leave. Now the United States is complaining about it. I don’t want them. And what will they do? I’d kill them!<sup>15</sup> Mexicans that come here, they don’t bother us; they don’t bother anyone. They get caught; here they catch them all the time and then send them back. And four days later, they’re already back here. They don’t stay gone for long. I know there are many here, but they come looking for a better life. Many are resourceful.

I was in California for a while, back when things were still good. I felt at home there, but I got bored. I stayed there for three months, spending the winter there. I was working there with fifteen or twenty-five men, and we were on a ranch planting Christmas trees. All strangers; they were all braceros. And one of them said, “How’s it going for you? And how is farming over in Mexico?” “It’s coming along.” “You know, this is the last time I’m coming here. You know, we bought a little piece of land together on a hill, and there’s water all year

14. The term “bracero” refers to migrant workers who entered the U.S. on a seasonal basis with temporary work permits. During World War II, the United States government instituted the Bracero Program to address labor shortages, encouraging Mexican workers to come north and work in agriculture or industry; the program existed from 1943 until 1964. See Erasmo Gamboa, *Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II Story of Mexican Workers in the U.S. West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016) and Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

15. In 1980, some 125,000 Cubans were allowed to leave their homeland for the United States between April and September. Known as the Mariel boatlift, the exodus highlighted the inherent problems that the socialist regime of Fidel Castro faced in delivering its socioeconomic revolution. The incident also revealed Castro’s intent to remove not only dissenters but also prisoners, further complicating the sociopolitical relations between Cuba and the United States. José Manuel García, *Voices from Mariel: Oral Histories of the 1980s Cuban Boatlift* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 1-14.

long; water runs down from the mountains, and I live down below. So we built a small dam and stored that water, and when it's dry, I have water. I bought a small tractor from here, I sent for it and bought it over there, and on this last trip, my wife says I should come, that the dam is ready, they've finished it." And she said, "This winter, I'm done; this summer I won't come again." And others, no. They go partying over there, spend their money,

chasing women, and they end up staying. So many fools. A lot of them never come back.

I have some relatives who were three brothers with a small, poor store. A nephew came to see me here; he's from Mexico. He went back. One went to California, another to Chicago, and another headed to Florida, who knows where. They left the youngest, the sharpest one.<sup>[KH]</sup>