

This is an interview with James Berroteran at his home in Poland Ohio on June 22, 2009. Interviewed by Esther Newman for Dr. Sherry Linkon, Steel Valley Voices program at Youngstown State University..

E- I want to just get started with the immigration story of your family. How did your family come to settle in Youngstown?

J- Well, originally, my father came during the First World War. The Americans were hiring Mexicans to come to work on the railroads because of a labor shortage and they would just go down there and hire them and bring them up. And, he worked – I don't know how long he worked – but they worked a while and then, when their contract was over, they just told them that they could go home. Well, half of them never went home. So they went out and got other jobs. Well, him and a couple men went to Chicago. They were working in Kansas and they got jobs there in the steel mills. Well, he had a friend of his that was living already here in Youngstown and he told him that the jobs were even better here so he came here to Youngstown from Chicago and he got a job at U.S. Steel. And after working several years, he decided he wanted to go back home. Then, he already knew my mother so he went back to Chihuahua and uh,

E – Do you know about what year that was?

J – Well, it would have to be, like, 1922. And he went back and got married but that was during the revolution. Pancho Villa, and things weren't very good. So then, his whole family went to El Paso, Texas because they happened to be fighting on the opposite side, or, you know, they were for the other side and that wasn't a good thing. So they all went to El Paso which is right on the border. The whole family, everybody, that was Berroteran. But, in the meantime, he had gotten married in 1924, right there in Mexico, and they went to El Paso, and then, again, his friend told him to come back to Youngstown. It was better. So he ended up coming to Youngstown, in 1924 and getting the job at U.S. Steel where he worked for 25 years, until he retired. And that's how he got here.

E – You said, “fighting for the other side.” What's the other side? Which side was that that your family was fighting for?

J – I really don't know who was fighting. It was probably the government fighting against Pancho Villa and, let's see, Pancho Villa had his headquarters right in Chihuahua so that was..

E – So, when your father came here the second time, and he brought your mother, were there children?

J – Just my sister. One. And the rest of us, I had three brothers, and we were all born here.

E – And when did they (parents) learn to speak English or did your father already speak English from his first time here.

J – He learned, he knew very little English and my mother, much less. But over the years, they did get better at it. But you know, the family, like us kids, we always talked Spanish to them, so that's why maybe my mother didn't learn too much English. She talked to us in Spanish, we answered in Spanish. So we learned from day one.

E – Bilingual from the very start.

J – Yes.

E – Was there, excuse me, was there much, was there a significant Mexican community here when your family was here?

J – No, they were really the second family that moved to Youngstown. One other family here, that's all. And, little by little, I guess, different people came up until say, in the 40s, there might have been maybe 50, 60 families in this area.

E – When were you born and where did the family live at that time?

J – We lived right in Youngstown, like, on the north side, and, well, I was born in 1928. But I was already the third one. My sister, then my brother, older than me, then me, then two others after that.

E – And where did you go to high school?

J – Rayen High School. Hayes and Rayen. We went to the grade school, Buttler School, which was only a block from our house.

E – And, what kind of job did you have after high school? Did you follow your dad into the steel mills?

J – No, I worked in a fabricating plant that was on the east side of Youngstown, it was part of Republic Steel where they manufactured building material. And I worked there for thirty years. And in the meantime, I don't know if you want to know, but while I was working there, I started my own business. I started a carpet cleaning business which I thought was going to be real part time. And it eventually became full-time and then I was able to get out of the plant in 1980 because they were slowing down and then, well, I got a pension, everything, hospitalization, but then, I went into the business full-time, until I sold it in nineteen eighty um, well, five years ago. Then I sold it after doing it for thirty years, you know.

E – So, did your family, you said that over the years, they got a little better at English but really spoke primarily Spanish in the home. Did they maintain a lot of their cultural traditions?

J – Oh yes.

E – What kinds of things would they do that might be....

J – Well, my father, he used to talk to us and tell us all about Mexico, the history, so we knew a lot about Mexico. And, well, naturally, the food. My mother cooked mostly Mexican food, and then he and several men, maybe a dozen or so men, all Mexicans, they formed a club. It was to help each other out but they followed the culture. Like, they would have picnics and dances. From a young age, we took part. We learned to dance, and you know.

E – So this was something in Youngstown that extended for a long time, I mean, as other Mexican families moved in, they would become part of this club?

J – Right. Some did, some didn't, and to this day, the club is still in existence although it's on a small scale but people like me and a few others that were brought up, we still have the club and we still try to do cultural things. We have a dance every year for the Independence Day for Mexico, you know. September. And we do things like that. We take part in the Canfield Fair and we have, some of the people, even my age, they were born in Mexico, so they know all the dances and they teach the younger kids the dances and we're still doing that.

E – Did your siblings take part in the club, as well? Did they stay in the Youngstown area?

J – No, I have one daughter and she lives here but my grandkids live out of town now which is very common today. My granddaughter just got married last year and she lives in Columbus, and my grandson lives in Minneapolis.

E – Did they marry Mexicans?

J – No, you know like me, I didn't marry a Mexican because there were so few Mexicans. I married a Slovak girl but she likes all the Mexican everything, especially the food!

E – Of course.

J – So she's good at it. She can cook Mexican food.

E – So she helps maintain some of those family traditions.

J – Yes, she's very interested in the Mexican whatever.

E – What about your brothers and sisters? Do they still in this area?

J – Well, my sister was the oldest. She died about five, six years ago and the next one, a brother, the oldest, he lived in California for thirty-five years. He came, he went to California after he got out of the service. He stayed there and then he died recently so actually there's only two of us left out of five. My youngest brother died about 3 months ago so there's only my one brother and I.

E – Did, was the church a big part of your cultural, I mean, I realize the Catholic Church was the cultural center of..

J - No, because there wasn't enough, there was no Spanish church to speak of. My parents, they were very religious so we all went to Catholic school and then later on to Rayen. I didn't go to (Catholic) high school. They couldn't afford it. But yes, they were very religious but we didn't but there was no Spanish years until twenty-five or thirty years ago.

E – Do you think Youngstown changed, was very different when they arrived versus once you were in school? Was there a period of rapid change then?

J – I don't think so because I remember, I thought growing up that there was nothing much...

E – They didn't say things like, “well, when I first got here, you know...”

J – No, no.

E – Did your mother ever work outside of the home?

J – No, never.

E – How did, you mentioned you married a Slovak girl and she took on a lot of your customs, did anything change once you have children? Did you try to celebrate your Mexican heritage more or less to keep them connected?

J – No, it was about the same because we sort of just grew up in it and like I said, we had the club and they had their doings. And we just sort of went along with it, you know. There wasn't too much difference.

E – In what ways do you participate? You said the club is still in existence and you're still active in it.

J – Yes.

E – Are there other things that you do?

J – What they try to do is promote the culture. They take part in several different things, like every year, Cinco de Mayo, they celebrate at Youngstown State University. Our club takes part in that. They have a doing and they have the kids that go up. One of them sings, several of the kids dance and it's mostly taught by some of the people that came from Mexico that know all that.

E – Let's see. How do you think Youngstown is different for your children than for you in terms of your Mexican heritage. Did you feel prejudice?

J – No. When I was growing up, there was no prejudice against us that I can remember. There was never a time that I felt that they were taking advantage of me or anything. No, I guess because there was a lot of ethnic groups growing up the same time I was so everybody just took, you know, the Italians, the Slovak, nobody ever said anything.

E – Do you know by the time your father started the club, did Mexican families move here mostly for the steel mills?

J – Yes, I think they came mostly, because almost of them worked at the steel mill. Most of them, the majority worked at U.S. Steel but there was a few others that went to other mills, but that's what drew them here.

E – Did many of them in the steel mills have trouble with language that you know of, or was that just not an issue..

J – Not that I know of because my father never said anything about it. You know, I guess they went there and they worked and they went home.

E – Have you gone back to Chihuahua?

J – Oh yes, I've been there twice and I assume I still have relatives there, cousins, but most of like say, the Berroterans all left but there was some on my mother's side. I was there, the last time I was there, was I think 1965, but I have cousins that live in Mexico City that were from Chihuahua and we went in later years and I visited them there. But my wife and I have been to Mexico about thirty times. I've always wanted to go, even if it's just to have a good time. Go to Cancun.

E – Did your parents ever express an interest in moving back or were they happy once they moved here?

J – Oh no, they never talked about moving back. Probably, too, one reason would be that by the time my father retired, things weren't that good for them. They probably didn't have the money. Though they did go back one time, you know, and after he retired, went to see his brothers, sister, but that's about all.

(end file 1)

(start file 2 – midsentence)

...Spanish background, but not so much his father but maybe back further. So they had, like that name there, Berroteran, that's strictly a Spanish name. It's not like my son-in-law's, Guzman, and you know, others, my cousins are named Martinez, Gonzales, no. So, my mother's side was French, because, you know, back when the French were in Mexico. So, like, my cousins from her side are very light skinned. In fact, if one of them would walk in here, you'd think they're Slovak. They had light hair, you know. So I went to Spain one time and as soon as I registered at the hotel, the man said "you're Spanish" just by my name and I said, "well, I guess I am but so far back," you know. But that's what they, you know it goes way back.

E - What job did your father have in Chihuahua - have before he came...

J – He used to tell me he drove a streetcar. Now when he went to El Paso, he worked at the dairy, what did they call it, a dairy. And now, there, in Texas in El Paso, they did discriminate

against the Mexicans, you know that. And that's one of the reasons he wanted to get out of there. He said the job he had at the dairy, they were rough on them. So then his buddy told him, "come to Youngstown" and coming here, they never talked about being discriminated.

E – Interesting.

J – But maybe it was because when he was working there, there was, well, some of his best friends were Croatians. In fact my godfather was Croatian. And, you know, Russians, Germans, I think everyone was in the same boat.

E – And, he worked at the steel mills from the 20s until the 50s ?

J – 1950, when he retired.

E – What did he do in his retirement?

J – Well, he liked to garden. Where we lived at, we had a big garden. There was an empty lot next door and he cultivated the whole lot. We had the biggest garden in the whole neighborhood. Then he was active in the club, you know. We'd go visit the Mexican neighbors because there was a lot of them lived, we lived together, you know, in the same neighborhood at that time. And we used to visit on Sundays. Naturally, go to church every Sunday morning.

E – And this was on the north side?

J – Well, actually, you know where Brier Hill is? We were even further south and they used to call that area Monkey's Nest. That's where we were at because, you know, all those people, they worked at the steel mill and they used to live near the steel mill. Who had cars in them days? Like, my father used to walk to work.

E – And what church did you go to?

J – The church doesn't exist anymore but it was St. Anne's church. It was an Irish church. It was right on the north side.

E – Did the church ever, you said there were very few Mexicans, so the church never specifically celebrated the Mexican culture in any way.

J – No, in fact, I think there was only three Mexican families who went to church there.

E – And, do you know when... When did you move away from that area?

J – When I got married in 1950, well, naturally, we lived there. And then, a few years later, well, my father had died and then my mother sold the house and she came to live with me. So all of us, well, like my three brothers went into the service at the same time. They were all in the service. Well, my one brother, he come back to California for the first time and met all my cousins and he stayed there. But my other brother, the one that's still living, he got a job at U.S.

Steel, and he stayed there until he retired. He lives in Boardman. Then my other brother, he lived in the north side. And I moved to different places, I don't know why. Well I lived in Poland before, then I moved to the west side because it was more convenient for my business. And then after I, you know, I was retired and we bought a condominium in Boardman. Then I moved with my daughter. You don't live too far from my brother. He lives on Shields Road.

(end file 2)

(start file 3)

E – I think one of the questions is, what does it mean to you when you think about your family's cultural identity. How has that shaped you?

J – Well, I've always enjoyed doing anything that's Mexican. To this day. My brothers, not so much but I've always wanted to. Like, I've been to Mexico that many times. My brother that just died had never been there. They weren't that interested but I've always been interested in learning the history, and taking part in my club. Right now, I'm the oldest member of the club, and they still depend on me because I enjoy it. I enjoy speaking Spanish every chance I get. Like yesterday, we were with my son-in-law's father for Father's Day, and well, he was from Mexico, too, his parents, so we talk in Spanish. They seem to be more comfortable and I like it. I enjoy it.

E – You son-in-law, so one of your children, your daughter married...

J – My daughter married a Mexican.

E – And is she the only?

J – She's my only daughter. No sons. And she married a Mexican and his mother and I grew up together.

E – Interesting. Is that how they met?

J – Well, yes, that's the way they knew each other.

E – I think, James that we're... is there anything that you want to share with people that would be looking at immigration history and settling Youngstown? Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you want to talk about?

J – I think you've covered it pretty good. No, right off hand I can't think of anything.

E – I don't want to put you on the spot. Are you confident that the club will continue on?

J – I hope so. We don't have as many members anymore but the members we have, well, the one girl, she was born in Mexico, and she's very interested. And then there's another girl involved. She's younger than me but we've always known each other because the Mexican community... at one time, I knew every Mexican in this area but not any more because there's a

lot of new ones that have moved in but they're mostly, they're not so much in Youngstown. But we see them when we have our doings.

E – Is there an area where there's a greater concentration of families that are in here or that or around?

J – No

E – Mostly scattered. There isn't like a Mexican community area?

J – No, because there's not enough of them.

E – Well, I certainly thank you for your time and wish you the best with your club.

J – Yes, we'll need it.

E. Thank you very much.

End of interview

picked up mid-conversation, as interviewer was about to leave:

E – You have extended family that lives in Los Angeles...

J – And El Paso, Texas, right on the border, and they have reunions about every three or four years, and I always go. That's another thing, if anything, I'm going to go. And, naturally, there's..., their kids..., well, they're all still in California, I'll say. Hardly any of them ever moved out. But down there, there's so many Mexicans that I tell people, if you can't go to Mexico, go to California. You'll be the same, you'll see everything you want to see. So I've been out there at least ten times.

E – So because there are so many Mexicans there, they don't really, do you think they do anything specific to maintain their cultural identity?

J – They do, you should see the celebration they have down there. One year, we went specially, my brother says, "you should come down here." See they celebrate two big days. Cinco de Mayo and September 16th. So we went down there for Cinco de Mayo. Oh, my goodness, downtown L.A., they had a big park and they had a celebration all day, from morning 'til night. Dancing and music and food. In fact, it's so big, that even the ambassador from Mexico was big, so you know that's big. I'm sure, down there, they had many clubs but there's like, they'd say, well this group is from this part of California, this group is from that part of California, because there's so many.

E – And did most of your family in California marry other Mexicans and keep the...

J – yes, that was specially, you go back then, like I think my cousins, there was eight in the family, they all married Mexicans. But that's because there's so many and they all group together, you know. The first time that I went to Texas, I visited my cousins and their father had gotten killed so they were on government assistance and they lived in this housing project. I don't know how many families lived there. It was big. Every one of them was Mexican, the whole project. There's so many and...

E – and this was in?

J – In El Paso, Texas in 1948. But most of my cousins my age were all married to Mexicans, but like I said, down there, there's so many. Yes.

E – What kinds of jobs did, you mentioned one cousin who worked in agriculture in California?

J – Well, my uncle was in agriculture but after, they were fortunate. His kids, he had I think four boys. All of his boys went into construction. One was a brick layer, one was a carpenter, one was a painter and they moved up. I don't think any one of them ones work in agriculture. But as young kids, they did. That was not unusual. My cousins told me that they worked in the fields when they were twelve, thirteen years old. Now, you know here, like, my younger brother worked in U.S. Steel and he had a very good job and he was a roller. Then I worked in fabricating and I started my own business. And my youngest brother worked at General Motors. And, uh, then like, my son-in-law, he got out of high school and he took a fancy to photography. Why, he's been in business for twenty-five years. Now he owns a pizza place. And my daughter always had good jobs. In fact she worked at Youngstown University at one time.

E – I was curious, you mentioned that your wife cooks all the Mexican dishes and has participated in the Mexican culture. Have you or your daughter participated in Slovak culture?

J – No.

E – Not the other way around.