

Tape 20b: Interview with Valentin Romero

Interviewer: Helen Krische

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Valentin Romero (Interviewee): Our other trip was to go the University and we'd have a picnic up there, at [unintelligible].

Helen Krische (Interviewer): Uh-huh.

VR: But this was on a streetcar, not a – not a bus or –

HK: Was Woodland Parks still in operation at that time?

VR: Uh, Woodland Park was there; it was operated by [Game?] Price.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Uh, related to – let's see, his sister – his wife was part – one of [unintelligible] family. And, um, Woodland Park, the way I remember it, they had a baseball diamond, they had a horse track, and that's all I can remember. And it was, if you go down 11th Street and could have gone straight through the woods, uh, that's where it was.

HK: Okay. So it was – was it right next to the cemetery, is that right?

VR: Uh, before you get to St. John's or Mount Calvary Cemetery. Uh, it was towards the railroad tracks. Mm-hmm.

HK: Now, the – the houses in the La Yarda, were they constructed of brick?

VR: Yes. The ones that were constructed on the east side of the railroad, uh, by way of entrance of 8th Street, they were very, they were cement slabs, brick house, double brick. And, uh, like I said, good windows and good doors, air-tight. And a chimney, they had, for your wood stove, of course, at that time. Uh, wood stove was for making food and, uh, for heat in the wintertime.

HK: How did those compare with, like, Union Pacific houses?

VR: Now, Union Pacific housing at that time, what little I remember, were boxcars.

HK: Okay.

VR: They were modified boxcars. Very, very neat, but of course an 80-foot boxcar is quite a bit of space.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Like today home trailers.

HK: Okay.

VR: They're about 80 foot.

HK: Yeah. Did they have the boxcars, like, divided up into rooms, or...? How did –

VR: Uh, most generally one family per boxcar.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: Uh, yes, they, uh, if they didn't have walls, uh, they strung a curtain or – or...whatever it was for privacy.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And, uh, now those people had a – a pump. They had a hand pump. Uh, they didn't have... well, Union Pacific had their own water systems for their steam engines. But, uh, they didn't have it for all the different sections.

HK: So the water that you got that was piped in, was that sanitary water, that you know of?

VR: Yes, it, uh, 'cause it was the same water that the Santa Fe depot used for their own use within the depot.

HK: Mm-hmm. What – what did you all do for healthcare? Like if you had to see the doctor, or...?

VR: Well, uh, under healthcare...the quickest doctor I can think of is Dr. Orchard (sic). He was a family practitioner, and he brought a lot of the babies into the world.

HK: Mm-hmm. Did – did he make house calls there, at, uh...?

VR: Oh, yes, they made house calls. And I was gonna say Dr. Cabell? But that isn't the right name. Um...he was, uh, right down the street from 9th Street and Kentucky. Upstairs [clears throat], uh, he was another – another doctor. And then the surgeon, Dr. Zimmerman, uh, well, they were the three basic – there was other doctors, and Dr. Jones, but they were the three basic doctors that, uh, our people went to.

HK: Mm-hmm. And did– did the Santa Fe Railroad help to pay for your healthcare, or was there...?

VR: Uh, the healthcare that the Santa Fe had was for, uh, the worker only.

HK: Oh, okay.

VR: I don't recall that it was for family. See, like I said, my dad came out of the railroad system just when Social Security kicked in. And at that time, they may have had other provisions within their, uh, medical health.

HK: Okay. And dental care, was there any dental care at that time?

VR: Uh, yes, Dr. McFarland [spelling?]. Dr. McFarland was a good doctor, but he – he was an older dentist, and all I can remember is this one person said: “I have a bad tooth, and I have a bad tooth, I'll go to see Dr. McFarland.” Dr. McFarland said: “Alright, climb up here. And we'll take that tooth out.” And he said: “That poor doctor did as much as he could, and couldn't come out, and he says: “I'm gonna have to get on top of you to – to get – get that tooth out.” And he said, he practically climbed on him to remove the tooth, but other than that, that's just one of the stories.

HK: Yeah. [Both laugh]

VR: But, uh, I don't recall us as a family having tooth problems. I mean, we may have had 'em, we may have had 'em, or...because I didn't start seeing the dentist until I went to school and they would examine your teeth and kind of give you a little checkup.

HK: Now, did you – did you grow up speaking Spanish, or were you –

VR: Yeah.

HK: Bilingual, or...?

VR: Uh, I was...my sister and my brother had gone to school earlier.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: So they – they were already ahead of me. But being I stayed home, I spoke to my mom and dad in Spanish.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: And, uh, my – I say that my mom and dad knew good Spanish. I don't know if you understand...like people have street Spanish out here, or street English, and over here they have, uh, uh, broken English.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: My – my mom and dad spoke good Spanish. What I call good Spanish. Uh...in fact, the whole community spoke the better Spanish, in my opinion.

HK: Did you teach your children any Spanish? Did they grow up speaking any Spanish?

VR: What was that, now?

HK: Did your children grow up speaking Spanish?

VR: Yes, up till the – the time my grandfather – their grandfather died.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Mm-hmm. Now, my last two children, Grandfather was already gone, so, uh...sure, they know enchilada, comadres, uh, things like that, and Carlos O'Kelly, and...[HK laughs] uh, but, uh, they can understand a lot of it.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: But their words are stumbling sometimes. And we do use Spanish, and if we come up to a word, they'll throw English in there, and keep on going.

HK: Sure, sure.

VR: Now, on my wife's side, out of their little town of Osawatomie, they had to learn English because, uh, there were just so few of them, even if it was a – a roundhouse, uh...community, there wasn't that many Spanish-speaking people. They were mostly Italian.

HK: Oh.

VR: Mm-hmm. And, uh, she, the mother, her mother knew good English, I mean, very well, in English. Her mother and – and my – Liz's uncle – he lived in Stanley, which was...oh, I don't know how far, maybe 40 miles away from there. And, uh, they were just one family. One family, so they – they just fell in to the community.

HK: Mm-hmm. Did you have any other extended family living with you? I know that you had your dad and mom were there of course, but did you have any aunts and uncles that – ?

VR: No. No, I did not. However, this lady, Matiana from Eudora, uh, I'd hear all the children: "We're gonna go to Grandmother's house, or Grandmother's coming over!" And I asked my mom, I said: "Mama, I don't have a grandmother." She said: "No, you don't, you – you have yours in Mexico." So this lady Matiana said: "I'll be your grandmother." And...well, what do you think, I mean, sure! So, now I was in grade school when this happened. So I would get on the train, Santa Fe train, the workman's, uh, the work train. And I'd ride the caboose to Eudora. And, uh, then – this would be on a Friday, maybe, or a Saturday, I'd go – and then I'd spend the night with them at Eudora, at her house. And, well, hey, I did chores, I did what little I did,

'cause – and then I'd come back in the big train from Kansas City to Lawrence, and it would stop at Eudora and pick you up and bring you in. Yes, that was quite a deal. I did that until the lady passed away, and I guess I would have been, uh, I was still in junior high. And I was one of the pallbearers. And they lived away from the main road and...and, uh, when she passed away, it rained so much that they couldn't get through that road.

HK: Oh.

VR: So we carried the casket, well, maybe today you might say a quarter of a mile.

HK: Wow.

VR: And, uh, we just walked it all the way through. And, you know, we never did rest. We just walked it and I was one of the carriers.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: One of the pallbearers. But that lady, I – I don't know if she ever had a husband or not, but, uh, she had a son by the name of John. And, uh, they were just good people. Good people to me, uh...well, she – she says: "What would you like to eat?" or, you know...just like a, you might say, a grandmother spoils a kid.

HK: Sure.

VR: And I think that, like she said, uh...uh, in Spanish: "Tu eres la luz de la casa," in other words, saying: "You are the light of home, the...You bring light into our home."

HK: How sweet.

VR: Uh-huh. And I...kind of remember that.

HK: Did you, uh, were you aware of any prejudice in Lawrence growing up, or, um...?

VR: Well, I really didn't know what prejudice was.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: Uh, I ate at the restaurants, at Mr. Reed's. I, uh...I went to the show. Let's see, what else did I do...I went to the barbershop. Well, I did just about everything.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: 'Course, uh...you might say I was kind of a loner there for a while, 'cause all the other boys were already working and they were, uh, doing what they're doing.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And, uh, they had brothers and sisters: “Oh, I’m gonna go with my brother or I’m gonna go with my sister. Or the three of us are gonna go,” And see, I was – I was the only one left in our family and I kind of had to go, well, kind of alone.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Yes. Uh...no, but, uh, the only thing that bothered me – well, not – not bothered me – but I saw here at St. John’s that, um, they wanted us, when we came to Mass, to sit on the back pews.

HK: Mm.

VR: But I didn’t take that as, uh, as being discriminating. I mean, I didn’t feel it at that time.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Maybe it – it was, maybe – maybe...but we did occupy the last, um, pews. Mm-hmm.

HK: Did your family join St. John’s when they first came here to Lawrence?

VR: Yes, yes.

HK: Yeah, so...that is a long –

VR: In fact, in 1927 when I was born, Dad said: “Hey, they built a church for you.” [HK laughs] See, if you look at our cornerstone, it says 1927.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: Yeah, yeah. Marie Ice, and Ice [murmurs] under, we were baptized under Father Fitzgerald. I can’t think of his first name. Yeah...uh, yes I would attend the summer relish – uh, religion school with the nuns from Leavenworth. No, I – I don’t feel, ‘cause the boys I ran around in high school, we would go to the Meadow Acres in Topeka to see the big bands. And, uh...then the university occasionally would get a big band and we’d go to that.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Although I never did go to the, uh, the high school prom, I – I guess I just didn’t go. [laughs]. But as far as going in the – we’d get over to the Dynamite, which was over past 23rd Street. And then Mr. Wiedeman’s, he would serve us ice cream though he had other stuff he could sell, but, uh...we usually got a dish of ice cream. Then, the Velvet Freeze, we’d sit down in there and we’d be served. I don’t recall any – I mean, to me, now, now this is just me. Maybe somebody else had a different experience. But, no... But I noticed that Ottawa and Topeka and some of those towns were really bad about that. I don’t know what the reason was, but, uh...I suppose they had ugly moments or something.

HK: Yeah. So how do you think, um, the lives of Mexican-Americans today differ? I mean, do you think it's a lot better for them now? Um, what advantages do you see that they have?

VR: Well, uh, when we lived down there at the section houses, everybody was the same. Nobody had money.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: I mean, you could come down Massachusetts Street and you'd know all the – all the shop owners, and they were a little better off, of course. [Clears throat] But far as the children that went to school at New York School, uh...uh, we were all on the same level. 'Cause I remember one kid by the name of Charles, he says: "What is money?" You know? "Uh, I don't know any math." But hey, I – I had a quarter my mom...on Saturdays would give me a quarter and I'd come to the [Pathe?] Theatre. And I'd buy popcorn, and then after that I had enough to buy a hamburger at Mr. Reed's hamburger stand. And when I spent my quarter, that was the end of the day. [HK laughs]

HK: Well, can you think of anything else that...?

VR: Well, at our house we never had a lock.

HK: Oh.

VR: We – we never locked our door.

HK: Uh-huh.

VR: If, uh...my dad had some tools, like a saw or hammer, couple of hammers, a – a big sledgehammer, uh...different-sized saws, and things that people'd say: "John, I need a – I need a heavy hammer!" "Well you know where it's at, it's over in the tool house there at home!" And they'd have wedges for splitting wood, you know.

HK: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

VR: Uh...well...and then, of course, when my brother learned how to drive, we bought us a Model A Ford truck and we did a little hauling, you know, people, they – they, sometimes they'd move and they'd say: "Can you haul this over to the other house?" We did things like that. And then in the '40s, '39s and '40s, before the '51 flood, uh...in the summertime the whole town, not – not only us – would go out and pick potatoes with, uh...hailed out potatoes on the other side of the river.

HK: Oh.

VR: I – I worked for Mr. Nicholson, a – a gentleman, an older gentleman that had a greenhouse on East 11th. And I'd help him plant tomatoes, I'd help him cut asparagus, uh...in the fall, we,

uh, picked turnips. Uh, what else did we do...well, anyways, he didn't have no – he had livestock, but we didn't move bales or anything like that.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: That came later on. I...I learned quite a bit from him. He, uh, him and Annie, uh, ran this, well, 80-acre farm. Well, that's what, uh...people used to be able to live off of an 80-acre farm that they'd raise corn, they'd raise, uh...oh, what else would they raise...? And then he had him an apple orchard there, to one side, by an apple orchard, I think he had eighteen trees and, uh, he did a lot of spraying work and a lot of taking care of the orchard.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: And then there was a vinegar cider plant on, uh, the 800 block of, uh, Pennsylvania. And when the, uh, apple season was on, and – and I didn't go out to Mr. Nicholson, I'd bring me a bag, take it to school, and then on the way back I'd stop at Mr. Krum's, uh, vinegar place. I'd say: "Mr. Krum, do you have any good apples?" He said: "Well, you know all the apples I use for vinegar, why don't you go back there and fill up your own sack?" Well, a little sack was a little bit bigger than a little sack. [HK laughs] And he said: "Oh, do you have a dime?" I said: "Sure, I have a dime," that's about what I...he'd charge me. And every once in a while I wouldn't have my dime, he says: "Go back there, go back there." [HK laughs] He was real good to – to me, anyhow. I – I don't know...

HK: Did you, um, where – do you remember the – the POW camp being over on that side? How – how far was it from, um, the...La Yarda there?

VR: Uh, just across the tracks.

HK: Okay.

VR: Across the main line and two spur tracks. The two spur tracks I'm talking about are where we had the bulk stations of gasoline, bulk stations. Uh...they would bring in carloads of...uh, train carloads of gasoline and it'd be siphoned out of the tank car into storage cars. There was, uh, Skelly Oil Company, City Service, [RV?], and then two other companies that had a – a line up there. And then immediately to the east was, uh, POW camp, mm-hmm.

HK: Was there – ?

VR: But, uh, they didn't give us any trouble, they...they, a couple of 'em spoke English.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Let's see, what was the only phrase I knew at that time? This was pre-, pre-Army time. [HK laughs]. Uh... 'Course, I'd hear the other older people downtown said: "Wie sprechen Sie Deutsch?" and uh, uh...well, I said [unintelligible] and...Well, that, you know. And, uh, yeah,

they had their compound, wired compound there. Far as trouble, they were no trouble, they – they were farmed out to people with farms.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: You know...

HK: So when the '51 flood came, did that destroy the compound there, or...?

VR: The water was above the chimney.

HK: Oh, gosh.

VR: Of the place, there. And, uh [clears throat] Joe Ramirez and myself, we went down there when the water was coming across the 8th Street road. And we told the folks: "The water is coming, and they say it's gonna be above your houses. Move." And, um, well, us young kids, you might say, we were – we would still be...we would still be about, uh, under eighteen, trying to tell older folks what to do, or –

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Or what we recommended that somebody else told us to do. Yes, they moved, but they left their – some of their furniture stuff, uh, propped up –

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: Uh, and then of course you – when you come back, everything's in disarray.

HK: Mm-hmm. So did the – did the people move out at that time from the compound?

VR: Yes, they all moved into town. A few of them stayed in town afterwards. Uh...it, they reclaimed it, just as good as it was before...

HK: Mm-hmm. Well, I think we're about to run out of tape.

VR: Oh, my goodness. Time, huh? Yeah, that's the one thing you don't want to run out of.

HK: That's right, that's right. Well, I thank you very much for coming and telling – telling us about your experiences.

VR: Well, uh...there's probably a lot of other things to say, but, uh...you'll – you'll get it from the rest of the people.

HK: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Fantastic.

VR: But, uh, sometimes, if you get two or three – at least two of them together –

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: They'll, uh, they'll bring up ideas, families. See, now, like I said, I was just Mom and Dad and my sister there for a while.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: My brother was in the Navy for four years. In fact, he enlisted, uh, one day before the 1941, when the...December the 7th. He enlisted in the – when they made the announcement over the radio, he took off to Kansas City and they sent him up to Great Lakes and then from there they turned around and sent him to San Diego.

HK: Yeah.

VR: Uh, I just went to Leavenworth a couple of times [HK laughs]. Then they – then they sent me to Camp Hood, Texas, for, uh...I took my training.

HK: Mm-hmm.

VR: But, uh, my brother and I, uh...noticed that some of the boys that had been in the army, like Mr...um, well anyways, he was sheriff here at one time. Uh, Saunders. Uh...Sanders, Sanders. He was already in the Army in Hawaii and he would write – I think his folks moved, were renting and they had to move from one house to another. And, uh...they miscommunicated, and, uh, that's when my brother and I, and my sisters said: "We're gonna buy a house so Dad and Mom will have an address that we can write to while we were in the service."

HK: Oh, that's...okay. Well, um...I think what I'm gonna do is, let me get you a copy of this. [Long pause] This consent form. [Tape cuts off at 28:54]

END OF TAPE 20B