

Interview with Celestino Reyes  
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: Interview with Celestino Reyes. When did you first arrive in Holland?

CR: Well, originally we used to Holland around '40, '45. We stayed here in Holland in 1952.

JO: What was your first place of residence in Holland?

CR: It was 345 West 16th Street.

JO: Was that a nice neighborhood?

CR: Yes.

JO: Was it a Hispanic neighborhood?

CR: No.

JO: All your neighbors were...?

CR: Anglo.

JO: Where did you originally come from?

CR: Texas.

JO: What city in Texas?

CR: Austin.

JO: Was it an urban area you lived in?

CR: Yes.

JO: What conditions brought you to Holland from Austin?

CR: At that time I was too young, but my parents basically started coming to Michigan because of the work available out here in the fields and different crops in Michigan. The reason he came up north is that at that time there was a war and he thought that

he has going to be inducted to the service. In the south they have what they call share-croppers, meaning work the land for someone else and you share part of whatever crop you raise. He sold everything he had because he thought he was going to be inducted to the service. After that we moved to the city, which is Austin, Texas. Later he found out that was a mistake because at that time if you were working a farm you were not required to serve, but by that time he sold the farm and whatever he owned at that time. So the only thing left was to work there in Austin, Texas, but at that time there was not much work there so he started coming up north. We first came to Michigan, we came to Saginaw, Michigan started working that area around the Lansing area. Later we came here to the Holland area, at that time around \_\_\_\_\_. We used to go back and forth, come to like Lansing, come to Holland, then in the fall go back to Lansing to work in the \_\_\_\_\_. From there we moved to west Texas to \_\_\_\_\_ and from there we moved to Austin. We'd go to school for maybe three months out of the year, then started the cycle again. The reason my father stayed here in Holland is two. One was because of the mechanization that was occurring and that eventually there was not going to be much work available in the fields anymore because the machines were taking over. The second one was we were \_\_\_\_\_ the family and the oldest of us were boys and at that time in the city of Austin there were gangs, each had their own turf. My father didn't want us to be raised in the kind of environment because he didn't want us to get in trouble with the law or get into fights with somebody else, protect ourselves. In that kind of environment you fight to kill or be killed. The two main reasons he

decided to stay in Holland, Holland is a small community, a community to raise a family. Those are basically the two reasons that my father decided to stay here. I worked in the factory and later on I got married to my wife. We had five children and they're all grown now. So basically, that is how we came to be here in Holland.

JO: What was your dad's job in Holland?

CR: What he used to do at that time was bring labor up here to Michigan, to like I said to Lansing, \_\_\_\_\_, Holland and back. Later on he used to work for Heinz. I can remember months he was working in the plant, then in the spring he would go back and bring people up north here to the company. He did that until the end of the, they called it the \_\_\_\_\_ program. What that is, because they were not people to work in the fields they had some kind of an act to permit people from Mexico come to the United States for a period of time, then they had to go back. They would come to states like Arkansas and Tennessee, for cotton, come up north for pickles, chickpeas. When they were done they'd go back again, south \_\_\_\_\_ back again to Mexico.

JO: What was your first job in the city?

CR: It was general work. Like I said, there was twelve in the family so the oldest ones decided to go to work so we could help my father support the rest of the family so that they could get an education. We realized that without an education you couldn't find a job, even at that time. We decided to go to work so our brothers and sisters would not have to work as hard as we had to work.

JO: Were you one of the older ones?

CR: I'm the third.

JO: How old were you when you arrived in Holland?

CR: I was going to be sixteen.

JO: Did you attend any schooling in Holland?

CR: No.

JO: But your children went to Holland Schools?

CR: West Ottawa.

JO: What were your impressions of the school system? As your children were going through West Ottawa Schools?

CR: I guess like any parent, all I knew was my child going to school. I guess there was certain things that I'm aware of now that I was not aware at that time. I realize that maybe if we had been more persistent, more aware of what they were...I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_ get attention. I say that because at one time they wanted me to approve the use of drugs to control the oldest one. I said, "No." They were trying to pressure me, but since at that time was not aware of drugs \_\_\_\_\_. To me a child is a child, there's differences in children, even in families, the oldest one was active, another one inactive might be the one in the middle. That's the way our parents raised us, they taught us to recognize that in the family. I always said no. To this day I'm wondering whether there was a reason they were doing that \_\_\_\_\_ they didn't give him the attention he needed at that time because he never did good in school \_\_\_\_\_. Now that we became more conscious of the school system, especially of course \_\_\_\_\_ concerned, I think maybe we could

have helped him more there, become aware. I'm sure our oldest son and daughter would have probably gone to college, which they never did at that time. They told us then things that we didn't want to believe at that time. So that's when we decided that we were not going to let the younger ones go through that. So we attended PTA, we attended everything we could. If they had problems in school, we'd go in and find out what the problem was. If in fact it was our child that was not doing what he was suppose to do, then we would say to the teacher that we would take care of it. If it was something that the teacher was not doing, \_\_\_\_\_ to be concerned about the well-being and to the proper education of our children. I think that sense, I don't think at that time we thought that the system was \_\_\_\_\_, it is. What I'm saying is, every system is good and bad I guess, the competition and what not. \_\_\_\_\_ to help them because they were different. \_\_\_\_\_ it was easier just to kind of push them along instead of giving more of their time to work with \_\_\_\_\_ at that time.

JO: Overall, were you satisfied with the school system?

CR: Yes, like everything there was always room for improvement. Like I said again, coming through the things I know now, yes. It could have been more.

JO: Did you know much English when you first arrived in Holland?

CR: Yes. Don't ask me how I learned English because I don't know. I don't know when I first picked it up.

JO: But you had it by the time you arrived in Holland?

CR: Yes.

JO: Were you quite fluent when you arrived in Holland?

CR: I would say yes, but then you talk about the difference -- you have your basic English and then you have your higher English. In higher English, no. I do now, but at that time if people said words to me I couldn't understand them. I could probably look them up and find out, but if they were spoke to me I could never understand them.

JO: When your family arrived in Holland did they start to speak English or did they continue \_\_\_\_\_ the older ones?

CR: The older ones. The younger ones, they hardly spoke Spanish, very little, they mostly spoke English, the ones that were raised here. With the older ones, we were bilingual.

JO: Within the family did you speak Spanish...?

CR: Spanish.

JO: What were your first impressions of the city when you arrived?

CR: I think we \_\_\_\_\_ it was a community where you feel safe, trusting. You could walk down the street, you didn't have to lock your door, you didn't have to worry about your neighbor. I guess in that sense that's how we felt at that time, still do. I guess that's why to me, it's important to be involved because of the environment that I come from, I don't like to see that happen in Holland. That's where we are involved, to bring those things up to the people. If we don't do something now, then we will get to the point where it can be corrected, but it may take a long time, it's going to come to a point of violence. I don't think we want that in Holland. That's why I'm glad that the city of Holland does take into consideration people with certain concerns

that \_\_\_\_\_ to people of backgrounds with those concerns beforehand. I do believe that this is really important, coming back to what you said, to like the neighborhood where we were. At that time they were steering us. I was not aware about it before, it was afterwards. I did find out later on when we became involved that they were putting us in certain areas. At that time we were becoming more conscious, as a group, what was being done to us as a group. We began \_\_\_\_\_ the consciousness of the community. What happened at that time they were putting us in certain areas, from 8th street \_\_\_\_\_ down to about 16th street. That was in early sixties. At that time there was some laws that \_\_\_\_\_ put into effect, I don't know the term \_\_\_\_\_ what that means is that we're segregating. For example, I went to look for a place to buy and they would steer me into a certain area, but would not go to the other area.

JO: From 8th street to 16th street?

CR: That was the cut off. Anybody that was Hispanic that came to Holland, keep in that area. The way we deal with it was to talk to the realtor and tell him that that was against the law. There were two things that they could do, do it on their own or we would file suit. That's why I'm saying that, I guess we're fortunate in Holland. They know that things are going to come, they might as well do it now then face the consequences later on. \_\_\_\_\_ the actions themselves \_\_\_\_\_ any member of the board of realtors had to comply with the law \_\_\_\_\_ along to do that. \_\_\_\_\_ dropped out because they didn't care, couldn't continue doing it so they got out of it. Those people and those realtors they couldn't control them. We

found out who they were and just told people not to deal with them. That's how we broke \_\_\_\_\_. I think that if that had not taken place at that time, by now you would have had a ghetto, a pocket. You don't see that in Holland, that's why people are surprised when they come, they don't see that in Holland and they say, "how could that happen?" It happened because it just happened or was something done to make it happen.

JO: When did this all happen when the Hispanic community...?

CR: Let's see...early '60s.

JO: Were there any other major problems besides housing that you encountered in Holland? Were you ever physically intimidated?

CR: No. I guess there were confrontations, but not really too much. You got to remember that the image of Holland has to be kept, meaning nobody wants to create problems that the outside world would find out. I think that's one thing that kind of \_\_\_\_\_. Holland \_\_\_\_\_ they're willing to do anything to maintain that image, regardless \_\_\_\_\_ one way or another.

JO: Did you ever feel there was any racial tension in Holland?

CR: At different times, yes.

JO: Was there ever a civil rights movement of sorts within the Hispanic community?

CR: Not as much as some of the cities. The way things work in Holland is that if anything happens, there are certain people that are called who are involved in the community. What we do is get together and approach from that direction, whatever that may be. For example, every year the chairman of the county commissioners, his name was

Rock, made a comment about Hispanics, needless to say \_\_\_\_\_ community said, "No, no." Needless to say, when he ran the second for the next term he didn't make it. If he would have been there today I think \_\_\_\_\_ to be there and then he wanted us to continuously \_\_\_\_\_ didn't want that. \_\_\_\_\_, like I said, the good thing is that the Hispanics feel the same as the Anglo community. They feel pride, they want to maintain Holland, the environment, a Christian community, a caring community, think of your fellow men, that type of thing because that's why they came and stayed here because they liked it. The majority want to maintain that, they'll do anything to maintain that. Anytime there's a tension, they want to deal with it right away, they go to the people that are \_\_\_\_\_ to deal with it right away, to \_\_\_\_\_ out, to the point where \_\_\_\_\_ sit down and talk about it.

JO: You see this as a positive aspect of Holland then?

CR: Yes. I think it comes back to what you said, being a good \_\_\_\_\_ I think it's a concern for them to say, here's a \_\_\_\_\_ Christian \_\_\_\_\_ town, strong, conscious I guess, that reaches their conscious and saying, should sit down with me and find out. Are we wrong? Are they right? Are they wrong? \_\_\_\_\_ right, sit down and talk about it. I think that's one thing that's unique about Holland, the way we've been able to do that as a community.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland at the present and what has it offered in the past?

CR: I think we offer a lot of things, the contributions for one thing, working together making Holland what it is today, the schools and the work place. I think the

contributions as the business increase, I think Hispanics provided that power. [stop]

CR: I guess in the past it's basically the same. At that time it was a little different I think. Manpower \_\_\_\_\_ on the farms, local areas. I think changes came about, for example, mechanization and the increase of manufacturers in the area. It just \_\_\_\_\_ for jobs, I think that's one of the contributions. Also I think that we have allowed Holland to realize that people are going to come \_\_\_\_\_ the country, not to assume because a group comes in that it's entirely coming from Mexico for example, rather we are all US citizens and we all \_\_\_\_\_ the economy allows us to move from one area to another. I think that's good \_\_\_\_\_ that Hispanic contributions. I think that those are the main ones, the other main contributions that have been made. I'm sure that it would have happened anyway, regardless of the situation, but also I think that we have provided the contribution being like anybody else. I guess for example \_\_\_\_\_, making Holland a better community.

JO: What organizations do you belong to within Holland?

CR: The main ones, Latin Americans United for Progress, what it does is it advocates for the Hispanic community. The other one is \_\_\_\_\_, if I can remember, get it right, Northeast \_\_\_\_\_ Water Restoration Education Project, that's out of Chicago, with a local chapter here. Basically what it does is registering people before elections. Also reminding people about voting. Each year it's possible to register people anywhere in the county of Ottawa. Before you could only register people in the city of Holland. That came about through pressure to the city because we found out that this law against it, that it stopped the local city clerk to say yes or no. So we

found that out and put the pressure on the city to allow us to do that. Next year I believe \_\_\_\_\_ the county, so we can \_\_\_\_\_ the county but that time the county has become aware of the changes that were coming about, registering people. By the time we get \_\_\_\_\_, they're already had information that it was possible to do that. We just came at the right time for us to approach them and they accepted the idea. Right now I think there are probably nine or ten people who are registers for the county. That's possible through this organization. There's another organization that I'm on the board and that's Justice Fellowship, what that is is an organization that deals with the new legalization law. Basically what we do is give information to document people and also to employers about the new law. It became effective in 1986, but it was a couple years to make \_\_\_\_\_. It was that time that we organized that year, it's a process that's going to take probably a couple years yet. People don't realize it, they think it's simple, when you say amnesty, amnesty means to forgive, but it's not that simple. They have to met certain criteria, and those are difficult. For example, you have to establish residency from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_. If you know anything about migrants, they go from one place to another, a week, a month. Sometimes you work for one farmer and he might let you work some place else while you're staying at that farm. How are you going to prove? Sometimes they work with crew leaders who all work under him, so the farmer might make one check, he pay them up. So you run into situations and they say, "Prove it." How are they going to prove it? I think that's why a lot of people have resorted to using false records because they have no choice, even though they themselves know that they've

been here for that time but to prove it, by records, this is \_\_\_\_\_ impossible for some of them. There are different categories and each one has different criteria that they have to meet, so it's not that easy. People talk \_\_\_\_\_, it's not so if they get a \_\_\_\_\_ they're doing good.

JO: What would you like to see changed in the city of Holland?

CR: I know they're more open. I think I'd like to see more fellowship between the Hispanics and the Anglo community. I don't think there's enough. \_\_\_\_\_ basically the numbers are increasing quite rapidly. They say that \_\_\_\_\_ I think \_\_\_\_\_ positive, more reason to establish a better relationship between the groups because if we don't we're going to have the same the problems the cities have. Then again, it depends on everyone \_\_\_\_\_ leaders from both sides come together, try to work out these things. If you don't, you lose touch with people. I'm not saying no one cares or \_\_\_\_\_ it isn't any good to get together \_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes it takes time to change people's minds, attitudes. We realize that. Both sides have to have patience, it's not going to change right away, we have to be persistent and persevering and trying to work the differences out.

JO: Do most Hispanics want these changes that you've just stated?

CR: I think so.

JO: Do they have any other aspirations?

CR: I think education is important to them. When they first get here their main concern is jobs, start working. The longer they live here the more they realize the importance of education, the importance of having your own home for example, worrying about the

safety of the community, a kid \_\_\_\_\_ for example. I notice that this \_\_\_\_\_ a few years ago \_\_\_\_\_ the neighborhood kind of being run down. For some reason I see a change there, the pride, they're proud to have contributed \_\_\_\_\_. About a year ago when we had the \_\_\_\_\_ there was a lot of violence between \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_. They approached the city, I believe last year, this year they didn't want that to happen. They wanted something done. The city, the department \_\_\_\_\_ council had a meeting in the neighborhood to kind of resolve that. The positive that came out of that was that the officers and the people around the area found out that they always looked at things as them, not as a protection, but rather...

JO: The enemy...

CR: Right. Out of that came a better relationship between the residents there, and the police department. In fact, the police department agreed to have officers patrol the area on foot. That has established a relationship with the residents there. They have \_\_\_\_\_ quote more things. Something happens, they're more willing to give information where before \_\_\_\_\_ thinking exists. They found out that the officers are there to protect them. The people found out that they ... the officers found out that the people were not really out to get them, rather it was because that was what they perceived because the officer was always in the car and the only time they saw the officers was when they came in \_\_\_\_\_. They found out by working together, they would not have the problems. The officer would not \_\_\_\_\_ the problem they would encounter all the time and \_\_\_\_\_ life \_\_\_\_\_ to resolve.

Good things happen.

JO: What do you see in the future for Holland and its Hispanic community?

CR: I hope that we have a lot of young men and women graduating not only from high school, but also from colleges. I hope that the business community will realize the potential that these young men and women can contribute to not only the work place, because what happens is once the student graduates they go on to college and after college, we don't get them back. We do need them here in Holland both for the betterment of the Hispanics and also the community. Every time you go to collect for services, someone has to take an interpreter somebody's there to help them understand \_\_\_\_\_ example. Also, to give the opportunity to \_\_\_\_\_ women in the workplace, to give them start so they \_\_\_\_\_ - contributed. What's happened in the past, we keep losing all our young men and women, they go some place else like Grand Rapids, bigger cities because their not getting the opportunities, stay here \_\_\_\_\_.

JO: Just to go back into your past, where are you employed now and what position do you hold?

CR: I'm employed at the Good Samaritan Center, the coordinator for an emergent shelter home, used to be one and we're now \_\_\_\_\_ - another one, which will be open for families to come in probably by the first of July.

JO: Are these families that come to this shelter, are they basically Hispanic?

CR: No, from all backgrounds. The only criteria that we have is that their homeless regardless of race, religion. The only restrictions that we have is no single \_\_\_\_\_.

We take single women, a father and children, a mother and children, the parents of the children and single women.

JO: Do migrants, present day migrants, do they use these facilities a lot?

CR: Yes, we run into problems with migrants because they usually come with extended family, meaning the father, the married sons and daughters and sometimes we \_\_\_\_\_ say ten, fifteen, twenty. We can only house eleven. We don't want to break up the family, let them stay and the other ones go someplace else. They don't want to do that. They travel as a group, as a unit and \_\_\_\_\_ to be separated so we do run into problems because of the large number of families according to unit. Hopefully, we'll resolve that with the new shelter because with the new shelter we can house probably, we \_\_\_\_\_ right now because \_\_\_\_\_ an exact number, but I'm estimating, from the first shelter, probably around eighteen or nineteen.

JO: Do migrant families have an interest in settling in Holland permanently?

CR: Some do.

JO: What percentage would you say?

CR: It's hard to really give a number, I only deal with a real small number. I don't know. Probably the \_\_\_\_\_ house deal with larger numbers.

JO: What do the migrants see in Holland compared to what you saw when you were a migrant? Do they still have the same vision of Holland as a community or do they have a different vision?

CR: I think they have a different vision. I think the only concern that they have is finding housing, finding work and go back. Like I said, there are very few that receive an

opportunity here to stay \_\_\_\_\_ circumstances \_\_\_\_\_ look for work, place to live \_\_\_\_\_ they're here and then go back. The reason why I think is because their families are in Texas or Mexico, where ever they come from.

JO: The new migrants, are they from Texas most of them, like your back ground or are more of them from Mexico?

CR: I guess it's both. I think very few of them come from Florida, California \_\_\_\_\_. If they have a bad year in one area then \_\_\_\_\_ increase migrants up here. For example, this year, I think Florida, a crop froze, so people came up north where normally they would not have.

JO: Do you see the Hispanic community growing in Holland through the migrant stream or do you see it just growing as the present population...?

CR: Both. And newcomers \_\_\_\_\_. We might not see this much anymore, migration from South America basically because what drove the people up here was \_\_\_\_\_, war in those countries, which we have a way of messing things up and creating problems. They wonder why some people are coming here because they see \_\_\_\_\_ place to get away from all the fighting and we turn around and say, "I'm sorry, but you have to go back." After we bombed the heck out of what little they had. So they turn to the United States and \_\_\_\_\_ we lost our homes and our places \_\_\_\_\_ use of forces, but indirected by some guns and weapons and what ever. Their thinking is, we lost our homes and we're here. That's the way they look at it. Things seem to have kind of simmered down there and we might not see too many from South America.

JO: Basically from Mexico and Texas...?

CR: ..Well those \_\_\_\_\_ I'm talking about South America. From Mexico, yeah  
\_\_\_\_\_. I don't think we can change that \_\_\_\_\_ I don't think we're going to  
see much increase. Maybe a trickle but not as much, unless things change over there,  
civil wars \_\_\_\_\_.

JO: Thank you very much Mr. Reyes.