

Oral History Interview with
Ernesto Cantu

(unedited)

Conducted November 5, 1997
by Geoffrey Reynolds

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with Ernesto Cantu
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Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds

GR: Could you please state your name and date of birth?

EC: Ernesto Cantu, [date removed], 1936.

GR: Where were you born, if not in Holland?

EC: Monterrey, Mexico.

GR: When did you first come to Holland, Ernesto?

EC: Well, I come first like on vacation with a friend of mine, let's see, like 1969. Then we decided put a business and we found the place in '71.

GR: What was that business called?

EC: Casa Cantu.

GR: And that's on 16th and Ottawa?

EC: Right.

GR: Before you moved to Holland, can you tell me a little bit about the hometown that you're from in Mexico? Do you remember any of that? Do you remember about Mexico?

EC: Oh yes. Well, I was born in Monterrey Mexico. It's a real big town. It's supposed to be the first industrial city in Mexico. So I came to the United States in 1955. We came in 1955 to Chicago. And I lived in Chicago until we came here in August 15 in 1971.

GR: Why did you move to Chicago originally? Was there a job in Chicago when you left

Mexico?

EC: Yes. I had different jobs in Chicago. I used to work in a paper company, cardboard box as a printer, and different jobs. And I used to work on Sante Fe Railroad as a diesel mechanic. Then I worked in General Motors in the electromotive, where they build the locomotives that hold the big engines. I was an engine tester. That's when we went up here in 1971.

GR: Did you move to Chicago for a job in particular or just a better life?

EC: No. You mean from Chicago to here?

GR: No. Why did you leave Mexico?

EC: I had a lot of friends who were living in Chicago and, I guess it's not a problem, but my father got married again and everything. And so, how can I say, we don't get along with our stepmother (chuckle). So I got the opportunity to come here. So I came to Chicago.

GR: Describe your first impressions of Holland. What was it like when you first arrived?

EC: I really liked it because it was nice and clean. Like it is now, nice and clean. I remember the first time we came here, everything was closed on Sundays, even the gas stations, everything was. We used to come here like sometimes for a weekend so we have to put gas in the car Saturday (laughs) to go back to Chicago. Because we used to come with this friend of ours, he used to work with me in General Motors, he would always invite us to come over, and so then he moves here. And then after he moves here, then I move here too (laughs).

GR: Now did you have a job when you arrived in Holland?

EC: No. We start with the store.

GR: You bought the store as soon as you arrived?

EC: Right. We were looking for a store all over the place and we finally found this one. I liked this one because it had a lot of room, a lot of property. So we bought this one.

GR: Do you remember what the store was called before you bought it?

EC: McKay, the one Mrs. McKay used to run.

GR: What are some organizations or activities you've been involved in in Holland? Do you belong to any groups?

EC: No, I always help all the groups and everything, but I don't have no time to get involved.

GR: Since you've come to Holland, in the past 22 years...

EC: Twenty-six.

GR: Twenty-six. What have been some of the most significant changes you've noticed with the town?

EC: Well, the town keeps growing too much. I mean, it really keeps growing all the time. I remember when before they put in the mall, they wanted to put over here in town. And they don't let them. I think they're sorry now (laughs). Over there in the North Park it is just booming because of that. Now for a long time, they have been talking about putting in a marina over here. I don't know if they're going to do it.

GR: On the south shore?

EC: Yes. That's going to be a good business and help everybody.

GR: It'd be good for you.

EC: Everybody (laughs). Not only me, everybody.

GR: Have you been involved in any of those changes, Ernesto?

EC: No.

GR: Too busy?

EC: Yes (laughs).

GR: Have any of these changes affected you directly? With the size of Holland being bigger?

EC: No.

GR: Population changes haven't affected you?

EC: No.

GR: Holland has been recognized as one of the ten All-American cities. What qualities do you think earned Holland this honor? Is there anything in particular about Holland that make them better to receive this than other cities?

EC: Well, older people are real nice. They don't have any problems with anybody. Everybody tries to help everybody. There's a lot of jobs available, so that's why I think it keeps growing.

GR: Are there particular qualities about Holland that you like? You talked about cleanliness before. Is there anything else about Holland that impresses you to live here?

EC: One of the things, you know that's why we moved out of Chicago, because it started

getting real bad down there with gangs and everything. At that time when I came here, 26 years ago, sometimes I even leave the truck open, load it, nobody would take anything. Now, it's a little different now, but it's not that bad yet. So, they tried not to let things go to far, which is good. Otherwise, they can't stop it (laughs).

GR: Is there anything the community still needs to work on in your opinion? Any problems that they need to still work on?

EC: Well, no.

GR: Nothing stands out?

EC: Well, they have to give more opportunities to minorities, that's about all.

GR: Describe the role the church has played in your life. Is church an important part of your life?

EC: It's important because we were raised with the church and everything. But since I've been here, I got no time to go to church, once in a while whenever I have time. Most the time I can't because I'm always working all the time.

GR: When you do go to church, what faith do you follow?

EC: Catholic.

GR: Are you involved in any particular Catholic Church?

EC: No, well, I go here to the St. Francis, but once in a while I can't make it.

GR: Do you think the church plays a big part in the community of Holland?

EC: Yes.

GR: Do you think that Hope College plays a large part in the Holland community, the college itself?

EC: Yes, because it's a real big school, or college.

GR: Your heritage you said is Mexican born?

EC: Yes.

GR: And both your mother and father are from Mexico?

EC: Right.

GR: Do you see that heritage playing a large part in Holland, the Hispanic or Mexican heritage? Is that important to Holland?

EC: Well, I don't know if it is to Holland (laughs).

GR: In your opinion.

EC: Yes. You try to keep your - what do you call them; I forgot the word.

GR: Your roots?

EC: Your roots, yes.

GR: So in Holland, do you think that is still pretty strong in the Mexican and Hispanic backgrounds? Is it still strong?

EC: Yes it is.

GR: Holland has become more diverse, population-wise, over the years. Have you seen any affects of that in itself, more immigrants from Arizona and Texas or East Asia? Has that affected the community in your eyes? Have you seen any changes?

EC: (long pause) What was that again?

GR: For instance, there's a lot more Hispanic people now living in Holland. Do you think that's changed Holland dramatically, or enough to notice?

EC: Maybe a little bit, but not exactly.

GR: Have seen the role of women change a lot in Holland over the years?

EC: Yes (laughs).

GR: Any way in particular that you noticed?

EC: Well, no. There are more starting to get into business and everything, which is a good thing.

GR: You think that's a good thing?

EC: Yes.

GR: Have you ever witnessed any controversies in Holland? Anything that upset the community a lot?

EC: There were some, you know, they don't upset a lot, but a little bit.

GR: Are there are any things you remember specifically?

EC: Not long ago when they have this kid at the restaurant, just what I see in the paper. They said that the mayor make the city fly the flags at half-staff. But there were some other murders and they did nothing. I mean they have to be, like we say, everybody is the son of the Devil or everybody is the son of God. You got to be one.

GR: So the Hispanic population talks a lot about that?

EC: No, I've just seen in the paper that there were some people complaining.

GR: Are there are other incidents like that that have happened while you were in Holland that people have reacted to negatively or kind of wondered?

EC: That one time when they put that immigration officer (laughs) everybody reacted.

GR: Oh, the Board put that up?

EC: Yes.

GR: Of all the jobs you've had in Holland, this is the only one?

EC: Yes.

GR: Do you enjoy being a business owner?

EC: Oh, yes.

GR: Is your family involved in the business?

EC: Only my wife and me, that's all.

GR: No children?

EC: We have two. Actually, I built this restaurant for my daughter. Before we finished building the restaurant, she got married and went to Texas (laughs).

GR: Her name is?

EC: Carol, Carolina.

GR: And you have a boy too?

EC: Yes, Ernie Jr. He's not too interested in this though.

GR: He lives in Holland still?

EC: Yes.

GR: Is there a generation gap in Holland that you're aware of? For instance, your generation and your son's generation, do you see things in common?

EC: What do you mean?

GR: Do you have the same ideas about business and what he does in his free time, what you do in your free time, are they similar in any way?

EC: Not too much (laughs). They do now things we never did before.

GR: Anything in particular that really strikes you as being different with the next generation? For instance, high school students - is there anything about them that you don't like or like?

EC: A lot of things like the education here. I don't think it's right, no, not right, but they don't do it right. For example, there are some people that I know, they go even to high school and they don't know how to add or multiply or nothing. And they are in high school! I think I heard the other day that they were saying that in Chicago they are starting to do this now: you pass, you pass, you don't, you stay. Over here they go the idea that passing everybody, everybody, when they get older they will get even, but they never will. If you don't know how to add by the time you get to high school, you're going to be in worse trouble. You can't even get through college, because you don't know the principle, so you cannot keep going, so you drop out. That's the problem (laughs). I remember in Mexico they give you two opportunities. If you fail two times, you are out. They will give that place to someone who wants to learn.

GR: You graduated high school in Mexico?

EC: Yes.

GR: Have the problems and concerns of the average Holland citizen changed over the past 25 years? The typical problems you ran into as a young store owner, have they changed at all in the 26 years you've been an owner? Have things changed problem-wise?

EC: No, I don't think so.

GR: Pretty similar?

EC: Yes.

GR: When did you build your restaurant?

EC: 1991, we opened it in August, 1991.

GR: And then, your wife and yourself run that now?

EC: Yes, and my son, but he was working with us and then he didn't like it so he left.

GR: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life? Is there anything in your life that happened that changed things forever? Any job? Or when you moved to Chicago or Holland?

EC: No, I just keep working that's all (laughs).

GR: Pretty steady?

EC: Yes.

GR: Is there anyone in particular that influenced your life more than others? Father, grandfather, your wife?

EC: No, because I'm here by myself. I mean all my relatives are in Mexico. I'm the only one here. I used to have an uncle in Chicago, but most of the times I never had a chance to see him. I see him once in a while. So it's just my wife and me, and we got to keep working that's all.

GR: Have your priorities changed since moving to Holland? Do you still work as hard as you did 26 years ago?

EC: No, because now I'm not working any more. I got some surgeries in my knees and everything. So, there are a lot of things I cannot do.

GR: So you've slowed down a little bit?

EC: Yes.

GR: Now, you have a pretty competent staff to run your business?

EC: Yes.

GR: What is your viewpoint about bilingualism, or speaking of two languages, in the school systems for the non-English speakers? What do you think of that?

EC: (sigh) Well, if you can handle it, it's okay (laughs).

GR: Do you think it's important?

EC: It's like my father used to tell me all the time, "You go to school or you got to know two or three different languages." It's like you are playing poker. You got three aces and you're waiting for one card. Now, if you don't know anything, you got no game. So, when you go to school or you know two languages you have more opportunities to get a better job or something than if you only speak one language.

GR: Now, do you think Holland is trying hard enough with the non-native English speakers to help them adjust?

EC: I'm not sure. I don't know.

GR: Are the schools putting enough time in?

EC: I'm not too familiar with it. My daughter was in school and my son too. They went through here. But most of the time they went to school in Mexico. Sometimes it occurred to us that we always are speaking Spanish in the house. Well, they are going to learn to use it in the school. And that's what they did. They both speak real good English and Spanish. Now if we only speak English, they going to end up

speaking one language.

GR: Do you speak Spanish at home still?

EC: Yes.

GR: What do you think of Tulip Time? Honestly?

EC: (laughs) Honestly, it's a headache (laughs).

GR: Because of the traffic and stuff?

EC: Yes.

GR: The business doesn't pick up?

EC: Not too much because I'm a little bit out of town. It is a good thing for the town and everything.

GR: What do you think of the city government the way it is? Are you happy with your representatives?

EC: Well, yes.

GR: For the most part?

EC: Yes.

GR: Do you think it's good that there's some ethnic diversity on the council, some more minority representation?

EC: Yes, needs a little more.

GR: Well, I guess that's it. That's the end of the interview with Ernesto Cantu.