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Latino Voices in Cache Valley

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01: Voices: USU's Latino/a Voices Project

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Utah State University Libraries' Special Collections and Archives Division (SCA) is home to rich oral history collections. SCA endeavors to preserve Northern Utah history and heritage by collecting the voices of everyday men and women. Our collections range from the poignant reminiscences of those who survived Idaho's Teton Dam disaster to the recollections of modern-day cowboys.

Our oral history efforts serve to enhance SCA's other documentary sources, such as manuscript, folklore and photograph collections. At times, oral history may be a first effort of discovering the history of some segments of our community. One such segment is Northern Utah's Latino population. While this community accounts for more than twelve percent of Northern Utah's population, its history is grossly under-represented in SCA's holdings. In 2007, as an effort to rectify this, SCA partnered with Utah's Cache Valley Latino communities to collect and preserve the stories of 45 people. This joint effort became known as the Latino/a Voices Project (LVP).

The project started with the creation of an advisory board drawn from community members and university specialists. Under the direction of the board we applied for matching funds from the Utah Humanities Council and the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation to hire a native-speaker to help direct the project, and to train and engage native speakers to do the interviewing. As the project progressed, we also hired a recruiter to help enlist community members as interviewers and interviewees. To this end, we advertised for a bilingual assistant director and received more than fifteen applications. We hired Elisaida Méndez, a native of Puerto Rico, and a doctoral student in psychology at USU to be the project's assistant director, and Jorge Rodas, a local real estate agent to train project interviewers and recruit project interviewees. Rodas immigrated to the United States with his parents from Guatemala when he was 19 years old. He lived in California and Arizona before moving to Utah. Aside from being a native speaker, Jorge brought the essential experience of migration, which would be part of the life-histories of many of those interviewed. Furthermore, he had personal experience in the two prominent religious traditions of Cache Valley's Latino communities: the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These life experiences gave Rodas the cultural tools needed to introduce the project, get feedback from Latino community members and enlist their help and support.

In collaboration with folklorist Elaine Thatcher, Randy Williams (project director and USU SCA Fife Folklore Archives Curator) created the interview questions and wrote the project mission statement and letter of information. Williams and Méndez worked closely with USU's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which reviewed and approved the mission statement, release form, questions, and letter of information. The decision to work with the IRB gave project

participants an offsite, non project organization to interact with. This additional regulation worked to protect the community.

The project's success was contingent on our ability to organize, but also on our ability to win the support of Cache Valley's Latino community. We followed the American Folklore Society ideal that enjoins oral history professionals to work "at the invitation of and with the collaboration of the members of [the] community" (AFS). To this end we insured that all literature, advertisements, forms, and training materials were in both Spanish and English. This provided control and respect to the project community. We employed translators to examine all of our documents, which were then meticulously reviewed by Professor María Luisa Spicer-Escalante (Associate Professor of Spanish & Linguistics, Department of Languages, Philosophy & Communication Studies, Utah State University) and Elisaida Méndez.

After six months preparation we were ready to begin looking for individuals to participate in the project. Rodas engaged the community and posted our bilingual flyers in an effort to enlist interested community members as interviewers and interviewees. Méndez then took the contact information and along with Rodas and Williams planned an oral history workshop. Méndez, Rodas and Williams selected all the oral history workers and interviewees. Funded through grants from the Utah Humanities Council and the Utah Division of State History, we hosted the workshop at USU in June 2007. Sixteen community members attended, of whom 13 agreed to act as project fieldworkers. During an earlier workshop held in March, Williams trained five USU linguistics students who wanted use the interview experience as part of their Spanish linguistics course service learning component.

The training was *very* successful. Méndez, a gifted teacher, shared information on cultural sensitivity; and Williams taught oral history best practices. The participants clearly caught the vision of oral history work, and expressed excitement in being part of this collecting project. "I was very impressed with the scope and depth of this program. . . ." exclaimed one, noting how similar projects should be pursued "in Davis County [Utah] where I grew up." Participants universally expressed their belief that the project would be a "voice to the Latino community… [and] help the Latino Community feel more a part of… Cache Valley…" [UHC]. Méndez offered a concluding sentiment when she declared that as both "a member of this community, and a direct contributor to the project's fulfillment, I cannot think of a better way to bring the Latino community to light." The project, she asserted, would illuminate the "qualities and strength of character that have helped [my community] forge a present and a future in a western corner of a great nation. The Latino Voices Project is making justice as it enhances the quality of education, promotes further research and connects generations through the years" [Williams and Méndez].

The project collected forty-five interviews from community members between March and October 2007. From the start, we had envisioned that the entire collection would be in English and Spanish. In March 2008, we were able to have six of the forty five interviews translated from Spanish to English and in October 2008, with generous support from the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation and the Utah State Historical Records Advisory Board (USHRAB), we were able to have thirty two more interviews translated from Spanish to English. And plans are underway to have the remaining seven English language transcripts translated.

Each interview was transcribed by Workforce Language Services. We selected this company, in part, because its president is a cultural anthropologist who has conducted oral history work herself and understands the complexities and nuances of this work. In addition, she employs transcriptionists that are native Spanish speakers, an essential component of our project.

Following transcription, we returned the transcript and interview to each informant for vetting. We made all the suggested changes and returned the revised copy to each interviewee. The revised version is the one that we use in the physical (FOLK COLL 38) and online collection (http://uda-db.orbiscascade.org/findaid/ark:/80444/xv83200).

The project received great media coverage, both locally and from Wasatch Front newspapers. Although much of this coverage was positive, blogs associated with several articles included vitriolic posts which confirmed to us that our efforts to preserve and present the life experiences of Cache Valley Latinos is vital. We carried this mission forward by holding public presentations. In October 2007, Méndez and Williams presented the project at the Cache Community Connections' Tabernacle and Lecture Series at the Logan LDS Tabernacle. Approximately 50 people attended, where a question and answer session led to a particularly interesting discussion. Following the presentation several individuals shared with us their interest in oral history work for their community/group, including Providence City, the Logan Presbyterian Church and the Cache Community Connection organization. These contacts have since enabled Williams to hold oral history presentations or workshops for each of these groups. All of these groups have conducted and completed oral history projects for their organizations; and the Cache Valley Presbyterian Church (FOLK COLL 44) and Cache Community Connections (FOLK COLL 47) have deposited their oral history projects in USU Libraries' SCA.

In an effort to analyze the LVP project Méndez and Williams organized a symposium and in September 2008 invited all the LVP interviewees, interviewers, advisory board members and some community members. Twenty participants, ranging in age from seventeen to seventy attended. Participants were asked to read selections from the LVP oral histories prior to the symposium to guide discussion. While preparing the readings,

Méndez noted four major themes in the "voices" of the participants: social/political, family, work, and community. USU scholars, participants of the projects, were asked to moderate each theme group. From the vibrant discussions at the symposium, Williams, Méndez, M. Spicer-Escalante, Eduardo Ortiz and JP Spicer-Escalante prepared short essays about the project and themes. At present, Ortiz, M. Spicer-Escalante and Williams are working on Latino/a Voices II, an effort to enhance the LVP by adding youth perspectives to the collection by collaborating with students in Mountain Crest High School's Latino Discovery.

Along the way, Méndez and Williams received a Utah Humanities Council *Human Ties Award* on behalf of the effort. The publicity kept the LVP in the spotlight and paved the way for further donations into a subset of the LVP, including Mountain Crest High School's yearly Latinos in Action class publications *A Journey to the American Dream: One World, Many Countries, One Family, One Purpose* (2010) and *In Hope of a Better Future: Making our Parents' Sacrifice Worth it* (2011); *Utah Latinos: A Proud Legacy*, Vol. 1 and 2; and *OKEspanol* (formerly *El Observador de Utah*), Utah's leading Spanish language newspaper published by the *Deseret News*.

From concept to (near) completion, the Latino/a Voices Project works to strengthen SCA's Latino holdings. From the insightful oral histories and commentary of forty five Latino community members to the engaging symposium from which central themes from the histories were discussed and short essays inform the collections' digital presentation the LVP was a success. But, most importantly the collection is a robust beginning of Latino community connections and community involvement in Utah State University Libraries' Special Collections and Archives.

Works cited

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