

Oral history interview of Celia Dominguez Mariscal

(Excerpt of interview transcript)

Interviewer: Noël Wiggins

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*Please note: The original interview was conducted in Spanish and is available (in its entirety) for review in the Research Library of the Oregon Historical Society.

Noël Wiggins = NW

Celia Dominguez Mariscal = CDM

Tape 1, Side A

Noël Wiggins: Celia, could we begin by talking about when you and your family came here to Oregon? Could you tell me a little about your trip here—your arrival here?

Celia Dominguez Mariscal: When we first came to Oregon, we came for only two weeks. We came from Blythe, California. When we came it was like an adventure—our school vacation. My father had been here before, when he was single. When my Mom and Dad got married, they got married in New Mexico and they returned to the state of Oregon, in Hood River. They worked with Walton Orchards and there used to be an opening (?) that belonged to the owner. My Mom and Dad had two children here, but I was born in California. After my birth they came to the state of Oregon. Luis and Jose were born here. For three years they lived here, then they had to return to California because they closed the opening(?) and moved it to California. So my Dad moved back to California. But my Dad didn't stay with the same company, he moved to Blythe. That's where I was born. We lived there several years.

During this time neither of my parents had immigration papers, so we were caught by Immigration and we were sent to Mexico. My folks lived in Tijuana seven years. During these seven years, seven children were born there in the state of Tijuana. Then my Dad put in for his papers to come back legally, and it took about a year. But economically we were very poor and my Dad didn't have the money to get papers for the whole family and an Aunt helped us right away. I think it only took about two months to get all of our papers. At that time it was so easy to get legal papers. Then when my Mom and Dad got their papers we returned once again to Blythe. There we stayed for several years; more children were born, like about four more.

Let's see, then my Dad and Mom worked in the tomato fields. My dad had a normal job; he was a foreman for a company called Heidi/Mighty(?). Then we were out for vacation and my Dad said he was bringing us to Oregon. So we all said ok, and all of us came, happy as could be, in a station wagon. He had given it an overhaul. My Dad was very interested in mechanics. So we said we would stay in Indio to pick tomatoes for a week and get more money. My family wasn't really considered a "migrant" family, say, we didn't follow the migrant route. My Dad always cared that all of us were in school during the school days. We would always stay in one place for many years to be sure we had our schooling, but because these were vacation days we went to Indio to

pick tomatoes. But that year the tomato crop froze, so that there was no crop to pick. So, my Dad said ok, let's go to Oregon. So all of us, especially Luis and Jose wanted to visit Oregon state, because that's where they were born. So we all came but we didn't have much money.

NW: Could I please interrupt? What year was that?

CDM: My Mom said it was, hmmm, 1964, yes 1964. So we came to Oregon with about \$200 but in those days it was quite a lot of money. For us it was like a vacation because we had never had taken such a grand vacation. So we came in two days to Hood River, Oregon. My Dad took off to visit orchard-owner friends. My Mom said we were only staying for a short time. My Dad couldn't find work for us because no one wanted to employ such a large family – we were almost thirteen at that time, plus my Mom and Dad equaled fifteen. They just didn't have cabins large enough to accommodate us. So my Mom said we would just go back. We'll go back to California, we'll work a few days and go back. So, we looked and looked all over. At night we'd sleep in the orchards. It was so peaceful then – no one would bother you. You could sleep wherever, and everyone was so friendly.

During the day we'd go to a park, to the Toll Bridges Park. (?) We'd cook there but you can only stay until 10:00pm and we'd bathe in the river but the water was very cold because all the water came from Mt. Hood, very cold. We did that for about 1 and ½ weeks, then we found a man named Bill Burma, he's deceased now. He said that he had a small house, but to us it was very large because it was a two story house. So we stayed there until we ran out of money, because there was no work. Only my Dad worked with the owner. We all still had intentions of going back to California. Then the other harvests hadn't started, it was around June. The only thing available was the green bean harvest and there they paid in cash daily. We loved it because our family had never worked out in the fields. We went one day and we made lots of money with the whole family.

That evening we went to the store and bought chicken and vegetables and my Mom fixed us a good dinner. We were real happy, but we still wanted to go back to California. But, we still didn't have enough money. So, one day my Mom went to the "welfare office" to see if they'd help us with money to go back. They said yes, to come back the next day and they'd give us the money. At that time, my Dad spoke with Mr. Burma and he told my Dad that if he wanted to stay he'd give him work year round. My Mom and Dad must have discussed it while we were sleeping because the next day they asked us kids and we all said yes and then no.

During this time my Mom called to Blythe to speak with my Godmother and asked how things were over there. She told my Mom that there had been an earthquake and our house was completely gone. My Dad had helped this ranch owner build a machine for cotton picking. They had made a new patent, or rather, they renewed the existing machine so it would be easier to pick cotton.

My Dad never received any money for his work from the rancher, but the rancher told my Dad that for the rest of my father's life he could live in the rancher's housing. That was the way he compensated my Dad, with housing. It was a series of cabins but we used them all and we were very comfortable. The earthquake knocked

them all down and there was no housing left. So I guess it was like a miracle because now we did have a house where we could live. So we stayed, we went to school here. I went to Wise(?). Then it was a high school, now it's a Jr. High. In 1964 I was fifteen; I celebrated my 15th birthday here. So, we stayed, we lived there in Parkdale(?) in Bill Burma's house. From there we stayed about three years.

Then my Dad wanted to move because there really wasn't year-round work for him, but he had to be "on-call" because we had free housing. So, my Dad heard about a lady, or rather a couple that needed a foreman. My dad went to inquire about the job and was told that it was year-round work. Apparently the previous foreman was stealing a lot of fruit from these orchards and this couple was looking for a better manager for their orchards. So, my Dad said it was fine and the owners also provided us with a house that had light, water—everything provided. The whole family was included in the decision making at all times, so when my Dad asked what we thought we all said "yes." Everyone was very friendly, we easily made friends with other schoolmates, and we were happy. Actually we were the only Mexican family in this whole valley. Another family, the Ibarras, came later. So we stayed, and there were only two families here—us and the Ibarras.

Then we came to Pinegrove (?). My brother went to school at Pinegrove. I went to Wise (?). During the day the little ones went to Headstart or Daycare. My Mom and Dad went to work. When the harvest was on, my Dad was the foreman. Other times, he'd drive tractor, and during harvest Mom would pick fruit. My Mom always loved working outside. At night she'd go to work in the packing warehouse. During the day I was in school, and at night I'd take care of the family because I was the oldest. My Mom always worked very hard and long hours. By the age of 16 I was a little more advanced than my classmates and much more mature. Maybe being the oldest in the family contributed to this. So then I decided I didn't want to continue in school. I spoke with my counselor, Virginia Huffler (?), and told her that I wanted to work in an office.

My Dad never liked for us to work in the fields so she said I could try for my GED. I passed my GED at sixteen and my counselor got me a secretarial job in the Forest Service. I worked there about two years. When I turned eighteen they offered me a job as a manager of an office because I was bilingual English/Spanish and at that time there was a large influx of *Braceros* who had no one to help them. I applied and had to interview. Another girl, who was Anglo but who spoke Spanish, and I, were interviewed. This was a government position where I could work with the police, doctors, lawyers, and the hospital and they'd pay me. I got the job, so I became manager of this office and I also worked with the police, lawyers, doctors, in the valley whenever they needed me to interpret. I also worked with senior citizens.

As time passed, the rest of my siblings grew up and began to graduate from school. The first one was Luis. He always loved school. He was very popular and was student-body president. I've never felt that any of us experienced any racial problems because we were very well liked in school, work, and in our neighborhood. The Anglos, Asians—everyone liked us. Luis is the child born after me, eldest of the boys. He is the president of the company. He always liked business. When he graduated, he worked at Rosauer's, at a store. This man asked Luis to come and work at his store as a manager at Mt. Hood Store. His name was Jack Mills (?). So, they got along very well, and Luis was his manager. After a time Mr. Mills didn't want to own the store anymore so he asked

Luis to take over. Luis was only nineteen years old. Mr. Mills saw that Luis was really interested in the store and asked Luis to buy the store. Luis wanted to buy it but he had no money. Mr. Mills was also a banker, he's a millionaire and he told Luis he'd help him buy the store, so he did. The store did very well. Everyone likes Luis, and Luis loved to talk and visit, he's like me in that sense. So he bought it and was successful. The others began to graduate also. They all did, and as time passed I got married. (twenty-one years) I was the first of my family to marry. I married Santos Mariscal; my husband is from Mexico—Zacatecas. My brother Gonzalo was next. He married when he was sixteen—too young. I was twenty-one years old when I married. Then the others started to marry. My sister Virginia was next. In that year there were 3 of us that got married. We kept on working. Jose became manager of the Chevron station. Alfonso worked for him. Others worked at Rosauers.

My Mom had always dreamed of owning her own business. She'd worked in Blythe in a tortilla factory with my Godmother, Luz Rodriguez—she was the owner. We kept on growing and I had my first son Julian. Then I went to work with the Rehabilitation Center. I worked with the retarded, helping them to slowly begin to be on their own. I worked with them for several years. In time, all my brothers and sisters got together and discussed the possibility of starting our own business. I didn't have any savings since I had just purchased my home. The rest of the family had very little savings. My brother Gonzalo was in the service, and we all decided that we just didn't have the money for a business. My Mom kept on dreaming of owning her tortilla factory.

We discussed our business for about a year or two until we finally decided to go ahead and see how we'd do. We opened a small place on 12th street in Hood River. It was only 20' x 10'. We bought a small machine that we got on payments. We started at night in the year of 1969. During the day, we'd all work our jobs and at night we'd work in the tortilla factory. I was pregnant at the time, and I had to quit my job, so I started to do babysitting during the day. At night, we made our tortillas; about thirty boxes at night 10:00 – 11:00pm. Since I was the only one who didn't work during the day, I would take the tortillas to the stores to try and sell them. At that time, the only competition was Reser's, but it was a very hard tortilla when warmed and many people didn't like it. Even my Mom would make her own tortillas; she was very picky about tortillas. Nightly we worked until about 10:30pm or 11:00pm, so we felt that thirty boxes of tortillas was so many tortillas. In time, as we kept selling, we'd run out of *masa* dough and my brother would go to California in a van to buy *masa* so we could make more tortillas. They'd bring about thirty to fifty sacks and we'd have enough for a whole month. The first year our profit was about \$2,000.

We didn't know about business or commercial dealings. Luis was the only one but the rest of us didn't know a thing. For us, \$2,000 was good, like wow. The second year was better; we sold more to the workers. By the third year we all had to quit our day jobs and we had to move from the 12th Street location into a larger place. The old owner didn't have anymore space available for us (so we went out looking for a larger place) and he told us we had to move because we were employing more people and we were also using more parking spaces.

We were looking for a larger place when my brother Luis found a place, but it wasn't available, only through sale. We all decided to buy the place and also that if the

business didn't prosper we'd all pay the difference out of our own pockets. We moved to Franklin (?) after three years. We bought a place like a large garage and for us it was an immense place. We bought a larger tortilla machine. We used to pack and count our tortillas by hand. After a while we had to order our *masa* by the truckload, a semi would come and deliver to us on a monthly basis. Slowly we kept on making more tortillas as the demand grew. We also started spreading further with our sales, from Hood River, we went to Vidale (?) from there to Portland, from Portland to Salem, and we kept branching out.

NW: How did you make connections to make your sales?

CDM: Luis was the president of our company, so his job was to go out and find new stores for us to sell. Albertson's at Vidale would ask him why he didn't go to Albertson's in Portland and the Albertson's in Portland would tell him to go to the Albertson's in Salem. So that is how we kept on going further and further out. Then since he was already in Salem, he'd go and call on other stores in that area and that's how we kept on growing.

After about five years we needed an even bigger place so we had to move and expand again. From there we moved to Industrial Street. There the cannery rented out a bigger place to us. Here we decided to make flour tortillas (wheat) we bought another machine to make these flour tortillas, so now we had two machines. We made tortillas all day—all of us. Now we all had to leave any other jobs to work in the tortilla factory. Luis was always on his own; or rather he had free time because he was the owner of his own store. Jose and my Mom were the next to come on full time at the factory. We also hired a few employees; next came Alfonso. He had to make deliveries. When he made his deliveries, he also delivered candy for another company. This was to supplement his income. So now, I had to come on full time also. By the time we moved from Industrial Street the demand for tortillas was so great, we were delivering very far, with more workers coming into the area the demand was immense. This happened within two to three years. We had to move again, Jim O'Bannion who's in charge of the court told us that we had to make another even bigger decision something that was more suitable for us so now we moved to ... [tape ends]

(End of Tape #1)

Tape 1, Side B

CDM: More and more people were buying our tortillas. My brothers and sisters started to question why we didn't make tortillas for other companies. Now we were working eighteen to twenty hours daily. I now had to take only three to four hours to sleep, shower, and go right back to the tortilla factory. My brothers in law have always been supportive of my sisters and especially my husband. He really helped me out. Daily he'd pick up the children at the day care and feed them and put them to bed. I had a sitter that came into our home, so she'd take care of the baths the next day. This sitter really helped me out with my family.

Now we were so busy that we had to have a day and a night shift at work. We had a year lease on this place with the option of buying. We realized that this place was adequate for us because now the semis were delivering twice to us—two times a week. We started having more business and now we started making "chips." We now had the machinery to make chips.

About two years later, we suffered a fire at the tortilla factory. This was publicized all over on radio, TV, and newspapers. It wasn't really a big fire. Thank God that no one was hurt. None of the machinery was lost. Oh, we had a lot of work cleaning up the place. You know, it was the day before New Year's and we had many festive plans but we had to scratch the fiestas and do the cleaning. We asked our employees if they would help. It wasn't mandatory but everyone pitched in and we got it all cleaned up so we could open up the next day. We were so lucky, not even our supplies were damaged. Actually it was a matter of cleaning up all the water used in putting out the fire.

So we went on making tortillas and making chips. Now we decided that this place was really too small. It was too difficult for the semis to make their deliveries. They had to go thru town and this was difficult for them. We knew that this location was for sale, but we were doubtful we could actually pay for it and buy it. The next year was very profitable for us we made a lot of money. Now we were making about \$4 million a year.

NW: Was this about ten years or so?

CDM: Yes this was only after many hours of work—many sacrifices for about nine to ten years. Finally, we were making money for the family and the company. Little by little the rest of our family started joining the company. Once again we'd get together weekly to have our meeting and discuss purchases, needs, the business. We all came to the decision that we wanted to buy this building because now we felt we could make the payments. We met with the bank executives, worked out and signed a contract and we bought this place. I guess we bought this place for over half a million dollars. We've been here three years and the value is now at least a million dollars. Now I don't know if they have this for tax purposes, but that's what it's appraised at—\$1 million. Of course

now we have adequate machinery, we have three machines for corn tortillas, two for flour, and one for chips.

Right now we're the biggest tortilla factory in the Pacific Northwest and in the nation. We also deliver and sell canned foods imported from Mexico. We have a large warehouse for storage. I believe this location is where we'll stay. I live across the street. We're comfortable here and it's adequate for our company. Most of our family lives around here. One of my sisters lives in Hood River. Unfortunately, last year we lost one of my nieces—she died. We haven't had any negative response from our community. As a matter of fact, someone is always looking out for us. If it's off-hours and someone is here, they'll call me and let me know. They help us watch our business.

NW: I hear you're going to buy more machinery.

CDM: Yes, my brother Jose is going to Las Vegas to a business show and he's going to be looking at another machine. We're still working twenty-four hours a day, some people ask if we get to work less, but actually we're still working a lot. We're thinking that another machine will lighten the work load, especially for summer when the migrant people come into this valley, our sales always increase. So we need a larger machine that will put out even more tortillas.

NW: How many employees do you have now?

CDM: We employ sixty people—this includes our truck drivers. We have three semis that go out daily to four states: Montana, Washington, Oregon, and Iowa. I hear that even in Kansas our tortilla sells. This could be because we sell to many private enterprises so they buy our products and we don't know where they sell them. So they could go anywhere. We have an agreement with Juanita's in California. They sell *menudo* and other products. They don't sell in Oregon and we don't sell in California. We sell product we buy from them here. Now someone told us they saw our products, a bag of *chicharones* in California, but again we sell to others and they sell on their private label—like Safeway and others.

NW: It seems like your business is good for the economy of this community.

CDM: Yes, I believe so because we employ workers year around, and we pay good wages. This eliminates them from the welfare, food stamps, and energy assistance programs. We're always looking for ways to better conditions for our workers. At this moment we're looking into insurance benefits for our workers. We're exploring different companies, different packages. We realize that our employees are important to our company, without them we just couldn't do it all.

NW: Let's go back in this story to when your family first arrived from California. You said that your family was the first Mexican family here, how was that?

CDM: Oh yes, we were like a novelty; there were many Asians, but no Mexicans. When we'd be at a store the people would stare at us and they'd smile at us and pay a lot of

attention to us. It was all positive. The first year we stayed here year around, during Christmas the whole community of Pinedale got together and brought us furniture and lots of toys and loads of food. We got lots of canned goods and meat like elk, deer, and other food stuff. In all, about forty cars came loaded with things. This showed us that we were accepted in the community.

NW: I suppose that being the only Mexican family there were few Mexican products you could find in the stores.

CDM: Oh yes, many, many items we couldn't buy—especially tortillas. That's how we got used to eating biscuits. There was a government store in town and our neighbors told us to go there. They'd give families food. The first time my Mom went there, because we were such a large family, my Mom couldn't even carry all the food given to her. My Dad never wanted us to ask for charity, but we just had to at that time. Well, my Mom got a pick-up full of food; she got butter, oil, peanut butter, and so much stuff and lots of flour. Now we started to make and eat flour tortillas.

My Mom would go to the meat stores and ask for *menudo*. They didn't carry it but she told them about *menudo* and now we had *menudo*. They'd give it to her because they used to throw it out—also, pig's feet and the heads. Now we had most things we were used to. All we needed were corn tortillas. We had chili peppers, and now we learned to eat and like deer meat. Now my Dad learned to hunt. He'd get a license each year and each year we'd have deer meat for the winter. All of my brothers love to hunt. When I started school, the girls (schoolmates) all talked to me. They were friendly and included me in their activities. Now I had many friends. I spoke English, so language was not a problem.

NW: I'd like to return to another point. You mentioned that your Dad now wanted to return to Mexico, but only on vacation. Was there something about Oregon calling, pulling him?

CDM: Yes, yes, as you may know life in California is very different for a large family. In Oregon life is peaceful. There is a slower pace—much better for the family structure. Of course at that time there were no gangs. My Father always liked Oregon to raise his family.

NW: You said you were immediately accepted in school but it was a change for you and your brothers. Did you like school here immediately?

CDM: Yes, I liked it right off. The first day of school I was a nervous wreck. My stomach hurt, but I made so many friends that first day. The teachers had Spanish classes and asked us if we wanted to help them so we felt included and welcome at school. I had a teacher who told the class that my name in English was "Sally" so many people still call me Sally. In Spanish it is Celia but I like both (either) names.

NW: Have you seen more education opportunities for the Hispanics now? Or, is it less or the same?

CDM: I believe there are many more now. For example, when I went to college it was because the government, where I worked helped me. Now when my son graduates, since he was a Jr. in High School, he was approached about applying for monies available to Hispanics to go to college. When I went to college I paid my own way. Now we have Caesar Chavez College in Woodburn. When I went to college the expense was paid by me, we just didn't have financial aid. I always wanted to be a teacher but I could only afford classes that my work would pay for. So, yes there is much more help now. The opportunities are all there now.

NW: Now let's touch a little about your family. What do you remember about your grandparents?

CDM: My paternal grandparents, really nothing, because when I was young they were in Mexico. My Grandmother died before I was born. I wasn't raised nearby my Grandfather; therefore we're not very close. My maternal Grandfather lives in Durango, Mexico. There are many people in our community that adopted us as grandchildren. We call many people Grandma and Grandpa. But you know Grandparents are needed in every child's life.

NW: What about your parents?

CDM: Oh my parents are my parents. They have been very important in all of our lives. They sacrificed so much so that we could be educated and learn a good solid work ethic. Above all they instilled in us the value of family. We are a close family because of my parents, when either of them are ill, we all rally around them. About two years ago my father was hospitalized for prostate cancer in The Dalles. Each of our family members practically moved into the hospital, we were there day and night until finally the hospital staff told us they had a room for the family members. They all joked about what happens when any one of us becomes hospitalized. That's how we are. We are very protective of our parents. Thankfully we are all in excellent health except our Dad; of course he's quite elderly.

We can't imagine life without our parents. My Dad is seventy-seven years old. Sometimes he gets tired. We all tell him and my Mom to travel now that we have the money. My Mom and Dad both insist that they'd rather work. My Dad still works in the orchard and my Mom works here daily in our company. My Mom is fifty-seven years old. When she was fifteen she married my Dad who was thirty-five. So you see my Dad is much older than my Mom. Often, whenever either of my parents becomes ill, we all just about go crazy. Thank God their illnesses have been little things. I often discuss with my husband that we need to be prepared in case something happens to either of my parents. I've seen so many times families fall apart when the head of the household is missing. Hopefully the fact that our family is so close—so united—this will help keep us that way. Many people find it hard to believe that we are so close.

[End of transcript excerpt.]