

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: AMADA ORTEGA
INTERVIEWER: HOLLY METZ & ROBERT FOSTER
LOCATION: 205 HUDSON STREET, Apt. 1111,
HOBOKEN
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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

HM: We'll start at the beginning. You need
to tell us where you were born.

Where were you born?

AO: No date.

HM: You don't have to do a date, if you
don't want to. I didn't say when, I said where!

AO: In Cuba.

HM: Yes. Where in Cuba? What was the name
of the town?

AO: A very beautiful town in Cuba, very similar to Hoboken in geography and also the situation. A very small town, in front of Habana City, in the province of Habana. The first time I came to Hoboken was in December, just before I got married, and I remember driving to Washington Street.

HM: In December of what year did you come to Hoboken?

AO: In 1948.

HM: And it was before you got married.

AO: I came to my uncle's house (he's an American citizen, Alexander Anceaume Ramos) and I got married in my uncle's house. I came November 20, 1948.

HM: But you got married in your uncle's house --

AO: Yes, in the Bronx, December 24, 1948. I came to Hoboken with my aunt-in-law.

HM: Before we talk about coming here, we should talk about where you came from. Tell me about growing up in Cuba.

AO: I said before that I lived in Regla, right?

HM: You had to give me the name of the town.

AO: So then I can tell you my childhood.

HM: Yes. Regla. You grew up in this town?

AO: Yes.

HM: Which you learned later is like Hoboken.

AO: Yes. I was born there, too.

HM: And was it like Hoboken because it's near a harbor?

AO: Because of the bay, Habana Bay. Because it's right in front of Habana City, the same as New York.

HM: Across from a big harbor, yes.

AO: Right. We took a boat to cross the bay to go to the city. And it was a very -- how do we say it? Everyone, when you said you came from Regla, they would say, "Regla!" Because it was a very happy town. See, the situation was exactly like Hoboken. It has the Paso Major, which is on Habana. It has the mountains on the side and the bay on the other side, like you have here. When I came to Hoboken for the first time, it was December. See, we don't decorate towns like they do here, and I remember driving on Washington Street, and seeing all the lights. Because at that time they put more so than now, and it impressed me so, the town. I fell in love right away, and I just wanted to see where I was going to live. It was a furnished room, at 944 Bloomfield Street. We were very happy.

HM: Before you get there, you have to tell me a little bit about --

AO: -- my childhood.

HM: Yes. Because you told me that you met your husband when you were thirteen.

AO: Yes, yes. Twelve. I knew him. I always liked him.

[But to go back to my earliest childhood,] In my case, you know, my father wanted a boy, right? And when I was born, I was a girl. I was named after my two grandmothers, Amada Rosalía, which means "Love the Flower Garden." Rosalía is "flower garden," and Amada is "love."

HM: Wow.

AO: I love my name, very much.

HM: That's a great name. I didn't realize that.

AO: Both of my grandmothers' names.

HM: What was your maiden name?

AO: Agüero. My name is really long. Amada Rosalía de la Caridad Agüero Anceaume -- because there you carry both names. You carry both your father's and your mother's last names.

HM: I did not know that. Before we leave, you'll write out the whole thing for me. It's so musical, and all your history -- so people know how the sides of the family came together.

AO: Yes. I didn't know I could keep my last name when I got married. They always say you take your husband's name, and I know you don't do that in Cuba. I think also you lose your identity. The reason -- I'll just tell you -- I had one student, he came to my class in the eighth grade, and he said, "Oh, yes, my mother's a teacher." I said, "Okay." So he went home and he said, "Oh, Mom, my teacher's Cuban and she's Mrs. Ortega," right? "Oh, good." She came to Hoboken, and she was also teaching, under her husband's last name, right? It took a friend of ours, who tried to get all of us together -- he had the address. He came to see us, and he said, "You know, Ada Nunez lives in Hoboken and she teaches here, too." I say,

"No." He says, "Yes." So I knew that she was here, with another last name, and she did not know that I was Amada Agüero."

HM: You can't find each other, because your names are different.

AO: They always say that. So all my papers, on my degrees and things like that, are Amada Rosalía Agüero-Ortega.

HM: We will write that out. That also helps you know the different sides of the family. You can trace both sides.

AO: Right. Yes.

HM: Before we started taping, you told us a little bit about your father. So could you tell us about what your father did in Cuba, on tape? Just a little.

AO: Well, whatever I say will not make justice to him. He was a great man. He was a great man. I loved him dearly. What can I say? My father -- he was an

artist, a painter, a professional photographer, and a poet.
He wrote two books.

[But also] what I want to say is that his cousin was one that fought for the independence of Cuba, so he was a Cuban-Cuban. He was born in Camagüey.

HM: And your father's name?

AO: Tomás del Carmen Agüero-Aréjula. Oh, I have a book for you. You don't speak Spanish?

HM: No, unfortunately.

AO: If you could only read that poetry.

HM: Well, this will be my goal. You could read it, and then you could --

AO: Half of the book is poetry for my mother, Teresa Anceaume Ramos. He loved my mother so much. It was something. Unbelievable. She was his princess. The other book is about the influence of colors on your health, *Cromoterapia*.

HM: [Looking through the poetry book] This is wonderful.

AO: I had this published. I had the manuscript, and then I collected news from the newspaper, like a history of my father, you know. This was published when he was alive.

See, this portrait of my mother was much bigger when we had it in Cuba, and it was like these here. This is my father's teacher, Dr. Melero, a well-known artist. My father was only sixteen years old, and he was his teacher, and he painted him. I don't have this painting. My father left some of his paintings with somebody who doesn't have them now. His teacher thought my father really had a future, because he was good. He wanted him to go to France to study painting, but then my father met my mother, and he decided to have a family.

BF: How did your father make a living?

AO: How did my father make a living? From time to time he worked for the government and things like that. But my father was very outspoken.

BF: Was he political?

AO: He did a lot of things. He would not be quiet, he would always speak his mind. So he would lose the job. So he worked always in photography, retouching and reconstructing pictures, to make a living.

BF: So he made his living more through his photography than his painting? The painting was more for his enjoyment?

AO: He would never sell one of his paintings. Are you kidding? No, his heart and soul were in there. For this picture we would have got -- we were poor. We had nothing. And people would buy it. But no. Because he got medals and everything. One time he was the president of the "Bellas Artes" in Cuba.

BF: What was the organization?

AO: "Bellas Artes," fine arts.

BF: Like a painting association?

AO: Yes, I think. Artists would get together. There were exhibitions and social activities. They were all prominent people. This is my father, here.

HM: Handsome.

AO: Yes. He was good looking. He was very handsome and good looking. People in Hoboken knew him, because he would always walk on the avenue. He had what I would like to have -- that air of aristocracia.

HM: Sophistication?

AO: Aristocrat.

BF: You have that, a little.

HM: You do.

AO: No, I don't.

HM: Yes, you do. You do. Very classy.

BF: Regal.

HM: Yes.

BF: Dressed for success.

AO: He always was a gentleman. He always treated people with respect, and he always was courteous.

BF: How old was he when he came to Hoboken?

AO: Sixty-nine, already. And you know what? He went to school, to learn English.

BF: Tell us about that. Where did he go?

AO: You know Sue Newman? Miss Newman? You talk to Sue Newman. She'll tell you more about my father. She knew my father. I met her through him, because he went to Y.M.C.A. in 1970. A program from the Board of Ed to teach English. Sue Newman was the teacher.

He went all the way there. He had classes there. And he had his own way. He was so specific, and so serious -- "I'm not going to be 'mute,' you know. I hear people speak English, I have to learn English."

BF: Did he do any photography while he was in Hoboken?

AO: No. In fact, before he came I got him this case with all the paints in it and everything, and all the brushes, and I got an easel. I thought my father had to have that. "He's going to come to this country, and be lost from his art. He hasn't painted for a while." So the director, Natalie Zanetish, the family lived here. They moved.

So when my father met her, she was working in Harbor View, Jersey City, every day, they would go there and they would paint and things like that. So he got involved -- and he took his easel there and he painted. He painted a portrait of the nurse, and gave her the picture. When they have to show the people who go there, they were all wishing everybody was like him. I have that somewhere, that I saw recently, but I don't know what it is now. I'll have to look again. So he was the artist, then.

He also painted a bouquet of flowers for Natalie Zanetich and gave it to her.

HM: So he came after you came here.

AO: Oh, a long time.

HM: So you came in '48, and he came when?

AO: Sixty-nine. Sixty. He died at eighty-six. He lived with me.

HM: What made you decide to leave Cuba in 1948. Do you not want to say?

AO: Yes, I'll tell you. Because it was a surprise. Manuel [Manolo] always wanted to come to this country. He thought in Cuba, there was too much politics. You know, people don't have the opportunities there that they have in this country, to be what you want to be and things like that. So he prepared everything. Because I always changed his mind. I was starting to teach already, I was going to the university, and I didn't want to leave the country. So he left. We were supposed to meet that day. I go to his office. He was working, then, at La Aduana. You know where they receive all the merchandise from other countries? --

HM: Import?

AO: Yes, it was import and export and all that.

BF: A shipping office or something.

AO: So I get there to the office and they say to me -- oh, my goodness, his friends were there, and they say to me, "You don't know?" I said, "What are you talking about?" "He left for the United States." So I took a bus, and went to see his father. He said goodbye to his father. He was the only person he talked to before. So I met with him, and didn't know what to say. So everybody there thought he was running away from me -- the family, his father, his sister -- But he saved money, he sent me a ticket, and I came in November. And I came to convince him to come back. Instead, we were married. In nine months and three days I had my son (named Manuel Tomás, after his father and grandfather), right away. I wanted to have a family right away -- I lived in a furnished room, one room, one room. The lady was very nice, she gave me a little stove. I cooked a good breakfast, and I

cooked dinner, too. But they were so good -- Karl and Elsie Wenz.

HM: So when you came, did you come by boat?

AO: No, no. I came by plane.

HM: By plane. And did he know you were coming?

AO: Oh, yes. Of course. He paid for my fare. But my uncle went to Cuba, to make sure that my parents agreed that I would come here, because he would give me the permanent residence. My uncle was here since he was nineteen years old. So I came to my uncle as a resident. Manuel only came for twenty-nine days, and he stayed.

BF: So you didn't leave Cuba for political reasons.

AO: No.

BF: You came for love.

AO: Yes. Yes.

BF: And he came for opportunity.

AO: Yes. But you know, Manuel, he was an intelligent man but he never had the confidence. He would just like to work manual work. He worked all the time, and he kept his job. He was a very honest man, and you name it. He has all the good qualities. They don't make men like that too much, I'll say that. And he was happy. He was happy because we were together. His first job was at Tootsie Roll. Everybody worked there.

BF: So he didn't know what kind of job he'd have when he came here, did he?

AO: No. No, because he came to visit, to the United States. Do you know some history of Cuba? Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín. That was the president before Batista. He would say to the United States, "You all come to Cuba as a tourist. Why can't we go there as a tourist?" So he passed the "immigrato," that people could come here

to visit for twenty-nine days, if they wanted to. Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín was the best president we ever had.

I'm going to tell you a story. (Don't even think of doing this.)

HM: Come on. Do you want me to shut this off? Put it on pause?

AO: Yes.

HM: You may decide that it's actually -- because it may keep coming up again.

AO: Because it goes into politics, and people would think that --

BF: It was a while ago.

HM: When you read it, you'll decide. It's totally up to you. But we should have it down, because you may change your mind.

AO: I did something that I don't think somebody would think of doing something like that.

HM: Well? Well?

BF: What's the story?

HM: Right. You know, since it was very political in Cuba-- then Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín was an idol for me, because he was such a good president. He had to do everything by a presidential decree, and against the government, because they would not approve anything that he wanted. He was so very good, so I felt so highly for him. So he was going to be in a big stadium, and my friend and I (her name is Alicia Gonzalez) went to see him. [And before that,] I wrote a letter for both of us, [to ask for jobs.]

There was this stage, you know, and we were going down this way and you could pass, and down the other way you could pass, and finally the guy that was [in front of us] didn't look too good [that he might not let us pass], so I started running. And this is in front of the stage, in the lights, you know. We were running, running, to where the president was sitting there. So we got there, and right away the people were trying to stop us. But he saw us, and he gave the order to let us go to him.

So I shook hands, and then I have the letter, right? I said, "If you can do this fine, but if not -- you're such a good president. You do so many good things for everybody, that would be okay." So I gave the letter to him. He put it in his pocket. I don't know how long after, he sent me a letter giving me an audience in the White House. My family went along. I went -- He was such a good man. He was such a good man. I loved him so dearly. So he looked at me. My family -- my aunt and my cousin, we were tenacious. We had formed a group, in the town that we lived, and my aunt was a personal friend of Dr. Gran San Martín, who came to the United States to get away from politics or something. I don't know exactly. When he saw the name Agüero--that's my family name, my aunt's name--right away he asked me if I was related to her and I said, "That's my aunt." So he wanted to know what she was doing and all that. Not too long after that, my friend and I, we both got a job.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

AO: The only person there who was respected by Fidel was Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín. When he died he had all the honors and everything. They never say anything about him. He really respected Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín,

very much. So I have to say, that he was good to him, and he lived all his life there, until he passed away. He never left the country.

HM: When you went to, basically, the president's palace -- right? You went to his home.

AO: What?

HM: You went to see the president.

AO: Yes.

HM: Were you afraid? Were you nervous?

AO: No.

HM: No. You weren't.

AO: I don't think I was nervous.

HM: You didn't know to be nervous.

AO: I was very young, you know. You set a goal, and that's all you're thinking of doing.

HM: You're more bold when you're younger.

AO: Yes. After that, some of my friends tried to stop a car where he was --

BF: Well, it worked for her.

HM: It worked for you.

AO: But, also, I think that even the fact that I had the name Agüero --

BF: How many years did you teach in Cuba, before you came here?

AO: Oh, two years. I substituted for one year. I got my permanent job in the city for another year. Then I left and came to the U.S.

HM: And did you teach school children?

AO: Second grade. Elementary school. But that's another story. The first job I got was in the country. I was not afraid of anything. I had to walk 5 kilometers. Inside it was a one-room school, and I had to walk. I would pick up the children on my way. I was there, and I had many grades, and I was the only teacher. It was rewarding, because the people are so simple and so nice. They respected the teacher, and that I was very young. I would go on all the big trucks-- and they'd say, "Teacher, teacher, want a ride?"

I was there the day the inspector was going to come to see my books and my things. Then he came, and I didn't know he was there. Manuel was there. He was sitting in the back, and I told them he was my brother.

HM: How many students?

AO: That I don't remember exactly. It was a small room, and there were not that many students. Maybe ten, fifteen at the most, and all the grades. You know how it is. It's in the country. But not too long afterward I was transferred to the city, Marianao, and I had first grade and second grade. It was nice. That was the beginning. It was a good experience.

But I'm telling you, I look back, and like I say to you, I'd live my life again, because it was very exciting. But the things I did, I can't believe it. I just, you know --

HM: Well, when you left, you left everything.

AO: Yes. I thought I would go back to Cuba and study at the university and everything, but no. No, he wanted to stay here. As I told you, it's the only case I know that he did not have to go to Cuba to get his residence. And I can't find that paper, that paper went to the Congress, to be approved. We became American citizens the same day, after five years here. But because everybody had to go back to Cuba, get these papers and come back -- Sometimes you tell people and they don't believe you. I can't find it. I don't even know where he put it. He would just show it, and say, "Well, here. I'm saying the truth." But I think it was really like a -- he has a record with the immigration department, because he took his second name, Frank Valdes, and he was working -- See, he didn't want immigration to find him. His full name was Manuel F. Ortega-Valdes.

HM: He used his middle and second last name?

AO: He was Manuel Frank, right? So when he was at Tootsie Roll, he was Frank Valdes. [And under this name], he wrote articles in the factory newspaper for many years. Everybody knew him and respected him.

HM: So he wasn't --

AO: -- legally here.

BF: He had extended his twenty-nine days.

AO: When he came, he registered into the army right away. My uncle took him, and registered him in the army. There was no war, and they never called him. Then we got married.

HM: He signed up. He enlisted.

AO: He signed up. He enlisted, yes.

HM: How long did he work at Tootsie Roll?

AO: Oh, many years.

HM: And what did he do there?

AO: He worked the machines. Then he couldn't take it anymore, so he left and went to that company that makes the cars.

BF: Chevrolet? Chrysler?

HM: General Motors?

AO: General Motors.

HM: So he left Hoboken, to work for General Motors. Where did he work? Edison?

AO: I can't remember. I don't even know. He didn't stay long. He and his friend -- my friend Rita Knapp's husband -- they both couldn't take it. Because they put them in the line. He got black and blue. He works hard. Manuel is strong. But that job, no. Then a friend met him

and told him, "I can take you to work at Sun Chemical," that makes the ink for a newspaper in Rutherford. That's where he worked. Because there he has his own department, to control it, and there's nobody else. He worked there until he retired, more than 25 years.

HM: So tell me more about -- You came to Hoboken -- You got married in the Bronx, but then was Manuel living in Hoboken?

AO: Yes.

HM: And why did he come to Hoboken?

AO: Because his sisters were here. There was a group of ten people from Regla living in Hoboken. And Manuel started working the next day. The next day he was working at Tootsie Roll.

HM: Did they come here because they knew jobs were here?

AO: Why they came to Hoboken I really don't know, how they came to come to Hoboken.

BF: Had they been here a long time?

AO: Not a long time, but Manuel's older sister was here, the other sister, too, and everybody else was -- You know, in a little town --

BF: Sure. They stick together.

AO: They were all friends.

BF: Did they work at Tootsie Roll, too?

AO: One was a beautician, I remember. I know my sister-in-law works in New York, where they make hats. Different places, they work.

HM: And he lived in a furnished room when he came?

AO: At 944 Bloomfield Street, and the people were from Germany.

HM: You said you wanted to talk a little bit about them. They were really nice to you.

AO: Well, because, all through the time we encountered people from different nationalities, helping us. They were the first ones. We didn't speak English, and they were really so good -- Elsie and Carl Wenz. They were really so good. They really fell in love with us, and they worried about me. I was pregnant right away, and I worked and went to school. So she used to let me use their refrigerator. They'd call me down when they'd make -- I think it's pork, with apple, or something like that, and she used to make some -- not a cake, but it was something like that. She would feed me, because she was thinking that I would not eat enough. And when I had Manny (one of the happier days of our lives - I became a mother and Manuel became a father of a beautiful and healthy boy.) That day she was leaving for Germany to see her mother, that she hasn't seen for twenty-five years, but before she went to the airport, she went to the hospital. She was the first person to see Manny, my son, to see me. They were really so good to me. They let me use their washing machine for the diapers. Lovely people.

And when we moved to an apartment at 707 Adams Street, we didn't have any furniture, just my son Manny's crib, a gift from my uncle. The Mama of the LaGuardia family took us to a furniture store, Mr. Ranieri, and we picked out a bedroom set. She got a good price for the set, plus mattress and pillows. She paid him cash and we paid her back little by little. Manuel was making \$30 a week and I was not working. His family told her, "Mama, what are you doing?! How do you know they are going to pay you back?" She said, "I know they are good people; they need the help."

We moved in December 1949, at the end of the month on our first anniversary. The whole family came to celebrate with a cake and gifts: blankets, towels, sheets, pillow cases. They show us how to work the heater (kerosene). They showed me how to make the gravy for spaghetti. We love them all. They are like family. Especially Carmela and Vinnie Tarantino.

[I meant to tell you also,] Manuel had an extra job. I don't know if you remember -- around Tootsie Roll was a trailer that had like a restaurant?

BF: A diner?

AO: A diner.

BF: Yes, a classic kind of --

AO: Yes. So Manuel worked there, as a part-time job. This way he would have lunch.

HM: Was he a cook, or a waiter, or -- ?

AO: No, he was serving. A waiter. Yeah. But he made very good friends with Mike LaGuardia. Their family is still here, at 707 Adams Street. Mike, they became good friends. And my son, Manny, was born on Mike's birthday. What a coincidence, you know? When we went to get an apartment at 707 Adams Street, we had to have a "letter of recommendation" from Elsie because they didn't know us. Then we got an apartment. No heat.

HM: Of course. Cold water flats.

AO: And a toilet that was shared with the two apartments. No shower. Don't put those things down.

HM: No, because that was very common. It's not like you lived in a bad --

AO: A double sink. We would climb in the double sink, and my uncle put in a hot-water heater. It was nice.

HM: But that was very common. It's not like you lived in a bad way.

AO: But I had a friend coming from Cuba to visit, to stay with us. She was expecting. He was a musician. He would play the cello -- was it a cello? -- an accomplished musician. He came to play here. I don't know if it was in Carnegie Hall or something. I remember they took a shower right there in the kitchen sink. It was normal. I didn't think of anything but I had a friend, you'd have to tell her you were making money, you were living in a mansion, the husband was like that, you know. But I was very simple, and I remember that. Oh, isn't that a shame? Whatever.

HM: Well, and things got better, as you went along, right?

AO: Yes, yes, because when we got that apartment, it was a three-room apartment, no heat, but we were on the first floor first, then afterward we moved to the third floor, which was better. The first floor was colder. But, in fact, Manny, my son, never got a cold there. We never got sick. So whatever it was, it was okay.

My uncle gave us a water heater, then it was good. We took a good shower in the kitchen sink.

[I want to tell you about what I did when I first came here.] As soon as I came here I went looking for a teacher's job. I visited a few language schools and all of them told me I had to speak English to teach Spanish. I knew from Cuba about Berlitz School of Language and I went there to enroll in a Conversational English Class. When I told them what was happening, they offered me a job. I said, "Fine!" I didn't have to speak English to teach Spanish. "Okay!" I got a job! The school was in Rockefeller Center at the Universal Building.

On my way to the school I was carrying my diploma from Cuba. I didn't know I had dropped it and an unknown person told me. I was very impressed then. I knew that people in this country care for others and I felt at home.

I came here with a leave of absence, with pay, to study. It lasted four years, and during this time my mother collected the check. I was very happy to help my mother.

HM: And how did you start to learn English?

AO: Well, I had studied English in Cuba, for seven years. But you know how it is. You read and translate, but you can't speak.

HM: Oh, yes. You know how to say things that are useless.

AO: They don't teach it that way. Right.

HM: That's true. No conversational English.

AO: Only translations. A lot of vocabulary, and that's it.

When they brought me to Hoboken High, I was the only teacher certified to teach U.S. history to bilingual students -- not that I knew all the history; not that I knew how to teach it. When I was becoming good, it was time to retire.

You remember Dorothy Siegler?

BF: I've heard the name.

AO: Well, she passed away. Bernie Siegler?
Her husband. He passed away too.

BF: I know the names, but I didn't know
them.

AO: She was a history teacher, excellent.
She knew her history, and she would teach it the way you
make it alive. She helped me a lot, with the history.

HM: So how did you start to acquire
conversational English? Just by talking to people while you
were here? Because you said you knew it from books.

AO: I went to Seton Hall to take courses
for certification and I was forced to speak English. I
practiced there. I made a lot of friends. It was there that
I met Tomasina Nolan, my mentor and my good friend up to
the present time.

For two-and-a-half years, without stopping, I took courses. During the summer I went to the South Orange campus and took my sons with me. While I was in class they waited outside the building. Everybody was very nice and watched them! One of the priests gave them special attention and showed them around and brought them to the cafeteria for lunch.

HM: And what about ESL?

AO: When I first had a class of ESL, which was called orientation then, I was a pioneer. I was the only ESL teacher.

HM: And when was that, the ESL teacher?
Much later. David Rue?

AO: Yes, that was in 1956-'57.

HM: Really? That early?

AO: Yes. I was just a substitute, but, actually, I had a class. But they were paying me like a substitute, so when it came to vacation, I didn't get paid.

HM: But were you teaching -- is that when you first started to teach here? With ESL?

AO: With ESL. Then I went to the library and taught Spanish, for a few years at night school. Later I taught ESL to adults.

HM: The Industrial School. We have really good pictures of the old Industrial School. We'll pull them out and show them to you. You might recognize people.

AO: Oh, yes. That was Helen Macri, who worked in the sewing department. That's when we became friends. Where is Helen? I haven't seen her around. Did she die?

BOTH: Yes.

AO: She did die?

BF: Very tall, very thin person.

HM: Four years ago, maybe?

BF: Maybe longer.

AO: I never knew.

BF: She lived on Hudson Street.

AO: Yes.

BF: Her daughter lives there now. The daughter. You're talking about Helen Macri.

AO: Yes. Helen Macri, yes. She was very thin, when she was in Industrial School, very elegant. She always dressed very nicely.

BF: They used to run the stationery store on Washington Street.

AO: Right --

BF: Okay. I just wanted to make sure we were talking about the same person.

AO: On "Fourth Street," right. Right. At one time I thought I knew everybody in Hoboken, until the new people came in here --

You talk about all the people here that I know -- because when I went to the Industrial School, everybody wanted to learn Spanish. That was the time that the schools -- they brought teachers who came from Puerto Rico to teach here -- Who was the mayor at that time?

BF: De Sapio?

AO: Capiello?

BF: Capiello.

AO: Grogan?

HM: Grogan or De Sapio.

BF: And Louis DePasquale.

AO: Grogan got my first vote in this country. Because my friend was Irish, and I said to her, "Rita, who should I vote for?" "Grogan," because he was

Irish. Because I always thought I must vote. That is a responsibility.

BF: So how was the Industrial School set up? Was it more evening classes?

AO: Evening classes, and I think they still teach in Spanish, and they're teaching ESL, too, now.

HM: Well, but it's through the high school.

BF: Yes. The Industrial School is disbanded. They don't use that facility anymore. The library -- Sue Newman took it over. It was the Hudson School.

AO: No, she was at the library.

BF: Right. But she took over the whole thing.

HM: The building.

BF: And now she's moved into the Martha Institute, the new building. That part is closed, but the library is going to expand and use it.

HM: But at the high school, they do teach night classes.

AO: Yes, they do.

Sue Newman was an excellent teacher. My father was her student and they became good friends. I'm happy to see she has a building for the Hudson School.

HM: I keep going back. I want to go back to -- your first son is born, and you're at home.

AO: God blessed us with a son, Manuel Tomas Ortega, born September 29, 1949. It was one of the happier days of our lives. I became "Mami" and Manuel a Daddy. Two and half years after we were blessed again with our son Alde, born on my uncle's birthday, March 8, 1952. What a surprise! I was almost sure I was having a girl, because it seemed to me that everything felt different. And it was a boy! The nurse asked me, "Aren't you going to ask me what

you have?" And when she told me "It's a boy," I could not believe it. What a blessing—a healthy, beautiful boy.

HM: Can we talk more about *your* childhood?

AO: I remember my mother always at home. She loved to read and loved poetry; she was always teaching me poems and songs. At the age of three I recited to my grandmother a poem that my father had written. (It's in his book, page 87.)

I grew up in a happy home. My mother and father gave me a good example. I learned to be honest, decent, respectful, compassionate, friendly, studious. To be a good person. My father told us that we have to study. We are poor and the only way that you will be prosperous is if you have an education. "No matter what happens no one can take it away from you." They were very strict, but understanding. I am thankful for that.

I was three years old when my father took me to school. I cried all the way. Later in my life, I loved going to school. I had perfect attendance! As a teacher, my students would tell me, "Mrs. Ortega, you are never absent." Thank God I am healthy.

I especially remember my 3rd grade teacher, Francia Leal, my 5th and 6th grade teacher, Gloria Diaz and my health teacher, Rosita Añon. Their examples helped me to want to be a teacher myself.

HM: Do you have brothers and sisters?

AO: My brother just passed away, three months ago. [shows papers] See what he wrote here. This is for my sister. I'll have to translate it for her.

HM: You told me this.

AO: She found this paper, of my brother's.

HM: I know. You told me this. And his name?

AO: My brother. Aldemaro.

HM: And was he older than you?

AO: Younger. My father named him "Narciso Aldemaro."

HM: Like Narcissus. So he's the oldest?

AO: No, he was the youngest. And he was our baby.

HM: So what's the order of the children?

AO: Me -- I'm the oldest -- then there's my sister --

HM: And your sister's name?

AO: Caridad Agüero Anceume. Caridad, that's the name of the patron saint of Cuba. You're good, pronunciation. You did good in the Spanish.

HM: I'm a good imitator. I obviously can't spell.

AO: I'm not too good at the spelling, either--

HM: So there are three of you. So tell me about growing up.

AO: Oh. I always have to say that the public schools are good. It is up to the student to learn what they teach you.

I moved out of town -- when I was already fifteen years old, and I went to all public schools. I did not change schools [though.] It was my last year in the "Escuela Superior" and I wanted to graduate from there. I traveled one hour to school with my brother. My parents would not let me go alone. Also, this way I saw Manuel every day. We were sweethearts.

I knew him all my life. I liked him, but he didn't even look at me.

HM: Why not?

AO: That is the truth. Because he was, at sixteen years old, already supporting himself. He knew himself, working, you know. He didn't stay in school too long, and he was a man, even though he was only seventeen or so. He was a good dancer -- He was a good skater, roller skater, and he has all the girls, like that, more developed than me. But the young people say, "Oh, Amada? -- Wow, forget it. You don't get her. Forget it." So Manolo took a

bet, and he said, "I will -- " So what happened was he was after me maybe six or seven months, and by that time he was the one who was hooked. Because, you know, I was just -- but I was really a "coquette," and --

It was funny. He did so much work. He delivered ice, he delivered charcoal for the stove. Hard work, as a young --

HM: He must have been a strong guy.

AO: Oh, he swims so beautiful. Yes, he did all those things well. He told me that before he went to school -- and at this he was very young -- he would deliver milk, and there would be a horse with a carriage, with the milk. The guy would sleep, and the horse knew where to stop, he said.

HM: Good thing.

AO: Yeah, on the route. The horse would stop, and he would go and deliver the milk, then went back to school.

HM: Did he work because his family needed the money, or was he just not so interested in school?

AO: His mother was remarried, and she remarried a Spaniard, but he was "born" in Cuba, and helping with housework and things like that. She has five kids. She had four before -- one daughter and three boys.

HM: So she took care of nine children?

AO: And she did a lot of things helping her husband, so he finally graduated, and he became a lawyer. He was the lawyer of the town. Later -- you know how the Spanish are. They work very hard, the Spaniards from Spain, the mother and father, acquire property. Very charitable with the people. He helped a lot of people.

HM: So Manuel -- he wanted to be independent. He didn't have to be, he wanted to be.

AO: He wanted to be, because there were many children in his family.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

AO: She was a very good woman. Do you know that when she died, twenty days later he died? They had five kids. The Spanish believe that the girls play the piano, study sewing, not prepare for life. They lived very well there. When they came here, they had to work in factories. They went to good schools, but that also -- higher education, because some of the fathers don't believe in that.

HM: So they were unprepared.

AO: They were very unprepared. Because when you get an education, nobody can take it away. Money goes. He lost all his property to Fidel, he lost everything. That killed him. That killed him. Because he always said, "I had one house for each of his children, each child." Manuel had a house, but he gave it to his sister. Hee told her it was the right thing to do. Then after Fidel came -- and they lost everything.

HM: So when you came to Hoboken, would you say there were a lot of people from Cuba here?

AO: No. I would say ten people.

HM: And did it get bigger? Were there more?

AO: No, never. They didn't even stay in Hoboken. Well, one has stayed. They went to Florida.

HM: And you stayed because you felt comfortable here? You liked it here?

AO: Oh, Hoboken. Hoboken. At that time, it was an industrial city, and there was so much love. We would get together on Sundays, see the family, and the city would be peaceful -- there would be people going to church. That was the Sunday, and they were all good people -- hard-working, who worked locally. There was everything here. I know people who worked at Maxwell House Coffee all their lives. My neighbors down the street, Tony and May DeCongelio. It was a safe city, too. All over, it was a safe city. I remember, myself, when I started studying I was going nights, and I would come nights, after classes, 10:00, and I remember leaving -- I had to park in the back -- no houses, and I remember walking very fast because I

could hear the echo of my feet, behind. I always felt I didn't want to encounter anybody in my way, this late.

HM: And when was that? When were you studying at night?

AO: I lived at 1036 Willow Avenue and went to Seton Hall University in Jersey City. [Addresses in Hoboken: 944 Bloomfield Street [2nd address], 707 Adams Street [1st address], 1036 Willow Avenue [3rd address], 619 Garden Street [4th address], 205 Hudson Street [5th address].]

AO: Well, when I came here and I had my kids -- my uncle said, "The first five years is good. Just stay home." He helped me a lot. He bought the coats and shoes at the store? -- the boy with the dog.

HM: Oh. Buster Brown. I remember Buster Brown.

AO: Right. He was a great man. My uncle was the greatest.

HM: But your uncle's name, we can use his name. You said he was the greatest.

AO: Alexander Anceaume. My son Alde, his middle name is Alexander, for my uncle. He has a son named Alexander, for my uncle. And my oldest son had a girl, so her middle name is Alexa, for my uncle, because they loved my uncle and my uncle loved them. He was single, he had no kids.

HM: But he was good to your family.

AO: Oh, he was my mother's oldest brother. He was really good.

HM: He was the one who was here longer, when you came.

AO: He was nineteen, when he came here. He was an adventurer. He worked on ships.

HM: Like a merchant seaman? He worked on the ships.

AO: I don't know what he did on the ships. After, he was a waiter. He was a waiter. He had a good job. In New York, The Athletic Club.

HM: Oh. So he was unionized. That's a good job.

AO: They loved him there, because he was a gentleman. He always paid attention to what the people liked. There was a man that you had to take the plate like this -- When they changed the whole thing, he brought me dishes from there, and it has a Navy blue ribbon like? And if he saw a mark on it, you had to take the plate away. It had to be spotless. So he treated everybody with respect -- and they loved him there. He was a very good man. Very good. He worked there until he retired. Then he went to Florida. Everybody told me when I retired I was going to Florida, and I said, "No way, Hoboken is my town. No way."

HM: So the first five years you stayed home.

AO: That's right. Then when they started to go to school, I went to the PTA meetings, and I was told

the Board of Education was looking for teachers. Thomas McFeely was the superintendent, actually.

HM: Of the famous McFeely family.

AO: Yes, because he ran for mayor, right?

HM: Mayor, chief of police - McFeelys had every position.

AO: Oh, yes. They would know him in Hoboken. They had the power.

HM: Yes. They were everywhere. There were lots of them.

AO: Yes, yes, that's right. That's right. He was very nice with me. One day there was a meeting and my friends say to me, "There is a meeting today, and they're going to 'appoint' a lot of teachers." They "appointed" a lot of teachers, but it was not going to be me. They said, "Why don't you talk to Mr. McFeely." So when I went to see him, he couldn't believe it. He said, "You were not 'appointed' yet?" He was really feeling bad for

me. At that time, the superintendent had power. They recommended to the board, and they just did what he said. There was not much politics involved in that. That gave me such a feeling in this country, that you are what you are and it doesn't matter who you know. Later then, in politics, things have changed. But I had the opportunity to actually succeed in all my things. I did what I wanted to do.

HM: You don't know what happens when you go behind the curtain.

AO: Oh, they knew.

HM: Yeah? They knew you were independent.

AO: No, no, they knew, I have integrity.

HM: So you're saying that when you were first involved with the school, you felt that it really wasn't who you know and political, but you could succeed --

AO: I came at the right time. I have a degree from Cuba, and at that time you could get a

provisional certificate. So they interviewed me right away. I was appointed a substitute teacher. But then I began teaching English as a second language -- and I got involved, and I went to a lot of different talks. I took courses in college. Then I knew what I was going to do. But at first, not really, because -- I used tapes. I have a lot. I used to get everything that I needed. Mr. Frances McGorty. He was really a very good man. He would get all my books and materials, and when I got involved with Hoboken Teachers Association, I got to know everybody who was involved, teachers.

HM: But they encouraged you. It sounds like you were encouraged.

AO: Oh, yes. Yes. In fact, many, many students did very well, too. I don't rely as much on my pronunciation; we use tapes, and the "lab" and things like that, so they can hear.

HM: So the children you taught -- it was English as a second language, ESL.

AO: I'm still friends with some of the girls. Joan Orlic from Croatia. We're still friends.

HM: From fourth grade you knew her? Wow.

AO: And she became an ESL teacher. She was working as a teacher. Then I could give her some ideas, then, because by then I already knew what I was doing. She's a very nice girl. She called me recently. She's doing very well now. She goes to a place where she helps other people. She was working as a teacher. But I'll have to give her a call.

HM: I'm still tracing -- You moved from 707 Adams Street to Willow?

AO: Yes. Adams Street --

HM: -- to 1036 Willow Avenue?

AO: Yes. Had we had both kids already? Yes. Yes. Alde was born already. So we moved to Willow Avenue, 1036 Willow Avenue.

HM: And how long did you stay there?

AO: Eight or nine years. My children went to Wallace School and graduated (8th grade) from there.

My Irish friend helped me. So then I had German, then I had Italian, and now I've come to the Irish. That's the one who asked me to vote, Rita Knapp.

HM: And that was at Willow Avenue?

AO: You know Dennis Knapp? He was a fireman?

BF: No. No.

AO: He was born the same day as my son, Manny. I became friends with his mother and his family, and they lived in the same house. We got an apartment. And then, we had six rooms. Our kids each had a bedroom, we had a complete bathroom. We had a dining room. You know Mr. Kramer? Ask Mr. Kramer about the Ortegas. He is going to put me in heaven. Every time I see him in the bank, he's always telling everybody, "You're the best --" How you call it? They rent to us, and they want us --

HM: The best tenant?

AO: Because we painted the hall. He gave us the paint, and we painted the halls, and we fixed the apartment good.

HM: So the Irish friends helped you get the apartment? What's the connection to the Irish friends?

AO: Well, she lived in that apartment.

HM: She lived at 1036?

AO: At 1036. A friend of hers lived there, too, who was going to live across the street. Through them, I got the apartment.

HM: Then after 1036.

AO: At 1036 we were a while. I don't remember. Oh, yeah. You know what? I lived there when the kids were going Wallace. I looked out the window, and "it was there," and that was it. I only took them the first

day, to kindergarten. Then, I moved to 810 Garden Street, which is near the same block of Brandt School, and my kids went to Brandt School, for junior high. They were my students too, can you imagine that? I would teach science in the seventh grade to Alde and Spanish to Manny in the 9th.

HM: Was that hard for them? That must have been hard for them, for you to be their teacher.

AO: Well, the kids felt obliged to help him, but if they did they would fail. But that was the time -- one year -- and Bonnie Rathgeter?, and excellent science teacher. She lived here. When we had to do experiments and things, I would do it together with her. She would actually do it. I really couldn't do it. But you get a certification to teach seventh and eighth grade, all subjects. All subjects. How ridiculous.

HM: They needed you, so they put you there, and you have to do what you do.

AO: But I talked to the teachers there, the head of the department of science in high school, so she

told me, "Emphasize the vocabulary," so they can understand what they're reading, and "give me a list." I always asked for help, because I want to know.

HM: And you want the kids to get what they need.

AO: -- so that was emphasizing that, to understand vocabulary.

HM: So 10th and Garden --

AO: Eighth. It was Eighth and Garden Street.

HM: And what address on Eighth and Garden?

AO: 810 Garden Street. Mr. DeRobertis was the landlord. We're still friends. They were very nice people, too. They're nice to you. I always say that the people here, they don't say hello. "Why don't you say hello? Why don't you say good morning?" They say good morning to me. The tenants here -- I could never live

anywhere they don't say good morning. And when I say that, they come and say, "Oh, good morning."

BF: So do you still do that in Hoboken now?

AO: Oh, yes. There was a man who always -- when I went to the high school every morning, this man would come with the kids, and he would not say good morning to me. I always say good morning. Finally, you got to talking to the kids and things like that. But you have to initiate it. There's nothing wrong with that. The other day he recognized me, and I forgot about him. "Oh, you remembered." "I remember that occasion, yes." "Nice seeing you again."

HM: That is the good thing about Hoboken, because people walk, so you see people on the street. That's what's nice about it. Sometimes, when we're walking -- I know some people, but he [Bob] knows everybody. It takes us half an hour to get two blocks, because we see and we talk, and --

AO: Oh, you're telling me? I say, "Let's go through Bloomfield, don't take Washington," because I meet

people. And it takes me so long to get to the bank, because we're always talking.

HM: You see, you want to know how everybody is.

AO: I know. The other day we were going to class, and I didn't want to stop for anybody, and I saw two people I hadn't seen for a long time. I really had to talk to them, so I was late for class.

HM: You have to factor that in; a little extra buffer.

BF: Fifteen minutes "chat" time.

HM: So did you teach at all in the schools in Hoboken? Which schools did you teach at?

AO: David E. Rue and Brandt, and high school.

HM: And when did you start teaching at Hoboken High School? When it opened?

AO: No, no. I was at Brandt. That was another thing they did.

HM: They transferred you from Brandt?

AO: In the middle of the term -- January -- to teach academic classes - seniors, U.S. History.

I got an ulcer. I was sick. I didn't know what was happening to me. By the eighth period, I was really like "in the air." I had a bleeding ulcer. They never told me that your stool would be black, and I had seen the blood -- you have that test. I went to the doctor, so they gave it to me for the stomach first, then they found out it was the ulcer, bleeding.

HM: Did you leave? What did you do?

AO: I don't know. I took a pill, I took it for a month, I don't remember if it was for six months or what. Then he changed it to something else, since that wasn't doing it, and I had to go back to that. Thank God, I never had any problem. I stopped all these things that

could -- like tomatoes -- acid and things like that. But I never had any problem.

HM: Yes, but the aggravation of the job was probably still there.

AO: That's what happened. No, because, you know, you go in the classroom -- they're men and women. They're grown up, and you're going to make a fool of yourself. They have to know about what you don't know. And I told them, and they appreciated it. But I told them what they had to do. I said, "If you participate in the class, and we have the questions," and I have a good thing -- this man, Francis McGorty, who was the assistant superintendent, he helped me a lot. He retired. He was so good. He got me all the books. And I said to them, "If you do your homework," (I used to check that) "and answer the questions," and I had all the work, and I kept records, "and participate in the class, I think that since you're in the class, you have nothing to worry about not passing the subject." Because they were seniors. I wasn't going to --

HM: -- keep them from graduating.

AO: Okay. Sometimes some of them knew more history than I did. And I told them, "If you ask me a question, I'll answer it if I know. If not, I'll get you the answer and come back to you." Because I said I don't know all the answers.

[Interruption]

BF: Most of the pictures are of the paintings that we've seen in the room, here. Right?

AO: Yes. Let me see.

HM: Because we may use one or two, when you talk about your father.

AO: And then there's a lot of poems to my mother

HM: And poems. Well, when we get there, we'll get there. But we would need you to -- there are captions.

AO: I am going to show it to you. I have this picture here in color. My father was really --

BF: What does this translate as?

AO: This is an exhibition --

BF: Exhibition.

AO: An exhibition. There were friends, you know, and they had this --

BF: Warner is [the last name of] one friend, and he's Agüero [Amada's father]. No. You can't read that typeface. Don't try. So it's about his photographic exhibition.

AO: So they had an exhibition, and I recollect -- I went to New York, and I learned those machines -- for the newspapers, the long-time newspapers, to get the correct information to have it here. But one thing I'll tell you. I never think anything is impossible for me. I just see this picture here, with this.

BF: That's in Hoboken, right?

AO: Yes. My son Manny's house. My son said to him, "Grandpa, do something with, you know, that is done for peace." At that time my father was kind of a rebel -- so he looked and he was angry at these things, you know, and he said, "They do -- the atomic bomb for peace. They do the money brings you peace." I'm going to show you the picture. And then he put it in canvas -- So I said to my father, "How are you going to do that, and give these to Manny?" Manny is kind of a rebel too. Manny" was a gentleman, like my brother, like that, and he was so happy. "No, no, no, you have to do something with the positive things." So he did this other one. Then he did the trip to the moon, the observatory, the church, the dove of peace, the United Nations.

TAPE 2, SIDE 2

HM: Two versions of the same --

AO: -- of the same idea. Fantastic.

HM: And these, of course, were done in the '70s, much later, in the United States.

AO: See this composition? Of the color?
Very peaceful?

HM: It's almost like a poster. You can
really see that as --

AO: Did you see on the side of the
building? [on Observer Highway] -- Somebody did that -- put
the "atomic bomb" on this side, put the peace sign on the
other?

HM: This is better.

AO: It's the idea.

HM: But this is much better.

AO: Oh, yes, of course. But I agree with
you, because it's really --

HM: Well, the design of it is so much
better, and it's more complicated.

AO: You know, I belong to the National Association of Cuban-American Women (NACAW). In my basement, I had a window, looking at the valley of Vinalas en la provincia de Puror del pio en Cuba -- my father did it. So I gave it to Siomara Sandrez?, the president, and she put it in the club. There are a lot of Spanish, not only Cuban [people], who go there, and it would pay honor to my father, anyway, you know?

BF: Right. Do you have photographs that your father took? Most of them are probably portraits of family members? Did he photograph scenes, like street scenes or anything? Or was it more in a studio? He took all these pictures, I take it.

AO: Yes. All the pictures. At that time he was working as a photographer. That's when you have this picture here, of him, right? That's with the old cameras. My father has great eyes. That's the picture I have here.