

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: AMADA ORTEGA
INTERVIEWER: HOLLY METZ & ROBERT FOSTER
LOCATION: 205 HUDSON STREET, Apt. 1111,
HOBOKEN
DATE: 18 AUGUST 2006

TAPE 3, SIDE 1

HM: Today is the 18th of August, 2006, and we are once again enjoying the company of Amada Ortega, and covering some last - but really, first - things that we didn't cover before. We want to find out more about Manuel, her husband, and their relationship to Hoboken.

So this idea of "Honeymoon in Hoboken," can you talk about this a little, about you and Manuel, and your feelings about Hoboken?

AO: Well, Manuel and I got married in my uncle's house. So we were very happy and we just, the next day - we stayed in my uncle's house that night.

[laughs] And the next day, we just took the suitcase and we must have looked like foreigners coming in, you know... And the look on our faces, we were happy. It's your first night with your husband and you're nervous and everything else.

And we came and took the subway, came to Hoboken ... I don't know if we took the PATH, I don't know. I didn't know anything; just coming, all right? And we just came to the place where he was living, 944 Bloomfield Street. And that was ... we got married on the 24th, actually that was the 25th, the next day, because we stayed in my uncle's house. And we started the honeymoon - we didn't start the honeymoon until two days after. And we'd been very happy in Hoboken because... we found love in all the people. And tranquility, too... it's kind of a very safe place, I would say. At that time, Hoboken was just like heaven for us.

Of course, you know, we wanted to have children right away, and God just blessed us with that, because Manny was born 9 months and 3 days (later). I remember the time where... We always went out, because Manuel works nights, on the weekend. We had one of those big carriages, you know. It was given to us. We didn't have anything. We didn't have anything, but we were very happy. You know. We used to go to one store, to pick things, the 5 and ten; one time we went to the store and the girl said to me, "Your brother is very handsome." I didn't understand much English, but I knew what she said. "I said: He's my husband." She didn't know what to do! [Laughs] Because you know-

HM: She wanted to be introduced!

AO: We look a like. And for some reason, she thought that was my brother there. OK? You know. But we had happy times, you know.

And, as you know, we went up the ladder step by step. All the way, you know. When I say that Hoboken is safe, because I remember the time that I went to school at night, and I used to go to 10th and Willow Avenue and behind there's all factories, no houses or anything, and I would park back there. And I would walk, and I would hear my step, with the echo behind, and I would walk fast... and I wouldn't want to meet anyone. And I would feel safe, but... when people go out now, no. My friends say, You go out? You go out at night in Hoboken? They all stay inside at night, they don't walk. I say, What? I was never afraid in Hoboken. I thought it was a really good place. It is. And now everybody thinks so! Everybody discovered Hoboken.

RF: What were some of your favorite stores that you went to?

AO: Oh yeah, yeah. Mary Oliver.

RF: Where was that?

AO: Fourth and Washington Street, it's now a grocery store. There were a lot of Jewish people here. Very nice. And Mary Oliver [was one]. They had nice things, but I paid, little by little. We were friends, a very nice lady. After she closed the store she went to work in another store in Union Square, and I went there all the time. And Manuel went to Geismar's. He had his suits made there in Geismar's.

RF: Did Geismar's have women's clothing, or just men's?

AO: Just men's. And they really liked Manuel a lot, you know. Cause the fellow who was there, he did everything for Manuel. You can pay it when you can, and things like that. So, those are the main stores that we always went to for clothes.

One thing, that I say, that Hoboken was really safe, like you go to the 5 and ten, you line all your carriages, and you leave the child there, sleeping, and you go inside the store, and you don't think of anything, really, nothing, ever. You know. And at night, and Manuel works nights, many times I would just wait for him - I guess I was jealous, I don't know - with my kid, I

HM: Did he always work nights?

AO: At Tootsie Roll, 3 to 12. Then he had a part-time job, in the diner. So he left maybe about 10 o'clock in the morning, or something. Working there first, and then went to Tootsie Roll after.

HM: That's a lot of hours.

AO: Yeah, a strong man. [Laughs]
Healthy, too. That was really helping, you know.

HM: So, just to talk about Hoboken and how you felt about it, when you first came, did you describe what Hoboken was like to your parents, to tell them what you found in Hoboken? How life was? The things you would have pointed out to them?

AO: Well, you know, actually, when I wrote to my mother, it was always about the kids. Because it was so soon that they came... The night that I went to the hospital and I felt really fine, and I wrote to my mother a letter, that I was fine and everything. I would always talk

have one, and I wait. And many times, I would wait when the weather was nice. I had Manny. And we used to take the bus with the carriages, and the bags, everything, you know - they were very nice, they'd say, "Put it here, put it here," - and we'd go to Palisades Park. We'd go there to the pool. There was a pool that had waves and everything. So it was a great place. In the end, it was really going down; I don't know what happened.

So that was our outing. And of course, we were invited many times by the lady from 944 Bloomfield Street -she's the one who introduced us and took us to the lake, very popular. I would pick berries. I have pictures, I don't know where they are, with Elsie.

RF: What else was on your block? On Willow Ave - 1036. Was it all houses?

AO: When I went to 1036 the kids were in school already; they went to Wallace. There was a Laundromat on the corner. And I lived there until I started working; I would leave every morning, and I was running, always, for the bus. And the laundry man, I was walking one time and he said, "What happened to you? You're not running today?" Just walking. But Manuel worked nights.

about the grandchildren. When I went to Cuba [returned] for the first time, Manny was going to be two. And I was expecting Alde. That was the time the immigration kept Manuel; you have the story there.

You have this, that we became American citizens [shows documents].

HM: Yes.

AO: But I don't think I gave you the date. [opens the documents]

HM: [reading aloud] November 1954. Manuel, and you, the same day. That's around the same time that the Tootsie Roll reunion picture was taken. [that she showed us earlier]. This says 1036 Willow [for the address]. That's neat; these are your naturalization papers. These are too important for us to take.

AO: 1954, so I came in 1948. That's important for people to see because I can never understand people living in this country and not becoming American citizens. And the same thing in Cuba, they have the Spaniards, they always have businesses and grocery stores and things like that,

they were hardworking, and they wouldn't become Cuban citizens. I don't agree with that.

HM: Also, they're putting themselves at a disadvantage because they can't vote; they can't control their own destiny.

AO: They don't vote now! I'm trying to get people to do that. They can vote for Menendez!

HM: You'll have to register people!

AO: I also have to get absentee ballots. Because the church in Union City are going, before the elections, to England. Whoever is American there, because they're not all American.

HM: They're going for some conference?

AO: Just for a trip. I was going to go, and I saw it was the day before [Election Day] and I said No.

HM: You've got a job to do!

AO: They call me for Jersey City, but I... You know Maurice Fitzgibbons? He said, "Oh no, Amada, we need you here!" He wants me here, not Jersey City.

HM: They can rely on you.

AO: A lot of times, these things that I did, Manuel worked nights and he didn't join. But when he retired in 1999, he joined everything. Family Planning, with that information you have there. Because he was representing the board, at meetings that they have. He was always... He joined everything and did everything with me.

HM: We would always see you together.

AO: Because you know, at the beginning... You know Anna Cerra?

HM: No.

AO: Anna Cerra, myself, we were in the entertainment committee, and he'd say: I'm not going to planning [meetings]; I'm not a teacher. I say, No, but I'm not going to have a separate life; no way. You have to know

my friends, the same way I've got to know yours, and we're going to do things together. Later on, they waited more for Manuel than they waited for me! They loved... and they called him "Daddy." You know Stanley Palmissano? Stanley would always say "Where's Daddy?" Yeah. He was well liked, very much.

Then he agreed, and he started to go. There were times when he was the only man. [Laughs]

HM: He was a good dancer, right?

AO: Oh yeah, yeah.

HM: So did other women try to dance with him?

AO: No, no way Jose! [laughs] He didn't like me to dance with anybody; I didn't like him to dance with anybody! So, one time we were at a teacher's party and one of the teachers asked him to dance and I went there and I said "Excuse me!" No way! Dance is an embrace. How are you going to embrace Manuel? No way! No.

HM: What was your favorite dance with Manuel?

AO: We dance all kinds... but he had a rhythm. I loved that about him. I loved to feel his body when we were dancing. He was feeling it. Everybody would compliment us, when we went to weddings. I remember, one time, when we were in Florida, this guy came up, he was there with his family, and he said: "You two dance well." We really could... I could follow him well. Together...

When it came to the new music, we danced, like disco. [laughs] He would pick it up; listen to the music and follow the music. One time we were... we belonged to the organization is in Florida now, the people that were born in Regla - [goes to look for reference, comes back with something else, a brochure for Niles and Edith, the dancing instructors on Washington Street that she mentioned in a previous interview.] -

HM: Can we take this? 402 Washington Street.

AO: Yes. It was like, 4th Street. They always gave concerts and recitals.

HM: [reading] Alde Ortega, "Dig That Skiffle." [program notes]

AO: You know, Manny was partner with England, with Kathy England, that's the sister of the England who's in the government. [Dick England] I save so many things.

This is the magazine that comes from the Regla organization in Florida. He wrote [Manny] articles for them. He was vocal.

HM: You've got everything.

AO: I'm a person, if I have a goal, I have perseverance, I just [gestures with arm, go forward]. I do whatever I think is important at that time. But I realize more and more, that's also because I have a very happy life, secure, I don't have to worry about Manuel going out and meeting anybody, I knew that he was my man. I tell you: Every picture - you have the card from the 50th Anniversary, right? - it also shows something, that one shows him looking [adoringly at her] and this one, he has a hand here and here [around her waist and shoulders]. "She's mine, she's mine!" You know. [laughs] When you have that... all the other things are not important. Like clothes, and entertainment. You name it.

HM: It sounds like it made you strong. That you could face the challenges because you had...

AO: I think I wrote that. When I was going to college, 2 ½ years without stopping, I took the kids with me. And I did... nobody else would take their kids to South Orange and leave them outside the campus while you're in the classroom. And their everybody was helping with that. My youngest son, Alde, he was seven years old, about, and he got a job in the cafeteria. [laughs] Helping with tables. And they always gave him lunch. And the guy told him he would give him a quarter. But when the week ended, the guy gave him ten cents and he would not take it. This is 7 years old, he said: "You told me a quarter!" And he didn't work any more.

HM: He went on strike! A promise is a promise.

AO: Sure. He's like me.

RF: And of course, he's being under-paid at a quarter.

AO: Yeah, yeah. We'd give them an allowance, 50 cents a week. That was a lot then. We always went together to the stores and things like that.

HM: He stood up for himself. [skip section where we discuss what date the release event's going to be] We're excited [about the event]

AO: I'm excited, too, because deep in my heart... because my main purpose is telling the people that actually how great this country is, and if you want to do something, you have the freedom to do it.

HM: I have to tell you, too, that all the booklets that are coming out next year--there are four, and yours is one--are all under the title "Hoboken Is Home."

AO: That's the thing.

HM: I feel that you really present, that's where your heart is.

AO: Can you imagine getting to the city and not getting involved in the city?

HM: Their heart isn't here.

AO: Even the organization I'm involved in, in Florida, and the one here, is also [makes sound].

HM: They're homesick. They don't feel they belong here. They don't give their heart over to the new place. But you did, and that's why your story is so beautiful.

AO: I always liked Hoboken, even when I was in Spring Lake and the people said, "What are you living in Hoboken?" Maybe they think it's a jungle. And now they say, "Oh, you're living in Hoboken!" Maybe they think I'm rich. How can you afford Hoboken? You know. I am here 57 years.

RF: Why Hoboken? Did you ever think of moving to one of the other towns around here?

AO: Noooo. [laughs] No way.

RF: What makes Hoboken so special?

AO: So special? Well, first of all, was the location. It reminded me very much of the town that I came from. Actually, mountains on one side - here is the bay, here is the river. Go into Havana, this is New York. It was just so similar, you know? And some days, what we did, with Manuel's sister, we'd take the ferry, because that's what we had in Cuba, we had the ferries, we took the ferry into New York, we'd throw pennies into the river. [laughs] That was the outing. One Sunday.

RF: Did you throw pennies in the river in Cuba, too?

AO: Their they had the children who swim, who dive for the money.

RF: You did the same thing there?

AO: We did. Because you make wishes, for good luck or whatever. Even like that, you know, I have friends that were born here, they have never gone to the Statue of Liberty. I went to the Statue of Liberty when I was eight months pregnant. I went to the top. Manuel didn't go,

because he used to get dizzy; he had problems with his inner ear. He had operations.

This is another thing, that he was great. He didn't hear well and nobody ever knew. One thing that I was not sensitive to the fact, that the television had double pictures in English and Spanish, and he didn't like that. Whenever we discuss and talk about it, I'd say "Why don't you like it?" And now I could cry, because the reason was that he didn't hear well. He could not read the lips. But we didn't talk about it. Manuel was not... he didn't talk much. He'd say: No, no, I don't like it. But now is when I realize it. What happened. Isn't that sad?

RF: He could have told you, too.

HM: He decided, for whatever reason, that he would prefer not to tell you. You can't take all the blame. [We discuss this for a while.]

AO: That [damage] was from swimming. He was a great swimmer. He used to leave school and run to the beach. [Rest of tape, general conversation.]