

# Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978

## Fresno Historical Society

### Esther Castillo

Esther Chacon Castillo, "a Chicana from Pinedale, California," was interviewed on August 24, 1977. She was born on January 28, 1937 in Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles, now known as Dodgers' Stadium. In 1940, Esther's family moved to Fowler and she went to school in Del Rey before attending Selma High School. She describes her elementary school in the 1940s and mentions that she graduated high school after World War II. She describes using ration books during the war and feeling like she was contributing to the family when her personal ration book was used. She describes the unity of the Chicano community in Del Rey during the war.

Esther describes going down to Chinatown in the "pachuco days" in a short skirt and pompadour hair-style. She describes the men's style with large chains hanging from their pants, large hats and checkered shirts in black and burgundy. They drank a lot and had "gang fights with chains" with the Montelongsos of Sanger and the Avilas and the Rubios of Pinedale. Esther says her father described them as punks and bums.

Esther has lived in Pinedale for five years. She talks about the recent improvements in Pinedale and the incorporation of the community into Fresno. She describes the discrimination faced by Chicanos and believes that they should work toward a better future for all Latinos.

Esther notes that her father did not want to let her go to high school, that he felt a woman's place was at home. She describes her feelings against the oppression of women, though she says she is not a "women's libber." She goes on to describe the differences in the role of women between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Included at the end of her 32 min. oral history is Mexican music of the 1930s, which was recorded at the time of the interview. Interview is in English with some phrases in Spanish.

Interviewer: Ben Garza  
Transcript: 18 pages  
Audio: 00:55:19  
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FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ESTHER CASTILLO

August 24, 1977

Today, August 24, 1977, I, Ben Garza, am interviewing Esther Chacon Castillo in Pinedale, California. Mrs. Castillo is Chicana.

GARZA: When and where were you born?

CASTILLO: January 28, 1937, in Chavez Ravine, which is now known as Dodgers' Stadium in Los Angeles.

GARZA: When I was three years old, my father and mother moved down to Fowler and, then, later on, when I was about six, I started school at Del Rey. During that time, we moved into Del Rey and I started school at Del Rey. I went to grammar school at that time. I went to Selma High.

GARZA: What was Del Rey school like for you?

CASTILLO: Well, not being worldly, and not knowing any difference, it was just a normal school. Now that I see city schools, we got a lot of one to one attention from our teachers. They knew you in Del Rey, not by a serial number, or the color of your skin, but as an individual, which is the way it should be. I think that there was about twenty to twenty-five people per class. Some of our classes were so small that I remember going through the fifth and sixth grade together and the seventh and eighth together and then on to high school.

GARZA: What years were these?

CASTILLO: In the '40's and '50's, because I remember that I graduated after the war. Do you want to know anything about the war?

GARZA: Sure.

CASTILLO: All I remember is that as a child we had stamps, similar to (food stamps), but the only difference is that these were bought, they were issued per person, and the younger you were the less you got and they were used to buy sugar, shoes, and gasoline for the car, and meat.

GARZA: What did that mean to you?

CASTILLO: Well, I guess in a way I got recognition as a member of the family because without my book, we would of been short for month, and I remember shopping at a gasoline station. My father always managed to have a model-T somehow. We'd stop at the gas station and my father would say, "Why don't we use el libro de Esther." I used to say, "Wow, I'm contributing to this trip." So it was quite exciting to me, not knowing why the reason why we were short of everything, why we needed the stamps. That was the main thing, I think.

GARZA: And you said that this was for certain commodities?

CASTILLO: Well you paid money, but if you didn't pay the stamps, you couldn't buy. You couldn't get at all, like, for instance, if you went to a gas station and you didn't have stamps, you couldn't buy gas whether you had money or not.

GARZA: Were you ever in a situation where you were without them?

CASTILLO: My father was always a very careful budgeter and usually we were left with more than what we would use per month. I don't know if they gave it to us per month or per year. All I remember is having a new book every so often, so they must been giving it to us per month.

GARZA: What did the rest of the Chicano community look like?

CASTILLO: I never remember any struggling from anybody. I never knew if welfare existed that far back. I remember there was always plenty to eat. I remember that there was an abundance of whatever it was. Of course, in our home, lacking a mother, we didn't know what cakes and pies and luxuries were. My father, being very skinflinted, a scrooge, we never had any luxuries at all. About the only thing I remember ever having was whenever my father bought a car, he paid for it in cash. We may not have had any new furniture in our house or even a house or a great deal of food. I don't even remember having meat more than once a week and sometimes it was baloney or weiners or whatever, which was not the best of meats. The Mexican community was united. We were very united. I think we were very close. Everyone knew everyone.

GARZA: Was there a feeling of mutual help?

CASTILLO: In Del Rey, yes. ~~What~~ the percentage of the community makeup was, I didn't know. All I remember knowing is everyone in the community, including the very rich, Like there was a person they called a judge's wife, who was Goldie Meyers. They lived in the special part of town. I remember having a doctor who lived like on an intersection of three streets and they were very well-to-do. The more well-to-do people stood out. The Mexican people were all struggling. The Mexican people were all in the same class. We were all struggling. We all had father, brother or cousins in the service, and we were all waiting to hear if anyone had been killed. We stuck very close together.

GARZA: Did you have brothers in the war?

CASTILLO: I had my brother Joe, being the oldest of the boys, had left and I think that he was 18 years old when he left. One night he called us up and told us he was getting married and it was really a weird setup. I didn't realize this until I was lot older. The girl that he married--he married her 'cause her mother treated her super bad and he felt sorry for her. The girl's mother's name was Nelly. Her mother used to be our maid at one time, because lacking a mother, my father used to hire some ladies to keep the house and food going. I guess at that time we used to have a superb diet, because we had a female in the house who was like a mother image. I remember her cooking very well.

GARZA: What kind of foods did you eat? Was it American food or both?

CASTILLO: A little of both. I remember having pancakes with eggs on top and that isn't Mexican food. I also remember eating sausages and German sausages. But, once again, this girl was having a lot of problems with her mother who wanted her to marry a certain boy. My brother, Felix, decided to marry her. He was about 18 years old and he came home from the war. It was during the war. I think he was leaving or was on leave. He came home. He had a white jacket that he had when he had graduated from high school. It was a cream color jacket and he looked really good because, you know, in those days, everyone had a tan because they did farm work. And he stood out in the dark. I remember him standing in the door. He had his wife with him. That was the last time I saw him.

GARZA: Esther, do you remember the pachuco days?

CASTILLO: Do I remember the pachuco days! You used to go down Chinatown, all of the girls were either wearing black blouses and short skirts and they must of been only eight inches above the knees. They talk about the miniskirt right now. These girls nowadays don't have anything to those girls in those days. But everything was supposed to be prime and proper. The pompadour must of been maybe eight inches high. It was a lot of hair. I remember they used this thing called ratas, which they rolled their hair in or created their own. And the bigger the rata, the better the pompadour looked.

No one ever dared burn their hair because if it burned, it would stick out of the pompadour. I remember the men wearing very, very large chains that would hit the side of their pants and I used to wonder if their legs weren't bruised. It was real weird with the large hats and the checkered shirt. It was really beautiful, but the fact is that it didn't make them any less punks, because that's exactly what they were. In those days, when a pachuco was a pachuco, he was a bum. He was like the F-14's are nowadays.

GARZA: He was a bum?

CASTILLO: That was the way they were classified. That wasn't what it really was. It was a fad. A father did not allow his son to dress that way unless he was next to nothing.

GARZA: Who was discrediting the pachuco? Was it the parent or was it being created from the outside?

CASTILLO: No, I think it was mostly the parents. It's just like nowadays. The parents have not allowed them to wear a lot of things because they have made up their mind that, that's what you are, a bum, the significance of what you are. There are a lot of gang fights. They did a lot of stealing. I think, in those days, drinking was the in-thing for the younger set and they were doing a lot of that. Mostly, the colors black and burgundy were being used a lot.

GARZA: How long have you been living in Pinedale?

CASTILLO: We've lived in Pinedale about five years now.

It is going to change. There's a lot of new houses, and there's a lot of them that they're improving.

The city is coming in, and there's going to be a lot of changes. It's inevitable, the city is already surrounding us. I think it will be for the best.

GARZA: How can the incorporation of Pinedale to Fresno help the Mexican people in Pinedale? Do you think that it will help them?

CASTILLO: I don't know. They're a lot of old people here and they're set in their ways. I don't know if it's going to help them or not. I think it would help the younger people. But there's a lot people who didn't know that freeways are going to go around here in Blackstone. They just don't want to believe it. I guess the old people are just set in their ways. I think it will be better for the young kids. I guess it's going to be tough for them. I guess no one likes for anyone to take over their town. That's progress.

GARZA: How do you compare your generation with the generation now?

CASTILLO: Well, my generation used to go out to dances and hung around the street. To me we seem different. We don't seem like we were as mischievous as now. We didn't have as much free time in our hands like they do now. They don't want to work. I don't know why.



GARZA: What were you doing about this time?

CASTILLO: During this time, I must of been eight or nine years old, My sister was wearing the very short skirts. The girls wore the cardigan backwards. So you had this kind of funky-neck affect, in the front, and everyone had a cardigan and don't have one button missing, because it was really out of sight.

GARZA: The pachuco was a '40's happening and a lot of people didn't understand it. In the '50's it was the beatnik in California. Did that affect you any? Did you ever think that the whites were going through the same thing also?

CASTILLO: In Del Rey, we were very Chicano oriented. In Chinatown, I don't even remember noticing a black. I know there were a lot of them, but mostly I was concerned with Chicanos, and I never associated with gavachos (whites) or noticed what they did. To me, because of their superiority in school, and, the fact that most of them were white teachers, they didn't look as bad as a Mexican did. The beatnik wasn't so much the Mexican, it was a white fad. The pachuco was a Chicano fad. So we were more concerned about the pachuco than with the beatnik. My father spoke badly of the pachucos. "Ya quieres andar en a calle como los pachucos, arastrados," and all of this stuff. So, to us, it was bad news. You just didn't dress like a pachuco.

Once in awhile, my brother would sneak in a fad and my sister would wear her pompadour too high. Of course, my father wasn't in compliance. It was a bad scene, all and all. They didn't do anything. It was just a a fadish thing, especially the girls, like my sister was allowed to date. My father was very strict. Habia muchos gang fights with chains. I remember my sister going around with my brother-in-law y se agaro con los Montelongs de Sanger and when he came to see my sister that night he had large chain welts and stuff all over his face.

GARZA: What was the names of those gangs?

CASTILLO: For instance, the Montelongs of Sanger.

Everyone was afraid of them. They would say, "We went to a dance y alli estaban los Montelongs."

Everyone knew that they were killers. It's just like the Avilas here in Pinedale, or the Rubios. You just don't mess around with them because there was a whole mess of cousins and brothers, and they were very mean. They took violence into their own hands, so you can't see them with a glance. They were very average family. Eran muchos pero se peliaban.

GARZA: Do you believe that there is discrimination?

CASTILLO: There has always been discrimination. I have always felt discrimination. I should be very prejudice against whites, super prejudice, because my father always said, "Como esperas a hagarrar un grado bueno report card de ellos. Cuando tu sabes que son gavachos y tu eres Chicana y tu nunca vas agarrar un grado bueno."

I always felt like now, "Maybe he's right, maybe I won't be able to get a 'B'." I have always felt that it is the effort that he put behind it. If you sit on your ass, and get discriminated that's exactly what you are going to produce in your grades and school.

Because of the fact that we are discriminated against, I felt that our effort should have been even greater. This is what my father should have told us. No porque son Chicanos, but in spite of the fact que son Chicanos, try. If this is the way society felt now, we still wouldn't have Mexican professors, Mexican congressmen, Mexican senators; we wouldn't have anything because we would still feel the prejudice.

GARZA: Do you feel that we have enough? Do you think that today now after fourteen years of really open struggle against this system and trying to better this situation of the Chicanos and the Mexicanos and Latinos, do you feel that we have enough doctors?

CASTILLO: Oh no, oh no. But this is why it's the duty of every future father, and every present father.

GARZA: Why are you pointing at me?

CASTILLO: I am pointing to you because your wife is going through some very extensive labor pains . . .

GARZA: What does that have to do with history?

CASTILLO: That has to do with the fact that we, you, as a father, should push your child, set him aside, take the time to tell him that there still isn't enough of us. Because we don't want to be a one-fourth noticed, we

want to be three-fourths noticed. We want to be one of the biggest most successful races in this world, aside from the whites. The whites will have it, have had it and it's time that we moved up too. And I think that there is still prejudice and I think it's the duty of every parent.

GARZA: Do you believe that racism and prejudice will be eliminated?

CASTILLO: No, because there will always be stupid people to fight over some kind of prejudice, whether it's race or whatever the case may be with our race, but I think we should be treated like equals, for we are equals.

GARZA: So you believe that the Chicano race constitutes a Chicano nation?

CASTILLO: Right! For once upon a time we were Mexico. In the future, we might be able to regain that status, not as a Mexican country, but as a status of the states that were taken away from Mexico.

GARZA: Do you think that the Chicano nation should liberate itself from the other races or from the system?

CASTILLO: Bilingual education will be the thing and streets will be, you know. It will be completely-taken over by Mexican-Americans as it should have been.

GARZA: Let me ask you this: Mexico had the Southwest for twenty-five years, right? Prior to that, Spain had it for two hundred and seventy-five years. Although

the Spanish speakers, right, the Mexican, the Chicano, the Indio, lived on this nation, in spite the fact the United States conquered this nation, took over the resources, the banks started coming, do you think the people should liberate itself from the other Chicano nation or do you believe from the existing system? Because races don't seem to understand.

CASTILLO: I believe in a nation as it is. I think that we are all that, and that we were put on this world for a reason. He didn't say of different colors. We should believe that, which will never come to pass it brotherly love. There is always someone that is greedy, somebody that is stupid, somebody that is fighting. They don't even know what.

GARZA: Who is responsible for the condition of the Mexican in Del Rey, California, or in the Southwest? Are we responsible?

CASTILLO: Yes, I believe that we are responsible. We, as parents, are going to strive for equality within our race area through our children, in spite of the fact that they still judge you by your skin, you are going to get out there to be one of them, not as whites. Because I'm glad that we're not white. We have the blood that makes us a stronger people and more able to go on and face the things that are coming, the rough parts. Because there is still a lot of people that judge you by

the color of your skin, which I think is wrong.

But I do think that we bring it upon ourselves because a lot of Mexican people instead of speaking for what is right, keep their mouths shut. We must teach them to stand up for their rights, take care of their health and the attitudes that they have towards the so-called white. For they are nobody. They are just humans like we are. They are not gods. The only god there is, well we all have the same god, we all share the same god. We will always share the same god whether he is a Buddha god or whether he's an idol, whatever the case may be.

GARZA: Do you believe that God has a color?

CASTILLO: No.

GARZA: What is he supposed to be?

CASTILLO: According to what the things that you hear, he was Ethiopian, but to me he was a god, whether he was Ethiopian or if he was Oriental, whatever the case, he could of been; he was my God.

GARZA: Did you work in Fresno?

CASTILLO: I went to work in Selma. I remember my father did not want to let me go to high school. I wanted to go to high school, but he wouldn't let me, but he felt that a woman's place was at home. She didn't need an education. He was going to keep me at home at that time. I remember my father getting a letter from Fresno County telling him, "You can't keep this child at home. You have to send her to school." So against his wishes, and of course my brother, Arthur, knowing the necessity

of going to school, told him, "You have to send her or you are violating the law." So my father being very cautious in not violating the law decided that he was going to comply with the wishes of the county and send me to school. I remember going to Selma High School for four years, and after getting out, I realized I didn't accomplish anything. I used to ditch four days a week.

GARZA: Do you think that your father's initial refusal to allow you to go to school is another form of oppression against women?

CASTILLO: Yes, it was. This is why I feel so strongly about women being put down, about equal rights for women. I am not a women's libber; so don't get me wrong, because a man should still dominate a little bit of a woman's way of thinking. He should be the king object at home because of his children. Children should still look up to a father, regardless of whether there is a Women's Liberation out there.

GARZA: The Chicano never used to think of Women's Liberation in the terms that you are speaking. What is Women's Liberation to you?

CASTILLO: Because I always felt that I was a women's libber in the first place! I never thought that when I went out to look for a job that a man was going to get paid more than I was. I never thought of things like that until Women's Liberation came around. I always felt that a man wasn't going to tell me what to do

or I wasn't going to be noticed as the baby bear, the dishwasher. This is the way I was brought up as a child. My father always said, "Tu tienes que limpiar la casa porque tu eres la mujer, tu tienes que hacer la comida porque nomas las mujeres, hacen el quiaser." I felt that was wrong, when we were a unit at home, all dirtying the home, all eating at the same time. Why couldn't an equal share been given to all of us?

GARZA: When did you become conscious of the situatuion of women, that which you call Women's Liberation?

CASTILLO: When Women's Liberation came around.

GARZA: When did that come out?

CASTILLO: It must of been eight or nive years ago.

GARZA: 1969?

CASTILLO: Somewhere around there. I remember it started here in the papers. I never thought about it because I never felt that we were the oppresed, even as Chicana women. I knew that maybe the reason why women were oppressed is because that's the way they wanted it to be, because they were stupid enough not to stand up for whatever was right. I felt I was going to stand up if I felt something was injust.

GARZA: So you felt that weakness come from the women themselves. Is that what your saying?

CASTILLO: No, it came in the way they we raised. They already knew that this is the way things were and they just fell into marriages or being a woman in a home,



the same way a lot of girls. Let me give you an example: Armida feels that just because her mother stayed home and takes care of her father, whether he treated her her right or not, that was her responsibility, and that's the way. I believe that you're an individual and you should be the way you feel. If you're oppressed, it's because you want to be that way. Women's Liberation had a lot of good things together. A lot of good things came out of it because they got together, fought for their rights and they're still fighting for their rights. I don't think that I would like to join them because I never felt I was an oppressed woman. What was I doing there?

GARZA: How does a woman like yourself look at the '50's? What was happening to women in the '50's? What was happening to the Chicana women in the '50's versus the '60's?

CASTILLO: Well, once again, I was raised without a mother. I don't even remember following the example of women. I was raised around men. I think this is one of the reasons why I never felt oppressed, because being raised by a bunch of men no one ever said, "No puedes hacer eso porque eres un mujer. No puedes andar en la calle porque eres una mujer. No debes de chiflar por nose mira bien." Nobody even set an example to me as a woman. So I never noticed the way women were. I just thought that they were mothers and housekeepers and they took

care of their homes. But there is a lot of women that are amazing to me. They work eight hour day jobs and take care of their homes; they're excellent mothers and wives. They go dancing with their husbands and act like everything is hunky-dory, just like women used to a long time ago.

GARZA: How do you view divorce, historically, in our community? Do you think that it has been increasing or decreasing?


CASTILLO: Increasing and I'll tell you why. You were talking about the difference of the women in the '40's and the '50's. More mothers are telling their daughters, "No te dejes aprende from what you see me go through at home. Si un hombre no te trat bien, dejalo y agara otro. Nadie te exige que te quedes con ses sepose y nodie te dice que te tienes que quear." There is no reason why you can't get a divorce. If you can't live with a man, get rid of him. There's a lot of interference in marriages from the mother-in-laws. If parents now would leave their children alone to hassle, marriages would go on longer. For you see, I'm speaking to you as an example. Where can I go if I even was to get into a hassle with my husband? Who do I go to? There's no interference from my mother-in-law. She doesn't come over and tell me, "Treat him like this." There's no one on my side to tell me that. So I think the reason divorces are increasing is because mothers are encourag-

ing it.

GARZA: Well, Mrs. Castillo, this has been an interesting conversation. I wonder what you think of this project? What do you want to see done with this project?

CASTILLO: I hope I'm wrong about all of the things that I told you. I hope I'm wrong about the average Mexican community as I saw it at that time because maybe I was seeing things differently, Perhaps, I was seeing things differently because I came from a tiny community. I like to see us progress as Mexican-Americans into something a whole lot better.

"BY MY SIGNATURE, I MAKE THIS TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE TO RESEARCHERS IN THE FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES."

 11-9-77  
ESTHER CHACON CASTILLO, NARRATOR (DATE)

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BEN GARZA, INTERVIEWER

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(DATE)