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Louise Ferrari De Petrucci

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Mining in Mexico
Oral History Project

Louise Ferrari de Petrucci
By W. Noel McAnulty, Jr.

September 23, 1995

- M: Today is Saturday, the 23rd of September, [1995]. I'm in Parral, Chihuahua, with Louise Ferrari de Petrucci. I'm going to visit about her remembrances about her life here in Mexico. Louise, thanks very much and I'm glad I had an opportunity to catch you while you were in Parral. Could you, please, just tell me how you got started in...or how you came to Mexico.
- F: Well, I came with my husband. He was working for Ingersall-Rand Company.
- M: In what year was that about?
- F: In [19]57. 1957. And then I met Mr. [Henry] Hansen in Mexico City. He was the head of Minero Frisco and he asked me if I wanted to come out here and help him in the administration of the club and the apartments and the dining rooms and administrate the whole colony.
- M: Had you been traveling some in Mexico before that? Had you been...
- F: With my husband I had traveled.
- M: Had you been to San Francisco [del Oro Mine] before then? Before you came to work?
- F: Yes. Yes, yes, I had been.
- M: And you came originally from Canada?
- F: Yeah, I came from Canada and I came to Mexico City. And then we lived in Mexico City seven years. And then I came out here

and worked for Henry Hansen. He was the one that hired me. And we were friends in Mexico City. And that's how I met him.

M: So then you would have come to San Francisco in the early [19]60s?

F: That's right, that's right. And I was there for twenty-six years. It was a very good place to be in. We had a very good time and they were very good to us, all the bosses. They treated us royally.

M: But now, where you grew up in Canada, or where you lived, was a mining area, too, so the mines were not just a new experience.

F: No, no. Definitely not. I came from a mining town and came to a mining town in Mexico, ended up in a mining town in Mexico. Of course, there's nothing like a good mining town, you know. Everybody knows everybody and...

M: So you lived and managed the- what would be the proper- the social activities and so forth?

F: All the social activities in the club and all the food, all the buying of the food, all of the menus, and the formal dining room. We had a formal dining room, we had an engineers' quarters, and we had VIP quarters, so I had to look after all of that.

M: Now, the engineers' quarters would have been more for bachelors' quarters.

F: Yeah, bachelors' quarters, also for people with wives that came in to the place. They came into the hotel. And the VIPs stayed in the apartment.

M: Can you describe the San Francisco? You call it camp.

F: Yes, it was a camp.

M: But it was certainly not a rustic camp at all. Describe what it was like.

F: Well, it had beautiful homes. Everybody had a beautiful home, beautiful gardens and gardeners, and they all had help. They all had maids and, you know, gardeners. The maids, one for cooking, one for doing the rooms, so everybody lived high off the hog.

M: About how many families lived at the San Antonio camp?

F: At the San Antonio camp, I think, there was over eighty families.

M: Eighty families?

F: There was over eighty families. And then, of course, there was the other camp, too. We had two camps, so it was the San Antonio and there was the San Luis. So they had their club over there. See, the VIPs lived in San Antonio, all the higher ups, all the bosses. They had to be bosses to live in San Antonio.

M: Supervisors?

F: Supervisors and bosses. And the lower element, they lived in San Luis. And they had their own club and their own... . And, also, we mingled. They came to parties that we had. We went to parties that they had. You know, like they had the 15th of September. They had the party the 15th of September and we'd all go there... (Housekeeper enters room to announce phone call, taping stopped and started again)

M: You were telling me about the San Luis camp. Who lived at San Luis?

F: The workers, the employees.

M: These would have been employees, though, but not miners?

F: Yes, there were miners.

M: Were the miners there, too?

F: No. The miners lived in the pueblo and these were bosses, but not the top bosses.

M: Okay. Like shift bosses, underground bosses?

F: Yeah.

M: Clerks?

F: Yeah, clerks.

M: Mechanics?

F: The mechanic, secretary, and all that. Then they all moved in to...now it's all one camp.

M: But when you came in [19]63 or [19]64 all the people that lived in San Antonio camp were foreigners, am I correct?

F: That's correct. They were all foreigners.

M: But that dates from way, way back. The original camp there at San Antonio was built when? In the [19]30s or before that?

F: Oh, I think so because Henry brought all the stuff. A lot of the things that were there Henry Hansen brought it from some other mine, you know. That goes way back. But, you see, Henry's dead now. Henry's dead, his wife is dead, they're all gone. And Hans Skow is gone, he's in Tucson, and he was the assistant manager. He'd be able to say a lot of things, too. And he was assistant manager there.

But, as I say, we had a terrific camp. Our camp was terrific because we had all walks of people come in to visit the fluorite plant. And, naturally, they all came to the

club. And the manager would always have a dinner party for all these VIPs that came in. And, naturally, they'd invite all the heads of departments, whatever they were interested in, you know, so that they could get a view of what they did there. They were very interested in the fluorite plant, you see. And they came from Japan, they came from Peru, they came from France, they came from Spain. The head man of the fluorite in Spain came and the head one in France came to visit the plant. We had them all. And, also, Union Corporation had a lot to do with the mine because they were part owners of the mine. And they got out when it Mexicanized. Then they sold their part to the Mexicans.

M: But, now, when you first came to San Antonio to the mine was Frisco Mexicanized? If it wasn't it was close to being Mexicanized.

F: It was close to being Mexicanized. It was close to being Mexicanized, but when I came it was not Mexicanized. But, I think, it was Mexicanized about two or three years after.

M: Okay.

F: That's all. And then, naturally, we had Dr. Quintana who lived in the camp. Now, Dr. Quintana could tell you a lot of things and he's in El Paso. Dr. Quintana has been here for fifty years. He was in the camp for fifty years. And, now, I'll give you his address.

M: Okay.

F: I want you to see him because he's a very, very interesting person and he's a very smart man and he could tell you a lot.

M: Tell me just a little bit more about just the facility there

in San Francisco. They had, you mentioned, eighty houses. But was the hospital on the premises, too?

F: No, the hospital was just down the road from the mine. And, of course, Dr. Quintana could tell you a lot of things about the hospital because it's completely apart, but it belonged to the company. Now, they built a wall around that hospital because they had trouble. Some man went in and shot one of the doctors for something. I don't remember what it was all about, but anyway, Dr. Quintana could tell you all about this. And it's quite interesting and...

M: But there were schools at...

F: We had an English school right on the property. And all the children went to school there and took English. And Mrs. Arajo was the English teacher there. And, of course, all these kids that were... (Housekeeper enters room to announce phone call, taping stopped and started again)

Mr. Hansen was a man that was, well, he liked good things. We had the best of everything while he was the head of the company. And Mr. Hansen and his wife were very gracious. She was a person that had parties at her house. She entertained all these people that came in. They'd have big dinner parties. And sometimes we'd have a dinner at the club. And they'd have the hors d'oeuvres at her place and drinks and then take them all over to the club. Sometimes she'd said, "Well, Louise, I'll have them all over to my place." And then she'd invite us all over to her place and we'd all be in her home.

And people there had everything. They didn't want for

anything. There was nothing...I mean, they lived very, very well.

M: Well, I mean, you would compare this, say, maybe, to a country club with residences around it.

F: That's right, exactly.

M: For example, what did they have at the club itself?

F: Well, we had a bar. We had a bowling alley downstairs. There was dancing upstairs. Anytime they had a big dance the orchestra would come in and then we opened up all the doors and we had all the chairs in the different rooms upstairs and we sat everybody in there. And, you know, it was just like a country club. That's what it was like. It was like a big country club and, as I said, we had the best of food, we had the best of drinks, we had the best of everything.

M: Now, the engineers and technical people that lived at the camp, when they used the club for other than special occasions, special parties, did they pay for their own, like, have a bar tab and things that they had to pay for?

F: Oh, they paid their own bar tab, you know. Each one was a lot less than what you would buy, you know, outside. And they belonged to the club. Like everybody paid a fee, you know, a small fee, at the end of the month and everybody used the club and on Sunday night...

M: Was there a swimming pool there?

F: And there was a swimming pool where we would have our parties at the swimming pool and take all the food out to the swimming pool and invite different people from other camps, you know. And they'd all come to our parties. We would go to their

parties. Like Santa Barbara would have the Halloween party and we were all invited to the Halloween party. So everybody would go to the Halloween party. And then Prieta had another party and we'd go to Prieta. And this was the way we, you know, sort of had, what would you say? Well, we integrated with all the rest of the mines.

M: One of your responsibilities as administrator of the facilities. Did you feel that some of the obligations of the company was to entertain your own employees? I mean, the parties that you organized were...

F: Oh, yes. Yes, a lot of the parties were really for the people in camp, you know. And they invited everybody. And if they had a party they invited everybody in camp. And they all would go, you know.

M: Were some of the other camps, like at Santa Barbara and La Prieta, were they similar in their makeup to...

F: To ours, yes.

M: In the sense that they were mostly foreigners living there at that time?

F: Yeah, that's right. And they would have their dos like we had our dos. And when we had the big certain do, well, we'd include them and when they had their certain do, they'd include us. And this was the way it was. And everybody knew each other, you know. And then on Sunday nights we'd have hamburger night, what we called hamburger night or burritos or whatever you want to call it. And we had weinies and what not. Anybody could go on Sunday nights and they didn't have to do any cooking. And we closed the restaurant upstairs and

everybody would go downstairs. And this was helping the bar and the club. And this was to make a little bit of money for the club, you know.

M: Was it difficult for you to buy the supplies you needed, foods and drinks?

F: Well, in those days it was difficult because we could only get what the country produced. And we tried to use as much as we could of what the company produced, but, also, when we had VIPs we brought in things from El Paso. You know, I used to go to El Paso and bring some things in to make it nicer, a little nicer, and to make it more Americanized, I guess, or just to make it a little more elegant, you know. We'd bring in pâtes and good cheeses and stuff like that, little crackers and, you know, things that made things nicer.

M: Things out of the ordinary that would have been sort of difficult to...

F: Yes. And, of course, there was an awful lot of people came in to our camp and they said they couldn't get over our camp the way it was. Spotlessly clean, everything was spotlessly clean. And I ran the club like you would run anything in Canada or the United States.

M: What do you think would account for that difference? Was it some of the British influence you think?

F: Well, I think it had a lot to do with our manager, who was Mr. Humphreys, and Mrs. Humphreys. I think they were people that came...a background of very good quality people. And they wanted things to be right. And they insisted on having things right. And, of course, I was Canadian and I knew how to

entertain the way we entertain. And I made it so, you know, so that people that came in, they'd say, well, they couldn't get over the formal table, you know, with candlesticks and a flower arrangement in the center and cocktail things and good china plates.

And, you know, we had everything to work with. Like they brought in porcelain dishes and we had crystal glasses. And we had everything to work with. And we had a kitchen that...I don't think there was anything missing in that kitchen, you know, like machinery or anything: meat slicer, grinder, saws, everything that you could have, freezers, all kinds of freezers to freeze chickens, turkeys. We'd bring in hams from the United States in those days because we didn't have good hams here. Then later on, of course, we could buy them here in Parral, but we didn't at first. We didn't. We'd bring them in from...and we had them all frozen. And, of course, I would freeze a lot of stuff, like peas, beans. When they were, you know, good quality I would freeze them and put them in the freezer, so we had these things. I'd make fruitcakes for Christmas. And we'd bring all this stuff in, you know.

But it was just like you were in the states. It was a colony like you were in the states. And people that came in were so overwhelmed to find a place like this in Mexico in the hills. And they didn't expect to find what they found, you know. They were overwhelmed, you know. They'd come in and say, well, you know, everything was white tablecloths and linen closets and so forth and so on and just like any country club in the United States. And we had that in [San Francisco

camp]. Now, I don't know whether they had that in the other colonies, but our mine, as I said, the San Francisco mine to me was one of the best mines in Mexico. And that's the reason that I stayed the twenty-six years.

M: Of the various visitors that you entertained at the hotel, do you remember some of those especially more than others?

F: Well, I remember them all because I had to entertain them all, you know. Like we had people from DuPont, from Chrysler Company, we had people from the DuPont Company, we had people come in from the mining magazine from California, we had people from Peru, managers from Peru. We had all these different people and everybody was overwhelmed. They couldn't figure out that it was such a terrific mining colony and everything was just so. Because I can tell you that our place was one of the cleanest spots in Mexico. And our kitchen, anybody could walk in to our kitchen in Mexico, in a small, little place in Mexico, and everything was in its place. And our fridges, you could open our fridge doors and there wasn't one that was not looked after. And...

M: How large a staff did you have to help you with the management?

F: I had a girl in the apartments, a girl in the hotel with twenty-four rooms, and, of course, I switched them and each one would help someone else. And I had one in the laundry room to do all the washing and the ironing. And we washed and ironed everything. And everything was done just like in the states. And I had four or five girls in the kitchen helping me. And I had one girl in the club cleaning floors and doing

the waxing of the hardwood floors and things because it was a hardwood floor and you had to keep that up. And everything was spotless. And we had glass windows all over the place. And we had them spotless, too.

M: Now, you served meals on a daily basis, too, didn't you?

F: Oh yes. Too, as well.

M: What? Lunch more than...

F: We served breakfast, lunch, and dinner...all the engineers that were there that didn't have homes.

M: Okay.

F: And they came. Some of the bosses, when their wives were out of town, they came over and ate with their families, too. And that's the way it was. But, like I said, it was like a country club, you know. It was run that way, of course, because I was a foreigner. And I ran it like you would run your own home. It was run that way, you know. And, of course, I was a very fussy person, you know. I could rule with an iron hand. Of course, I had to be good to the workers, too, at the same time, but I had to be hard, too, to have things the way they should be because it's kind of hard. I imagine you would know that.

M: Well, I can vaguely imagine, but I'm sure it was not...

F: Because I came back. I've come back and it's not the same.

M: Now, as years passed, and after Mexicanization, there were some gradual changes at the mine. What were most noticeable about those changes?

F: Well, really, I didn't really notice too much change because I left.

M: Well, you were there, though. What year did you leave?

F: I left five years ago.

M: Around 1990.

F: Yeah.

M: Okay. Well, so let's say during the late [19]70s...

F: Well, it didn't change too much. After I left is when the changes came.

M: But now, Mr. Humphreys was there as manager until [19]84.

F: Yeah, but as long as Mr. Humphreys was there there was no changes. As long as he was there there was no changes. Really, I didn't see any changes.

M: But there were gradual changes in the makeup of the technical people of the families that lived at San Antonio. Is that not right? There were more Mexican nationals...

F: Oh, yes. There was more...

M: That came to live there?

F: Yes. They Mexicanized it and more Mexicans moved in, but they were good quality Mexican people.

M: But these changes were gradual.

F: Yes, they were gradual, yeah.

M: I mean, there was nothing abrupt about it.

F: Because then there were certain ones that became bosses and they were Mexicans. They moved in to the colony. They no longer lived in San Luis. They moved them from San Luis in to the colony, in to our colony. Now, it's completely one colony. There's no separation. Now, why the separation I don't know.

M: That was in existence long before.

F: That was long ago. Now, the colony is completely one and, of course, there's no English school any longer there and everybody's Mexican. There's no foreigners.

M: Now, when the Mexican nationals began to live at San Antonio there wasn't much change.

F: No, there wasn't too much change then.

M: The parties were...

F: Were the same and things went on the same. They were used to... . And I was the one that was in charge, so everything went on. At the club everything went on the same and I treated the Mexican people, the Mexican bosses, exactly the same as I did for Jack [Humphreys]. I did the same things for them as I did for Jack. And then I left. And, of course, all these changes, the big changes, came when I left. And, of course, they got another cook and another person to take my place. He was there three months and they fired him. And then they closed the kitchen and they closed the club. And everything is closed down now.

M: Oh, is that right?

F: So now, there's only the club downstairs and they have a little something- I don't know what they do because I haven't been there- but the kitchen is completely closed and the formal dining room is closed and they don't do any cooking at all there at all. Now, the girl that worked for me, the couple of girls that worked for me, that I taught a lot of things that they know, they've opened restaurants for themselves in the pueblo. And one has a little place in her place and she's got thirty-five people eating there. And then

one of the other girls has another place up the street and she's got people from the mine eating there. But they were girls that worked for me and they've opened up. And that's what they're making their living on now because they no longer work for the mine. You see, that's how much it has changed.

And, of course, there's not as much money as there used to be. And before, of course, the mine was doing great and, you know, the sky was the limit, but they always showed a profit. The shareholders wanted a profit and Jack made sure that they got their profit, but we also watched, you know. We didn't throw things out or away or anything like that, but everything was done nicely and done the way it should be. And that's why people that came in to the camp said they'd never seen a camp like it.

And we had doctors come in doing operations for poor people, you know. I think it was the Lions, I don't know which club, and they flew in with their planes and they brought everything in. And at our hospital, the company hospital, Mr. Humphreys would loan the company hospital. They did all the operations there and they didn't use anything from our hospital except...

M: The facilities?

F: The locality. And they were the ones that said that they had never seen anything like it in the mining town and they would come back to Minero Frisco anytime they wanted, that that was one of the places they would like to go because we did things the way they should be done. And we were noted for it because one time they had a big party at IMMSA and invited

all the bosses, our bosses. And one of the head men that was there, well, this was told to me, and he said, "You know, we offer you what we can, but we don't have a Petrucci in our mine." So, meaning to say, it's not going to be as nice.

But I tried to make it as nice as I could because I had a lot of pride and I didn't want people to say it was dirty or there was cockroaches or anything like this. I was very, very fussy. I was hard as I could be to keep things as clean as I wanted them and, in fact, you know, like the hotel was very old. And the bathrooms were very, very old, but they were white. And when the doctors came in they said, "Can you imagine how old these things are? And look at how clean they are." You know, they couldn't get over the cleanliness of the place.

M: Did some of the parties that you had out there...

F: They were beautiful parties.

M: Do you remember some of those in particular?

F: Well, all of them were great.

M: What about some of the watch parties? There was one watch party where you had some last minute difficulties, as I remember.

F: Well, those were the things that happened, you know, but that happened because the fridges went on the blink overnight. But we came out with flying colors because I was able to go to Parral and get a bunch of fresh chickens from this Trasco Company. And I knew the lady that owned it and I went out and found her. And I was able to come in a taxi with all these boxes of chickens and we got them all ready and cooked in the

pressure cookers and was able to serve it and nobody knew the difference. So that was something. That was the only thing that happened in all the years that I was there. That was the only one thing that happened. And that was, oh, God, that was awful, but, anyway, we came out with flying colors. Nobody knew the difference and, as I told you, the only thing that saved my life was the big turkey that I had in the other freezer in the other fridge that didn't go bad because that was working. And I started with that one first and I was able to serve that part of it to the head table and then the chicken to the rest of them. But they were all going to get turkey, but it ended it up that we had to serve turkey and chicken because it was the only thing I could do. But we saved the day. But, you see, we had hors d'oeuvres downstairs first, you know, just everything that you could imagine, you know. And they had drinks downstairs before and then they had the speeches upstairs. And that's the way it was with all the parties, you know.

And like in Mr. Humphreys' home. They were very gracious people, you know, the two of them, very, very gracious. And Peggy was a person that knew how to do everything, too, you know, and how to entertain and do it right. She was very fussy, too. And she was a wonderful person and so was he. I mean, I would say that, to me, I liked to work with him because he was so up above board. You know, he was a person that was so honest and wanted things right and told you so, you know. And everything was just so. As a manger I wouldn't have asked for a nicer person for me, for my dealings, and I

dealt directly with him. I dealt directly with him. And any problem or anything, I'd just go to him and everything was okay.

M: So when you first came to Mexico you had no idea that you'd spend a quarter of century here.

F: No, I certainly didn't, but it was nice. I enjoyed it. I loved the place and we were protected. And they were good to us, you know, very, very good to us. And I liked everybody that I met, you know. There wasn't too many people I didn't like in our camp. And people that came after, you know, I mean, I got along with them all and it...

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

F: And I still come back.

M: You still come back to visit.

F: Yeah.

M: But as far as you're concerned, you wish the life at San Francisco could have gone on...

F: Forever.

M: Forever.

F: That's right. Because I would have stayed forever if I wasn't getting older because it was a wonderful place to be. I enjoyed every minute of it. I worked hard, you know, worked hard. And we had good times and that was it. And we went home and went to bed and slept it off and came back to work

again happy to go to work again. And it was just right in camp, you know, just walked right across to your work and that was it.

M: Did you have, at all, a difficult time in readjusting when you back to Canada after so many years in Mexico?

F: Well, I sure missed it. I missed Mexico very much because, after all, my friends were all here. I mean, I spent more years in Mexico than I did in Canada, so I do miss it and I still miss it. I love to come back, you know, and see my friends and love to get back with them and talk about old times. And, you know, we have a lot of laughs and we have a lot of fun, you know, just talking about the things that happened, little anecdotes that happened long ago. And we still get a kick out of it, you know. So I really, as I say, I would have stayed on if I wasn't getting older and, you know, and didn't think that I had to get back to my family.

M: Louise, thanks very much for your time. I hope you have continued success here and with your visits to Mexico.

F: Well, thank you very much. I'm always glad to come back to Mexico. And I love Mexico.

End of Interview