

1-23-1996

Interview no. 898

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Recommended Citation

Interview with José J. García by W Noel McAnulty, Jr., 1996, "Interview no. 898," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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Mining in Mexico
Oral History Project

José J. García
By W. Noel McAnulty

January 23, 1996

- M: [Today's date is] January 23, [1996]. I'm in El Paso visiting with Mr. Joe García about his memories of experiences working in the mining camps in Mexico. Thank you, Mr. García, for your time. Could you just briefly tell us something about your life history, how you got started mining in Mexico?
- G: Well, I started in 1949, in October of [19]49, right after completing my university bachelor of science in electrical engineering. And I went...
- M: Where did you graduate?
- G: At the University of Texas at Austin. And the way I found out that they needed an electrical engineer is because in my senior year they sent application forms to the university. I filled one out and I was fortunate to land a job with the San Francisco Mines of Mexico. That was the name at that time. And I started working as assistant superintendent of the electrical department at the mines and I got promoted about four years later to superintendent. And that was because the superintendent and the other assistant, they had to retire. They were beyond their working age, so I was the only young person in the department that could handle the job, so I became the superintendent. Our job was to do all the electrical maintenance at the mine, in the mill, the housing for the employees. And we did from electrical house wiring to

installing all the new mining equipment, new mill equipment, and did our own maintenance as far as motor repairs and everything.

M: So then how long did you work at San Francisco?

G: For the first period, ten years. Then I left in [19]59 and went to California and came back in 1967 as superintendent of the electrical department. But I was offered superintendent of machinery, which covered both the electrical and mechanical departments both in maintenance and new installations, everything that pertained to electrical and mechanical in mine and mill and other facilities that we had there.

M: So you returned to work at San Francisco in 1967?

G: Yes, and at that time it was no longer San Francisco Mines of Mexico. It was Minera Frisco.

M: That would have been after the Mexicanization?

G: Yes, oh, yes. Well, they started in [19]51. No...

M: [19]61.

G: [19]61, yeah, [19]61, little by little, and then the complete changeover was around [19]65, [19]67, somewhere.

M: Then how long did you stay after you returned the second time?

G: Until 1982. So, in all, I worked for the same company twenty-six years.

M: And then in 1982 did you leave Mexico or did you work somewhere else?

G: No, I came here to El Paso and worked for the electric company.

M: So the first job you had out of school was working at the mine?

G: Right.

M: What were your first impressions of San Francisco when you showed up?

G: My first impression was when I got a letter saying that they wanted me to go and visit them with all expenses paid. I hadn't graduated yet. I was on my last year, but it was before graduation. And my first impression was the signature on that letter, that it looked like it had been signed on a wooden crate of some kind because the signature was very wiggly. And it was that my boss, Mr. Mashburn, he suffered from palsy. His hands shook all the time, so when I saw the letter I said, "Gosh! They don't even have desks to write on! (chuckles) What am I getting into?" But it changed when I visited the installation and the whole operation. And at that time it was up-to-date. I mean, the housing was very comfortable. So I was made an offer on that visit and I accepted.

M: Tell me, how did you travel from Austin to Parral for the first interview?

G: Well, I traveled from Brownsville. My hometown is Brownsville, Texas. And it was semester break or something. It was a whole week that we were off and I went back to Brownsville and I got my passport and visa. By then I had it all ready and I traveled by bus...I can't remember. I traveled to Torreon through Reynosa, Tamaulipas, and I took LAMSA from Torreon to Parral-- LAMSA was the airline at that time- and they were waiting for me then. And that was another experience (chuckles) traveling by bus and then by plane

because there was no plane from Matamoros or Reynosa nor Laredo. I think the only plane was here from El Paso to Parral, well, Ciudad Juárez to Parral, and then Torreon and then Mexico City. But I thought it was too long to come from Brownsville to El Paso and I just took the bus from, I think, it was Reynosa through Monterrey, Torreon, and then caught the plane.

M: So then, when you accepted the job and went to work at San Francisco...

G: Right. And then I came back and finished, graduated in May. And from May to October it took all that time to get my Mexican working passport and get shots and everything, so I could clear the American consulate and, also, the Mexican consulate. And all that paper work was done here in El Paso. I came from Brownsville to El Paso and from here I took the plane to Parral again. LAMSA was still operating.

M: Well, it was easier to get to Parral in the old days then it is now.

G: In a way, yes, yes, because there's no airplane right now except for private charter planes. And those are fun, (chuckles) especially if you're flying in to the sierra, you know, in to the mountains.

M: So then when you first went to work were you married at the time?

G: Oh, no! I was a bachelor for two years in the bachelors' quarters. It was a twenty-two room hotel with very comfortable accommodations and very good restaurant for the bachelor employees and, also, visitors and guests. That all

disappeared after a while. Well, not after a while. It was still there when I returned in [19]67, but nowadays there's nothing there now.

M: Well, now, this first period when you worked at San Francisco, from 1949 to [19]59, that was when San Francisco was a foreign-owned company?

G: Yes, it was by Union Corporation of South Africa.

M: What was the makeup of the technical staff that worked there?

G: Mostly Americans, a few Canadians. When I left there were a few British...very few.

M: Who was living in the hotel that you mentioned? I guess, the nicer of the two camps was the San Antonio Camp?

G: Right, right.

M: Now, who was living in San Antonio at the time? Only the foreigners?

G: Well, no, not really. I was living there. I'm an American citizen. I was living there and there were a few others of Mexican descent, Americans of Mexican descent, who were living there, also, but they were either mine foremen or both.

M: So it depended on the job position that you were with in the company?

G: Right, right.

M: The people that worked in the electrical department, the people that worked under you, were they Mexican nationals?

G: I had one assistant who was a Mexican national, who came up from the ranks through this sindicato, the union. He was an electrician, came up the ranks, and he spoke English, so we promoted him. Before Mr. Mashburn left he promoted him to

assistant superintendent, so I inherited him and we kept him. And then the second time around I hired several national electrical engineers and electricians.

M: But the electricians that worked for you, say, in the period up until [19]59, were they locals?

G: One was local, one was local. And I only had one assistant. When I left they replaced me with two people. (chuckles) And when I got back one of them, who was the superintendent of the electrical department, he was killed in an accident in the electrical department, so I replaced him. And I had a national electrical engineer working for me and then I hired another one, another electrical engineer, and then I hired about four or five national electrical technicians, who graduated as technicians not fully degreed.

M: But this would have been in [19]67?

G: In [19]67, right.

M: For right now let's just talk about the [19]49 to [19]59 period.

G: [19]49 to [19]59, alright.

M: Your work, then, you saw everything. You worked in the mines some, in the mill, plus all the other maintenance and equipment and so forth.

G: The housing and everything that was electrical, even from bread toasters and irons from the housewives, we would get them in the electric shop and repair them.

M: At that time was Frisco on the national electric grid or did you generate your own power?

G: No, we never generated, although there was a generating plant,

but it was dismantled years before I started working there. And we bought from the Comisión Federal de Electricidad, which, at that time, it was not the comisión. It was Compañía Eléctrica de la Laguna or something like that. Their home office was in Torreon or Gómez Palacio.

M: And it was not a national company?

G: It was not national, no. It got national afterwards, yeah.

M: So when you went to work in Mexico did you speak Spanish?

G: Oh, yes.

M: Did most of the foreigners that were living down there at that time speak Spanish?

G: Depends on what you (chuckles) call Spanish, how much they spoke. Some weren't too fluent. They all spoke and could make themselves understood and they understood what they were told, but some never learned good conversational Spanish.

M: Was that a difficulty as far as just the day-to-day operations?

G: No, they got around, they got around. And a lot of the work force, or the workmen, they learned little phrases here and there that they could make themselves understood and it wasn't too much of a problem.

M: Would it have been a problem for some of the Mexican nationals to advance within their organization if they did not speak English?

G: At that time, yes, it was. Yes, it was.

M: What do you remember about just the overall living conditions there at the San Antonio camp in that period?

G: Actually, they were wonderful. (chuckles) They were great.

For two years I was a bachelor, then I got married over there in Parral. My wife was from Parral and I got married there in [19]51. So when I left I had a four bedroom house with an electric stove and everything electric and it didn't cost me a cent.

M: Now, was that typical of the housing available in San Antonio?

G: Right, right.

M: I mean, there were houses with several bedrooms all provided free of charge to the employees?

G: Yeah, right. And it was furnished, too, except for drapes and carpeting, things like that. That we had to supply ourselves or buy ourselves, but as far as the furniture, living room, bedrooms, everything was furnished by the company.

M: What about social activities? Was that pretty much restricted to the colony?

G: We had a club for employees. The San Antonio Colony had a club and the San Luis Colony had their club. And then the other mining camps were ASARCO, Santa Bárbara and Parral, they had their clubs. And each colony or each club had an annual dance and we invited the other people. And then we were, also, invited. We belonged to the casino in Parral, which had a social club, and we belonged to the Juvenil Feminin. My wife belonged to that, so we went to their parties, also. Socially, we had a lot of fun. (chuckles) We had a lot to do.

M: Well, in those years though, I mean what, for example, did you do on a typical weekday night? That was before television and all. What was a typical activity?

G: Right. In the club house we had two bowling alleys, we had a bar completely supplied with liquor, and we had a bartender. We had to pay for our drinks, though, those weren't free, but they were at a minimal price, a minimal cost. So we would get together and go to the bar and play cards or just talk to friends. By ten o'clock we would be home getting ready to go to bed.

M: How did you meet your wife in Parral?

G: In a dance in Parral.

M: In the town of Parral?

G: Yes, in the town of Parral. Yeah, she was going to all the parties and dances in Parral. And another bachelor and I, we got together quite often while we lived in the bachelors' quarters. And we used to go together to Parral. Most of the parties were dances we went to. She was there, so that's how I met her.

M: So why did you leave in [19]59? Did you just get tired of being there?

G: I didn't see much future (chuckles) and my wife's family moved from Parral to Los Angeles, so she started pulling towards Los Angeles. And I got a job in Los Angeles with Dodge Shipyards and I spent seven years there...not with Dodge Shipyards. I worked with three different companies. But then living in the Los Angeles area with small children is very difficult. At least we found so, that it was too difficult then, so I called Mr. Hansen, who was the general manager. Well, at that time I didn't know he was just in the Mexico City office and Jack Humphreys was the general manger. So I contacted Mr. Hansen

first and he referred me to Jack Humphreys. I had met Jack before I left. He was already working at the mine, so he offered me the job of superintendent of machinery provided I would get the electrical department going again the way it should be going. He had a lot of problems with the electrical department, so I started as a superintendent of electrical.

M: So you came back in 1967 after being gone for eight years?

G: Right.

M: And during that period the Mexicanization law had come into effect?

G: Right.

M: San Francisco itself had been Mexicanized or was in the process of being Mexicanized?

G: Partially, yeah, right.

M: What were the principle changes that you noticed when you came back in [19]67?

G: Well, the sindicato, the union, was a little rougher. It was a little stricter. It was hard to convince when you wanted to get your point across. The work force wasn't easy to get along with. They were a little bit against having Americans working at the company even though we got along real well and the rest of the staff got along real well, but you could see the trend, the change, and it got a little tougher.

M: Were there quite a lot more Mexican nationals working in the technical staff?

G: Oh, yes. Well, at that time the equivalent of chairman of the board was a Mexican national and Mr. Hansen was just a consultant then, but, yes, there were more Mexican nationals

in top positions.

M: Had most of those nationals been hired from outside or were they people that had worked with and had previous experience with Frisco?

G: Very few were with the company. Most were hired from outside in the mining field and, also, in the administration. Accounting and all those departments, they were all Mexican nationals.

M: And how would you assess their capabilities?

G: Oh, they were very capable. I can't say that they weren't doing their job. They were doing their job. The people I had under me, they were all Mexican nationals. I didn't have any foreigners. And they had to do their job. (chuckles)

M: So like the electrical engineers and the electrical technicians that you hired from outside were adequately trained? Well-trained? How would you characterize that?

G: Well, some of them were just out of school, so they had no practical experience and they had to learn the hard way, but they responded real well. They responded real well and, I think, I had a very good crew that they did their job and did it right. I really can't complain, other than one of the electrical engineers, whom I took over from him, he tried to get me fired (chuckles) through the process, but he wasn't successful. And then the mechanical engineer, a Mexican national, he tried to get me fired and that was unsuccessful, too. So outside of those two people I didn't have any problem.

M: Well, in the later years after [19]67 when the Mexicanization

was completely in place and there were other Mexican nationals in higher and higher positions within Frisco, did you sense any animosity then between those technical people and foreigners?

Were they hostile at all?

G: Well, they weren't openly hostile, but you could sense it. I sensed it, especially from the accounting department, from the higher echelon in Mexico City. The purchasing office was in Mexico City, although we had our purchasing office, also, at the mine, but they were controlled by Mexico City and it got a little tougher for us to work. They were asking a lot of questions every time they came down from Mexico City as if we were not doing our job or stealing from the company. And they would really ride us hard sometimes. I got angry several times at those (chuckles) auditors. And they were internal auditors. The external auditors were easy to get it over, but the internal auditors...as a matter of fact, the CEO right now was an internal auditor and, boy, he rode hard. He wanted everything by the book to the point that my mechanical superintendent, he had a gas cap from a truck, brand new, in his desk drawer that they had brought from the garage because they didn't need it or didn't use it. And he asked him, "How come you got that there? That should be in the warehouse." (chuckles) Things like that, you know...a gas cap from a pickup.

M: Well what about the social life? Were there any noticeable changes?

G: Yes, there were. There were a lot of changes. The club was

not operating as we were operating before in the first period that I was working at the mine. People didn't get along as well as they did before. There was a lot of competition and somebody trying to get ahead, things like that.

M: Now, you brought your children to live at the camp. Is that true?

G: Well, not really, no. My two oldest girls, when we came back from California, they stayed here in El Paso and went to school to Loretto Academy. At that time I was renting a house.

M: In El Paso?

G: Here in El Paso. And then my three boys, they went to school in the colony, but then they outgrew it and two of them went to the secundaria right there in the village, in the mining town.

M: Now when you say outgrew it, the school that provided there in San Francisco was only through the eighth grade?

G: Eighth grade, right. So I had them in the secundaria. And one of them completed secundaria there in San Francisco del Oro. And it was a good secundaria. I was the president of the (chuckles) of the PTA and we kept good teachers and a good curriculum.

M: Well, do you think the living environment for children of that age was pretty good?

G: It was alright, oh yeah.

M: Did they find plenty to entertain themselves?

G: Oh, yeah, and they made good friends. We always kept an eye on them. But then we thought that, eventually, I was going to

leave that job, we were going to move to El Paso. And I bought a house here and my three boys started going to high school here in El Paso. And they graduated from high school here in El Paso. And my wife was going back and forth and I was coming here and going back. And having two houses, or two homes, is not easy.

M: Alright, so then in that period how did you travel from Parral?

G: Drove.

M: You drove?

G: Yeah.

M: Now, the highway at the time went from Parral over to Jiménez, is that right?

G: Jiménez and then Chihuahua City and Juárez. I drove and I, also, rode the bus many a time. Many a time I would take the bus in Parral at eleven o'clock at night and get in Juárez at six o'clock in the morning and vice-versa. Take the evening bus or night bus and arrive in the morning.

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

M: Mr. García, you had talked about living in San Francisco after you returned in [19]67. Let me ask you a question. Whenever I talk with anyone that did not work for San Francisco they always bring up the subject of San Antonio camp, was a segregated camp, that San Francisco was the only mining camp

in all of Mexico that had two camps: San Antonio and San Luis. Was the San Antonio camp a segregated camp?

G: I don't know who told you that, but Santa Bárbara, ASARCO mine, had two camps. They had Tecolotes, and I can't remember the other one. It had a saint's name, but I can't remember, and they were separated more so than ours. Ours was separated by a fence. They were separated by areas. Prieta had only one camp, but they had a lot of people living in town. They were just a block away from the main street of downtown, so they had a lot of people living in town. Whether that was for their convenience or segregation, nobody knows. Same thing with Santa Bárbara. It was a convenience or segregation. As far as our camps, yes, I'll agree that they were separate and the higher echelon, or the higher staff employees, were in the San Antonio camp. We had a closed gate camp with a guard at the door. The San Luis people, they were junior engineers, accountants, office workers. They did not want a closed gate in their camp. They did not care to have a guard, so we didn't think it proper for us to be altogether having one end of the camp open and the other one closed.

M: Was the San Luis camp approximately the same size as San Antonio in terms of number of families that lived there?

G: Probably San Luis had a little bit more, yeah, not very many.

M: Did they have their own club?

G: Yes, and club house with two bowling alleys, a bar. They had the same facilities that we had. Tennis courts, we had tennis courts; we had a swimming pool, they did not. That was the only difference. Around the swimming pool we had a picnic

ground.

M: Now, did the company provide housing for the people that lived in San Luis free of charge?

G: Right. And furnished.

M: And furnished. And you did all the maintenance and so forth in San Luis just like in San Antonio?

G: That's right. They had a broken door, a broken window, we'd send people to repair it. If the roof leaked we'd send people to replace the roof. When the company grew in staff we built new houses in San Luis, same way we built new houses in San Antonio.

M: When you left San Francisco in [19]82, by the early [19]80s, how many foreigners were left working there at that time?

G: If I can remember correctly, I think, only two; Jack Humphreys was the general manager and Mauricio Grenaire, who was a diamond driller. I can't remember any other.

M: So most of the people then that had left, it had been a gradual departure?

G: Yes, yes. And the reason I left was because of the devaluation. It hit me hard. I had my family living here with dollar expenses and earning pesos and it just didn't work out. I could have stayed longer, but I just couldn't make ends meet.

M: Are there some particular experiences that stand out in your mind from the time you spent in the Parral area at San Francisco?

G: Experiences socially or in working?

M: Working or anything.

G: Well, the installations that we made both inside the mine and in the mills, were...I don't think that any person can say they did a sloppy job or didn't have the experience. Well, we did everything we could by research and trying to get everything done according to the manufacturer's specification. A lot of times we had to change it, but as far as the support groups of electrical and mechanical, we built a fluorspar plant from scratch and all the electrical and the mechanical were done by our group with our supervision with our workforce. Yes, we had consultants go from the States because they sold the equipment and we wanted them responsible to a point as far as the operation of the equipment.

M: Now, in regard to, for example, the electrical work. That was done basically to your own standards, to your own specifications, because there were not what would be county codes or anything to...

G: Well, there are codes, but you get around them. You can't here in the States, okay, but we didn't cut corners and make things unsafe. Everything was done through manuals that had a specified code and we followed those codes. And we did everything by calculating electrical loads and everything. I mean, we just didn't think, "Well, I think it'll take a hundred amp switch." We had to find out whether a hundred amp switch was adequate or not. It wasn't a fly-by-night operation.

And I had an engineer. He left before I did. Now, he is doing electrical work here in Juárez. He was very sharp and he helped me out a lot. And he's a national and graduated

from Mexico City, the politécnico. But he is sharp in electrical work. And he and I worked together in a lot of those projects. We installed over a mile length of trolley inside the mine through hook or crook, but we got it working. It's still working. And I even sent a write-up to Ohio Brass and it was published in their periodical. And it was sketched and everything because we bought the equipment from Ohio Brass. And I told them that some of the places where we had to install these trolley hangers it looked like they were hanging just from air (chuckles) because of the high ceilings. And we got it working.

I mean, we worked with 13,000 volts inside the mine. Same thing outside the mine. We ran our own power lines and everything...13,000 volts. So it wasn't just a job of putting things together and "Let's hope it works." We knew it was going to work.

M: How would you characterize your twenty-five years of working at San Francisco?

G: A big experience. I mean, what I know now, I think, I learned most of it there. I can't say I didn't learn anything the seven years I was in California because I did learn something. And I'm the type that is very inquisitive. I want to learn. And even right now I'm learning (chuckles) how to put an organ together. So I can say that my experience, and I started working right out of school after graduation, I started working at the mine and that's where I acquired my experience and that helped me get the three jobs that I had in California. And they were three different jobs...not mining.

M: Knowing now what you didn't know then would you have signed on to work in Mexico?

G: Would I go back to work in Mexico?

M: Would you have done it again?

G: Not at my age. (chuckles)

M: No, but, I mean, as a young person.

G: As a young person, if there was a chance of going back, yes, I would, yeah. Yes, I would. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working and living in that part of Mexico. I made a lot of company trips to other mines that the company was exploring. In the state of Sonora they opened up two mines and I did all the electrical and mechanical work there. When I say "I", I supervised it. I designed a lot of it and supervised it. I had people under me who were the direct supervisors, but I had to make trips to those mines periodically to see the progress of the job and I enjoyed that, too.

M: Did you maintain acquaintances and friends in Parral over the years you worked?

G: Oh, yes. Yes, we still send Christmas cards and sometimes they come. They still live in Parral. They come here to El Paso shopping or they call me on the phone. We get together. We either go out and have dinner somewhere or they come and visit me and we just talk old times. (chuckles)

M: Mr. García, thanks very much for your time and conversation. It's been very interesting.

G: Thank you. I enjoyed it, too.

End of Interview