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José Anthony Quintana

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Mining in Mexico
Oral History Project

Dr. José A. Quintana, Sr.
By W. Noel McAnulty, Jr.

December 15, 1995

- M: Let me make a brief introduction. Today is Friday, December 15. I'm visiting with Dr. José Anthony Quintana in El Paso about his remembrances of the experience of working in mining colonies in Mexico. Dr. Quintana, thanks very much for your time. Could you just tell us briefly how you got involved in working in Mexico?
- Q: Well, I'd be very glad to do it because, as I said, I spent forty-two years of my professional life over there. The first time when I was there the medical department practically did not exist. It was just a first aid station. And at that time the manager was Mr. Hansen, Henry B. Hansen.
- M: Now, you're talking about Minera Frisco?
- Q: Yes, sir, yes, yes.
- M: That would have been in the 1930s?
- Q: At Minera Frisco. That was San Francisco Mines of Mexico, Limited when they started.
- M: Right.
- Q: They changed the name, Minera Frisco, when the Mexicanization...that's when they changed the name to Minera Frisco, S.A.
- M: So you first went to work with San Francisco mines when Henry Hansen was...
- Q: Limited. Yeah, it was an English company.

M: Yeah. And Henry Hansen was the manager when you first went there?

Q: Yeah. And the manager, when I went in, it was Mr. Straut, Allan Straut, but he didn't live in the mine, he lived here in El Paso or in California. He used to pay three or four visits a year to the mine. Really, the acting...it was Mr. William Hill. He was the general superintendent.

M: What year was it when you first started working in the mine?

Q: Well, he had some troubles, you know, with the union or something like that. He quit and he went to work for himself, so this was when Mr. Hansen came.

M: Right. And what year did you start working?

Q: In 1937.

M: In [19]37.

Q: In 1937 Mr. Hansen took his place. In that year, you know, the mine was probably one of the best times because the ore was very rich and high-priced...lead, zinc, and copper. And Mr. Hansen was a very, very nice person. He was a good manager, a good man. He had, too, many friends. Everybody liked Mr. Hansen, see, because he was always ready to help in all the way that he could. And at that time was when he built the hospital. We had a hospital with thirty-five beds. I remember when myself and the architect and Mr. Nunn, we came here to see the hospitals. In that time the...

M: Here in El Paso?

Q: Yes, sir. In that time the old Hotel Dieu was number one. Well, we went there and Mr. Nunn made plans and everything to build something in a small way, but according with the way

they were here. I remember, especially in the operating room, because it was my department. It was very, very, very well-equipped in that time. I can say without...that that place was the best operating room in the northern part of Mexico. Mr. Hansen, he gave me carte-blanche, see, to come here to buy equipment. I don't know if you remember some surgical supply, Southwest Surgical Supply.

M: I've heard of the name, yes.

Q: Yeah. It was Mr. Cameron and Mr. Hudson. They were the managers. And they helped me to buy the x-ray equipment, everything, see, up-to-date in that time. And we got to take care of the... . In the first place, we had three more doctors that worked with me and some nurses from the Palmoré School in Chihuahua. They were very well-trained. We had six nurses. And we took care of the workers, their families, the employees and their families, and, when we had the time, some private practice. Mr. Hansen let me do it. And we worked. You know, it was really the only place that had everything because in Santa Bárbara the ASARCO had a unit, too, Tecolotes, but they didn't have the equipment we had.

M: So the new hospital that was built there at San Francisco about when? About 1940? Was it around there?

Q: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

M: And was the hospital built on the grounds of the colonia?

Q: Well, the hospital was built on one hill before going to the colonias in the same place that they used to have that first aid station. They tore down that and built the hospital, that's what I said, in the best way we could. Hotel Dieu was

our model.

M: Was it a regulation of the federal government that mines such as San Francisco had to provide medical services for the employees?

Q: Oh, yes, sure. Yeah, according with the law the two people, they had to be Mexicans, the doctor and the...in charge of the labor department. The rest of the people, they all were Americans.

M: So let's back up just a moment. When you first went to work at San Francisco Mines was this one of your first jobs as a doctor?

Q: Yes, sir, yes. I was in private practice. I came here, spent two years' residency in Boston, in New York, and in Atlanta. And the company, they wanted to have a doctor that could speak English and Spanish to take care of people because the community was mixed. The same way was with the labor department...to understand the workers and the, you know, all the unit's staff.

M: Well, tell me more about the hospital. You mentioned that it was equipped with thirty-five beds, modeled after Hotel Dieu...

Q: Yeah. We had the hospital equipped with thirty-five beds: ten that were private beds and the rest were in wards. The private beds were used especially for the American employees, their families or some private persons, or in case, if necessary, even the workers. They were entitled to have all the facilities. Our equipment and x-ray was very good. You know, it was practically the best. To the compensations and

to hire the people they had to pass a very strict physical examination to go in. And later, every year we made a check of all, see, to see if they got some silicosis and what grade they had.

M: The medical facility was primarily to service the miners?

Q: Sure.

M: And their employees?

Q: Yeah.

M: About how many miners were working at San Francisco at that time?

Q: Well, including the surface and the mine, approximately three thousand people.

M: Plus their families?

Q: Yes, sir, yes. Three thousand people working plus their families. The miners, they were all American, including the manager, the assistant manager. Everybody was American except the laborers. That's what I said, the labor department and medical department, by law, should be Mexican citizens.

M: What were the most common illness and accidents that you had to deal with among the miners?

Q: Well, you know the mines, how they were. It was just trouble...sometimes very small things and sometimes very serious but, especially, we worked in orthopedics: hand surgery and fractures of the limbs. But it was really general surgery because we did everything, not like now. The general surgeon was to do obstetrics, gynecology, general surgery, hernias, trauma, everything. Now it's different.

M: The accident victims that you had to deal with among the

miners, was the accident rate fairly high among miners when you started?

Q: Yeah, sure, yeah. But the accidents, that's what I told you first, supposedly were called the "regular" accidents. It was only small things, but I remember about four or five times about the really serious accidents underground. I remember very well once when a cage, for some reason, came down right to the bottom and there were twenty people in the cage. And the twenty people, they were all killed.

M: This would have been in the shaft?

Q: In the shaft, yes. It was one of the most serious accidents we took care of there. Apart from that, it was routine every day...bruises and small fractures and hernias and all that.

M: Among the families that you dealt with what were the most common illnesses that you dealt with with the family members?

Q: We had special hours to take care of the families for medical consultation, like a private patient..the families of the American miners, the superintendent, his aides, the shift bosses, and everything.

M: But you also dealt with the families of the laborers?
Is that correct?

Q: Yes. And the first time we took care of the families of the laborers, too. Later on the company had, it was really beautiful, another place. They called it La Clinica for the families of the workers.

M: And this was a separate facility?

Q: Yeah, sure. We didn't take care of them anymore there, but for the first two years we took care of them, too. It was a

lot of work, a lot of work, including obstetrics.

M: But, now, when La Clinica was formed was that, also, the responsibility of the mining company?

Q: No, no. The company paid someone, I don't know how much, to run the clinic. They paid the money to the union and the union, the Sindicato, Sección 20, they took care of that. You know, those people, how they are in the union...good people and bad people like everywhere, but it was the union of the company. It was the main, I can't say trouble, but the union asked for so much every year, more and more and more. And the company could do that when the mine was in a boom, okay, but later on when things settled it was completely different. It was not possible to.

M: Well, you must of had a different perspective of the mining company.

Q: Oh, yeah.

M: Did you live at the San Antonio colony?

Q: Yes, yes. The first time I lived in a house. They closed the hospital. I practiced in my quarters. It was part of the hospital. Later on I moved to San Antonio and that house was for the nurses...close by the hospital. I moved to the colonia at San Antonio. You know that they had two colonies: San Antonio for the Americans and the...they called it confidential employees. And the San Luis was for the, I can't say exactly the workers, but the first-class workers and their families. In certain ways it was the same, but San Antonio had more class than the other one, including the hotel. They provided rooms for the single people, and the restaurant, the

club. It was very nice there, very nice.

M: So when you first went to work at San Francisco all the people that lived in San Antonio camp were foreigners? Is that correct?

Q: Yes, sure.

M: And you mentioned they were mostly American. Were they all American? Did the British have some people there?

Q: Mostly American, and a couple of English, and two more people that used to be here in the El Paso School of Mines. They graduated here. And one was called the ingeniero responsable, Rafael Rangel. Another was Arnulfo Araujo. Yeah, Arnulfo Araujo was shift boss, but he studied here in the old School of Mines.

M: What are the principle changes that you remember about just the living conditions and so forth at San Antonio camp in the forty years that you worked for San Francisco?

Q: Well, the living conditions were very good, very, very good. We had everything including swimming pools, the club, a very good restaurant, and the houses. The company provided houses furnished. We didn't pay utilities, just a symbolic one dollar every month...just symbolic. You know those people, the dealers that sell mining equipment, they said that San Francisco was the best mining camp in Mexico.

M: So then you worked, then, until...when did you retire?

Q: When did I what?

M: When did you retire from...

Q: Well, I retired on the first of September, 1978.

M: [19]78?

Q: Yes.

M: So did you work through the period of Mexicanization with Frisco?

Q: Yes sir, yes sir.

M: What do you remember about those times? How did it affect the lives and attitudes of people during the Mexicanization?

Q: The Mexicanization, really, it was not too much, but to practically all the employees, excepting the general manager, it was the same thing to Mexicans and Americans both. It was symbolic.

M: The San Francisco colony...when did the Mexican nationals first began to live in San Antonio?

Q: Let's see. I think around 1940.

M: That early?

Q: Sure. Yeah, there was no distinction, but at first they had the two colonies apart. Like Santa Bárbara, it was the same thing.

M: Now, you mentioned that the other big mining camps, like Santa Bárbara, would have had their own separate medical facilities.

Q: Yes. Yes, sir.

M: But those facilities were, also, just set up to treat the miners?

Q: Sure.

M: And their families?

Q: There was no difference.

M: Was there ever particular pressure or need for these hospital facilities to treat people that didn't work for the mine?

Q: Well, you mean the people that didn't work for the mines?

M: Yes. Did they come to the hospital?

Q: In the village?

M: Yes.

Q: They used to come to the hospital, too. They had services there like a private patient.

M: What were the major illnesses that these people had? The people that were not miners, what were their major illnesses?

Q: Well, the difference was because the workers, they had the union. Back then, sometimes, the union made pressures, but it's like everything. Some people, they didn't like it, some people liked it, but always the union was in back of the workers.

M: Your family grew up, then in...

Q: My family? Yes, sir.

M: In San Francisco?

Q: Yes.

M: They attended the schools at the mine?

Q: Yes. We lived in San Antonio. I had my wife and two girls and a boy. Now, he's a doctor. This is my son. He lives here.

M: What was your impression of the quality of the education that they received at San Francisco?

Q: It was good because they had a school in the colony and the teacher in charge, she was Mexican, but she spoke very good English and Spanish. The kids, they grew up bilingual.

M: Were classes and instruction both in English and Spanish?

Q: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

M: So even there must have been...

Q: In San Antonio

M: In San Antonio.

Q: In San Luis they had just Spanish.

M: Just Spanish. But now, there must have been...the children of the foreigners at San Antonio camp, also, they received instruction in...

Q: All the people that lived in San Antonio colony, they were entitled to have...

M: But they received instruction in Spanish as well as English?

Q: Yeah, sure.

M: So were the majority of the children that grew up there in San Francisco, were they all bilingual?

Q: Yeah, sure, bilingual, yeah.

M: Then later, did they have a high school at San Francisco?

Q: I beg your pardon?

M: A high school, secundaria?

Q: No. No, it was just, I think, up to the eighth grade or something like that.

M: So then your children went somewhere else to high school?

Q: Sure. They graduated from here to continue their education.

M: So they came to El Paso?

Q: Yeah, but I think the eighth grade.

M: After the Mexicanization took place were there changes in government regulations in regard to the type of services or facilities that the mining companies had to provide? Did the companies continue to provide medical services?

Q: Well, the American people worked in the same way. They changed us...many Americans, they left. They left the company

and their position...it was to a Mexican citizen, but the general manger, he was American.

M: But did the requirements of the federal government to maintain medical service...that continued?

Q: Yeah, sure.

M: Is that still enforced today? For example, San Francisco still has the hospital there, I guess.

Q: Yes.

M: Is that a requirement of the federal government or is it something that just is tradition?

Q: No, no changes.

M: No changes?

Q: No changes at all. The surgeons would take care of the patients the same way. The only difference was that the company changed names to Minera Friscso, S.A. instead of San Francisco Mines of Mexico.

M: The general health of the miners during that period...how would you categorize that?

Q: The what?

M: The general health, the overall health of miners.

Q: Well, it was alright, it was alright. It was alright.

M: Was silicosis a particular problem?

Q: It was like a small town. We had running water, drainage, everything, like a small town.

M: But the miners, in general, were healthy, robust, strong people?

Q: Oh, yes, sure.

M: I had read somewhere that one of the complaints among the

miners were that when the mining companies began to have physical examinations as a prerequisite to their being an employee that some of the old miners, particularly, complained that was a way of discriminating against them because they probably weren't in good enough health to pass the physical exams.

Q: Well, if they were in good physical condition, especially in the respiratory, lungs and all that, especially... . Because the silicosis, it was the only professional sickness...accidents, yes, but this was according with the ley de trabajo, but the men should be in good physical condition.

M: Was silicosis a problem for miners? Did many of the miners contract silicosis?

Q: Yeah, sure.

M: Even in more modern times using water with drilling and so on?

Q: Sure, yes, Even that. It's impossible to avoid that. All depends on the individual, too. Some were predisposed to have silicosis more often than other things. And the complications from TB, it was, I can say...about ten percent of the whole had some infection. When they were found infected, the man was retired from work. They paid him according with the law, the Mexican law; so much silicosis, thirty percent, twenty percent, twenty-five, forty, fifty, seventy-five percent...according with the grade of the TB.

M: So, then, one of the responsibilities of the medical staff was to have annual examinations?

Q: Annual examinations.

M: Of all the miners?

Q: We had to do the whole mine.

M: Well, that was no small undertaking.

Q: It was really work, really heavy work.

M: So three thousand miners?

Q: We had to take the x-ray picture of the chest and the examination of the sputum, every year, every year, every year. If we found some signs of TB, the man was paid so much indemnity and he had to quit.

M: So then the medical facility, the hospital, was that facility upgraded through the years?

Q: The same way.

M: But the facility itself was improved every year?

Q: Well, the periodic exam...every year everybody that worked in the mines, in the surface, no, just in the mine...

M: Just in the mine, okay. But now, the hospital itself, after it was built, was it maintained to be a modern facility?

Q: Oh, yeah, sure. Yes.

M: Was it difficult to continue to get nurses and other doctors to work at the facility?

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

M: Let me ask you a couple of other questions, doctor. You mentioned that you don't remember, particularly, any striking conditions that took place at San Francisco after

Mexicanization.

Q: Yeah.

M: But there were some gradual changes that took place.

Q: Well, yes, yes, some changes, there's no question, but in general, I think, not much.

M: The changes were mainly in staffing?

Q: Yeah, sure. There were more Mexicans in the staff than before. That was the difference.

M: When you met with all the various miners through the years was there ever any resentment on the part of the Mexican nationals against the foreigners in the times before Mexicanization?

Q: Well, really, not too much, not too much. They had a good relationship.

M: Now, you say not too much. Does that mean that there was some resentment or was it more of a conflict between the boss and the worker?

Q: More socially. None at work...socially.

M: Tell me more about the Colonia San Luis and the Colonia San Antonio. The reason I ask is everyone I've talked with points this out as a real peculiarity at San Francisco. San Francisco was the only mining colony in Mexico, apparently, that had two separate colonies.

Q: Yes, sir. It's true. They had two divided with a fence.

M: It was divided by a fence?

Q: Sure, yes.

M: What was the origin of that? How did the two colonies come to be separated?

Q: I don't know. Since I came there the first time they already

had them. Now, in the last years, I think, no more. They tore down the fence, but the first time when I was there San Luis was, properly, a Mexican colony and San Antonio was for the American company.

M: Now did you think, was there resentment of the people that lived in San Luis against those that lived in San Antonio?

Q: Well, you know, sometimes there could be jealousy, but in general...the end of year and Christmas party always came together. Americans and Mexicans and their families always got together without any discrimination or anything like that.

M: In the early years when San Francisco Mine was owned by Union Corporation was there anything particularly noticeable about a British influence at San Francisco?

Q: Well, there was a certain difference.

M: How would you describe that difference?

Q: Well, I think, in the quality of the houses and the hotel, the restaurant. It was much better at San Antonio than San Luis.

M: Do you think that was partly due to the British influence and the English influence?

Q: Yeah, yeah. In San Luis they had the hotel, the club. I think it was alright.

M: Do you remember any particularly interesting experiences that happened to you in your forty years working?

L: Oh, too many.

M: Well, tell some of your favorite experiences.

Q: In the medical way, yes, we had very, very nice cases and we pioneered many things.

M: Such as? What types of things did you pioneer?

Q: Cancer surgery, a lot of surgery, vascular surgery. Yeah, we did the first lung resection, we did over there. The first resection of the esophagus, we did over there, and a lot of cases that we...gynecology, oncology, cancer of the cervix, cancer of the ovaries. I'm writing my memories.

M: Oh, you are?

Q: Yes.

M: Well, that will be good.

Q: I'm writing my memoirs and one section is for special cases, things that happened to me as a doctor right there. Because with my training I did not intend to stay there. It was just chance. I went for six months and six months converted to forty-two years because it was a virgin field of many things.

M: How would you compare the quality of the medical facility, the medical service, that was available at the hospital of San Francisco to the medical services that would have been available in Parral, for example?

Q: Oh, ours was much, much better.

M: Much better?

Q: Oh, sure. No comparison.

M: How about in some of the larger cities such as Chihuahua?

Q: Well, in certain...yes. That's what I told you. We had the number one operating job with everything: oxidants, pressures, suction, everything...including the floor was conductive... . And the equipment was number one.

M: Do you remember anything special about some of the things that happened to you while you were living at San Antonio? Was there anything particular that sticks...

Q: That happened to me in what sense?

M: Oh, any social events or any particular activity?

Q: You mean socially?

M: That you remember especially.

Q: Well, the Christmas time we were together. It was very nice.

M: How did you come to live in El Paso?

Q: I've been living here since that time.

M: Since you retired?

Q: Because my family...when my kids needed to change schools I sent them here. And they went to school here.

M: They went to school here and stayed?

Q: Yeah, I stayed over there and my family lived here. I used to come every month, spend a few days with them.

M: And then your son went to medical school and came back to El Paso to practice medicine?

Q: Yeah. My two daughters, they are nurses. They went to the school here, the Hotel Dieu School...not any more, it doesn't exist anymore. One is still working in Providence and the other one in Houston.

M: Oh, is that right?

Q: Yes.

M: So your entire family, then, is in the medical profession?

Q: Yes. And my son, he's practicing here and my grandson is studying medicine. The medical virus was in the family, yes, sir.

M: It sounds like it was. Indeed, it was. Well, Dr. Quintana, thanks very much for your time. I appreciate it.

Q: It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure to talk to you about it,

that wonderful time, because, really, for me, it was a wonderful time. That's what I told you. I came for six months and I stayed forty-two years. It was really good.

End of Interview