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Mary Navarro De Barssé

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Mining in Mexico
Oral History Project

Mary Navarro de Barssé
By Michelle G. Benavides

November 27, 1996

B: This is an interview with Mary Navarro de Barssé. The interview, by Michelle Benavides, is part of the Mining in Mexico Oral History Project. We are located at the home of Mrs. Barssé at Libramiento, *numero* 62, Colonia Las Fuentes, Hidalgo del Parral, Chihuahua, México. Today's date is November 27, 1996.

How about if we start the interview, Mrs. Barssé, by having you share a bit of biographical information with us. If you could tell me when and where were you born, please?

NB: I was born in Torreón, Coahuila on August 26, 1942.

B: What was the name of your parents?

NB: Manuel Navarro and Louise Martínez.

B: What did your father do, Mrs. Barssé?

NB: He always worked for the railroad company. He worked on a lathe. He was a lathe operator.

B: Were they from Coahuila?

NB: No, they were from Monterrey, Nuevo León. But they moved there when they were very young to Torreón. That is where he started working for the railroad.

B: Did you have brothers and sisters?

NB: Yes, I have a sister and two brothers.

B: And what are their names?

NB: Emma is the oldest and Serapio (?), he is the second, then Roberto and myself. I am the youngest.

B: You're the youngest?

NB: Yes.

B: The spoiled one.

NB: The baby. (laughs)

B: So did you grow up in Coahuila?

NB: Well, yes, I could say so, yes. I was there until junior high. First, I went to the United States when I was twelve for a year, but then I got homesick, so I came back and completed three years of junior high. Then I went back to the United States and finished high school there.

B: Did you choose to go to the United States or did your parents send you?

NB: Yes, I wanted to. I was so young, but wanted to learn English and know about the States. I had some relatives there...my father's cousin.

B: In which part of the United States?

NB: In Racine, Wisconsin. He asked me if I wanted to go and I said, "Yes, I'd love it." So they let me and I went. But, you know, I was too young and so I wanted to come back.

B: Did you learn much English in that year?

NB: Well, yes. I didn't know a word of English when I went. I didn't even know how to say "Hi" or anything because in those

days they didn't teach you any English in elementary school, so I had to learn the hard way. I couldn't understand the words when they were talking to me.

B: Did you go to an elementary school while you were visiting your uncle?

NB: Yes, I finished elementary here in Mexico and then when I got there, because I didn't know a word of English, they put me in the third grade. By the end of the year I was in the sixth grade already because I advanced. I knew all the subjects except the language. So that's how it went. So then I came and did three years of junior high and went back to the States and then finished high school.

B: To the same area?

NB: Yes, to the same area...with another uncle and aunt.

B: You mentioned that you were there for three years to finish high school.

NB: Yes, that's right.

B: I imagine they were impressionable years because you were at that age where everything just...

NB: Yes, and I don't think I really took advantage of all the opportunities that you have there because of the language and the culture. You know, it's different. But now that I think about it, it seems like, wow, maybe I missed out on a lot of things that I could have done.

B: So when you graduated you came back to Mexico?

NB: Yes.

B: And what did you do when you came back?

NB: I started working for a company in Torreón.

B: In Torreón? What did you do for that company in Torreón?

NB: I was a secretary because in the last two years of high school I learned secretarial skills.

B: Such as typing and shorthand?

NB: Yes. I also had two courses in English so I would advance more rapidly.

B: Well, you must have been a real asset to the company if you spoke English and knew how to do all that.

NB: Well, yes, because in those days in Torreón there weren't a lot of bilingual secretaries, so I did get a good job. I worked for them for a couple of years. Then they moved to Mexico City. My family also moved to Mexico City. They asked me if I wanted to move with them and I said, "Yes", because it was a coincidence that my family was also moving to Mexico City.

B: Was your father transferred by the railroad?

NB: No, he was retired already in those days, so it was easy for them to move anywhere they wanted.

B: What was the name of the company where you were employed?

NB: Atlas Copco. It's a Swedish company. They sell equipment for the mines, like compressors and drills. I was secretary for the general manager.

B: So you moved to Mexico City. That must have been a big change from where you grew up.

NB: Oh, it sure was, but I loved it. It was beautiful. In those days it wasn't as hard as it is today. The population wasn't as bad and neither was the smog. You know, all those things. I really enjoyed it.

B: How old were you when you transferred to Mexico?

NB: Eighteen.

B: Eighteen? Were you dating at that time?

NB: Well, I started dating my husband. (laughs)

B: You need to tell me about the courtship. (laughter) How did you meet him, et cetera, et cetera?

NB: Well, I was learning French in Torreón because I wanted to learn French. Then when I got to Mexico City I asked for my transfer from the Alianza Francesa. They have it in Mexico City, also. So I started taking French in Mexico. He liked to collect stamps and I liked to collect stamps, so that's how we got, more or less, on the road. (laughs)

B: Well, back up. You started working for that company and, meanwhile, you were taking French lessons?

NB: Yes.

B: So how did you meet your husband the first time?

NB: It was in the company because he worked for the same company. Remember that I moved from Torreón to Mexico City? He was working for the same company that I moved to.

B: Do you remember the first time you saw him?

NB: Yes, very clearly. (laughs)

B: What did you think?

NB: Well, it was in a three-story building and we were on the third floor. He was on the first floor working in the warehouse. When I first got there another secretary took me to introduce me to all the personnel. It's kind of funny because when I was in Torreón I received a letter. Remember I worked for the general manager? He would get a copy of all the correspondence from Mexico City and I used to read all the correspondence. I just remembered the name. It stuck in my mind...Luis Barssé. Then three or four months later I met him. Isn't that funny?

B: Yes. Did you already have pictured in your mind what he looked like?

NB: No, no, no. Well, yes, I thought maybe he was an older man. Yes, I did have a picture of him, but it wasn't very clear. When I got over there and they told me Luis Barseé- he was reading the newspaper because it was coffee break or something- I didn't know him. When they took me on all the floors to introduce me to the people and he said, "Luis Barseé," I said, "I think I've seen your name somewhere." So it was right there in my mind.

B: Was it love at first sight?

NB: No, not exactly, but I really liked him. He was nice from the beginning, but no it wasn't. I don't think so. I was going out with another boy at the time, but it was nothing serious. So then we started talking. He would bring all his paperwork at the end of the day to me of whatever they had done; all

the movements in the warehouse. He was always very neat and all his papers were always arranged by date and number. That's what got me.

B: So when did he ask you out for the first time?

NB: We started talking and I mentioned something about the stamps and he asked me, "Do you collect stamps?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I do, too." We were always fighting for the stamps. This was an international company and they received mail from all over the world, so everybody was after the stamps. But I got to open the mail... .

B: So you got first choice?

NB: Yes. (laughs) He asked me if I could give him whatever was repeated and I didn't want. So I said, "Okay, I'll give them to you." Then he learned that I was taking French and he was trying to get into French, too.

B: Do you think he really wanted to learn French or did he just want to be with you?

NB: No, because he had been in another course before, but he just didn't stick with it.

B: How long did you date?

NB: For more than two years. And then we got married.

B: Did you get married in Mexico City?

NB: Yes, in Mexico City.

B: Do you remember your wedding?

NB: Yes. We had a small reception, but we married at a very beautiful church, the Sagrada Familia. I didn't have many

friends because I had just moved there, but some of my friends from Torreón went and, of course, my relatives. My parents were there and my brothers and sister. All the people from the company went. After that we went home for a *brindis*. Then we went on our honeymoon to Acapulco for a week.

B: Did you go back to work after the wedding?

NB: Yes, I worked for another year. Then I got pregnant with my oldest child and I worked for about four or five months more. Then I quit. He kept working for the same company, but now he was in a higher position. My daughter was born on July 10 and then four months later I was pregnant again. (laughs)

B: That was quick.

NB: It sure was. Then I found out I had the Rh negative and that I should be pregnant at least five years apart, but nothing happened, thank God.

B: You had a fairly easy pregnancy?

NB: Yes, I did.

B: During this time your husband was still with the same company?

NB: Yes, he was. He worked there for a couple of years more. Then he started his own business with a partner, but it didn't go well so he took another job with Ingersoll-Rand, which is in the same field.

B: They make mining equipment, also?

NB: Yes, they do. They were the competition, but because he was a good salesman they took him right away.

B: How long did the two of you live in Mexico City before he was

transferred?

NB: Well, not exactly transferred, no. First he worked for Ingersoll-Rand.

B: He left the company he worked for to work for Ingersoll-Rand?

NB: Yes, for a better salary. Then he quit to start the new business, but then the company didn't go well. So they closed it and he was out of a job.

B: That must have been difficult.

NB: But I was working.

B: You had gone back to work?

NB: Yes, I already had three children and my youngest daughter was going to be five years old so she was going to school. My mother-in-law was living with us and I had a good maid. So I went to work for a school, Sun Hill. It's a Montessori school.

B: Oh. And you taught there?

NB: No, no. I was the secretary to the principal.

B: Well, that must have been interesting.

NB: I also taught when there was a teacher missing. I would substitute.

B: Did you enjoy doing that?

NB: I loved it! It was completely different from what I was used to doing. My boss was really nice, Dr. Meadows. So then my husband found this job in Matamoros, so we moved. And I was already seven months pregnant.

B: With your last baby?

NB: Yes. We moved and he told me all about Matamoros. It was not a pleasant city. It rained a lot. The cars rusted easily because of the humidity. But we lived in the best part of the city which is the Colonia Jardín. It's about three blocks from the border to Brownsville, [Texas]. We really enjoyed it. I easily adapt to anywhere I go.

B: Which is an asset.

NB: Yes, I think so. We stayed there for a couple of years.

B: Did you work while you were in Matamoros?

NB: No, because I had the baby. Remember, I was already pregnant. We moved in March and the baby was born in May. So, no, I didn't have a chance to work anymore. I already had four kids. I had to drive them around for their school, painting classes, dancing classes, and, you know, all of that and take care of the baby. (laughs)

B: A lot of work.

NB: Yes, but my husband would get home early. He would leave work at 5:00 p.m. because it was an American company and they had working hours from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. And he would come home for lunch. He had a contract for two years while they built the plant. When they finished building the plant we were out of work again. He was out of a job, but this company was a sister company to the Frisco company and they offered him the purchasing department here in del Oro.

B: When he was in Matamoros was he in the purchasing department, also?

NB: Yes, for Química Fluoruro.

B: What type of plant were they building?

NB: Fluoride. But it only lasted two years.

B: How did he feel about taking jobs like that knowing that it was going to end? Or did he always feel confident enough that he would find work?

NB: Yes, he was confident he would find something at the end of the contract, which he did, because they recommended him for the purchasing job here. So we moved again to Oro. It was getting worse and worse. (laughs) You know, from Mexico City to Matamoros and then to Oro. You know Oro? Have you ever been there?

B: Yes, I was there today.

NB: How is it?

B: Well, this was the first time I had seen it. We just went for a ride in the country today because I had never seen Santa Bárbara. I wanted to see the colonia because many of the people I've interviewed lived there. So we drove up and my husband got out. He talked to the watchman. He said, "I can't let you in." My husband said, "We just want to look around." So he answers, "No. It's gone down. It's not the same." He sounded as if he was embarrassed, but to make a long story short, we did get to go through. It's just totally apart from the rest of the community, but I'll let you tell me.

NB: Maybe Peggy Humphreys told you about it. That was, more or

less, the time we were there.

B: You were there at the same time? Oh, when he told you that you were moving to San Francisco del Oro did you picture the town to be like it was?

NB: Not exactly, no. But my husband had come there before to talk to the people there. He had talked to Mr. Humphreys, who was going to hire him. He went to see the houses and they had told him about the school; that it was an American school, you know, an American system of education. He liked that for the kids. They told him about the swimming pool and the club, also. They told him about all the things he would get if he came there. So he said, "Yes."

B: This was before he discussed it with you?

NB: Well, he had been there because, remember, he was a salesman and he had been there on one of his trips. Frisco was a client to Atlas Copco, so he had to visit them and he knew what it was like. He told me, but he didn't tell me everything exactly. So he drove me through the town before getting me to the colony. I was saying, "What is this?" And he would say, "Don't worry. We'll get there soon." You know how the *pueblo* is?

B: It is very picturesque.

NB: Yes, but it's depressing after you've been to Brownsville and Mexico City. So then he took me to the colony and said, "This is it." I thought, "Well, it's not so bad." The house was an American-style. I really liked it.

B: Before you moved, did you know anyone who had lived there that you could call and ask, "What do I need to take?"

NB: No, I didn't know anyone there. Nor did I know anyone who had lived there. It was my first experience in a mining camp.

B: So which part of the colonia did you live in?

NB: San Antonio. That's where the Humphreys' were.

B: How many different sections, or areas, were there?

NB: In those days there was San Antonio, San Luis, and Zacatécas.

B: So the one I saw was San Antonio?

NB: San Antonio, probably. That's where the gate is.

B: Yes, San Antonio. Where were the other camps, the other colonias?

NB: It's close to San Antonio, except now there is no fence. They tore it down to make only one colony because when this person came- I don't remember his name- as the general manager he said it was like racism. So he took the fence down and then it was only one colony, which was San Francisco, I think.

B: So the company provided your house for you?

NB: Yes, the furniture and everything.

B: Tell me about the house.

NB: Well, when we got there they offered us a house just for the time being because it was a small house. The one that was assigned to us, they had to build an extra bathroom because there was only one and another bedroom. So we stayed in the Green House. The person that had lived there before us was named Mr. Green, John Green. He was the purchasing agent. So

we lived in the Green House. We stayed there for about seven or eight months until they finished the other house, which was close to the apartments. Did you see where the apartments were?

B: On the right-hand side.

NB: Next to the swimming pool across the street.

B: Yes. Yes, I noticed those.

NB: Well, the first house next to the apartments was ours. That's where we lived.

B: When you drive in and you're following the little road that circles through, it's Argentina. Is that the road?

NB: Well, it didn't have a name before. I don't know if it does now.

B: It's Argentina, or something like that, and it circles through the colony. We passed through the gates and the road follows the hillside, then descends, and on the right side there is a big, big adobe house and it has a red tile roof.

NB: Okay, that's the one we used to call Las Lomas. That's where, I think, the mine supervisor lived.

B: Superintendent?

NB: Superintendent, yes. But, no, we lived where the swimming is. Did you get to place Peggy Humphreys' house?

B: No, because I interviewed her before I had seen the colonia.

NB: Okay, okay. Well, her's was the first house coming into the colony up on the hills. Then in front, but across the street, are the apartments. Then there's the rest of the houses.

Mine was the first one.

B: So was it a big house?

NB: It was a huge house.

B: It was big?

NB: Yes.

B: You had plenty of room?

NB: All of them are adobe houses. They have thick walls.

B: They're very distinct, though. When we drove in I told my husband, "It's like we're worlds apart from San Francisco del Oro." Because the roofs were different.

NB: Well, it was English-style because the English lived there before the Americans did. The company was owned by an Englishman. I can't remember his name right now.

B: That's okay. Maybe you can think of it later. So you were placed temporarily in the Green House?

NB: Yes.

B: And then you moved into your home?

NB: Yes.

B: Was it what you expected?

NB: Yes, I liked it. Well, not really, because those are not very modern. The distribution of the rooms are such that you have to go from one room past a door and into another room. They were not separated like they are now with an individual entrance into each room, but it was okay.

B: How was the furniture? Do you remember the furniture?

NB: Oh, yes, it was good furniture. They had Chippendale dining

sets. The sofas were sort of worn out, but nice.

B: They were good for children?

NB: Yes, well, they were well-kept except you could see they were old. You could have them upholstered, but they only had one kind of fabric to use for upholstering so all the houses looked the same. (laughs)

B: Well, that made it easy. You didn't have to make many decisions. So was there a welcoming committee to greet you when you arrived?

NB: No, not exactly, but we got there before Easter.

B: So the weather was real nice? It was Springtime?

NB: Well, it was chilly. It was in March. On Easter Sunday they always opened the swimming pool and they would have a picnic there. All the families from San Antonio get to go. They served chicken. You know Mrs. Louise Petrucci? You haven't met her?

B: She was interviewed by Dr. McAnulty. Wasn't she the social director or caterer?

NB: Yes, she was like the caterer, but she was in charge of, for instance, the hotel, the apartments, the *comedor*, the main dining room, for when they had visitors from England or whatever. She would cater to them...real nice person.

B: How did you make friends?

NB: Right away. (chuckles) I make friends right away with everybody. I think I'm sociable. I remember that I met a lot of people while all the families were there at the picnic.

One thing I can remember is that there were so many kids, about sixty or...I don't know how many. All the mothers would know the names of all the kids. I wondered how they could learn so many names and know who they are and call them by name. I thought, "I'll never learn their names." I thought there were so many of them but, no, in a week or two you learn all the names of everybody.

B: How did you pass a typical day? For example, a Monday. What would you do on a Monday?

NB: Well, at the beginning I was bored and it was March almost at the end of the school period. They had this teacher, Mrs. Araujo, who is now living in San Diego. She was the teacher for forty years there. Then there was Carolina Garza who took her job because she was retiring. The school year after I got there Carolina started school with Mrs. Araujo. Then the second year, when Mrs. Araujo was already out of the school, I asked Carolina if I could help her. I asked if I could be her assistant. She said, "Yes." So I would teach reading to the kids. We had only twenty-two children.

B: Tell me about the school. Was it a one-room school?

NB: Yes, a one-room school.

B: How were classes conducted?

NB: We had all the desks in the room. They were not separated by grades. We would call them to our room. For instance, when I was going to give them reading I would call them to a special room for reading. Then we had the audios and it was

really nice.

B: Do you think the education the children received there was better than what they would have received in town or anywhere else?

End of Tape One

Side A

Beginning of Tape One

Side B

NB: I was telling you about the room where I taught the reading.

B: Yes.

NB: Carolina had her desk and she would call the kids to take the math class or the science class. I was getting bored without doing anything. The baby would sleep a lot and he was eighteen months old.

B: So, the school children...were they all English-speaking?

NB: Oh, no.

B: What was the makeup of the children attending school? What was their nationality or ethnicity?

NB: When the school first started it was for the English who came to the colony to the camp so they wouldn't miss school. They were English-speaking children. But with the nationalization of the mines all the Americans left and so Mexican people had

to take their positions. So all the kids were Mexican. When we were there there weren't any American children anymore.

B: So you were there after Mexicanization?

NB: Well, it took place while we were there or a year later.

B: A year later. So you were there when it happened?

NB: Yes.

B: So when you first got there there were Americans?

NB: There were no children because all the American employees that were there were older people and their children had gone to the United States for college. So all the kids we had in school were Mexicans.

B: But they were taught in Spanish?

NB: No, English.

B: Oh, English.

NB: No, no. Spanish.

B: Did you use a certain style of teaching such as the Calvert Course?

NB: Mrs. Araujo was very fond of the Calvert Course.

B: Could you explain to me what the Calvert Course is for the benefit of listeners to this interview?

NB: This is almost a self-teaching course.

B: Like home study?

NB: Yes. For instance, if they move your husband to a different country you take the Calvert for your children. It comes from the first grade up to the twelfth grade. So you can teach your own children in India or China, wherever you move.

B: Do you think it's a good system?

NB: Yes, I think so. But Carolina, she wanted something more energetic. Is that how you say it?

B: Boy, she's energetic isn't she?

NB: She sure is and she was even more so in those days, but I think it was a good change we did with the books.

B: Your children were in this school?

NB: Yes.

B: Did you teach them?

NB: Yes. Well, I was a teacher so I had to teach them.

B: Was that difficult?

NB: No, not really because my kids always loved school and they were good students. They were smart, I think. (chuckles)

B: Good. They had a mom that was a teacher, so there were no excuses. (laughter)

NB: No, no. They really enjoyed school.

B: Did they ever interact with the other children who lived in the other colonias?

NB: Yes. They would call for parties or *piñatas*. I used to take them, the girls, to the other colony for dancing class because the teacher lived there. Her name was Elva. Yes, they would interact with other colony kids.

B: Did they celebrate both American and Mexican holidays before Mexicanization?

NB: No, because, for instance- this is a very cute anecdote about... . Maybe you should talk to Bertita Rice in

Chihuahua. She's so funny.

B: You'll have to give me her name and all.

NB: I'll give you her phone number. She lived there for more years than I did. The kids would go from first to sixth grade in the American school. From there they would go to the *pueblo*, to the village, to learn Spanish and to get their certificate for sixth grade because, otherwise, they would not be accepted in *secundaria*, in junior high, in *el pueblo*. So they would go in the morning to the American school and in the afternoon to the Spanish school to learn Spanish. Every Monday they would salute the flag. The first Monday that Bertita's oldest son got to school they said, "*¡Saludar!*" and he started saying, "Hi!" instead of saluting the flag. (chuckles) It was so funny and the way she tells it is funny, too. I think you should interview her.

B: I'll get you to write her name and telephone number down later. So when the children went into the *pueblo* to attend school what transition did they have to go through?

NB: It was hard. They were looked down on. They were called *chorchos*.

B: ¿Como?

NB: *Chorchos*, which meant the rich people.

B: How do you spell that?

NB: C-H-O-R-C-H-O-S, *chorchos*. One of my kids almost cried when they called him that. I think it was the oldest one. He said, "*Mi dijieron chorcho*." I said, "Why don't you tell them

corchos?" (laughs) Just like, you know...so he wouldn't feel so bad. After the White School... .

B: Why did they call it the White School?

NB: Because the building was white.

B: It wasn't named after a Mr. and Mrs. White?

NB: No, no, no. It was the White School because it was a white building. After that they would go to the *secundaria* and that was it. When we were there there were only six years of English school.

B: So after the *secundaria* where did your children go?

NB: They had to come to Parral for high school.

B: You didn't send them away to the States or somewhere else?

NB: No, no, no, no. Only the American people would do that for high school. But, as I told you, the majority were Mexicans. There was only Mr. Humphreys, Louise Petrucci- and she was a widow already with no children- and there was Mr. Evans. His children were already married, I believe. Those probably had relatives to send them away to, but the Mexicans stayed here in Mexico.

B: What facilities did the company have there for the employees? Was there a hospital?

NB: Yes, there was a hospital for all the people in both colonies. I think it was for the workers, too. The workers had another clinic in town.

B: Did you ever have to go to that hospital or take your children because of an illness?

NB: Oh, yes, because of accidents. The oldest girl, when we had been there for about six months or so, fell from the merry-go-round and cut her lip open. They had to give her stitches. She bled so much that I was so scared.

B: Traumatized.

NB: Then the following week the third one fell from the slide and cut her forehead. There was a lot of blood then, too. Then another time my boy, who is the second, went to a hospital because he was doing an experiment, a bomb, (chuckles) and burned his left hand. He is left-handed and the skin was just hanging in pieces. It was terrible, so I called the hospital and we took him, but we then had to take him to El Paso.

B: Really?

NB: Yes, he was really bad. We had him there for about three weeks. They had to give him grafts and rehabilitation.

B: Is he okay now?

NB: Yes, he still has the scars, but he can move his hand and fingers.

B: Did many women deliver at that hospital?

NB: All of them.

B: Did anyone ever mention anything about their birthing experiences there?

NB: Well, that Dr. Quintañña was very strict. (laughs) He wouldn't let them yell.

B: Really?

NB: He wouldn't let them yell, but he was a very good surgeon and

a very good doctor. As a matter of fact, people from Parral went to the hospital over there for him to operate on them.

B: Evidently the hospital had a good reputation.

NB: Yes.

B: Was there a *familia planificación*, a family planning clinic, there?

NB: No, not in those days. Not that I know of.

B: I'll ask one more question about the hospital. Were there ever any mine accidents where people had to be hospitalized?

NB: Well, yes. There were many, for instance, men that fell in the chutes or if they got their fingers smashed. Of course, they didn't happen everyday.

B: Was there a library in the *colonia*?

NB: Yes, there was. And we had a book club. We would gather once a month and discuss the books we had read. It was really nice.

B: Where did you get the books from?

NB: Some of them were from the library and some of them we would buy ourselves. We had to pay a fee each month so we could get new books that were not in the library.

B: Did you have access to magazines?

NB: No. And that's funny that we never thought about it. As individuals we had subscriptions to magazines, but we didn't get them through the library.

B: But you had personal subscriptions?

NB: Yes.

B: Did that enable you to keep up with the latest styles?

NB: Yes, it did.

B: Was there a beauty salon in the colonia?

NB: No, it was in *el pueblo*. You had to go to *el pueblo*.

B: How about a grocery store?

NB: When I first got there, remember, my husband drove me through the town. He showed me where the mercado was. There were three little puestitos. I thought to myself, "Well, okay?" I was used to buying my groceries in Brownsville in a supermarket.

B: Are there things that you can remember not being able to get there at the mining camp?

NB: Oh, yes. Like vegetables, for instance, but you could grow your own vegetables in your own garden.

B: Did you grow your own vegetables?

NB: Oh, yes. You could get asparagus, beets, carrots, broccoli, and bell pepper.

B: I noticed that all of the homes had nice-sized yards.

NB: You had your front yard and you had your back yard. Behind the houses across the road was land for planting your own garden.

B: The company paid for the housing. Did you have to pay utilities?

NB: No, only the phone.

B: That must have been a savings.

NB: We only had to pay for our phone, food, and clothing.

B: Were the houses heated and cooled?

NB: Yes. Well, they had the chimney. They were not heated, but we had all the heaters you would need.

B: Space heaters that you could just plug in?

NB: Yes, that's right.

B: Do you remember what the housing was like in the other colonia?

NB: Well, they were more or less the same, but not as big. They didn't have the same furniture that we did either.

B: Did the company provide housing for them, also, or did they have to pay rent?

NB: No, not in those days. When I was over there, I don't know if someone has mentioned this to you, that we had *fomento cultural*, which was for people from the town. It's like a craft school for women. And Patricia Rable- have you heard of her?

B: No, I haven't.

NB: She was the one that had started it. It had been there before, but somehow they closed it. I don't know why. Maybe they didn't have the money to keep it going, so they closed it down. And then when she was there she started it again. She reopened it. And we had a lot of shops; we had sewing, we had knitting machines, first aid, and- what else- cooking. And then we had crafts, like dough flowers? What else? Carpentry for the men. We had beauty classes to become a beautician... for decorating cakes, *pastiaje*. What else? Well, we had a

lot of activities there.

B: When you were there who was the mine superintendent?

NB: Mr. Humphreys.

B: Did his wife sort of set the standard for what the other women would do?

NB: No, no, no. Her motto was 'live and let live'.

B: Was that unusual?

NB: Well, it was my first experience in a mining camp. So I didn't have anything to compare it to. For me it was great. She was a wonderful person.

B: Many of the women in passing say that it was very difficult to live, work, and play together.

NB: To me it wasn't. I never had any problems with anybody. No, I don't think so.

B: Probably because you stayed so occupied with work, crafts, and the like.

NB: Yes, because when Patricia left I took charge of the *fomento* and I had it for about three or four years.

B: What did they do with the products...the crafts?

NB: They would sell them.

B: In the *pueblo*?

NB: It was the purpose of the center to teach them to do something to make a living with.

B: That was a good thing.

NB: Yes. And a lot of people really benefitted from it.

B: Was there a church in the colonia?

NB: For what?

B: To attend mass.

NB: A church? It was in town.

B: Did you attend mass in town?

NB: Yes, I did. There was only one church...the Catholic Church.
I think there was one for the Protestants, too.

B: Were there many single men in the colonia?

NB: No, not really, only families. There were a couple of men,
but they would live in the hotel or in apartments.

B: In the same colonia?

NB: It depended on the level that they were in. If they were
executives they would live there. If not, they would live in
San Luis.

B: Did you have a problem with vices such as prostitution,
drinking, gambling, or anything like that?

NB: Well, it must have been going on, but if it was it wasn't a
huge problem. I have heard that there was a house.

B: In the colonia?

NB: No, in town. It was in the town. The colonia was completely
protected you could say.

B: It was gated?

NB: Yes, it was gated.

B: Did they check everyone that went into the colonia?

NB: Yes, but not as they do today. For instance, nowadays they
ask, "Your name? Where are you going?" and "Who are you going
to visit?" But in those days you didn't have to sign your

name or anything. You could just go in.

B: What did you do if you wanted to go shopping?

NB: We went to a larger city. For clothing we would go to El Paso, [Texas]. We would go to El Paso three or four times a year.

B: Was that a treat?

NB: Yes, it was. (laughs) Especially for me because I was so used to Brownsville. After two years of buying everything American it was an adjustment.

B: Did you get vacations every year?

NB: Yes.

B: How many weeks or months was it?

NB: It was a month.

B: I know one lady that said that they got a month's vacation because the camp was so isolated that it took them a week to get where they were going. (laughter) And it took a week to get back, so they really only have a two-week vacation.

NB: It depends on where you went. For instance, all our kids were little and we took them on a trip all the way to Canada.

B: To Canada?

NB: Yes, the first time we went we took a trailer. We rented it in El Paso.

B: Did you camp out?

NB: Yes, we did. We would camp in the parks. We were supposed to go all the way to Seattle, Washington, where I have a brother, but we didn't get there because it was so hard to drive that

enormous trailer. It was one of those- what do you call it?

B: A Winnebago?

NB: Yes, a Winnebago. It was huge; it had three bedrooms and a kitchen. It was huge. It was very hard for my husband. It was just like driving a trailer.

B: Could you help him drive?

NB: No, he wouldn't let me because it was so hard for him he thought I couldn't make it. So we ended up in Denver, [Colorado] and then we came back. We were staying in the different states we were crossing. We took a month.

B: Well, that must have been a fun trip.

NB: For my kids, yes it was. They still remember everything about it. (laughs)

B: And then back to reality.

NB: The following year we went to Canada by car. We loved it. My kids enjoyed it a lot. On that vacation we made it to Seattle.

B: To see your brother?

NB: Yes. We stayed there for about a week. While we were there we saw a bunch of shooting stars. Then my brother took my husband to a huge fish market and they bought all kinds of seafood. They made a big, big pot of soup. It was delicious.

B: Do you like seafood?

NB: Yes, I love it.

B: Me, too. Did your husband ever come home and talk to you about his job?

NB: Well, yes.

B: Did he complain or say good things or what?

NB: Well, a little of both. Sometimes he would get mad at some of the employees because they wouldn't do things the way he wanted them to do them. Yes, I think so.

B: Did he stay in the office or was he on the road travelling?

NB: He would travel, but not that much. He didn't stay in his office because he had to visit the warehouse and the mechanic department. Because he was the purchaser he had to know what they needed. He had to check to see that it was the right thing they were ordering.

B: What happened when the company was Mexicanized?

NB: Well, everybody was upset because they had been paid in dollars and from that day on they were paid in pesos. A lot of them lost a lot of money because they had their savings in dollars and the bank paid them in pesos. So they lost a lot of money.

B: Did the management change then after Mexicanization, also?

NB: No, Mr. Humphreys stayed on. After Mexicanization if you had one hundred employees you had to have more than fifty percent Mexicans. That was the rule in all the areas. But, like I said, when we got there there weren't that many Americans. Every year for the Watch Party...

B: Tell me about the Watch Party. Several people have mentioned the Watch Parties.

NB: The English would come from England, that is, the owners of the

company, and they would give out watches to the people who had been working for the company for twenty-five years or more.

B: Did your husband ever get a watch?

NB: Oh, no, because he only worked there for about eight or ten years.

B: When the owners came over from England did they stay in the hotel?

NB: They had, as they called it, a guest house. It was commonly referred to as Mr. Hansen's house. He was the director of the company in Mexico City. Whenever he came he would stay in the Hansen house and when people came from England they would stay in the Hansen house, too.

B: Was it nice?

NB: Yes, it was. It's a colonial style and very beautiful.

B: Would they throw big parties for them?

NB: Yes.

B: Formal evenings?

NB: Yes, yes.

B: Did you have to get dressed up?

NB: Yes, yes.

B: How did they dress to go to the formal event?

NB: In those days? They wore long dresses.

B: Did they wear gloves?

NB: No. They weren't in style anymore, but they would dress very elegantly.

B: Do you think the women were a civilizing influence on the men?

What if there had been no women? Would they have had all of the social clubs, the tennis, the swimming, and everything?

NB: If there weren't any women?

B: If there were no women, do you think the company would have set up the same type of arrangements?

NB: I don't know. They would still have to have something to do. Not only drink, (laughs) but others things, too. Yeah, for instance, in the summer for the kids they would have swimming classes and tennis classes.

B: Who taught the swimming and tennis?

NB: Different teachers from Parral. Sometimes *capitán* Brito would teach.

B: What did he teach?

NB: He was a pilot. He was the company pilot for Mr. Humphreys and all the big-shots.

B: He would fly company people from one spot to another?

NB: Yes, to Mexico City or wherever they wanted to go.

B: Did your husband ever have to fly away?

NB: Well, yes, but usually to El Paso or Mexico City.

B: So he wasn't gone for a long period of time?

NB: No, no, no.

B: Did you come into Parral often?

NB: Yes, we did. For instance, the ladies would come on Wednesdays for the tea party or a shower or whatever. Sometimes we would all come in a car. We would come about 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon and leave about 5:00 p.m. or 6:00

p.m. in the afternoon.

B: Did you have a best friend in the colonia?

NB: Well, I had several. For instance, I had Bertita, Sylvia Murrillo, and Carolina.

B: Do all of you stay in touch?

NB: Yes, we do. As a matter of fact, Sylvia Murrillo lives here. Maybe you could interview her, although she doesn't speak English.

B: That's alright.

NB: They stayed there longer than I did. It was for about twenty or more years- Carolina, who lives here and Sylvia. Bertita used to live here, but she moved to Chihuahua about a year or two ago.

B: Did Carolina live in the colonia?

NB: Yes.

B: She lived there?

NB: Yes. Yeah, because remember that she took charge of the school. Then her husband was also hired by the company. He was a geologist.

B: So when did you leave the colonia? When did your husband leave the company?

NB: It was 1982. He started his own business here in Parral. He sells parts for the mining companies.

B: So he is still in mining?

NB: Yes, but also in industry and construction.

B: How did he decide to leave the company?

NB: Because we have these very close friends in Parral who encouraged him to start his own business. He said, "Yeah, maybe I can."

B: What were your sentiments? Did he discuss it with you?

NB: Well, I was afraid because we didn't have any capital to start it with. Then we would have to pay for the house, school, and everything. So it was a complete change, economically speaking, but we got through it. Of course, we had a hard time and we worked with the banks because the interest was so high. But we're getting along.

B: What advice would you give to a woman...

End of Tape One

Side B

Beginning of Tape Two

Side A

B: You were telling me about the advice you would give to a woman accompanying her husband.

NB: Yeah, to go and make the best of it. Because I think any place is good for you. It's what you make of it. It's not the place that makes you; it's you that makes the place.

B: Did you ever hear any stories of women that went to the mining camps and didn't like it?

NB: Yeah, a lot.

B: What would happen?

NB: I don't know. I think it's people who can not adjust to the changes or maybe their personality is not adequate for those places. It does take a lot of courage to be in a place like that, but you can make whatever you want out of it. I had a friend in Mexico City who would visit me. She would ask, "What do you do all day?" I would tell her that I didn't have enough time to do all the things I wanted to do. And that was true. For instance, I told you I became an assistant to Carolina.

B: Yes.

NB: At the beginning it was only two hours in the morning. Then she asked if I could help her more. By that time my little baby was already going to kindergarten, so I told her I would. I was working for three hours. Then in two or three months I was working for four hours until I was going all morning. When Carolina and I started we would go from eight o'clock to 12:00 p.m. and then the kids would go home to eat. They would come back at 1:00 p.m. and get out at 3:00 p.m., just like in the United States.

B: They would walk home?

NB: Yeah, because everybody lived there close to the school. The school is right by the swimming pool. You didn't see it?

B: I think I did.

NB: I don't think it exists anymore.

B: Then that must not have been it that I saw.

NB: There's the tennis court, the basketball court, and you have to go down about five or six steps and the school is down there.

B: I didn't see it.

NB: Well, it used to be there. I don't know if it's still there. It was a long rectangle.

B: What did you do for school supplies? For example, you mentioned that the children had headphones. Did Carolina go somewhere to buy them?

NB: No, no, no. We would order them by catalog and my husband would get everything because he was the purchaser. We would give him the purchase order for all the books and everything. He would get everything for us. No, she didn't have to go to the States or anything to get the supplies.

B: How did she keep up with the latest teaching styles and techniques? Or did you just teach one way?

NB: No, because she was a teacher and she knew the right thing to do.

B: Did you ever take the children on field trips?

NB: Yes.

B: Where did you go?

NB: Where did we take them? We took them to the Juanota, which is close to Guadalupe Calvo. It's a lagoon.

B: Can you spell that for me, please?

NB: La Juanota. Juan-o-ta. Juan with a "J". Yes, we took them and stayed for two nights.

B: Where did you stay?

NB: We took tents, sleeping bags, and everything we needed. Some of the mothers went with us.

B: As chaperones?

NB: Yes.

B: And you did all the cooking and roasting marshmallows?

NB: Yes, we took turns. The kids had a lot of fun. We would sing songs and tell stories. It was really fun.

B: Did they swim there, also?

NB: No, it was really, really cold. I don't remember which month we went in, but it was really cold. We had a campfire. It was really fun. That's the only one I can remember.

B: I'm backtracking because I wanted to ask you something about your house. You already explained the size and layout of the house. Did you have help in the house?

NB: Yes.

B: How many people did you have helping you?

NB: Only one.

B: Was it a he or a she?

NB: It was a she. Well, we always had the yardboy besides the person inside the house.

B: Was he from the *pueblo* also?

NB: The yardboy? Yes, he was and the maid, too.

B: Did she cook?

NB: No, I cooked. I've always cooked. I love to cook.

B: So she just cleaned?

NB: Yes. And I had another lady who would iron. She still comes here.

B: You're kidding?

NB: No. Twenty years later and she is still here.

B: She's almost part of the family.

NB: She's from Santa Bárbara.

B: She comes from Santa Bárbara to iron?

NB: Yes, once a week. Tomorrow she will be here. I have the same yardboy that I had over there. Now, he works for my husband. He doesn't want to do my yard anymore.

B: He's advanced.

NB: (laughs) Yes.

B: Do you ever have reunions or gather together?

NB: Oh, yes, we would get together and play cards on Wednesdays and sometimes on Fridays.

B: At someone's house?

NB: We would take turns. For instance, each week was a different house. We would play from 1:30 p.m. when the men would leave for work and get home about 4:30 p.m. or 5:00 p.m.

B: What a long afternoon. And what would you talk about when you got together?

NB: Nothing. We would just play.

B: No gossiping?

NB: No, no. Sometimes we would go for breakfast at someone's house, but it was mostly playing cards. And we had the Book Club. We would get together once a month. Then we had the

CAPS, Centro de Ayuda Parroquial. We would have a tea, you know, a card party, and we would charge twenty pesos. That money would go to the Church. That was once a month, too.

B: Do you know who started that tradition?

NB: Well, it was my idea, but it was Patricia and I and several ladies.

B: Do you keep in touch with the friends you made in the colonia?

NB: Yes. Bertita, we see her quite often. She comes to Parral because she has a daughter here. Also, Sylvia and- who else lives here? Well, Sylvia, Carolina, and I are the closest and Bertita, but she moved.

B: And Sylvia lived in the colonia also?

NB: Yes.

B: And what did her husband do?

NB: He was in charge of construction.

B: And Bertita?

NB: He was the metallurgist. He was in charge of that department.

B: Was your husband close to the husbands of these women?

NB: Well, he had a lot to do with them, with all of them, because he had to do all the purchasing no matter what the department was.

B: Would you have changed anything?

NB: If I had to do it over again?

B: If you had to do it over again.

NB: No, not exactly. I had a great time there. No, I don't think so. Maybe I would do more tennis; you know, play tennis

myself and take advantage of the swimming.

B: Was the pool and tennis court used mostly by children?

NB: No. You know, it was used by the teenagers and women. They would play tennis and swim. But, for instance, in the summer when the kids were out of school we would have to be at the swimming pool everyday.

B: Watching?

NB: Every day because we took turns. Children under the age of fourteen were not allowed to be at the pool without a parent or someone to take care of them.

B: Did the children date each other, or were they even of dating age? They were kind of young, weren't they?

NB: Well, there were all sizes and ages. As I said, we had kids from first grade to sixth grade. Then there were the ones who went to the *secundaria* in *el pueblo* and the older ones that came to Parral to the high school. Yeah, some of them dated.

B: Did any of them get married?

NB: No, I don't think so. No.

B: Do you remember any weddings while you were in the colonia?

NB: Yes. Mrs. Grenier's son got married. She's French-Canadian, or something like that. They live in El Paso. Maybe you could interview her.

B: That's great...all these names you're giving me.

NB: I had her phone number, but she moved. She was here a couple of weeks ago. I think he's still working selling steel for the mines.

B: They got married there?

NB: No, their daughter's wedding was there.

B: What happened when a child was born in the colonia? Would it have Mexican citizenship or dual citizenship?

NB: No, if the baby was born there he was automatically Mexican. But some women would go to El Paso to have their children...not all of them, though.

B: You'd have to time it pretty close, too, wouldn't you?

NB: Yes.

B: You mentioned that you went on vacation at times. Did some of the women ever leave their men behind, take the children, and go on vacation?

NB: No.

B: One lady told me that she did that because he couldn't be away for such a long period. So she would take the children and go herself.

NB: I don't know of anyone who did that. Because, for instance, myself, I never went anywhere on vacation without my husband, especially with the kids, no. Both of us went ourselves and left the kids there with some of the ladies there for a couple of days. Those were only short trips. I don't know of anyone who did that.

B: Well, would you like to say anything else?

NB: What else? I had a great time. My kids loved it. They grew up there and had a nice childhood because they could do anything. My kids loved animals, especially the boys. They

had snakes, tarantulas...you name it and they had it in the house. They weren't in the basement. They were in the house. I had a rattlesnake once in a fish bowl. Another time I had a tarantula there. We had hamsters, guinea pigs, turtles, fish, rabbits, and always a dog and cat, so I think they grew up very healthy.

B: Do you think they were isolated from the problems that are so prevalent today, like drugs and alcohol?

NB: We never heard of it there. They were so privileged because they were so enclosed and protected. Maybe the kids in Parral were different. When they came out of the colonia I think it was hard on them.

B: Do you think they were exposed to more of those things when they left?

NB: Well, yes, they were exposed to a lot. There was a lot of difference between life in the camp and life in the city.

B: How did you prepare your children for that change?

NB: There was this minibus that took them to and from school. They were so protected. They were so naive.

B: Could you tell the difference when they attended Parral?

NB: Yes, but the drug problem was not that big in those days. Or maybe I just wasn't aware of it.

B: Maybe not drugs, but just what the students did for entertainment because I'm sure they had different ideas on how to dress or whatever.

NB: Well, no, because the kids were up to date in everything even

though they were living in the colony.

B: I wonder if they would have taken different roads if they had grown up somewhere else, if they had not grown up in a mining camp.

NB: That we'll never know. (laughs)

B: How about we stop for now?

NB: Yes.

B: I'd like to thank you for your time and patience. I'm very flattered that you consented to let me interview you, Mrs. Barssé. It will be a very important addition to our collection.

NB: Well, I hope that it does help a little.

B: Thank you for your time. This is the end of the interview.

End of Interview