

Juan Espinosa

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Pablo Mora

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Colorado State University-Pueblo

University Archives and Special Collections

Pueblo, Colorado

MORA: This is Pablo Mora. I'm interviewing Juan Espinosa, today, March 4, 2014. The interview is taking place at Colorado State University-Pueblo in the Archives office. The interview is sponsored by CSU Pueblo University Archives and Special Collections and is part of the Southern Colorado Ethnic Heritage and Diversity Archives project. I wanted to confirm that Mr. Juan Espinosa, who I will interview today, understands this interview is being recorded and that this recording will be preserved at the CSU Pueblo University Archives.

ESPINOSA: Yes. I understand that.

MORA: Thank you. I've been asked to talk about the legacy of Christopher Columbus, not only here in Colorado, but across the nation and internationally really. Can you tell us a little about yourself in preparation for this?

ESPINOSA: Well, I think in relation to the subject, what is relevant is that I'm retired from the *Pueblo Chieftain*. I worked there as a reporter for 22 years. Then I became an editor and I was columnist for many years. One of the things that I was assigned to do was to cover the Columbus Day memorial and celebration, then eventually the protests. So, I have that history as a journalist in covering it [Columbus Day]. A little bit of back ground--I'm a Colorado native born in Montrose. I'm an Air Force veteran. I spent 1968 in Vietnam. I attended the University of Colorado in Boulder. I have a degree in news editorial from the School of Journalism there and I was involved in starting several alternative newspapers, actually two alternative

newspapers, El Diario de la Gente in Boulder and La Cucaracha here in Pueblo. So, there's a little bit of back ground.

MORA: Can you tell us about the background of the controversy over Christopher Columbus?

ESPINOSA: Well, my first awareness of the controversy, I believe, was prior to 1992 in preparation for the 500 year anniversary. I have videotape of a conference here at the--It was then the University of Southern Colorado--and there was a speaker that was speaking about Columbus. He was showing a slide show and he was showing some really atrocious kinds of torture, that the conquistadores did and how they treated the Natives of Mexico. The subject of his talk was against celebrating Columbus Day. That was my very first exposure to the issue. I hadn't really given it very much thought before that, to be honest with you. I guess I thought *Wow! How un-American.* But then I listened to him and it made me think, and I've been thinking about it ever since.

MORA: What about the legacy of Christopher Columbus?

ESPINOSA: Well, from his [Columbus'] own journals, we know that he was responsible for the death of many Native people that he encountered. The legacy has spread throughout the Continent. I don't know how many people--I would say that the estimates are at a minimum of about 30 million people that died during the conquest as a result of this "Age of Discovery" and it could be as much as 100 million people. And that's the legacy of Columbus.

MORA: But in Colorado, we were the first state to adopt a state holiday for Christopher Columbus. What was the idea of that celebration?

ESPINOSA: Well, there is a guy named Casimiro Barela. They used to call him the Perpetual Senator. He is one of the authors of the state constitution and he was very much involved in trying to protect the interests of the Hispanic settlers of Colorado. It was through him, or should I say, he helped write the constitution and he insisted that the constitution be written in three languages. Colorado's first constitution was written in English, Spanish, and German. His idea-- I read a biography of him-- was to establish Columbus as the important historic figure, because he was flying the Spanish flag. So the fact that he may or may not have been Italian wasn't even part of the issue at the time. It was more giving credit to the Spanish for the conquest.

MORA: So, at one point in the state's history, Christopher Columbus was celebrated for his Hispanic roots?

ESPINOSA: Well, for the country that he flew or that he sailed under. We all know that he was sailing under the Spanish flag for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. It wasn't until--well I don't know in history when he was recognized as an Italian sailor--but I'm not sure that's been determined to be a fact.

MORA: Right. In 1906, Colorado adopted Columbus Day as a holiday.

ESPINOSA: Right. Right.

MORA: Alright. Now the new perception of Columbus is what fueled the protests--is what I've been told and what I've seen. Here in Colorado, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to what was then called the New World was going to be a big celebration.

ESPINOSA: Well, you probably have to go back about 100 years before that. It was 1892 that Columbus was recognized--I think it was at the Chicago World's Fair [Columbian Exposition]--as being the great explorer that we now perceive him to be. Up to that point, he was pretty obscure. It was part of nationalism, part of manifest destiny. It was part of opening up the West to exploitation. And [it was] part of what is known as the "Doctrine of Discovery," which is a concept that came out of the Vatican in the 15th century. It basically gave Columbus and all the other explorers' permission to seize and claim lands of non-Christian people. So, it's got a very strong Christian religious connotation and through the "Doctrine of Discovery" they were allowed to claim the land. They were allowed to either convert the Natives to Christianity--if they [the Natives] refused, they [the explorers] were allowed to enslave them--or kill them by order of the Pope. That became international law and it's been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in a series of decisions in 1823. It's really what opened up the doors to exploiting all of the Native American tribes of the Southwest.

MORA: Do you know any specific things that Columbus did or that were attributed to him?

ESPINOSA: I think we were talking earlier about the Spanish friar or--I don't know if he was a priest or what he was.

MORA: Bartolomo Casas [Bartolome Las Casas].

ESPINOSA: Bartolomo Casas. He came with Columbus. I don't believe he was on the initial journey, but he came later, maybe on the second journey. After seeing what Columbus was doing with the Natives, he warned him that he was going to rot in Hell. He told him, "no God would support what you are doing to these people." And I think that's pretty damning. And that's a first person account!

MORA: Specifically what did Columbus do?

ESPINOSA: Torture!

MORA: Torture?

ESPINOSA: Yes, torture. I mean, cruel things! Burning people at the stake. But I'm not a historian, Paul. I don't know specifically, but I've seen pictures that illustrate Casas' writings which are of people in bondage, people enslaved.

MORA: He mentions the slave trade?

ESPINOSA: Yes.

MORA: Specifically, what role did Columbus play in the slave trade?

ESPINOSA: Well, he captured people on the island of Espanola and attempted to take them back to Europe. More than half the ones [Native Americans (Taino)] he sailed with didn't make it back to Spain, because they became sick at sea and they were just dumped in the ocean. And that's from his [Columbus'] own journals.

MORA: Well, let's fast forward to current events. When did Columbus Day become a controversial subject here in Colorado?

ESPINOSA: On the 500th year anniversary. 1992, to my knowledge, was the first protest at the Columbus statue [in Pueblo] and they used to have--well I guess they still do--they have two events. They have a laying of a wreath and a memorial service in the morning and later in the evening, they have a dinner. It became a political dinner, you know, politicians running for office would go there. It was very popular. Before there was a controversy, I covered it as a reporter. The speeches were political speeches, predominantly Democratic.

MORA: What was the nature of the event then?

ESPINOSA: Well, the laying of the wreath, was—It was Charlie Musso I believe. It was Musso and when I covered it in the years just prior to 1992, there was hardly anybody there. It looked like it was on its way out. I would guess that some of the times I covered it, there was less than 20-30 people there and most of them were ROTC honor guards, little bands, choirs that the schools would bus over, and a hand full of older Italian people. When the controversy started, that's when Columbus Day became a bigger deal for everybody on both sides. Just this past year, there was probably easily 150 people there to celebrate Columbus and at least 200-300 people to protest Columbus. I think the protesters have outnumbered the celebrants since 1992. I can't think of any exceptions to that. Because I worked at the *Chieftain*, I was trying to remain somewhat neutral on the issue. So, I took the role of documenting it [the Columbus Day events and protests]. I have videotape of about 10 Columbus Day protests and celebrations here in Pueblo. The demonstration used to follow the celebrants to the dinner in the evening at the arts center.

MORA: Well, have there been any attempts to negotiate a compromise on the Columbus Day observation?

ESPINOSA: Yes, there have. I don't remember the year--it had to be the mid-90s, maybe about '96 or '97. My wife Deborah and others worked to try to bring the different factions to the table. We met in a classroom at the El Pueblo History Museum. We had the Chief of Police, we had the Sheriff, and we had people from two different Italian groups. One was the Sons of Italy. The other group was the Familia Italiana—I believe—and we had several people that represented the protesters. We had two meetings as I remember, and at the second meeting, the Italians became very angry and walked out and there haven't been any meetings since then that I know of.

MORA: No attempt at negotiation?

ESPINOSA: No, like I said, we had a couple of meetings. They were both pretty contentious and, like I said, it was the Sons of Italy delegation that stomped out of the meeting and that was pretty much the end of it.

MORA: I understand that in other countries, for years, for decades, there have been Dia de la Raza and other sorts of observations of this date, as a date to bring up what you're talking about the European legacy in the Americas. Do you know if that has been attempted here?

ESPINOSA: Again, yes, we have tried to do that here, Paul. In fact, we have a Dia de la Raza on Columbus Day after the protest. We've had a cultural event off and on for probably about six or seven years. I remember I did a logo in 2006 or 2007 for Dia de la Raza. We usually get Native American speakers and have a little gathering. I know that some of them have been at the University campus and others have been at the El Pueblo History Museum and I think there's been others at all the other locations. I'm not sure of all the locations. It's basically a day of honoring and celebrating the indigenous cultures. I think it's important to say that I don't think anyone is against the Italian community celebrating their culture. I don't think that's the issue. I think the issue is taking a historical figure that is responsible for the deaths of millions of people, either directly or indirectly, and celebrating that person. Frequently, the comparison has been made to Hitler and it would be unheard of to have a Hitler celebration anywhere except maybe Germany, and even there, I don't believe they would do that. And you don't celebrate Custer. These are the people that are responsible for genocide. Covington--Colonel Covington [sic John Chivington]--the [Sand Creek Massacre] commander.

MORA: Chivington, from Sand Creek?

ESPINOSA: Yes, Chivington. I'm sorry. I was thinking about our old superintendent. Yes, Chivington, the commander at the Sand Creek Massacre. Those are people we don't celebrate and for good reason, because they are connected to genocide. And there is a greater genocide and a greater connection [to genocide] with Columbus. To continue to celebrating him is flaunting that conquest in the face of the people that were conquered.

MORA: Why was Chivington remembered?

ESPINOSA: Why is he remembered? Well, he is remembered as a coward.

MORA: What happened?

ESPINOSA: Attacking men, women, and children--old men, women, and children. The braves were gone. They attacked a camp that was flying the American flag that was also flying a white

flag of truce. And they [the Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Arapaho] had already negotiated to come in. There had been some hostilities and Chief Black Kettle [Cheyenne Chief] was trying to bring the people in [to the U.S. officials]. So they could live under a flag of peace, right?

MORA: And they had been guaranteed.

ESPINOSA: And 100 day volunteers led by Chivington, who was a hero of the battle of Glorieta Pass, a Civil War hero. So, he hadn't got into a war--and that was really the beginning of the Indian Wars and it didn't end until Wounded Knee [Massacre].

MORA: Alright! So, this counter protest against the Columbus Day celebration is rooted in-- what would you say? We want lessons.

ESPINOSA: Well, I think it's more in support of the indigenous people--the Native people. But it's been done largely by Chicanos and many people don't understand that Chicanos and Native Americans are related. Most Chicanos are Mexican and European by heritage, or they're descendants of the conquistadores, the Aztecs, and the Mayans. Up here, all of the Native American tribes--the Cheyenne, and the--the Spanish intermixed with all of these Native Americans and created what we call the Mestizo [the person of mixed blood]. We [Chicanos] are Mestizos. So, the Mestizo side of us is indigenous and we're supporting our Native American brothers. We [Chicanos] are Native Americans ourselves. Some people don't understand that.

MORA: Russell Means, the noted American Indian Movement activist who died in 2012, poured blood on the statue of Columbus in Denver, as I remember one of the early events.

ESPINOSA: Well, he was here [Pueblo] at least once, that I know of, because I have him on videotape and he was scheduled to come here the year that he died. He died two weeks after Columbus Day and he had planned to be here [in Pueblo] that year, but he became ill and eventually died. So, yes, he was very much aware of Pueblo, Colorado being the roots of this Columbus Day celebration. They [Native Americans] wanted to get at the celebration, at its roots.

MORA: Alright! Do you see any resolution to this controversy?

ESPINOSA: Well, I don't, no. The sides that I know are both entrenched and are going to stick to their positions through their lives. I think when people die, maybe there will be a resolution. The people that are involved now, are, I think, going to do it [resist a compromise] as long as they live on both sides, and I don't see a resolution. I don't see anybody with the diplomacy to bring the two sides together and to resolve it. There's a choice to ignore history and to ignore the facts. If the facts were known and acknowledged, I believe it would be easy to resolve. I think that the people that celebrate Columbus, are celebrating Columbus for the wrong reasons. We don't know if he really was Italian. And they are celebrating it, because they think it is important to stand their ground for their Italian heritage. You know, we would support calling it Italian Heritage Day and have them celebrate their culture, but when they want to put Columbus as the figurehead, as the focal point, that's flying in the face of the descendants of the people that he murdered.

MORA: Thank you very much for a great interview today.