

Rita J. Martinez

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 am interviewing Rita Martinez, today, March 4th, 2014. This interview is taking place at Colorado State University-Pueblo in the library, in Pueblo, CO of course. 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 Ms. Martinez understands that this interview is being recorded and that this recording is being preserved at the CSU-Pueblo University Archives.

MARTINEZ: I understand that.

MORA: Thank you for letting me interview you. Let me start out with a little bit about you. That's what our viewers want to know. What is your background? Are you from Pueblo?

MARTINEZ: I'm born and raised here in Pueblo. Yeah, I've gone to parochial schools here in Pueblo but graduated from a public school, a high school here in town. Then [I] went on to school at what was then Southern Colorado State College and then later University of Southern Colorado. So, I'm a home girl.

MORA: How did you come to be involved in political issues here in Pueblo?

MARTINEZ: It was actually when I was attending school here at the University of Southern Colorado. I took a Chicano Studies class from a person by the name of David Martinez who just kind of turned on the light bulb for me and really got me interested and involved in Chicano issues. The first thing [was] the second issue of the *Cucaracha* newspaper which was the Chicano newspaper here in town that just had been newly started. I was able to participate with the second issue from then on. So not only was it talking about being involved with helping with the Chicano newspaper, it was getting involved with social justice issues as well.

MORA: That might be about what year?

MARTINEZ: That was in 1976.

MORA: Okay, '76. I understand the Christopher Columbus issue didn't come up until later.

MARTINEZ: Right, so my involvement was anything from police brutality type issues, cultural events like Cinco de Mayo, the Dies y Seis de Septiembre, [and] doing other kinds of things that would come up during the year, no matter what that would be, just getting more and more involved. Right about 1990, there was a lot of talk about [the] 500 year anniversary of Columbus Day. So it was being talked internationally with groups that wanted to celebrate the 500 year anniversary, and then those that wanted to demonstrate and bring attention and thought that enough time had passed and that this was outrageous that we had Columbus Day still. There was a planning meeting all the way in Quito, Ecuador that was going on and some organizers from Colorado went and came back with a real big push that we should be doing something here in Colorado. In Denver they took it on and started doing activities before 1992, before the 500 year anniversary.

MORA: What was the nature of the objections to Columbus Day? I don't understand.

MARTINEZ: So I think that when I went to school, elementary school, you always heard that Christopher Columbus discovered America. So then later, there was a revision of the history, and [people] realized that he actually did not discover the Americas, that he was lost. [He] wound up in Hispanola, thought he was in India, [and] therefore named the native people Indians. So there was a lot of misunderstandings and, there were a lot of people who had believed so much in Christopher Columbus, thinking that, him being Italian, the Italian people that [he] was their person that they wanted to honor and [they] did not want to relinquish that. So, it was a real big struggle. It continues to be a struggle, and here we are in 2014 and we've gained some ground but it's still a struggle. So, in 1992, for Pueblo, it was to bring about awareness. In '92 there was probably about 20 people that would get together at the statue. They would do a wreath laying ceremony, and really, 20 people is generous. It might've been 10 that actually got together there. So it wasn't really a celebrated activity. The biggest function that happened was in the evening. They would have what they called a Christopher Columbus dinner and that really was a political dinner. It was good timing, being in October, before the November elections, and election years it was very heavily--

MORA: Attended--

MARTINEZ:...--attended by all the politicians from all over the state. So it was a big legislative get together. So that's really more of what it was than celebrating Christopher Columbus. But it was in his name, and so, our group--and it was a group of about 20-30 people that got together, and they were all community people that got involved in a lot of different kinds of facets of life, whether it would be grassroots, a lot of political people as well as professional

people--all felt that we needed to do something. So for the first demonstration, we decided to do a skit kind of a thing. Again, it was all about education. So we rented costumes for two of our younger people to look like the soldiers of Christopher Columbus on his voyage. We had someone dress as Christopher Columbus. We had made poles with big sails with crosses on them and three of those to represent the ships. So we processed to the [statue] right in front of the library and we did somewhat of a skit. So our Christopher Columbus actor talked about some of the atrocities that had happened at his hands and at his orders. It was our way of educating people to understand where we were coming from. We did the same thing that evening in front of the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center where the dinner was held.

MORA: Why did you pick in front of the library?

MARTINEZ: The library because that's where the wreath laying ceremony is that'd [been] done every year for the statue. The statue is the second in the country to be erected and that was in 1905. So, Pueblo really--we feel Pueblo is the birth place of Columbus Day. In the research that we've done, we realized that it was the Italian community, [the] strong Italian community from Pueblo, that pushed the legislation to go to Denver to have the first date to be recognized as a state holiday. So, Colorado is the first state to recognize Columbus Day as a holiday.

MORA: And doing it there by the Mesa Junction, the purpose of that was confrontational or what was it for?

MARTINEZ: Well no, just again a place that--I think that we didn't disrupt their activity. It wasn't much of an activity. It was just laying a wreath. I think someone might've said a couple words and pretty much that was it. Our take on it was that we wanted to educate people. So, it wasn't taken well, so, year after year, we continued to do that. Our whole emphasis is education, and the thing that people listen to right now is the demonstrations. We've had different forums--the library, educational forums where we get Italian studies professors to talk about Columbus and the voyage and [?] really can't defend what happened. We've had different forums by trying to utilize the Human Relations Commission and trying to work with the community and understanding what our goal was and that's to educate people as to the truth in education. We have yet to really address the school board and the church, because the church, again--it was all done in the name of Christianity. So that's a little ironic when you're talking about slave trading and mass murder and torture, and near genocide, but it's all done in the name of Christianity.

MORA: Have you brought these concerns to the Italian American community here in Pueblo?

MARTINEZ: We have.

MORA: And what--

MARTINEZ: We've sat down at the table so to speak, several times. I have a document here that lists the names of people and--

MORA: What is that paper?

MARTINEZ: That's what I'm looking for is the year here. Sorry.

MORA: Well, ballpark it, early '90's, or the 2000's? I can see the sheriff there. If it says what I think it does, that would make it in the late 90's.

MARTINEZ: [Dan] Corsentino? Yeah, Corsentino was part of that. Hmm, I'm surprised.

MORA: What is the nature of the letter?

MARTINEZ: So we met for several meetings over and over and over. It was representatives of the Italian community including clergy, educators, business people, and some other grassroots people from the Italian community and then from the Chicano-Mexicano-Indio community reps, professionals as well as grassroots people. The police department, the sheriff's department, all sat down and tried to have an understanding of what was happening. So we talked about the religious aspect. We talked about the educational aspect of it and why we were doing what we were doing. There was no agreement that anything would happen differently. We spent a whole lot of time and effort but basically what we signed was an agreement to disagree. And--

MORA: Over what? Christopher Columbus?

MARTINEZ: Over Christopher Columbus.

MORA: How did the community respond to that, the Italian-American community, when you said that he was the problem and not the celebration of Italian heritage?

MARTINEZ: Well, they understood it, but they also said--some of the attorneys that represented the Italian community--they basically said that they knew that their parents wouldn't give that up. Give up this holiday, and that it was--it almost seemed like it was going to be generational before something was going to happen. I've heard from the Sheriff Dan Corsentino who said that he agreed with our point of view but said that it wasn't going to happen right away. Even the Koncilja brothers--in one of the speeches that was given for Columbus Day, he as much said the same thing, that the Italian community celebrates the spirit of discovery and could not condone what happened at the hands of Christopher Columbus. So everybody knows what the right thing to do is. It's just that passing it in front of the older Italian community was not going to happen at that point in time. But I think that I'm very hopeful. I used to say that I don't think it would happen in my lifetime. I'm not too sure now. There are some, a lot of gains. There are different states that have changed the name of the holiday, or just don't observe Columbus Day anymore. There's legislation happening here and there in different states. So there is a trend to change the holiday. There's only one other holiday that is named after a person and that's Martin Luther King, Jr. and I can't even compare the two. So when there's so much controversy around somebody like Christopher Columbus and comparing him to Adolf Hitler, how could you ever imagine that the United States would have a Hitler Day?

MORA: Why not then a separate but equal arrangement where progressive people could celebrate Dia de la Raza, whatever it's called, you know, one of those things, or multi-cultural day, apart from what they're doing. I know it's been tried.

MARTINEZ: Part of our education is that we do present a forum every year called Dia de la Raza. So we present cultural entertainment [and] speakers about issues that are relevant to native people. We do that every year instead of celebrating Columbus Day. We have our Dia de la Raza activity. So we've tried to promote that.

MORA: For what purpose?

MARTINEZ: To honor indigenous people. I know that part of our arrangement with the Italian community in sitting down and trying to deal with our dispute is trying to say that we would also recognize anyone else that they brought to the forefront, an Italian explorer or scientist, whoever. There's been a lot of people mentioned, and that those people would be more deserving of a holiday. But whatever they decide to do, whether it was just to name something Italian Heritage Day, that we would support that because this, again, is not against the Italian community. It's against Christopher Columbus

MORA: And you've noticed a softening in the attitudes from both sides or from the Italian side or the Chicano-Indio side?

MARTINEZ: I think that more strength has been gathered for our side of it. I think that the Italian community realizes that, and I think that they see that it will happen, I'd say within the next 10 years, that there's going to be a change in what we celebrated. I just hope that we are able to do it in an educational type setting and that it's something that we can celebrate, Italian heritage and Indigenous people at the same time. That would be the win-win situation.

MORA: Let me go over one thing that did occur. I understood that police presence was required because there was the threat of violence, or violence actually did take place. Is that true that you're aware of?

MARTINEZ: Well, we're talking over 20 years of that activity and so [at] different times there have been different things that have happened. In the early years, the police would be there and they would not be facing the Italian community. They would only be facing the Chicano-Mexicano community, and they were waiting for something to happen, that we would do, where they would also let the older Italian people come over, push, wave flags in our faces, really trying to provoke our group. It was with our insistence, our organizers' insistence, that police get out of their cars, come and deal with what was happening before any other harmful situation would arise. So that's the way it was for a long time. Then there was the year when the wreath laying ceremony was over, our group was just left there, and someone from the Denver area went over to the statue, got the wreath and threw it down. There was one of the organizers from the

Italian community who was leaving, saw it, came back, and started a fight with that person, and a huge thing broke out. But there were no charges filed against that person, nothing.

MORA: Which one, the one who moved the wreath or the other one?

MARTINEZ: Either one.

MORA: Neither one was charged?

MARTINEZ: Right, right.

MORA: Where the police present then?

MARTINEZ: Yeah, they were. They were kind of on the outskirts of what was happening because it didn't look like anything was happening. So the presence of police has increased, as of a couple of years ago. The police presence would include people on the business side, the Abriendo business side. There would be cameras and police with rifles up on top of the business side. They would also be on the top of the library so they would have two different angles. They would also have a van that would be parked on the street to catch anything that would happen prior to the event, like overnight. So they've had a lot of presence. The other thing that they would do to prepare for us would be to have the SWAT team in the alley right behind Abriendo, on the alley of the business side. So they've had a lot of presence. When they used to do the Sangre de Cristo Art Center for the Columbus Day dinner, they would have the sheriff's department there because it's a county activity. The building is run by the county, so, we would have the sheriff's department there. They weren't as intensive as the Pueblo Police Department, but nonetheless, they were there.

MORA: That was the Columbus Day dinner held--

MARTINEZ: The same day but in the evening, right. So we would have two demonstrations. Then at one point in time, we decided to stop the dinner. We didn't really see any value in demonstrating in front of the dinner. We thought it was more important for us to focus on the wreath laying ceremony. So we've continued to do that. The one year that we chose not to do anything was the year of 9-11. That was because it had just happened. It wasn't even like a month and things were really at a different state in the country, and so out of respect, we chose not to have a demonstration that year.

MORA: Just for the record, did they have the wreath laying that year anyway? Do you know?

MARTINEZ: I'm not sure. Like I said, we didn't--we weren't there.

MORA: There has been a softening in the attitudes on both sides then? Since then?

MARTINEZ: Well, the individuals--there's two women and they are the daughters of Charlie Musso, and these two women continue to do the wreath laying ceremony and organize the dinner

in Christopher Columbus' name because of their dad. Their dad has since passed away and so they do it in his memory. And so, I can see these women, we can talk, where as before it was--we were enemies. I think there is somewhat of a softening. I think that maybe they understand. They've been interviewed at times and at the time they were interviewed, I didn't think that they understood our point of view. But since then, I think that either they're ready to let it go or I'm not too sure. But there is somewhat of a softening, as you call it. I think that some of that has to be--partly we can claim credit for that because we have brought a lot of awareness around. There was no La Familia Italiana. There was no Sons of Italy and there is now. They've organized themselves and they have big organizations now, and it is a direct result of the Columbus Day Protests. And, that, because sitting at the table with these people, they knew that as Chicano-Mexicano people, we were way ahead of the times by having Chicano Studies within the high schools. After that, you started seeing a real big interest in Italian Studies. Italian Studies went to the high schools as well as the university here. I know it's a direct result of our demonstrations. It's a form of education in a whole different way. So, that's got to be just positive. I mean, everybody wants to be proud of who they are, and their background. So to us, the more they learn about their own heritage, they'll pick someone who's really honorable of a day to recognize out of the year, instead of someone with the background of Christopher Columbus.

MORA: You had mentioned the schools being an arena sometime in the future?

MARTINEZ: Yeah, when we started doing all this organizing, I came across some information and it was a new curriculum that's being put out there, It was called "Rethinking Columbus." So at all different grade levels, whether it's elementary to high school, there is that kind of education as well that's going on. Right now in district [60?] what I've noticed is that teachers are left up to their own devices how they want to teach that subject. So they can pose, "is he a hero or a villain?" and they present the facts and the kids decide. Most times kids will say that he's a villain and--

MORA: Is that here in Pueblo?

MARTINEZ: Here in Pueblo and across the country, there's been a lot of national reports about this. So, again, the hero or villain? And presenting the facts and letting the kids decide on their own.

MORA: Well, let's talk about your goals then. Nationally is it to abolish Columbus Day, or to have a name change statewide. Colorado was the first state to adopt the Columbus Day holiday in 1907, I think, it became official. And locally, what are your goals here? What do you see coming out of this movement?

MARTINEZ: My personal goal is not to tear down the statue like a lot of people think. I think of that statue as a sign of the times. That's what was happening. That's what was important to people at that point in time. It's a reminder to us of where we were at. To perpetuate something

like that is not healthy. My goal is to abolish Columbus Day. It shouldn't be a holiday, and it's just that simple. If we get to the point of having another day named in its place, that's fine, but that's not my ultimate goal. It's just to abolish Columbus Day.

MORA: At the federal and state level?

MARTINEZ: Right. Because we realize also at those levels that we're paying as tax payers. We're paying for those federal, city, state holidays, and so it's a benefit that people are getting and at what cost really of realizing somebody like Christopher Columbus is--that were paying for a holiday for him? It's wrong. It's wrong in just so many ways, and so we need to rectify that. So to me, if we can abolish the holiday, that to me, is the ultimate goal there.

MORA: And you've seen progress in changing the curriculum in the schools, right? You mentioned something about the Catholic Church. Would you expand on that?

MARTINEZ: Well, I think that--we talked to one Bishop at one time. We know that every Columbus Day, in the morning, they have a mass that is done at the Union Depot, and the Bishop, for the most part, is the person that does that. They get a high ranking clergy to do that. So, in a sense, he's not just doing a mass, but he's celebrating an atrocity. So the church has to take a stand. Do they really believe that in the name of Christianity that that was right to do? You know, things happen in our history all the time that are wrong, and that years later, whether it was slavery, that we come and realize that was wrong. We were wrong back when all of this happened. We didn't do this right, and that's the kind of thing that the church needs to come out and say. They need to acknowledge that. And--

MORA: Their role in the genocide? Or what does the church need to do?

MARTINEZ: To acknowledge what happened in the name of Christianity, to absolve themselves and realize that they need absolution and make a public statement of that. To further the education around Columbus Day. That it should not have ever happened. When you're talking the murder of babies and the removal of men's hands because they didn't bring gold to them. I mean, they talk about--and this is all from Christopher Columbus' own journals, you know--they talk about the native people as being generous, generous to a fault, and that babies are thrown up in the air and [and they saw] how they could spear them, and making a game of it. I mean, it's just horrible things that happened.

MORA: With Columbus then or with all of the Europeans?

MARTINEZ: We're taking issue with Columbus. We're not taking the whole thing on. I mean, you can talk about invaders from different sides of the country. I mean, you can talk about Cortez [Hernán Cortés de Monroy y Pizarro] coming and what that meant. Again, that was done in the name of Christianity, but we're specific about Columbus. So again, the goal would be to

abolish Columbus Day, and to educate people, whether it's in the church and whether it's in the schools and to get the general public to understand what really happened.

There's even more thought around that and we have a very eloquent professor from CU-Denver, by the name of Glenn Morris. [He] is also involved with the American Indian Movement of Colorado [and] is also a law--what am I thinking?--an attorney that deals with Native American law, and who is talking about what was known as the Doctrine of Discovery and that is a huge piece that we're learning more about. How it wasn't by happenstance that Columbus came and was given the money that he needed to make these voyages, that there was a plan behind that and part of it is the Doctrine of Discovery, and part of it continues today in a lot of the different countries. I'm learning more about it--

MORA: What does it entail then, the Doctrine?

MARTINEZ: Well, it's a plan, and it's a plan to make sure that there is genocide of different peoples, that people think it needs to happen. It's kind of a Manifest Destiny kind of spirit, if you want to call it that, that there is a way to proceed and there is information behind it, and people behind it as well. I am really learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, but I realize that there is a bigger picture there, with the Doctrine of Discovery and more that we want to continue to educate people about. We've hosted Glenn Morris here, and he speaks more about that, and we're waiting for a book.

MORA: Who was specifically targeted by the Doctrine of Discovery? Indigenous people?

MARTINEZ: Indigenous people, yes.

MORA: Did it have a religious connotation too?

MARTINEZ: It's part of it. The Doctrine of Discovery is also part of what this country was founded on as well. So it's very, very in depth and I would do it no justice to try to, to speak of it.

MORA: Is this something living or is it a thing of the past?

MARTINEZ: No, it is living, and that's what's really interesting about it is that it was something that was developed back in the 1800's and that continues on from there, labeled as the Doctrine of Discovery. So, yeah.

MORA: So the change you are seeking is the abolishment of the Columbus Day holiday, changes in the church, an acknowledgement of its past role, [and] colonialism.

MARTINEZ: Sure.