

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Arturo Mantecon

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Norma Téllez and Briana Maldonado
May 22, 2015

Transcription by Technitype Transcripts

Mantecon My full name?

Q Yes.

[00:00:09]

Mantecon Arturo Alexander—not Alejandro—Alexander Mantecon.

Q Great. Birth date?

[00:00:16]

Mantecon May 2nd, 1948.

Q Marital status?

[00:00:21]

Mantecon Married.

Q Do you have any children?

[00:00:23]

Mantecon Yes.

Q How many?

[00:00:26]

Mantecon I have two biological children, two sons, and I have three stepchildren.
Check that. Four stepchildren. [laughter]

Q Okay.

[00:00:43]

Mantecon I lose track.

Q So where were you born and raised?

[00:00:47]

Mantecon I was born in Laredo, Texas. At the age of two, my mother and father took me to Detroit, Michigan, where I grew up.

Q Oh, so you grew up in Detroit.

[00:00:58]

Mantecon Mm-hmm.

Q Was that most of your childhood or—

[00:01:02]

Mantecon From the age of two to fifteen. Fifteen is when I moved to Sacramento.

Q What did your parents do for a living?

[00:01:12]

Mantecon My father was in retail men's clothing for most of his life. My mother was just a housewife. A housewife.

Q Do you have any brothers or sisters?

[00:01:34]

Mantecon Yes, I do. I have three sisters.

Q So where do you stand in there? Are you the oldest, youngest, middle?

[00:01:42]

Mantecon I'm the oldest.

Q So could you please describe your experiences, like, in your childhood and with your sisters and your mother and father?

[00:01:54]

Mantecon Well, I wasn't a child when my sisters were born. I was thirteen when my twin sisters were born, and I was seventeen when my youngest sister was born. So I was an only child for the first thirteen years of my life.

Q How was that change? Was it, like—

[00:02:25]

Mantecon I was fine with it. I mean, you know, I helped my parents take care of my twin sisters. I took care of them in every way. I fed them, I changed their diapers.

Q So the neighborhood you grew up in, Detroit, since you were an only child, did you, like, have a lot of friends? Like, how was that like?

[00:02:50]

Mantecon Through the first four years of school or so, I didn't have too many friends. It was after we moved, for some reason I acquired more friends. One of the reasons was I began just playing pick-up baseball, stuff like that, so I met a lot of people, a lot of kids that way. Before, I just lived in an apartment building and, you know, didn't really meet too many kids.

Q So were you a Fellow or a Felito or actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:03:45]

Mantecon No. Never even heard of it.

Q It was just an academic program at Sacramento. [laughs]

[00:03:51]

Mantecon Oh, okay. When was it?

Q It was like during the seventies.

[00:03:57]

Mantecon Seventies?

Q Yeah.

[00:04:02]

Mantecon I graduated from the university in '72.

Q So during that time, so you had no idea of the program.

[00:04:10]

Mantecon No.

Q Did you know of any other programs kind of like it, with the cultural aspect?

[00:04:15]

Mantecon Programs or associations? I knew there were some—

Q Or scholarships.

[00:04:19]

Mantecon There was MEChA.

Q MEChA?

[00:04:21]

Mantecon Here at City College there was a chapter of MAYA. What did that stand for? Mexican American Youth Association. That was about the first thing I was ever aware of, you know, academically. That was back in—I entered City College in '66. I wasn't a member.

Q Though you weren't a member, were you intrigued at all, or what were your personal feelings?

[00:04:56]

Mantecon I really wasn't intrigued. I kind of liked to look at the girls. [laughter] That was the only thing that intrigued me. [laughs]

Q Just kind of like to go back to, like, your childhood, how was that transition from, like, Detroit to coming to Sacramento?

[00:05:20]

Mantecon It was interesting. Looking back on it now, I had a very good time in Detroit. I had a very good upbringing. My parents, who were both high school dropouts, nevertheless had an appreciation for culture, and after having taken me to the Detroit Institute of Arts when I was five, and then having begged them repeatedly to take me again and again, it became a weekend thing. We would go there almost every Sunday, and then afterward—well, if it was a Saturday, we'd go to the Detroit Main Library, which was just across the street, this magnificent marble structure, still there. So I came into contact with a lot of high culture when I was in Detroit, and my schoolmates were very intelligent, so I gleaned a lot of things from them.

Coming to California, things got kind of rough economically in Detroit. It was suffering from one of its really, like, regular downswings. When the auto industry

would suffer, everything would suffer, retail, everything, and so my father was having trouble finding work because there wasn't enough business. So he wanted to go back to Texas, and my mother prevailed on him to go to California instead because she had some cousins here.

So we came out, and I thought it was a great adventure. I had read William Saroyan's stories, and I looked at Sacramento on the map and saw that it was close to Fresno, and I thought, "Well, it must look something like that." I imagined that it was set amongst gently rolling hills with yellow grass, the way that Saroyan described Fresno. I wasn't too far wrong. So like I said, I looked on it as an adventure.

I was disappointed when I got here by the high school that I ended up in, James Marshall in West Sacramento. I had never run into so many ignorant kids in my life. They were not very smart, according to my standards. I'd gone to public schools in Detroit that were attended mostly by Jewish kids, and the political conversations, the discussions of literature, these were kids in junior high, you know. It really was a contrast to California, at least in the environment that I was in, that I found myself in.

Q So how did you handle that?

[00:08:59]

Mantecon I withdrew into myself pretty much. I had a few friends in high school, not too many. It was a great relief when I got out of high school and went to college.

Q So what did you study in college?

[00:09:17]

Mantecon Here at City College I studied journalism. That was an ambition that I had developed when I was in high school. I joined the staff of *The Pony Express*, became editor-in-chief, and then when I transferred to Sacramento State, I dropped the journalism because I felt that I wasn't getting a good enough education with journalism as my major. I wanted a classical education, so I switched to philosophy, and that's what I got my B.A. in and my M.A. in. I got my master's degree at Davis.

Q Were you a part of the EOP Program at all?

[00:10:13]

Mantecon No.

Q Did you know about the EOP Program?

[00:10:18]

Mantecon Sure, yeah. Yeah, I did.

Q What did you think about it?

[00:10:25]

Mantecon That's Equal Opportunity—what did it stand for, EOP?

Q Education Opportunity Program?

[00:10:34]

Mantecon What did I think about it? I thought I was doing fine without it. I got a California fellowship to Davis, and Davis at the time, the tuition was \$400.

Q Oh, wow.

[00:10:52]

Mantecon Yeah, \$400 a quarter. So I didn't really—that and student loans. I think I took out a total of \$3,000 in student loans—

Q Oh, wow.

[00:11:04]

Mantecon —in my six years at college.

Q What a time. [laughter

[00:11:08]

Mantecon That's all I needed. The tuition at Sac State was \$74 a semester.

Q So did you take any, like, cultural issues, like classes? Like, what were your perspective on that, like around that time?

[00:11:24]

Mantecon My perspective? I really wasn't interested. I was interested in philosophy. I was interested in the great thinkers. I was interested in Emmanuel Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche. That's what I was interested in.

Q So with the Chicano Movement, like, happening, like around that time, did you have any, like, friends who were involved or—

[00:11:51]

Mantecon Yes. Well, obliquely I did. I had friends that had some ties with it, but I didn't have any direct involvement at that time.

Q Did you participate in, like, any open discussions with them? Like, do you remember anything of that?

[00:12:13]

Mantecon No, no. I told you I was going to be a dud. [laughter]

Q No, no, no. Everything is, you know, valuable information. So even though you didn't have, like, direct participation, do you, like—

[00:12:29]

Mantecon I'm talking about this time in my life.

Q Okay. So I guess looking back now, like, do you, like, wish that you had taken part more in it, or—

[00:12:39]

Mantecon A little bit, yeah, yeah. Maybe the disillusionment would have set in sooner if I had, instead of later. [laughs]

Q So I guess since you weren't exactly attracted to the Movement, what do you think caused people to be attracted?

[00:13:01]

Mantecon I was an interested observer. Don't get me wrong.

Q Okay.

[00:13:07]

Mantecon Attracted? Okay, maybe I should explain that I'd come from an urban environment. At the time that I was in Detroit, there was something like 50,000 people of Mexican descent or from Mexico there, which was more than Modesto has at the present time. [laughs] And yet there were four million people there. So were Chicanos visible? No, not at all, not unless you went to the Mexican part of town, which my parents did from time to time to get tortillas and different things like that.

But having come from that situation and having forgotten the little Spanish that I knew, not having a farmworker background, whenever I would come in contact or would listen to the different Chicano leaders of the time, local, I got the very distinct feeling that I would not fit. Back then, there was a very, very pronounced

inclination to deny *Chicanidad* to different people. If you weren't from a farmworker background, if you didn't speak Spanish, you were not one of them, and they made it known to you that you were not one of them. I called it a "more Chicano than thou" attitude. Thankfully, that has basically gone away, you know. That's not even an issue anymore, but back then it was. Who is and who is not really a Chicano? That probably sounds alien to you, doesn't it?

Q Yeah. So on campus, did you feel like that's how the activists or the people that were—

[00:15:42]

Mantecon Yeah.

Q That's how they acted towards it?

[00:15:43]

Mantecon Yeah.

Q Okay. You mentioned, like, that that was the definition, if you worked in the fields, if you spoke Spanish, that's how people identified you as Chicano.

[00:16:05]

Mantecon Mm-hmm.

Q Was that, like, a reason why you felt like you didn't fit in with them? You mentioned that you didn't—

[00:16:11]

Mantecon That wasn't my background. That isn't to say that I didn't come from people like that. My mother's people were extremely poor. She remembers laying in her little bed at night and being able to see the stars through the cracks in the—the

ceiling was just boards. This was in Laredo, Texas. She could see the moon and the stars through the cracks in the ceiling.

My father would often go off in the summers after school to work all over Texas and the Midwest. He went to Minnesota once to pick onions, and he thought he had never seen a more beautiful place, and I think that's one of the reasons why when he got the chance to go to Michigan, he went, because he remembered the North as being this beautiful, beautiful green place, a greenness that he never saw matched again until he went to Ireland during World War II.

What was I saying? You have to forgive me. I'm given to going off into tangents and then I lose my train of thought.

Yeah, I was saying that I'm not from some privileged background, you know. My parents were not well-to-do by any means, but they wanted something better for me. My father even told me, he said, "Thank god you didn't grow up in Laredo around a bunch of Mexicans." And that was his attitude, you know. He didn't want that for me. So he was happy that I was experiencing a different kind of life in Detroit. I'm not saying that he was correct. They were just being protective.

Q Okay. Perfect. And now you mentioned, like, the interaction that you had with the leaders with, like, the Chicano Movement. What role do you believe the Chicanas played in the Movimiento, in the Chicano Movement?

[00:18:31]

Mantecon Women in any organization—and I especially experienced this in my involvement within the Labor Movement, which I've had a much more active role in the Labor Movement than I have in the Chicano Movement—they're the heart and

soul of any organization. They are the organizers. They are the logicians—not logicians. The logistics experts. And they also have the most courage, especially during strikes.

Q By “the strikes,” do you mean, like, any strikes or are you referring to—

[00:19:24]

Mantecon Any sort of strike.

Q Okay.

[00:19:31]

Mantecon And that opinion was confirmed when I saw that wonderful film *Salt of the Earth*, which deals with the copper miners’ strikes in the Morenci Dodge area of Arizona. Are you familiar with that film?

Q No.

[00:19:56]

Mantecon *Wonderful* film. But what comes out very strong—it’s a semi-documentary—was the leadership roles that the women assumed almost by default because the men weren’t following through.

Q In given, like, what you saw, like, the Movement, do you feel like anything you initiated contributed to that?

[00:20:28]

Mantecon That I initiated? You mean in the Labor Movement, you mean?

Q No, the Chicano Movement.

[00:20:34]

Mantecon The Chicano Movement? I didn't—well, that I initiated. I founded, along with Francisco Alarcon, Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol. It was kind of an adjunct of La Raza Galeria Posada. I'd been a board member for many years and I was president of the board, and I would say that's probably my strongest contribution, if you can say that that's the Movement, but I was more interested in literature. I've been interested in Chicano literature since the mid-eighties when I first became aware of it.

Q When you became aware of it, is that when you got exposed to literature, or were you exposed to literature and then you were like—

[00:21:34]

Mantecon To literature in general, you mean, or to Chicano literature?

Q No, to the Chicano literature.

[00:21:37]

Mantecon My first exposure to Chicano literature was spoken word. At Sacramento State, there was an event that was held yearly called the Third World Poetry Festival, and Chicanos were very prominent in this festival, and that's where I first heard José Montoya and Olivia Castellano, her sister Lupe Castellano, a fellow that I think most people have forgotten by now, Oscar Caro [phonetic], Louie “the Foot” Gonzalez. They all participated in these events, and I was impressed. I was impressed particularly by José Montoya, by his code-switching, which I'd always derided my father for his code-switching. My mother and father, that's the natural way they speak; they switch from one language to another, with ease and with wit. When I heard José Montoya do it in a literary way, I was really bowled over. That

probably was a landmark event for me, were those Third World Poetry festivals, but I still hadn't come across Chicano literature on the page.

Q In addition to Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol, were you a part of or involved in any other organizations?

[00:23:34]

Mantecon La Raza Galeria Posada. I started volunteering there in 1986, and shortly thereafter, I became a member of the board, then vice president of the board, president of the board, director of publicity. I cleaned the toilets, too, when I first started there. [laughs]

Q And what were these organizations like?

[00:24:10]

Mantecon What were they like? When I first started volunteering, it was La Raza Bookstore, and "Pike," Philip Santos, was the director at the time, and Armando Cid was the manager. Tere Romo, Terezita Romo, at that time she had been the president. She had taken on a more peripheral role. She was very high-minded, very principled. She had a very distinct noble vision of what the bookstore should be. Other people, not so much. Other people saw it as a hangout in which to smoke marijuana. This was mostly the RCAF. They looked upon it as their personal clubhouse. I was very disappointed in that. At Sac State I had gotten a favorable impression of them. When I came into closer contact with them, not so much.

Q And do you feel like these organizations played a role in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:25:44]

Mantecon Which organizations?

Q Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol and La Raza Galeria Posada.

[00:25:52]

Mantecon La Raza Galeria Posada, definitely. Los Escritores, like I said, it was kind of an adjunct to the bookstore. We weren't part of the organization, but we held our meetings there. Round about 1996, was it, that the big coup occurred at La Raza Galeria Posada, and factions within the RCAF purged the board, Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol, it was made known to them that they weren't welcome, so we had to hold our meetings elsewhere.

Q How did they show that they were not welcome in that space?

[00:27:03]

Mantecon Because most of us had spoken out against what they were doing. Let me explain. I was no longer a member of the board. I'd just recently resigned from the board. We had a director. I probably shouldn't mention his name. I'm going to say enough outrageous things as it is. He was not doing a very good job and he was alienating a lot of people, and so we decided to begin—god, what is that union term? Progressive discipline? In other words, he had to meet certain goals. He had to show that he was improving in order to keep his job. We didn't tell him at any point, "We're going to fire you." We told him that he was, like, under a probationary state.

This man was married to Christina Luna [phonetic]. He went and told her. She went and told members of the RCAF, who went and told Joe Serna, and they were saying that the mean old board was going to fire him and that factions within the

board were anti-Chicano and were going to take over the bookstore. So Joe Serna believed all that, another man I'm very disappointed—was very disappointed in.

José Montoya—well, his daughter and her husband were behind the efforts to get rid of the powers that be, the board that was directing the bookstore, and they were successful.

Excuse me. Are you Senon Valadez?

Valadez I'm Senon.

[00:29:32]

Mantecon You've probably heard all this from your ex-wife, Gloria Torres. She was president of the board at the time. It's a shame, a complete *desmadre*, what they did to her and the rest of the board. They ended up taking control. Francisco Alarcon and I were told that we were forbidden to enter La Raza Galeria Posada, and that if we were, the police would be called, as if we're going to create some sort of disturbance. I was banned for a number of years from entering the place.

They eventually took over the bookstore, and with the help and collusion of then California Senator Debbie Ortiz, they took the bookstore and sold it and profited from it. Shocking stuff, huh? [laughs]

Q Yeah. Were you in Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol and La Raza Galeria Posada at the same time or did this happen, like, at different—

[00:31:06]

Mantecon I was active in La Raza Galeria Posada from '86 through about 1996 or '97, eleven or ten years. I resigned about 1995. This whole *movida* took place about a year later. Los Escritores del Nuevo Sol I founded with Alarcon around 1991.

The year that Cesar Chavez died. You can look it up. I don't remember exactly when that was.

Q And given that you were part of these while the Movimiento Chicano's taking place, how do you feel like the Movimiento Chicano had raised your consciousness, or do you feel that it raised your consciousness along social, cultural, or political lines?

[00:32:10]

Mantecon Oh, it definitely raised my consciousness, but only as a finger pointing the way, you know. I can educate myself. I mean, I don't need other people telling me about things. Well, authors, yes, but I mean I can navigate a library, you know. I know how to do my own research. So I found the books that I felt would instruct me on the history of Mexico, *la Chicana* in the United States. I did this on my own, but I will say that if it weren't for the Chicano Movement, I may have taken a more circuitous route to finding this stuff out. So it was consciousness-raising in that sense, but, you know, I wasn't directed in any way by anyone.

Q Like, politically, did it impact you in any way?

[00:33:28]

Mantecon Oh, no, no. I've been a socialist liberal almost from my high school days. The first election I voted in, I voted for McGovern. [laughs] When was that, '68? What a year. What a year '68 was. So many things happened.

Q What about culturally, given that you had, like, that transition from Detroit to California, the Movement here in California?

[00:34:04]

Mantecon Repeat that.

Q Did the Movimiento Chicano, like, raise your consciousness along cultural lines, given that you also had, like, that transition from Detroit to California?

[00:34:14]

Mantecon Yeah, I would say that, cultural lines.

Q And did the interaction that you had with the Chicano Movement or with, like, leaders and how impactful the organization that you were a part of, did that impact your personal relationships with family?

[00:34:36]

Mantecon With family? I became more forgiving [laughs] my father for his code-switching, you know. I remember being really taken—this was in the early seventies—by José Montoya. And I was over at my mother and father’s house one day, ’72, something like that, and it was a Sunday and *Progreso* was on. I don’t know if you have ever heard of that TV show.

Q No.

[00:35:13]

Mantecon Really a groundbreaking TV show. It was an hour of complete Chicano-oriented news and reports of cultural events and happenings. Armando Botello was the host, and he had José Montoya on. And I said to my dad, “Dad, you should listen to this fellow. He reminds me so much of you, his ability to go back and forth in one language, and he has a lot of wit.”

So my dad listens to him, and he said, “What’s all this *pachuco* stuff?” He says, “That guy’s no *pachuco*.” And he said, “He’s just some damn *marijuano*.” He

says, “If I ever hear of you associated with flyers like that—.” That’s what he used to call them, people who smoked marijuana, flyers. Isn’t that ironic? I mean, that’s the whole metaphor of the Royal Chicano Air Force, is that they’re pilots. “If I ever catch you around flyers like that, I will disown you.” [laughs] So that kind of backfired.

And then I *did* get involved with them. How about that? [laughter]

Q Do you feel that the Chicano Movement had an impact on your career?

[00:36:55]

Mantecon Did it impact on my career?

Q Or that it shaped, helped?

[00:37:01]

Mantecon Not really. Simple answer, but not really. I was a state worker, you know. The union and management misdeeds is what shaped my work career, you know. Seeing the behavior of management really drove me into union activity, but that had nothing to do with Chicano culture, not that I was aware of.

Q And now looking back at the experience of the Movimiento Chicano, do you feel that there were any issues that were left unresolved?

[00:38:01]

Mantecon I don’t know. I have regrets. I don’t know about issues that were left unresolved. I regret that so many terrible things happened, but I think that all in all, the Chicano Movement was a good thing, you know. With all its errors, its mistakes, its groping for the right path, for all its missteps, I think it was a force for good in the end, and it continues to be.

Q Yes. Can you describe how, like, the Movimiento Chicano impacted the community like here in Sacramento?

[00:38:50]

Mantecon What I observed is that it had a very strong impact. I'll never forget I was still in high school when the march from Delano to Sacramento took place by the UFW. That was very moving to me, you know, very, very moving. My father was touched too.

I don't know what I'm trying to say. What was the question? [laughs] Maybe if you repeat the question, I'll know what I was trying to say.

Q Can you describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted the community like here in Sacramento?

[00:39:40]

Mantecon I think that that event really was an eye-opener for a lot of people. A lot of Chicanos who had been going around saying they were Greek or Spanish, all of a sudden felt, "No, no, no. This is who I am. That is what I'm a part of." And I wanted to be, but I didn't feel—you see, I think going back to what I said, you know, that was the litmus test back then, you know. Have you ever been a farmworker? If you hadn't been, I always got the feeling that they felt that there was something missing, something lacking in you.

Q Perfect. Many Movimiento Chicano activists have passed on. Can you identify individuals that you feel had an impact on the Chicano Movement?

[00:40:46]

Mantecon José Montoya, he did, definitely. People who have passed on.

Q Can you explain, like, the significance of his involvement in the Movement?

[00:41:02]

Mantecon Well, I only know of his involvement in the UFW by hearsay. I know that the RCAF did bodyguard work for Cesar Chavez whenever he was in the area. You know, they would actually form a phalanx and keep unwanted people away. I know that José Montoya was very much involved and he would frequently make trips to Delano and to Fresno and those areas where there were strikes going on, to help the strikers. I know he was involved in that way. I wasn't with him, but I knew that.

Other people that had an impact, I think culturally Tere Romo had a very large impact. She's kind of an unsung cultural hero, I think. Like I said, very high-minded, high-purposed individual.

Q Perfect. And what do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community?

[00:42:30]

Mantecon Getting a proper education, escaping poverty, the same problems that have been there since, I don't know, since the Chicano presence was first heavily felt in the United States, around 1911, you know, same problems that have been around since 1911.

Q And do you see yourself staying involved in helping, like, overcome those challenges for the Chicano community?

[00:43:12]

Mantecon Do I see myself involved? No.

Q Can you elaborate a little bit more why you don't see yourself—

[00:43:23]

Mantecon I'm sixty-seven years old. I mean, that's not in itself an excuse. I'm retired, but I'm taking care of my ninety-year-old mother who has Alzheimer's. She lives with me and my wife now. I have a day off today from taking care of her. My daughter-in-law's taking care of her today for me, which is why I want to make sure to get out of here by 12:00. Looks like I'll make it. So it's a matter of time.

I'm still writing, you know. I don't know that I write on Chicano themes per se. I employ code-switching in my poetry and in my writings. I've been writing stories, reminiscences of my childhood, for whatever they're worth, and they entail descriptions of what it was like growing up a young brown boy in Michigan and here.

Q Perfect.

[00:44:34]

Mantecon So I don't—you know, is that somehow being involved in the Movement? I don't know. I'm just a writer writing about his experiences, you know.

[End of interview]