The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education
Oral History Project

Carlos Mora

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by David Rasul
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Transcription by Henry Liu and Technitype Transcripts

Rasul Can you please state your full name?

[00:00:11]

Mora Yes. My legal full name is Charles S. Mora, but I go by Carlos.

Rasul Where were you born, Charles?

[00:00:17]

Mora I was here born in Sacramento, California.

Rasul What year?

[00:00:23]

Mora January 19, 1953.

Rasul 1954. Wow, man. Carlos, can you please provide your marital status?

[00:00:30]

Mora I'm divorced. Twice married. [laughter]

Rasul Do you have any children?

[00:00:34]

Mora No children.

Rasul You said you were born here in Sacramento?

[00:00:39]

Mora Mm-hmm.

Rasul And raised in Sacramento?

[00:00:41]

Mora Yes.

Rasul What did your parents do for a living?

[00:00:43]

Mora Well, my parents were farmworkers, and then my mom worked in the canneries, and then my dad got a job with the Southern Pacific Railroad. So they originally were farmworkers.

Rasul Can you tell us a little bit more about your mom and dad?

[00:01:01]

Mora Yeah, my mom was really an outspoken lady. I mean, she was really the life of a party, and my dad was more of a quiet-type man, hardworking. He would take my old brother John and I to the fields to pick tomatoes during tomato season, and then we would go pick pears and then we also would do onions. My grandmother was married to a foreman who worked for a foreman or contractor, and so he would get us a spot on the bus and then make sure we got to the crops that we were going to pick for that day. My dad normally would work in the railroad during the week, but then during cannery season, he'd work the late shift, night shift for one of the canneries here in town.

Rasul Do the names of the canneries he worked for?

[00:01:53]

Mora He worked at Bercut Richards. He worked at Del Monte. My mom worked at Libby's, Del Monte, Campbell Soup. Yeah, she worked at a few of the canneries here in town.

Rasul You mentioned your brother John. So you have any other siblings besides your brother?

[00:02:09]

Mora Yeah, I have five younger brothers and sisters; I have two younger brothers and three younger sisters. So it's kind of interesting. After my birth, my brother right behind me is Jose, then my sister Martha, then my brother Ricardo, sister Maria, and youngest sister Margarita. I was given the English name Charles by my grandmother, from what I understand. She thought it'd be easier for me to assimilate here in America.

Rasul Can you tell us a little bit about—I know you mentioned briefly about what you did working, but more about your childhood and your neighborhood?

[00:02:48]

Mora Yeah, my childhood was more--early on, I grew up downtown, went to Marshall Elementary School, so it was more of a diverse community. A lot of the families that lived in that area, a lot of the fathers worked on the railroad, so they would walk to work and come over. So there was a lot of railroad workers

downtown at that time, which was known as Alkali Flats or El Centro. So we lived there for a short time.

Then we moved to West Sacramento. My dad was able to purchase a home in a little neighborhood called Arlington Oaks. It's still there. It's off of Jefferson Boulevard. We used to live there for about four years. Then in the fifth grade, we moved back to Sacramento and moved to where our family was raised, on 34th Street and Folsom Boulevard.

So my childhood was a little bit interesting because in the third grade, I caught rheumatic fever, so that kind of put me off playing with the kids and so on. So when I went to school after that, I experienced a lot of bullying and had to deal with that stuff. But then when we moved to Sacramento, I ended up going to an elementary school called David Lubin, which is right off of 35th and O Street. Our family was, like, one of four families that was Mexican American. So it was an interesting elementary school period for me.

Then from there I went to Sutter Junior High School, then Sac High, and then Sac State.

Rasul Did you experience any type or feel any kind of discrimination while you were going to David Lubin?

[00:04:44]

Mora Oh, yeah, David Lubin, it was like you got to really stand up for yourself. A lot of the kids didn't relate to us as being *mexicanos*. You know, learned how to defend myself and defend my younger brothers and sisters. The outlet there

was more playing sports and showing the rest of the kids in the neighborhoods that we could hold our own, and the competition was there with the other kids in the neighborhood.

Rasul Were you a Fellow, Felito, or were you actively involved in the Mexican American Education Project?

[00:05:24]

Mora No.

Rasul Did you know of anyone that was in the project?

[00:05:45]

Mora No, I didn't, because like I said, there was only like four families that lived in that area that went to school with me.

Rasul I'm talking about the college project over at Sac State.

[00:05:56]

Mora Oh, the college project. Okay. Well, I was involved in the Chicanito Science Project at Sac State. I got involved with them in my second semester at Sac State.

Rasul So you knew Alvino Chavez?

[00:06:11]

Mora I did know Alvino Chavez. He was quite the character.

Rasul Good guy, was he?

[00:06:15]

Mora Yeah, he was a good guy, yeah.

Rasul Did your study of cultural anthropology or your knowledge of cultural issues influence your involvement and participation in the Chicano Movement?

[00:06:27]

Mora Oh, absolutely, yeah. It was eye-awakening for me, because when I was in high school, I was more of a jock, but in the early seventies, late sixties with the Movement, with the Civil Rights Movement, with Vietnam, with a lot of the issues that were going on, I became more and more aware of what was going on within my *raza*. We started a Chicano Studies Project there at Sac High. Then there was recruitment for Brown Berets. The Blacks had Black Panthers and so on. I kind of stayed outside those groups. I was more into just wanted to play sports, and I had a *Bee* route, you know, worked another job, so I didn't really have time after work to do much except work.

Rasul That was Sac High?

[00:07:29]

Mora That was at Sac High.

Rasul Sac State, you got more involved?

[00:07:30]

Mora Yeah, at Sac State I definitely got more involved. First semester there, a couple of young guys that I met wanted to recruit me into a fraternity. I had been involved with a jock organization at Sac High, but at Sac State I just selected

not to do that. I was more interested in finding out who I was as a young man, and it was really an awakening for me.

Rasul Can you mention a few people who influenced you there your first semester?

[00:08:00]

Mora Well, I think the professors actually did a lot of influencing. For English, it was Olivia Casiano, and Joe Serna was very instrumental, José Montoya and the whole RCF group, the anthropology program that was there. So Professors Validez and Sam Rios, and, yeah, there was a handful of young Chicano professors there that really opened my eyes up to what was going on in my community and in the country and so on.

Rasul So you started mentioning already about opening your eyes. What are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Chicano Movement?

[00:08:44]

Mora I think, you know, it was just, like, feeling empowered. I was feeling more proud of who I was as a *mexicano*, having some camaraderie there at school and meeting a lot of other young Mexican Americans who started getting active in the Chicano Movement and wanting to do something more for *la raza*, and showing that we could do it as young students. For me, I wanted to be part of that. You know, I wasn't active in high school within *la raza*; I was friends with everybody. So when I went to Sac State, that's when I changed my name to Carlos. I went from Charles, Charlie, to Carlos. So a lot of the students that knew me at Sac State in the

first couple semesters knew me as Charlie, but then I really wanted to change that name and go by the name I was being called at home, which was Carlos.

Rasul Very similar to that is the term *Chicano* came about. They were called *mexicanos* before.

[00:09:58]

Mora Right.

Rasul So how do you think that term *Chicano* was received by the community and by yourself and your friends?

[00:10:06]

Mora Well, within my household, my dad wasn't really receptive of me now saying that I was Chicano, but I really wanted to show him that I was going to more outspoken in how I felt about what was going on with the issues of that day. My dad, again, was a very quiet-type man, but in 1965, him and his coworkers from the Southern Pacific Railroad, they joined Cesar Chavez as he walked over the Tower Bridge, and I went with my father that time. They had their contingency off one of the streets there. We were all sitting there or standing there while he came across the bridge. For me, that was something that I won't forget.

My mom, who was more of an outspoken person, she was a Teamster in the cannery and she got active as a union rep, so she was more open to the fact that I was starting to refer to myself as a Chicano, but my dad was more like—you know, that kind of has a more derogatory meaning and he wasn't as receptive. But as I got older, he was fine with it.

Rasul And during that same period of time was the Civil Rights Movement.

[00:11:32]

Mora Right.

Rasul What did you know about the Civil Rights Movements? Did the involvement with Sac State turn you more to the Civil Rights Movement nationally?

[00:11:40]

Mora Oh, absolutely, because, you know, we did the anti-*Bakke* protests. We were more active in community demonstrations. Yeah, I became more and more active in taking a position on what was taking place during that period of time. I loved to drink Coors beer, but then we boycotted Coors beer, and then we had the table grapes, then we had iceberg lettuce boycotts. So I was more conscious of not participating and purchasing those products, but wanting to boycott the products, so, yeah.

[00:12:18]

Rasul Can you tell us a little bit about that—you mentioned the Anti-Bakke Movement there.

[00:12:28]

Mora Yeah, it was a movement back then where a student that, I believe, applied at UC Davis, a White student, felt that he got discriminated again, and now he was saying that the Mexicans and the African Americans were starting to get more preferential treatment in enrollment. So it was related to education and being admitted to school. So from a group of students, we just weren't on the same page

or agreed with that legislation that was going to happen, so we took this position on that.

Rasul Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:13:16]

Mora I believe so, yeah, because, actually, when I graduated from high school in 1971, I ended up got a job with Southern Pacific Railroad in the summertime, so as I became more aware of who I was as a young man and learning my rights, I became a shop steward. I was a shop steward by the age of twenty, and there was a lot of older *mexicanos* that I worked with. We worked in the warehouse, forklift drivers, laborers, so a lot of them had let things go on in regards to employer-employee-type relations, labor relations, that I thought wasn't right, so I started writing grievances for them. So they kind of picked me as their union rep, and I got really involved with them and representing the men that I respected, who opened the doors for me to work there, and definitely was a pebble and a stone for management, for sure, on union issues. So I educated myself on the contract, and whenever I believed there was a violation of the contract, I would write a grievance.

So I did that, and then worked on the railroad, and then I was able to earn enough money to go to school and then take some time off from work, then go back to work, or I worked on the railroad and then I went to school at night, or I worked at night and went to school during the day. So, yeah, it was something that I did.

Moved out of the house when I was nineteen years old, and working on the railroad gave me a lot of opportunities, like traveled to Mexico a few times because I wanted to understand my roots, understand who I was as a person, and did a few trips to Mexico during that early seventies, throughout the seventies.

Rasul Great. This is not one of the questions here, but what did you think you learned when you went to Mexico?

[00:15:30]

Mora Man, I just learned how beautiful our culture was. I did different types of trips. I did one trip where I went to the different museums, Diego Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, went to Frida Kahlo's home in Mexico City. I did that trip once and then I went to another trip. I wanted to go to Oaxaca, went to Oaxaca, hung out in Oaxaca for a couple weeks. Then after my junior year, I decided to go to Mexico for six months, and I went from Mexico City to Cancun, back to Mexico City, then to Puerto Vallarta. I was trying to learn Spanish more fluently, and I did, I did. I traveled by myself, and it was an experience.

Rasul What role do you believe that Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:16:35]

Mora Oh, the Chicanas were really outspoken. They were, like, equal to us as young men, and they were very well respected. They were on equal [unclear] with all the other Chicanos, and more active in a lot of sense, and more willing to give than I think maybe some of the guys, but they were very outspoken young ladies, for sure.

Rasul Can you mention a few that you've been talking about?

[00:17:13]

Mora Well, there's the Garcia sisters. They were artists in Sacramento. Eva, Catherine—

Rasul Lorraine.

[00:17:25]

Mora: Who?

Rasul Lorraine.

[00:17:27]

Mora Lorraine. Yeah, Lorraine Garcia. Then, of course, Nene Jimenez. There was Irma Barbosa, Christina Rodriguez. There was a few ladies that I hung out with that were good friends and very outspoken Chicanas.

Rasul What did you personally initiate or help initiate in the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:17:52]

Mora Well, I don't know if I really initiated anything except really got involved with the Chicano Movement. I loved to play music, so lot of times if there was an event that was going to happen where it was involving us Chicano students, I had a band, so we'd play for different house parties. We played for different RCAF art openings there in the seventies. I was part of the first Cinco de Mayo celebration in Southside Park in the seventies, got local businesses to give support, like Skip's Music to provide the sound, my band to play, other bands to play, and then we did

the event for a couple years and then RCAF, and Freddie took over more of the organizing of that event.

Rasul You mentioned Freddie, Freddie [unclear]. Can you talk just a little bit about Freddie [unclear]?

[00:18:56]

Mora Yeah, Freddie was a cool guy. He incorporated dance in his music. I mean, it was more old-school Chicano stuff. He had a lot of connections, knew a lot of musicians from the Bay Area. I remember one party that Freddie had, it was at the Cathedral in the basement. He had band members from Santana, band members from Azteca. It was cool. And he was a really outspoken guy. He really loved music and he loved sharing the music with everybody.

Rasul What were some of the organizations that you were involved in?

[00:19:39]

Mora Well, as an organization, I was more involved with what was going on in the railroad. I was more involved with my union organization than anything, because when I became a shop steward, that took up a lot of the time because there was union meetings, there was meetings after work with my coworkers, filing grievances. We filed hundreds and hundreds of grievances against the company. So I was really not active in any, like, organization in town; more involved with what I was doing at work.

Rasul The railroad and your music, what significance do you think it lended to the Chicano Movement?

[00:20:27]

Mora Well, I think with the railroad, management didn't have an employee like me before to deal with. So I was pretty aggressive in writing grievances and fighting on behalf of my coworkers. With music, I think I was able to share art with the community at large and show how music was important to us and to the youth at that time, and it still is. I mean, I'm still very active with music today, and so it's something that I've carried with me since the seventies.

Rasul Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, political lines?

[00:21:26]

Mora Oh, no doubt.

Rasul Explain that.

[00:21:27]

Mora I think it was, again, the boycotts that took place, the position of understanding the candidates better who were running for office. I supported Joe Serna when he was running for councilman, walked the precincts for him and walked the precincts when he ran for mayor. I also supported other city councilpeople during that time. So it did get me more active in the community in stating my position politically.

Socially, I was not going to back down from any criticism the *mexicanos* and Chicanos—so, like, even today, I mean, there's a lot of events that go on, and now the term *Chicano* is kind of like not used; it's more *Latino*. And for me, Cinco de

Mayo has always been a Chicano event. We put Cinco de Mayo on the calendar. So now in the last few years, when there's a Cinco de Mayo event, it's referred to as Latino, Latin American or something, and I'm always talking to the promoters of these events and saying, "No, you've got to really be clear. I know you want to get all the community at large, but Cinco de Mayo *is* a Chicano celebration."

They don't celebrate Cinco de Mayo in Mexico. We celebrate it here, and I know throughout the Southwest, Cinco de Mayo is celebrated differently, but in Sacramento, it was really a Chicano event where we brought out the music, the art, men and women that shared their position on legislation that was going on, education, voters' rights, everything. I mean, that was what Cinco de Mayo, to me, was all about. This is something that I've been trying to work with other friends of mine who produce and promote events in Sacramento, is that we need to do something where we get voters' rights out there again. We've got to do something out there where we get the candidates out there, and we have to do something where we bring the art back into these events and not ignore all that.

Rasul Your social, political perspective and views, how did these changes impact your personal relationships with family, your peers, and significant others? [00:24:12]

Mora Well, I think my brothers and my sisters look at me when they want to understand a position on how different legislation or different politicians may represent us running for office or how to vote. During the election years, during that time of the year, I get calls from my family about, "Who should I vote for? What

should vote for?" And then even with coworkers, I used to have that all the time. We would sit down. I mean, they would pretty much bring their ballot to work, and I would help them fill out their ballot. So they understood that this generation of Chicanos was going to be more active in society, and so they entrusted in me that maybe my opinion or my position on things was something they want to recognize and support.

Rasul You've kind of stated already, but how did the Movimiento Chicano impact your career?

[00:25:37]

Mora Well, I worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad for twenty-eight years, and so I recognize that this industry has been around since the 1800s, and it's an industry that safety is a big thing. I mean, you could get hurt real easily. So I really got involved with working with management on safety issues. When I started working on the railroad, the forklift drivers, they drove gas-driven forklifts and they would have to go in and out in boxcars and unload and load equipment, and these boxcars would get filled with carbon monoxide. So they didn't have any masks to cover them, to protect them.

So what happened one time was I told the guys, "We're not going to drive anymore the boxcars unless they give us some safety apparatus." So that caused a big problem with management, but I had documented the fact that these forklift drivers were driving in and out of these boxcars, it was unsafe, they weren't being provided with any kind of safety masks or anything like that. So they recognized

that that was going to be a safety issue, and they started providing us with little air filter-type masks. But that wasn't good enough. That didn't work for us, so I did some research, saw that there was propane forklifts, propane-driven forklifts, so I got them to lease propane forklifts, and we got the propane tanks and we were able to get rid of the gas machines. So I got active with Safety Committees, working conditions on the railroad.

Then after the railroad, I worked for a law firm that represented different unions that represent members on the railroad, and it was all about safety. So I did that for about eight years.

Then a good friend of mine, Carlos Portillo, mentioned to me that they were hiring Deputy Labor Commissioners. I'm fifty-four years old at that time, you know. I'm going like, "Okay, I don't know. I mean, I'm fifty-four."

So I did took the test and, sure enough, got hired, so I worked as a Deputy Labor Commissioner for two years, did field enforcement, so I was out there inspecting employers, farm labor contractors. I was more of an advocate for the workers, even though they were all scared when we would drive up and come in to do the interviews and the inspections. They thought we were the *Migra* or we were somebody that was going to bust them, but I would explain to them, "No, we're here to represent you. We want you to know your employee rights, etc., etc." So I did that for two years. Now I'm with Labor, with Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Rasul Looking back at the Movimiento Chicano, are there any issues left unresolved?

[00:28:57]

Mora Well, I mean, it's always a struggle. I don't know. I mean, I think there's something that we just need to continue to share with our *gente*, with our young people, that they have to be active, they have to understand the issues, they have to educate themselves. There's a period here that I recognize that with the Generation X, or the Millennials, I mean, they're not as active politically and outspoken as maybe my generation, the Baby Boomers, but the issues are still global. I mean, we got the war in the Middle East, we have what just happened in the early 2000s, recession and so on with the economy. And even though in the sixties we had the Civil Rights Movement and we had Vietnam and we had all these other issues going on, there's always going to be the struggle. I would just say that it's probably never going to get— [laughs] We'll always be fighting, brother.

[laughter]

Rasul With the Chicano Movement and the UFW and everything else, the events that we've had, what kind of impact do you think all this had on the Chicano community here in Sacramento?

[00:30:30]

Mora I think being the capital of California, I believe the Chicanos are more active, but at the same time, need to work on dialogue with one another, because I see there's too many factions, so that divides our Chicano community.

Everybody has good ideas on how to resolve issues and deal with addressing issues, but if we don't come to a consensus as Chicanos, we're not going to be united. So there's still struggle within our community on different issues.

To me, if a person's a Republican or Democrat, that's their choice, but make the right choice at the ballot box in regards to how it's going to help the people at large, not just benefit them, because our fathers, mothers, grandparents, even though they may not have been as educated as we are, they always looked at the *familia* at large, they looked at the community at large, they wanted to benefit and better us as their children.

Rasul Yes, completely. Looking at our time period between '65 and 1980s that we're kind of focusing on, time has passed and we've lost some individuals who were impactful in the community. Can you mention maybe one or two people and maybe explain their contributions?

[00:32:20]

Mora Two of the guys that were very influential and I had an opportunity to hang out for a little bit was both Joe Serna and José Montoya, Joe more on the political side and José more on the art side of life.

Rasul Can you explain a little bit why you feel they were impactful?

[00:32:44]

Mora Well, because they embraced me. [cries]

Rasul And the community? They were embraced by the community also, right?

[00:32:56]

Mora Right. They embraced the community, they embraced me. I'm sorry. I'm just— [cries] They were good guys.

Rasul Absolutely, absolutely. What do you see as current or future challenges of the Chicano community?

[00:33:18]

Mora I think just getting the younger generations to recognize that the fight's not over. The struggle's not over. We're trying to pass that baton on to them and nurture them to become leaders. I mean, there's a lot of opportunities out there. But to recognize that it's not just about themselves, but to recognize that it's about the community at large, like this young Eric Guerra, who just got elected to city council, young man who had a lot of similar upbringing that I had, and he seems to be a young man that is really looking at the community at large. I mean, dealing with the city council and dealing with politicians, it seems like once they get elected, it's just about who can get their ear and persuade them how to vote, instead of really taking the position of why they ran for office.

Rasul Do you see yourself staying involved in the Chicano Movement?

[00:34:33]

Mora I see myself being involved in regards to more—you know, I'm outspoken in some aspects. I try to be active with different organizations. One organization right now that's starting to develop, it's called the Latino Roundtable, Leadership Roundtable. It's a group of activists that come together once a month

and they're sharing what their projects are, nonprofit, it could be nonprofit, could be businesses oriented.

I know right now raising the minimum wage is a big issue, but it's something that we as a community at large need to really recognize. I read an article where with Latino businesses, their annual revenue is like $150,000, their annual revenue, but non-Latino businesses is close to $600,000 a year. So that's a big, big change, discrepancy in how much a small Latino business is going to being able to generate the first couple years versus a non-Latino. And then we see more Latinas becoming more entrepreneurs and businesspeople.

Being a former Deputy Labor Commissioner and going into restaurants, going into small businesses to enforce California Labor Code, I see the struggles that these mom-and-pop places have, and they're barely making it. Some of them even live behind the restaurant. They got workers' comp insurance to pay, they have their registration fees, they have all kinds of different fees that they pay, so that takes away from the bottom line for them, and so they really are just like working 24/7 and can't afford to buy a house. They want to put their kids through school, and that's important for them.

So I think with Latinos businesses that are being challenged by the minimum wage issue, it's something that will really have to be open dialogue. It's going to have to take place, and then there's got to be a consensus among the community how to address it, because it's like you raise the minimum wage for some of these moms-and-pop places, they're going to have to close down their businesses because

they can't afford it. But McDonald's can probably raise their—I mean definitely could raise the minimum wage. Walmarts, those that are multi-corporate businesses can definitely raise minimum wage to $15 an hour. But can the small mom-and-pop place that struggles every day to keep the doors open, pay the bills, raising their wages? And I'm sure they all want to raise the wages to $15. There's no one that doesn't want to make a living wage for their employees, but it's a difficult dilemma that we have right now, I think.

Rasul You know, personally I've known you as a labor union and also as a musician. Do you want to add anything-and then we can conclude our interview—add anything about music that you think that speaks to the spirit of our community? [00:38:33]

Mora Yeah, I think, music, for me, is a time to allow somebody to just let everything else in their world just be absent for a short time, because everybody's dealing with personal life stress issues, etc., etc. Going back to, like, Joe Serna, we played at some of his events, fundraisers and stuff like that, and when I did that and the band did that, we saw how the people really enjoyed it, and so it really was like a catalyst for me to say, "You know what? This is something that I see that we can do for the community." As you know with La Familia Loca, we would do a lot of fundraisers every year. So music is a way to bring people together and then use music as a platform to have maybe those young outstanding Chicanos that are coming up, to kind of share with the people there, their thoughts, you know, what

directions should we go to and how we should vote, or give their opinion and discuss how to look at the future as a community.

Rasul Thank you, Carlos, for the interview.

[00:40.34]

Mora All right. Thanks, Dave.

[End of interview]