

The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education  
Oral History Project

**Eric Vega**

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Jennifer García  
May 6, 2014

Transcription by Korina López; Brianna Figueroa, and Technitype Transcripts

**García** Hi. My name is Jennifer García, and I will be interviewing you today.

Could you please state your full name?

[00:00:08]

**Vega** Yes. Hi, Jessica. My name is, Eric Vega and I live here in Sacramento.

I was born here in Sacramento.

**García** Can you provide your birthdate?

[00:00:18]

**Vega** Sure. I'm born November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1951, and I'm hoping for presents now.

My family came from Mexico roughly during the period of the Mexican Revolution at the turn of the century. They came from the state of Zacatecas. I'm told that they had to hide my grandmother in a barrel of oats because of the violence and ugliness of the revolution. And they, like many other people coming from Mexico, they went into agricultural work or they were farmworkers and they went into the railroads, and eventually moved up to Dunsmuir, and most of the family was involved in the railroads at that time.

**García**        Could you please provide your marital status?

[00:01:11]

**Vega**        I am married. I have two sons. One lives over in Portland and the other one lives here in Sacramento.

**García**        So where were you born and raised?

[00:01:21]

**Vega**        Right here in Sacramento, so I first lived in the Alkali Flats area, and then we moved over to Oak Park and I went to Immaculate Conception Parochial School in the Oak Park area, and then the family moved out to South Sacramento.

**García**        So you said that your family was involved in working the railroads, but what did your parents—did they do anything else for a living?

[00:02:00]

**Vega**        I'm not sure about my father. My father may have been undocumented. I've never been able to kind of fully figure it out, so I don't really know anything about my father's family.

                  On my mother's side is the story of Zacatecas and farmworkers, cannery work, and railroad work. I think that they were in the United States, like, on an ongoing basis by the 1940s in Dunsmuir, and I had, I think, about seven uncles and maybe four aunts, something like that, a big family. The sons went off to war, and then they came back and some of them went back into railroad work, but others kind of dispersed and went out to different areas. A number of them relocated to Sacramento. That's the family background.

**García** How many brothers and sisters do you have?

[00:03:06]

**Vega** I have two brothers and one sister, and then, like a number of families that we knew at the time, we took in other cousins, so I also grew up with two other cousins that lived with us.

**García** Can you please describe your experiences as a child and youth in your family and your neighborhood?

[00:03:28]

**Vega** My earliest recollections are a deep familial warmth, so it was a big Mexican family and we ate together and I ran around with my cousins all the time. The uncles and aunts primarily spoke in Spanish, but also spoke in English all the time as well. One of my uncles created an art gallery in Oak Park and had a lot of space, so we started having big ol' family parties there. I just remember that vividly as a great time, very warm. The family helped each other out when there were difficulties, so one uncle went broke and they just all pulled money together to help each other out.

My first job was with my cousins and my brother, and we went to Yolo County and picked tomatoes, so that was my exposure to kind of agricultural work at a very young age.

They were deeply committed to Catholicism when I was little, so I was in plays, you know, and little pageants and ceremonies connected to the church. My

grandfather helped to start Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and helped with the creation of different supporting organizations to make it a reality.

We lived in Oak Park and then we moved to South Sacramento and went into a kind of suburban reality which was different than in the downtown area, and it was harder at that point to connect to the family, so there's a beginning of disconnecting from the family.

**García** Were you a Fellow or Felito during the Mexican American Education Program?

[00:05:53]

**Vega** I don't know. I may have been. There was a kind of split in my family. My father did not want us to be with Mexicans, did not want us to speak Spanish. He wanted us to go to parochial school and become doctor, president, or something like that. My mother, on the other hand, said, "You're Mexican and you're going to go over to Lucy Lemos' house," a friend, "and you're going to be with other youth and you're going to learn what it is to be Mexican American." So I was, like, going in both directions.

I do want to say I love my father, he loved me, and like many fathers, what he perceived was that he was discriminated against when he was youth, he didn't want that to happen to us. He wanted to figure out a way to deal with that. My mother was intuitively an activist, so she got us involved in what was called the—I think it was called the Mexican American Youth Organization. So we did some stuff in that group. That's the best that I can remember from the kind of early days.

**García** So what are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the Movimiento Chicano?

[00:07:24]

**Vega** So, in 1969, I graduated from high school and I started over at City College, and there was already a Farmworkers Movement, you know. There was already stuff happening. So I was just learning about the war in Vietnam and learning about farmworker issues.

When I got into the armed forces, I was in for four years and I started hearing more and more about Cesar Chavez and the Movement, that component of the Movement. And I did anti-war work in the military, so I was beginning to interact with Socialists, Marxists, Leninists, and Chicano nationalists from that period of time in the San Antonio area, which is where I was stationed. So I guess I just was learning and talking to people.

When I got out of the service in '74, I kind of accelerated my interest in both Marxism, Leninism, and the Chicano Movement, and I became involved with different groups of people that were trying to organize and do support work. So I came to really appreciate the National Liberation Movements that were occurring around the world, the fight against white supremacy, the fight against foreign domination, what is popularly referred to as imperialism and capitalism. I was captivated by that. I was drawn to that critique and that analysis, and so I guess I began to run more and more with a number of different people that were doing work around farmworker issues and around cannery worker issues.

In Sacramento, there was this thing called the Sacramento Seven Defense Committee, so that was just loosely around issues like police brutality towards Chicanos. In one event—I'm just trying to remember—the MEChA was trying to raise some money, so they held a party, too much noise, and the police came in and they destroyed the stuff and they whacked a bunch of people. I mean, they didn't kill them; they just used violence on them. So that period of time was kind of interesting. There was a lot of different angles that people can get involved and do stuff. So those are my recollections up until about 1977 or so.

**García** Thank you. So how did other Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Latinos react to the term *Chicano* and *Movimiento Chicano*?

[00:10:51]

**Vega** Well, I got involved with MEChA, and the term *Chicano* was a source of great pride and was an assertion of a non-White sense of one's identity in history, and I think it also carried with it a certain us-versus-them aspect to it. So from the very beginning, there was the assertion of pride, but there could also be differences of opinion when people would say, "Well, what if I don't want to be called Chicano but I'm still with you? I'm Brown, I speak Spanish." So there were conflicts, I think from the very beginning, about being a *vendido*, betraying your people, not being down for being Brown. So there were conflicts regarding identity in my sense from the very beginning.

Having said that, the people that I knew and that I was running around with were very involved in specific political struggles, so they might not necessarily

refer to themselves as Chicano/Chicana, but they were deeply imbedded in actual struggle, political struggle, and this included White people. Kind of interesting. It's like sometimes I would find that there were White dudes that, like, just *incredibly* identified themselves with the Chicano Movimiento. So, interesting stuff was happening.

Some of the women from that period of time I thought were, like, just really strong. I worked with Pat Lacias and Connie Aluellas and Martha Bustamante, and there's a lot of different people that were engaged during that period of time.

I don't know if I'm answering the question, but—

**García** Yes. Did you hear about the Civil Rights Movement at that time?

[00:13:18]

**Vega** I was active in the Civil Rights Movement of that time. The Black Liberation Movement from the earlier sixties, the National Liberation Movements around the world, and the rise of kind of a nationalist perceptiveness in the Southwest were all coming together in the late sixties and early seventies, so I just had the opportunity to listen and be a part of the conversation and then, more importantly for me, become actually involved in some stuff.

Just as an example, I did farmworker support work, and I remember Pat Lacias and I organized a picket line in front of Safeway over on Alhambra Boulevard. We couldn't believe—it was *huge*. I mean, we had a huge number of people show up, and I remember seeing these artists on their hands and knees on the floor, like out by the street, and they were making the signs and drawing things for

this big picket line that we had thrown, and that was José Montoya. I mean, that's how I met him, is he was, like, just right on his knees, like, making posters and doing stuff for our strike.

Again with Connie and—god, I'm forgetting names—Juanita Ballesteros, I think, we created this thing called the La Raza Rights Committee, and we went to the city council to petition them for the police not to be brutal to the lowriders, because lowriders were in different places like parks, and the police wanted to move them to other places and it would get real testy. So those were kind of the some of the issues that were occurring during that period of time.

**García** Did your involvement in the Movimiento Chicano change you personally?

[00:15:30]

**Vega** I think I considered myself a nationalist for a good period of time, and in order for myself to process that, what that meant was that we were a people, I was part of people in the Southwest and that there was a history to our people, and that like many of the National Liberation Movements around the world, they attacked imperialism, they attacked domination by oppressors. So I came to identify with that and see that as being a useful analytical tool. So it transformed me. That transformed me. And pride and identifying with a people, it made me feel connected in the way that I had a family when I was younger.

With time, I felt the complexities of that. Sometimes I encountered people who were, as the expression was, “down for the Brown” and put forward an



analysis that said “All I care about is Brown faces in high places.” And I found that increasingly to be insufficient that Chicanos could be oppressive either by way of male domination or by becoming capitalists and using their identity as a way of making money and not being down for what I thought was important, which is revolution and overturning the capitalist and imperialist system.

So I also saw that some people were stuck in an anti-White perspective, and I didn’t care for that. I found that really problematic. I could understand the history of anger and resentment, but as time went on, I felt it was important to make an analysis that did not simply demonize White people and put them simply in an us-versus-them perspective.

Then as time went on even further, I began to see that some of the solidarity that I had felt was much more complex. In other words, the Chicano community is bisected in terms of class and in terms of urban and rural realities. In other words, it’s a very segmented population like many other groups of people in the United States. So I have modified some of my perspectives on nationalism, but I think I still identify as a Chicano.

**García**        What role do you believe Chicanas played in the Movimiento?

[00:18:55]

**Vega**        A very deep and important one. I mean, so as an old man now, my analysis is that women have been oppressed systematically and exploited historically, and one has to be very careful about any liberatory movement that it is not disguising other forms of oppression. So what I mean by that is that my mother, who is

intuitively an activist and a rebel, was caught up in certain gender roles as a housewife, as taking care of little children, as being a good Catholic mother, as all those things, and it took a long time for her to be able to make a critique that sometimes found herself outside what many other Latinas or Chicanas might be thinking or feeling.

So I said earlier that I think that's something that many women felt of her generation. The next generations, you know, the children were for a period of time caught up in some of those gender roles, but as I said with Pat Lacias and Connie Aruellas and Martha Busta, if you knew some of those people, jeez, they're very strong, strong people. I'd hate to ever get into a fight with any of them, if you know what I mean. [laughter]

So I think my last comment on that is that the woman force, the woman question is probably the most powerful one, and that the liberation of women within our community and within all communities is just one of the most important indicators of a better world to come.

**García**        Next question. What did you personally initiate or help initiate in this Movimiento Chicano?

[00:21:18]

**Vega**        I've been in 100 demonstrations, many more than that, around cannery workers, around farmworkers, around civil rights and know your rights, around immigration, around DQ. I mean, you name it, I've been doing it.

**García**        What were some of the organizations you were involved in?

[00:21:50]

**Vega** Well, Mexican American Youth Association I think was the early one. Later on, I was in MEChA. I helped to create this thing called La Raza Rights Committee. I helped to create this thing called the Migrant Farmworker Rights Project over in Alkali for years. I mean, some of it blends into the work that I did professionally, but I was at Legal Services as a civil rights advocate, and then in the eighties, I think I was with MALDEF, Mexican American Legal Defense. So I've been all over the place.

**García** What significance do the activities or organizations play in the Movimiento Chicano that you were involved in?

[00:22:46]

**Vega** From 1965 to 1980s, I think the period of time that we're looking at, I can't help but feel that the analytic and the work that occurred during that period of time pointed the direction for later work. It laid the seeds for later work. So just as an example, a number of times I went to Mexico as an international observer, as a Chicano international observer to the elections in Mexico, and I did that with a group called North Americans for Democracy in Mexico, and maybe it was with LACLA as well. I think that came out of the Chicano Movimiento, the attempt to develop better relationships, to understand Mexico, to work politically on both sides of the border, to address problems that people were having.

The same thing, you know, the blowouts, that I did not participate in, but the blowouts and the demands around educational equity for Chicanos became a

major component part of legal work of MALDEF, so around the protection of bilingual education, around English-only legislation, around making sure that there was better access, all of those things needed the Movimiento period, which was like a battery cranking up and the electricity flows forward inspiring and generating strength and enthusiasm and analysis that I think has resulted in some changes, not enough, but some changes.

I mean, the same would be true in terms of political access, so coming out of the Chicano Movimiento period was Velasquez and the Southwest Voter Registration Project, and that moves into, again, legal strategies having to do with single-member district elections, prohibitions on Chicanos being able to vote, which is a current issue right now and is being contested in the courts, the emergence of Chicano Studies, so that comes out of the Santa Barbara Conference and the Spiritual Plan, but it continues with great vitality to this day in Arizona and around the country. So I guess the Movimiento period has long legs, long fingers. It stretches all the way to the year 2014 and is continuing to inspire.

**García** I know you already spoke a little about this, but I don't know if you'd like to add some more to it. Did the Movimiento Chicano raise your consciousness along social, cultural, political lines?

[00:25:59]

**Vega** Yes. It taught me the effectiveness of working with other people on political issues. So if you say, "*Yo soy Chicano*," and you look around and there's nobody around, you're talking to yourself. But if you have hundreds of people and

they don't just identify, but they do something, they address a political issue, then you can change the world. And it is our time right now. We are right in the midst of a massive demographic change that is going to shake this country to its very core. And the question is, do you lag behind, do you stay in the middle of it, or do you help lead? And hopefully my generation will be part of remembering and helping to lead and pointing out pitfalls and pointing out the rainbow ahead.

**García**        How did these changes impact your personal relationships with family, peers, and significant others?

[00:27:23]

**Vega**        Oh that's a tough one. You know, the United States is real interesting because it's so rich and offers so much, that the Mexican family that I romanticize in my mind and that touched my heart so deeply, it exploded. I mean, it just went in different directions. So, suburbanization, higher education, just the mobility that you see in this country means that people move in different directions. So I have some family that moved over into the Roseville area, others went towards the Bay Area, so I lost some of that.

                  And then the other thing is that people get old and they lose their hair and they get fat and they look for the check, you know, and I don't want to be overly critical of that, but it is a reality that as we get old, some of that vitalism is lost. So I regret that. I mean, I wish that more of the people that I knew from earlier years were still doing stuff. Having said that, it's important for the old guard to nurture the young guard, to develop the next line. It's not enough to become Che Guevara for, you

know, two years and then hang up your beret and move on to other things. I think it's important to create new revolutionaries and to make *chicanismo* meaningful with 21<sup>st</sup> century characteristics. It means summarizing and analyzing our history and our attempts at identity and trying to figure out what's healthy and what can be problematic and what is noxious, what is not good.

So it's a big task. So I still have some of my family, I still have some of my friends, but I also have had the opportunity, the privilege to work with many younger people who are bringing bright eyes and new analytical frameworks to deal with the world around them. And there's lots of stuff that needs to be dealt with. In the 1960s, a lot of people weren't talking about environmental degradation. Today I can tell you that a lot of Chicanos and Latinos are at the forefront of saying we are in the shadow of apocalypse and we better do something about it, and they're *going to* do something about it.

**García** Please describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Movimiento Chicano had on your career.

[00:30:22]

**Vega** I did not want to stay at high school, and so I went to community college. I lacked self-confidence, which might be an aspect of minority people, I mean oftentimes is, but I lacked self-confidence, but I had this burning desire that was partly brought about by reading and working with other people that were involved around political issues.

So then when I went to State College, I gravitated towards Ethnic Studies, which it just was very interesting to me, and then I kept on doing volunteer work and being involved politically, just got exposed to more and more ideas. The question again is?

**García** To describe some of the impacts that your involvement with the Movimiento Chicano had on your career.

[00:31:28]

**Vega** So I had these jobs, I was going to school, but I was impacted by the street, by what was happening in the political movements at that period of time, and so I wanted to become involved. I went to law school so I could make trouble, and then I came back and I worked at Legal Services around poor people's issues, and then I went from there to MALDEF to do legal work around Mexican American issues, and then I went from there to become the Director of the Human Rights Commission, where I could investigate discrimination complaints. Then I became involved in leading the campaign against 187 here in Sacramento with many other people, but I guess I was one of the leaders in that, and doing farmworker support work. I mean, my whole occupational trajectory is intertwined with Mexican American advocacy.

**García** Looking back at your experience in the Movement, are there any issues that you were left unresolved?

[00:32:44]

**Vega** Yeah, the class struggle, capitalism. The dogs are still in power and they need to be taken down. I'm for revolution and for bringing about a human rights-based economic system and political system, and we haven't gotten there yet, so a lot of work to do.

**García** Describe how the Movimiento Chicano impacted community life here in Sacramento or where you lived.

[00:33:19]

**Vega** Concretely, you can see murals in Sacramento, you can see the poetry that has developed here. Sorry, I'm forgetting names. I was going to give you some names, but I just forgot them. I think that some politicians in Sacramento came out of that period of time, so just as an example, Joe Serna came from that period of time, Deborah Ortiz came from that period of time, and a number of others. So it's had a lasting effect in terms of some political careers. Really important is that the Movimiento period gave birth to a whole bunch of different organizations. Some of them go back, you know, like LULAC, go way back to the early 1900s, but others were born out of the struggle for, like, language rights. And you can see that to this day. I mean, just organizations are still pushing the envelope to make sure that linguistic minorities are treated fairly, that there's access. So I'd say in the arts and certainly in music, the arts, in political careers, some political careers, and in the development of organizations that continue to do work to this day.

**García** What do you see as current or future challenges for the Chicano community?



[00:35:18]

**Vega** I don't know how strong Chicano nationalism is anymore today. I mean, it just depends where you go, geographically, I mean. I think you can still go into pockets in which there's no question, but, instead, what I see is an increasingly complex demographic and in which national liberation can be a rhetorical response to certain kind of oppressive conditions, but more generally what you see is people demanding democratic rights within this capitalist system and, whether we like it or not, people still saying, "I'm a complex human being and I don't want to be reduced simply to this word." So that's why I think you still see the terms Latino and Hispanic broadly used, and I think there's real differences that I was trying to describe before. People who grew up in downtown East Los Angeles oftentimes have a different kind of viewpoint than people who grew up in the suburbs in Sacramento, so there's just differences, and those are challenges, you know, trying to figure out how we work together and how do we agree on a political agenda.

There is a Rainbow Coalition, but there's you got to watch out because people have been taught to think of their political analysis through the Democratic and Republican Parties, and so La Raza Unida Party was an attempt to deal with that, but it was overcome by the strength of tradition and political analysis.

I think environmentalism is a heavy one that is unavoidable and all peoples are going to have to unite in order to deal with our species surviving, but so far, people can hide their heads. *Farmworker* the movie came out about Cesar Chavez. Farmworkers still don't get paid jack, they're still economically exploited,

the working conditions are still bad, so we need that movement to continue to move forward. Labor unionism and the forms of organization, we need strong organizations. That's a really important thing, and whether we have the ability to create organizations anymore and shared ideology is a very interesting kind of complex question.

This country is founded in some ways by elites who propagated the idea that you could go on your own, that liberty meant being a total individual. And what you've seen is the collapse of the commons and the public interest. That's a deep and heady challenge for peoples in this country to try to deal with. Whether you can put together organizations and have kind a political cohesion is a big challenge.

So unions, as an example of that, for Latinos, for Chicanos, unionism is an important part of their history. Coming out of the Mexican Revolution, many of the people that came to the United States had a union background, union consciousness, labor consciousness, and today labor unions are on retreat. Their percentage is going increasingly down. All the evidence shows if you're a part of a union, you get paid better, you have better working conditions, and yet the kind of dominant cultural perspective that unions are just going to rip you off, they're no good is what you see. It's what you see amongst young people having that kind of consciousness.

So, for a lot of different reasons, whether we can create organizations that will struggle on behalf of the public interest I think is a big question. Many young people are caught up in Google bubbles or music bubbles, and many human

beings are becoming zombies right now and heavily narcotized, not necessarily by narcotics, but by a number of different mechanisms to numb them, and so you don't see mass movements.

What was important about the Chicano Movimiento was that word "movement." It was part of a Feminist Movement, Anti-War Movement, Native American Movement. It was like lots of movements that were posing a challenge to empire, and we still live in an empire, and the question is what are you going to do about it, but those movements are having a tough time even recognizing themselves as movements. So I think that's the period of time that we're in. We have a lot of real big challenges, and trying to break out of a zombie is one of the big ones. [laughter]

**García** Do you see yourself as staying involved in meeting these challenges?  
[00:41:06]

**Vega** Yes. I have created a thing called the Sacramento Activist School, and for years I've been trying to train new, young radical activists. I'm part of the Sol Collective, which is an attempt to fuse culture, activism, and the arts, to bring them together. My dream is to create many, many Sol Collectives all around the country, because you need bases to build a movement. And whether we get anywhere, we'll find out. We'll see. [laughter]

**García** Would you like to add or expand on anything about the Chicano Movement?  
[00:41:49]

**Vega**           The movie brought out some interesting questions, the one about Cesar Chavez, because it's real easy for people to romanticize and put people on a pedestal, especially in this country that tends to be obsessed with celebrity, with big sports figures or big musicians. So, for me, what was important about the film was less the hagiography, less the trying to anoint this person as being an angel or some wonderful person, and, instead, the idea that the people united can never be defeated, that the mobilization of the masses is the most important thing, that conservatives make the argument that the masses are asses, and the counter to that is "*Sí, se puede!*" We can do it, we need to organize, we need to create a movement, we can change the world. So that's the that's the hope that collective action, wise collective action, is in our best interest.

**García**           Thank you.

[00:43:38]

**Vega**           Absolutely.

[00:43:40]

**García**           Thank you so much.

[End of interview]