

Interviewee: Caram, Dorothy

Interview Date: November 4, 2004

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Dorothy Caram
Mexican-American History
Magnolia Park, Salon Juarez

Interviewed by: Leigh Cutler
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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: 2603 Glen Haven, Houston, Texas.

LC: This is Leigh Cutler interviewing Dorothy Caram about Magnolia Hall, Salon Juarez in the east end of Houston. The interview is taking place at Mrs. Caram's home at 2603 Glen Haven in Houston, Texas. The date is Thursday, November 4, 2004. Okay if you will just tell me where you were born and a little bit about your family, schooling?

DC: Background?

LC: Yes.

DC: Okay. My grandfather on my father's side was from Harrisburg and my grandmother on my father's side was from the Heights and my father was born here in Houston. My mother was from Mexico City and she came here with her father in 1922, 1923 during the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution that went on a number of years until 1930 something, there was still unrest. So she was from Mexico. When they got married they got married in Mexico. They went to live in McAllen because my father was fully bilingual, even though he was a Fairington he loved the Mexican culture and he loved Spanish so he became, and he had training in theatrical, theatrical training and he had almost finished his degree at Rice. So he became a radio announcer, the only bilingual radio announcer on the border and there were a bunch of border stations and

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that's where I was born in McAllen. When I was about a year old we moved back to Houston and he went back to Rice to finish his degree.

LC: Okay so what year was that you moved back to Houston?

DC: Well I was born in 1933 so we moved back to Houston in about 1934.

LC: What is your connection to Magnolia Hall or Salon Juarez, tell me a little bit about that history?

DC: First of all Magnolia Hall was a popular meeting place for the people in the Magnolia area. It was originally the YWCA and, first it was a *mutalista*, then it became the YWCA in that area.

LC: Okay that's where I'm a little unclear because I know in 1932 I guess the *mutualistas* lost the building. So do you know when it became the YWCA?

DC: Well I went to it for the first time in the early 50's and my brother worked there, and I don't think I am mistaken, my brother Richard worked there with Elma Barrera and they were the first two physical education instructors for the YWCA.

LC: Oh wow.

DC: Elma Barrera is on Channel 13, she is a reporter.

LC: Oh okay.

DC: But I had gone over there for meetings and things and we had, I remember that I danced, there was a little group that took ballet and classical Spanish dancing with me. I would go over to Magnolia area and pick up all these kids and take them to the classes, so this is in the 1950's, early 50's. I would take them to class because they didn't have a ride and I lived not too far away, about four miles away. Then I would take them back home again. I know we danced there.

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LC: Wow okay. Well so what do you know... I know there was a period where the building was just kind of abandoned and...?

DC: This must have been in the 90's.

LC: Is it that recent?

DC: Late, yeah because it wasn't during that time.

LC: So it was still being used for community activities?

DC: Something was going on there.

LC: Right okay.

DC: Yeah but I wasn't a part of it then. Because after I married in '58 then I didn't go back to that area of town except when I had meetings and things, you know at Ripley House which is further up and when I would go to that part of town to see friends or to go to Immaculate Heart of Mary.

LC: Do you have any other specific memories of things you did do there before?

DC: Mostly it was performing with a dance group that's what I remember. That was the most vivid memory. I went by there the other day it looks bad again.

LC: Yeah.

DC: It looks awful again.

LC: Yeah in disrepair. That's one of the things that I'm trying to figure out is the whole issue of preservation of the building. I'm also interested in knowing what the building has meant to the community over time. Has it lost its meaning at this point? I mean obviously it is in disrepair and the community is changing but what was its meaning; what did it evolve into and what it at this point?

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DC: Well when it was established as a *mutualista* it was a central place for that area to meet because everybody pooled their funds whether it would be for burials or to put a down payment on a home or something. It was the pooled insurance and the meeting hall for everybody. So that's what the main reference point was for the *mutualista*. Then after they lost it and it became the Y, then it was a place where everybody would gather for all sorts of events, like senior citizens. But when the YWCA then built the Magnolia YWCA across the street then that's when it started losing its importance and somebody bought it and later it was abandoned, it was never developed.

LC: So do you think there are a lot of people in the community now or in the past decade or so who really don't know what it's for, don't know much about its history?

DC: That's right. Anybody who was born after 1980 or moved in that area wouldn't know what it was for.

LC: What about, what are your views on steps toward preservation and obstacles of preservation if you feel informed at all.

DC: Well I am very interested in preservation because for one of the things, we recognize like in Sam Houston Park downtown, we recognize the old families of Houston by having some of the old homes moved into that area. We have representation from the black community from Antioch Church that is there and from another building that is there; but the Hispanic community which was here even before anybody else is never recognized because they have never been able to find a building to move over there. Now I heard that they were now planning, the Heritage Society was finding a building and was going to do something to kind of recall the history of Hispanics in this area. But Magnolia was really important because the people who developed the Ship Channel, who

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drudged up the Ship Channel and then established home there and then later became the workers around the Ship Channel. They were carted in here beginning in, first to build the railroads in 1880 and all; then after that to do the Ship Channel and to work there. (Ship I can't even say that anymore.) Then they established that neighborhood as a Hispanic neighborhood, Magnolia was. They named the school de Zavala for the first vice president of the country of Texas and he was a very important man who had a home in Harrisburg, which is right down there so in that general area but we don't know where because it was burned. Santana's troops burned Harrisburg except for... they didn't find his house because his house was the first hospital in what is now this area because that's where they took all the wounded, he was a doctor de Zavala was, an M.D. They took all the wounded soldiers both Mexican and Anglos, (Tejanos, Texanos), they took them to his house as a hospital. Nobody ever does much about that. I mean there is history there and they just ignore it. We need to preserve something in that are that will bring back to the glory to the first people that came there.

LC: So you think a moving of the building to...?

DC: That would have been my wish but I looked at the building the other day and it is just decrepit, it is just falling apart. So that made me real sad because the man who owns it, the family was paid off, they were going to pay off all the debt on the taxes and then start fixing it up but I don't see that they have.

LC: Yeah I talked to the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance and they said that he did pay the taxes; it was up on the auction block so he paid the taxes but at this point...

DC: He hasn't done anything else.

LC: Yeah.

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DC: See Felix wanted, Felix Fraga talked to me about it and they said that they wanted to make it into attorneys' offices or something like that.

LC: I had heard that too. That was another thing that I was wondering about is because there was some talk about if it was turned into attorneys' offices who would they be able to convince to buy it or to lease it just because of where it is may not be the most appealing location, even though it is changing, and I don't necessarily agree with that, and also issues like parking space.

DC: Since it is very limited parking.

LC: Right so what I had heard was that they were, that had dropped because of those issues.

DC: You know what would be perfect for that place is to make it a senior citizen community place. Because the closest one is the Community Center which is off of 76th street, who right now has the contract to run the Montessori at what was the YWCA, they have that contract and they are doing really well. Family Community Center is what it is called. But if someone could get that building and deed it over to them I bet they would fix it up and use it for something that would be beneficial to the community as a whole.

LC: I agree something that would engage the community again.

DC: Yeah and they are going to expand and give back the YWCA to the YWCA and they are going to build a whole new corridor of education and all and build a Barbara Bush Early Childhood Center.

LC: Right there on?

DC: A half a block from there!

LC: Oh.

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DC: Right where there used to be a railroad track that ran, they bought all that property and they are ready to go.

LC: That area really is going to come back.

DC: Yeah in fact let me show you because I'm getting ready to, I'm on their fundraiser for that. I'm getting ready to send out these invitations which will more or less tell you what they are doing. Let's see what it says, I haven't even looked at it. What's it say?

LC: "Mr. and Mrs. Alfredo Brenner cordially invite you for a luncheon Tuesday, December 7th to the Houston Club. Mrs. Barbara Bush Announcement of the new La Casa de Los Ninos, Barbara Bush Early Childhood Education Center and John P. McGovern, M.D. Community Sports and Recreation Center to be built in Houston's east end for Community Family Centers." Oh yeah that's great.

DC: It would behoove you to go by the Community Family Centers and see if you can find some people that, because from 75th Street or 76th one or the other and Canal.

LC: Okay.

DC: There's a big warehouse and right next to the warehouse is a little building and then right there is the Community Family Center. The head of that center is Elena Vergara, she hasn't been there but about ten years but I'm sure she knows everybody who has been there for a long time now. One family that has been there for a long time is the Reyna family (R-E-Y-N-A), they have a bakery on 75th Street, across the street or cattycorner from de Zavala school. The daughters are still there. They might be able to give you some information. There is also a bakery and I can't remember the name of the man who is the, but he is a big community leader there. His name is Francisco is his first name and he owns the bakery that is on the same side of the street of the front door of

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Immaculate of Heart Mary but down the street a little bit. It used to be cattycorner but he sold it. Now he is on the same side of the street on 76th Street.

LC: Okay well with all of this coming up and happening right around in the same place, do you think this means that it being privately owned, the Salon Juarez being privately owned, is that somewhat of an obstacle?

DC: Yes it is, especially if the owners don't really care and don't want to fix it up or don't have the money. The best thing they could do is get an offer from a non profit and have them make a special price so they could carry any debt on the property and let this other agency...

LC: And sell it?

DC: Yeah. Sell it or convey it to them.

LC: That is an option but do you also think that if there is any possibility that if it remains privately owned that community activism combined with the owner can still make something out of the preservation?

DC: Well they got the owner to pay the taxes, so community activism does play a role but the community activists in this area they don't have any money to do that.

LC: It seems like it is all coming down to money.

DC: Yeah. You just have to come from other areas to do this work and the owner is not, I don't know if he is very interested.

LC: So this whole project with the Casa de Los Ninos and that was all done by Community Family Centers?

DC: Oh yeah, they organized that.

LC: They funded it?

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DC: Well no they are not funding it. We are raising the funds for it.

LC: Oh fundraising it?

DC: Millions, I forgotten how many, ten million or something; but we are also getting foundations and stuff and that's what this luncheon is about. It is to bring in people who would want to see their name on a brick or something.

LC: Well the other buildings in that area obviously, were they not, they weren't privately owned or they were...

DC: Well that area is a blank piece of property.

LC: Oh these are being built? Okay.

DC: That's going to be full...

LC: I was thinking the other Y for some reason.

DC: But the Y is going to be given back to the Y. They remodeled the Y and fixed it up and have run for the last four years a very successful program and the reason they are so successful is that they require the parents that take their children to that Montessori school to take classes themselves at night at the community center on computers, on English on parenting schools. So if the parent doesn't go to the class then the child can't go and the parents want to kids in there because it is such a great program. So it is really working well.

LC: Wow that's interesting to know what is going on around...

DC: There's another group that's been there forever is the Houston Junior Forum.

They have a house or they used to have a house on Avenue I, I don't know what they have now because I used to teach the ballet and folkloric dancing to the kids during the late 50's, early 60's no just late 50's by early 60's I stopped. Mother used to teach them

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ceramic skills, you know how to make little vases and all sorts of stuff. So we went there at least twice a week for a long time for two or three years. But they know a lot about that history of that neighborhood.

LC: Okay that's a good contact. You mentioned that the idea of Salon Juarez as a senior community center.

DC: Right.

LC: What do you think about the idea of a Mexican-American museum heritage center?

DC: That would be great. I wouldn't call it Mexican-American I would call it Magnolia Historical Museum.

LC: Because a lot of that history is Hispanic?

DC: That's it Magnolia Historical Museum. I wouldn't call it Mexican-American because it's, it's just like the Orange Show. It will have its unique presence.

LC: And preserve the history and present it.

DC: It would be wonderful if the owner would convey it to a foundation and the foundation would then take it over to do that. Right now I am working on another project for the Houston Hispanic Forum it's called the Houston Light Guard Armory and we are preserving a building that is on Caroline Street just on the fringes of the museum area.

LC: Oh yeah.

DC: But it used to be, the original one was built in 1850 something and this building that I am helping raise the money to restore was built in 1926 and it was the equivalent of the Junior League for Women was the Light Guard Amory for men in the 1800's, after the sons of McGregor and Childress and Baker and all these people who came and made

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a name for themselves, their sons used to get together and drill like soldiers and they were a militia that was used to keep the peace in Houston. But they also competed with other cities, their little militias in parades and stuff and in gunmanship and all. So they build this building and it is like a little fort. It is right behind; do you know where Houston Community College is on San Jacinto?

LC: Yeah.

DC: It's on Caroline right behind it. It's a wonderful building.

LC: Oh okay, I'll have to look for it.

DC: It's a great building and the city is giving, through my efforts and Felix Fraga's efforts we are the two that did it, we went to City Counsel and they bought the building, it had been deeded over to the Houston Community College and they didn't want it. We bought the building through the city with community development funds and they are renting it for 30 years for \$1 a year to the Forum with the condition that they restore it. So it is going to be called the Houston Hispanic Educational and Cultural Center. So it will be nice and it will still be the home for the Light Guard Armory.

LC: Okay.

DC: We will keep the memorabilia.

LC: I think we have covered pretty much everything that I was looking for. Just another kind of opinion question; what would you say that this building is meaning for Houston's history as a whole not just for its community but...?

DC: Well it is definitely a building that reflects the better buildings in the 1870's when this was built. Wasn't it 1800, they say 1911?

LC: In 1928 from what I've read.

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DC: Okay but before that there used to be another building.

LC: Was there really?

DC: Yeah because the mutualista existed in the late 80's.

LC: Yeah because I was wondering what was there before.

DC: Yeah. There were more than one mutualista, the other one Mamie Garcia knows the history real well. Do you know who she is?

LC: No.

DC: She used to be the liaison to the police department, Houston Police Department.

Her name is Mamie Garcia and she runs the other mutualista that is up there on somewhere on Canal and Scott or somewhere up that way.

LC: Okay.

DC: But it is definitely, and that one is really used. I mean it's got a big hall and they still have quinceaneras and weddings and meetings and birthday parties and whatever they are. But you have to walk up a big flight of stairs so it is not ADA. So she could tell you a lot of that too.

LC: Alright. Anything else?

DC: I'm thankful that you are doing this it will be a nice paper to read. You've got pictures and stuff and references?

LC: Yeah I'm working with Rolando Romo at the library to try to get some pictures.

DC: They had a nice one in the Houston Business Journal.

LC: Oh yeah.

DC: And on the emails when we were doing...

LC: I didn't see the Houston Business Journal.

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DC: Maybe it was an email and I'm getting them mixed up. I think it was the emails that we got when we were looking at the preservation.

LC: Yeah.

DC: Also in a couple of books like The History of... was it Tom Krenigs book or one of the others had them in there.

LC: Okay. There are some things I need to go through there.

DC: Right.



