

NPS-65
ANTONIO BONILLA
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PUERTO RICO, 1952
AGE 17

NASH: July 15, 1974, and I am speaking with Mr. Antonio Bonilla
who came to the United States in 1952, and was born in Puerto Rico in
1934. Mr. Bonilla is the owner of Mexico Lindo, a restaurant on East
Twenty-sixth Street. Mr. Bonilla, where were you born?

BONILLA: I was born in a little town in Puerto Rico, Isabella (?), and I
cam to this country in the 1952 because I left school at the time my
father died when I was twelve years old and I have to leave the
school. So there was no other place for me to go so I came to the
United States.

NASH: What was Isabella like? Was that Isabella?

BONILLA: It is a nice little town. It is beautiful. It is near the sea and a very nice town. Now it is a big town. We have about fifty-thousand people now. As a matter of fact, I go there every year to see my family. My mother is still living there. And I just came from there about a month ago.

NASH: When you left Isabella did you leave by yourself and where did you go?

BONILLA: Well, I leave by myself. I have a little money with me and I came to Miami. I was seventeen at the time when I came to the United States. And then I took a trip. I went to Venezuela. I was traveling with the money I earned in Florida. Then I came to New York in 1954, 1954. Ever since I have been here. Then I went to Mexico so I married a Mexican woman. That is the reason I have a Mexican restaurant, which I am very proud to have this place. And most of the people ask me, "Why, if you are Puerto Rican, why you have a Mexican restaurant, such a beautiful, such a nice place, and good food?" Well, the reason I have the restaurant, Mexican restaurant, is because my wife, she is Mexican. She do all the preparation in the kitchen and that is the way we run this place. Mexican, I am the only Puerto Rican in the place. So most of the time I talk to my fellow--fellow who work with me--I have a fellow here from Morocco, Maracay,

Tangiers. I have this girl from, she was born in Mexico, but she lived in Miami. Another one from Mexico and one from the Dominican Republic. Both of the cooks are Mexicans, and my wife is one of the cooks. So, my life here has been very hard. At the beginning I work very hard and I (?) a lot. It had been very hard my life in New York until I opened this little place. Now I make a better living. But, at the beginning it was very, very hard for me.

NASH: What was the sort of things that you did to make a living?

BONILLA: Well, I work as a painter because, like I tell you before, I have to leave school when I was young because my father died. I had hardly finish eighth grade school. So without school, you can't go nowhere, anyplace. That's why I tell everybody to go to school and get their education because without education you are nobody. So, I have to paint. I work as a painter painting houses, I work painting ships when they are in the docks, washing dishes, cook, bartender. I have done everything, everything. But, it had been very hard until the last few years, till I got married. We work together with my wife and we make a little money to open this place.

NASH: How did you get the idea to open a restaurant?

BONILLA: Well, the idea, I got it from my brother-in-law who also have a little restaurant in Brooklyn and from my wife. She always told me to open a Mexican restaurant because there wasn't, you know, any other way to make a living without working so hard. At the beginning that I open this place I work very hard. I used to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week for about six, seven months, but now that I am a little settled down I'm, you know, now I have time to move around and take it easy.

NASH: Was it hard to get together enough money to open a restaurant on Twenty-sixth Street and Second Avenue? I imagine it would be.

BONILLA: Well, at the beginning it was hard because we didn't know much about restaurants and we didn't invest much here. It was an old house. We fix it up. I fix it by myself, the whole thing. With the carpenter, all the decorations, I put all the decorations. Whatever is done here, I have done it by myself and a carpenter. And it is hard, you know, at the beginning it is very hard. But, now I feel more safety, have more confidence in myself. But when I first started I was lost. I didn't know where to go because well, the first time I went into business without knowing anything. But now, you know, I could run any kind of business.

NASH: How old were you when you opened the restaurant?

BONILLA: It was two years ago. I was thirty-eight. Now I am forty.

Two years ago.

NASH: Do you have children?

BONILLA: I have two girls, one is four and one is two years old, and we are expecting another one. I live in Brooklyn Heights, Montague Street.

NASH: Is Mexican food very different from Puerto Rican food?

BONILLA: Well, I get very few Puerto Ricans here, mostly American people, 99 percent, 99.5.

NASH: How about Mexicans?

BONILLA: No, we don't get Mexicans, very few. People-- we depend on American people. Especially, I will say 55-60, 65 percent Jewish people, and the rest Italian, Irish, French, German. But 99.5 are American. I cannot depend on Spanish people because very few. I got very, very few. And maybe on Sunday I get five or six couples. That's all, but 99 percent are the Americans. And thanks to them I am here. And like I told you, Jewish people are the most--I have 65

percent of my customers are Jewish.

NASH: What do you eat at home, always Mexican food?

BONILLA: Well, steak, Mexican food, whatever I get and I like everything.

NASH: Is there any other kind of food that you like a lot besides Mexican?

BONILLA: Well, because here besides the Mexican food we have seafood, shrimps, we have shrimps and garlic, we have shrimps in creole sauce, shrimp in chili sauce, we have paella, (?) that's seafood in stew, and chicken and rice, steaks, beef. We sell beef too and steaks. And most of the time I don't eat here. I go outside and go to Ole. I go to some other places to eat.

NASH: Mexican restaurants?

BONILLA: No, Mexican, Spanish or mexican. It doesn't matter. I go all over the city.

NASH: Are most of your friends in the restaurant business?

BONILLA: I have quite a few friends, yes. Mexican and Spanish. They came to the United States. I have a friend who came to the United States about eight years ago and he owns a restaurant now, big one, a beautiful restaurant.

NASH: You all go out together to eat on your days off and talk about food?

BONILLA: No, no.

NASH: Somebody else says you do.

BONILLA: He's my son. He is the oldest son I have. He is seventeen. When I go out I don't like to talk about food and I don't like to talk about my place either. I never talk about my place. When I go on vacation I forget about the whole thing. I go to enjoy myself and whatever happens it happens. When I am here I take good care of my place. I take very good care of my food and my place and my business.

NASH: What is the nicest thing about owning a restaurant?

BONILLA: Well, I like to talk to people. As a matter of fact, I wish I

could speak better English. I don't speak too good English. I wish I could speak better English than I speak now because I like to talk to people, like to get with people. Most of the time I sit with the people at the table and talk to them, make jokes, whatever, you know.

When I have music here--sometimes I have music and musicians here on weekends, and we sit with the people. They sing songs for us and all that. That is the only thing good I like about this kind of business because I deal with people all the time. I have friends. I meet different people every day. I have here Mr. Joe Franklin, was here, from the television. Mr. Soupy Sales was here a while, and I have quite a few big people that come to my place.

NASH: Well, what do you miss about being in Puerto Rico?

BONILLA: What I miss? Well, I miss the weather there, the weather when it is winter here. I miss the good weather that is there. That's all.

NASH: What are some of your favorite dishes at this restaurant, that people could order?

BONILLA: We have the moelle, chicken moelle made with chocolate sauce, which is delicious, and the chili rellenos. That is the green Mexican pepper stuffed with cheese.

They are very good, very good, and I suggest to have some steak.

NASH: Is there anything else you would like to say about coming to the United States--well, of course, you are an American anyway, but do you feel like you came to a new country?

BONILLA: I did, yes, I did. It was like a new country to me. I live in a little island, small town and I never left my town. The first time I came here I was lost. Different. The whole thing was different for me, people, the language, customs, everything was so different. I was lost in the beginning. See, like I go to Mexico and I live in Mexico. I go there I feel like I am a Mexican because the people are so close to us and it is like being a Puerto Rican, being Cuban, being a Mexican are not the same because we have the same ideas, the tradition and it is all like all the same whenever I go. Of course, I have been in Venezuela, I have been in Brazil, I have been in Mexico many, many times, which I lived there. I have been in Santa Domingo, and whenever I go there I feel like I'm in Puerto Rico. I talk to the people. But if I go to Canada, I have been in Canada, I feel a different world. People are different, the language and all that. That is the way I feel, but I mean I am very proud to be an American citizen. I am very proud to be a Puerto Rican, and I am very proud to have the American citizenship because I could go wherever I

want and I come to the United States. I make a decent living here and I kiss the land, the earth if I have to. If I have to give my life for the United States I give my life for the United States because I am proud to be part of the American people and part of America. I am very, very proud.

NASH: Thank you very much.