

Coming to the Plains

Berta García, Interviewee
Dr. Michelle Warren, Interviewer
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Tecolotlán, Jalisco, Mexico

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WARREN: To start, can you tell me your full name and your place of origin?

GARCÍA: My name from my hometown where I was born is Berta Castillo Vega and my hometown is called Tecolotlán, Jalisco, Mexico.

[2:12]

WARREN: Very good. Do you use the same name here in Lexington? What name do you use here?

GARCÍA: No, from the first day that I arrived here twenty-two years ago, my sister in law told me that I shouldn't use my name from over there when I was filling out papers. That it was too long to sign. That I shouldn't use anything but Berta García, like my husband. Since then, I've always used Berta García, and when the day came that I wanted to be a citizen they asked me if I wanted to change the name and I asked my husband if it was important to use García or if I would choose mine. He said no, that that's how it was going to be and I just chose Berta García and I always sign Berta García now. Nothing more.

[3:14]

WARREN: Tell me about, about how your life was in Mexico.

GARCÍA: We lived very comfortably. There were nine of us in my house and it was a childhood... not rich, but everything in the house was very good, very comfortable. I met my husband in the same neighbourhood and then I got married. We lasted fifteen years there. We got permission to come. I thought that they wouldn't give it to us and they gave it to us for ten years. And we only lasted two weeks of vacation. But no, I didn't like it. Later on when we went back, after I got pregnant with my third girl, my sister in law told us that we should come over, so that she would be born over here and so we came. One month, two months, and we now have twenty-two years here because we never left. Only let my oldest daughter finish high school. Now the other one is getting in to college, and it is how the years went by and here I am. Very comfortable. I don't want to leave anymore.

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[4:43]

WARREN: Who decided that you would go?

GARCÍA: To where?

WARREN: To come, I mean, to come.

GARCÍA: Oh, my sister-in-law. My husband's oldest sister said that... When we came on vacations, my brother-in-law said, "Submit your papers so you can get your residency," because he was born in Los Angeles. My husband said, "But we didn't bring anything." I told him, "No, I did bring birth certificates and the stuff that we need." We hadn't arrived back in Mexico yet when we turned around and there was the answer that we had been accepted. So in four, five months we already had papers. It was fast, and... that's why my sister-in-law said, "So that the process doesn't take so long, they should come and make sure the baby is born here" and I didn't leave. That was right after they finished school, and now this one is going to high school and I still haven't left. And my husband would tell me, "When you want to leave, you will be by yourself. What will you do?" I told him, "Well, now I don't even want to leave because I would be alone." I don't have family anymore. Not my parents' families... uncles. All my family is in California, and my husband's are in Kansas. His parents aren't alive anymore, either. I feel really alone over there. I have had more time here than I did in Mexico. Than what I lasted there. I like it here, but I don't know.

[6:16]

WARREN: What did you do for work in Mexico? To make a living.

GARCÍA: With my husband, there was always livestock. We had dairy cows and we would make panela cheeses, then it became butchering, along with the milk. Then, he set up a grazing business. We did it all on the same corner and it was all business. He always liked to work and I'd help him with what I could. We always had something to work on and working in the fields was what we liked the most.

WARREN: Here, in Lexington, have you worked?

GARCÍA: I worked at Tyson. I told my husband that I wanted to get to know Tyson. Only during summer vacation. I started in May, I said, "They are about to get out of school." He said, "I don't want someone else taking care of my daughter, no." I worked only during breaks and I lasted for fifteen years. It was fifteen years until the day of the accident that we had, and then I

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couldn't return. It was when we were going to Mexico and my husband's accident happened and I couldn't return... My hands and my foot no longer worked right. I always dreamed of working but I just can't. I wanted to go, but no.

[7:47]

WARREN: Tell me about your grandchildren. Because you continue to work taking care of your grandsons or granddaughters.

GARCÍA: Whenever I went to Tyson, they would bring me one, two... well, every year there was one and I would watch them because my daughter worked nights. I would watch them all afternoon, all night, and early morning. Her husband would come and get them at three in the morning. Now, I end up with all of them. That's just for now, and I can't...but here they are every day.

WARREN: How many grandchildren do you have and...?

GARCÍA: Eight.

WARREN: And their names and ages?

GARCÍA: Andrea is twelve? thirteen years old. Anahi, twelve. She is about to turn twelve now in May. And Alex ten, and Ailany eight, Yazlen, eight now, right? And... Andres seven, and Daleisa one, and Ariela six, seven months.

[9:00]

WARREN: What was your first impression of the United States?

GARCÍA: When I came, we came through California, through Los Angeles, around there. And we changed course and came over here because one of my sister in laws was here and my mother in law came to take her children to watch them, and so we came over here to Nebraska. We were here in Nebraska four or five days, and we came only for the children, but I liked it a lot here. I just said, "If I leave one day I will go there." But, I never imagined that I would actually come here to stay. My sister in law was here; she was who invited us to come over here and I never imagined that I was going to stay. But since the first time I saw this place, I liked it. Yes, I liked it a lot.

WARREN: What were the things that you liked the most or what impressed you? Like the differences maybe from Mexico and here.

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GARCÍA: I liked a lot that... well, not the food because I didn't eat things from here [laughs]. I thought it was really nice and my sisters that I hadn't seen for years. Well... my sisters-in-law that used to live here no... I didn't like any food but only... just beans and coffee. It took me a while to eat chicken and beef because I didn't want anything else... only beans.. When I was coming, I brought my cooking pot, my four plates, my tortilla maker to make my tortillas, my molcajete. I didn't know how I was going to live here. I didn't know what was going to happen to me because I wasn't going to be able to work right away, and well, here we are.

[11:07]

WARREN: Was the reality of arriving here different from what you were expecting or what you thought before coming?

GARCÍA: The first four or five days I had an idea of what the environment was like here, but when I came to stay here... well, they would say, "Let's go to the park, it's beautiful." I would say, "It's not beautiful." It didn't look like my country, right? and I would say, "Is it really beautiful now? But what do you see as beautiful about it?" I didn't think it was beautiful, but little by little I got used to being here. But no, I didn't feel very comfortable, even though I was here with his family and that, but no.

WARREN: Can you compare families from here to the ones from the previous town?

GARCÍA: Yes, because it's very different here. Here, even if you have neighbors, because we just see each other, it's not the same as over there. Over there is very different with neighbors, with relatives, with family, with anyone and here it's not the same. If you knock on a door, well, they open the door, but I don't like to visit anyone. It's very different from over there. Over there is another life to live.

[12:41]

WARREN: What's it like to make a visit to a friend or neighbor in Mexico? How is it different?

GARCÍA: Over there, you can get together in the afternoon for a cup of coffee, some corn, some barbecue... We are up until midnight chatting, with a cup of coffee, and the kids are playing...It's very different here. No, I don't feel as comfortable, but since there's not much family over there, I feel very lonely there. But I have my neighbors, who are always with me when I go there and everything. "What do I need?" They send me something to eat, they pick me up to go eat, but my hometown is not the same as it was before, right? Well, for me. I don't have family there, but my neighbors, yes, they are with me, but it's not the same as I lived before. Without my husband,

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without my children, it's not the same anymore. That's why I think I am comfortable here. I don't know.

[13:59]

WARREN: What are some of the biggest challenges you've been through here?

GARCÍA: Like what would they be?

WARREN: The things that have been hard for you here.

GARCÍA: Well, for me, the hardest thing was to be alone. Without my husband, because I never knew about payments, rent, bills, doctors, gas, nothing. I didn't know about anything. He always was in charge of the payments. They cut off his foot and he still was looking at how to keep moving forward but I never knew anything about that and now it's difficult for me. I have to decide everything on my own. Because he's not with me anymore. But God is with us and we take the days as they come. What else we are going to do? That's what makes it hard for me.

[15:12]

WARREN: How do you think your experiences would have been different if you were born a man and came here? Would being a man here be different than being a woman here?

GARCÍA: I never liked coming here. Everyone who grew up over there in town came to the United States. I never wanted to come to the United States because people didn't come back. My sister, the first one who came, brought the one that grew up, the other, and the other and I told my mom, "She better not tell me that she is taking me because I don't want to go there ever because they do not come back anymore." They didn't return because they didn't have papers, for whatever reason, because they didn't make enough for the expenses. I never wanted to come. So when my husband brought me, it was with permission, but I said, "Good because he doesn't like it here." We only came for vacation, but when I came to stay it was very difficult because what I had here, I brought with me and my mom passed away a month before I came and I didn't have anything there anymore. So, it was easier for me to stay here with my family because I was here only a month or two and then to go back...But we stayed for one thing, for another and here we are.

[16:48]

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WARREN: Well, for official questions. I have no more official questions, but I want to know if there is anything else you would like to tell us about your life here, your life over there, your family, your observations?

GARCÍA: When I told my mom we were going to come for a month or two, I didn't tell her the reason, but she knew well already. We weren't close enough for me to tell her, "I am pregnant. I will go because of that reason." I told her, "We'll just go for a month." She told me, "Don't go, daughter, because you know what's going to happen. Your daughters are going to be dispersed." My oldest daughter was fifteen years when I brought her, and that's how it was. She got married to a man from El Salvador. He left his four daughters with her. About seven years ago, he left them. And now he doesn't help her with anything because he's in prison. His girls are really little. He never feeds them. Why? Because she works a lot to pay rent, to pay electricity and food, to dress the girls, because they grow, and they grow, and they grow, and their clothes don't fit them. If they have three changes of clothes, that's what they have for the week. I like to wash them every third day so they don't have to wear the same thing again. And they always like to eat beans, and one way or another, we get by. And it seems tough to me, that they're without their father, if they look for him. The other one, well, she has three kids. She's married. She has her baby and she's studying, and I'm alone. That seems tough to me, but here we are, getting by.

WARREN: Do you still have the four plates and the machine to make tortillas?

GARCÍA: Yes, yes.

[19:56]