

Oral History Interview with the Guillen Family
Washington County Historical Society

Informant: Guillen: Apolinar, Maria, Renee
Interviewer: Michael O'Rourke
Transcriber: Jim Lundblade

A= Apolinar Guillen (father)
M= Maria Guillen (mother)
R= Renee Guillen (son)
O= Michael O'Rourke

O: Okay, this is Michael O'Rourke for the Washington County Historical Society beginning an interview today with the Guillen family, and we have with us today Why don't we have each of you introduce yourself on the tape. Your name is ... ?

A: Apolinar Guillen.

M: Maria Inez Guillen.

R: Renee Guillen.

O: Great. I'd like to ask both of you a little bit about what you did and where you came from before you were in to Oregon.

A: Okay. [Spanish 1:05]

R: They came from Guadalajara in Mexico in '79 to Oregon.

O: Ok. Inez, when were you born?

M: I was born in Guadalajara in [1951?]

O: Ok. And you?

A: I was born in Guadalajara in 1952.

O: Ok. And what did your family do in Guadalajara?

M: My father was a farmer.

O: Ok. And your family?

A: My father was a farmer, and a brick And we did like a bricklaying to build houses ... bakers...

O: Oh, brick makers.

R: And they sold the bricks to brick-layers, construction companies, that made buildings. They actually supplied the bricks.

O: How did you two meet?

M: We were neighbors.

O: Did you work on the farm?

M: No, only him. I stayed in the house and cooked.

R: We also had like a store or a small market, and she worked at their, at the family

O: and you sold Vegetables?

M: ... groceries.

O: And did you both play music, too?

M: No,

A: [Spn.]

R: A friend of them showed them how to play the guitar. Initially all he knew was how to play the guitar.

O: You said you came to Oregon in 1979?

A: Uh-huh.

O: How did you happen to come to Oregon? Did you come directly to ... from Guadalajara?

A: Yes.

O: And how did that happen?

R: My mom had a sister that was here in Oregon, and when she talked to her she asked her if she wanted to come down ... to Oregon, there was a lot of work, a lot of things you could work at here in the state of Oregon. Just very

O: And how did you travel to Oregon?

M: 1986. [06:20]

O: How did you cross the border?

A: Walking and running.

O: Did you cross in Texas, then?

A: We crossed from Tijuana.

O: Did someone help you to cross...?

A: Yes.

M: We just walked up to the Jack-in-the-box.

R: He picked them up at a restaurant in one side of the river, and then they [07:05]

O: Were there people on the Mexican side of the border that helped too?

A: Yes.

O: Did you know these people?

A: No.

O: Did you pay them something to help you

M: Yep.

A: \$300 each person.

O: How did you actually cross the border? Was it at night? How did you ... ?

A: We crossed during the day. In the morning.

M: [Spn]

R: All they did was, as the cars were going past by, they just walked through, as soon as the cars would come, they would just walk right through

O: So no problems?

A: It was a big danger, but we made it!

O: You came because you felt that maybe you'd have a better life here?

M: Uh-huh.

O: So you came first to Los Angeles. How long did you stay in Los Angeles?

M: About 3 days, until my sister could ... come and pick me up.

O: Ok, so they drove to Los Angeles and picked you up. And so they you came to here?

M: To Hillsboro.

O: What was it like coming with no English?

M: [Spn] ... hospitals, doctors.... We don't have good services Start to go to school ... To learn English.

O: Where did you learn English?

A: Centro.

O: Oh, Centro. What did you ... Did you find better work here when you first came?

A: No, not better. Hard job. Everybody ... for me and my brother, we worked together, my brother and me, but very, very hard job. I worked in the fields, in the rain and the snow, the wind blow, and everything ...

M: They had to work

O: So, long hours, long days.

A: Yeah, and I don't have no car. Ride in the bus. And it a very, very hard job. No time for rest.

O: How long did you do this?

A: I think, like, two years, hard years. After two years, I changed to another job. I worked for the ... landscaping, but much better,

O: So the landscaping work was better. Who did you work for in the landscaping work? It was a Japanese

A: Yeah, Japanese.

O: Did you work in the landscaping business too?

M: No, I cared the kids. I didn't work for the companies when I have kids. I gave myself to them and How can I help him? But, I tried to help my husband, then kids, ... Long time ago we not have much Mexican stores, so I make piñata for the kids birthdays. I need to help my husband So people come and buy, cause they not have much. And no Mexican stores. It good money. I help my husband to support the house. The food or something. To make piñatas. So I use to work with my children's school.

O: Did you have children when you crossed the border?

M: Yeah.

A: And the belly, she pregnant when we came....

M: We came with three kids, but.... Cause Jim [Spn]

R: Many years before that, back in like '72, and they were here roughly two years in California. And one of my little kids was born in California. And then their third child was born in Mexico. So they had ... we had three young children that they had to cross at the same time.

O: And were you one of them ?

R: Yeah, I was one of them.

O: How old were you then?

R: I was probably like 4 years old, but you've got to remember I was an American citizen. I was born here in the States. But I still had to pass everybody together. My Aunt crossed us because her kids were born citizens of the country. And so she just passed us, my other brothers and sisters as one of their own kids.

O: Did you cross with your parents then?

R: No, we crossed with my Aunt and cousins.

O: Ok, so I see. You crossed at different times.

R: Yeah, at different times.

O: When the two of you crossed you crossed alone except for the one in your belly?

M: [Spn]

R: Yeah, they crossed just them two by themselves, not with kids.

O: You met them in Los Angeles later? Did you cross first or ...

R: Yeah, the kids crossed the day before.

O: And do you remember this at all?

R: No, I don't remember.

O: Back to when you were working here, those first couple of years, and then you got the better job landscaping. How long did you work in the landscaping business?

A: Like, uh, 3 or 4 years

O: And then what did you do?

A: I was pruning and cleaning the houses, and cutting the grass.

O: And so you were working on your own?

A: No, but sometimes, after the job, I had friends and I worked with those people, sometimes they, I work for myself. Sometimes I took my son....

M: Sometimes we took all the kids....

A: Not usually, but sometimes.

R: [Spn]

R: After he stopped working for the landscaping, he went to another nursery in Aloha that was better. Better pay and better position. By then he had a car, it was easier for him to get around.

A: I worked 5 years over there with that company.

O: Let me ask you about those first two years, the hard ones. Did you ever think that you made a mistake coming here?

M: No! [Spn]

R: They always had hope that things would get better. And I guess they did.

O: You say you worked 5 years for the second nursery?

M: Yes. Around 1983, we sometimes, because my husband play the guitar, there was a building like a house, this family invited us to a barbeque, and said "Mr. Guillen, can you play guitar... sing for us [a choir in Spanish] " You and your husband." "No, we have never play at the church." "You will start tomorrow to play at the church." I say, "I never sing at the church, but this time, but in front of the people?" She said, "Yes!" So, when I came in the morning at the house, we have to practice at the time for the church. And we practice.

O: At Centro?

M: No, at my house. So I remember my first time in front of the many people in front of the church. So the next Sunday, ... the Spanish mass is one....

R: Before there was only one Spanish mass on Sundays, because there wasn't very many Spanish people in the community. But now there is 6 different masses in Spanish on Sunday. But before it was just one every Sunday.

M: So later Chito[?] start to learn guitar and later my husband say, my older son play the trumpet, and he start to play violin after school. So my husband start to teach them another instrument like the [wina?] and my older son with trumpet. But at home, so later we start to play at the church every Sunday.

O: So it was the guitar, trumpet, violin and bass.

O: And you sang as a kid, too?

M: Yes. Not in church, but like at a birthday party, or something.

O: So you knew a lot of Mexican songs?

M: Yes. After that [Spn].

R: All the Hispanic people came to us through the church that we added a musical group component to.

M: So they would come and say "Can you come and play at my son's birthday party, wedding, or something like that." So they start to get money.

O: So they start to play professionally.

M: Oh, then they come and say "Can you come and play in my restaurant for one hour or two?"

O: And so you did that too.

M: Yes. No, well I just go to the church.

O: So you didn't sing at the restaurant?

M: No.

O: But did the band go to the restaurant?

M: We start to get business, but later my husband decide to work just for mariachi. No more nursery.

O: Okay. When was that?

A: About 10 years ago.

R: About 1986. More like 15 years ago.

O: But you performed only in the church then?
Was it just 3 members when you played outside the church?

R: Just the original 3 people, but then we mentioned people who were also mariachi players in Mexico, in Hillsboro and Woodburn. We started going out to restaurants, we started meeting people that were musicians, but then we integrated more band members into our band.

O: How big is the band now?

A: Seven people.

R: We started with three and added more musicians as time went by.

O: Are you still a member of the band, too?

M: Well, I think sometimes, but not now.

O: At the church still?

M: Uh-huh.

O: What's the name of your band?

A: Mariachi [Marisco?]

O: Did you have a name in the very beginning too?

M: [...] Jalisco.

R: Jalisco is the state where we are from.

O: And so you still play often?

A: Yes.

O: What kinds of places do you play at?

R: They play from everywhere from birthday parties, to masses, to funerals. They pretty much play at anything that has requirements for music. You name it, they play it. They've played at grand openings for restaurants locally, hotels, meetings, all kinds of locations that require a little bit of music.

A: One time we play for the governor at a convention. Governor Atiyeh. The immigration in Portland, the Mexican consul for Mexican Independence day.

R: They play at Centro a lot for Cinco de Mayo and other festivals. So they pretty much play everywhere.

O: And originally it sounds like your reputation spread by word of mouth. The restaurants started calling you.

R: Yeah, that is correct. It originally spread through word of mouth because people knew us. People would recommend us to their friends. When we first got started, when there were just 3 of us, we didn't have any business cards. Just word of mouth. And then as the band got bigger, we turned it into a business of mariachi. And then we became the first mariachi in Oregon established here.

O: When you first started out, it was just a 3 or 4 person band. Did you have a manager per se? Were one of you actually trying to get jobs?

R: Well, my father was the head of the band and he actually worked as a manager when we saw it was something that could be made into a business because the demand was so great. He actually get business cards, and got our phone number to other people and other places. So he served as manager and became the owner of the band and runs the band.

O: Do you play mostly for Hispanic

A: Mostly for Spanish people. American people too.

O: You mentioned festivals as well as all these private parties. It's very traditional to have mariachi during weddings or baptism or piñatas. Right?

R: Sweet 16. When young girls have this big party. Mariachi plays at the mass, at the reception and do special birthday songs. Same for the wedding. You know you have these Special weddings. You play at the wedding, then you play at the reception.

A: We play for parades too. Fourth of July. Every year.

[Tape change]

O: When you started getting serious about the band, how did you decide what music would be part of your repertoire?

R: [Spn]

A: We start with popular music like American people know about.

M: [Spn]

R: It would depend on the occasion. If it was like a birthday party, then you'd have like a list of popular birthday songs. If it's for a mass, we have a list of popular mass songs, if it's a private party, then you have a certain song for a certain dance music, if it's people who don't know very much about Mexican music, then there's a list of more popular songs. So it really depends on the occasion, but there is generally a list they go by depending on what the occasion is.

O: I assume both of you knew lots of songs from Mexico. Did other band members bring in other songs, or new material.

A: [Spn]

R: Yes. In Mexico, sometimes songs become popular in Mexico so that you buy the music and then you learn the songs to practice, and then you bring them into the culture here.

O: So that's what you did to?

R: Yes.

O: How often do you perform?

A: Every weekend, like Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

O: You have jobs to play. Does the band get together to practice and work out the new songs?

A: Yes..

R: Yes, they practice about 3 days a week. For about 2 hours.

O: When you first came to Washington County, was your illegal status ever a problem for you?

M: No, we not ever have any problem. Not with the school, not the police.

R: Not even when finding a job. It wasn't a problem then.

O: How did you get your green card status?

R: [Spn] In '86 there was an amnesty in which they offered temporary residency for illegal aliens that were in the country, so they applied for ...

A: We qualified for working the fields...

O: Can you tell me... you mentioned you started to learn English at Centro. Can you tell me

What Centro was like in those days, and did Centro help you in other ways?

R: [Spn]

M: [Spn]

A: And when you need any food, or any application, we work with Centro and they help us to

R: They helped with questions, with applications. They'd write it...

M: We need something for mass, for amnesty... [Spn]

R: Centro would also help with people with low income, donating food, clothes and donating to needy families, to help them with translating applications, letters, they'd offer classes. It was pretty much a resource center for non-English speaking Hispanics, and a resource center for just about anything. They had people who worked there full-time, who'd pretty much help in any way they could.

O: Did your family experience any problems fitting into the English speaking society? Any prejudice? Any problems you might have had?

R: [Spn]

M: [Spn]

R: She said that at first, when they first moved here, they had a neighbor that was very worried about, you know, foreigners moving in, but as the years went by they got to know each other better. It got a lot better. Not being familiar with other cultures.

A: Just the lady. The men he's nice. [42:31.9]

M: Only the lady. So one time the lady she come and say, "So, I'm sorry because before I know you guys.... You bad person. Now I know you good people. So sorry."

O: So she learned something from you. And no other problems?

M: No.

O: And what was it like for you growing up in a bi-cultural environment?

R: It was difficult at first because we really didn't learn the language. We were young and our first language was Spanish. So it was somewhat difficult for us to make the transition to only speaking Spanish to learn how to read, and communicate with other kids in English. But luckily, the Centro system was really good. They actually had an English as a second language instructor that would help the students individually one-on-one so that they could learn English a lot faster and eventually become part of the class and eventually take on reading assignments as a normal kid. They helped the transition from non-speaking to become English speaking students.

O: So you made that transition with a little bit of help?

R: Most kids were accepted for being who you are and not because you didn't speak English. They were good about sharing and kids didn't really act different toward you because you didn't speak English. Children play and play is a universal language, and so they really don't care whether you are an English speaker, what's different about you. It wasn't too hard.

O: And when you grew up here did you mostly hang out with other Hispanic kids?

R: Yeah, most of the other Hispanic kids were cousins, but then we started

O: So you played mostly with your cousins?

R: Mostly with my cousins. As we began to interact more with neighbors kids, we became more open and we lost ... we gained more confidence because we spoke a little more English so gradually become more familiar with the neighbors and we eventually became friends with the neighbors kids, even though we didn't speak English completely as well. But the position wasn't very difficult.

O: And what was it like for you when you first joined your parent's band?

R: It was kind of difficult at first because we never really got up on stage when you're a kid. You find it hard to go up on a stage or in front of a lot of people. But because we had seen our parents sing and play, then it wasn't as difficult for us. Plus the church was something that we always educated about going to mass and reading the Gospel and learning about God, so some of the songs that talked about the church wasn't as difficult, because it was something that we were so used to ... we were used to going to church every Sunday and singing along with the choir, even when we weren't in the choir. So it wasn't that hard, because we already knew a lot of songs we had sung at church. So it wasn't difficult. But getting into the money and performing in front of people who weren't from church, that was a lot more difficult. Yeah, that was difficult.

O: But you got used to it.

R: Yeah, definitely. After a year or two, you get use to it and then it wasn't a big deal. But sometimes it was difficult. Sometimes you're singing in Spanish and people are speaking English and you don't really know whether you're getting to the people or if they are understanding what you are saying. But it was difficult at first, but as time went by the whole ordeal of performing become easier.

O: How old were you when you got started?

R: I was 10 years old when I first started playing musical instruments.

O: And on stage then?

R: About a year later. I began at the church for about a year playing , and then I was , I joined the band, and we started playing outside the church.

O: And did you do music at all in school?

R: I played violin when I was in sixth grade until I was in my senior year in high school. And then I played guitar in my Dad's band, and then we had a kind of band with our high school friends. So we were kind of really involved in music.

O: And was that a more modern band?

R: Yeah, it was more like a dance band. Like a Mexican dance band. More Latin rhythms or more mixed with Latin, kind of Kumbiya [?] and a little bit like rock and stuff like that. Whereas my Dad was more traditional folk music. So it was different but more appropriate for youth once we got into our teenage year. Something we related to at that point.

O: The mariachi band is all acoustic?

R: It's composed of trumpets, violins, a bass guitar which is a guitarron, and then a tenor guitar which is a [Spn], and then you have a guitar. So it's all acoustic. No sound system. All wind music is what it is. It's really traditional. That's what separates it from more modern type music.

O: And when you say bass?

R: No, it's a huge guitar, it's a humpback, it's a double string bass. You play two strings at a time. It's got a very deep voice with a lot of vibration that it makes. Very unique and distinct sound.

O: Do you enjoy playing in the band now?

R: I don't anymore, I've been to college for the last couple of years, but I certainly enjoy listening to music now and sometimes I do wish I played in the band. I occasionally play at parties, at a birthday party, but I haven't done it for the last couple of years. However my brother, who was in the band when we first started, has his own band. He separated from my dad after he got married and had his own family. And he has his own band after learning how to play the basics from my Dad's band. He then went on his own and formed his own mariachi band.

O: And what's the name for that band?

R: Mariachi Viva Mexico. So it's become a tradition in the family now. Even his youngest son, at a young age sings mariachi and has been learning how to play instruments, so this is like the third generation of mariachi in our family. [51:57.8]

O: Well, I'm starting to run out of questions here. Is there anything about your music or band that you would like to say?

A: [Spn]

R: ...[Jalisco] originally came out of the St. Alexander's Spanish choir. That's really how it formed. We were a choir first doing Spanish masses and it eventually was a friendly get-together band, and then we eventually turned into a professional band, and [have been together] for the past fifteen years.

O: Do you play sometimes outside of the area here?

A: Spn

R: They've been up in Alaska three times, California, a couple of customers in Washington, Seattle, Tacoma. Anywhere.

O: Do you ever go back to Mexico?

M: Yes we go at Christmas.

A: Sometime we go to Mexico two three times a year.

O: Do you look for new recordings while you're done there?

A: Yes.

M: Sometimes they look for new instruments in Guadalajara and bring to Oregon.

O: I guess you've seen the Hispanic grow quite a bit in the area since you've come. You said there were no Hispanic stores when you first came?

A: Yes.

O: That must be a really big difference between then and now.

M: It's better now, because then we only had tamales. Husks. I had to go to the little store up at Cornelius. They have some corn tamales, and chilies. It's not easy to find Mexican products. So now it's easy. Albertsons, Safeway, everybody got it.

A: We can eat anything we like. Very hard time long time ago. 22 years.

O: Do you think that for people who still work in the fields things are better now than they were when you first came?

R: [Spn]

A: No, no. It's the same. The fields never change.

M: [Spn]

R: She says it's a lot different now then 20 years ago because there's less farms now and it seems that the crops aren't as good as they use to be as before. It's very hard to make money working in the fields now than it was 20 years ago cause there was more farms and better crops 20 years ago.

R: My mother when we were young formed a Mexican dance group for kids who would perform at different events: Centro Cultural, church groups, and it was something kind of volunteer to get the kids into the culture get them to learn how to dance, something that would keep them busy and active while they were growing up. This was something she did for several years, for almost....

So now her grandkids dance.

O: And when you did that originally for a couple of years did someone else take it over then.

M: [Spn]

R: Yes, one of her friends, Maria, took over the group, and now the dance...

M: So now I teach my grandkids, some celebration, I tell my kids and they dance!
We have a celebration in April, kids' day, and we celebrate at the center, but April 28,
Saturday, so I got my grandkid to dance there.

O: Well I wanted to thank you all

LCSH Search Terms

Acculturation
Agricultural laborer – History
Bands (Music)Brass instrument players
Brickworks
Catholic church buildings
Celebrations
Children's Day
Children's parties
Choral societies
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Cooking, Mexican
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Families – History
Farmers
Folk dancing, Mexican
Independence Day (Mexico)
Mariachi
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Singers
Trumpet

Pronouns

Apolinara Guillen

Maria Inez Guillen

Reno Guillen

Guadalajara

Oregon

Tijuana

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Hillsboro

Centro Cultural

Saint Alexander Catholic Church

Woodburn

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Cinco de Mayo

Mariachi Jalisco

Mariachi Viva Mexico

Cornelius