Fresno Historical Society

Arthur R. Tirado

Arthur R. Tirado, “a Fresno businessman and owner of the Azteca Theater,” was interviewed on November 11, 1977. He was born in Mexico City on September 3, 1912. His parents were born in Spain. They were from a long line of theater people who acted in operettas. He arrived in Fresno in 1956 when he purchased the Azteca Theater at 838 F Street. Tirado describes the history of Spanish-language movie theaters that were in Fresno and the surrounding area. He describes the Azteca Theater as a social center for the Mexican community. Tirado notes that thirty or forty people are waiting to ask his advice on immigration, social security, civil rights, home and car purchases. Tirado describes the free Christmas program offered at the theater. He describes the importance of Mexican, Spanish and Cuban movies to the homesick Spanish-speaking community.

Tirado sees hope for the Mexican community as more youths are going to college and becoming professionals than twenty-five years before. He attributes the change to the Chicano movement. Tirado advocates for Latinos being involved in politics at every level. He describes his own political participation with the Nixon campaign. When asked about why a Mexican would be a Republican, Tirado explained that many Mexican businessmen were Republicans. He suggested that Mexicans should have a presence in both parties to ensure that they always had representation. Tirado approves of the Bracero Program and would like to see it return. He describes the poor treatment of the Mexican farm laborers in Fresno County. Tirado describes the current poor treatment of illegal immigrants, including eight million Mexicans. When asked about Mexicans in schools, Tirado advocates for bilingual education in the early years. Tirado describes serving as vice president of Pacifica Savings and Loan.

Interviewer: Lucia Cabral
Transcript: 8 pages
Audio: 00:18:00
OH-EOHP-MA16
Today, November 11, 1977, I Lucia G. Cabral, am interviewing Mr. Arthur R. Tirado, a Fresno businessman and owner of the Azteca Theater.

CABRAL: When and where were you born?
TIRADO: I was born in Mexico City on September 3, 1912.
CABRAL: What were your parents' occupations?
TIRADO: My father and my mother were born in Spain. They were both actors from a long line of theater people, presenting operas, operetas, revues and all phases of the theater.
CABRAL: What has been your longest place of residence?
TIRADO: My longest residence, I presume, has been Fresno. I arrived here in 1956.
CABRAL: What brought you to Fresno?
TIRADO: This theater was for sale, and the people that had it, called me and told me that they would like me to run it; they knew that I had the background in theater and motion pictures and that it could be successful. It has been successful the twenty-four years I have been here.
CABRAL: You are talking about the Azteca theater?
TIRADO: The Azteca theater, at 836 F Street, which has been here since 1949-50. I took it over in '56. Previous to that, there were many Spanish theaters here in Fresno; we were not the first. Actually, the first motion picture theaters showing Spanish pictures came to Fresno in 1929-30. A gentleman by the name of Tony Bou, who is now deceased, opened the first theater here and also in Mendota. After that, many theaters have sprung up in the vicinity of Fresno. Now we have about ten to twelve Spanish theaters around Fresno. We have them in Parlier, Lindsay, Dinuba, Madera and Firebaugh.
CABRAL: What does the Azteca theater represent to the Mexican community?
TIRADO: I think it's not only the entertainment center for the community, but it is also the social center. As you can see while you are sitting here in my office, I must have around thirty or forty people waiting for me to give them some advice. Not all of this is immigration, some of these people came here because they think, perhaps not
rightfully, that I know a little bit more about certain things than others. For example, I give them advice on social security, on civil rights because I happen to be on the Civil Rights Commission in Washington. I give them information on any problem they may have on buying homes or buying cars. I am a real estate broker.

CABRAL: What type of people come?

TIRADO: Mostly people from Mexico that have been here some years and have not become residents. About forty per cent are residents of the United or citizens. And they come to the theater, as I said, for entertainment, to see pictures that remind them of their forefathers, the scenery, their history and the social aspects of Mexico.

CABRAL: Do you think that Spanish theaters are really necessary here in Fresno?

TIRADO: For these people, yes. Because they always have the idea, like I had at one time, of returning some day back to Mexico, or, in some cases, back to Central America or South America. Not all of the people that come to see Spanish pictures are Mexicans; some are Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Spaniards. Spanish pictures are a must for themselves and also for their children.

CABRAL: When you first came to Fresno, what were the social and economic conditions of the Mexican people?

TIRADO: Conditions were poor poor; that was twenty-five years ago. Today, things are changing, the youths have come out of high schools and colleges and they are turning toward the professions. Twenty years ago we only had one attorney in town, Mr. Gilbert Lopez. Now we have at least twelve. Same thing with doctors, white collar workers, dentists, real estate brokers, and government workers. They are going into other fields instead of just agricultural labor.

CABRAL: Why do you think that this has only happened recently?

TIRADO: Perhaps, it was that some of us, some years ago, raised so much hell. You might say that the ears of the Anglo-Saxons began to take notice that there was a group, what you call Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans or Latin Americans, now you call them Chicanos, who had the same rights as everyone else. Perhaps the Negro brought it to the forefront in the 1930's and '40's by the uprising all over the United States. They are listening to us now and are making some preparation for us to enter into every field. Where we have lacked unity and assistance has
been in politics. Here is the clue and answer to many of our problems, to have Latins running for the assembly, the supervisory race or the city council and eventually for senators. And, who knows, some day we might have a Mexican youth born in the United States become President. It's possible.

CABRAL: Have you been very involved in politics?

TIRADO: Yes. I was instrumental years ago in forming MAPA here in Fresno. I was involved in the Nixon campaign. Probably that is why I was invited to the White House. I was sad to see what happened afterwards with Mr. Nixon. I still believe that he would have been a great president had he not had his problems later on with Watergate.

CABRAL: Isn't it strange for a Mexican to be a Republican?

TIRADO: No, it is not strange at all. As a matter of fact, we had a club in California of 1,000 businessmen. We met in Los Angeles in the 1960's. It was surprising because I didn't think we had that many at that time. Now we have, in the state of California, 5,000 to 10,000 Mexican Republicans. The majority, you are right, are Democrats because our forefathers thought that Roosevelt and other presidents who were Democrats helped minorities. The Mexicans shouldn't stay on one side only because the moment the other party wins, we are out completely for four, six, eight, twelve years, whatever it happens to be. We should always have part of our population in one camp and part in the other camp. No matter who goes in, we always have representation.

CABRAL: What about the Mexican community when you first came? Were they involved in politics at all?

TIRADO: No, very little. As a matter of fact, in the Nixon campaign, I could not find anybody to help me. I had to get a lady secretary from welfare and I had to get a "wetback," who is a radio announcer today, to actually assist me to put up signs. Things have changed since then, of course.

CABRAL: What did you think of the bracero program?

TIRADO: I liked the bracero program. I hope it comes back, but not exactly like we had it before, where they had to contract themselves for a limited time; then they had to go back to Mexico. I would like to see this contract for a longer period of time. Instead of one or two years, make it five years, and after the five years, the bracero would have permission to either stay and become a resident or go back to his
country. We don't have that now.

CABRAL: What would you say has been the treatment of Mexican nationals here in Fresno County? Has it generally been good?

TIRADO: The treatment of Mexican nationals in the years passed—I am speaking of the 1900's, 1910's, 1920's and '30's—was very poor, with the exception of those that were either light complected or who worked in certain fields where their faces were well-known, like in politics. But the majority of our laborers, if they had brown skins and worked in farms, were not well treated in any phase of social or political life. In no realm of government were they ever involved.

CABRAL: Do you have any specific examples or do you know of any mistreatment of Mexican nationals here in Fresno?

TIRADO: Yes, we still have them, especially what you now call the illegal or non-documented alien. But the only reason this happens is that we don't have just a few aliens like we used to have. Today, we have 12,000,000 illegal aliens in the United States, of which probably 8,000,000 are Mexican. The rest are Canadians, South Americans, Central Americans and Chinese. It is unfortunate that they are mistreated, not that they are punched or kicked or anything like that, but mistreated in that they are not given more courtesy to stay in the United States when they have proven that they are good citizens, have homes, children in the schools and never been in jail. They are hard workers. The government of the United States should be more lenient. If we are easy with the English and the French and other nationals that come to the United States, why can't we do the same thing for the Mexicans who are actually our brothers across the border. If you recall, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, California and Nevada were once part of Mexico. Mexicans cannot understand why they should not now have some kind of privilege over any person that comes from Europe, China or Africa.

CABRAL: About how many people come here each week seeking help?

TIRADO: To my office here on the second floor of the theater?

CABRAL: Yes.

TIRADO: I would say about ten to twenty people a day, on Sunday about thirty or forty people.

CABRAL: Is this all volunteer work on your part?

TIRADO: It's all volunteer work, yes. I don't charge anything for information or advice, or for going with them to buildings where they have
problems. The only time that I have to charge is when I fill out forms for half an hour or an hour. I charge them $5.00 at the most.

CABRAL: Is it true that you have an annual Christmas program here at the theater?

TIRADO: Yes, every Christmas I put on a Christmas program. I have been doing this for twenty-five years. I get about 800 to 1,000 Mexican children, depending on the advertising I do. We give fruit and candy; these are the only things some of these kids ever receive on Christmas.

CABRAL: When you first came to Fresno, how did you view the school system? Were the schools meeting the needs of the Mexican community?

TIRADO: No, they were not. As you notice, we now have the privilege of having bilingual education, which has helped a lot though I do not believe that bilingual education is the answer for everything. As a matter of fact, I don't believe in bilingual education in every phase of education. I believe in bilingual education for the first years of school; kindergarten, the first and second grades, but no more than third grade. After that we should stop it, otherwise it's a crutch for these children. They don't understand their own language and they never understand English either. If you notice, a lot of our kids cannot speak either language fluently because they depend too much on bilingual education. When I first came to the United States from Mexico, in 1919, I couldn't speak a word of English, I was enrolled in school and little by little I began to pick up English. So that, by the first or second year, I knew English well. It was very difficult and I still recall the difficulties. When I had to go to the restroom, I couldn't explain myself. I know that this still happens to young kids today. So, again, bilingual education, yes, but only in the first few grades.

CABRAL: Do you belong to an organization of professional businessmen?

TIRADO: Yes. They are not all professionals, they are all businessmen. We didn't want to start a chamber of commerce, so we became a businessmen's club, which in effect takes in every Latin businessman in the city who wants to join. We have at the present moment over fifty-five businessmen who meet every other Tuesday, once in Casa Canales at Maroa and once at The Plaza Mexican restaurant downtown.

CABRAL: Are these businessmen from Fresno?
TIRADO: Fresno and Malaga and cities around here, Highway City and Pinedale.
CABRAL: Were you once president of Pacifica Federal Savings and Loans?
TIRADO: I was president for awhile, I am vice president at the present time.
As you know, Pacifica Savings and Loans was the first Latin Savings and Loan Association in the whole valley, and was formed by seven or eight businessmen here in town. The president, at the present time, is Mr. Robert Campos, who is also head of Franklin Life. We have Mr. Ruben Duran, who is a businessman; he owns a restaurant among other things. We have Mr. Manny Perez, the head of Valley Medial Center. We also have Mr. Henry Heredia who is head of an insurance company. So all of us formed this company and have been very successful; we reached almost 5,000,000 in assets, and that’s very difficult. Most of the depositors are Spanish speaking people, about eighty or ninety per cent are Mexican. We are trying to branch out to Hanford, Sanger and other places. We have joined San Diego Savings and Loans; so now we are much stronger. Instead of having 5,000,000 in assets, we now have 1,000,000,000.
CABRAL: Did the company ever erect a building here in Fresno?
TIRADO: We have a building that we are renting at 2117 Merced, but we are moving from that location to a larger site. We will be at the corner of Tulare and M, probably by the first of January. Beautiful offices.
CABRAL: What kind of films do you show here at the theater?
TIRADO: They are all Spanish language films. I would say eighty to ninety per cent are made in Mexico. Of the remaining films, five or eight per cent might be from Spain. Cuba used to make quite a few pictures, but, since the upheaval that happened there, we have not bought any Cuban pictures. We have bought some from Argentina and some from Puerto Rico, but the Spanish speaking film industry is mainly centered in Mexico.
CABRAL: But what kinds of films are they? What do average individuals expect to see when they come into the theater?
TIRADO: I think they expect either a love story or a musical or a comedy, one of those three things. The India Maria is a very comical girl. She imitates the little Indian girls in Mexico; she is a very smart little cookie. You feel sorry for her, but at the end she comes out all right, something like Cantinflas. And then, of course, we have Tony Aguilar. We used to have Pedro Infante. He and Jorge Negrete
were the two greatest idols we ever had; they are now both dead. Tony Aguilar must be number one now. We get a tremendous number of people to see his pictures.

CABRAL: I had better let you go now as your clients are waiting.

TIRADO: Well, I appreciate your coming, and do hope this interview, although brief, might have some value in the creation of an image. Talking about image, you have so many people here that have made it and that came here as poor people. Your best example is Phillip Sanchez, who worked in the fields and later became an ambassador. We also have people like Roberto Revilla, who is a contractor, and Mr. Manuel Pasillas, who is an architect. We have so many Mexicans who are well qualified whereas we didn't have many before. So I tell the youth, "Study and take an interest in social and political matters; get into politics. Its good for us now and its good for our future."
CABRAL: Thank you very much.

TIRADO: Thank you.

"BY MY SIGNATURE, I MAKE THIS TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE TO RESEARCHERS IN THE FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES."

ARTHUR R. TIRADO, NARRATOR  
9-16-78  
(DATE)

LUCÍA G. CABRAL, INTERVIEWER  
12-19-77  
(DATE)