

**Basilio David Villarreal IV Oral History**

By

Nancy Jasmine Serna

Spring 2010

Dr. Sonia Hernandez

Starr County, Rio Grande City, Texas

Porcion & Oral History Project

University of Texas Pan American

Community Historical Archaeology Program for the Schools

**(CHAPS)**

## **Oral History**

I chose to interview Basilio David Villarreal IV for the oral history part of my Porciones research project. Basilio has resided in Rio Grande City for most of his life. He is part of the third generation in his family to live in city. Basilio was born to Maria Adelina Gonzalez and Basilio David Villarreal III on April 24, 1985. Villarreal did not live with his parents very long. Most of the stories he shares come from his experiences which were a result of being raised by his grandparents. As a child, Basilio developed a love for the land and the outdoors because it was what he was taught by Adalberto Gonzalez, his maternal grandfather.

### Childhood and Adolescence

Basilio was very knowledgeable about his family's background. He described his upbringing as very strict and conservative. As a boy, Basilio participated as an altar boy and the choir at the local church. His grandparents enforced Catholicism on him because they believed that it was the right thing to do. Basilio complied to his grandparents wishes when he was young, but when he became of age, he chose to become an Atheist. During the period of his high education, Basilio obtained his CNA license which enabled him as a caretaker. This would prove to be useful later on. Adalberto, his grandfather taught Basilio how to live off of the land at a very young age. Basilio said he remembered waking up early every Saturday morning and going out to the ranch with his grandfather. It was during that time that Adalberto showed Basilio how to hunt and fix fences, activities in which Basilio still participates.

### Family/Property History

Villarreal was very knowledgeable about the history of the land, as well as the history of his family. The property has been owned by Basilio's grandmother Adelina's family since the late 1800's. Adalberto and Adelina purchased the property from Adelina's father, Lorenzo in the mid-1940's. His grandmother, Adelina was born and raised in Starr County. Adalberto, his grandfather grew up on a

ranch North of Rio Grande City in an area that was inhabited prior to the construction of the Falcon Dam. Adalberto's family was forced to relocate to Rio Grande City as a result of the flooding caused by the construction of the dam.

Adelina's family owned about 5,000 acres of land in Starr County. By the 1830's, the number had decreased to about 1,000. Many people, including Adelina's father were forced to sell their land in order to survive the Great Depression. Her father, Lorenzo was one of the first people to introduce the Brehma Bull to the Rio Grande Valley. Introducing the Brehma Bull to the area was an innovative business move. Brehma Bulls were a result of breeding local cattle with cattle that originated in Africa, which had a higher endurance for hot weather.

Basilio's grandparents both grew up during the Depression, which made them very resourceful. He said that his grandparents never threw anything away. All of the leftovers were eaten later, and they recycled containers. As a result of the Depression, Basilio's grandparents were self-sufficient. During her free time, Adelina made clothes for herself and her family, and sold clothes to the local people. She also made her own jelly and tamales, which she also sold on occasion. Adelina was employed as the manager of the JC Penney in Rio Grande City, and she also took care of bookkeeping of the ranches which she owned with her husband. Tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and other housework were done by Adelina. Her husband Adalberto did the manual labor in the ranch, as well as in the home.

Adalberto and Adelina were not able to produce any children during their marriage. They opted to adopt a child when they were in their late 40's. They named the child they adopted Maria Adelina Gonzalez. Maria was deeply scarred when she discovered that she was adopted. This caused her to act out against her parents. At the age of seventeen, Maria married Basilio Villarreal III who was twenty-five at the time. Villarreal's family also had their roots in Starr County. Basilio Villarreal III's father founded Grande Butane, a propane and tire company and served as the first mayor of Rio Grande City. Both of Basilio's parents currently work for Starr County. His father is the President of the School Board, and his mother is the Director of Counseling and the Grant Counselor for the Starr County

School District. They have two other children, but Basilio mentioned that he does not have much of a relationship with them because they are much younger than he is, and because he did not grow up with them.

### Anecdotes about his Grandfather

The ranch meant the world to his grandfather, Adalberto. From a very young age, he learned how to live off of the land by eating snakes, armadillo, and deer, which were found locally. Adalberto only received two years of formal education. My favorite anecdote about Basilio's grandfather was the one where Adalberto learned about Christmas in the fourth grade. He asked his parents for a Christmas tree, but they had no idea where to find a pine tree, so they decorated an ebano tree instead. Adalberto's family owned a ranch in San Carlos in which La Cueva de los Indios is located. Indian petroglyphs were found in the cave. There was also an anecdote about his grandfather participating in the killing of mountain lion after deciding to engage in a night watch to resolve the problem of missing cattle on the ranch.

### More About His Grandparents

Basilio considered his grandparents the biggest blessing in his life. He said he learned a lot from them. Adelina and Adalberto shared a very loving marriage. His grandfather suffered from three strokes during his lifetime. After the first stroke, he was unable to function at one hundred percent. Both Adalberto and Adelina upheld the marriage ideal of til death due them part. They took care of each other, even though both of them were ill. Villarreal shared that he had no idea that they were both in such poor health because they managed within their marriage, and he never heard them complain. The third stroke was fatal, and resulted in his grandfather's death. When Adalberto passed away, Basilio's parents hired a nurse to take care of Adelina, which became an economic burden for the family.



**Basilio David Villarreal IV**  
**Interview Transcription**

By

Nancy Jasmine Serna

Spring 2010

Dr. Sonia Hernandez

Starr County, Rio Grande City, Texas

Porcion & Oral History Project  
University of Texas Pan American  
Community Historical Archaeology Program for the Schools  
**(CHAPS)**

**Basic Questions:**

Name: Basilio David Villareal IV

DOB: April 24, 1985

Occupation: Student (Biology Major)/Administration Assistant and Bailiff at the Rio Grande City Courthouse.

**Who did they purchase the land from?**

Basilio inherited the land from his grandparents after they passed away. His grandparents purchased it from his grandmother's parents.

Family background: Basilio grew up with his grandparents. Mother is an only child, adopted when his grandparents were in their late 40's in the 1960's. His grandfather came from La Pena, a city located by the Falcon dam. His grandfather's family was forced to move along with several other families that lived along the Rio Grande when the dam was built with very little warning and not a lot of time for evacuation. Construction of the dam affected the flow of the river, and that's why they had to leave their homes. Only went to school from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Shared an anecdote about how his grandfather did not know what a Christmas tree was until he was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. He told his parents he wanted one, but they didn't know where to get a pine tree, so they decorated an Ebano tree. His grandfather's family owned a ranch in San Carlos, about an hour and a half away from Rio Grande City. His grandfather's siblings inherited that ranch. His grandfather grew up on the ranch. They lived off of the land. Grew up eating snakes, armadillo, deer, and water from the lake. There is a cave on one of the properties called La Cueva de los Indios where there are Indian petroglyphs. Basilio also shared a story he heard from his grandfather about a lot of cows turning up missing, so they went on a night watch, and used kerosene lamps to discover it was a mountain lion that was attacking the cows. They killed it and skinned it.

**Family ties to the RGV:**

Basilio's grandfather was one of the first people to introduce the Brehma bull, a mix of local cattle mixed with African cattle in order to endure the hot weather. Very innovative business move.

Great grandparents lived in RGV, from both maternal and paternal side. Mother's family affluent in Rio. She said her diaper pins were all made out of gold (he's not sure if it's true). Great grandparents suffered through depression. They sold about 5,000 acres of land in order to survive the Depression, and were left with approximately 1,000 acres.

His grandfather got an \$80,000 loan from Future Homebuyers of America to purchase about 200 acres of land. It took him 50 years to pay it off, and he finished paying it one year before he passed away.

He used his house as collateral, as well as his cattle.

Land use by ancestors?

In order to pay property taxes he set aside a 150 acre section under the Certified Reserve Program funded by the government, in which they paid landowners to leave land alone, or plant special in order to support natural habitats of different species, specifically quails. The rest of the land was used for agriculture (cattle, goats, vineyard). Basilio described the land as a self-sufficient plantation, and it was also a major route in the cattle runs.

### **How was work divided?**

Villarreal's grandfather worked out in the ranch. He was part of the United States Army, and participated in World War II. He visited places such as Italy and Africa, and after that worked for Medina Electric, a rural electric company. Throughout his lifetime, he suffered three strokes. He was severely affected after the first one, and after that point, his grandmother was the one that took over the management of the ranch. His grandmother also worked as the manager of JcPenney in Rio Grande City. His grandmother took care of the cooking, cleaning, and other housework. She also made jelly,



tamales, and clothes in her spare time. Both of his grandparents had suffered the Depression, so they didn't believe in throwing away anything. Always ate leftover food, and recycled containers.

### **Description of life growing up:**

Basilio grew up mostly with his grandparents who treated him as a son. They were both very traditional and conservative. When he was growing up, he was an altar boy, and participated in the church choir, very strong Catholic roots. He spent a lot of time in the ranch with his grandfather, who showed him how to do things such as fix fences, and tend to cattle so that he could continue his grandfather's legacy after he passed away. Spent a lot of time hunting animals, also learned how to cook and skin them. He also learned about local herbs and their healing powers. He shared that he learned a lot from his grandparents relationship. They took care of each other until they were separated by death. His grandfather took care of his grandmother's special needs (diaper changes), even though his health was failing, and he never complained about it. Basilio never found out about this, until he took over as his grandmother's care taking after his grandfather passed away. They shared very good marriage ideals. Basilio put school on hold to take care of his grandmother at the age of 18. He had obtained his CNA license in high school, therefore was a qualified caretaker. He took care of her for two years, then she passed away.

### **More information:**

Basilio's grandfather was one of the first Mexican-Americans to attend a vocation school in the Rio Grande Valley. He learned from his grandfather that there was a lot of discrimination against Mexicans in the area, particularly in Brownsville. There were signs outside of businesses that said that Mexicans were not allowed. When his grandfather went upstate for business, people would have trouble pronouncing his name, so he went by "Chico" to facilitate things for his partners. He also goes by this nickname.

His grandmother was an only child. Her family was established. His mother found out she was adopted when she was 12 at school, which greatly affected her and made her rebel against her parents. Adoptions in the area were not very common at the time (1960's). She worked at a bank since the age of 16. She married Basilio's father at 17, and he was 25. She went on to receive three college degrees, all in education. She currently works as the director of counseling as well as the Grant Counselor for the Rio Grande City school district. He has two other siblings. Sister 19, brother 15.

His father's family also owned ranches in the Starr County area. His father's dad was the first mayor of Rio Grande City. Prior to that it was just a rural area, although it was an important part of the local economy because of its location along the Rio Grande River. It was an important port of entry. During Prohibition his grandfather and his brother were tequileros. They sold liquor to locals. His Uncle is currently the Mayor of Rio Grande City. His paternal grandfather founded Grande Butane, a propane and tire company operating out of the area.

Basilio also found many arrowheads in different properties owned by his family. There are also records that Robert E. Lee, leader of the Confederate Army stayed in Rio Grande for a short time period during the Civil War. His mom is the coordinator of a local museum where artifacts are being conserved.