

Narrator: Carmen C. Cook
Interviewer: Leslie Bilodeau
Date and Place: November 18, 2001 9:30 A.M.

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Begin Tape 1 of 1, Side A.

Leslie Bilodeau: My name is Leslie Bilodeau. Today I am interviewing Carmen Cook as part of the History 447 project, which is designed to capture the history of the Lincoln Place neighborhood. I'm interviewing Carmen at her residence at ██████████

██████████ It is November 18th at approximately 11 A.M. This is tape 1 side 1.

Mrs. Cook, when is your birthday?

Carmen Cook: March 9, 1943.

Bilodeau: What was your maiden name?

Cook: Ballesteroz, b a l l e s t e r o z – like the golfer.

Bilodeau: Is that a relative?

Cook: Ballesteroz. No.

Bilodeau: Okay. How do you know about Lincoln Place.

Cook: My mother was born there. And when she married, she had three children, and we visited my grandmother and grandfather. You know, we moved to Alton, Illinois.

But they were from Lincoln Place.

Bilodeau: And who were your grandparents?

Cook: Mr. and Mrs. Ceneobia Gonzalez.

Bilodeau: C I N

Cook: C E N E O B I A

Bilodeau: Gonzalez

Cook: G O N Z A L E Z

Bilodeau: And your mother's name?

Cook: Lucy.

Bilodeau: Lucy. Okay. What part of Lincoln Place were your grandparents in?

Cook: Olive Street.

Bilodeau: Olive Street. So that is....I have a map here that someone gave me from memories of when...when Lincoln Place was just...at the turn of the century, from what I understand. [I take the map that was drawn by Norma's mother as a point of reference. We both begin to look at the map together.] And where is Olive on there? [She is searching for Olive.] Do you remember who any of her neighbors were, or...your grandmother's neighbors, or...

Cook: Well, um..

Bilodeau: See, this is Niedringhaus right here down the middle. And I think this is...

Cook: Mitseff's. Here, down, here's Olive Street.

Bilodeau: Oh, okay, right there. So you knew the Mitseff's, or?

Cook: That was a store.

Bilodeau: Okay. So you played in the neighborhood when you were a young girl. Did you frequent the community center?

Cook: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You know, in Lincoln Place you learned to line dance and get along, play pool, and sing, and it was quite good times. Happy times.

Bilodeau: Was Mrs. Prather part of that organization when you were there?

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: Because you're quite a bit younger.

Cook: Josephine Resney was there, or Resley, Josephine Resley. [we both paused] She was head of the community center.

Bilodeau: And when was that approximately? Do you remember?

Cook: Well, I was born in 43, so, ever since I was 5 years old I was all over up and down Lincoln Place.

Bilodeau: And were there.....I know that at the turn of the century there were many, many different European immigrants. I....I heard from one person that it was named "Little Europe."

Cook: Uh huh.

Bilodeau: And were there, was there the diversification

Cook: Oh, yes.

Bilodeau:when you were young?

Cook: Oh, yes. There was a hodgepodge. Potpourri.

Bilodeau: Was that a problem....

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: for the kids?

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: By the time you were there most of them spoke English?

Cook: Everybody went to the clubhouse, and played out on the playground together. Everyone got along.

Bilodeau: I hear that...

Cook: Quite interesting. Ethnic foods....

Bilodeau: Tell me about some of the foods.

Cook: Ohhhh, well, from the Hungarians we got the spinach pie and the wonderful cookies. From the Greeks, cookies and meat – lamb. Well, also from the Hungarians, Armenians. And then the Italians – pasta, great salads. Then the Mexicans, the Mexican food.

Bilodeau: How about some family specialties? Any family favorites, or....

Cook: In the Mexican?

Bilodeau: For your family?

Cook: Oh yeah! There was chicken mole', with a chicken and red gravy, wine colored gravy....over potatoes. That was good with beans, refried beans and tostados.

Bilodeau: Did your grandmother cook a lot for you when you went down?

Cook: Oh, yes.

Bilodeau: Were there any family holidays that you celebrated in Lincoln Place?

Cook: Sure. Cinco de Mayo, 16th of September, and Christmas was always big. Christmas is a big day with the Mexican people.

Bilodeau: Tell me about Cinco de Mayo.

Cook: Cinco de Mayo.....do you have that paper? [I look for a paper Mrs. Cook gave me before we began the interview. It is enclosed with this transcript.]

Bilodeau: Mrs. Cook has given an article that I will be placing with this interview on the highlights of Cinco de Mayo. She is one of the co-authors of the article, but we're going to talk a little about some of her work in this tape.

Cook: [She begins reading from the article she has written with Norma Mendoza.] It's a Mexican holiday celebrated with as much festivity in the United States as it is in Mexico. But it can be celebrated by both because it ensured their freedom and liberty. Many

Americans think of Cinco de Mayo as literally the 5th of May, as the Mexican equivalent of the 4th of July, or a day to commemorate independence. However, it is NOT the Mexican Independence Day. That event is celebrated in September. [she is finished reading.] So we have two main celebrations, the independence and a big celebration on the 5th.

Bilodeau: Okay. What were they celebrating freedom from?

Cook: The Mexicans over the French at the historic battle of Pueblo, more than 50 years after Mexico declared it's independence from Spain. So they commemorate the victory.

Bilodeau: In your family line, do you have any....any stories of.....why did your grandmother and grandfather come to the United States?

Cook: Because they wanted to do better. And come to the United States. They just wanted to! And then all their children were born here. No, I'm sorry, my mother was born in Mexico. Yes, she came here when she was 5.

Bilodeau: And so, it was higher wages here or a better standard of living?

Cook: Right, right. They wanted a better way of life. Which Mexico was a very poor way of life. In fact, my mother wasn't a citizen.

Bilodeau: And when did she become one, do you remember?

Cook: Unless it was just by, what is it, through the government, or whatever, she never did, she never did live long enough...she died when she was 56. And so she never got social security, so we never got that far. She had to use that as being a citizen to get it.

Bilodeau: Wow. And what about your grandparents? The same thing?

Cook: The same thing. They weren't...but then, so many years ago my grandfather got a job at American Steel. The steel mills, they hired the immigrants, because you know

they're basically better workers. They have an ethnic [ethnic], a work ethnic that's hard to debate.

Bilodeau: So, you know, in my research, one of the people that I interviewed said that there weren't any cars, so people lived close to where they worked.

Cook: Right. And Lincoln Place was like that. And American Steel right up the road, what, 3 or 4 blocks, in a 6 block radius.

Bilodeau: Did the women work?

Cook: Very few women worked at the plant. They would go to other plants like NESCO Barrel, where they made the NESCO ovens, NESCO...the roasters, the old NESCO roasters, plastics, just things like that.

Bilodeau: And so, I don't know if at that time women had the same kinds of roles we have now where they work outside the home and they do all the work inside the home as well?

Cook: Oh, yes! The Mexican women were overworked.

Bilodeau: Did they grow their own food?

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: Nothing like that?

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: So...were there shops in Lincoln Place that had....

Cook: Oh, yes! Mexican Store and Armenian Store.

Bilodeau: So, what...

Cook: We could get the goods at both stores.

Bilodeau: Oh, you could?

Cook: There was two stores, and they sold intermittently things that each of us needed.

[silence]

Bilodeau: What are some just....fond, early memories in the neighborhood....friends, or
....occasions, or....

Cook: A place called Blubby's, which was across from the grocery store - Mitseff's.

And the kids would always congregate and buy candy and ice creams. In those days you could buy cho-chos. Did you know what a cho-cho is? It was an ice cream that you roll in between both hands and it would just pop out and it would be a malted square. It was like malted milk. Delicious! And we used to get our sodas there, and candy. And...the old men would sit in there and play cards. But they had a pool table for the older people, for the older children. But we were always allowed to go in and out. And then you graduated from there to the clubhouse, which had a swimming pool, a wading pool, but everybody called it a swimming pool. But it was a wading pool. And may be 40 or 50 people at one time sitting in there. And we learned to dance there. Lincoln Place is well known for their dancers. Everybody learned to swing and jitterbug.

Bilodeau: I love to swing.

Cook: And everybody had to dance the same. If you didn't do it, they would teach you until one was like the other. Some of the best dancers are from Lincoln Place. And usually, not boasting, but the kids were very popular. Not only because of their backgrounds or whatever, but they were likeable. Sociable. Personable. And many times because they associated Lincoln Place as across the tracks, the parents didn't want

their children to go across the tracks. But it didn't worry, it didn't bother the people of Lincoln Place, because in high school they were the most popular kids.

Bilodeau: Very athletic.

Cook: VERY athletic.

Bilodeau: You have some well-known athletes.

Cook: OH, YES!

Bilodeau: I believe...Ruben Mendoza.

Cook: That's my cousin.

Bilodeau: Oh, it is? Now is he going to be inducted into the hall of fame?

Cook: He IS in the hall of fame.

Bilodeau: His is in?

Cook: In Granite City. But, there's talk that he will probably be in the international hall of fame. It's in the making.

Bilodeau: That's exciting!

Cook: Well, I remember when my cousin, Ruben, went to the YMCA and started soccer in Granite City. He started it. He started teaching it from the YMCA with no pay. And he started 4 teams, 8 teams, 12 teams, 18 teams, 24 teams, 36 teams, until he taught....you know Granite City went to state 7 years in a row, you know that don't you?

Bilodeau: I knew they went to state, but not 7 years in a row.

Cook: Yes, they won 7 state champs. But that's because he taught their kids, and their kids and their kids. Now...he's to be commended.

Bilodeau: What a magnificent legacy.

Cook: Yes. The only thing he didn't do is like what most Mexicans don't do, or Hispanics – didn't go to school. If he would've went to school he could've been the Gene Baker. You understand?

Bilodeau: Yes.

Cook: And yet, he's reffed. I don't know how old my cousin Ruben is, maybe 70, but he still ref's games. And to be able to be a referee you have to run. He's in shape! But when he was a little boy, and in Mexico, they couldn't afford much. He would make holes in his shoes from playing soccer.

Bilodeau: So they didn't have the kinds of sponsorship..

Cook: Oh, NO! And then finally, after 10 years or so, the YMCA kicked in and started giving him \$125 week or so, or \$100, very minimal. But the love of soccer was already there.

Bilodeau: So did he support himself other than that job at the Y?

Cook: Refing all his life.

Bilodeau: Oh, he did?

Cook: And, he, at one time, had a sports store. But he wasn't a manager, he was a soccer player. So he didn't do well. Everybody loved him, and they respect him tremendously, but his wife always said, "Go to school. Go to school." But he never did. So therefore, she didn't work until later years. I think it took her 10 or 15 years to get through school, going at night, the years that she could go. And she's a very intelligent woman. She's a journalist. But Norma Mendoza could've been the editor of a paper, or she could write books. Very, very intelligent, very entertaining. She's one of a kind.

Bilodeau: you seem very intelligent yourself. Have you ever thought of that for yourself?

Cook: No, but I know I can write. And in my own right, I have done well.

Bilodeau: You have a lovely home. Everything is lovely here. This is a magnificent place!

Cook: Yes.

Bilodeau: Tell me about yourself, how you came to know so much about decorating and art.

Cook: Yeah, I never have had a decorator help me. What it is...is that I have to like something very much to buy it. And I'm not one that gets tired of it. If I do, I will give it away or throw it away. In other words, if something around me...if I buy it, I like it a lot. Ever since I was 16 I've just been....I used to buy my mother beautiful things. And when she died, I just....you know....my sister said, "Just take everything you've given her." And at the time she didn't like some of the things I bought her, because they were so ornate, or cut out of wood or something. You know?

Bilodeau: Uh huh.

Cook: But yet, she'd put them in the house. So many, many things I have I've had since I was young. Nothing new.

Bilodeau: Some of these items in here seem like they're from around the world.

Cook: Yes. I have worked for, I've worked since I was 16, for different doctors. I mean I've worked for...I mean, maybe 60-70 doctors. Because I moonlighted. I many times had 2 or 3 jobs to make money. And I would get gifts. And everything on that table there was a gift from a doctor. [She had a table with a display of perhaps 20 figurines

made of various materials (china, onyx, jade, pewter), and all appearing very exotic. They were breathtaking.] And after many years, when they got to know me, and those things up there on the mantle, when they got to know me they realized the things I do like. And I have a room in my house that I collect masks. Would you like to see them?

Bilodeau: I would LOVE to see them. [I paused the tape and followed her to an adjacent room where she had an extensive mask collection. There were masks from around the world made of everything to porcelain to what appeared to be a mummified mask. It was captivating, mysterious, and colorful.]

Bilodeau: When your mother was young and your grandparents lived in the neighborhood, was it common to travel outside the neighborhood.

Cook: No.

Bilodeau: No.

Cook: When my mother was young, she stayed in Lincoln Place. And so did the other people. But don't forget that to get uptown you had to get out of Lincoln Place. But, I mean, everything was pretty well contained there. They liked living in Lincoln Place, the people that lived there.

Bilodeau: It seems they still like Lincoln Place.

Cook: Uh huh. They thought nothing of walking over the tracks to downtown to go shopping...I mean, because there were no busses then downtown that came to Lincoln Place. You had to either get a ride or walk. School busses, I don't even think went to Lincoln Place.

Bilodeau: Everything seems to be pretty close there.

Cook: Yes.

Bilodeau: Now tell me about the...now the Magyar Haz

Cook: The Hungarian House?

Bilodeau: Did that change to the Mexican

Cook: Yes, the Mexican honorary.

Bilodeau: Tell me about it.

Cook: We bought it for a dollar from them.

Bilodeau: Oh, you're kidding!

Cook: We bought the whole building for a dollar.

Bilodeau: What was the purpose of buying the building?

Cook: Well, the Mexicans needed a recreation home. So they sold it to the Mexicans.

The Armenians and the Mexicans remain close.

Bilodeau: So what kind of activities went on there?

Cook: Many activities. It's not like it is now. We used to have bingo every Sunday where you'd win bushels of groceries, home embroidery pillowcases, hand made things that ...you know, I mean...it was just different. And many things were always going on at the Hungarian Home. And the Mexican Club. And then downstairs was a bar. Upstairs was a hall that people used for birthdays. And it was big celebrations. And the fiestas in May and September was held there. And many baptisms. It was a very social community. More so than uptown.

Bilodeau: And were there customs, special customs in your September and May celebrations?

Cook: The fiestas, which we would have Mexican music and Mexican food, a Mexican program. And that's another thing....all the children learned how to dance. We had to be in the program.

Bilodeau: Did you wear costumes?

Cook: Oh, yes!

Bilodeau: Any particular costumes you remember?

Cook: Oh, yeah! They were...some brought from Mexico, some were hand made. But they kept them over the years and used them over and over and over. And their kids danced and then their kids danced and their grandkids danced. They still have it. We still have a fiesta.

Bilodeau: So there's a program that's put on of national, of the old customs in costume and everything?

Cook: Right. Oh, yes! We have big, big celebrations.

Bilodeau: Mexican music....is it different?

Cook: Yes, it's different. It's the samba, mambo, cha-cha beat.

Bilodeau: I love cha-chas.

Cook: And polkas...very happy, it's happy music.

Bilodeau: Were there any musicians in your family?

Cook: Oh, yes. I come from a very popular family. There was soccer starts, and my Uncle Joe was a counselor at the high school. He died. We have a scholarship in his memory that the Mexican Honorary gives every year – 3 scholarships to the high school. And we've done it for 31 years.

Bilodeau: And what was his name?

Cook: Joe Gonzalez.

Bilodeau: Joe Gonzalez.

Cook: Joseph M. Gonzales.

Bilodeau: Was he married?

Cook: Yes.

Bilodeau: And how did ...how did he come to give this scholarship? Why did he do that?

Cook: Well he died in 1967, and so from there, the Mexican Honorary Club, in his honor, formed a committee. And I've been head of that committee for a great many years. So we have a dance every March. And we collect enough money. We make enough off of the dance to give three scholarships a year to the high school.

Bilodeau: And what kind of criteria for the scholarships?

Cook: Oh, grades. We get to recommend two or three people, you know what I mean? Not always do they pick them, but we do get consideration. And we try to give people a chance to better themselves. You give somebody \$1000, it's enough for books. You know what I mean?

Bilodeau: Yeah.

Cook: You know, and I mean \$3000 even helps more.

Bilodeau: Absolutely.

Cook: So every little bit helps. But we've done this for 31 years without fail. Never, ever failed to make our goal.

Bilodeau: Amazing. It seems, from my own personal experience, that the people who give, the people who are generous....it seems to be the same people all the time.

Cook: It is. There's givers and there's takers. And it just depends to what degree when you give makes you a hypocrite. If you're going to give, and gripe about it, then you're not a giver. A giver has to give, forget and go on, because it comes back three times.

Bilodeau: Do you think any of your philosophy about giving came from growing up in Lincoln Place?

Cook: Oh, sure! Because there is a bond that is beyond friendship. I mean, you can go anywhere in Granite City or in the surrounding communities, and you see somebody from Lincoln Place, and it's like you're back home.

Bilodeau: I took a walking tour with a man that I... Sandor Toth, I don't know if you know him.

Cook: Toth, I do, yeah.

Bilodeau: Alex.

Cook: Yes! I knew their daughter. I used to bowl with her. I can't think of her first name. It's on the tip of my tongue. I can't think of it.

Bilodeau: That's okay.

Cook: But she was a great girl.

Bilodeau: I think there were 2 Toth families, unrelated, but I was down there, we took a walking tour, and people just kept driving by and stopping their vehicle when they saw him in the street. He would look down the street and recognize that it was so and so's daughter, or so and so's granddaughter. So you all knew each other well.

Cook: Very well! Yeah. And I was from Alton. I've been twice blessed. You know I grew up and graduated from Alton. But I was in a time when they had the streetcars.

When it was a quarter or twenty cents. On Friday my mother would put me on the

streetcar, I mean, when I was even a little girl. They had conductors. It was a different world than it is now. They would take me to Niedringhaus Avenue. I would get off and my aunts would meet me, or my uncles, or my cousins. Somebody would pick me up to take me down to Lincoln Place. [long pause] It was an interesting life. In Alton I had my friends, and in Lincoln Place, in Granite City. I mean, I know as many people from Granite. And I married in 1961, somebody from Granite, so we moved here. So I've been here ever since. [phone rings and Carmen quickly hangs up to return to the interview]

Bilodeau: So how did you meet your husband?

Cook: Well, at Lincoln Place. He was hanging out at Blubby's, or Simone's. They used to call it Simone's and Sims, but the kids called it Blubby's. Same place, where we got the candy and the ice cream. And I used to see him there, and...well, it's still there. It's where Planet Granite's at. Do you know that big slab of concrete there? We always used to sit there and laugh and have fun, and you know, play jacks. It was just...then...you could go out of your house, leave the door open, and your mother say I'm going to the cleaners, I'm going uptown, I'm going to the grocery store, I'll be back in 3 or 4 hours. And we didn't need babysitters because we had Lincoln Place. It was the truth. You was either at the community center spinning records, listening to the radio, or playing outside, playing ball, playing tag....or you was out at Blubby's, sitting outside having a cho-cho, visiting with everybody there and laughing....or you'd be in the wading pool. I mean...we had things to do.

Bilodeau: I heard from another resident of Lincoln Place that there was kind of an understood rule there...that you respected your elders and the law. And that you always

conducted yourself honorably, because no matter who you were, everybody knew you, and they all knew your mother.

Cook: Yes! [chuckles] Yes! And the grocery stores. Everybody got credit then, you know? So you would get to go to the grocery store. I mean...it was just a different world. I mean, you could stop by Louie's Market, or Barton's, or Mitseff's and say, "I want a half a pound of bologna. Put it on my mom's bill." Then you and your brother and sisters, or your friends, would go home, eat it, and head back out...when your mom's doing her errands. They weren't even home. But we didn't need watching. Because everybody respected each other. It was a different kind of upbringing.

Bilodeau: Yes, it's a lot different than today.

Cook: Oh yes!

Bilodeau: Being a newlywed myself I would like to do a piece of my project on any kind of special custom concerning courtship or weddings, or wedding receptions...any kind of...would you mind telling me about your engagement and your wedding.

Cook: Well, it's just mostly big parties when you get married. With pinatas, sometimes. Now not so much as we used to have, years ago we did. But now pinatas are just restricted to birthday parties. And like...I had a big party in the backyard, a retirement party for a doctor. So I made a pinata with his face, you know, a picture of his face....and that was fun. And we had one for the grown ups and one for the children, which was a lot of fun.

Bilodeau: Explain what a pinata is.

Cook: A pinata is a paper mache product made, we made him in the form of a doctor, with scrubs on, and the kids would hit it with a bat, a plastic bat. It would be filled with candy and money and toys.

Bilodeau: And when you

Cook: Flowers. We had a lot of flowers in the church.

Bilodeau: Lots.

Cook: Lots of flowers. Much like they do today, but with Mexican music.

Bilodeau: What...I'm wondering is there any special Mexican instruments or anything?

Cook: Guitars.

Bilodeau: Just guitars? Like

Cook: And when you have horns, it makes it even more intense, for the polkas, which it makes it very nice.

Bilodeau: Any kind of special....one man that I interviewed said that at the end of the dollar dance it was the Hungarian custom that when the man claimed his bride the dance was over. He would go up and grab the hat and set the hat down and put his dollar in it. And he would go up and claim his bride, and from then on, the others didn't dance with her because she was only his.

Cook: being from Lincoln Place, we used to...we were invited to everybody's wedding. Even Hungarians, Armenians, Greeks....it was just one big free-for all. [giggles] And everybody loved each other's children. It was just amazing. Even in Alton....I can tell you the difference between Lincoln Place and Alton. I had lots of friends, and I was popular in high school, but yet my heart was in Lincoln Place. Because I went every weekend to visit my grandma and grandpa, and my aunts and my uncles....and they were

very social. So I used to go to their things. And then I knew all the kids from high school. And even the class reunions, I'm invited, because I know them all. But Alton was a different world. It wasn't like Lincoln Place. You didn't have Simone's. You didn't have the clubhouse [community center]. I mean, all you had there was the YMCA or the YWCA. And you lost it there. You didn't have the closeness, you know? And in Lincoln Place, at the clubhouse we used to embroidery, and just hook threads, and paints...we just had it...everything!

Bilodeau: I heard somewhere that it takes a community to raise a child.

Cook: Oh, yes. I think so. Like in Alton, my friends would say, "We love to have you here during the week. Why can't you go with us somewhere on the weekends?" Because my heart wasn't there. Because they didn't have the fun that we had here. The camaraderie. It was so far they couldn't even understand it.

Bilodeau: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about Lincoln Place? Anything?

Cook: I just remember that there was no difference....with people. And in places, you know, like you have some people say, "You don't want your child to be at a tavern." Well, in Lincoln Place there was a lot of taverns. There was....1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 that I can remember right off hand...in a 3 block radius. So, many of our grandfathers or uncles or cousins would be coming out of there. But, it wasn't like you were in a tavern, I mean, you wouldn't hang in the tavern, but if you went in there, you wouldn't be kicked out. You just couldn't stay more than 3 or 4 minutes, or 5, but you could visit everybody and then you had to leave. You know what I'm saying?

Bilodeau: Uh huh.

Cook: And the men, when they got inebriated, they were all working at American Steel, they had a lot of change in their pockets. They would throw it at us, or we would just laugh or....they'd say, "Here. Here's some change." And they'd just....we were just having fun. It wasn't in a bad way. And we'd just fill up our pockets with change, because they had it. And we'd go down to Blubby's and spend it for cookies and candy and soda. But I don't think Blubby sold cigarettes. I don't think he did. So, see....it was for the kids. I just don't remember that. I think I would remember that if he did.

Bilodeau: That's one difference, I think, some...there's no exploitation of children that I've heard of that's come from the Lincoln Place neighborhood. They all just kind of work together, but not for wages, just for family.

Cook: Yes. [long silence]

Bilodeau: I thank you so much for interviewing with me, Mrs. Cook. Thank you.

Cook: You're welcome.