AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 03: EPISODE 1: Mario Cervantes. Boeing Aircraft Factory Worker. Wichita, Kansas.

ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with senior plaster pattern maker Mario Cervantes, a skilled factory worker who makes the tools, that make the planes for Boeing aircraft in Wichita, Kansas. Mr. Cervantes was interviewed by Briana O’Higgins on behalf of the Kansas Humanities Council as part of an Archie Green Fellowship from American Folklife Center to document Boeing Aircraft Workers.

Shortly before this interview took place, Boeing—which had been a community mainstay for decades—announced it was permanently closing all its factories, offices and facilities in Wichita. During their in-depth interview, Mr. Cervantes talks about his family’s connection to Boeing, his pride in his trade, and his pride in being connected to Boeing. He also discusses his Hispanic heritage and how it has impacted his career; labor unrest and his commitment to fair employment; his union; and his disappointment that Boeing would no longer be a presence in Wichita.

INTERVIEW

Mario Cervantes: My father worked there, of course, and he knew that there was a position opening up in the tooling department – plaster/pattern maker. And, boy, I just went every day and put my application in, when they had a physical HR where you could do that. But, it was like every day I would go and check on my record or my resume and all that. And finally, they got tired of looking at me and interviewed me and set me up in tooling classes. And I took eight weeks of tooling classes and I ended up a pattern maker. I was 19.
And actually I think at that time, I don’t want to say it was a quota, but being a minority might have helped me a little bit, because tooling was predominately, what I want to say, Anglo, probably, so getting minorities in at that time in those positions was something that I think the government made them do, probably, yeah.

It seemed like forever, but you know, it was really a short span. Trying to get on at Boeing, because I was at the meat packing plant, and then I went to Cessna for a little bit and everybody at Cessna said, “Oh you don’t want to go to Boeing!” But my dad wanted me to go out there. And it was kind of like a perfect fit for me. I’m very fortunate, really. It’s been a blessing to be able to work for them.

I guess I knew they paid well, and I knew all I had was a high school diploma and I needed somebody to teach me skills so I could provide for my family and they gave me skills and this is where I am at today, because of Boeing.

Briana O’Higgins: You mentioned what you were doing a little bit, but what was your job title at Boeing and what did you do?

Mario Cervantes: Plaster pattern maker and what we did was tool up, make tools, uh, that actually made parts for the planes. At that time they did every detail inside house. There were no vendors or anything, so the work—it was a lot of work, but we tooled up for the 757, 767, so they could pull skins and all that kind of stuff.

There was a demand for workers at that time, and uh, kind of the lot older guys, like I am now, you know, were getting to that point of retirement, they needed to train other people in, and the young ones were the future. So, no, it was pretty—there was a bunch of us; there were a whole bunch of us.

Briana O’Higgins: Did you have to have special training?

Mario Cervantes: You know, on the job training. You know there is nothing better than, you know, on the job training, you know, when you can work next to a veteran who has been doing this forever, and not everything the engineers would put on paper would work in the shop, so the old guys would know how to work a job and teach us how to do the same thing. So yeah, that is the best kind of training.

I worked on the commercial side. Of course, we did some military work over there, because we were just one big tool shop at the time. So yeah, both sides, but predominately, I was commercial.

I’ve never been laid off, that’s been... again, kind of lucky, I have just been fortunate where things happen inside the tooling department. I mean, we weathered a lot of layoffs in the ‘80s, and I just was fortunate that we merged both plaster and plastics together and all the plaster guys came in first, because to build the patterns. And then the plastic guys
came in second. So we were fortunate to get in the door first, and they had to leave before we did. It was, it got up to my year when they were laying off, but then again, they started instead of A-through-Z they started Z-through-A. So again, I weathered it. So I’ve been very fortunate. There has not been very many people that can say they have not been laid off for over 30 years now.

Briana O’Higgins: Wow. What was it like experiencing strike for the first time?

Mario Cervantes: It was tough. I had three small children at the time. I have been through two strikes, and long strikes. Both in ’89 and ’95. And, it’s no fun. But you know what—I brought my kids on the strike line with me and my wife so they knew why dad wasn’t bringing home a check. So they knew what was going on. So it has just been something in my blood. Although, nobody wins probably in a strike, the result is hopefully you’re going to have not only better benefits and salary, but, you know, a safer workplace for everybody. You know, kind of justice in the workplace. So strikes are no fun, but something that you have to do from time to time.

And I’m a Boeing employee, and I am proud to be a Boeing employee. You know, when I see Sunday Morning, and the commercials about the defense, what we’re protecting—America, and that’s Boeing. You know, it is a sense of pride that we’re helping out. It might be a little piece, but you know, we’re all as Boeing employees at the end result providing these great products to keep America safe, to have America travel. So yeah, it’s loyalty that...like I say you spend more waking hours with those folks out there then you do your own family, so you create bonds, one big bond was with the Boeing company. I can say I was proud every morning to cross that gate.

Interviewer: The airplanes you worked on were really leading edge technology, I mean 757, 767... how did the impact of technology on the new airplanes impact the union?

Mario Cervantes: Oh it did because they don’t need as many workers. You know, to build a plane—it used to be in Plant Two, and there used to be a lot more rivet pounders. Now but through technology they have gone on to machines, computers, all set up and are doing a lot of the, uh, riveting now. So yeah, we have seen a lot of change out there where we don’t need as big of a workforce as we used to, you know, back in the day. Even my work, the plaster/pattern work, they don’t do it that way anymore. I am kind of like a dinosaur now. It is all done on a digital, it is all computerized now. So, we don’t need to set up any mocks and sweep in a 41 section as big as the house, you know, so everything is done on computers. Yeah, I’ve seen a lot of change out there, a lot of change.

Briana O’Higgins: When Boeing announced that they would be withdrawing completely from Wichita what was your reaction when you heard that?

Mario Cervantes: Well, I was pretty shocked. You know, then you kind of wonder, what about me? You know, what happens to me? And I am not at that age yet where I can
retire. I’ve got a couple more years, so I am hoping I am going to sneak that in before they shut the doors. In fact, actually I hope I am the one that turns the lights off and shuts the door. I am not sure that is going to happen though. It’s devastating, it’s like losing a family member, really. I know for one, I never thought that they would sell.

Boeing has provided a very good living for me. I raised three wonderful children. And it is just hard to see them go. It’s tough. You do become loyal, even if you have strikes. You know, sure, for that short span, you know, you’ve got to--you know--you hate everybody at that time, you know. But then you go back and you learn to work together again. You know, we are striving to do, again, to make Boeing successful.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): You’ve been listening to plaster pattern maker and Boeing aircraft factory employee Mario Cervantes, who was interviewed for America Works by the Kansas Humanities Council as part of the American Folklife Center’s Occupational Folklife Project.

To hear the complete interview with Mr. Cervantes and other Boeing Factory Workers, please visit: www.loc.gov/folklife or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project. This is folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, and with special thanks to AFC intern Camille Acosta for her help with this episode, thank you for listening to America Works.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov