

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Jorge Gallegos

Interviewer: Leslee Dean

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/jorge-gallegos>

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LD- I'm Leslee Dean with the Coney Island Oral History Project, and I'm here with...

JG- Jorge Gallegos

LD- And where do you work?

JG- In Deno's Wonder Wheel Park.

LD- And, if you could tell us a little bit about how you got to Coney Island. Where are you from?

JG- I'm from Ecuador. Well I came as an immigrant.

LD- And why did you decide to come to the United States?

JG- Ah, because in my country there were very few opportunities, and well, I wanted to have an adventure, and to make it here.

LD- What year was that?

JG- I left August 30th, August 30th of 1986.

LD- And how old were you?

JG- I was 30 years old, yes, 30.

LD- And when you arrived to the U.S. where did you arrive?

JG- Well, I came to work, in a restaurant, washing dishes. I got another part time job, and I had the job in the restaurant. But later, they told me that I couldn't have two jobs, and they fired me.

LD- That was in New York?

JG- Yes, that was here in New York, in Queens. I lived there. Then, someone told me that they needed people here at the wheel, at the ferris wheel in Coney Island. I knew a lot about painting, so I came here, and that's how I got, well how I started working here.

LD- And how did you know about painting?

JG- Well, I knew how to paint in my country, I was a bit of an artist. I used a paint brush a lot, and I did a lot of letters, and I also always worked up high. And, so, I thought that since they needed to paint this huge wheel using a brush and a roller, well it wasn't that difficult for me.

LD- Did you study painting?

JG- No. No, I never studied. It's a skill that well, was just in me. So I always practiced and I liked painting, I liked to paint and draw.

LD- They were painting the wheel?

JG- Ah, Dennis, yes the two brothers, at that time [their father] Deno was alive, and they were painting, and they had contracted a company so I came through the company to work. When I got here the job painting the wheel finished. So Dennis asked me if I knew how to paint with spray. I didn't speak any English, any at all. So, Dennis could communicate with me because he spoke a little bit of Spanish.

LD- And who is Dennis?

JG- Dennis is Steve's brother. So, he told me that when I could, when it rains, I should stay working with them. Here inside. So, they wanted to paint the wheel's cars and I could do it with spray. So, I painted the cars and Dennis was happy with that, and they didn't know, I couldn't explain to them that I knew how to weld, that I could draw, and that I could do a lot with a paint brush. I couldn't communicate with them, because of the language. Little by little they got to know me. So, that's how I got the job here.

LD- What year was it that you came to Coney Island?

JG- In '86. Around November. I got here in August. September 3rd I was here, October, around November. Of 1986.

LD- So you had recently arrived to the U.S.

JG- Yes, I had recently arrived. I wanted to work, and that was what was important to me.

LD- And what did you think about Coney Island when you got here?

JG- Well the truth is that I was blind, I didn't know that this was a big park, that there were a lot of people here. I also didn't think that I would stay working here, how should I put it, in an amusement park. You have to deal a lot with people, I couldn't talk and I didn't know how I was going to communicate with people.

LD- And what did you think of the wheel?

JG- Ah, it was very rare it was...something I had never seen. In my country they're very small. And this one was very big, so it was impressive to me.

LD- What part of Ecuador are you from?

JG- I'm from Guayaquil, the province of Guayas, Milagro. It's a small town close to Milagro called Roberto Astudillo. When I left the town was very small. Now it's very big, there are a lot of pretty homes, and the people who left immigrated, and it's very nice.

LD- So, you started working with the brothers, with the wheel, or how did that happen, little by little?

JG- After it was painted, or I painted the cars, then, the April season arrived. So Steve, the brother, told me. No, first I started with Dennis in the part above, in the Kiddie Park. So, loading kids [onto the rides], and dealing with the kids, and people and all of that. I was there about a month, I think, or two months I don't remember exactly but after the brother, Steve told me he needed me at the wheel, in the lower part of the park. So, I stayed on working with them, in the lower park.

LD- And what was it like loading the kids? Did you like it?

JG- Well yes, loading the kids was, how would I put it, a job with responsibility, of looking out a lot because kids will be kids, right. So, well, I was learning.

LD- Then, later you started to work on the wheel, in mechanics?

JG- Yes, later little by little, it wasn't directly after but, after I painted the cars, when they put everything on the wheel, I put the numbers, I did the letters, I put the signs everywhere they needed them that said: "exit," "entrance," "be careful." So after I had to paint the following year, and every year, I had to go back and paint the cars. So little by little, for example they always needed help dismantling the cars, we needed to take them down, loosen the screws, bolts and tools, and I knew a little bit about this because I always liked mechanics. And so little by little I became part of the wheel, and I stayed there. After, Steve let me drive it, and they taught me to drive the wheel, so at that time the wheel was mechanical, it basically had a lever and a brake. So we drove it like that, and after I got a lot of practice, Steve didn't let anyone else but them drive it and they let me drive it.

LD- And what was it like to drive it mechanically? Did you have to pull it each time, or can you describe what it was like to work like that?

JG- Well, mechanically the wheel had a lever very similar to that which controls trains. It's a plant that had, I think about 9 speeds or something like that. So, you pulled the lever at the first speed. When people had gotten on, it would go very slow, then it went up, and started to go around and went up to the second speed. Manually. And at most it worked in the third. Second and third. Once it went around on turn and was approaching the next you took the speed down little by little. And then it stopped. So because it had a brake, a brake with a big lever we had to pull it with the strength of our hands and stop the wheel.

LD- And did you like driving the wheel?

JG- Well, I had to do it even if I didn't like it I had to drive it. I needed to work, and I was also young and eager. So, I needed to work and I felt good about it, yes. I liked it because my bosses were always satisfied. So, my bosses were always satisfied with what I did and that made me feel good.

LD- And little by little you started to do more with the wheel, or...?

JG- Yes. The years went by. One day, I took a brush and I painted the rides above in the Kiddie Park, small rides like the little cars, the fire trucks, and there was a caterpillar that I started to paint. My bosses liked all of this, they told me, and one day Steve and Dennis' dad told me, because I asked what color he wanted and he told me "Don't ask, paint it as you wish" (imitating Greek accent). So, I don't know, I painted it how I wanted. After that, little by little I was included in fixing the cars on the wheel. There were parts of the wheel that needed to be changed, that needed to be replaced. The bosses bought the parts, and I did it. I also painted the wheel two or three times. Then it wasn't through the company but just myself here in the park with three or four other people, we painted it.

LD- What was it like, or what is it like painting the whole wheel?

JG- Well, I don't remember how many gallons of paint it used but because I had already been around it I knew what it was like, from the experience I had from when I started with the company. So I said I'm going to paint it. We started painting with a brush and roller, and at that time the rollers weren't like they are now. They were bigger, and a little harder to work because they didn't fit everywhere. There are very narrow parts. So, well we used the brush. And little by little we moved forward and painted it.

LD- And how do you feel when you see everything painted or new?

JG- I think that after it's totally finished I say I think that I can go home.

LD- What is your work with the wheel like now?

JG- Well, now, it seems like it has been more tied to the wheel. Because I've started thinking about how I've lived around the wheel. And around the wheel it's been, I don't know, forged here with my family, the son I have, my wife. So, this has made me understand that, well, I'm here working for the wheel, and I have to give her the best of me because she has given me work and I give the best of myself to the wheel.

LD- That's very beautiful. Do you like to go on the wheel?

JG- Yes. Yes, it's nice and it's exciting even now it always gives me a little bit of...how do I explain it...there's the feeling of a little bit of fear. With the movement in the cars that move. But it's, a moment and then it goes away.

LD- So do you prefer the cars that move?

JG- Yes. Those that move and those that don't move. Those that don't move for their height, you can feel the cool air and the view is very beautiful. And the cars that move well, when you have to check for example the cars that go over, over the wheel or should I say over the cars, sometimes you have to check them, see if they're turning, check the security wheels. So, sometimes you have to go up in them, and go around two, three, four times until it's finished and you're sure that everything's ok.

LD- What's the hardest part of the job?

JG- Well, the hardest job...I think it's loading the people. Because, the hours are long. Long hours and, people always ask things that... don't have anything to do with the wheel. There are a lot of questions, and sometimes you're tired, and sometimes we've worked almost 14 hour days. And, people sometimes ask the same question all day, so it can be tiring.

LD- What are examples of the strange questions they ask?

JG- (laughing) Well, one day they asked me if this was the Wonder Wheel. Not just once, many times they've asked us. And well, I don't know, I see it as something, silly you could say, I don't know. Sometimes, my coworkers have said "No no no, no it's not here, it's over there." (laughing) They're joking.

LD- And what is the part you like most about the work?

JG- The part of the job I like best is in the winter. When we're inside, working, I'm repairing doors, repairing the bearings that go on the doors, and checking pieces that are bad and changing them. So that's the part I like most. And I have a little bit of, not fear, but I know that the hardest part of the job is in the summer.

LD- Because of the customers.

JG- Yes. Because of the hours, what more can I tell you...well you're not at home, we can't eat food from home, sometimes we eat on the street and get stomach aches.

LD- And what do you think of Coney Island, the neighborhood? Or, how has it changed since you got here?

JG- Well, Coney Island has changed a lot. Since I got here it was more, how should I put it, older. There were a lot of things that, you could say, have changed here mechanically. Today things have changed for example the wheel used to work mechanically, now it has a computer that controls the speed, it controls...what else, the movement of the wheel is controlled, and it can even stop without pulling the brake. The computer controls everything now. So, this has all been changing in Coney Island and now there are new games, more modern, more exciting. It seems like Coney Island keeps changing. So, I don't know. After me there will probably be better things.

LD- And do you prefer to control it automatically like it is now, or like before?

JG- Well, I think that now the wheel is better cared for, I think automatically. Because it's not a rough job. Before, the manual work was very abrupt. Sometimes the wheel didn't stop, it stopped a little, it almost wasn't stopped and people got off. Now no, the computer stops it, and it has to wait until it's fully stopped, the people get off, and all of the doors shut when the people are on, and the computer pulls the wheel. You never have to control the time, or when it stops. It gives the customers the two times around.

LD- And do you still paint?

JG- Well now I only paint with spray. I've also been replacing the computers, you could say the scanners, a lot of things that I did with a brush are now done with computers, so it seems to be quicker, I'm not sure if it's cheaper but I don't do it with a brush anymore. Now everything is machines that give us stencils of something. They're already made and they're stickers, they just come off you stick them and they're there.

LD- Do you paint at home, or no?

JG- Well, at home I've wanted to but, only very few times. Because I get home tired, and I say I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it one day but there isn't time, because your life is always more around the wheel.

LD- And was your son born here in Coney Island?

JG- Yes. My son was born here, in Coney Island, and he grew up around the park. He also worked when he was young my boss Dennis gave him a small job so he was counting tickets. And little by little he grew up, and he worked until he went to college. Now he's not here. Oh no, he is now that I remember. He had a corner where he works doing tattoos, how do you say, that are painted. They're painted and they're just temporary.

LD- Here in Coney Island?

JG- Yes, here in Coney Island he had his little job, he works two months, in the summer time.

LD- Do you like that your son is working in the park now?

JG- Well, yes I like that of course he has to work. He has to work, he has to learn, how would I say it to get a job. If it's lowly it doesn't matter, that's how you start. With humility, and as he grows up experience gives him more, and he'll eventually have his job. That he got from studying in college, so little by little. Yes, I'm happy. He'll mature a little. And after, life will go on.

LD- So in Ecuador did you work as a mechanic too, or only painting?

JG- Well, the truth is that I never went to mechanic's school, it was always a skill that I had. For example I can do electric installations, I can install pumps, I can weld, I can do stickers. I could paint cars, I worked in a body shop, as they call it here, painting cars, fixing crashed cars. A lot of jobs, it wasn't difficult for me, I could do it.

LD- And when you arrived were there a lot of Latino immigrants here?

JG- I think so. I think that there were, because you could find a street, and ask someone something in Spanish. But, it seems like after there was more emigration. So, now you can find my language wherever you want. So I think there were a lot of immigrants.

LD- And I know that you participate in the parade, the Mermaid Parade, do you like it?

JG- Well, the truth, the truth is that in those parades it's June and it's a little hot, and there are a lot of people. And it's like you, I think that sometimes it's more that I go to the parade because I want to escape a little from the pressure of work. So, that's why I do it. And also, another is that, how would I tell you, the mermaid [float] represents the park or the wheel, and that's what is in the parade. So, because I've painted her, I've repaired her, well, that's also why I do it.

LD- And the mermaid is old, right?

JG- Oh yes, she's very old. When I found her she was in pieces, her head and arms were broken, and she had a lot of imperfections. Then, they told me to repair her so I went, I got her, repaired her, and I got rid of the bad parts. Inside her head I even found newspapers from the year 1930. So I realized that she was very old. There was the evidence of her age.

LD- Very interesting, and how many years ago did you repair her?

JG- Ah, I don't remember exactly when it was but I think it was already about 5 years, I'm not sure.

LD- Are there other specific events in Coney Island that you like?

JG- Other events...well I like when the 4th of July comes. The 4th of July, the whole world waits for it here, we prepare for its arrival, Independence Day. Because, well because I know that after the 4th of July for us or the workers or me especially it feels like the summer is ending.

LD- And that's why you all like it.

JG- Yes. Once the 4th of July has passed it seems like the most tiresome, or most difficult part of the work in the summer has passed.

LD- Are there other attractions you like, or just the wheel?

JG- Well, I haven't really been to other attractions outside the park. Because, I don't know why but sometimes there's not time. There are new rides and I haven't been able to ride them either.

And, I'm more at the wheel. More because of the work on the wheel.

LD- And can you talk a little about the hurricane, and how it affected the wheel, or the park?

JG- Well, the hurricane that happened, I didn't think it was going to happen like that. They talked about how a long time ago before I arrived there were some storms similar to a hurricane that left a lot of water here. So when this hurricane came, you could say it was a catastrophe because it damaged a lot here in the park. It damaged a lot of motors, tools, it destroyed completely. Even the Spook-A-Rama ride, which is a house of horror, was completely damaged. So, it made me sad in a lot of ways. I thought I may lose my job, because so much was damaged. There were a lot of losses.

LD- And what was it like, to work after that? What did you have to do?

JG- After that, once the hurricane's storms calmed, there was a lot of cleaning. The rides needed to be cleaned, I had to clean and wash with water. And, well, to wait to replace certain other things. And, at the same time you felt some sadness, because it's a loss for the bosses. And when the bosses aren't doing well the workers aren't either.

LD- And is there a fear that it's going to happen again?

JG- Well, it could happen again. But I mostly think that maybe not, it's not going to come.

LD- Now that it's going to start already, the park is going to open in about a month, how are you all preparing?

JG- Well, now we're already a few days before April so we're a little, rushed, you could say, doing everything we need to, finishing making new doors, and making certain readjustments in the cars of the wheel. And assembling the rides for, for Holy Week, the Holy Week that begins when we open on Easter day. I think that it's Good Friday. So, we hope that the temperature is good, and from there we're already ready for the summer, ready for the summer.

LD- And do you think you'll keep working with the wheel for many more years?

JG- Well, I think so. Because as long as I can, you could say. I don't know how long my years will give me the strength to keep working. But, for now I think more about the present.

LD- How do you describe the wheel to people who haven't seen it?

JG- Well, I've talked about it to people who aren't familiar with it, or who don't know about it in my country, for example. Ah...that it's very impressive that it's something, something engineered almost a hundred years ago. So, it's something that, that anyone would be impressed upon seeing. Because it has cars that move, a lot of metal and a lot of weight. So, it's what's incredible from German engineering. So, now that there's the possibility of searching on the internet, sometimes people search for it on the internet, and they know about it through that.



LD- And, what is the most important thing, or something that you've learned from all of your years working here?

JG- Well what I've learned here...I think it would be, it would maybe be responsibility. Constant work, I'm not sure. Well, I can tell you, that I've learned, that I've learned from Coney Island, from my work...ok, now I understand. I know that, I came here, without thinking that I would get to where I am at this job. That I've worked you could say consecutively for 30 years. When I left my country I asked God to take me to good people. So, it seems like my God gave me the opportunity to arrive here. So, to be humble, you could say, to work, to do what they ask of you it doesn't matter the class or work, that's what one does...remains maybe at one job. So, I think it's the humility that, is what I would say that I've learned. And maybe that's my advice for many people. Do what you have to do, and do it well. That's all.

LD- Is there anything else you wanted to say, or to tell about the wheel, Coney Island, your life?

JG- Well, I wanted to say something about, a job we did that was very difficult. And, just as dangerous, it was a new experience. My boss thought a lot about, Steve thought a lot about how to change the principal bearings in the axle of the wheel. The wheel weighs about 200 tons. And, to replace those bearings, the wheel had to be lifted. The problem was, how to lift the wheel. Despite that previously, before I got here to the wheel, they had done it. But in a way, how would I say it, a rougher way, to lift a wheel, mechanically you could say. So, when about 20 years went by after this, the bearings had to be replaced again. We finished the season, then this was what Steve was thinking about. That he didn't know how to do it, if we could do it, how to lift the wheel to be able to replace. Then when the big day arrived, we did it. We did it with hydraulic jacks that were very small, they lifted the wheel and they changed the new bearings. Then I said, the wheel will now last 100 more years.

LD- Very good, and that was a big success, right?

JG- Oh yes, right. Once we did that job, I said, everything has been done. There's nothing difficult that can be done to the wheel, everything is easy now.

LD- Well, that's great is there anything else you wanted to talk about?

JG- What can I say...to thank my bosses a lot, especially Deno, his wife, Lula, Steve, Dennis. In their family they are all very caring, very friendly, very compassionate. Deno, more than anything because he was an immigrant, it seems like he understood the immigrant that is far from their family. So, I'm grateful for that because I could read in them, you could say this kindness they had toward someone that's been an immigrant.

LD- And do you feel, more or less part of the family now?

JG- Well yes, yes, because it's been many years, working with them. You could say I've spent more time with them than with my wife. (laughing) So, I think that we're like a family, yes, a family here. With my other co-worker for example, Reggie he's worked here a long time too, I think that he's been here 30 or more years, 31, 32 years. So, we're like brothers, you could say.

LD- Very good, anything else?

JG- Well, I think that everything's good.

LD- Thanks for talking with me.

JG- Thanks to you all.