



1980-07-22

Kepler, Maria Interview

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Stockton Immigrant Women Oral History Collection

by Sally Miller

KEPLER, MARIA

(Salvadorian)

July 22, 1980

Interviewed by Mary Cusick

Translated from original audio

Start of tape

CUSICK: First can, you tell me about life in your country before coming to the U.S.?

KEPLER: Well, my life is a bit embarrassing (ashamed), because I was born in San Salvador, in the little town of Quezaltepec. My father was a navigator, he lived on the water. He knew 7 languages. When I was 5 or 6, he took me out of that place. The most I can remember of my land was that there was a stone (cobbled) street, very clean, pretty, and much traffic. Where I was born, that's all I remember because my father took me out when I was very young. So he took me to San Jose, Costa Rica. There he looked for a woman, who was the one who took care of me. I went to school up to 8th grade. I learned to read and write, not very well, but I learned grammar, geography, sewing, cooking. When I was 12 I looked for work (a job) in the city. I worked for a rather wealthy family. The owner of the house was a lawyer and president of general hospital (?) and he had about 7 children. They went to school. What I was to do was to help the sister of the women to sew, who was a seamstress (the sister). I was the helper. I was about 15. I worked from 8 to 5 pm. I lived alone in a little house that I rented. (My father never helped me.) He visited the woman every 2 months to leave money for food. (When my father left in 1923). He came to see me and said he was getting married to another lady. I asked the lady to take care of me but the lady told me not to go with my father because she didn't believe he was my father. But I didn't know anyone else to whom I would say "I'm his daughter and he's my father." Her motive was, as she told me "Maria, don't go with your dad because he's going to have a new wife and family and you're going to have to do all the work, and if you don't do it they're going to hit you." As I was a little more intelligent, I said "what am I going to do?" I continued working in the same house. I sewed pretty clothing, as they were rich, and I mended the children's

clothes. I lasted about 4 or 5 years there. After I went to talk to the father of the kids and told him I wanted a vacation. I was tired of the sewing machine. I was the one who wanted to work. I worked a lot because I had the responsibility of a little house. I went to work at 7:30 and with pain in my soul I tell you at times I did not have 10¢ to grab a bus, and I would walk and arrive late. They'd ask why are you late? And I'd say I don't have the 10¢ to take a bus. I got mad one Saturday when they said they didn't have the money to pay me. They were a family of money, but that's the way they are. You know, the difference, in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, the people are categorized. The middle class is middle class and those without money are the poor. The middle class doesn't look at the poor. The rich class doesn't look at the middle class. It's not like here. Here you don't know who is a millionaire or what. We all walk equal. It's a great advantage you have here. I lived in Costa Rica until I was an adult. I lived in Panama when I was a woman. There was little work in Panama.

CUSICK: Why did you go to Panama?

KEPLER: Because I asked for a vacation and leaving was a little different because I was not Costa Rican. I was from El Salvador. So going with that man of much weight, since he was a lawyer and president of the main hospital, I left C.R. Since I worked for him, I asked him to write me a letter of recommendation so I could leave. I had a friend who lived in Panama so I went there. This friend I had suffered a lot because she had a husband who was a real drunk and 2 children. So we left that place. I went with her. We looked for work. There wasn't much, nothing much more than a waitress, earning some salary, and I lived in a little apartment where a lot of people lived each in their own room.

CUSICK: You two lived there?

KEPLER: Yes, we lived there together for awhile. Later, one of her daughters came with her, and I separated myself and went to live alone. But as I worked, the room was not worth much. About 10 pesos (dollars?) a month.

CUSICK: Was it very common for a young woman to live alone in a room like that?

KEPLER: Well, if one didn't open the door, there was no danger. There were many. We were like a family, There I had the luck to meet the man who was to be my husband.

CUSICK: How did you two meet?

KEPLER: Walking by. I left work and he came by the house. One day he talked to me and I refused to answer. Another day he waited for me, and another.

CUSICK: So you started to talk?

KEPLER: We started to talk. He spoke little Spanish. He was American and was in the Service. Then we were married.

CUSICK: After how much time?

KEPLER: After 9 months. We had (sexual) relations. We went out, we went to the beach, we went to restaurants. He was a very good man. He was not lost (?) in the service. He didn't drink and he didn't smoke. He did have one thing though, he gambled!

CUSICK: How old were you when you got married?

KEPLER: 22. All this time we were getting to know each other.

CUSICK: So there was really no one who had an influence on deciding who you should marry?

KEPLER: No, I grew up practically alone because I didn't know my mother. It's very bad (ugly) that I say it

CUSICK: Why?

KEPLER: (Maybe) it was that she died when I was very young, or my father left her. I never knew her.

CUSICK: How did you feel? How do you feel now?

KEPLER: I don't like to talk about it much because it seems like a strange thing that I never knew my mother, nor my brothers and sisters, nor anyone. It's because my father took me out when I was very young. But I do know that then I had to leave. I was in Panama in '42, '43. My oldest son was born in '40 and then in '41 came her (the daughter).

CUSICK: And in what year did you marry?

KEPLER: In '43. I had the family first because in that place at that time they didn't allow Americans to marry colored people. But the "big guys" upon looking at my family accepted that he marry me. The older boy was a beautiful child. Very white with blue eyes, curly golden hair, very beautiful. In this year he would have been 40.

CUSICK: How many children do you have then?

KEPLER: We had 2 boys and a girl, but had bad luck because all 3 died by drowning. First my husband drowned, and then little one I had who was only 2 years and 5 months. He was very cute. He was never ever sick, never. And the oldest who would be 40 it's a sad story. What happened is that you know that grown boys leave their parents. He went to S.F. bridge of the world (Golden Gate.) He worked in a house, where all nationalities went. He was a little talented. He was a dancer and so was my daughter a ballerina. He danced on a TV program (once)

CUSICK: How do you feel?

KEPLER: I feel very bad I was alone and I had done all I could to raise us up and present us to the public because they were very pretty. I worked here 30 years in a factory. I came here with my

husband, and they sent him to Puerto Rico. I went with his; my littlest, David was born here in Fresno. He was barely 6 months when we went to Puerto Rico. There we were till '48. Then we returned to Panama. They called him to work since he was still in the service. I try to teach these little ones (grandsons) a little (Spanish) so they know a little. That's why when mine were little I bought them a little chalkboard to teach them Spanish. They learned English in school. See, at first all they knew was Spanish. But after they went to school, English dominated but it's good to have both, those who don't don't know what they're losing. I came to Fresno when my husband and son drowned in Panama Canal in '49, on the 26 of January. (Story of how husband and son drowned). They had gone fishing at the canal but had not seen a sign that said the canal would open, cause a danger of much rushing water. I don't like to talk about this because it's a very sad story and although it's been 30 years, to me it still lives. I'll finish. It wasn't only him, it was him and his son, and two other adults. It took a lot to find them. They helped me, they gave me pills to control my weeping and my grief. Later, since they didn't think I understood English, I heard them saying my son had died. I said if he had, I wanted to see him I thought I wouldn't be able to survive, but I endured it.

CUSICK: Did you remain in Panama?

KEPLER: We came here soon after.

CUSICK: How did you decide to come here?

KEPLER: I had a friend here in California. An American. They had lived in my country 5 years because they were missionaries (Baptist). When after everything had happened, I wrote them and they said yes, come. The grandfather in Pennsylvania wrote me and said he'd help, not to remain there. When I wen there (the missionaries) accepted me and we went to see the grandfather. We stayed a week with the missionaries and they helped me find a little house, fixed the papers for me, arranged the payments, everything. We bought a little house in Fresno, when the kids were 7 and 8, and I worked for a rich woman. I cleaned house and they paid me only 50¢ and I had to take care of her baby. She was a little old lady but a millionaire, she didn't have a husband, but she had a very beautiful house. She had a ranch.. (with animals)..

CUSICK: How did you feel working for these people?

KEPLER: Well, I felt very sad... but always with little intelligence... there was an American woman who lived around there, and one day she told me "I don't come to bother you or ask anything from you, only to offer you something you might like." It was work! And I was so happy! When I came the first time with the little ones I wasn't yet a widow, and we went to pick grapes, ranch work.

CUSICK: Did you like that?

KEPLER: No. I wasn't used to work like that, very tiring. So when the kids started to grow up, this American woman told me she'd give me work. As I didn't have a car she said she'd take me. She

was a very good lady. She took me to work, where I worked for 30 years. When I started to work there, the lady called and the kids answered. She was asking me to come work, and since I was a bit more oriented to this country, I knew a little more about the country. I told the kids to tell her I'd work if she'd pay \$1.95 an hour. She told me it was a lot! Nevertheless I went to work for her. I walked there. She told me "Oh, now you've learned. You're going to become rich now that you've found work where they pay you well." I worked all week and ½ of Saturday.

CUSICK: What job was this you had?

KEPLER: With poultry... (where they kill and pluck feathers off chickens, turkey, etc., boil them in water. A chain of about 5 or 6 women who each had a task. Very detailed account.) 30 years I did that. My kids were in school and I was with them at night. I never went out at night and I won't tell you a lie. When my oldest was about 15, he was now a teenager and didn't obey me like he should have. I had bad luck. He was very nice and very handsome. He dressed the best. With the little salary I earned, it was for them. And Saturday's pay, \$5, I gave \$2.50 to her and \$2.50 to him to go to the movies. I stayed home to cook and clean.

CUSICK: So you did a lot for your children?

KEPLER: I was everything for them. Destiny deprived me of him. An American man and woman, she was rich, him I don't know, he was a high school professor; ha and the lady began to take him out of the house, to go out for walks or swimming. He was 16. The son. He began to lose respect for me (the son). Now he was not mine, they had taken him from me. So one day I told him, "Look, son, don't believe in women. We women are very bad. We are like vipers, we go little by little and when we are possessed we give out poison." Well, this woman was rich, her farther was a banker. They lived in Berkeley. She too him (my son) away and that's why I told him to watch out for women because we're poisonous. Because after we think we have what we want we give our poison. He told me, "I'm not in love with this lady." I told him "...then why have you forgotten your sister and I?" He said "What am I going to do here mom?" There's lots to do. You have to iron your clothes. At the end he left with her.

CUSICK: Did you think you could tell him anything more?

KEPLER: He paid no attention to me...Since he was good-looking and well-dressed, at school he liked compliments. These "sweet words" ruin the young. They all flattered him, they offered him very goof positions. He left home very early...I still worked where I had the job for 30 years. Every Saturday I'd go to S.F. to visit him, but one day they told me if I didn't work Saturday I'd lose my job. I preferred to work, not thinking that it would be the last time I saw my son. 2 Nov. 1978...She (daughter) married in 1967...Ohe day he called her (she was working in a bank in S.F.) and, crying, he told her he was all alone. He wanted to take me out of Fresno so we could live together, work and live in a little apartment... I had had to sell my little house where we had lived. The government paid me, and said they were going to make something, but they never

did. But it wasn't bad, I bought another little home in Fresno...It's been 3 years since I quit working.

CUSICK: Did you like working so many years?

KEPLER: At first I had to, because the kids were little and what they gave me for my husband was not much. Only \$120. And we had to eat, dress, go to school, and pay for the house. I had to work. Later, when I was alone, I didn't want to be a bum, I continued working. Then the doctors told me I shouldn't work. I had to go once a month for an injection for the blood. Seeing how everything was lost, I had to come here. They arranged for me to come here (daughter and son-in-law) I've been here 2 years in Stockton.

CUSICK: You came directly from Fresno?

KEPLER: Yes, because my daughter and her husband live here. They moved here 7 years ago. I can't work anymore. I started in '49. But I stopped because I'm sick. I think if I wasn't sick I'd still be working! Since I was a little girl they've taught me to work! I had to work to get what I wanted... I told my daughter "Work! If you don't work you don't get (have anything)." Look, if I hadn't worked where I had, how would I have Social Security? They only give me a little more than \$200. That's why I tell her to work. And she works so much, poor girl. She's very intelligent... I say I don't know where she gets her intelligence because I'm not intelligent! But you know, it pleases me.

CUSICK: Do you believe there's only a certain type of job for women?

KEPLER: No, there's a lot of work for women...One had to put in her part. There's field work. When I first came that's the first thing I did...When my husband said he didn't want me to work in the field anymore "What will people say, that I don't support you?"...The kids were there, and I never put them with a babysitter. I stayed with them until they grew up and went to school!

CUSICK: What are the differences between your life when you arrived in the U.S. and the lives of your children?

KEPLER: When I came here with the little kids.

CUSICK: What did you expect? What hopes did you have?

KEPLER: I'll tell you something. Many of us Latin American immigrants can't enter unless we bring money because this country doesn't want foreign people to come in and bother people here. Nevertheless, now it's different.

CUSICK: How is it different now?

KEPLER: I think now they enter without presenting any documents. While when I came I had to come up with, I don't remember exactly, \$2000.

CUSICK: You had no problems?

KEPLER: No, not any. The problem is when you don't have someone waiting for you here. But I had those friends waiting for me. You have to have some contact. So I went with those people, and it was ok, in spite of so many problems! I had problems coming here from Panama because I wasn't American. I had a passport from El Salvador. I didn't have a birth certificate. I had to go to Panama with the El Sal Consulate to ask the man to do me the favor of writing the Civil Register to write me a birth certificate. He didn't do anything. He took the \$5 and didn't help. Same things happens to many Latinos, Mexicans. Thinking I had to leave, I wrote a letter to the Civil Register in San Salvador. I sent \$5 and said I have only 24 hours to leave, so whoever takes care of this will receive the rest of the money. Look, see I'm not so dumb. Two days later I had my birth certificate, 4 days later I left and here I am! They say help me and I'll help you without money you don't talk- you can't do anything without money, even if you want to.

CUSICK: Do you believe you had difficulties because you were not of American origin?

KEPLER: No. Only when I was trying to leave Panama. I haven't had problems here (in the U.S.A.). I was working, and there was a companion I had many of those I knew are dead, I don't know anybody here except one Mexican lady and an American who was my neighbor. Once a car came when I was picking cotton it stopped and a man asked where I was from, where are your papers? I told him at home, and he asked why don't you carry your (immigration or working) papers, and I told him so I wouldn't lose them. He asked if I had been naturalized and I said no. He said the next time he comes and I'm not naturalized he'd kick me out of my own country.

CUSICK: What did you do?

KEPLER: I went quickly to school! I went for 3 days, and took a test. I passes and had a party. My kids are Americans.

CUSICK: Let's see what is the best age in your opinion? Your best time?

KEPLER: The best time for me was when my children were growing up. I worked, was independent. Nobody could bother me about my life. I worked, went home, ate what I wanted, dressed how I wanted. Now I can't because I'm sick now. Now I feel a little strapped in now, without freedom. Like when I lived alone I liked it a lot to be alone. I've been alone about 20 years. Sometimes you don't know what you want. The hardest time for young people is to decide where you're going to work and live, what you're going to do, what you want to do. For example say a young woman goes out with a man she's young and doesn't know if she wants the baby or what's she going to do with him And later many opportunities come up for her. It's the ruin of the young. It's the real truth, and young people don't see it.

CUSICK: Do you think the same will happen to these kids (grandchildren)?

KEPLER: No, because (the mother) is very strict and they don't watch much TV. They're always busy.

CUSICK: Is this the same thing you did with your children?

KEPLER: Just about.

CUSICK: What are the other similar things you find with these kids that you did with yours?

KEPLER: She (mother) restrains them they're always busy. I hope to God that this "gust of wind" (of young people) passes and a more peaceful time comes.

CUSICK: It doesn't seem you find this "ruination of youth" here. Where have you seen it?

KEPLER: Here. Not Stockton because I hardly ever go out, but in Fresno. I was pretty involved. It's common everywhere around.

CUSICK: Tell me about important things that have happened here that have changed your life in the States.

KEPLER: Well, the most important thing when I came here was to become naturalized.

CUSICK: How did it change your life?

KEPLER: I have many privileges now by being naturalized.

CUSICK: Like what kinds of things? Programs?

KEPLER: Programs, I can go to the hospital, they can help me,.

CUSICK: In what form?

KEPLER: In helping me pay my medical bills, if I ever leave the country, these are the privileges. Here one lives in much comfort. Sometimes people don't understand, but you can live like a queen here compared to the rest. So many people want to come live here.

CUSICK: Do you believe there are many opportunities?

KEPLER: There are so many opportunities and privileges, and anyone who has a good head can come to own his own home, he can have some money in the bank. It's a country where, many people don't understand, it's a privilege to live here.

CUSICK: Have you wanted to get involved in groups?

KEPLER: Yes, but because I'm sick I can't

CUSICK: Also in Fresno?

KEPLER: Well, in Fresno I wouldn't because I always worked, and I never went out. I'd like to but I can't. I can't because the sickness won't let me.

CUSICK: Are there programs of the government that you especially like?

KEPLER: Yes, we went to a place for American citizens where one can learn to sew, to crochet, you could learn to do a lot. There are many little things I know how to do, but I can't go out because this sickness will not permit me.

CUSICK: When you arrived to the U.S., did you bring also the costumes of Panama and Costa Rica?

KEPLER: Well, yes. At first I dressed like (I was) there. But I looked around at people. I wore pants in the field. We wore uniforms (in the factory) where I worked for 30 years, with a (hairnet).

CUSICK: Are there also recipes you use in your kitchen that your daughter uses too?

KEPLER: She cooks very well- she cooks food from her country. I know how to cook etc...

CUSICK: Are there days that you celebrate too?

KEPLER: Yes, Independence day, New Year's, Christmas.

CUSICK: Are there days that are celebrated in Latin America that you still observe?

KEPLER: I believe so. In my homeland we celebrated the 15th of September (independence day). Honduras and El Salvador from Panama and Costa Rica and Guatemala.

CUSICK: Are there other customs you brought here to the U.S. that are still existent?

KEPLER: Yes, for example there is still a lot of family that, even though you're young, they take care of you. Here when you're 18 you're free. There, no. There a woman is free at 22 years. I didn't let my daughter leave until she was 22. She never did what others do here, she never spent the night at her girlfriends' homes, I didn't let her. You don't know what they're going to do, if they're going to do, if they're going to smoke a cigarette, or go drink beer as young ladies. Now she's a good little girl, a good mother. After she got married I told her, I didn't want her to have a family yet. "Go to school, I'll help you. When you get your diploma, then you can have a family." And she did it. But with a big family, there will be no good schools, nor college, nor lots of good food. Some families do so and don't work, they depend on welfare. There's a lot of poverty.

CUSICK: What things make you happy?

KEPLER: Her. She's one thing that makes me happy. She's "well-married" has a good husband.

CUSICK: Did you have any influence on who'd she marry?

KEPLER: No, it was her decision. I always told her I wouldn't get involved in her business. They raise their kids how they want. I take care of them when they go out but nothing more.

CUSICK: Do you prefer to live here?

KEPLER: No. I prefer to be independent, but the doctor says I can't. I can't swim against the current!

CUSICK: How is life here for people from your country?

KEPLER: Seems ok. I have friends they like it. As I do, I like the U.S.

CUSICK: Do you feel very close to your country?

KEPLER: No, sometimes I like (being close or being there) very pretty things there

CUSICK: Are you in contact with family or friends there?

KEPLER: No, I have a little niece who calls every 6 months.

CUSICK: How have your attitudes changed toward your country?

KEPLER: Well, now it's really ugly, the revolution, lots of blood they're Indians, that's why. They aren't very civilized. They have an unconquerable character. Civilization reaches here but not there because of the poverty. Many Latins are accustomed to having 6,7,8,12 in a family! When? Where? Sleep on the floor!

CUSICK: You believe it's not the same here in the U.S.?

KEPLER: Here it's civilized, clean, there is a place to sleep, a place to eat, you have a little money, although you have to work, because if you don't work you have nothing. If you sow, you gather.

CUSICK: One more question. Have any other incidents affected you or your family here in Stockton?

KEPLER: No. Nothing special. Although we've gone to many festivities here. I like (these ethnic festivities) a lot.

End of tape