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Oral history interview with Patrocino Barela,
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Transcript

Preface

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH PATROCINO BARELA

INTERVIEWED BY SYLVIA LOOMIS

IN CANON, NEAR TAOS, NEW MEXICO JULY 2, 1964

SL: Sylvia Loomis

PB: Patrocino Barela

Interview

SL: The subject to be discussed is Mr. Barela's work with Mr. Vernon Hunter in the days of WPA in the 1930's and 40's. But first would you tell us something about yourself, Mr. Barela, where you were born, and where you lived as a child?

PB: Can't say where I was born.

SL: You don't know where?

PB: No, my mother die when I'm too young, and so I have no way to know exactly where I born.

SL: Did you have your father with you when you were a child?

PB: Yes, but my father dead and I ask him lots of times, but they don't exactly explain to me.

SL: When did you come to New Mexico -- do you know that?

PB: Oh, I'm coming on here to Taos in 1908.

SL: You were just a child then?

PB: Yes.

SL: What did your father do?

PB: Well, my father he do for his own -- I believe in Santa Fe is a record up there. There used to be -- I don't if it still. And that's what my father do, he cure lots of people with wild weeds. He use medicines from the drug store mixed in with the special wild weeds.

SL: And that's what he did to earn his living?

PB: Yes.

SL: And what did you do as a child?

PB: Oh, I do pretty near everything.

SL: Like what?

PB: Well, when I am raised awhile, enough to work, I been working farms, I been working the railroads, coal mines. I work on the steel work in Pueblo (Colorado) seven years, but I been quite a few years away from here, and the last place I stay is Pueblo. Then in `30 I quit and I coming in here to get quainted.

SL: When did you start to do your wood carving?

PB: On 31.

SL: And how did you get started with that?

PB: I see old figure -- you know "santos?"

SL: Oh, yes.

PB: I see em, kind of wrecked, broken, and somebody, a friend of mine, had it and told me, say to fix it to sell em, some lady to buy it, and they say, "Come around to my house tonight and let's see if you can fix this santo - San Antonio."

SL: San Antonio? Oh, yes.

PB: He had a baby here, and kind of flowers in his hand, so I worked it easy, with a pocket knife. I worked holes in here where his arms come I took out piece of plug and make it over there and I put it back.

SL: And it was all right?

PB: And this guy he told me some lady promise to give it twenty dollars for the figure. He say, if I get twenty dollars I give it to you five. But he never give it to me. But I get it on my head, you know, when I fix this, I get it in my head if you make it solid, no joints, it will be better.

SL: It won't break so easily?

PB: And I get it on my head -- I don't say to him, just myself --thinkin' and thinkin' and thinkin', so I started, easy. I make a little Santa Rita-- some virgin, that one, with one pocket knife and one single chisel. And that's the way I started.

SL: And this was in 1930? About then?

PB: About 1931, I started to do these carvings.

SL: Well, now, how did Vernon Hunter find out about your work?

PB: Well you know, there is a lady here in Taos, up this way in the hospital -- I believe they work in the hospital now -- Ruth Fish --

SL: Oh, yes -- I've heard of her.

PB: That lady is the manager of that office here on the WPA, and I make a few pieces, I believe about two or three, and I put em on (what) used to be store -- Birch's -- Albino Birch -- so I ask him if I can put em on the inside of the store for showing the people, so the people can see it, and I work on the WPA, so he say, "Yeah, bring it over, bring it over."

SL: What kind of a job did you have on WPA?

PB: Well, I used to have a team of horses, and a little wagon, and I haul em dirt and gravel and so and so.

SL: And you did that on the WPA first?

PB: Yes. And so this lady ask him, "Who do that carving?" and they tell em right there that I, but they don't know me. They got my name but they don't know me really. So they call for me, they sent a paper and told the foreman to send me up there to the office and this lady told me, "I want to talk to you this evening. When you quitting you don't go home. You wait for me here by the church, and I want to talk to you." They started talking, you know, and then they say they want to find out if I do that carving or not. I told this lady, "If you want to find out for sure that I do it, let's go to my house and I show em the one I had started." So they come down here with me, and I show him the one I had started." So they come down here with me, and they say, "Well, I believe it now," so I had left my horse up there and my wagon, so I need to go back with her to get it so I go, and this lady told me, say, "well, Pat, I can't do it tomorrow, but the day after tomorrow you wait for me and I'm going to ask you some questions, and if you want to lay off -- to rest -- them horses I can make papers so you can do the carving and let the horses rest." And that's how I started, you know, get a great big paper, and they ask me lots of questions about so-and-so, and I answered.

SL: Had you known Mr. Hunter before that time?

PB: No, this lady they write some place for me, and they told me you need to find three witness -- no relation to you, three business people. So when they give me this paper (that) say you be looking for this three witness, so I come to the store where I got my figures, and I made the name Pasquale Martinez, the ranger to the foresta, and I know him, you know, and Clyde Birch the other one, and I don't remember that other one. But in that much time I am here with you, I get them three witnesses, and go back and give this paper to that lady, that Ruth Fish, and she send it, and in about three weeks they call me again, and they give me a great big envelope with the papers, and they told me, "Every day you work eight hours and make a cross in one of these squares," because I tell them, "I don't read, I don't write," and they say, "You just make a cross in one of these squares ..."

SL: For each day?

PB: Yes, "And then when you work a whole week, you bring these to the office." And that way I started. So a little later, when I already started to do this carving, then Vernon Hunter come to meet me.

SL: I see -- it was after that.

PB: Yes, but I am already doing carving for the government .

SL: Before he came?

PB: Yes, but he coming, and he say they want to collect some of them carvings to send em. So that's the way I keep with this Vernon Hunter. I'm already carving.

SL: I see. How much more money did you get as a carver than you did before when you were working with a horse and wagon?

PB: I don't remember exactly how much I get with the wagon.

SL: Was it very much more?

PB: No-o-o, well, I believe it was just about, but I don't remember exactly.

SL: You should have gotten wages as a craftsman when you started doing woodcarving.

PB: I don't know if I have a paper in there since that time.

SL: Do you have any papers?

PB: But it's hard to find it right now. I'm not sure where it is, but probably there are papers in there

SL: That told how much you got? Well, it would be interesting to know how much more you got as a woodcarver than with a horse and wagon, or whether they paid you the same. I suppose you had a family to support then, didn't you?

PB: Oh, yes.

SL: Did you have children?

PB: Oh, I got two boys and one girl -- all married right now.

SL: Well, when you started to do the carvings, what subjects did you like best? Did you like religious subjects?

PB: Well, yes, that's the way I started -- with that old santo,

SL: Yes.

PB: I met a lady, coming down in here to see me, and they said they don't like figures like a santo, they like animals, and so and-and- so. Probably they don't believe in no Christ.

SL: Maybe not.

PB: But all my work is for some kind of a santo feeling.

SL: Something religious, yes. That's what I've always felt about your work.

PB: Like this apostole (apostle) and so-and-so different santos, but the main thing is "machination."

SL: What?

PB: "Machination" (imagination)

SL: Oh, yes!

PB: Yes, machination. I don't see Christ in person on the ground, But I think him, I believe him, and the rest of it that's with him. I had a little Bible in there--an old one-- and my daughter had a brand new one now, but lots of different pictures of the santos, looks like. This record (?) that I keep, but I don't put in tight neck (collar) on a figure, but more like the Indians. That's the way Christ been.

SL: Yes, of course, with shawls.

PB: And probably they don't have no shoes, and they wrap a blanket -- a manto -- around em. And that's the way I keep on.

SL: Have you ever done any for churches, or chapels?

PB: No.

SL: But do the people call you a santero?

PB: Yes.

SL: That was what I thought your work was -- santero.

PB: Yes, lots of people call me that way.

SL: Did you ever know Old Man Gallegos in Santa Fe, on Agua Fria Street? He was a wood carver and died just a few years ago. His work looks something like yours and I wondered if you knew him?

PB: No, no.

SL: Well, did you ever go to New York to see your exhibitions?

PB: No.

SL: Because I know they have some of your carvings in the Museum of Modern Art.

PB: Oh, yes. I tell you, Mr. Vernon Hunter told me once they took about eleven pieces -- come were retablos, on a piece of board and they told me some of these figures are going to Europe -- they send them out there.

SL: Yes, they had an exhibition in Europe.

PB: But they were sending some pieces to the White House, and one piece of board -- they call him "The Shepherd" -- and about two years later, Vernon Hunter told me that "Shepherd" is still in the White House. The rest they go to New York. But it's all over, all over.

SL: Yes, I know.

PB: You know, I had a friend from here, and his boys had been in the Army, in Japan and Germany, and different places -- good friend of mine, I know him for years -- and he told me they see pieces up there that I been making, in Japan and Germany and France.

SL: How long did you work on WPA, do you remember?

PB: When the project close, I was just about the last one they shut me down.

SL: And you started when? In 1935, do you think? It ended in 1941 or 42.

PB: I know I started on the last part in 31.

SL: In 31?

PB: When I see that San Antonio.

SL: Yes, but when was it that Ruth Fish got you started ... ?

PB: That I don't remember.

SL: I think that started in 1935, so from then on you were on until it closed?

PB: Yes.

SL: Then what did you do after that? Did you earn enough money so you could just go on with your wood carving?

PB: No, sometimes I go to work around here to Monte Vista to pick potatoes, and I been one summer down LaMar Corrals, working at mills where they grind alfalfa up for animals, and that way, but I come back in here and keep on with my carving.

SL: But you don't sell enough of it to keep going? You have to do other kinds of work?

PB: Yes, but now my eyes, they . .

SL: They bother you now?

PB: Yes, so I can't go out to work for somebody else. I might as well stay here.

SL: But you can still do your carving, though? Your eyes are good enough for that?

PB: Oh, yes, well not too good, but I do my best.

SL: And you probably do a lot by feeling, too, don't you?

PB: Yes.

SL: Would you tell us how you start to do a carving? I understand you take a piece of wood and sort of get a feeling for the wood. Is that right?

PB: Oh, yes.

SL: Suppose you tell me now a piece of carving develops, from the time you first pick up the wood.

PB: Well, I don't know.

SL: You said you did it from your imagination -- that you don't have a particular idea in mind.

PB: I don't copy, no. I do my imagination and so-and-so feeling, you know. I make one figure this side, another one over here, to fill em up, the piece of wood. It depend on the size, but I do this on cedar because I like better for the natural color.

SL: Do you like the cedar better than cottonwood?

PB: Oh, yes -- you know, it's more like the color. No need to paint it on. The white pine, or something like that, it's too white, you know, and I started on cedar and I keep on that way.

SL: You like that better now?

PB: Oh, yes.

SL: Do you put any finish on your carvings at all, like wax, or

PB: No. I painted about two with stain, and I keep them awhile. One fellow that coming in here -- a water painter --

SL: A water color painter?

PB: And he told me, he say, "You spoil it to work with the varnish, let em natural." So I don't put it no more.

SL: Yes, I think it looks nicer without anything on it at all.

PB: Lots of people from back east they come in here and they like to smell it, the cedar.

SL: Yes, it's a wonderful smell.

PB: Yes, and so I keep on the cedar -- better than any other kind of wood.

SL: Where do you sell your things now?

PB: Well, anywhere that I can. Some people come in here, sometimes I sell em in the Blue Door, Taos Inn, all over . . .

SL: I had seen your things at Taos Inn, but I didn't know whether that was the only place to buy them, or whether they were in other shops.

PB: I don't know how many, but quite a few, and at the Blue Door they had a few, and different places -- all over. Some people, up there close to the bank, his ten-cent store, what you call em?

SL: Ten-cent store, yes, I know.

PB: That fellow have quite a few, too.

SL: He sells them at that store?

PB: Oh, yes.

SL: Do you do many special orders? Do people come and say, "I want one like this" and you do it?

PB: Well, yes. A fellow living here in La Loma, he comes here a few days ago, and he told me they want a figure, kind of tall, like that one I work on now, with two faces only, so I was working think about two days and he come around, and took it. But not many people order.

SL: Oh, not very many?

PB: No.

SL: About how much would one that size sell for? How much do you get?

PB: Depend on, if it's a single figure, probably I get twenty-five, thirty dollar -- depend on ...

SL: How much carving is in it?

PB: Yes, and if it two or three figures I ask more, but single figures ...

SL: I think that's very reasonable.

PB: Oh, yes. Well, I believe I go now . .

SL: You have to go back to your work?

PB: Yes, The people they gonna coming in. They go to Kansas.

SL: Well, I'm very grateful to you, Mr. Barela, for giving us your time.

PB: Yes, they want to leave today .

SL: And you have to get this finished before they come? Well, I won't take up any more of your time, and I'm very grateful to you for having this chance to talk to you.

PB: All right. Thank you.

[END OF PATROCINIO BARELA INTERVIEW]