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Irizarry, Honorina Weber, Oral history interview conducted by John D. Vazquez, October 17, 1974, Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.030; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with Honorina Weber Irizarry
Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.030

Interview conducted by John D. Vazquez on October 17, 1974 in Brooklyn, New York

VAZQUEZ: This is John D. Vasquez, interviewer for the Long Island Historical Society, Puerto Rican Oral History Project. Today I'm going to interview Mrs. Honorina Weber Irizarry, a resident of the Borough of Brooklyn since 1928. Mrs. Irizarry has been active in various groups, always has been interested in politics and religious organizations and has contributed to the Puerto Rican community for 46 years. Mrs. Irizarry, you arrived here in May 28, 1928. You came to live in Brooklyn?

IRIZARRY: That's right.

VAZQUEZ: Where in Brooklyn did you come to live?

IRIZARRY: I came to live with my sister Juana Weber Rodriguez, who at that time lived at Court Street, corner of Degraw. I stayed with her for about 2 or 3 months then my brother Louis Weber, who was very well known in the community, politically and otherwise. I stayed with him because he had a bigger house.

VAZQUEZ: Where did he live?

IRIZARRY: At 155 Douglas Street, he owned the house.

VAZQUEZ: What year did your brother Louis F. Weber came to America?

IRIZARRY: For the first time, because he made 2 trips, the first time was when the things were very bad in the First World War, that they had an immigration, a lot of people came, emigrated from Puerto Rico to this country. He was very young at the time; even though he was about 16 or 17 years old maybe. He had already done political work in Puerto Rico.

VAZQUEZ: Where did he come to live and what year was this?

IRIZARRY: Let me see. Around 1914, '15, around, thereabouts.

VAZQUEZ: That was the first time. How long was he here then?

IRIZARRY: He stayed 2 or 3 years, then he went back to Puerto Rico. He stayed a few years there, he established himself in a grocery store that he managed, rather, he owned. Then he came back around 1922 or so.

VAZQUEZ: Then 6 years later you came. You lived with him after a short time?

IRIZARRY: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: You mentioned prior to the interview that you worked as an Assistant Manager to B. F. Goodrich--

IRIZARRY: --To the B. F. Goodrich Rubber Company of Akron. They are in Akron, the main--the main house. But in Puerto Rico they have what they call the General Distributor. Mr. Carlos Decelis was the owner of the place.

VAZQUEZ: When you came to Brooklyn, did you go to work for the company, here in New York City?

IRIZARRY: No, I didn't. Because I intended to come as a visitor, I didn't intend to stay. But I was suffering from dizzy spells and a very bad case of constipation that couldn't get any cure in Puerto Rico, and Louis suggested that I come to the States with a view of finding somebody that would be a specialist in that line that could help me. Having most of my brothers and my sister here, they started to delay my stay. That was intended to be 3 months, and here I am: 46 years.

VAZQUEZ: Where did you--Did you work when you came here?

IRIZARRY: Yes. As I said before, I came in 1928, May. In July of the same year I suffered an appendectomy and they found out about the other condition that I was suffering from. One day I saw an advertisement in a newspaper; that they were asking for a stenographer or a secretary, bilingual. I applied for the position without the consent; nobody knew. I just asked an officer how to get to the place. It was across the street from City Hall. The trolley cars used to go up to that place from Brooklyn; Park Row, right there. They gave me an interview, they dictated English and Spanish and asked me to translate both. I got a position when I could not even work. That's how I started. When I came, they were desperate because I had told my sister that I was going to visit Louis. I still was with my sister and they didn't know where I was. She telephoned

there and I wasn't there. They thought that I had taken a walk and I got lost. I telephoned from New York that I had obtained a job. The next day--although they didn't, especially Louis, didn't want me to work because I wasn't even able to walk straight. But I got the job in a place called Emsen & Son & Co., located at 96 Worth St.

VAZQUEZ: How long did you work there?

IRIZARRY: I worked there 2 1/2 years until I got married. I got married December 1930.

VAZQUEZ: Did you have many friends there?

IRIZARRY: All Of them were Americans, the only Spanish-speaking one was I.

VAZQUEZ: Did you speak American to any of them?

IRIZARRY: All of them.

VAZQUEZ: What do you mean by American? They were mostly, what?

IRIZARRY: There were, in that time, it wasn't like now; you see colored people employed everywhere. There; all of them were either Irish, or from Irish ancestry, and Germans, English.

VAZQUEZ: Any Italians?

IRIZARRY: No, no Italians.

VAZQUEZ: You said that you lived in and about Brooklyn. You got married in 1930. Did you marry a Puerto Rican?

IRIZARRY: Yes, from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico.

VAZQUEZ: Where did you go to live?

IRIZARRY: At 138 Dikeman Street, in a house that my brother gave me; Louis.

VAZQUEZ: What kind of neighborhood was that?

IRIZARRY: Mixed one; we had, around there, again: Germans, Irish, Italians and a few Puerto Ricans.

VAZQUEZ: Were there any Puerto Rican stores or places to buy Puerto Rican tropical foods or fruit at all?

IRIZARRY: No, we had to travel, either by car, which we had one at the time. We always had a car. And if one preferred, we could communicate by phone with whatever stores there were on Columbia St. Some of them made deliveries. They had some Spanish

people that had grocery stores. I don't remember their names, but I know there were some. But the majority were in hands of Italians.

VAZQUEZ: Did you continue working for a long time?

IRIZARRY: Yes. Let me see. I did not go back to Emsen & Son. I got a job at a place. I don't even recall the name now; Leonard Street in Manhattan, near City Hall also, around Chambers, somewhere. Those people; they wanted you to start too early in the morning and work almost 'til doomsday, and they were paying very little salaries so I did not work there. But I'm trying to remember. I think my next job was with a freight forwarding concern by the name of D.C. Andrews & Co.

VAZQUEZ: Where were they located?

IRIZARRY: At Water Street, downtown New York, in Manhattan, on the corner of Broad Street, the building with all those--.

VAZQUEZ: Was your husband also working in Manhattan or he worked in Brooklyn?

IRIZARRY: At the beginning he was working in Manhattan in a place where they made zippers.

VAZQUEZ: How long did he work there, in the zipper factory?

IRIZARRY: Could we interrupt here, while I ask? [Interview interrupted.] My husband worked in a place by the name of Strauss. Somewhere around 14th Street, I think; a zipper factory for 5 years.

VAZQUEZ: And then after?

IRIZARRY: After that he came to work in Brooklyn at the Bossert Hotel, around Montague Street. He was working there for about 22 years.

VAZQUEZ: Oh right, Bossert. It's torn down. Right on--What did he do there?

IRIZARRY: He had more than one job. He worked sometimes as a night clerk, and some other times as an auditor. They call it "auditor" but what he had to audit was whatever checks people that did not pay cash, but by checks, so he had to audit and enter those in the books, and take care of the bookkeeping.

VAZQUEZ: Did he have any difficulty getting a job because he was a Puerto Rican?

IRIZARRY: No.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever have any difficulty?

IRIZARRY: No.

VAZQUEZ: How about your brothers?

IRIZARRY: None of them because they were good workers. There was a little jealousy sometimes, especially where I started to work amongst the American stenographers. It was because of the fact that I could make more money than they were making. It was because of the fact that I could speak more languages than they were. So there was always a little friction but otherwise there was no objections to the fact that I was a Puerto Rican.

VAZQUEZ: You always got your jobs on your own? Nobody--

IRIZARRY: Yes, I went to employment agencies. I remember there was one on Nassau Street that used to be called--My first job, the one on Worth Street was this same agency but they were located at 245 Broadway, Manhattan. They called themselves the Foreign Language Employment Bureau. Then, later on, they moved to Nassau Street.

VAZQUEZ: Did you--shortly after coming, or while you were here--know of any Puerto Ricans in the community who were helping other Puerto Ricans? You fortunately, got out and got a job on your own. Were there anybody in the community who could help you get a job at that time, the late '20s or the early '30s?

IRIZARRY: That could help me? That would help others? Well, this is not a matter of bragging, but my brother was the one that was helping the Puerto Ricans that were unfortunate.

VAZQUEZ: Which brother was this?

IRIZARRY: Louis Felipe--Louis Felipe Weber. He is remembered by many, many people. In fact he used to be called the father of the Puerto Ricans. He made a little fortune and whenever anybody was in dire need, either because of ill health or lack of employment, he was ready to give his help or to get through politics. He knew some politicians.

VAZQUEZ: Did he have a political club? Which were they?

IRIZARRY: Yes, he had three. None of the members paid any dues. They called themselves members of so and so but the one that was putting all the money there was Louis.

VAZQUEZ: What were the names of the clubs?

IRIZARRY: There was one in Adams Street. I don't recall the number but the name was Agueybana.

VAZQUEZ: It was named after a Puerto Rican Indian.

IRIZARRY: Indian, right. He had one in Sackett Street called the Betances and the other one in Jefferson Street, I think it was, called the Hostos. So he was always--

VAZQUEZ: Were they Democratic clubs or Republican?

IRIZARRY: Yes, they were Democratic clubs. Sí. They didn't call themselves Populares, just Democrats. If anybody knew that somebody was sick and they needed a doctor or they needed medicine, or somebody died and they had expressed--before their death of course--their desire to be buried in Puerto Rico, there was Louis to send the family and the dead person, and everybody who wanted to go to, to bury that particular person. During the--My husband was one who used to help also. During Christmastime and during Thanksgiving, he used to give 200 baskets of groceries with all the goodies that are always used at those particular times. And you could inquire from people who knew him at that time, he did that during Christmas and during Thanksgiving for very needy persons, people that actually--He found out or knew that they were needy because at that time the relief or the welfare was not helping like now. With their eyes closed everybody getting a great deal of money. I myself was an investigator. I forgot to mention that. I still have my card here with me. I used to help people because at that time the relief people did not have enough money to give for shoes or clothes or anything. I used to give out of my own money. It's old but it is still there.

VAZQUEZ: Brooklyn Precinct 685. What year was this?

IRIZARRY: That's what I couldn't remember what I had done after I left the job. This was my job. That was 1932 or '33, after the Depression.

VAZQUEZ: Were you working during the Depression?

IRIZARRY: Yes, I got that job with the; they had--That I did not get. As a matter of fact, Louis got jobs for a great deal of people. But I never necessitated going to him because I had my own ability to get my particular employments, by telling them what I had studied. That I had college education and that I speak 5 languages.

VAZQUEZ: What languages do you speak, besides Spanish?

IRIZARRY: Portuguese, Italian and French.

VAZQUEZ: You studied that in school?

IRIZARRY: I started in Puerto Rico. After I graduated there and was working as a secretary I used to go to night school at Erasmus Hall High School; here in Brooklyn, in Church Street, Church Avenue rather, Church and Flatbush, yes.

VAZQUEZ: Did your brother, besides the political groups, did your brother have any other groups? Was he active--He was active politically in the Democratic Party.

IRIZARRY: Yes, he was active in the Democratic Party. But I would like to inject something here because not very many people know how Louis became a, more-or-less, a leader amongst the Puerto Ricans. Just to help because he was never looking for him or the family. He was always looking for others that were in need. He did it only to help other people, not looking for anything for himself or his family. We were orphans; Louis was about 3 or 4 years older than I am. When he was about 15, and that I learned from my sister Juana, he went to a conference that was being given when the Socialist Party was being started in Puerto Rico. And somehow or other, I don't know how, he went there. I don't know whether he was invited or just went. He was about 15 years old. And everybody was discussing what they were going to do, this-and-that, and he was, he had a, he was a well-read person, he was always reading all kinds of books and he asked, when they finished, he asked whether they would allow him to speak. So he went there and he started to say that the best thing was, for everybody, was regardless if they were poor, rich, white, or black that all the Puerto Ricans should get together for the betterment of all us, not just for a certain group, and he had those socialist ideas that he exposed at that time, and at that particular meeting or conference there was a doctor by the name of Dr. Rafael Lange who was very well known in Mayaguez.

I don't know if you have heard of him. When Louis was finished, he was greatly applauded and Dr. Lange admired him so much, the nerve that he had, first to go there at his age, to speak and the way he expressed himself. Dr. Lange encouraged him to continue studying politics and he put at his disposal books, and his library, and whatnot. He put a professor, I don't remember--Mr. Peters I think was the name--to further educate Louis. He had the advantage of all the books that Dr. Lange had there and he continued to work; always fighting for the poor, for those that were trying to, to unite those who were always trying to pretend to be better than others like sometimes it happens. And, when he came to this country, the first trip that he made, was the time when the Italians hated the Puerto Ricans. They use to call us "the spics" or "spics," something like that. And the Italians, in turn, were called "dagos" or "dagos" by the--So that's how he started when he came. He was always defending the Puerto Ricans. If anybody was abusing them, he would, in fact he went to the hospital with a cracked head because he intervened in defending.

VAZQUEZ: Did he know Carlos Tapia?

IRIZARRY: He knew Carlos Tapia and he helped Carlos Tapia very much, and there is--I don't want to belittle what Carlos Tapia did, but I want to make one thing clear for those who don't know it. Carlos Tapia was living in Brooklyn, I knew him too, through that club, Betances, because his wife was not interested in politics and Louis always asked me to go. And my mingling with whoever was there, and I met Carlos Tapia; he was a big colored fellow, very fat and tall. He had a restaurant, partly with his money and partly Louis.' And a lot of people that were hungry were fed at that restaurant. A lot of people were under the impression that Carlos Tapia was the one that was feeding them. But who was footing those bills was Louis Weber. He used to tell them that anybody that came around that was in bad need of a job or what, "If they are hungry you give them whatever they want to eat and later on you give me the bill and I'll take care of it." That's one point that I'd like, if this is going to be written somewhere because I'd like it known.

VAZQUEZ: They worked together?

IRIZARRY: In the club they worked together. Carlos Tapia used to bring people and he was more or less the one that would find those that were in need, and bring them to my brother. And my brother would try to get in touch with the Alderman that used to live somewhere in Congress Street--I think it was--and the Deputy County Clerk, and the other big politicians, and tried to get jobs for those people.

VAZQUEZ: Did your brother know Jimmy Kelly?

IRIZARRY: Very well. They were very close friends.

VAZQUEZ: Can you tell me something about their relationship and what role Jimmy Kelly played in the community, in the Puerto Rican community?

IRIZARRY: He used to attend the meetings that were given in those clubs that Louis had. Mr. Kelly, being that he was a city official, would bring some of his Irish or American friends there, of course they were interested in getting the Puerto Rican votes, so they attended and they became friends with us. So whenever anybody came, Louis was always very generous with Mr. Kelly and the others, just to have them as a--What would you say?--as a resource for the benefit of anybody that would be in trouble. Maybe, some Puerto Ricans if they had a little trouble sometimes, a little fight or something, to try to get the fellows out of a jam. But there was nothing else that Mr. Kelly would do. The one that--Louis always tried to be more or less behind the curtains. Pulling the strings, doing the work because of certain work that he was doing that he didn't care to--

VAZQUEZ: I was let to understand that he was one of the first boleteros or vaqueros.

IRIZARRY: Por eso no lo quería nombrar. Así.

VAZQUEZ: Was he friendly with the Viruet family? Ellos también eran unos de los primeros boleteros.

IRIZARRY: Bueno, por eso es que yo no lo quería mentar. The fact that Louis was able to help all these people was because he was engaged in what, up to this time, is illegal.

[Interview interrupted.]

[Unintelligible.]

[Interview interrupted.]

VAZQUEZ: You said that your brother Louis very often, especially at election time would have his friends, for example, and people that were members of his clubs go out, personally, in their cars and bring in the voters?

IRIZARRY: Right, when primary time came he was always exhorting all the members of his three clubs to go and register and he made sure by sending, going and sending, his employees and friends to get the people to vote on election time; Election Day.

VAZQUEZ: Besides these political groups, did your brother ever get involved, let's say, in La Vanguardia Puertorriqueña?

IRIZARRY: That came afterwards. That came afterwards. There was a lady by the name of Doña Antonia Denis, I think it was. But she used to come to the Betances Club, that's where she started getting political ideas and whatnot.

VAZQUEZ: Do you know Felipe Medina or Celio Vasquez or any other people that used to visit the clubs that I've mentioned, the clubs, before?

IRIZARRY: No. Because I was rather young at the time and I don't remember.

VAZQUEZ: Were your other brothers involved in the political clubs also?

IRIZARRY: Well, they helped like--They were not as active as Louis was. Because they had their own families and children, and Louis never had any children.

VAZQUEZ: Was he active all through the '30s, the '40s, the '50s, and through [unintelligible] '60s?

IRIZARRY: Right, right, until he had an unfortunate case. He was very faithful to his friends and when they were investigating O'Dwyer, the Mayor, and Mr.--What was his name?--the one that went to jail, the one that was the Fire Commissioner, Moran. Louis had a--had started a business of scraping the steamers and the ships that came and after scraping, also the painting, and he used to go and see these people on a friendly basis and political also. But when these people were involved in a matter that was detrimental to the others, they asked Louis, being that he used to go and visit Moran and he used to visit O'Dwyer. Louis used to make banquets and Mr. O'Dwyer would come, and this Mr. Moran and that senator that died, the father of the mayor--What was his name?--Mayor Wagner, he used to come to the clubs also. They subpoena my

brother, Louis Felipe Weber, and asked him, "Do you know Mr. So-and-so-Moran?" And he denied, he denied it because he did not want the scandal of the policy of numbers or racket--let's call it--to be a blemish that would endanger Moran's position. So he denied. But when they called Moran, he was proud of being a friend of my brother Louis, he said, "Yes, I know Louis Weber." Just because of that my poor brother had to go for 5 years for perjury just because he denied knowing Moran and O'Dwyer.

VAZQUEZ: He served the full time?

IRIZARRY: He served. They were vindictive and up to this time I'm bitter because of that. Because they wanted--They thought Moran was involved with Louis in some racket. And the fact that Louis used to go there, they thought that something was going on there besides--

VAZQUEZ: From what to what year did your brother had to go away? That was in the '40s, the '30s?

IRIZARRY: In the '40s, I would say. Do you remember [unintelligible] Louis was? At the time that O'Dwyer was mayor, at that time.

VAZQUEZ: But he had to go the full five years?

IRIZARRY: Well, they deducted--I don't know how much--for good behavior, or whatever they call it.

VAZQUEZ: Who took care of his business while he was gone?

IRIZARRY: My other brothers, Frank and the other, and he had a lot of employees.

VAZQUEZ: Everything was OK when he came back out?

IRIZARRY: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: Was he still very active in the community?

IRIZARRY: Yes. He continued to be helping the people, and then he was more so interested in politics because he saw there that by trying to help somebody, you get it in your neck. So he trying always to say to the Puerto Ricans that we should be united and that we should help one another and things like that.

VAZQUEZ: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your activities or your brother's activities besides the politics and the social service. How about in education, was he active at all in education?

IRIZARRY: I don't recall in what place it was but he had built a club like a gymnasium.

VAZQUEZ: Was it here in Brooklyn, uptown here?

IRIZARRY: Yes, I don't recall where. So that in order to keep the children off the streets, he bought boxing gloves, and they used to play basketball and every--everything to keep them out of the streets, but I don't remember. I know that--I learned that through my sister. He used to help, he was never bragging of what he was doing. A lot of things, like the matter with Tapia, I was living there and I heard their conversations. But not because he was telling anybody. Tapia was taking the credit, alright. He was a good man. He was bringing the Puerto Ricans that were in need but the one that was feeding the back was [unintelligible], was Louis Weber, and that was one thing that--

VAZQUEZ: Who else was around during the '30s and '40s besides Louis Weber and Carlos Tapia? [unintelligible] Who else helped? Who else was contributing or active in politics? Your brother was for the Democratic Party. How about--?

IRIZARRY: For a time this fellow Colon that came to see me. He was once--I think he belonged to the Betances Club. But then he found out, rather he told me, that by the suggestion of my brother Luis he was encouraged to get into a group of Republicans, so that he could get a nucleus there to help the Puerto Ricans. So that my brother could be helping in one side and the other could be helping in the other. In that way, bring the whole community together.

VAZQUEZ: Have you heard of Jesús Colón?

IRIZARRY: Yes, the two. There were two brothers, Jesús and, I think, Joaquín was the other. They used to work in the Post Office. They were very intelligent. I say "were" because I don't know if they are still alive. I remember them, yes. If I'm not mistaken, one of them became a lawyer. They used to work in the Washington Ave. Post Office.

VAZQUEZ: Were they also active in the community here?

IRIZARRY: Not as active as my brother. But they did come over to the meetings. They also did, but they had to work. They didn't have the time or the money to, you know, any political work. Whereas my brother was financially independent, he could afford to do all those things. My husband is reminding me when I worked as an investigator from 1932-1935. My husband was also a friend not only of Mr. Kelly but also Mr. Cunningham who was the President of the Municipal Council. He was an Assemblyman, I think it was. I know he was like an Assemblyman for many years. And I think that they used to call this the 14th Assembly District. I think that's what--I don't know--now they have changed--.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, rezoning. Was there anybody else in the Puerto Rican community that you think is worth mentioning? Any in the community who worked, contributed or who was interested?

IRIZARRY: Not that I know. But I would like to mention that even though my brother was always trying to get, and getting, jobs for other people. I never had to go to any political leader, or any person related with politics to ask for any job or any of my family. All my employers, my employment agencies were the ones that I mentioned, the Foreign Language Employment Bureau, and another one which I don't recall now. And I worked in that place as the--I became. After they took me as a Secretary Interpreter, I became the Head of the Translating Dept. for D.C. Andrews Company that I mentioned before. Then I worked for [Interview interrupted.] Then I worked for Scholtz & Co. at 82 Wall St. for almost 10 years as a secretary of the President for the concern.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever felt any discrimination there?

IRIZARRY: Never. I left the job because my daughter who use to manage my store for me, got married and was ready to have my first grandchild, and she left the job and I left the job. But previous to that, I want to mention that I worked at the Office of the present State Comptroller, Mr. Arthur Levitt. I worked at his office, at 369 Lexington Ave. as a Secretary Stenographer.

VAZQUEZ: The last name Weber is not a classical Puerto Rican name. Mayaguez has a strong German influence.

IRIZARRY: It's from a German origin. Yes. But the name is German origin as I said. But our people from both sides come from French people, because probably back we had somebody German. But the close--like parents, grandparents, great grandparents; they were French. On my mother's side our name was De Jordan. Her people came from Marseille and my father's people came from Bordeaux. That's how I happened to have those two names that don't sound Puerto Rican.

VAZQUEZ: Could you tell me before we finish, Mrs. Weber, I would like to--Mrs. Irizarry, I am sorry: What do you feel about the Puerto Rican today? Do you feel that he will ever become united? Do you feel there is any Puerto Rican or force in the community that can unite the Puerto Rican community?

IRIZARRY: Having lived in this country for so many years, I have notice--and I am sorry that I have to mention it--I don't think that we have reached a level where we could say that we are united. A Puerto Rican, the moment they put their first foot in this country, they change. You go to Puerto Rico and you find another Puerto Rican different from here. The hospitality that's there, you don't find it here. There's something; they don't believe in voting, they want to live for themselves, they don't care about the others. We have to continue to fight for that unity because I don't think we have it. I'm sorry to say, but I think that if we were united, if we would cooperate without thinking of ourselves or thinking of the others, we would have maybe, already a Puerto Rican Mayor there instead of the one we have, or maybe in other cities of the union, maybe we'd have other Puerto Ricans. But the fact that somebody--the Jews, they have one another; the Italians, they stick together; but the Puerto Ricans, I don't know whether that's inherited from the Spaniards or from who. They don't seem to be able to stick together. They are always ready to stab you in the back. I don't know whether I'm saying the right thing but that's the way I feel about it.

VAZQUEZ: Mrs. Weber, we'd like to thank you very much on behalf of the Long Island Historical Society's Puerto Rican Oral Project. We'd like to thank you. I'm sorry your

brother Louis Felipe Weber is not here so that we can interview him. But I'm sure everyone will make the most out of the information you have given us and we sincerely thank you.