



McMENAMINS



HISTORY



McMenamins Brings New Life to Olympia's Historic Café

★ THE SPAR ★

Olympia, Washington, is known to many in the Northwest as one of the most scenic, peaceful and easy-going small towns in the region. The waterfront community has been the capital since the territory first broke off from Oregon in 1853, but old timers from the area will tell you that it hasn't always seemed so, well, stately. Long before the city was associated with white-collar state workers, college students and public art it was a union town populated – especially on weekends – by railroad brakemen, loggers, longshoremen and the like.



*A working-class stomping ground for decades, this 1964 view of The Spar shows off the building's 1935 Art Moderne styling.
Courtesy Washington State Archives.*

One such old timer is Alan McWain, lifelong Olympia resident and longtime owner of The Spar, one of the town's oldest restaurants. The Spar, soon to become the newest McMenamins pub, has been in McWain's family since 1945 when his father purchased the place. There has been a saloon, bowling alley or billiards hall on this spot since the 1860s; the current structure was built in 1935. Of course,

McWain's memories of growing up in and around his father's place paint a different picture of The Spar than one sees today. (...continued page 12)

RUBEN CONTRERAS

MIGRANT RIGHTS PIONEER CALLED HOTEL OREGON HOME

"[Ruben Contreras] was, I would say, one of the first civic activists that was out there making sure that the rights of Hispanic people were upheld." He "was one of the original people that dug in and took a position, and wasn't afraid to do that because of the times – I mean, you're talking back in the late '50s and early '60s, when not many people would stand up, and say what needed to be said!"

—Lee Vasquez, Retired Yamhill County Sheriff (and first Hispanic sheriff to serve in the State of Oregon)

"There was nobody like Ruben. That was certainly true. God, it was just a great feeling to go ride with him, 'cause always, I was going to learn something, we were going to do something interesting."

—Jim Houser, VISTA worker assigned to Ruben's Valley Migrant League district office in 1965

"There's a lot of things that came to my life that I didn't expect."

—Ruben Contreras

Most Oregonians today won't recognize his name and are unaware of the substance and breadth of his accomplishments. This is due in large part because Ruben Contreras never sought a spotlight for himself. Instead, over the course of four decades, he intentionally remained outside the glow of celebrity, working side by side with government officials, growers, laborers and their children. Walls came down, bridges were built. He was there in an Oregon State Capitol committee room. He was there in the migrant camps. (...continued page 13)



CONTRERAS (continued from page 11...) He was there at federal hearings in Washington, D.C. He was there to translate and advocate in the local jail.

And for a time, Contreras called Hotel Oregon his home away from home. So, in celebration of the hotel's 102nd birthday in January, we offer this look back at the remarkable life and work of Ruben Contreras, probably the most significant individual associated with the venerable McMinnville landmark.

BEGINNINGS: MEXICO CITY, McMINNVILLE AND ALBERTA

During the late 1940s, Contreras came to McMinnville for extended visits. He booked a room at the Hotel Oregon (then called Hotel Elberton) and often sought out the solace of the second-floor balcony that overlooks Third Street. The young man had a lot to contemplate. Just a few years earlier, he had left his home, Mexico City – the world's largest metropolis, where he was born in 1921 – and with it, the promise of a comfortable and prosperous life.

Ruben's family included some prestigious and powerful residents of Mexico City, including prominent lawyers, doctors, a general, a supreme court judge and the city's first woman pharmacist. His father was a pioneer in the city's transportation system who became a congressman. Family tradition steered Ruben toward such a track.

Ruben started on this course, motivated to some degree by his ailing mother. He enrolled into Mexico City's Escuela Medico Military, intent on becoming a doctor who could ease the suffering, if not cure the afflicted, such as his mom, who had contracted tuberculosis when Ruben was a young boy.

But in 1944, Ruben made a dramatic deviation from his professional path, a decision that not only changed his life but ultimately affected countless other lives. He chose to distance himself from family expectations. Encouraged by some relatives to go explore, Ruben joined friends headed north by invitation of the United States government.

Two years earlier, U.S. and Mexico had implemented the Bracero Program as a means of temporarily filling the enormous labor void created by the thousands of American men leaving the civilian workforce to fight in WWII. The program successfully channeled many thousands of Mexican *braceros* (laborers) to the fields of Oregon and other agricultural states to save vast harvests threatened by the critical labor shortage. Even after the troops returned home, a shortage of American farm labor persisted, ensuring that the seasonal tide of migrant workers continued long after the war's end.

Though possessed of an advanced education and rather aristocratic lineage,

Ruben never put himself above others. That first summer in the Midwest in 1944, he labored alongside and socialized with other migrants and probably never breathed anything about his background. In fact, throughout his career, Ruben allowed others to assume his was a humble upbringing.

What was impossible to hide from all who met Ruben, virtually from the first hello, was that the man had great confidence and commanded respect, not in a threatening way, but with a smile. People who have known him over the years say they've never seen him intimidated by others. All of this was a by-product of his family and educational background that would serve him well.

Ruben's confidence was apparent when he arrived in McMinnville in the summer of 1945, his second season in the Bracero Program. He was assigned to do railroad work in and around town, after an earlier stint at Crescent Lake in the Cascade Mountains southeast of Eugene. Being one of the very first Mexican laborers to appear in McMinnville, his notice was guaranteed. The fact that in his free time he dressed in a nice black suit with a starched shirt, with medical books under his arm, meant that he was never missed.

But also, Ruben never missed a chance to interact with the local people. His one obstacle was that he didn't speak English. He was, however, fluent in Spanish, Latin

and French, which is why he struck up a friendship with the Machetes, a family from France. They invited him out to their farm for dinners, and Ruben no doubt relished the opportunity to have conversations. On one occasion, their daughter Juliet met Ruben to go roller skating at the old armory in town, which was one of the real hang-outs for young folks in McMinnville at the time.

On this outing, Juliet's friend Alberta Schmauder saw her skating with Ruben. Soon afterwards, Alberta spied him again in a local grocery store. "And he smiled at me, you know. He said something in Spanish. And I am German background, completely, and I don't know what he was saying." Ruben was one of the first Hispanic persons Alberta had ever seen, and he was certainly the first she had talked to. When Alberta got home that day, she told her mom that she had found the man she wanted to marry.

Ruben felt the same way. Alberta was a real beauty – and a firecracker! Born in the McMinnville hospital, she grew up in nearby Lafayette, where her German grandfather had established a meat market in the early 1900s. Then in the early '40s, the teenaged Alberta and her parents moved into McMinnville where she found a job working as an usher and ticket-taker at the Mattechek family's three downtown movie theaters, including the brand new Mack Theater. The Mack still stands today, directly across from Hotel Oregon. [...continued page 14]



*Ruben, left, with another bracero, repairing tracks in Oregon, 1945.
Courtesy Contreras family.*



*The young couple, Alberta Schmauder and Ruben Contreras, in the late '40s.
Courtesy Contreras family.*



Ruben's room key holder (above) from Hotel Oregon (formerly the Elberton) and 1958 Interviewer Identification card (right). Courtesy Contreras family.

CONTRERAS (continued from page 13...) Recalling the fanfare surrounding the new theater, Alberta says, "Every week there were some new flowers. There was a doorman, with brass buttons, who opened the doors. And there were girls all over the place, and we all ushered, you know.... They'd have two, three, four or five girls working at the time."

Alberta knew something about putting on a good show, herself. As a young teenager, she took up baton twirling and joined her school's drum majorettes, where she excelled.

Her junior year, she placed second in the state championship and as a senior, she took home the grand prize. She didn't stop at plain old batons, though.

"I was always twirling," Alberta recalled with a smile. "And I twirled fire, nobody twirled fire. I twirled big fire." Sometimes she performed in clubs or school programs accompanied by musicians. The fire marshals and school board had meetings to observe and discuss the safety of this practice.

Alberta and Ruben were smitten. But Ruben couldn't stay. As a *bracero*, he was legally bound to return to Mexico after the season. Before he left, he gave Alberta a keepsake photo of himself that he had taken in a McMinnville studio. After he was gone, Alberta received another gift through the mail, a music box. It was addressed to her in care of the Mack Theater. Ruben didn't know where she lived. They also exchanged letters, which Alberta learned years later had actually been written by a translator – as dictated to him in Spanish by Ruben.

Alberta was Ruben's reason for returning to McMinnville in 1946, '47 and '48. He was no longer working as a *bracero*, but was taking medical classes in Los Angeles. It was on these trips north to McMinnville that Ruben stayed at the Hotel Oregon. His life was at a crossroads at this time, and the young man had a lot of things to mull over. But the real reason he spent so much time on the hotel balcony, as noted earlier, was less for the contemplative environment, and more for its prime vantage point for catching the eye of his girl while she worked across the street at the Mack. The young couple spent many happy days together during this three-year period of interrupted courtship and could converse more easily as Ruben's English improved.

And Alberta learned about Ruben's life and culture. He invited her to her first Cinco de Mayo celebration. "I didn't know what Cinco de Mayo was, but he handed me what looked like a wedding announcement... He brought it to the theater. And so, it said, Eola Village on it."

Eola Village was the migrant camp located in the small town of Dayton outside of McMinnville. It had been built in 1937 for the Dust Bowl-era migrants. By this point, a decade later, more and more

Hispanic laborers were coming to the camp. Eola Village would soon become a primary focus in Ruben's career. It's interesting to note that from his earliest years in McMinnville, Ruben, who never lived at the camp, knew of and took part in goings-on there.

Alberta and Ruben were married in September 1948 in Santa Maria, California, where Ruben had recently gotten a job working as an orderly and nurse at a hospital. After several months there, the newlyweds moved back to McMinnville in June 1949, where Ruben became the first permanent Hispanic resident not just in the community, but in the entire county.

TAKING UP THE CAUSE

The two settled into their new life in McMinnville. For Ruben, the adjustments were substantial, not the least of which included ending his initial pursuit of a career in medicine, but it was what he wanted. As Alberta put it, "He really took a dive to come up here." Being mechanically inclined (and certified in welding and refrigeration), Ruben easily found work in the area. By the early '50s, he was employed as a refrigeration technician at Alderman Farms in Dayton, which was the largest operation of its kind in the nation. A multi-million-dollar, 3,500-acre snap bean operation that required 2,000 pickers at harvest time, the farm also featured its own processing plant, which was the unit in which Ruben was employed.

One day on the job, Ruben saw a large piece of equipment break loose and roll towards another worker. Earlier, Ruben had warned supervisors that this very same equipment presented a safety hazard, but nothing was done to rectify the situation. Now, Ruben lunged towards the endangered worker and pushed him out of the way, saving him from injury if not death. Ruben wasn't so fortunate. He sustained a broken back and his legs were actually paralyzed for a time. He was incredibly lucky that his injuries didn't have more of a lasting impact; he could easily have been crippled for life. Still his recovery was difficult and took many months.

During this lengthy period of being physically sidelined, Ruben became consumed with the hazards and inequities facing farm workers, particularly the legions of Hispanic laborers who didn't have the skills, education and language to stand up for their rights. And being the sole Hispanic resident in the county, he felt compelled to take action.

In 1954, Ruben joined the effort of the Oregon Council of Churches and Migrant Ministry, the very first organized attempt to identify, aide and improve the situation for migrant workers in the state. He may have been the first Hispanic to participate in this pioneering effort. Most Hispanic people then in Oregon were not in a position to help, especially on



Ruben dressed in his suit, tie and starched shirt, late '40s. Courtesy Contreras family.

a voluntary basis. The church-organized volunteers visited migrants at the camps, talked over the conditions and difficulties they faced, and provided as much counseling and aid as the group's limited funds allowed. Illustrating his drive and resourcefulness, Ruben soon formed a local migrant committee for Yamhill County.

Data from the hundreds of migrant interviews conducted by Ruben and the many other Oregon Council of Churches-Migrant Ministry volunteers was organized and compiled into a report presented to the Oregon legislature that revealed "serious problems involving housing, health, employment security, education for children and community attitudes." The Council made a plea that the legislature investigate and act upon the situation further.

The legislature complied by establishing the Legislative Interim Committee on Migratory Labor in 1957, which over the ensuing year oversaw a massive survey of migrants and migrant camps within the state. The result was lauded as the most complete factual survey ever accomplished by any state. This data became the basis for drafting a legislative packet of farm labor reform and regulation that was passed into law in 1959.

This was all done even before most Americans, outside of agricultural communities, were even aware of the problems faced by migrants. (Edward R. Murrow's documentary "Harvest of Shame" broadcast on CBS in 1960 is often credited with bringing the subject into general knowledge.) No federal laws existed and the few Eastern states that had passed migrant farmworker legislation came nowhere near Oregon's 1959 comprehensive package.

Once again, Ruben Contreras played a significant role in bringing Oregon's pioneering and landmark effort to fruition. In 1957–58, he served as a volunteer interviewer for the state-sponsored migrant surveys and later in '58, was appointed to the six-member steering committee responsible for drawing up a prospectus and nominating officers for the Oregon Committee on Migrant Affairs. The latter was the formal organization established to promote and otherwise rally for the passage of the 1959 migrant reform legislation. Other notable members of the steering committee were State Senator Carl Francis and Tom McCall, then a Portland news analyst but soon to become one of Oregon's most celebrated governors. Senator Francis represented the Yamhill County district and almost certainly knew Ruben personally by this time. In fact, it's very likely that Ruben's appointment to the steering committee came through the advice of the senator. Later, as a district judge, Francis expressed his gratitude for Ruben's commitment and efforts to help migrant workers.

Tom McCall was similarly struck by Ruben's keen understanding of and commitment to the subject. Tom and Ruben remained admirers of one another for years to come.

In 1966, when McCall was in the throes of his gubernatorial race, Ruben and Alberta Contreras were invited to a campaign event at a McMinnville country club. There McCall and his wife both spoke highly of Ruben and his contributions, and treated him and Alberta as old friends.

The great wave of optimism and momentum generated by the passage of the 1959 migrant farm laws unfortunately was undercut when the same issues continued to plague the migrant workers. Tom Current, another member of the steering committee for the Oregon Committee on Migrant Affairs, reflected that the massive efforts of the late '50s "made some difference but not nearly as much difference as we had expected. We got some standards in housing, but despite them, we still have some dreadful housing... We got some sanitary standards but

growers in many areas still don't supply water in the fields. In other words, we didn't cure the disease."

VALLEY MIGRANT LEAGUE

Another wave of momentum came in the mid-1960s following the passage of the national Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the provision of federal funds through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to grass roots organizations benefiting the poor. In Oregon, the Valley Migrant League (VML) was formed with the help of an OEO grant from a reorganization of the old Migrant Ministry. The VML served seven counties in the Willamette Valley, with a resource center established in each county.

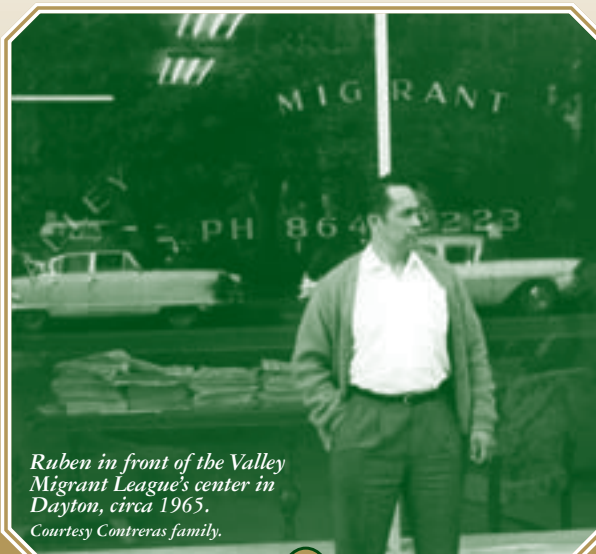
At the outset, in April 1965, Ruben was named assistant director of the VML district for Yamhill County (after a year, he was promoted to director). This was his first paid position as an advocate for the migrant's cause. Just prior to his hiring at VML, he had been working as a refrigeration technician at the Darigold Creamery in McMinnville. "I

started for less wages at VML," Ruben later recalled, "and did so because I believe in the same cause. As a member of a Spanish-American family, I have committed myself to changing the conditions whether working for VML or some other place."

Over the subsequent six years with the VML, Ruben overcame much frustration, confrontation and bureaucracy to bring about palpable changes that made life better for many migrant workers. Ruben saw himself as a connection for individuals to tap. "I am a door stop, to keep the door to hope and improvement open a little way... I help the workers get the credentials to operate in society." [...continued page 16]



After their committee work in 1958, Ruben and Tom McCall remained friends and admirers of each other's work. Courtesy Contreras family.



Ruben in front of the Valley Migrant League's center in Dayton, circa 1965. Courtesy Contreras family.

CONTRERAS (continued from page 15...) There was no such thing as a normal day, and rarely was a workday contained within the typical 9-to-5 framework. The VML center for Yamhill County was located in an old storefront in Dayton, not far from the Eola Village one of the largest migrant camps in the state. There, Ruben and his staff, which ranged from one to five people, helped those who came in with everything from filling out various forms, studying for the driver's test, finding employment, mitigating conflicts between workers and growers and ensuring that those needing health care were given proper attention. In addition at all hours of the day and night, Ruben was essentially on call to serve as a translator for Hispanic migrants who found themselves in trouble with the law.

Among Ruben's major accomplishments during his tenure with the Yamhill County VML were the opening of a medical clinic at Eola Village, and the hiring of a Hispanic, bilingual officer to the staff of the county sheriff's department (a position in which Lee Vasquez, quoted earlier, excelled). Both proved to be an enormous benefit for all migrants living and working in the area.

There were also many individual, more personal cases in which Ruben's compassion and leadership provided a solution, guidance, hope or combination of the three to ultimately make a difference. In just one example, a woman with an elementary education who was the mother of nine children was given assistance that allowed her to enroll in a continuing education program and later graduated from Linfield College with a bachelor's degree in teaching certificate. Two of her children then went on to get Ph.Ds.

Ruben always put a large focus on broadening the horizons and aspirations of migrant children. For example, he organized a bus trip for Eola Village children to come to Portland to see – and meet – the jazz great Louis Armstrong. On another trip, kids took a bus to Cannon Beach to experience what for many was their first encounter with the Pacific Ocean.

Remembering his days in 1965 working for Ruben as a VISTA volunteer, Jim Houser recently had this to say about his one-time boss: "He had a big heart, and he was very, very smart, and he knew a lot of people, and he knew *about* people. And so, he could get lots of things, social service things done. And [he] was just absolutely wonderful."

Ruben himself expressed, in an interview at Hotel Oregon this past October, his deep understanding of the migrant people he served. "Poverty is not about the money," he said. "It's about the inside, the feelings, and the way you love others that don't have what you have. Don't look at people as down here. You treat 'em like another relative that you haven't met. You know? So, the feeling of security, love, opportunity, those things are very important to the very needy. And when you transfer some of your feelings in that direc-

tion, with talk [that's presented] eye to eye, this dilutes all that attitude, and it brings the people to your eye level. And so they're willing to connect and to tell you their needs."

As the 1960s turned into the '70s, Ruben's inclusive approach of working within the existing system to build new bridges was viewed as being no longer a viable course by a rising radical element. This new group aligned itself with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union out of California. Ruben expressed his belief that such unionization would not be effective in Oregon because there weren't enough permanent Hispanic residents here to support it. He

also felt that the radicals' confrontational attitude was undoing many of the successes that Ruben and others had worked so long and hard to achieve among government agencies, growers and migrants. To the new way of thinking, Ruben's views were antiquated if not paternalistic. Either way, he was seen as impeding progress of the Chicano movement, and he and other nonmigrants were ousted from leadership positions at the VML.

Many people from all walks rallied in support of Ruben and his long record of commitment and effectiveness, but it didn't help to restore Ruben's status within the now politically charged popular movement. He didn't want to go that direction anyway. The outpouring of support for Ruben however did encourage him to continue doing all that he could to aide the migrant cause, both at the local and national levels. In 1972, for example, Ruben accepted an invitation to serve as a charter member of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Standards Advisory Committee on Agriculture, which convened in Washington, D.C. Fourteen years later, when Ruben was 65, he took on the position of Hispanic liaison officer for the Yamhill Community Action Program as a means

to better assist migrant farm workers with language and job skills. At the time of his hiring for the position, Ruben reiterated his prevailing philosophy, the same one that had guided him for four decades: "We are concerned about the needs of the people, period."

Ruben Contreras is now 85, but you can't tell that from his dark, dancing eyes and disarming smile, which remain as engaging as ever. Fortunately for his sake, though, his life has quieted down considerably from the pressure-filled, breakneck pace he once called normal. We were very pleased, then, that he, his wife of 58 years, Alberta, and Ruben Contreras, Jr., youngest of their five children, took the time to come by the Hotel Oregon, Ruben's one-time home away from home, and recount this remarkable chapter in Oregon history. 📖

Many thanks to the Contreras family, Jim Houser, Lee Vasquez and Kathy Tucker for sharing. Anyone with information or reminiscences about Ruben Contreras are encouraged to post them on the message board at MigrantMentor.com.



Ruben and Alberta, McMinnville residents going on 60 years, returned to Hotel Oregon last October for an interview and photographs.