



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Emilio Canales

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

DANTZIC: I'm Martha Stracener Dantzic, I'm here today with Emilio Canales and Carlos Canales. We're doing an interview on the Eastern Market. Today is April 8, 2009, and Carlos will help to translate at times if needed. So my first question for you, Mr. Canales, is when did you first come to Eastern Market?

E. CANALES: I came to work in the Eastern Market April 17, 1992. When I came to the Market didn't know too much about meat. I had one very, very nice friend, his name was John Kasacov. He was a butcher for four years in this area. He teach me everything, because in my country [ed: El Salvador] I have a store but we don't sell meat—different items, but no meat. When I come here, I need learn about meat because I know nothing.

DANTZIC: I was curious if you had any butcher experience.

E. CANALES: Yes. After six months or one year, I know more and more. Now I am at the Market almost 17 years, I know everything [laughter].

DANTZIC: I know that you have two brothers at the Market. Who was there first?

E. CANALES: Yes, two brothers. First came my brother Jose to the Market, I'm not sure, but he have about 25 years working at the Market. And the second brother, Jorge, he come one year after me in 1993. I go to the Market because the last owner of my stand—it won't sell. He put in the newspaper, nobody want. My brother Jose told me, "This guy, he want to sell this stand. You want to buy?"

DANTZIC: So the meat stand was for sale and nobody was wanting to buy it.

E. CANALES: Nobody. He had more than three months selling, nobody want it.

DANTZIC: Oh, that's interesting! That's a surprise to me.

E. CANALES: My brother, he know because he work in the same place, Eastern Market, and he tell me. I start to work April 17, 1992. I was worried when I started because I don't know nothing about meat! [laughter]

DANTZIC: So you bought the stand without having any experience with meat. As a business opportunity.

E. CANALES: But, the customers—very, very nice persons!

DANTZIC: And you mentioned you had a business in El Salvador. What kind of business was that?

E. CANALES: We have mostly a grocery, but we sell everything: we sell jewels [?], we sell all the groceries, but no meat. No meat, okay. When I came here my problem was no experience in meat. We keep any store in any country and here the same. Only the difference is the language. It's a lot different. But I have an idea how to work that.

C. CANALES: He raised cattle as well.

E. CANALES: In the Market, this Market, the best thing to keep the Market number one, the owner or the worker start to work seven in the morning to seven in the night. Every day, never close. Okay? Second: That community. They've been a support to the Market. [unintelligible]

DANTZIC: Could you say that again?

E. CANALES: The system of how we can live in the Market. The owner working completely full time.

C. CANALES: With the support of the community.

E. CANALES: Saturday, we start to work four o'clock in the morning to six pm in the afternoon. The rest of the days we work six to seven. But sometimes we are sick, sometimes we are tired, that's no problem, we need to work!

DANTZIC: Thank goodness you have a son with you, too!

E. CANALES: Now is better because he work with me, yes.

DANTZIC: So you mentioned John Kasacov. How did you meet him?

E. CANALES: My brother, Jose, he know him. And my brother tell him if he can teach me and he say yes.

DANTZIC: Was he the previous owner?

E. CANALES: No. He was only the customer in the Market.

C. CANALES: Very well-known in butcher shops around the area—Katz, Magruder's, Safeway. He worked in different butcher shops around the Market.

DANTZIC: So he was a friend of your brother's. Jose is resourceful, huh?

E. CANALES: Yes.

C. CANALES: He knows a lot of people. [laughter]

E. CANALES: I never forget when I told this guy about the stand. "I don't know the meat," I told him. He say, "No, no, no! Got it! Got it! Got it! I will bring help to you, no problem!" I never forget that. The guy come to work to me to teach me same the owner. He try to make a very, very good job. He teach me a lot. Now I work and he dead around three year ago. This guy come from Uzia [ed: uncertain of name; somewhere in Russia] after he grow up in Germany. When he was a 19-year-old, he come here.

DANTZIC: That's nice you had that support. So Carlos is your son? Do you have more children?

E. CANALES: Yes, I have two more. [?] is a young guy. When I come to this country, I carried three boys and my wife. The oldest was 14 years old, Jaime. Second is 9 years old, Sergio. And the last one, Carlos, was five years old. I came to work seven days a week because I fathered three boys. They went to school. My wife, she went to school too, for one year. I worked day and night, weekends, to earn money for support of all my family. But now Sergio went to school at Columbia in New York. Engineer. He worked over there because he finished school in 1999. Another son, Jaime, went to Virginia ...

C. CANALES: Commonwealth University

E. CANALES: ... and now is working for the federal government in DC. Only Carlos, he likes the Market.

DANTZIC: Well he does a great job.

E. CANALES: Yes, he likes the Market.

DANTZIC: He's always very good to me!

C. CANALES: That's right.

DANTZIC: Did your other sons work for you at other times?

E. CANALES: When they was going to school in Virginia, they come to work with me on the weekends, Saturday and Sunday. I think this is very, very good for me because I keep busy always then, no chance to go another place or ...

DANTZIC: Get in trouble!

E. CANALES: No, no, no. Only weekends working with me. Monday, back to school.

DANTZIC: So Carlos, you grew up as a young boy coming to work with your father on the weekend?

C. CANALES: We would get here at three or four in the morning. I would actually take naps underneath this table, there was a cabinet and I would just climb in and take a nap. Or I would take a nap in the van if it wasn't too cold out. I would take a nap in the van for a couple of hours before starting to work.

DANTZIC: So you guys still get to work that early in the morning?

C. CANALES: No, no. That was before—now we usually come in about six or seven in the morning, except for Saturdays it's around five in the morning.

DANTZIC: That's early! So how has your business changed over the last 17 years?

E. CANALES: When I start to work the thing is I don't know too much about the business in my stand. Okay, the customer is looking for the old, they see a different face. But little by little we talk. After that I have a lot of friends. But when I start, it was very hard. Yes, very hard. Now it's fine because all people, they know me. I know a lot of people too.

DANTZIC: Have you found that customers are wanting the same products? Different products?

E. CANALES: When I come to the Market, a lot of products we changed. Because the customers, they like very, very good meat. We sell a lot of sausage. When I start to work at my stand, the last owner had only two kinds of sausage, that's it. Now I have more than 30 kinds of sausage. Some sausage comes from California. And fresh sausage we make in the Market.

DANTZIC: You make your own sausage? I didn't know that.

E. CANALES: Yes. We make the chicken sausage, we make lamb sausage, we make pork sausage.

DANTZIC: So that's something that you learned to do over time. I've been one of those people who's asked you, "Is this grass-fed beef? Is this hormone-free?" Have you found a greater demand for that?

C. CANALES: Yes. Most of our meat is not hormone-free, but we are starting to carry a line of natural beef that's hormone-free. And there has been more demand for that.

DANTZIC: An interesting thing across the industry, right?

C. CANALES: Yes. Part of the problem with grass-fed is that it can be a little bit too tough. So having it grain or corn fed actually makes it more tender, makes it fattier. So we started carrying a line—maybe two years before the fire--we started carrying natural, I think. So we carry a couple of selections. It's grass and corn fed. Grass and grain fed. It is good natural beef.

DANTZIC: I remember you telling me. It's delicious. And so do you ever have to throw away food? Do you ever have extra meat that doesn't get sold? What do you do with that?

E. CANALES: We cut and we date a little bit. Keep the freezer light, not too much meat. In the weekend, we cut more because we sell more. Now when some meat is not okay, we put in the trash. No choice.

C. CANALES: Or we take it home. That works too. [laughter]

DANTZIC: So you mention that you are busier on the weekends than on the weekdays. Is that significant?

C. CANALES: Significant difference, yes. Most of the business is done on weekends. Most people have off on weekends so everybody does their grocery shopping on the weekends. Except for the people that come into the Market that actually prefer to come in daily or every couple of days and get what they need for the next couple of days or for that day. So it's kind of convenient to be in the middle of Capitol Hill and people can just walk over and get whatever they need for that day. But most of the business is done on weekends.

DANTZIC: Where do you get your customers? Are they Capitol Hill residents?

E. CANALES: No. We have a lot of neighbors, they come to buy, and a lot of people come from Maryland, from Virginia.

DANTZIC: They come just to come to Canales Quality Meats?

E. CANALES: Yes, we are people they know because we try to have a very good product and we have a very good reference.

DANTZIC: Do you do different things to attract customers?

E. CANALES: The thing we do is start with a good product customers like. Second, we do for customers very, very good service. Always talking with them, smiling. Some customers say, "I like to come here, Eastern Market, because I have a chance to talk. When I go to Safeway, nobody talks with me. I spend my whole day working, nobody says nothing. When I come in here, they say, 'Hi, how are you?' I start to talk to talk with them. If I have some problem, I live single in my home, I come to the Market to say ..."

DANTZIC: So true. How are the holidays different than the rest of the year? Do you find you have more business at that time?

E. CANALES: Holiday, yes. But the best time is November, December for Thanksgiving Day, Christmas, New Year's. Holiday is okay, too, but the best is in Christmas and November. Now this holiday coming is not bad, Easter. It's okay, but we sell a lot too.

DANTZIC: Has there been turf competition with other vendors in the Market?

E. CANALES: I don't think so because usually they have their own products, I have my own product. When I carry some item I try to not make it competition with nobody. Because my stand is a small one, I don't have big room to put more items. I take check of my neighbor, if they don't have it, I try to get it. Okay.

DANTZIC: There's seems to be a real gentleman's agreement among vendors. I think it's good to have two meat choices, two chicken choices, that kind of thing.

First, how did you first hear about the fire?

E. CANALES: The fire was a Sunday night. My brother Jose woke up early Monday. He watched TV and he saw on the news and he called me and told me, "It's on the news—the market have fire now." And I saw the news. They were talking about showing the Market with fire.

I told Carlos, "Wake up. We need to go to the Market." We come here. But I was thinking, when my brother told me, it's only the trash fire, that's it. Okay? But when I come here, oh man! My surprise was when I saw the whole market ... all the firemen, the whole market, the fire. I was surprised. But I like it when I saw some neighbors. They come to tell, "If you need help, I can be help!" Another thing is, around 5:30, the mayor was walking around the Market, looking. And when he told all the vendors we need to make a meeting today. I think it was at eleven in the morning on the same day.

C. CANALES: The next day.

E. CANALES: The next day. We make a meeting and the government says they have plans to fix one temporary building, put that to work. He told they had two places. One is the plaza close to the Metro, and the other the school. They say. "In the plaza we can start to work tomorrow."

C. CANALES: Very soon.

E. CANALES: "But in the school, maybe we need two or three weeks waiting for the neighbors," what they say. We tell to the DC government, "We will wait three weeks, because we want it more at this place because it's in front of the Market. No big traffic, we wait for this place at the school." He make a

meeting with all the neighbors of the Hine School to talk about the use of the place in that school for the new Market. A lot of people, but everybody they want the Market in the school. No opposition. Nothing.

DANTZIC: Everybody agreed.

E. CANALES: Everybody. Yes. They started to work—the fire was April 30, I think. And finally we are working in that new building in only about four months, I think. I was working outside after the fire. I rent one truck for to keep the meat, refrigeration in the truck. Am selling very, very few meats outside. But I got help for the truck, but the neighbors they bring help to me too to work outside.

DANTZIC: The Capitol Hill Community Foundation?

E. CANALES: Yes.

DANTZIC: They were just a conduit for funds that the neighbors gave to help the merchants stay in business. So you guys rented a refrigeration truck and were outside for those months. But business wasn't as good during those months? A tough few months?

E. CANALES: Because we don't have everything. We have a few meats.

DANTZIC: Just a few. But you had customers, people came?

E. CANALES: Yes. They came to buy, yes. They came, I think, for support to me.

DANTZIC: And when the temporary building opened, has business become normal? Is it better?

E. CANALES: Better than the old Market, no. Because in the new building we don't have parking for customers. In the old building, we have it. In the new building, before the people was driving around looking for parking to the Market, but if they don't have the parking, they left. But now it's okay because they are fixing the school place for parking for the customer.

DANTZIC: That was a great idea, yeah.

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TAPE 1/SIDE 2

DANTZIC: What do you think about the new Market? And the second life, when you move back?

E. CANALES: I think it's okay because always the problem is for the parking. When we move back to the old building, we have parking for customers. And the people, the customers tell me "I want to see the old Market, how it looks!"

DANTZIC: The building itself.

E. CANALES: Yes. Because when we started to work in the new Market it looked very nice, everything new, everything new, looked very, very clean. I hope when we start in the old Market it will look the same.

DANTZIC: Because the temporary building was, I hate to say, much cleaner, but the old Market had a reputation for not being as clean, right?

E. CANALES: That was the problem, was too old. Was too old. Now they are fixing everything new.

DANTZIC: Will you do anything different in the new Market? Will you have more space? Less space?

E. CANALES: No. The same room. The difference now is the A[ir] C[onditioning] is coming for that new Market. Before we don't have it. Sometimes the weather was too hot in the Market.

C. CANALES: Our own sauna.

DANTZIC: [laughs] I didn't live on Capitol Hill at that time, but I do remember. I would visit.

C. CANALES: It was warm in the summer times.

E. CANALES: ... the same place for everybody.

DANTZIC: And people will be in the same spots they were before?

C. CANALES: Yes. Everybody will be in their same location that they were before the fire. And have the same square footage as before.

DANTZIC: Do you have any dreams or other plans for the Market for the future?

E. CANALES: My plan is always to keep the meat, that it always be good meat. This is my dream, keep it nice meat always. Okay? Another thing is I like is to be nice to the people, to bring very good service always. But my plan is to always keep better, better, better items. Because my stand is a small one, I don't carry too much, but my few items I have I always try to keep very good.

DANTZIC: And they are!

C. CANALES: And they are. [laughter]

DANTZIC: Was the construction on Seventh Street something you were concerned about? Did you want them to close it?

E. CANALES: First, I was thinking about the customer because the customer used the front of the market for parking. But now they are fixing more parking at the school. I think the problem was fixed.

DANTZIC: With the new management. I guess there was a management company that managed the Market through December, and now the city has taken over. I guess I've just heard recently that the city's going to continue to manage the Market. Do you have any thoughts on that?

E. CANALES: I don't know. When I come to work to the Market I saw only two managers with the Market. First was the Glasgows. After was Eastern Market Venture. Now it's the government, Barry [Margeson]. But for my point is now we have better. Now because this guy is working every day with our permission, asking "How are you, how is it, how is that?" Every day. Saturday mornings, 5:00, he is outside on the street working with vendors outside. Soon, inside. It's very nice.

DANTZIC: I have to say it's been great to see such involvement. When you mention the outside vendors, do you feel like the outside vendors have an impact on the inside merchants and vice versa?

E. CANALES: I don't think so.

DANTZIC: In a mutually beneficial way?

E. CANALES: Yes, we have it because people come to look outside, look inside. People come, they have plans to buy something inside the Market. But they went out, they look at something, they like it they buy it too. I think the help is the same. We help outside. And the outside, they help inside, too. Yes.

DANTZIC: I've asked what were your dreams. Do you have any fears? Are you concerned about anything for the future of the Market?

C. CANALES: Besides the fire ...

E. CANALES: I don't know, really. I think always my point is if all merchants in the Market make a very good job, we keep happy to the neighbors. If the neighbor is happy with the Market, I think we don't have a problem. But we make a wrong way to work neighbors don't like, soon we have complaint with the neighbor. My point is we need to be sure everything we do is okay, that people will like, don't want to complain. This is my point. When we're working and respect the line to the Market—what item you can sell—what you want to do inside, there's no problem. When I come to the Market, I remember I told you the last owner had only two kinds of sausage. And some customers they tell me, "Why you don't carry more sausage from California? I need to order this sausage by mail." Okay. When I start to carry more sausage, the neighbor was happy with me. Because they say, "Oh, man, I don't get it now by mail."

DANTZIC: That's good. Do you think that the fire was a blessing in disguise?

E. CANALES: When I was my first week after the fire, I was very worried what happened. But when the government take control, everything was okay. But the only things better after the fire are what they are fixing now. If the Market didn't have a fire, maybe they never fix! [laughter] We will have a very good place to work, yes.

DANTZIC: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the Market or your experience?

E. CANALES: Only I can say one time more to the government, to the neighbors, thank you for all your help.

DANTZIC: I think everybody's really glad to keep the Market alive—and you guys are clearly a large part of the Market, your family. I guess maybe I'll ask this, since you have a unique situation—is it fun to have your brothers there in the Market?

E. CANALES: No, it's okay, because before we don't talk too much because Jose lives in Maryland, Jorge in Virginia. Not too close. Now we see every day, we talk every day. And sometime a brother need help and another brother will help.

DANTZIC: Do you guys ever share employees across your business?

C. CANALES: Not really.

E. CANALES: No.

DANTZIC: Your businesses are very independent and separate.

E. CANALES: Yes, everybody have their own workers.

DANTZIC: And do Jorge and Jose employ anybody else in your family? Do you have any cousins that work down there?

C. CANALES: No cousins. Everybody that's in the family will come in and give a helping hand. Our mother, our brothers, my uncles' wives will come in and help them, but no cousins or anybody else.

DANTZIC: So none of those young women who work for Jose

C. CANALES: No they're not his daughters.

E. CANALES: Before my sons worked with me. And my wife. But when my sons left for school, I need help working for me because I need help. Now I have two.

DANTZIC: Well, you should be very proud. You have such a good business, and all your employees are great. But I think Carlos does a great job! He's the one who always helps me.

C. CANALES: I try to help everyone.

DANTZIC: I think that's it!

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW