

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Gloria Cantu

Interviewee: Gloria Cantu

Corpus Christi, TX, April 21, 2013

**For the most accurate representation of the interview, see the audio recording held at the South Texas Archives at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, as the process of transcription can contain errors or not fully reflect voice intonations, pauses, and other factors that may convey important meanings. The transcript might not reflect the precise phonetic meaning of what was said in all cases. For instance, what sounds like "mm hmm" might be transcribed as "uh huh," etc.*

M.M: Okay, when were you born?

G.C: December the 31st, 1936...Here in Corpus Christi.

M.M: And how was your house like or where did you...How did it look...Where...Did you live in a ranch? Did you live in a city? How was your surroundings?

G.C: I would say it was out in the country because as far as I can remember it was a long s-s-street with woods all around it and at the end of the street there was a (minor stutter)...a little house and that's where we would live. And we lived there for a long time.

M.M: No one lived beside you? No other houses were around you?

G.C: N-n-n-n-no, not when we got there. We were the first ones in-in-in that little...(trails off and shrugs to signal that she didn't know what else to say.)

M.M: And how did you get to school?

G.C: We would walk a long ways through the woods to get to the first end of the street cause that was the main street and a bus, a city bus, would come and pick the kids up. There were s-s-some-s-s houses but they were hidden in-in the um in the woods. So we would all get together at the same place, there was a little tiny store, and we would all wait for the city bus and then her would take us...I would say about... four miles away from this place. They would take us to a-a-a school where all the teachers were white and they didn't wanted us to talk Spanish. We didn't know any better, so they would usually hit us in the head or on the hands with a ruler so ugh we would try to do the best and try to learn how to speak English because we didn't know any better.

M.M: So is that where you learned English, in school?

G.C: You had to learn English in school. Yes. (giggles while stating answer)

M.M: When did, um, kids usually start working?

G.C: Well in those days as soon as you would get, I don't remember whether it was seventeen or eighteen, it was the law that you have to go to school so as soon as-s-s we-wo-we would get, I would say sixteen, right away my dad would always try to find us a job, so we would go to work a-ann-d the work wasn't s-s-something big, it was just like a-a little tine store, where they sale a lot of little things like costs ten cents, fifteen cents. But by that time my dad had a little old old truck and he would take us to the city to look for a job.

M.M: And if ye, the kids did not go to school and they broke the law and they didn't go to school, what would happen to the fathers?

G.C: They would fine them. (Unsure if G.C said fine or find)

M.M: Fine them or find them? With mm, fine them as in a ticket or...or find them?

G.C: I got no idea but my dad would always send us to school until we were able to, old enough to go to work because we were too many mmm...

M.M: D-did you like school?

G.C: I did, I loved school and I was the only one that went ahead and go to school. I got to the ninth grade, all the other ones as soon as they were, like I said I don't know he age, sixteen or seventeen, they would go a-a-and work but I stayed in school more because I was real petite and um they wouldn't believe how old I was so my other two sisters that were s-s younger than I, they would go to work, so I kept on going to school, which I loved school. And I was the only one that learned how to speak better English. I still don't know (giggle in background) but I'm trying my best.

M.M: So, um, do you remember holidays? How were holidays for you and your family?

G.C: We never had holiday. We didn't know what holidays wa-were. We didn't nn-know, even when we were going to school, we didn't know about holidays.

M.M: And why was that?

G.C: I guess because we were poor and we didn't have...I don't remember, I just remember that, ugh, sometimes when the year ummm a Salvation Army truck or tiny bus, I don't remember, would come with lot of packages real...like gift wrap, and they would bring us a lot of gifts and lot of boxes with-with food and vegetables and food a-nnn-d well we were glad to see it and we enjoy it, but we didn't know what it was for, we really didn't. We were too young and we were very naïve.

M.M: How was, um, how was...who...where would you get your groceries from? I know you didn't have an H-E-B, where would you get your groceries from? Do you remember?

G.C: That I don't remember because bes-befor-or-or-e m-my sister start working, they were the first ones to work. I don't even remember us having a car. The car came real-l-l, after we were teenagers, the car came, so I really don't remember-r. I knoooow my dad would go to a little tiny store on Belton street and that was the only store there was and we would buy everything at that tiny store. Everything was real-real cheap to buy.

M.M: Now do you know anyone who, um, did cotton picking, other than Blas Cantu (deceased husband of Gloria Cantu), um-who-did you know anyone personally who did cotton picking, like any friends?

G.C: That would go to school with me?

M.M: Mm-hmm.

G.C: Mmm-no, not that I can remember.

M.M: No one in your family had to do cotton picking?

G.C: Nnn-no. Nope, no my-my

M.M: So you just...

G.C: Inside my family...

M.M: You just worked in the-the stores?

G.C: City.

M.M: The stores in the city?

G.C: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

M.M: Okay. Um, when did ch-when was Blas Cantu born? Do you remember the-do you know the year?

G.C: April the third (counting fingers) 1941.

M.M: And where did he live?

G.C: He live in Corpus Christi.

M.M: Did he live in Molina?

G.C: Uu-huh.

M.M: And Molina was what you considered to be a ranch?

G.C: It start getting bigger. And then we had two more streets and a lot of houses and that's how come we get to meet each other because he was at the beginning of the street and I was at the end of the street, where we-where we use to live (M.M: Mm-hmm (background)) over there (points).

M.M: How many people lived in his household?

G.C: Together with us? With my family and my kids? Or him by himself?

M.M: No, just him and his family like his brothers and sisters and his mom and dad?

G.C: Oh-no there were-there were a lot of them (counting). There were nine kids, my mother-in-law and father-in-law, but then they weren't the only ones living in that house because when they grew up, everybody had lotta kids and they would all-ll live with us in that tiny house.

M.M: So, um, more families lived with him-his family? How many more families?

G.C: Oh my pp-maybe about five and then all that family had more kids, but they would go-they would go out and pick cotton. And then in-in-in the season where it's time to pick berries, strawberries, apples, orange, they would all leave-they would all leave, almost all year round, they would leave so when they would leave, we were just my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, Blas, me, and my three kids cause...

M.M: And this is after your married?

G.C: Yes.

M.M: They would...

G.C: Yes.

M.M: So, um, whenever you were married and you had kids, you lived with the mother-in-law...your mother-in-law and father-in-law?

G.C: Yes. Mm-hmm.

M.M: So were there more other families living with you?

G.C: NN-No. Not when I-after I had my three kids- No, only my o-o-only my three kids. Well, I had four but my last one came real, real late. After-after seven ugh seven years, I had four kids and we live with my father-in-law and my mother-in-law.

M.M: S-so, um, the families would-it would be one family one season, another family a different season?

G.C: No, they would all go together.

M.M: They would allll- go together to pick cotton and...

G.C: Uu-huh.

M.M:...if it wasn't cotton, it would be fruits?

G.C: Yes. Uu-huh.

M.M: So or whatever the season was...

G.C: Was

M.M:...bringing

G.C: Yes. Mm-hmm.

M.M: Okay and what would they do with the cotton or the fruit?

G.C: What they do?

M.M: What would they do with the cotton and the fruit and the fruit that they picked?

G.C: Well its just like picking cotton. You pick it up, they weigh it, they-they put your name and-and ugh tell you how many pounds you picked and then ugh and that's everyday-everyday and at the end of- in Saturday they would pay you-they would pay you as much pounds of cotton you would pick. Okay, so ugh that was during cotton picking season but then maybe in three more months or in a month, its time to go pick the orange, they would go to Oregon or wherever the oranges come from and they would stay over there. The who-ole gang-the whole family, about three or four families that would travel all the way over there to go pick oranges. Then and it's the same thing, they pick the oranges from the tree, they put it in boxes, and then they would pay em by how many boxes they put-how many oranges they put in the box, and then they would pay em. Depending on how much they were-they were paying for the box and that would... and all the season of a-a-oranges, they would stay there. Then it was time to go maybe back where the strawberries are in-in Florida or California. They would all go over there because you know that's-that's the way they would make their living.

M.M: So, um, did Blas, when he was married, did he do cotton picking? Was that his job?

G.C: Part-time.

M.M: Part-time?

G.C: Part-Time. Yes.

M.M: Okay, so what was his job and then what would-when would he do cotton picking?

G.C: He was working for the city department, here in Corpus. Sanitation department, he was a truck driver (pen falls and makes loud sound in background).

M.M: And then, ww...after that he would do cotton or...

G.C: Yes.

M.M: ...how would that work out?

G.C: ...he would get out at three o'clock and then he would come pick me up and my kids. And we had o have extra money cause they didn't pay him too much, so he would pick me up and we would go. I would stay under the truck with my little kids and then he would pick cotton. He was a good cotton picker, real good cotton picker.

M.M: On average, how fast did he pick cotton? How many pounds did he get?

G.C: Well the people, my brother-in-law would take in the morning would hardly make a hundred pounds a day. And he would go at three-thirty and by six, he had a hundred pounds by himself so he was a good cotton picker.

M.M: So...

G.C: Very, very good.

M.M: So what took a person a whole day, it would take him only three hours to pick?

G.C: No in-in the job, because Blas had been doing that since he was a little boy. He was born like that, going from street to street. You know? You know what I mean?

M.M: Yeah. So he was already use to it?

G.C: He was and he knew-he knew how to... my mother-in-law ya-would do that too. She was a good cotton picker, real good and she was old.

M.M: Do you remember seeing other people there, picking cotton, whenever Blas would go pick cotton?

G.C: Well yes all his family were there because they would take the whole...mmm...I don't know how you call it, the whole field-the whole field, and it was the whole family so I don't know how it worked all-all-all I could remember is going with him because he just wanted me to go and when we would go my mother-in-law and my father-in-law were there working too.

M.M: So, um, where were these cotton fields located?

G.C: Ohhh here in Corpus. I remember-r-r, they call it the-the Gray Ranch and it was in highway nine, highway forty-four, here in Corpus.

M.M: Was it called the Gray Ranch or did it have a Spanish name cause I remember you telling me it was a Spanish name?

G.C: Well yes it was, ugh, el Rancho Plomo (English:the Gray/Lead Ranch), and that's where my husband was born, Blas was born there.

M.M: So he was already born where that cotton field was, so that's why it came naturally to him?

G.C: Yes-s-s.

M.M: Did, um, your kids ever have to pick cotton?

G.C: Nooo, they didn't know what it was.

M.M: Whenever you would go to a cotton field and you saw his family there, um, was it all his siblings that were picking cotton, even his parents?

G.C: All of em.

M.M: And his siblings', also spouses? Were and...

G.C: Si (English: Yes)

M.M: So you were the only spouse that wasn't picking cotton?

G.C: Yeah.

M.M: And your kids...

G.C: I wasn't use to it. I-I never did that.

M.M: Were you considered rich in their eyes?

G.C: Yes.

M.M: Even though you didn't have much money, you were still considered rich?

G.C: Comparing to them, yes, because I could see how hard they worked and we would have the same things.

M.M: Um, would the ss, um, the siblings, like your nephews and nieces, on Blas Cantu's side, sis they have to also ugh pick cotton?

G.C: Yeah.

M.M: Did you see the little kids picking cotton as well?

G.C: Yes, yeah but they would hide when they would see that-the sheriff (M.M: Oh, okay(background)) they would go-they would go to the fields. And if they would see kids, ugh, I really don't know what they did to the parents, but the kids would remember. They would hide under the trees or under the cotton-n-n plants. (M.M: Mm-hmm (background)) They would hide under the cotton plants cause Blas use to tell me that-that they he-he-he had to get...they would tell em something was watching out for the-for the sheriff and when they would see that car, the truck coming they would, you know...

M.M: Hide

G.C:...yes they would tell em "hide because he's coming" or they would take the kids. I don't know where, I can't I-I-I don't remember because I wasn't there at that time but he use to tell me that.

M.M: Because it was law for them to-o-o-o go to school?

G.C: Yes. They want em for them to go pick cotton.

M.M: So Blas Cantu never went to school?

G.C: No, he never learned how to talk English and he never learned, well he did learn but he didn't-he didn't know how to write either.

M.M: When did he learn to talk English?

G.C: When he start working for er-a-a carpet- a carpet ugh layer company because he would do hobs for ugh rich people (M.M: Mm-Hmm.(background)) and ugh he was very smart because the-the boss would give um-ugh-a job real, real hidden on the ranch where there were a lot a pretty houses and they would-he would- they would give him a map. And they would tell him how to get to that-to the -to that ranch just by-by drawing a map. How he was gonna get out from Corpus, whi-what road to take, where he would turn. There's a big sign, he would-they would tell him, there's a big sign. Where there's a cow that you go straight and there's the house. And he was real smart and the people that lives in that house is rich and white, so somehow he got it to learning how to get in contact with them.

M.M: So what grade did you stop going to school?

G.C: Ninth grade.

M.M: Ninth grade, and that's whenever you started working?

G.C: Yes-s-s.

M.M: So they didn't see you as petite anymore (laugh).

G.C: Because I wasn't- I wasn't eighteen, nineteen, twenty. I think I was twenty years old already.

M.M: Okay, I-I have a question about your, um, your household. You said that your grandfather had lived with you. You had previously told me that before this interview. That you grandfather had lived with you and he would bake or...

G.C: He was a baker.

M.M: Explain to me what you mean by that.

G.C: A baker is a person that knows how to make sweet bread or-r-r...

M.M: Pan de dulce (English: sweet bread)?

G.C: ...bolos (English: bread rolls), pan de dulce(English: sweet bread), or-r-r pan frances (English: French bread). And my dad made him, um, a little room where he would bake-he would bake the sweet bread and then my dad would go and sale it. I don't remember where he would sale it because we didn't have houses where we could see but he knew how to get around the place where we live.

M.M: So that's what your dad's job was? That's how he provided for the family? He would make- he would go sale the bread that your grandfather would make?

G.C: At that time, yes-s-s cause I don't remember when we moved to the country. I don't remember where he would work. I really don't.

M.M: I have another question. Um,(what question was I gonna ask (background)) I was gonna ask you about your mom, how she would make vitamins, how it was different, how they didn't have vitamins back then. What did your do to prevent you from being sick? Or what kind of remedies did she have?

G.C: Well if we would have a sore throat, she would um...(doing signals because couldn't remember word)

M.M: Teas? Menthaladum (vapor rub)?

G.C: No. You do it like that (still doing signals)

M.M: Rub?

G.C: Rub. She would rub menthaladum (vapor rub) on-on-on your-on my-on your throat, here on the neck (M.M: Mm-hmm). And all on the chest and then he would-she would put us hot little towel here and then on the bottom of your feet and we would get well. If we would have diarrhea, they would give us umm mansania (herb) we-she had lotta plants mansania (herb), albacar (herb), ummm, lot of herbs that-that she would plant. And ugh we had ugh that we would all love and we still do its sacate de limon (lemon grass) and it's a tea and its so good. And you, when your gonna drink it, you put pet milk on it and it tastes so good. So that was our drink cause we didn't have any cokes. We didn't have any nothing that we have now, but it was something so good to drink.

M.M: Okay, my last question is...Tell me the differences from then and now? How was your life back then and how is it now? Like the electricity...

G.C: Well its very, very different. We didn't see any-we didn't see any nothing bad about it because in that-in those days when wo-would in the country, we didn't have light. We would have to buy, ugh, we had some lamps. My dad would buy, um, kerosene or asathia. I don't remember what it was, anyway, he would put it on the-on-on the lamp and light it-and light it, and we would have light. And, ugh, we didn't even have water. We have to go, I think we would have to walk about fifty feet to go get water from a pump. But we never did see it like how important it is right now. It was so simple. And at night time, when we didn't have kerosene, with the moon, the moon light, it was so good. We would sleep on the porch, all of us real small, we would sleep on the-on the porch and it was so satisfying. I wish we would be living at that time...for sure...oh yes something so wonderful.