

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Hilda Tagle

Interviewee: Hilda Tagle

Interviewer: Mark Robbins

Corpus Christi, TX, July 11, 2015

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MARK ROBBINS: Okay. Well this is -- the date, oh my gosh, July 11, 2015. I'm Mark Robbins and if you don't mind just for the record stating your name and --

HILDA TAGLE: -- Hilda Tagle.

MARK ROBBINS: And I thought we'd begin, if you don't mind, just mentioning where your from and a bit about your family background as it relates to this project or any memories that come to mind.

HILDA TAGLE: I am the daughter of Manuel and Dolores Tagle. My parents are both from South Texas. My mother grew up around Driscoll and Corpus Christi. My dad was born in Runge, Texas and -- or so his delayed birth certificate says that it was obtained in 1955 after my youngest brother was born.

And the reason I mentioned is because -- as a federal judge, I've had a lot of trials involving the question of where somebody was born and the fact that, you know, the question of birth is questioned by the government if it's not a contemporaneous birth registration, a contemporaneous birth. But in any event, according to my dad's birth certificate he was born

in Runge, Texas.

His grandfather -- his father died very young, but so I never knew him, but his father was baptized in Austin, Texas. I'm assuming that he was born in Texas so I would be the fourth generation Texan through him.

But my mother's parents were from a town called Candela in the State of Coahuila, Mexico. My grandparents migrated here probably around the turn of the century, the 1900's. So I was basically -- I was born in Corpus Christi, but I was raised in Robstown, Texas.

I have four younger brothers; Manuel, Jerry, Joe and Jimmy. And we've all remained here basically in South Texas. The farthest north that any of us have lived is, was Dallas, you know, or Commerce where I went to undergraduate school or Denton where I got my Master's. Pretty much we've been here, you know, historically.

Now, my mother -- my parents were migrant workers when they were young, but, you know, World War II was the turning point for a lot of people in this area, not enough, but a lot of people. So my dad was in the -- was at the time a new branch of the military; The US Army Air Force. Served in World War II.

And my mother, while my dad was in the military, went to beauty school. She decided to go to beauty school and so that was what the point in which the cycle was broken basically for all practical purposes. Although they had moved to Corpus Christi earlier than that. She had worked at a cleaners and that kind of thing, but to have a way to earn a living for herself she went to beauty school.

And that's why when I was 15 years-old, I graduated from Robstown High School in 1965. But when I was 15 years-old, my mother insisted that I go to beauty school because she felt that it would be a good way for me to have some kind of way to earn a living that would keep me out of the fields. And, so as a dutiful daughter, in spite of the fact that I didn't like the idea of doing hair, you know, got licensed as a beautician at the age of 16.

But my dream was always to go to college. And so -- it was not a dream that my

parents discouraged, but my mother's frame of reference was very limited. Although my mother herself was brilliant, she could have been an engineer easily. She was an abogada sin libros; a lawyer without books, you know, without legal training. She was really an amazing woman, very intelligent.

So anyway, that was her way to ensure that I would have a way to earn a living in case I wound up widowed, divorced with children to support.

So my memories of working in the fields, personally, was making bundles when my parents -- I don't know, in a fifth of a busman's holiday I guess, decided to go to New Home (sic) in West Texas, north in West Texas. I think it's probably close to Lubbock. When I was properly in the first or second grade and because my dad's older brother, Claudio Tagle, who had a very large family, they followed. They were migrant workers for many, many years and I don't know they just got this idea, crazy idea to go up there.

I remember it was winter time, so maybe it was during Christmas break or something but, no, I guess maybe not because I remember they enrolled me in school there for a period of time. Maybe my dad was between jobs or something and I don't know why my mother agreed to it because she always had a way to earn a living herself.

But for whatever reason, the whole family, my whole family went with my uncle and his family to go pick cotton in New Home (sic), Texas. And as little kids, you know, even though you're too small to lug one of those huge sacks, what your job is to pick the cotton and leave it in bunches so that, you know, probably the woman would come along and pick, and pick it up and although, like I said, I didn't do it a lot, you know, it was mostly my brothers who did it during summertime when they got are older, just as a summer job.

I remember that those, those cotton bolls, they hurt, you know, they're pointed. And when the cotton is already opened up, the hull -- the husk I guess, is hard and so it really hurts and if you don't have gloves, your hands get cut into because of all the hard husk or hull rather. And I remember, like (inaudible) I've always, you know -- I've been amazed at people

who picked cotton in that hot sun, pulling that huge long sack, that -- I mean especially the strong women and of course the men and, you know, how difficult that work had to have been, you know.

I was thinking -- so funny, because when I married Luis, whose name I've given you to interview, I remember driving -- of course, this would have been in the 90's or 80's -- and his sister, we were driving past the cotton fields and she said something, "Oh, boy that cotton looks so good to pick." And I'm thinking, why would anybody would romanticize that, you know and fondly like they had a real desire to pick cotton.

But I mean, it was such brutal work that I just remember -- even, you pick cotton in two ways, limpio or with the hull or the husk. So, of course, you got paid more if you had to pick it out of the husk, hull. So when you picked it with the hull you picked it like this, you know pull it, yank out, yank it off. And so the saca's, those huge old cotton sacks, you couldn't lie down and on them and be comfortable, they looked tempting but they had all of these things sticking up, sticking not all the way through but the canvas was pretty thick fabric, but, you know, because it was just, I mean a difficult plant. Just like they were talking about strawberries and tomatoes, you know, that certainly was a difficult crop to pick.

I remember one time going to the airport there was a mural, I don't know if it was a WPA mural, but it was on the airport here in Corpus Christi and when, my mother was with me, she said -- oh, because it was a scene that depicted all the different areas of economy in South Texas in Corpus Christi area, like the oil and the cotton and all that. And my mother said, "You know, the person who painted that picture never picked cotton." And I looked at the cotton plant and it was painted like -- the cotton bolls were like at the end -- like you see a rose bud? You know, it was just a stem sticking straight up. And I said, I thought, "Mother you're right. That person never picked cotton." Because you would know it hangs down, you know, rather than sticks straight up like a rosebud.

But, in any event -- like I said, my brothers were the ones who -- especially

Manuel -- who you told me you spoken to a couple of years ago.

MARK ROBBINS: Yeah

HILDA TAGLE: -- and Jerry, but a lot of people in our neighborhood, in Robstown, la calle Jefferson, Jefferson Street which was only two blocks long, just about everybody there, you know, went to pick cotton. I was -- like I said, I was the nerd, and I was in my room reading so I got spared that my -- being the only girl, I think is what the reason I was able to have the luxury of not picking cotton.

Well, my mother didn't want me to pick cotton and that's why she sent me to beauty school. But in any event, my brothers did and I just remember early in the morning hearing the sound of the truck, you know, announcing that they're there and for you to come out, you know, to come out -- because they were ready to pick you up.

And so one time -- another memory I have about that memory is that when I was at North Texas, I was already working on my Master's and my brothers came to see and they got there probably like the middle of the night and we stayed up. We got up and to visit and so by -- we just kept talking and predawn somebody, somebody's horn honk outside, this was in Denton, and so Jerry, my brother Jerry's response was "se me rompio la saca!" In other words, the sack is torn so I'm not going. That's what -- when you were -- he was gonna skip work, that was your excuse, that your sack is broke, was torn and so, you know, that's why you couldn't go to work, of course, you know -- but it was just so funny that was such an automatic response to him.

Years later when he was already in high school, but you know -- well he's not the that much younger than I am, so I guess, yeah, I was already in graduated school, so we would have already graduated from high school probably or getting ready to.

But anyway, I told you also about my mother. Like I said, she was always quite the

entrepreneur. She was very brilliant, she was always looking for ways to make ends meet, financially. So I've always believed that my mother, mother -- one of her entrepreneurial ventures was what later evolved into the Roach-Coach. You know what a Roach-Coach is?

MARK ROBBINS: No.

HILDA TAGLE: Well, when you go to work sites, it's now what has segued into gourmet food trucks. But, you know, those Roach-Coaches are the places, I mean the things that go to work sites, and they sell food right there at the work site. Well, my mother was what -- I credit her for being the original, originator of the roach coach, because she would go buy snacks and soft drinks and ice down the soft drinks in a big old tub that she would have in back, in the trunk of the car, ice down, and then she would go to the fields and sell these ice cold drinks, you know, and snacks. Nobody else was doing that. Like I said, that why I'm saying, she was the original, originator of that, the food trucks it all start with my mother -- so and make it convenient.

I told you on my e-mail about Luis and -- being his family was a large family that they migrated for, for a large part of his life. When he and I were married, if I made some refried beans, he would make a taco flatten it and put it in refrigerator. Because he said he enjoyed eating a cold fried bean taco because it reminded him of his youth. Because that's what they would eat in the field but by the time they would get to eat the lunch, it was already cold. You know what was cold was hot and what had been hot was now cold. So I just that was so funny that, that was a sensory, a memory that he was nostalgic about and when he could have had a fried bean taco that was hot he made sure it was cold when he ate it because that would take him back to those days, you know.

La Epoca De Oro and I told you about that, that song that I found the CD for -- Senator Gonzalo Barrientos, because one time he and I were talking about -- the fact that he had

picked cotton around Robstown and he was reminiscing about going to town and all that stuff and that was exactly what that song talks about it; somebody reminiscing about being a child, and buying popcorn or pa-corn as he says in the song for five cents and going to the movies and all of that stuff and making it -- Epoca De Oro translated as epic of gold. Like the golden age in Spain, but when in fact it was a very hard time.

The [Robstown] labor camp might have been there but it was still very basic, it was not certainly any, you know, anything to be that proud of but it was a roof over their heads and hopefully running water outside even if it wasn't inside as opposed to having to carry the water, you know.

So, you know, like the speakers in the panel were saying yesterday, I mean earlier today rather, you have so many memories, the time has dulled the suffering and the deprivation but you learned a lot about that, you know, and I would -- ideally as someone who goes, has that kind of experience you prevail and you use that experience to make you strong rather than letting it beat you down, you know.

And so like I said I've always been, I've always considered myself very fortunate that I never had to work because it would have been very easy for my life to have been a totally different, one or it could have been like the --- you know, our -- the panelist before still moved on and prevailed, but, you know, like being what it is.

Oh, I have to tell you, speaking about -- one of the questions about, oh what was it, Spanish speakers versus English. One of the times, one of the memories my ex-husband talked about was traveling up there, to go to -- los trabajos, they called them, los trabajos. He said they would travel on a convoy, because you know everybody's car or vehicle was barely making it, you know, bad tires, bad whatever, just didn't have any money to have any dependable transportation so they traveled in convoys. And, but he said -- this was I guess we were on our way to Fredericksburg for something, for my nephew, the nephew I raised, and Luis was telling me about las lomas de Fredica. Which -- that's what he knew them as

with when he was little. And what he figured out was it's the Fredericksburgs hills, the hills around Fredericksburg but they were not, I mean they were not montanas but that's what they call lomas, like huge hills, but they had enough of a grade that was it dangerous to travel at night because something could happened to those car; they were barely, you know, making it, you know, up the hill and all of that. So that's why they traveled in convoys.

And they would actually -- they would spend the night in their vehicles rather than cross the las lomas de Fredica at night. Because also, you know, the, how narrow I'm sure the road was back in the -- the roads were not as probably as good as they are these days. So it's funny to me that Fredica was actually Fredericksburg, that's what they called it. And then Lobica -- we went to Lobica -- you were going to Lubbock.

So, you know it's funny how they change the names to something that sounds, that something they couldn't pronounce the way it's supposed to be pronounced. I guess kind of like, for some reason there's some difficulty in pronouncing Refugio as Refugio and they call it Refugio (re-fru-e-o).

MARK ROBBINS: I think the equivalent in Michigan to me would be, I grew up near in a town that's spelled Charlotte, but everybody calls it Charlotte (char-lot). So when I first heard of Charlotte, North Carolina, "you mean not Charlotte (char-lot)" (laughter).

So did you have -- you mentioned the power of kind of the memory childhood and -- did you have particular memories or your parents have particular memories, I mean that kind of stuck with them that they mentioned to you a lot as a child about working in the fields or their background?

HILDA TAGLE: No. Well, like I said about the only thing that comes to mind right now was my mother's memory pointing out that the mural in the airport and saying that guy never picked cotton. But, you know, that was the only way to live those days.

And, you know, there was no education and sadly my mother, like I told you, was very, very intelligent and she had a teacher in Driscoll, when she was in school in Driscoll. My mother only went to eighth grade, and one of her teachers was willing to let her stay there with her rather than have her go work with the family so that she could finish school but my grandfather said no. And whether it was because he didn't want to break up the family or he didn't know who this woman was, you know, what problems there could be, but I mean rather than seeing it as an opportunity for her, which she would have made -- no telling what would have become of her life -- but it was a type of resignation that it's tragic, you know, really tragic.

So, no, other than that, of course my dad, you know, his, he had a really hard life in having to work in the fields because, like I told you or mentioned earlier, his father died when my dad was very young. My dad was only about three years-old. And that left my grandmother with five children to raise, no aid for dependent children, no Social Security benefits and then, you know, her in-laws basically saying, "hey, your husband is gone, you're on your own now." You know, she was basically supposed to go back to her family but her family was dirt poor, too.

So I know that my dad had to, at a very young age, probably work -- my parents died in 1984 and '86. I wished I had had them more time so I could have talked to them about that kind of stuff. But I just know that being, my grandmother being a single woman with such a large family without any other way to support them, had to, you know, both her and my dad and her brothers and sisters had to work really hard in the fields -- was the only way to earn a living at that time.

MARK ROBBINS: Did they move around or mostly stay in South Texas?

HILDA TAGLE: I suspect that if they went to -- anywhere, it would have been like no farther

than Lubbock. You know, that was about as far anybody in my family – I know other people, we'd hear about going to California, to Michigan, to pick cherries; I remember that. But they pretty much -- my family always pretty much stayed in Texas.

MARK ROBBINS: So when you were a child in Robstown, did you encounter a lot of folks who weren't from Robstown when you'd go in to town or go the school that were just there intermittently from the migrant work?

HILDA TAGLE: Well, I went to -- well everybody who was from Robstown, I mean who I ran into was basically from Robstown. There was not much, you know, diversity when it came to people from other parts of the country or even the county. And, but at one point, I -- when I really became immersed in people who or members of my town, who were migrant workers was when I was around, I was like fourth grade or something.

The school closest to us, you know, physically in Robstown was Bullard Elementary School. I was there for fourth grade and I learned later that it was a school where they sent migrant children; migrant workers' children. But I was very fortunate to have a wonderful teacher in fourth grade. So I really benefitted from -- and maybe the facility was not as nice as other schools in the district in Robstown, but Mrs. Palacios, I mean she was just an amazing teacher.

So one time when I was -- everybody around me was probably more limited in English than I was, I really excelled because, you know, I started reading when I was real little, so I had the command of the English language.

MARK ROBBINS: Generally speaking, would you say that, that was your experience in Robstown with schooling or were there challenges there? Was it mostly a supportive environment or -- ?

HILDA TAGLE: -- well, no. Actually I have an example of how -- I mean talk about, you know, I won't call it racism, somebody else might. My mother being the abogada sin libros that I tell you she was, wanted me to go to school at Hattie Martin Elementary School. I had already -- I was in parochial school for like what would be Pre-K now. And then I went to kindergarten, which was run by the -- it was the Wesley House which is a Methodist Church. So I graduated from kindergarten; and then my mother wanted me to go to school at Hattie Martin because I already could speak English.

And this was actually before all the, you know, litigation involving, you know, integration of schools and -- actually a case that my colleague on the Southern District of Texas, litigated here in Driscoll School District, parents who wanted to enroll their child, their daughter, in classes with English speaking students but she was not allowed to. She had to go to be in classes with all Mexican-Americans

Well, my mother wanted me to go to Hattie Martin Elementary School because I already had Pre-K, kindergarten. I could speak English and the principal did not want to admit me. She just fought my mother tooth-and-nail but my mother was a tigress. And she wasn't about to, you know, back-off. So I remember that principal -- I mean I would have been -- well, that was at a time when there was like zero and low first and high first I mean like you were at puberty by the time you got into first grade.

Anyway, I just remember, Mrs. Harris, the principle grabbing me by -- I mean here I am a little kid and telling me as she drags me down the hall, I'm going to keep my eye on you. You know, as if like threatening me a child, you know. It was not my fault my mother gave her a hard time, you know, but I'm glad that she gave her a hard time.

But actually I only went to the school at Hattie Martin, well, I guess that first grade and then for some reason I wound up transferring to another school which was just down the block; Robstown Elementary, which was the first -- I mean it's -- was Robstown Elementary

and then it -- name got named to Salazar Elementary. And so I got put into second grade.

And so within a short time after the semester started, my second grade teacher thought I should be in third grade. Well, by, like I said, by that time I had this, you know, these years of school. So I read for the principal and the third grade teacher and I got moved into third grade, so I skipped second grade. So fortunately for her and for the principal, Mr. Bullock, and the third grade teacher, Mrs. Bullock, I was able to, you know, move on to where I really should be.

And, you know, I was there such a short time in her class, the second grade class, that, that second grade teacher's class, that I never knew her name. And I knew the names of all my other teachers.

But, so I'm a County Court of Law Judge, right, and I have a lawyer there to prove up the probate of a will, so what I would do was, you know, I would swear in the witness, the lawyer would start listing question. I would make my notations on the docket sheet and then he finishes and he says, "Your Honor, my client says that she was your teacher in Robstown." And I looked at the name and I looked at her and I said, "Oh my God. I have been looking for you all my life." I've always -- "you must be my second grade teacher." She said that she was. I said I've always wanted to know who it was -- who, you know, who wanted to do this for me, you know. That took the time to make sure that was correctly placed.

When, you know, in contrast to the other teacher who, you know, was treating so baldly when I was in first grade. So I was so grateful to her. I said, "Thank you very much for what you did for me." You know. So -- and then I was really lucky, also, for third grade. I had a great teacher; Mrs. Bullock, was amazing. She always stayed in contact with my family even though, you know, her husband was a principal. You know, back in those days there was no mixing. I lived on this side of the tracks and everybody else, you know, I mean professionals or people who were white collar workers were on the other side, and but, I mean, she came to -- after I finished law school, I was home that day, you know, after law school before I got

settled into my first job and she came to the house to congratulate my parents for what I had achieved.

And this was -- I had been her third grade student, you know. So, so I had some great teachers and I was very fortunate and, you know, like I said earlier today, I've always loved my teachers. But it wasn't until I became a teacher that I realized how much work it is; it's hard.

MARK ROBBINS: Wow. Those are powerful memories. So you remember -- you mentioned earlier, when you went up to West Texas, being in school for a little bit of time there, were your experiences similar, different up there from what you can remember?

HILDA TAGLE: I don't know. I don't remember. You know, we were there such a short time that I don't have any memories, except -- I guess it have to have been, even before first grade. I don't know because I remember having -- that they had -- it's the first time that I had been anywhere where they had put the kids down for a nap. We didn't have that down in South Texas, that was a new concept to me [laughter].

MARK ROBBINS: So you were in school for part of that time and part of the time working?

HILDA TAGLE: Well, no. Part of that time -- I mean I was always in school. Whether it was in -- my parents like I said we, they -- whatever was the reason that they went up there, I was always in school. I was never taken out of school to work.

MARK ROBBINS: But your brothers did end up -- were they ever taken out of school?

HILDA TAGLE: No. No, they always worked in the summer time. It was like a summer job like,

I don't know why they did that. It had to have been before before the Beatles came, what year was that? They came to Texas in 1963 or something?

MARK ROBBINS: Sounds about right, I honestly don't know

HILDA TAGLE: Yeah, because I know by that time they were working jobs like car washes in Houston and Dallas, you know, for the summer. But before that, they had worked picking cotton in the summertime

MARK ROBBINS: Did you find that most teenagers, kids would work in the summer out in the fields in Robstown at that time?

HILDA TAGLE: Yeah, I think just about everybody did. Like I said I was one of the lucky ones. Because -- a friend of mind jokes about -- an attorney in Brownsville who, I'm not gonna agree or disagree, but the reputation that he has is, that he's very lazy. Like I said I'm not gonna agree or disagree, but that the joke is that he would say if somebody was whipping him he would say, "Whip me but I'm not gonna work."

Well, I think that if my parents had tried to made me go pick cotton, they would have to whip me because I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it.

MARK ROBBINS: Do you recall like your brothers having any feelings about it growing up or just something they did?

HILDA TAGLE: Yeah, they just, it was -- I guess when you're young and you're strong, it's not something that you really feel in the same way as when you're the mother who has to get up in the morning in time to make breakfast and lunch and then go work in the fields and then

come home and fix dinner and wash and all that.

I mean, when you're young, you're more resilient. So, I'm sure for them it was something that was not as difficult. And then, of course, for the men, it was hard because they had the family, you know, to support. So, that's why people wanted to have large families or benefitted from having large families that all worked.

But like I said, my brothers, Joe and Jimmy, might have also worked a little bit but I suspect that they didn't do, they didn't work to the extent that the -- because, me and my -- Manuel and then Jerry, then Joe and Jimmy -- so probably Joe and Jimmy probably didn't work as much as Jerry and Manuel did in the fields.

MARK ROBBINS: Do you remember your mom being up early in the morning to prepare things to help out?

HILDA TAGLE: Oh, okay. I can tell you -- well, she did that for my dad. She did that for my brothers, too. And I'm sure, you know, I almost kind of have a memory of that at that time when we went to New Home (sic) with my uncle, that, I mean, that was what women did, you know, and very basic.

At least at our house we had running water and a bathroom and stuff, but, you know, -- New Home (sic) was probably a labor camp as well. But yeah, that's what women did, they got up and fixed breakfast and lunch all in one fell swoop and then, you know, come back and start all over again at night for dinner.

MARK ROBBINS: Did you see any changes in that over time or was it pretty consistent from your memory in terms of gender roles and--?

HILDA TAGLE: Oh, well, yeah. Pretty much it remains to be the same. You know, I've always

thought that women have not taken advantage of that -- is it an aphorism or platitude that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. I mean, as women we have the ability to start indoctrinating boys. Not just the girls, like, you know, you're [a] woman you can roar, but to indoctrinate the boys about their sharing of responsibilities for the household and children. But we tend to perpetuate the stereotype.

MARK ROBBINS: So, things have largely remained similar -- (talking simultaneously)

HILDA TAGLE: No, there has been a lot of change. But, you know, it's still not, not there. It's not 50/50.

MARK ROBBINS: Yeah. Yeah. Wow. Well, so when your brothers or when you're up in West Texas, and the experience that you had as well as a child, did you all tend to work in the same place as a family or venture off into different parts of --

HILDA TAGLE: -- it was always the same place. And, like I said, from my personal experience, the only time that my family traveled was that one time. So the rest of it was working -- because my parents, after World War II they didn't go back to work in the fields.

My mother had her own little beauty shop at home or attached to our home and my dad worked as a mechanic. He got mechanics' training after World War II and so that's the kind of work that he did. He never worked the fields again except for that bizarre incident.

MARK ROBBINS: And so when he became a mechanic, was that with the government contract or --

HILDA TAGLE: No, no --

MARK ROBBINS: -- it just happened to be that timeframe

HILDA TAGLE: Yeah, right. It was just the GI Forum, not the GI Forum, the GI Bill, rather

MARK ROBBINS: Okay

HILDA TAGLE: Probably is what he benefited from or maybe self-taught and so yeah, he started working in, doing mechanic work

MARK ROBBINS: Did they ever share any memories of what it was like working during the Depression at all?

HILDA TAGLE: They -- I remember my mother saying that, that they were already so poor that they didn't know that there was a Depression.

MARK ROBBINS: Wow. Wow. Did she mention any anecdotes or --

HILDA TAGLE: No, just -- no, just the fact that she wished she had been able to go to school. Which financially they had been better off maybe -- but, you know, that would have been extra pair of hands that they would have lost. My grandfather would have lost. So, you know, money was definitely, you know, I'm sure a big reason for her not being able to continue her education.

And so beyond that -- now, like I said my parents died so long ago; it's already been more than 30 years since my mother died and beyond that I just can't remember

MARK ROBBINS: So remind me in terms of the timeline, when was the last year you were living in Robstown?

HILDA TAGLE: It would have been -- see, I graduated from Del Mar in 1967 --

MARK ROBBINS: -- okay

HILDA TAGLE: So, or actually I finished my classes in 1967 but I guess I didn't officially graduate until the following Spring in '68 but I was already at East Texas State

MARK ROBBINS: Okay, by '68 --

HILDA TAGLE: -- '67 actually

MARK ROBBINS: Oh, 67. Okay

HILDA TAGLE: Yeah, I left -- I went to school at East Texas State the Fall of 1967.

MARK ROBBINS: At that point, did you see any kind of activism shaping --?

HILDA TAGLE: -- I'm glad you brought that up. Yes, there was and then after I left. But I can tell you that I have had a lot of angst about the fact that I was not part of what some people called el movimiento, you know, the civil rights social justice effort. But, you know, there was -- if I had had one inkling of that in my resume, I would have never made it through Senate confirmation, many years later.

Anything that would have smacked of activism for social justice -- because my

nomination went before a Republican Majority Senate so there would have been no way. As it was my nomination, uh, lapsed for three years. So, you know, I was nominated actually in '95, my nomination lasted '96 and, you know, I was re-nominated in '97.

Much to my surprise, I thought it was just going to be a done deal but, you know, there was maneuvering in the Valley; people were wanting somebody from the Valley and I had to kind of help, do a lot of putting out fires and I got nominated again. But I still didn't get a hearing until March of '98. So like I said -- and that's because I didn't have anything to, to point to as like, "Oh, she's going to be a judicial activist," you know, and, so I mean if I had any, any kind of activity, like the Mexican-American Youth Organization, any Raza Unita, no -- I mean -- I wouldn't have even been recommended or nominated, you know.

There is a big difference between being considered, being recommended, being nominated, being confirmed, and even then you still have to wait for that executive order to be signed and when I -- after I'd had my hearing and I had my Senate committee vote and the full senate vote, all of the Monica Lewinsky stuff was bubbling up and I kept thinking, sign the damn executive order [Laughter]. Because I just knew he was going to get impeached, that Clinton was going to get impeached before he signed it, you know

MARK ROBBINS: What did it feel like when he finally did?

HILDA TAGLE: A big relief. I mean, a big relief. I mean, it was just a horrible. Well, you know the 13 years that I was in politics was one of the most stressful times of my life. You know, I got appointed, like I told you, earlier by a 3-2 vote to a county court of law judge position and that's without any kind of political base. I was just, you know -- excellent timing and being prepared, you know, at the right place at the right time.

So from '85 to '98 when I got confirmed, that's 13 years of constant, constant, constant politicking, as a -- I mean unmarried, single head of household because my nephew came to

live with me that same summer that I got my first judicial position, and I mean it was just a constant stress of, of politicking and like, you know, being a parent, single parent, of being a judge, both of those really being full time jobs on their own and then politicking; building a political base from ground zero.

MARK ROBBINS: Wow. Were you asked a lot about those years in the nomination process kind of behind the scenes or --?

HILDA TAGLE: -- no. I tell you what, what I was asked behind the scenes. On the morning of my vote, after being -- after waiting for three years, a Senate Judiciary Committee staffer calls me to say that someone had called the committee that morning to claim that I was a promiscuous lesbian. And -- [shock in MR's facial expression] - right that was my reaction. I just could not believe it that somebody would make such a lie up. And I said to the young lady who was -- I was fortunate enough it was a woman who fielded the call -- I said, "You know, all I ever wanted to be my whole life was to be married and have five kids. But it didn't work out that way for me but I tried to make the best of what life, through my way." And she said well -- and I said, ironically I have been an involuntarily celibate heterosexual all of this time. I said, I haven't had time for a personal life. And she said, "Well, it's not too late." I said, "What do you mean?" She says, "That's what I tell my family." Which was her telling me she understood what it was like to want a family but for it not to work out that way.

And, you know, I've always thought if that call had been fielded out by some guy who had no clue, you know, it would have been [inaudible] to say "well, you know what, let's check this out." But pulled from that -- stack that was up for hearing and I never would have gotten through, because the window was so tiny at that time. It was almost not there.

MARK ROBBINS: Did you feel a lot of pressure in terms of -- well, I mean that's certainly an

example, but in other ways also -- potential opposition or those who might get in way of the appointment -- feeling that you had to sort of conform to a particular ideal of what women leaders were supposed to be?

HILDA TAGLE: No, I can't say it manifested itself in that way. But I just had to keep strong when I didn't feel strong. I had to not alienate anybody. I had -- I mean I was walking on egg shells in a straight line the whole time. And it was a real effort to, I mean, just a lot of stress to make sure that; okay, if this is happening, then let's see what I could do to quell this situation.

So I was always having to, to see where the landscape was that day, you know. One time -- somebody claimed, for example, had called in the, it was called the Office of Policy Development that shepherds nominees through or that's what it was called back then, and I get a call from the young man who had the responsibility of my nomination and he said that somebody had called and to claim that I had had my utilities turned off. And that I had had a county employee go turn on the utilities without paying. You know, if you get your utilities turned off you have to not only get pay arrears but also the reconnect fee.

And so, I'm like, what in the world. So I literally had to go to the city's utilities department and to, and I drafted an affidavit of non-existence so that the person in charge of utilities could say in that affidavit that they had searched my records, I had never had my utilities turned off. I mean, can you imagine stuff like that?

MARK ROBBINS: I really can't

HILDA TAGLE: But, but okay so in -- I'm gonna have to go, my friend is waiting for me. But in the meantime, talk about, you know, having to do deal with all of this stuff. When I finally got my hearing there were two panels, six nominees; three, three nominees per panel.

And, you know, keep in mind that I had been waiting for three years for a hearing. In the first panel, one of the nominees was to the Court of International Trade, which is an article three court and there was a ninth circuit, two ninth circuit nominees and you knew that there was going to be problems there. But the Court of International Trade nominee was the niece of Arlen Specter, who was on the committee. And her questioning consisted of reminiscing about her childhood. And it's all the in the record.

And Strom Thurmond, that champion of civil rights [sarcasim], uh, said, "Of course I'm going to support you, you're my colleague's niece." And I'm thinking, okay, affirmative action is bad, but nepotism is okay. I mean, you know, so blatant no, no, you know, how is this going to look on the record, you know?

MARK ROBBINS: That's amazing. It seems that that whole process, having to wait three years, deal with things ranging from false accusations, to, of a broad scope to utility bills, it would require a lot of strength --

HILDA TAGLE: I got it from my mother, I'm pretty sure that was her.

MARK ROBBINS: That's what I was wondering, in terms of if you had reflections on where your strength came from at that time and beyond?

HILDA TAGLE: Well, my mother was always an incredibly strong woman so all the credit goes to her. And, I mean, she had to be watching from up above, my guardian angel, because this was happening in the 90's, you know, and she'd already been deceased.

She never got to see me as a judge, my dad did. He [inaudible] me and -- but she got to see me sworn in as an attorney which was a big source of pride for her.

MARK ROBBINS: Wow, well, that's great. Any other -- I know you have to go in a couple of minutes here -- so any other memories you want to share?

HILDA TAGLE: Well, not a memory, but something that I have always committed. I mean, I feel an obligation because of all the help that I got in my life, like from my teachers and my friends, Mike Anzaldúa being the first -- up at top of the list -- all the encouragement.

Everybody's, you know, everybody whose love and support got me to where I was, you know. I learned from them that to share information. Because as we know, the saying another aphorism or platitude; information is power. That, you know, I have an obligation to share my experience if it can be helpful.

As a matter of fact, one of the lawyers that I had dinner with on July 1st, you know, I didn't really know him at all until I got to Houston, which was only in 2013, and he right away had asked me if he could nominate me for a Lifetime Achievement Award for Hispanic Bar Association. So, I said, well that's so nice. It was very nice of him to do that for me.

But I found out three years later what the reason was, that he did, although he really know me. One, of course, being a Hispanic on the Southern District of Texas, in the Houston division. There's only been one other and it was James Deanda, and he did get appointed there. He transferred from Brownsville there and, of course, I got there only after I took senior status. But he said that he had asked other people about the process for nomination and appointment to the federal judge position and he said everybody else I would ask they would say, oh it's just very political and all that.

He said, you were the only one who said this, this, this, this, you know. Gave me -- or gave him some pointers, you know, some hard -- like bullet points. And this is why and this is what -- I think that if you want more diversity on the bench this is what I believe, that it's, you know, important to do.

And so, but I got that from Jorge Rangel, who was my basically my mentor during the

process of appointment. I learned from Lupe Salinas, the other judge, the judge I had dinner with on July 1st because although he was the presumed nominee for a position in the Houston division back when Clinton was president, he, for whatever reason, he was all of a sudden out of the running.

And in spite of that, when I was, you know, trying to make inroads into the political scene in Houston, he made sure that I got, you know, introduced and I got recognized and, you know, anybody else whose hopes had been dashed, might of very easily said, you know what, you're on your own. But he didn't. He made sure, in spite of his personal loss, to help me in whatever way he could. And that's what I've learn from all of my friends and my family is to share what I know so that other people can reach even higher goals

MARK ROBBINS: That's great. Thank you for that. That's wonderful. Well, I guess I'll shut off the recorder here, thank you so much.