

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Irma Woods

Principal Interviewee: Irma Woods (IR)

Interviewer: Mark Robbins (MR)

Corpus Christi, TX, March 4, 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.*

MR: This is Irma Woods. (Laughs)

IW: Yes.

MR: (continues chuckling)

IW: I want to begin talking about the, the ...the history that I know of my maternal grandparents, actually great grandparents. My great grandparents came to the United States in 1911. They were fleeing the Mexican Revolution in Mexico and there were, many people fled Mexico at that time, and they came to the United States. So, they went to Yorktown, which was at that time, settled by families from Poland. A lot of Polish people living in the Yorktown area. And my great grandfather and I wanted to show this picture to you, Mark.

MR: Oh very neat.

IW: Because my, my grandmother, my grandmother who was sixteen ye--, no fourteen years old in this picture. She, she just did this with every photo. She would write, she would write, this written in Spanish, but she would write a description of everything. Give the names of all the people in the photo, talk about the trees, the animals. She wrote that this photo was taken at 2:00 in the afternoon. She would give great detail.

MR: Wow.

IW: 2:00 in the afternoon, January the 6th, 1914, and talked about the animals and the families, and so on. So, and she would do that with every photo, so that she left a recorded history just based on the photos.

MR: That's great.

IW: So my great grandparents came and they became sharecroppers. They worked the land and they kept, they were paid very, very low wages, but they kept part of the crops, part of the produce, and they would use that to feed their families because my moth- my grandmother married at the age of sixteen, and she and my grandfather had nineteen children.

MR: Oh my!

IW: So it was a huge family to live, and they lived, and they became sharecroppers as well. They worked the land, kept a little bit of the produce, and earned very, very low wages. My grandfather, based on my grandmother's stories, he would earn 50 cents a day for a full day's work. The day the sun rose until it set, and then all the children helped as well. Um, they lived in a two room house. No, one room with a small kitchen. It was no, of course, indoor plumbing. It was outhouses, but every... one big room where they would all sleep on the floor, and um, my, the small kitchen for cooking, but some of the cooking was done outside as well. And so my grandmother would make the soap. She would make most of the products for use in the house. The le-, they picked cotton. The children were given short sacks so they could fill them up. The grownups were given the long sacks, and they were paid like ten cents a pound for picking cotton, and anything leftover, the, the pickings that were left from picking cotton, the land, the land owner would tell my grandmother she could have them. So she would go and pick the leftover, whatever was leftover, and then she would use that to make the mattresses for the family. The pillows and things like that. Um, so they lived off the land in terms of food. They never went hungry. My mother recalls they never were hungry because there was always food because they, whatever crop was growing, they would always have something to eat. Um, my mother married at the age of fifteen, but she, so she went to school. She never finished school. The highest she went was the 5th grade, and she went to a school in Yorktown called Bessing Elementary, which is no longer there, but there was great discrimination against Mexican Americans, and so the school had two rooms: one for the white children and one for the Mexican children, and they were called Los Mexicanos, the Mexicans. The records show the names of all the white children, but they didn't keep records on the names of the Mexican children. It is as if they did not exist. Years later, I wanted to find out more information on this school my mother attended, so I wrote to the Historical Society in Yorktown, requesting information about this Bessing School. And she was ve--, the lady was very gracious. She sent me as much as she co— she sent me pictures of the school. Um, and she tracked the names of the children who attended the school in the years that I had indicated, but they were all the names of the white children.

MR: Mmm

IW: She didn't have any records of the Mexican children, so I could never verify my mother attended the school, because my mother said they didn't think that they were important. They didn't think that Mexican children were important, and because they left early, arrived late in the school year, because they followed crops. I guess the school officials felt it was unnecessary to keep track of them, them come and go, and therefore it was not necessary to record their

attendance or anything like that. So, um, so anyway, then my parents, my mother married at the age of fifteen, my father was much older. They came, they moved to Corpus Christi to find a better life. You know, my father went to go work at a restaurant. My mother became a seamstress. It was an old, well a former laundry they called the Oriental on Staples and Morgan. Now I think it's a recording studio.

IW: The building is still there, but (laughing). It used to be a, a laundry, and my mother was a seamstress. She would sew the buttons and do hems on clothing that got damaged and things like that. And she worked there to augment the salary of my father. But, uh, they, my mother always worked outside the home while we were gro—I don't remember ever being at home as a child and my mother being at home. She always worked outside the home. Education was real important to them, I guess because they felt they didn't have any. And they wanted to make sure that we had an education. So, I soon, I soon learned that if I used the excuse: "I had homework," I didn't have to do the dishes. (Laughs)

MR: (Chuckles)

IW: That if I said, "I have to read this library book, mom," then uh, I didn't have to do housework because they valued education so much, and they didn't question, they didn't see if I really had homework, because if I said I had homework, I must have homework, and so they, "ok, you don't have to do the dishes," "You don't have to clean. You don't have to do that." Um, but my par—and while I don't remember a single time my parents reading a book to us or playing. They never played with us. Life was really different. They didn't, the idea that parents played with their children was unheard of. They worked so hard, they worked so hard just to put food on the table, pay bills, and I heard that all my life, "We got to pay the bills. We got to pay the bills. Where are we going to get the money to pay the bills?" You know.

MR: Uh huh.

IW: We didn't question the fact that they didn't play with us or read books, but what they did do was they modeled. They modeled for us. Um, my father, as, as little money as we had he always subscribed to the *Caller-Times*. There were two newspapers; one in the morning was called the *Caller*, the one in the afternoon was called the *Times*, and it was not until years later that the two were combined, what we know today, the *Caller-Times*. One newspaper, but we used to have two; morning and afternoon, and my father got both, which was unheard of in our little neighborhood. Um, and I would see him reading the newspaper, so he gave me the message that reading is important. Reading must be important because he would come home and read both newspapers, and that was the modeling that I saw growing up. We lived in a neighborhood, uh, that was all Spanish speaking. They, everybody spoke Spanish, and it was sort of like self-contained. Everything we needed was right there, on the west side. We had our grocery store. We had our theatre. We had our church. We had the laundry. We had everything we needed. We

didn't need to venture anywhere out. Going to Ayres Street was like going to another town.
(Laughs)

MR: (Laughs)

IW: It was so different. Um, and Spanish was the only language spoken. Even the mailman who was African American spoke Spanish, and I could believe that. I thought how, how does he know Spanish? He doesn't look like us, you know (Laughing)

MR: (Laughing)

IW: How did he learn to speak Spanish, but he did because I—it was just hard for me to understand how anybody who did not look like us could speak our language. And I went to the neighborhood school and I remember the principal of the school would go visit the neighborhood to make sure the children were attending school, and I was really impressed that the principal would walk the streets to make sure that we were attending school. He spoke no Spanish, and I, and I hadn't entered school yet, and he spoke no, and I spoke no English and he would come to the house and I couldn't communicate with him. I entered first grade, uh, without any background, early childhood, preschool, or kinder, or anything. (Laughs) I just went straight from a home environment, where only Spanish was speaking, to school where only English speaking. And this was in the 50's, late 1940's, early 50's, and, um, the whole idea was that you spoke English, that Spanish was forbidden, and so, at home I was always called [pronouncing her name in a few ways in Spanish], [Spanish term] is the diminutive, it's a, it's a nurturing term. In Spanish we use that for everything [giving examples in Spanish] (Laughs)

MR: (Laughs)

IW: It's a nurturing term. And so we take people's names and we make them. It softens the name and shows ...nurturing is the best way I can describe it. And so I was called [pronouncing her name in a few ways in Spanish]. I went to school and they called out the name "Irma" [with no Spanish pronunciation]. And I did not respond because that was not my name.

MR: Uh huh.

IW: They called it out again... and they never called my name. They never called my name; what I knew to be who I was. And so they went to my house because the principal told my parents that I was not going to school.

MR: Oh wow.

IW: And uh, I, and I had been going every single day, it's just that they didn't pronounce my name correctly. And so they told me that I had, that my name was "Irma" [with no Spanish pronunciation] and I had to respond to that name, and so I soon learned that my name in Spanish was not valued. It was valued at home, but not valued at school, or in this other society that I was

become--, and so I began to call myself "Irma" [with no Spanish pronunciation]. It was not until many, many, many, many years later (Laughs)...where I finally reclaimed my identity, and, and then, um, use only my name in Spanish, pronounce it, and if people could not pronounce it that's ok. I tell them "That's alright. That's ok. It's just that this is just how I pronounce it" (Laughs). And I do understand. I did marry a white man, and people said, "how could you have done that?" (Laughs) Because, because when you love somebody you do, you don't look at certain things, and that didn't matter to me, just did not matter. Uh, but it was very difficult going to school in a society that did not value our culture, our traditions, who we were. Everybody in the school was um, wa—everybody was poor so we, and we all spoke, we were all Mexican children, so to speak. We all came from the same area, the same neighborhood. It was truly segregated, simply that just was the way it was, because of where you lived, the neighborhoods and so on. But, uh, one year when I was in the 5th grade, a little white girl enrolled in the school. Her name was Dorothy and she was the only white girl, and she was in my classroom. And so when, the first 6 weeks when we were issued our report cards the teacher came to me and said, you made the highest grades in the class, but you cannot, I cannot put them on your report card because we know that nobody can score higher than a white child.

MR: Mm.

IW: So, because Dorothy was white, she had to have the higher grades. So she said, "jus, just tell your parents that you're doing really well, but you cannot have the highest grades because Dorothy has to have them." And I didn't question. I said ok. (Laughs) You know? I was a very quiet child, uh, shy to a large degree. And so I just accepted that that was just the way it was. That's, that's just the way the conditions were, that Mexican children were supposedly inferior in knowledge and skill and intelligence. That's just the way it was and my paren—I told my parents, and they didn't question it either. They just accepted it. That's just the way it was, that was the way society was at the time and you didn't—you didn't make a fuss, you didn't complain. You just went along with it. Um, and so that I remember clearly, very clearly to is the, the punishment we received for speaking Spanish at school. We were made to kneel on the gravel or the asphalt road, the little areas outside. We, on the gravel, the asphalt, we had to kneel, uh, during recess, the teacher would also take a ruler and hit us on the legs every time we spoke Spanish, or we had to put up our heads and she would hit us on the mouths with the, so that we would not speak the language, because she said, "you have to learn English." And I could've, I could... of course I would have, I learned English. I didn't have to lose my language, you know? So, at home we continued to use Spanish. At school, I would learn to speak English and, uh, I remember a teacher telling me that I would probably not go beyond elementary school. That I probably wouldn't go beyond elementary school because I did not, because I spoke Spanish, you know. You don't speak English. It's not your language. You will probably only go to the 6th grade and you'll probably drop out. And so there was little encouragement. There was no talk of high school. There was absolutely no talk of going to college or anything like that. But there was something in me that wouldn't accept that (Laughs). You know, just, just wouldn't accept it. So I

silently vowed that I would, I would show that teacher. I would show her what, that I had the ability, and the capability. And so I intentionally majored English in my, in my bachelor's degree. (Laughs)

MR: (Laughs)

IW: Intentionally, to show the teacher that I would master this language and that not only would I speak the language correctly, but I would write it correctly as well, and become familiar with the writings and the English language. And so, I think back, and think, how could I have thought that? But anyway, I purposefully minored in Shakespearian literature. (Laughs)

MR: (Laughs)

IR: And it was the way to show the world that I could do this, that they were not going to tell me I was incapable just because I spoke a language and not English when I first went to school. And so, uh, I, uh, as a child, I encountered many, many incidences like that. But it's hard to explain. It was just an accepted way of life. You didn't fight it. You didn't try to change it. Uh, it was not until when I went to college, Our Lady of the Lake, in San Antonio, that I, in the 60's, that I became an activist (Laughs). That I learned to use the boycott as a way to resist discrimination. And so I joined the Cesar Chavez, I joined Cesar Chavez movement boycotting the stores in San Antonio selling grapes. I didn't eat grapes for like three years. My grandmother in the meantime, they left the fields of Yorktown, they left the hard labor. Also came to Corpus. And she became active with the movement of Dr. Garcia, the GI Forum. She became... I have a letter from Dr. Garcia appointing my grandmother as a person who has his authority to organize authority to organize GI Forums in the United States. So she went... she became an activist as well. And uh...she became...she began to travel, South Texas, went to New Mexico to establish GI forum chapters for women. She was one of the organizers and I recently came into possession with a ... which I prize this photo of my grandmother. This is my grandmother....

MR: Oh my!

IW: This is my grandmother as she's organizing GI forums in New Mexico to fight for justice for the veterans coming back after the war.

MR: Wow.

IW: I remember... is that my grandmother a great, just a great women with boundless energy doing fundraisers to send them to college. We would do cake walks and we would do this concept of queens. You know, you ran to be a queen and you collected money from your supporters, and all the money went for scholarships. So that's where I heard this concept of scholarships for college, and it was my grandmother who promoted that and worked tirelessly. She didn't have a higher education at all. She only finished "La Primaria" as we say in Spanish, elementary school, but Dr. Garcia called her "La Profesora," because she worked so hard to

promote education. She followed the ideals of Dr. Garcia and worked tirelessly to promote education. She taught all her children to read and write in Spanish. So they.... so my mother when she went to school in Yorktown, she was already literate. She already knew how to read and write Spanish but that was not valued. That language was not valued, so it was determined that she was illiterate because she didn't know English, but my grandmother until she could no longer help she continued to promote education, do fundraisers and send people to college. And I think, really, my desire for higher education really came from my grandmother. She's the one who supported...she was the one who told me I was smart, nobody had ever told me that before, you know, nobody had said, you know, "You really are smart. You have potential. You can do this," but it was my grandmother who said, "You can do this. You can go to school, because you are very intelligent and you need to do that and I will help you," and she did. Um, so who I am today to a large extent I owe it to my grandmother who worked the fields. She had so many children and her story is a unique one, because she would work the fields alongside my grandfather while she was pregnant, and she would leave the fields to go have her baby and numerous times she had her babies by herself because they were out, you know, out in the ranches, and no neighbors really close, no access to a hospital, so she would give birth by herself and call if, if a midwife was close by, they would call a midwife. My grandmother...my mother remembers when she was 12 or 14 running to a neighboring house to get somebody to help when my grandmother was giving birth, but many a times she left the fields when labor pains began and would go have her babies, stay in bed for a couple of days, and then go back into the fields. Uh, it was a hard life, it was a very hard life. It was a life of impoverishment and, just a lot of discrimination, but my grandmother was such a strong woman she didn't see it as an obstacle but as a reason to fight harder, to fight the right way. Not aggressive, no violence at all, but standing up and speaking up for what was right for justice. And so my parents, um, my father went from working in a restaurant to....he got a job building the HEB warehouse that is out there on 37, is it? No...you know which one I'm talking about?

MR: I think I know which one you're talking about, yeah.

IW: He did, he worked at the base, civil service until he retired, and my mother worked as a seamstress at the Oriental Laundry and then went to work in a fabric store and worked in retail until she retired, so to them, they really, their life became better because they went from working in the fields to moving to the city and working retail. But still experiencing a lot of discrimination with unfair wages. The white people getting paid more because they were white. But my parents they just said, you know. I remember my father saying, "When you go look for a job, always keep your hands out of your pocket. Always have them out. So your employer knows you're ready to work." That you don't have your hands in your pocket because that's an indication you're lazy....

[both laughing]

MR: I never thought of that...

IW: That you don't want to work. So always have your hands out, that you're ready to work. And he always stressed any job that is, that is a legal job is okay no matter how humble. Never be too proud to work at any job as long as it's honorable work. And he would tell us, "An honest day's pay for an honest day's work" Don't cheat, tell the truth, all those things. All those character traits that are so critical for us as human beings I learned that from my parents, and they modeled for us the right way to live. And they never complained. That's what I [laughter]. "Why didn't you say something?" But they never complained, that's just the way it was. That's the way of thinking. And, um, until they retired and then all of their children, all of us, my siblings, myself, all their children are college educated. We all have college degrees. We all are, I think, upright citizens, productive citizens. And they've always said that that is their greatest pride, that we grew up this way. My grandmother to the end, she worked hard, tirelessly. And, um, I don't know what else you want me to say.

MR: Well, I mean, that is all extremely interesting and I think important stories to have. Do you recall hearing from your mother or grandmother or any other family members what sort of things when they weren't working tirelessly, it sounds like, that that they would do? Were there religious activities, or any time for recreational activities, or.....?

IW: Well, church was a big social event. The church played a big part of my life. We're lifelong Catholics, and the Catholic Church was, was the center of the neighborhood. You went to church on Sunday. You actually went to church every day. Every day at mass. And the social events at the church, the bingos, those were big things. The jamaicas, I remember the jamaicas. Festivals, I guess, is the best word for it. Fundraisers for the church, but big, big, events. But even within the church. The church that I grew up in as a child, and that my parents attended and supported for years and years. Even those priests were discriminatory. Because, the priests came from Spain, because we needed Spanish speaking priests. It was a Spanish-speaking church, and so there were no local, there were no local Mexican priests. It was unheard of that Mexican young men would go to the seminary and become priests. All the priests were white. And it was a given, because the image of God was a white God. Jesus was white, God was white, the blessed mother was white. We did have Our Lady Guadalupe. And so, she's greatly revered in the Mexican community, because she's brown like us. But, the church was the social center of the life of the people, but even there, there was the discrimination. I remember the priest from Spain telling us that we were inferior, because we were not Spaniards, and we didn't speak the Spanish of Spain, the Castilian. That we spoke the local Spanish. That we were [Spanish phrase], the Indians. We came from the Aztec Indians. And therefore we were not pure, like the Spaniards were. And, so even there, we were humiliated and kept almost subjugated, because we were not as good as the Spaniards. So, even the church promoted that. But, the festivities, yeah, my father became a deacon in that church, and so very, very active. That was the center of our social life, the church. They, um, I went to public school, but my sister, my younger sisters went to Catholic school.

And, there, at that church, they had a Catholic school, and they would have all kinds of festivities. They would have plays that the children would put on at Christmas. They'd have events, so, but that was our social life, the church. All the singing in choir, um, the jamaicas. The cakewalks. Those are all for fundraisers for the church. But it was our social outlet, and I remember going to church every day. And then having to go to confession every Saturday. And I didn't have any sins.

[both laughing]

IW: It was like, "what do I tell the priest?" We had to go to confession, you know, the idea that we were sinful, and you had to confess your sins, and I could think of what. So I would make them up. And then, that way I was lying.

[both laughing]

IW: But I didn't think that far. But the church had a tremendous influence. Tremendous influence in our lives.

MR: Did, was there access to a church, or religion, when they were working back in the fields, or are most of the memories that you have, or oral tradition, coming from...?

IW: They didn't have a, when they were working in the fields, they had the Catholic Church in Yorktown was - my parents got married in that church. But they lived out on the farms, so they did not attend. No, they did not attend religious services simply because of the distance, but they did get married in the Catholic Church. Um, but they would hold their little prayer groups at the farm. They would gather and have little prayer groups. Sundays were big days for the families on the farm. That's when they visited each other. They cooked and they all went and shared their food. The gathering was like a big picnic, my mother would say. Like a huge picnic. Everybody would take would they could. Everybody was poor, so everybody would take would they could, and then they would share. And they would stay, my mother recalls staying as a child, staying up until midnight talking. Adults, sharing and talking. The men drinking, and the women sharing stories, and cooking, and, you know, baking bread, and stuff. And, mother says as children, they looked forward to Sundays, because there was a lot of activity, and they didn't have to work. They didn't have to [be] working the fields, because they honored the Sunday as a day of rest. So it was a day for them all to gather together, and they would play. They didn't have toys. There were no toys available, so they would make their toys. They would make cloth dolls. The boys would get, they would get, um, make their balls with mud and leaves and wrap them around and tie string around them. That's how they would make their little balls. And the sticks, they would play baseball. Mother and her sisters and all the other girls would make the dolls out of cloth or corn husks. They would make their little dolls. They would get boxes and make little cars. And little baby beds, and things like that. But all their toys were homemade. They never had a purchased toy available to them.

MR: Wow.

IW: So my mother continues to be very creative in terms of making do with very little and recycling...today we call it recycling [laughter], but in those days, very creative in the way they played. And that's something I've wanted research myself, simply because of my field. I want to know the play activities, the toys that they played. So I've been doing research on that, so I can find, you know - I know some but not enough, because to me that's fascinating, and they would use whatever they had – the natural resources available: rocks, and sticks, and grass. They would use natural resources to play and make. They made up games. They didn't have any store bought toys, so they would make, you know, technology at the time [laughter]. So, they made all of their games, they didn't have things even like marbles, you know. They would get rocks and they would, um, they made kites out of sticks and cloth, and so those were their play elements.

MR: That's really interesting. That would be a neat thing, to learn more about that.

IW: Yeah.

MR: And that's one of those things, that it is hard to find that information except through the stories of people that remember or heard stories from their loved ones. So when your mom and your grandmother became activists, did they work with any of the same people that they had previously worked with on the farms?

IW: Actually, my mother was not an activist. My mother did not like anything like that. She...like, "don't talk to me about that." She just did not like that. My grandmother was the activist, and she would go around the neighborhood, and go back to the farms and recruit people, and talk about the importance of sending children to school, and supporting Dr. Garcia's efforts at the GI Forum. Um, she could speak. She was a natural speaker, and she would speak about issues. I found that so surprising that my grandmother could do that. I remember standing and listening to her. Wow, she could get in front of people and she could talk about what's important. It had a great impression on me, because she could do that. She could energize people. She could pull people together, and do that, it seemed with so little effort. And she only developed that skill under the guidance of Dr. Garcia, because his office on Bright Street is right around the corner from Verbena Street where my grandmother lived. So he was the family doctor for years and years and years, because he was right around the corner. And so, she had, my grandmother was a very gregarious person. She loved people, she loved to talk, and she gathered people around her, so she had lots of friends, lots of acquaintances, and if she didn't know them, she made sure that they became friends. Everybody was a cousin or somebody's – everybody was related to her in one way or another. And she would go back to the farms in Yorktown, Runge, Nordheim. Those were areas where I remember they went from farm to farm. And then in here, in Corpus, during the summer they'd go and pick cotton. And she would talk to people and, "come let's meet." They would do tamaladas. Meaning, get all the women together in the kitchen and make tamales. And that's a laborious task making tamales. You gotta make dozens and dozens and dozens to

feed so many people. And while they were making tamales, all the women chattering and talking, my grandmother would talk about these issues that were very important. So it was like in her home, she carried on a crusade. That's the best way I can describe it. And because my mother worked outside the home, she left me in the care of my grandmother. She would – my mother was working at the Oriental Laundry at the time. I was very little, maybe five, six – four or five, because I wasn't in school yet. And, I would see my grandmother gathering all of these people in her house and talking about the importance of this, and this, and this, and it became a natural – it simply became a natural occurrence for me to be – to witness that. To be a part of that. And so then when I had an opportunity in college, I knew that it was important. I knew that it was important to speak up, and to speak up for justice and human rights. In my own quiet way, but I knew that was important. I could not stay silent on issues like that. And today, in my own quiet way, I continue to do it.

MR: Wow, that's really interesting. Especially hearing about the tamale activism. That's really, really neat, and I think that's one of the things that increasingly researchers are noticing that oftentimes the spaces of activism and change come from places that aren't always in the boardroom or the White House.

IW: Well, and they're not in the news. They're not in the news, they're not recorded anywhere. It's the experiences that people have... You know, where did you first learn that idea? Uh, it may come from somebody's kitchen... places and times that you would have never thought possible. I guess it's what they call a grassroots movement. Where it's in the neighborhood and the individual homes. And my grandmother just had a capacity for being able to understand that, and to promote it – being that, it was not her experience growing up. But, she herself witnessed a lot of the discrimination, a lot of the unfairness, the bad treatment that Mexican people had. And no way to speak up, no way to have their voices heard until she finally found a way, and then she embraced it totally. Just totally. And to the end. She spoke up, told me I was smart, I had to go to school, because I could do this, you know. And I remember when I was going to A&I at that time, in Kingsville, I had to take the bus. And it was a commuter bus that went from Corpus Christi to Kingsville transporting students from Corpus to Kingsville. They don't have it anymore, but when I was in school they did. Back in the '60s. And, I had – she lived in La Armada Housing Project.

MR: Oh yeah.

IW: And so the bus stopped at Arcadia Village, which is right there by La Armada. That's where the bus would pick us up. She would tell me, "Mijita, you go, come just 30 minutes early and I'll have breakfast for you so you don't go to school hungry." Because I had to walk from my house to Arcadia Village to get the bus. And so I stop at her house, she would have breakfast ready for me, so that I would have something to eat. She would say so that "you can learn well. You gotta have food so you can learn well" [laughter]. And then I get on the bus, spend all day in Kingsville at the university, and come back in the evening, and she'd have dinner for me, ready.

So that, she said, “I know you’re hungry.” She supported me in those ways. You know, until I got my degree. And, um, she was an amazing woman.

MR: She certainly sounds that way. And what were your impressions in terms of your memories of Dr. Garcia? I remember you mentioned to me before that you had some memories, not just in the doctor’s office, but elsewhere. Do you have specific things...?

IW: Dr. Garcia was an imposing figure. I have to say. He had a sound – strong voice, and he – how do you say it when – somebody – in Spanish, “[Spanish phrase].” It’s a saying. In other words, he was not afraid of saying what had to be said. And he came out and said it. He was blunt, he spoke, people would [inaudible] for being gruff, because he just spoke, and just the way things were – this is the way it is, and he would - rapid, rapid, rapid. His language was fast [making noise of fast speaking]. [laughter]. And, uh, when I was in the fifth grade, I don’t know if I told you, but I loved to play sports. When I was a child, I loved to play sports. I played basketball and baseball, never played football, but anyway. I was playing baseball, and the person in front of me – I was next to bat, but the person in front of me hit the ball and threw the bat and hit me. The bat hit me right here. So mother, they called mother, and she came, and, of course, Dr. Garcia was our doctor, and he, she took me to his office, and he’s the one who stitched me. So I have his, a scar here. His stitches right there. It used to be here, but with age the skin has moved down, and it’s here now. Uh, but he was a no nonsense man, I mean he was all business. You do what you gotta do, and you do it well, and he took care of it, and he said, “now you’re going to go to bed for, just for today. But tomorrow you go back to school. You’re going to be okay. Go back to school.” He was a fiery speaker. A fiery speaker. Fiery. He just spoke, and he was – I mean, he fast. He would go from here to here to here to here to here just on and on and on. Um, he was greatly revered by the Mexican people. Revered. Honored. People just loved him. He, uh, I would go to some of his speeches, and I was just amazed at his capacity to use language, to say what had to be said, and not – and he inspired people to take action. Get up and do something. Don’t just take it. Do something about it. He was very charismatic. And eloquent at the same time, but blunt. Gruff to some degree. When my grandmother died, he came to her funeral, and spoke at her funeral, and called her, “La Profesora.” He said, “La professor, but she has left a legacy of promoting education among our people.” I will never forget that. So, he was a great man.

MR: Certainly. Absolutely. And it’s neat to hear some of the personal reflections. I’ve mostly just read about it really – well, entirely just read about it myself [laughter]. And until very recently, from afar – from halfway across the country. And you had said that you had participated in activism in college. Was that part of the walkout movement, or?

IW: No...

MR: You mentioned, with Cesar Chavez...?

IW: When the boycott of grapes came to San Antonio. I was in San Antonio at the time, and he came with his movement to boycott grapes, and I joined the boycott. I joined the demonstration on the streets of San Antonio. "Huelga! Huelga!" And I was holding up the sign, "Huelga!" Strike. Huelga is the Spanish word for strike. And I was so excited that – being, and by now the terms had changed. We were now Chicanos. We were Mexicans when I was a little girl. And it was seen as a very, uh, to be a Mexican was to be the lowest of the low. You were a nobody, because, well, we were just nobody, because we were not smart, we were poor. We spoke a language that was not the language of the mainstream society [summarizing what mainstream society thought of Mexican-Americans]. But by college, that had changed to Chicanos. Where you took pride in being brown. You took pride in standing up and speaking up. And while I still was quiet, because I've never been an aggressive person. I've always been non-violent, you know. Never used bad language in my life [laughter]. And that was part of my religious upbringing, how I was brought up in the church forever. But I did develop, I did develop an attitude that we should not take injustice and not do something about it. We needed to stand up and speak up and act against injustice. And to use the pen to write, you know. And so when his movement came, boycotting the grapes, then I joined the movement, and boycotted grocery stores, Piggly Wiggly in San Antonio, the different stores, the grocery stores in San Antonio, telling people not to buy grapes. And joining the different marches for the farm workers. Um, yeah, that was – my children today can't believe I did that when I was much younger, but [laughter]. My son, "Mom, we're so proud of you. We're so proud of you, mom." [laughter]

MR: Did you remember a lot of backlash from retailers?

IW: Oh yes. Oh yeah. They would throw rocks at us, tell us to get out, "go home Mexicans." Mes-kins. No, they didn't say "Mexicans." They didn't pronounce it correctly. "Mes-kins." "Mes-kins." They'd pronounce it, "Mes-kins." "Go back to Mexico, you Mes-kins." They would throw rocks at us, they would spit, you know. They would, yeah, you know, but we marched peacefully. We never, you know, we – and I never, I was never violently hurt or anything like that. It's just the words, how they looked at us, and, um, so some of that – much of my memories are not pleasant ones, but I'm very glad that I participated. I'm very glad I stood up and spoke out against injustice. For the – because the farmworkers, well, you know the conditions of the farmworkers in California and so on. And then, in Texas treated so poorly as well. But, for a long time - even after the boycott was called off, I still would not eat grapes for a long time. Because like, I couldn't [laughter].

MR: Yeah.

IW: So I got to meet Cesar Chavez and he was another [inaudible]. Just an amazing man, a humble, quiet, and unassuming man. A small – short of stature, but so humble, so unassuming, but spoke forcefully and with conviction. And, his demeanor very different from Dr. Garcia, because Dr. Garcia was forceful. He was forceful, but Dr. Garcia was a medical doctor. He had an advanced degree behind him. He was educated. Cesar Chavez was a humble man, you know,

without the education that Dr. Garcia had. And, without the big supporters that Dr. Garcia had. And, a quiet – Cesar Chavez just a quiet humble man, but when he spoke, you listened, because there was something about him that just was memorizing when he spoke about the injustice of the people towards our people. And always, of course, Cesar Chavez also non-violent. You don't use violence to get your ideas acc – the same teachings of Martin Luther King, the same teachings. So, I have, and that's why people often told me they couldn't understand how I could have married a white man. They just couldn't understand that. They called me a coconut. White on the inside and brown on the outside.

MR: Wow.

IW: And that was my own people. Calling me that. Because I was told many times, "How could you have betrayed your people by marrying a white man? How could you do that?" And then when we had children, some people would call my children – that's probably what hurt me the most – "half breeds." Call them "half breeds." When my daughter won the national – she was a national merit finalist to go to college, one of her schoolmates said, "well, the only reason you scored so high is because you have a white father." And when Audrey came and told me that, she said, "mom, guess what so and so said." It was like, "What!" And I said, "So what did you do, Audrey? What did you do?" She said, "Well, first I was just going to walk away like you tell us. Just walk away. But then I got angry, and I went back and said, 'You know something. You haven't met my mother.' Told that to her friend, and the girl was like, "uhh." I said, "Good for you, Audrey. Good for you" [laughter]. But, my children experienced – and so I didn't teach my children Spanish so they wouldn't suffer like I had suffered, and then they chided me for not teaching them the language, you know [chuckles]. So my daughter, Audrey, after she got her college degree, she joined the Peace Corps. And she went to Nicaragua, so that she could learn Spanish [laughter]. And she came back fluent in Spanish.

MR: Wow.

IW: And then my son, Paul, went to Mexico and lived in Mexico so he could learn Spanish. And they would, "why didn't, mom, you could have taught us." Oh, I said, "That's a long story. It was too hard. I didn't want you to suffer like I had suffered." And so, the story of my grandparents, great-grandparents closely, closely related to my own story. Justice and fairness, and – and so, why did I marry a white man? Because I fell in love with him. And that's the only explanation I can give. I said, "When you love somebody, you look beyond the color of their skin, where they come from, their traditions, their values." We don't even share the same religion. And that was another point of contention [laughter]. But, that's never been a problem. We've always made things work. And I'm very grateful. I wouldn't change that for anything. But, it was hard when people don't understand. They thought I was trying to show I was better. My own people would say, "You're just trying to be better than the rest of us. You're betraying your own people. You should have married a Mexican man." What can I say? You marry the person you love. That's just the way it is. Right?

MR: Yeah, I agree. It's interesting. I don't have any story in terms of the ethnic or racial politics of it. But my wife and I were not from the same religion, and I remember, I went through premarital Catholic Church training, and everything. It was interesting. I think I was the only non-Catholic there, but they were pretty good about it, I must say. At least the church I worked with, they were most interested in putting us in position to have the best loving marriage. And, you know, there's a religious framework for that, that can be related to just general human decency.

IW: That's right. That's right.

MR: It's great, because I could be perfectly honest about things I agree with or disagree with. It was an open discussion, so I was really privileged to not have other aspects to deal with there.

IW: The only thing is my husband did agree that the children would be raised as Catholics. And that's how it happened. They are all Catholics.

MR: Yeah. Well, I guess I will stop it there [conversation continues without recording]. Thank you.