

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Joann Pattillo

Principal Interviewee: Joann Pattillo

Interviewer: Mark Robbins

Robstown Area Historical Museum, Robstown, TX, March 28, 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.*

JP: I am Joann Pattillo of the Pattillo family in this area. We had the Red and White Grocery Store on 4th and Main. It was a red and white brand name store, but it was called the Pattillo brothers' grocery store, and I was raised in there...it burned down in '57 and in '57 I was a junior in college at A&I, and before that I used for work down there every summer selling cold drinks and like I told Dusty [Knoblauch], would you believe I sold \$500 once one Saturday and that's at a nickel a bottle? But that was my job, which I loved to do, and I loved to work at the grocery store, but I had to have an apron on, and I had to fold it over and tie a knot in the back, and I worked, I would sweep and do anything that needed to be done. And my sister, no. She had no desire to be down there, out mother made her one Saturday to go down there. And my sister is 4 years older than I am, and she would say, “but what if I make a mistake?” My mother would say: just correct it. And she was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof, and my mother was putting up with it. And she said, this isn't worth it, just go home. So that was my episode from my sister. And my brother, they tried to make him work in the meat markets, and that didn't last long either. I was the only one, and also I was 14 delivering groceries in our old pickup. In those days you could call to the grocery store and say, “I need some groceries” and have them delivered. No extra cost. They would take the list and give it to me and tell me where to go, and away I would go in that old pickup delivering groceries. I enjoyed it I met...I know everyone in town and everyone in town knows me because of my beginnings there. And my daddy would contract cotton picking farmers, farmers that had cotton pickers to come in there on Saturday with a truckload of them, and drop them off at the back of the grocery store there for them to come in and buy their groceries and etc. Saturdays you couldn't throw a rock without hitting three people because it was so crowded. You couldn't even walk down the sidewalks, because there were so many people on the sidewalks, but grocery store deliveries was one thing we did. I enjoyed doing it. Of course they don't do it or think about it today.

MR: Did you ever delivery groceries to the labor camp or any of the farms?

JP: No, the labor camp was there. My Junior high history teacher lived out there, because he wasn't married and he had a dog, and he wanted to give the dog away because where he was living and everything...we went out there to his apartment in the labor camp, knocked on the door and this dog came running up to the door and (barking noise), and we said goodness, but Mr. Cowan, I remember his name now, he came to the door and said "Seabag," and he just like that, sat down. So we went in there...anyway my brother and my daddy wanted the dog and they went by and gingerly took the dog, put in the pickup and we had a little farm on the edge of town...it was so small and mainly my father put meat in there that had just been slaughtered. It has to cool for about 4-5 days to cure and then bring it to the grocery store. We had that cooling facility out there. And Eugene Upshaw's grandmother and grandfather had a little house and lived out there and took care of the far... We called it that place because it was so small. And so daddy would make sausage out there in the back of the store, that's how we got into Pattillo's Country Sausage as a business after the store burned down in '57. Other than that, oh, the dog... we took the dog and gingerly and carefully we got him over where he was, we were the masters, and he was away from Mr. Cowan. But anyone come to the yard, they would stop. And, my daddy would take him also in the pickup with him, and his name was Seabag, because Mr. Cowan brought him over from England in his seabag when he was in the Navy, and he was an English Shepard dog.

MR: So, some of the folks who lived at the labor camp were not laborers or farm managers. So like Mr. Cowan he was teaching history, middle school, so this was also a place for just single men to live?

JP: Yes, a person could rent out there if they were available, but most of the cotton pickers... I really don't know. The people that picked cotton, I mean, farmers would contract these cotton pickers, and they would have 50 or 60 of them. Where they came from, I have really no idea. I just know that daddy would contract famers [to] bring the cotton pickers into our store to buy groceries and everything. We opened the store at 7 o'clock in the morning, and, dear, we didn't usually get out of there until 2 or 3 on Saturday in the morning.

MR: Oh wow, so you would get truckloads of people even at midnight, and...

JP: Well, not really that. People would come, "I need a jar of mayonnaise." My daddy would open the door and let them in, you know. But finishing and restocking and what have you, we were there late. You know, we worked hard there as an individual business as it was.

MR: So, you sold 500 dollars of cokes there at a nickel a piece. Do you have recollections of people being excited to come in to get something cold to drink?

JP: Oh yeah. They would come up to me and what an orange or soda water. You called them soda waters in those days. That's how I became physically fit, I had to carry those cases of drinks from the back to the front, and then stock my, it was an open Coca Cola case. It didn't have the lid on it. It was just open with crushed ice all in there. You don't put a bottle in there, but down. You put it cap down. Put it butt down, and it will explore. Cold water hits it and [makes noise]. So, I learned that right away. Stocked it in there, and have it stocked. They liked strawberries and

they liked those oranges. I knew what their desires were, and kept stocking that. You know, quite a bit of those drinks in there, because that's what they desired. Coca Colas, Nah [?].

MR: Interesting. Did you get mostly kids or adults? Kids saving up pennies?

JP: No, these were all adults. I don't even remember kids actually coming in there, what have you. But, I'm sure some of them had so. But, most of them were adults, and my brother and law was there, my sister's husband. And, he came in there to watch people from pick pocket, I mean, stealing things, because they could do that.

MR: I could imagine with 500, with that volume of sales, it would be hard to watch that many people in the store. Wow, did you have any sort of specific memories that stand out to you about those Saturdays?

JP: It would just, now remember, this is in the time when there was no air conditioning, but I don't remember it being hot. You know, hot I think when I was a child, or people my age, it wasn't as hot as it is today, because we're ruined today by having air conditioning. But no, we didn't even have fans that I could remember. At nighttime, roaches were 2 inches long, and they flew, and they would [makes noise] hit the wall and come down and you kill it, but I can remember those things, of me working there, and working there all the time that I did.

MR: Did you get to know a lot of the patrons as regulars?

JP: Most of the customers that came in there, yeah, I knew, and they knew me personally. Of course, I grew up here, and working at the grocery store like that, and my granddad died when he was 93. My granddad would get out in front of the grocery store during the day, meeting people, and he would come up to them and say, "I am Will Pattillo. This is my son's grocery store here." And he loved to do that. He'd stay out there about 2 hours and then he would walk home. He lived on Avenue E. He didn't want a ride. He wanted to walk home and he wanted to meet the people out there. And just get to know the people as they come by. And everybody knew Will Pattillo.

MR: Did you get to know a lot of the laborers that came in?

JP: No

MR: Were they mostly migrant laborers that came in?

JP: Yes. Most of them were migrant laborers. They came in and were hired by the farmers, and I didn't, you know. I was working too hard to get to know, selling those soda waters.

MR: Yeah [laughter]. Did you every run out of soda waters, or always stocked for Saturdays?

JP: No, we always had enough. Cases and cases of them in the back there. I was just toting them up to the front. That was a labor. I learned to do it.

MR: So when did you start working at the store? You said it closed because of the fire in the 50s?

JP: Yeah, '57 it burned down.

MR: Okay

JP: I started working probably, I would say...because I was even driving that pickup when I was 11, so I was 16 when it burned down, and I probably was working in there when I was 9 years old, and every summer that it what I did.

MR: Did you enjoy it?

JP: Yes

MR: What your favorite thing about it?

JP: Selling the soda waters. And, wearing the apron, I think. It identified me as somebody special. Wearing the apron.

MR: Yeah.

JP: Because after, you know, we had the cotton pickers out of there and everything. And that usually happened about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. 'Cause they would go home, and they would have a big dance at night at one of the farms. And we went one time, went just to drive out there, my daddy and mother wanted to go and everything, and boy, it was wild, wild [unintelligible], I tell you. But, I guess wearing the apron, [it] was one thing that just was very important to me.

MR: Yeah, yeah. I'm interested to hear...I don't know if you remember much more about the dance. You said it was pretty wild?

JP: Yeah.

MR: Was it just really crowded, or loud music, or?

JP: It was crowded, and they were hollering, and music was going. We stayed in the car. My daddy is the only one who went over there and everything. Of course, my daddy drank pretty heavily, and he went over there and got a beer. And they were all drinking, what have you. That's what they did on Saturday night.

MR: Did they generally work in the fields on Saturday morning before coming to the store? Or was that kind of a day off?

JP: I don't know. I really don't know. But, I would think yes. They came to the store... they didn't come all day long. About 3 o'clock to about 5:00.

MR: Okay, that was a peak time.

JP: They would come in there with their truckloads like that. And after they had shopped and everything, they would get back in the truck and he'd take them back to the farm.

MR: Alright. Did they look tired when they got there?

JP: No

MR: Or just excited to get a cold drink?

JP: You know, I didn't... as a kid, which I was, I didn't notice that at all in the people. They had on nicer clothes. They did have work clothes on, because they were going to town. Going to town on Saturdays. They had their bath. Cleaned up, and had on pretty nice clothes. It was a learning procedure in my life. And that's why I don't care where I go, I meet people that know me.

MR: Yeah, I can see how you would really get to know a lot people through that job. Um, that would be pretty exciting and a lot hard work too. So, let me think of other questions. Are there any other particular memories that you have about either farming in the area, or your time at the store, or selling sodas that you'd like to share?

JP: Other than with the grocery store. In January we had to do inventory. And I always got the job of counting what candy we had. Because remember this was the time of war time. There was no sugar.

MR: So this would be back during World War II, or during...

JP: Yeah

MR: Oh wow, okay.

JP: Mother would get in maybe two boxes of Hershey bars and that's all. She'd take a box at home and had it, and leave a box there for people to come in a buy. And another big thing was bubble gum, Flee's Bubble Gum I remember at school, "Hey, [unintelligible] ten cent store has Flee's Bubble Gum!" "You're kidding!" We'd run after school down there and buy, and it was a penny a piece. So that was my job at the store. What candy we had. I had to count all of the penny candy. All of the penny gum out, put the total there for inventory.

MR: Did you have to take people's ration coupons or anything like that?

JP: That was going on, but that... I don't remember, I remember that family having not so much. Had to watch. I also remember my mother saying in the car, "No, you can't take the car just to ride around. Its 20 cents a gallon! It's too expensive!" And 20 cents a gallon! Look at it today, it's too expensive [laughter]. But, uh, I can't remember anything else outstanding or anything. Of

course, the labor camp is part of my, after I quit teaching in '83, I went to work out there at the labor camp. It's called Nueces County Parks and Recreation Department as the director of [intelligible] parks out there. And we have a pavilion right next to the community [center]... Well, Richard Borchard was my boss, and we were building community center[s], so he put me in charge of it, check. My office was a little wooden building that they built when you come into the park there. And, he wanted me to check over there daily that they're doing what they are supposed to be doing to specs and everything. They community center over there, I saw it go up. The park, I worked on a grant in '96 I think it was, for the new park out there. North of it across the drainage ditch. We call it the new north park, and it is 70 acres over there that we developed, and Richard told me, "JoAnn, go to your office and take a piece of paper and develop that park out there. What would you like to see?" Which I did, and then we put it to a grant with Texas Parks and Wildlife in Austin. And after we tried three times in getting it, the third time we finally got. And we call that the million dollar park out there.

MR: Of wow, okay.

JP: The other park, which is 30 acres. The existing park. That used to be the labor camp.

MR: Uh huh. Do you remember much about the transition of, uh, as I understand it, there was time there when it wasn't used a labor camp, and then, I guess it was Commissioner Ortiz, uh, helped to make that into a park. Do you remember much about that?

JP: No, I didn't. I was in college at that time. And then, in college, in summertime... started in about '58. I started working in parks. I mean, in camp up in Hunt, Texas. Part of the girls' camp up there teaching swimming. And every summer I did that. Finished my degree. Going to A&I, finishing my degree, which I finally did. But I didn't stay around here in the summertime, and then I was staying down in Kingsville finally in the dormitories. I didn't start that way in the beginning. Two years, I lived with my aunt down there to save money. Like I said, it took me ten years to get my degree, because I worked, and even my mother passed away in '58, I think, and I then had to go to work for money to go to college. Before that, she paid for it. And I didn't know how I was going to do it. At one time, I had seven different jobs. I was making that money. But, also, I was [unintelligible] horses. I didn't realize I was spinning my wheels. But, uh, Dr. [unintelligible] asked, he said "Joe, what would you do different?" I said, "I think I would grow up a little but before I started."

MR: [laughter] You know, I still, you know, you see that a lot. I have some students that I teach at Del Mar, who went for a while and come back...

JP: See, I taught at Del Mar at nighttime, swimming.

MR: Oh, wow.

JP: I was adjunct faculty. And, I was adjunct faculty over there for 15 years teaching swimming. Probably right across the parking lot where I am in Heritage Hall, right there in the Kinesiology building.

MR: Well, I can stop here. Thanks again, I appreciate it.

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