

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Lilly Chapa Smith

Interviewee: Lilly Chapa Smith

Interviewer: Mark Robbins

Robstown, TX, March 7, 2013

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MR: This is Lilly Chapa Smith.

LCS: Lilly Chapa Smith, and my recollection of the labor camp in Robstown, TX was in the summer of 1946. I went to work as a dental assistant and the dentist was a doctor by the name of Dr. Cole. I believe his first name was Robert. He was in the Navy stationed and the Naval Station in Corpus Christi and he would commute during the week every day to work as a dentist. And he was originally from Peoria, IL. And we were always busy because it was during the summer when schools were out, you know, and a lot of children would come to have dental work done, and some grownup or adults, but like I said, lots of children. And the manager at the camp at the time was Mr. Willard Martin, and after Mr. Martin stayed in Robstown and owned some businesses here in Robstown. The labor camp had a big community hall and I belonged to a social club that ended up buying a piano that we kept there at the community hall and every time an orchestra or band came to play they would rent the piano, and we charged 25 dollars a night. And it was good because I don't remember how much rent we paid to the community hall, but anyway it worked out fine. I really enjoyed working there. Like I said, it was just for during the summer. And there were not only Hispanics, but also black people living there and they would all go out to work. At that time, Robstown was very progressive. It had a lot of field work. At that time we didn't have any cotton picker machines, so they would all go out to work in the fields.

MR: So, when did they normally leave for work and when did they normally get back?

LCS: I can imagine that they left at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. They had already left by the time I got to work at 8:00 and I don't know what time they got back.

MR: Did everyone go together or were small children left behind that someone would babysit?

LCS: I imagine, yes, either the grandmothers would stay and take care of the children, and they would all go to work. There were truckers that picked them up on a truck, you know, and now it's against the law to haul people on the back of the truck, but that was the custom back then.

MR: So how did they know where to pick? Did the manager make contacts with local farmers?

LCS: No the truckers would. And then they knew, I guess, they would go and talk to the people to see if they were going to go work for them, and then the truckers take them out to the fields.

MR: And this was from July through September, or?

LCS: Well, that would be cotton season. And I don't know if they worked in the grain business, you know, sorghum, but that would have started earlier. Probably the latter part of June, and that lasted only about two or three weeks.

MR: Do you remember how far some folks would come that stayed in the labor camp. Did you meet folks from pretty far away?

LCS: From the valley here in Texas. And according to people that I have talked to, some from central Texas, and definitely during cotton season, people would come from central Texas, all over, to pick cotton here in Robstown.

MR: Were there residents during other seasons, like the winter. Or just during harvest time?

LCS: I don't know if there were residents that worked because I know before the war, there was a big shed, you know, vegetable sheds. But they usually...but as far as I can remember, I wasn't that old at that time, but there were people in Robstown who would move from Laredo or the valley to work in the sheds. During the day they would build crates, and at night, by late in the afternoon, the truckers would bring in their harvest. At night there would be a lot of men working.

MR: And I remember you mentioned before, how they would line the railroad tracks. Did they sell just to the folks coming in on trains?

LCS: No, no. The owners of the companies of the sheds, they would sell by phone to either in Chicago or New York, so by the time they loaded those cars, they were already sold. They knew exactly where they were destined to go.

MR: And you had a really interesting story, if you wouldn't mind stating it again of a time when you were a kid and your dad was going to go to Houston, I thought that was really interesting.

LCS: Well, I was grown by then and I worked at a bank.

MR: Yes, that's right.

LCS: I must have been in my early twenties. But, my dad, now they call it a fleeter truck, you know, and he would sell onions, it was his priority, you know. And buyers would call him, and there was this buyer that called him from Houston, and he said "Chapa, I need number 1 onion, or something" and he said, "do you have any?" "Yes I can get it harvested tomorrow in my truck,

we'll be there the next day." You know, because the market opens at 2:00 in the morning, the farmers market in Houston. So, by then all of my dad's truckers except there was his pickup and a truck in Robstown, but the truckers were all gone, with taking the loads to San Antonio and other places, you know. And so he told mother, I am going to have to go and take the load. And mother said, no you can't go by yourself. My dad was diabetic and my mother was afraid that something might happen. He said, I'm sorry I already promised and I have to go, so she said Lilly doesn't have to work tomorrow because they have a holiday and she can go with you. And she said, oh fine. And so as soon as we left Robstown, I said daddy, daddy, let me take over the truck, and it was one of those tandems at that time, like an 18 wheeler. And so I took over the truck and I drove it until we got to the entrance of Houston. And the traffic there was, even at that time, was horrendous so I woke him up and said "daddy, daddy, take over the truck, we are already in Houston." And he said "we're already in Houston?" And he took over. At that time, the farmers market was right downtown. And so he drove the truck in there and the buyer came in a few minutes, and they unloaded the load into the buyer's truck, and the buyer gave him a check, and my dad said, we are going to go to breakfast and we'll have to wait until the bank opens. It's better to get a cashier's check because you never might know what happens to that person. But I said, "daddy, it is a holiday, the bank is closed." He said, "oh my goodness. We'll we will go to breakfast anyway." And that's what we did. And I pulled my hair up and put on my cowboy hat to not look like a girl. And, Mark, it was beautiful, so many people with their wears, lots of plants and flowers and all kinds of vegetables, you know. That was my first time at a farmers market.

MR: Wow, and at two in the morning...

LCS: Yes, and already there were people like this lined up like ants working at that time of the morning.

MR: And I think you had mentioned before how a lot of the buyers were restaurants and things like that?

LCS: That's a really neat story. There was a buyer that he had, like convenience stores, and I don't know if he had two or three convenience stores you know. And he was one of my dad's clients, you know.

MR: So did your dad do business with Houston a lot?

LCS: Yes, Houston was a big market... as a matter of fact he even relocated his brother, his younger brother, to Houston to become a buyer, you know. And he would call my dad, and say we need a load of this and whatever. Eventually my uncle just bought property and he just stayed over there.

MR: When he was acquiring crops to sell to Houston or elsewhere, did he have a group of growers that he worked with?

LCS: Here?

MR: Yes.

LCS: Yes, as a matter of fact I was looking at some old checks to try to get rid of some paper and there was a check made out for \$200, not a full payment but a down payment for seeds that he got from someone in Mexico, and then he would contract with the farmers to supply the seeds, and I don't know how they worked out the price on the crops, and that's how he did that. Not only onions, which was his favorite crop, but also watermelons.

MR: And so these crops, would they be grown outside of the cotton season?

LCS: Well, I don't know if they planted it. Cotton, they had to plant about now, about March. I know the grain was planted during the latter part of February. If they planted in January we could have a freeze and it would ruin all the crops.

MR: Do you remember any years in which that happened where there was a drought or freeze?

LCS: Yes. We had very bad droughts I don't remember exactly but around the 1980s. I remember somebody planted. And somebody said, oh Roy a planted in the latter part of January and his grain was already planted, and here comes the big freeze, and he had the plant everything again.

MR: Wow that must have been pretty difficult. So at the labor camp do you recall a pretty lively recreational community... I have seen kids playing baseball in pictures...?

LCS: I heard that at night some would play the accordion others would play the guitar, and outside of the barracks they would play. I wasn't there but that's what I heard.

MR: And I recall you mentioning some of the dances there...

LCS: That was at the community hall, yes that was on the grounds of the labor camp. That was a very nice hall. That is where we rented the piano at the social hall. They would have very nice dances. Big formal dances. Maybe in January for graduation. Yes, we had some very good entertainment there.

MR: The folks that went to the dances they were more than just people living in the camp...

LCS: They were not people living at the camp. It was people from Robstown that rented the hall. I imagine the people that live there might have had some social functions. I really don't know.

MR: Did a lot of the permanent residents of Robstown form relationships with residents at the labor camp?

LCS: Not that I remember.

MR: I read in the newspaper that sometimes flood victims would be located at the camp. Do you recall any other uses like that of the grounds?

LCS: No I don't. I do know that we, Robstown, used to flood a lot until they started putting in drainage ditches.

MR: Some general questions about Robstown history that I would be interested in... What kinds of changes have you seen, on Main Street and downtown, have you seen over the years?

LCS: I was born and reared on Main Street, this street here. It was dirt... and a big ditch in front of the house, my dad had a beautiful bridge that would go over the ditch, and every time we had a flood that bridge would flood and then go all the way to probably here and downtown, and then after they started working on the drainage and paved the streets, I guess that was around the 1950s, mid-50s, things changed, you don't see a floods in Robstown anymore. My dad would say that water would never get into our yard because my dad built it up, so whenever there was a flood it was more toward the street, but it never did get into our house or yard or anything like that, but, yes, Robstown used to be a very progressive town, we had good clothing stores, and grocery stores, a lot of Hispanics owned some good grocery stores, I remember that we traded with a grocery store that was a block away from where we lived, we would buy the best boiled ham, and cheeses, and good T-bone steaks, and that man would finance the farmers for a whole year. And the farmers it was mostly staples that they would charge because they had chicken, eggs, and meat at the farm, but that man did finance them for a whole year.

MR: And so they would pay him back...

LCS: As soon as they harvested their crops they would pay him back...

MR: Were there ever years in which the harvest wasn't so good so they would have to take a little longer?

LCS: I presume that there were but I really don't know. I do remember that one year the onion market fell and crashed, and my dad had a big investment. For him, it was big. He would borrow money from the bank to work with. The bankers said, "Chapa don't worry about it you can renew the note and next year you can pay it." And my dad owned other properties. He had a 50 acre farm out on 624. Out by Calallen. The properties are now worth a lot of money. Especially right where farm was, at one time it got to about 50,000 or 60,000 an acre. He told my mother, someone has offered to buy my ranch, and I would like to sell it because I'm not used to owing money like that. I can't work with a clear mind. So my mom said you worked for it, go ahead and do what's best. And so he did sell it. And my mother went ahead and signed because it was in both names. Yes, there were times but not very often, but I remember that one incident.

MR: Did you find that most people who were permanent residents of Robstown knew each other?

LCS: Yes, very well. In my neighborhood it was like a family and we're not related but we were very close. And all the kids we were about the same age, so, yes, it was very nice growing up in Robstown.

MR: And people helped each other out...

LCS: Especially if somebody was sick. They would send soup for the whole family...

MR: That's very interesting. Do you have other memories that you would like to share?

LCS: No, but I did forget to tell you that when my brother graduated from high school he wanted to go to the University of Houston so he told my dad, he said, "I can go to the market at two in the morning and sell your products or whatever you want, and then come back to my apartment and get ready to go to class." He didn't know if the class would be at eight or nine, and so that's how he went to college.

MR: So he continued to help out with the business... well then that must've worked out pretty well then....

LCS: He went into the service later. He did not finish college, but he did go I guess about two or three years, but it worked out pretty good.

And let me tell you something my dad's truck always brought in *good* watermelons. He always had very good crops, and so I would rush to the neighbors all down about a block away from the house, taking orders, "did anyone want a watermelon?" And you know, and so I picked up the watermelons and came home, and we had red wagons, then got a neighbor boy to pull it for me. But by the time we got there, my brother had beaten me to it, and he had not taken the order, and he had gone with his wagon with watermelons and sell them, and the neighbors would think that that was the one that Lilly had taken.

MR: That's funny...a little competition.

LCS: I can't say that my dad and mom would save so much for the allowance, but they did give us an allowance you know. We had a cigar box. He would have quarters and nickels and things like that. Then he would say go ahead and give whatever you need... and I was pretty unselfish, you know, I would get a nickel

MR: I guess all stop it right here. Thank you very much, Lilly.