

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Renato Ramirez

Principal Interviewee: Renato Ramirez

Interviewer: Mark Robbins

Corpus Christi, TX, February 18, 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 Renato Ramirez... now I'm forgetting the date, the date it is

RR: Today? Today is... the 18th? Hold on

MR: Yeah.

MR: Laughs

RR: Monday the eighteenth

MR: The eighteenth

Both: of February

MR: 2013

RR: Yeah

MR: So, it's pretty open ended... I'm really interested in hearing about your memories

RR: Okay

MR: Or even just stories you've heard about, it can be your family, neighbors, what it was like as far back as you can remember

RR: Okay

MR: Or even more recently in farm labor communities, and, um, Duvall county or even if it goes beyond there

RR: Well I, you know, I can cover quite a bit of ground.

MR: Sure, yeah.

RR: Yes, I was born in San Diego, Texas, in 1953 on November 12, my parents are from that area as well. My dad was born in Beeville but eventually migrated to the San Diego area, and my mom was born in Los Reyes Ranch community back in 1923. My dad was born in 1914.

Growing up in San Diego, some of my earliest memories were being picked up by this truck, a flatbed truck that would come by right before sunup, honk the horn, and all my neighbors and all my brothers, sisters, and mother would jump on the back of the truck and we'd go off to the closest, uh, well to the, to the closest, to the cotton fields and pick cotton, and that was my exposure to farming very early on. Then I had learned that my uncles and aunts still lived on a farm, my mom was born on a ranch. Um, okay, and every time we had a holiday the family, the extended family, would get together back at the ranch, and hold a celebration, you know, but I remember my mom telling me that when she was growing up at the ranch, uh, they were, there were no buses to take kids to school so every now and then my uncle was able to hire a teacher to live at the ranch. Okay, and she would teach all of the children of the ranch community, okay. In return for room and board and, you know, it allowed her to practice her profession as well, you know. But that little ranch community was out in the middle of nowhere. And, the men in the community built a church, had a one room school house and, uh, and ranched and farmed, you know, raised livestock and farmed crops for sustenance and hunted as well, and so forth. You know, I remember doing that growing up. Let me see what else, uh, well that ranch is still in the hands of my family. My cousins - especially was my age, she's got ownership of it. I haven't seen her for a while but they still have the ranch and its still in the same place, okay, and it's still a pretty desolate area, you know. What else...?

MR: Well, um, so was it sort of a daily occurrence that the truck would come by...?

RR: Oh yeah, that was daily, right, exactly, you know, this was in the mid 50's, from the early 50's roughly to about the mid 60's, we did that, okay. After World War II the men tried to get jobs in the economy, those that could were lucky, those that couldn't continued to try, whereas the wives and their kids would do menial labor, you know stoop labor, if you couldn't get a job as a maid or gardener or something like that, you'd pick cotton, you know, 'cause it was always there, that work was always there, okay. I also want to - well, my dad eventually, uh, by the late 50's, roughly about 1959 perhaps 1958, got a job at the Naval Air Station here in Corpus and, uh, we could now stop picking cotton, okay, because he was bringing home a decent wage and a steady job with civil service benefits and such, you know, so that was great, and that was a big boon for us, you know, we bought our first car. We actually got an inside toilet - inside the house, you know instead of an outhouse like we used to, uh, I remember those, that transition that took place, okay, but more than that I remember my dad telling me as well that he used to

hunt, to gather food to eat. He would also do farming, ranching and hunting, he went to school formally, to public schools only up to the third grade, and dropped out in order to work, so whatever he could do to work, he did it roughly at about ten years old, you know, actually third grade, your eight, nine years old, you know. So he gave up a public education in order to go to work, hunt and help his parents, you know, put food on the table and survive, things like that, my mother was able to graduate from high school, you know, so that was good, but my dad was basically self taught, he learned how to read later on in his life, after he had gotten jobs and so forth, and picked up a bible and stuff. But, uh, he was always sort of, uh, that's why he strived so hard to make sure that we went to school, you know, because it was something that he never got to do himself. But, uh, I remember him telling me that he used to hunt in the woods for food, he'd also pick, uh, medicines, you know, um like folk, folk medicines, bark, leaves, different roots, uh. He knew what to pick because his grandmother showed him which were medicinal and which were edible and so forth, and so he'd also go out and do that. His grandmother was generally considered to be sort of like a faith healer, or a folk medicine doctor, you know, in these communities where people were at that you had no access to a medical doctor here, you know. She was also a midwife, and his mother also raised orphans that people, uh, when parents would pass away or could no longer afford their children, they put them up for adoption, whatever. My grandmother would take them in and help raise them, you know, it was sort of like people helping each other to pull through, you know, and this is during; even before the Great Depression, you know, when this was going on, it was in the teens and the twenties when this was going on, I remember asking my dad, how did the Great Depression affect you all? And he said "well, I mean, we... it didn't affect us at all, we were poor to begin with." So, we knew how to survive under those conditions, it affected the people that had a lot to lose, you know, and if anything, it probably benefited the small ranching communities where I was at because I remember my dad, he went to work with Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's. Uh, I think they had a 17 year old membership threshold but you could lie your way into it. He went in at about 14 years old, 15 years old, and started traveling the country doing work projects out in the field, you know. And it gave him structure and it eventually got him all the way to California. And, eventually he joined the military from that, and then came back to South Texas and started a family, got married and stuff. But, that was during those periods of the 1930's as well and before then, and I remember them telling me also that he's -- in the twenties, when he was still sort of like a teenager, he used to see crews of workers, you know, before the 1920's and right around that time period, this is when this area of South Texas was being settled. Uh, after oil had been discovered and ranching had been -- become more prominent and railroads had been put in, you know, towns started springing up and stuff. People started buying plots of land and so forth. Work crews would be hired by ranchers who would ask them to come clear their land and then instead of paying them, sometimes they'd kill them, and bury them, you know and you'd never see the crews again and there'd be no investigation, you know. And there was a lot of stuff like that, that went on right before, right during the World War I period, as a matter of fact, after that Plan de San Diego. And, you know, the Zimmerman note became known, there was so much

paranoia about subversives here in this area, that they allowed for a lot of abuse of human rights to take place, mass deportations, uh, murder, burial, and mass graves, things of that sort, uh, were things that were whispered but never documented, but yet, people would realize that, wow these people went out to do a job and they never came back. You know, many times people would be hired, not knowing that there was never an intention to pay them, you know. Some of those events have actually been documented in some of these newer books that have been written by a new generation of Hispanics, Chicanos down here in Texas, who have become educated and bold enough to actually print this, you know. Because back, uh, you couldn't do that, you know, it was unheard of for anyone to write against, to write something like that. It would be considered fiction, outrageous, you know. Now more and more evidence is coming out that some of these things actually did happen, you know, so I'm glad to see that some of this is, uh, being brought to light, you know.

MR: I think that's very important, I think it's -- especially in terms of the style of history you have, not just what questions you're asking, but these are the kinds of things that wouldn't be on the front page of the newspaper...

RR: Right, exactly. Well, people that would bring up issues like this or land disputes and things of this sort many times are viewed as bandits, uh, according to traditional history. And so they were cast in a very negative light and demonized, you know, yet today, you know, they were probably s... you know, a fairer accounting of it would be that they were standing up for their property, you know, which, in turn was confiscated by those that considered themselves the good guys back then, you know, uh -- and got confiscated and got covered up legally through the paperwork and the deeds and the title offices and such, you know, eventually, but now that's coming out and better documentation, more accurate history is being written about this region.

MR: You've mentioned your father being able to recognize different plants, were used for...

RR: Oh yeah

MR: Medicinal purposes

RR: Right, right

MR: Just out of curiosity....?

RR: I remember being cured of illness, basically a fright. I used to have nightmares growing up. I was a very sickly kid, and my mother had this woman come in and pray over me and use a broom to sweep the evil spirits out of me, and then sucked them out with a raw egg under my bed, and had me drink tea made out of plants that were brought out of the forest, you know, so this was a common, uh, commonly known, uh... medicines for ailments, different types, not just physical ailments, but spiritual, emotional, things of that sort as well.

MR: Did he, since he was very good at finding what plants, and had been taught what they were from his parents, and grandparents...

RR: Right, right.

MR: Did he supply some of these plants for other people in the community, or act as a healer himself?

RR: Well, my grandmother would use them to heal others that were – that, neighbors and so forth, you know, because a lot of times neighbors were far and few between. And so, if you lived in the small ranching community everyone knew that your grandmother can help you, you know, and my father was probably not the only guy doing that. Guys his age were probably raised with the same knowledge, you know, that this is good for this, this is good for that, you know, how to treat poisonous bites, how to treat, you know, earaches, toothaches, a pregnancy, a hangover, anything, you know. They actually -- I remember having a flame blown into my ear, you know, they'd make a paper cone, and they'd light a match at the end of it, and then blow the flame into the ear and it would automatically melt all of the wax that had built up in your ear, and it would drain out and hopefully it would drain off the infection as well, you know, uh, some of it makes sense.

MR: Yeah.

RR: [laughs]

MR: And for a hangover too, that's interesting [both laugh]. That sounds like – well, maybe I ought to try that [RR: laugh] one of these days. So you mentioned before, churches. To what extent did you see -- when was the first church that you can remember, was that a major focal point of a community there?

RR: Oh yeah. The small town where I grew up, San Diego, is the oldest Roman Catholic Diocese south of San Antonio and it was formed back in the 1860's I think. The church is a beautiful church, it's got sort of a cross between Romanesque and Gothic architecture and in front of the church is the town square, the plaza, and the plaza has the gazebo right in the center, and it's got a radial pattern of sidewalks that come out and it's four square blocks in length, something like that. And it sits right at the entrance of the church, so it's the town center, you know, and that small town I'd venture to say that 99% of the population were Roman Catholic, and many of them were related to each other, you know, because of, uh, through distant, I mean through intermarriage over the years. By the time I was 6 years old, 5 years old, I was an altar boy, you know, and this is before the, uh this is when Catholics were required to know the mass in Latin okay, uh, that didn't change until the mid-60's, '63 I think was the year that the Catholic Church in Rome finally said that you can give the mass in the native language, okay. Spanish, English, Filipino, whatever. Okay, so, uh, prior to that you had to know the mass in Latin, and, uh, all of the refrains, and responses, and so forth, so I knew that very young. I remember doing a

midnight mass when I was about six years old, uh, and so that -- and I went to Catholic school as a young boy until it ran out of money and we all ended up going to the public schools but we continued go to Catholic education, parochial, uh, schools, uh, after the day in the public school, you'd go to Catholic school, religious catechism, okay, every day until I graduated from the 12th grade. I actually received a diploma from the church as well, you know, so it was a major impact on our lives. My dad was same way, my mom was the same way, we were all very close to the church, you know. Some -- my sister is still very, very close, I sort of drifted now in these years but, uh, I -- I'm not -- while I may not be very active with the church, I am still very deeply religious as far as the idea of faith, and stuff like that, you know, uh, partly out of fear [both: laugh]. You know, it makes good sense.

MR: So just out of curiosity, or actually more than out of curiosity, one thing that I'm really interested in is -- in terms of the geography of community...

RR: Yeah.

MR: Uh, you'd mentioned the church there, and when it came to working life -- and in particular picking cotton. How far from the San Diego area would that work be?

RR: Actually outside of San Diego, on the way -- on Highway 44 coming toward Corpus Christi about, right before you get to the town of Alice there is a small community called Springfield. Okay, and I distinctly remember at the corner of Highway 44, Springfield road, there was a large, large section of cotton fields, that's where we would pick, okay and, uh, but, I mean, South Texas is filled with cotton fields, okay. My uncle at his ranch at Los Reyes used to grow corn, used to grow watermelons, used to grow squash, beans, uh, and cotton as well, okay, so I had a little bit of experience picking corn, and picking watermelons as well, and so forth in the summer whatever crop was in and he needed help, all the cousins would go out there and get friends and we'd do that, I've cut sugar cane with a, with a, what do you call it? A sickle.

MR: A machete?

RR: No actually like a, like a Russian sickle.

MR: Oh man, the, uh, yeah, I know what you're talking about.

RR: The "hammer and sickle." Okay, and the sickle, you know, the Mexican sickle is not as big and wide. It's called a yoyal [spelling?], okay. It's a long wooden handle with sort of like a bow, half semicircle of metal, which holds a blade that is sharp on both edges, okay. And what you do, you swing it back and forth and just everything in your way gets cut down. You just have to be careful not to put your leg in the way, you know, but. We used that for, uh, sugar cane. Uh, which was a product that was raised in some of the ranches as well, you know? Uh, uh, the closest sugar mill is probably in Houston, Sugarland, okay. Imperial Sugar has their, their original factory there, and that was there for years and years and years, so, uh, that is sometimes sort of like a backup crop to, to cotton and other standard staples, you know, that are grown in this area. But, uh, yeah we would go just around the surrounding community. There's always

ranches around that need, uh, pickers, you know, Agua Dulce, Springfield, the Alice area, Banquete, you know, places like that. Uh, because coming toward the coast, the land is a lot flatter...

MR: Mm-hmm

RR: And you can, you can, it's made for growing cotton, specifically, you know, but also, uh, sorghum, and other types of grain, okay.

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: As you go further west and especially, say, past San Diego, you start getting into the hilly, brushy, non-arable type of land, it takes too much money, it's better for ranching, for livestock raising, you know. So it was always toward the coast that you'd go to pick, you know. And, we would pick from sun up to sundown, you know. I was real young at the time and so that I used a child's bag which probably weighed maybe ten pounds at the most when filled, whereas adults would wear, use bags that would stretch about 6, 7, 8 feet and you could fill it up with cotton. It would take you hours to fill it up, and then you'd, once you filled it up, take it to the truck, they'd weigh it and write down how much you picked and then you'd head back out to the field. Then, at the end of the day they would pay you based on how much you brought in, you know. And I think, uh, it might have been a nickel a bag or something like that, you know.

MR: Gheez...

RR: It was bad, man but, uh, it kept us working, anyway.

MR: Did they have much supervision in terms of when...?

RR: The same people that drove the truck, my uncle used to drive the truck -- He would pick too, you know. So everyone was involved in picking. Uh, you all uh, young kids, they would try and keep you out of the direct sun...

MR: Mm-hmm

RR: Uh, during the hottest part of the day. So you'd pick in the morning and then toward the evening, you know, and during the hottest part of the day they'd probably sit you under the truck. Uh, just to rest, you know. But the older folks, the more sturdier, healthier folks, they had broad hats and long sleeve shirts and, uh, to cover not just uh, from the sun but also from the plants themselves, you know.

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: Uh, some fields were a combination of corn, cotton and other types of grain. And so, you were always rubbing up against 'em and it would cut right through you, you know, if you weren't wearing the proper clothes. There was also the danger of snakes and stuff like that as well.

MR: Did you ever see, uh, a lot of snakes...?

RR: I remember we used to...

MR: Did they ever bite anybody?

RR: Well, no, uh, we uh, wore... You know, I remember telling Derrick Oden, you know, what they do down here if you ever see a snake laying across a fence, that's done to generate rain, okay. If you can kill a rattlesnake, and especially a rattlesnake, you don't want to kill the non-poisonous snakes, those, those are the ones that are good, they get rid of rodents and they actually kill rattlesnakes. Like the Black Indigo, okay, the Black Indigo snakes are constrictors and they kill rattlesnakes. They'll actually hunt them down and kill them, you know, so you want to see those around. Uh, it's just scary when you see them 'cause they're so big, you know, but a rattlesnake, I remember we used to kill them, they'd chop their head off and they'd lay it across the, the top strand of a fence, a barbed wire fence and that's supposed to generate rain, okay. And so that's sort of like an old myth, uh, or legend, or whatever, uh, but it's a practice that is still done, you know, and so we did that all the time. You'd always see that, you know, if you'd see a snake you'd call the men, the older men, and they'd come by and they'd either have a machete or maybe a rifle in the cab of the truck or something, you know. But, uh, they were able to kill those, pretty much.

I remember in high school, uh, when I was in high school in the late sixties, early seventies, La Raza Unita movement here in South Texas was organized, okay. As a matter of fact at A & I Kingsville is where it was organized and, uh, the founders of La Raza Unita Party was José Gutiérrez and Carlos Guerra and Efrain Hernandez, they were all students at Kingsville. And they organized boycotts and walkouts and sit ins especially over the treatment of, of farm laborers, okay. They were able to bring Cesar Chavez down uh, to the, to the valley and organize the United Farm Workers and I have newspaper articles showing meetings that were held and, uh, Chavez addressing the crowd and the Catholic Church also in support of that, you know, uh, so that, that eventually became a source of political strife and, uh, differences between the state, you know. They didn't want to provide any type of medical coverage, no minimum wages, no recognition of labor rights, uh, for stoop laborers, you know, cotton pickers and others, onion pickers, and so forth in the valley. Uh, I don't, uh, and so they organized, got Chavez to bring attention, national attention to the issue of farm laborers down here in the valley and organize the farm workers, you know, but not only that, they also called attention to police brutality against people who were arrested and spoke very little English. Many times you had grand juries that were all white, you had sheriffs that were all white, you had Texas Rangers conducting investigations that didn't have their heart in it and you'd have people that would be arrested on a, on a minor infraction and all of a sudden the next day they'd be found dead in their cells, you know. Uh, hanging from a belt or, or beaten to death, and things of this sort. When people would call for an investigation, the police were always cleared, you know, and so people started bringing, you know, conducting marches, public marches, demanding that the government, the federal government open up civil rights investigations and things of this sort, you know, and so they eventually forced much more open and honest government.

MR: Do you have recollections of participating in or seeing uh...

RR: Yeah.

MR: ...this civil rights activism?

RR: Sure.

MR: While you were at A&I?

RR: Well, actually in, in Alice.

MR: Or in Alice, yeah.

RR: Yeah, there was a march held by La Raza Unita Party and the Brown Berets. Alice -- this is shortly after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I participated in the march on my bicycle, okay. We marched downtown and congregated in front of the police station and it was covered by the newspaper, the local... uh, the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, they sent their, their head photographer George Gongora, and I remember him taking photos from the back of a pickup truck of the marchers who were throwing rocks, uh, to the police and to businesses and so forth, you know, and he got pelted by rocks himself and I remember reminding him, asking him, "do you remember this and that?" And he said, "Yeah, I was there!" And I said, "Yes, I know we were there throwing rocks at you!" You know, but that was a march that probably had about 300 people involved, and it was, you know, it, it originally was a candidates forum out in the public plaza where candidates would uh, run -- give their spiel on running for office, but eventually the Brown Berets, which were known for radicalizing events like this, you know, got people motivated and agitated to, to march, you know, and we did that downtown. We also had a couple of walkouts from our high school that were investigated by the police, you know, I helped organize, me and a couple of guys. And we wrote some newsletters urging students to walk out of school on a certain day, and what had happened, you know, it brought the class day to a standstill, you know, and the police are called in and people were expelled and such. But it, uh, it eventually forced the school board and the school administration to listen to the complaints of students, you know, so that was very helpful. But there are many other marches that took place, and especially down in the valley, because by the time 1971 and '2 came around, well, I graduated in '72. By the time '73 came around I was down in the valley and I witnessed some of those events more, uh...

MR: What were your more memorable impressions of those marches?

RR: Oh, I loved them. You know, for a young kid, relatively young, I was still -- I was 18 years old, you know, it was exciting to be involved in something political and historical, you know. Like I said, this is just shortly after the passage of the Civil Rights Law and the Voting Rights Law. All of a sudden, there was a lot of energy within the Hispanic community that, you know, now we can have a say so. And we, we can take part in decisions that affect us, you know. And so you had Hispanics running for mayor, and school board, and police chief in towns that historically been, they had been excluded from, even though they made up 70 % of the

population, you know. So it was very, very motivating and very great to be involved in that type of situation where that happened, and my brother who was older than me, uh, knew the, knew the people that organized a lot of these marches and organized that political party who actually had gubernatorial candidates running for office, you know. They were personal friends of each other so that was great, you know, I really enjoyed that too. My father hated it. My father was a World War II veteran, and he didn't like the idea of people taking up arms and protesting the government, because he fought for the government, you know, and he saw them as troublemakers and as long haired troublemakers, and pot heads, and so forth, you know. "Get a job," you know, "Go to work like I did," you know. He struggled, he, he never graduated, he was put into the workforce almost immediately, missed his childhood and so forth and he felt that anyone that uh, you know, you're living at home, and while I'm out at work you're doing this, you know, it's shameful, don't do it, uh, get a job, get a responsibility, things of this sort; it was a different generational clash, you know, but somebody had to do it to bring attention to it, and this was the first generation of Hispanics that had access to college on a large scale even though there were colleges down here, regional colleges, still for the first time ever they were getting an education on the Constitution and the laws -- and how come this doesn't apply to us? You know, and all this type of stuff, so they - it was important, you know, and there was a lot of intergenerational conflicts between families over the way it was being done here in Corpus Christi. The old generation was represented by LULAC and Dr. Hector Garcia, they didn't like La Raza Unita. La Raza Unita were the long haired, young, hot [pot?] head college students, whereas the older generation of LULAC were people who were dressed in suits, had professional jobs, and they wanted to work with the lawmakers, you know, they didn't want to work against them, whereas the old -- the younger generation were, were all about direct action, you know.

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: ...being out in the streets protesting, boycotts, strikes, whatever, you know, using the nontraditional methods, whereas the older folks wanted to work within the system, you know...

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: It was the same thing that happened with the black civil rights movement as well...

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: You know, but, uh, it was more of a microcosm down here in South Texas and we had our own issues to bring up, you know, and a lot, I mean, but they all had to do with the idea of inequality, lack of jobs, lack of access, lack, lack of, uh, determination, and, you know...

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: So all that. Every generation finds their own way of expressing themselves and that was one of the, one of the differences then, you know, and it was part of the sixties generation, that was it, more confrontational than it was back in the forties and, and fifties, you know.

MR: Did you ever find, or hear of from your father, from others, uh, moments where folks back in the twenties, thirties, forties, uh, or even the fifties, um, you know, asked for higher wages...?

RR: Oh yeah.

MR: ...or anything like that?

RR: My dad actually got fired from the Department of the Army, because there was an Inspector General that came to the Military Base, uh, Aradmac [spelling?], okay, here in Corpus Christi and, right before he left, he inspects the entire base, okay, and this was the biggest helicopter depot during the Vietnam War, and still is the biggest helicopter depot of any base in the country. Before he left they had the entire civilian workforce and the uniform workforce in formation, and the Inspector General of the Army asked, "Does anyone have any questions of me?" And my dad had the guts to stand forward and, uh, pose the General the question. And he said, "Look, there are a lot of Hispanic men here that served in World War II valiantly and the Korean War, and yet all they do is get jobs in custodial services or housekeeping. They can't get any promotions, yet they are trained and they're technically proficient and they're hard workers, you know, would you please see why we can't get promoted?" And the General took that down and he said, "I'll look into it, thank you," and then he left. And they called my dad to the front office for speaking out and fired him that day. And that same day the Navy, which is also on the base, hired him, you know, uh, but, uh, that's the way it was, you weren't supposed to speak out.

MR: Mm-hmm.

RR: My dad eventually died of poisoning of, uh, through Agent Orange, PCBs, dioxins, all types of solvents that he was exposed to while at work at the base for 29 years, okay. He developed lymphoma, uh, Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, primarily based on skin cancer, melanoma and, and other types, okay. Right now there's a class action lawsuit that's going forward by people that are finally getting recognition for being exposed to the, to those dangers back in the sixties, you know, but my dad, he, he didn't last long enough, okay, but there were a lot of people that complained like that. My dad wasn't the only one, many people, but a lot of times the, the best way to stop the complaints was to fire the folks and hire someone who's not gonna complain, and is willing to work for a cheaper wage, you know.

MR: Did, uh, did he recall, or, or others recall, or do you recall, um, seeing similar things happening in, when picking cotton?

RR: Well...

MR: ...was there any kind...

RR: ...back in the...

MR: ...of negotiation...

RR: ...back in the...

MR: ...in the compensation, or treatment there?

RR: Back in the forties my dad, in 1947, the same year that the American GI Forum was organized here in Corpus Christi, '48, they organized the Freedom Party in Duvall County to counter George Parr, who was a political boss of those counties right there, okay, Jim Wells, Brooks County, Duvall County, part of Webb County, okay. He was the biggest land owner, had the most money, and he controlled San Diego by making sure that he controlled every single political office. He controlled the public schools, the School Board, Superintendent, Chief of Police, County Sheriff, Tax Collector and Assessor, County Judges, you name it. And he didn't like workers working outside of the county, okay. When these people came back from the war they, they still saw the way things were and they had no political voice. They organized and ran their own candidates against George Parr's men, and Parr was actually accused of murder. One of the candidates that they ran for office, actually they had an attorney that defended the Freedom Party. The Freedom Party got in touch with the Justice Department, and the Texas Rangers and had them investigate Parr for the destruction of public records, okay. [the allegations:] Parr burned down the courthouse twice to prevent records from being found that implicated him with voter fraud, uh, Box 13, for example in Duvall County. My dad was jailed on – with no charges filed against him solely because we was a “trouble maker,” okay. They hired an attorney named Floyd. Jake Floyd from Alice, Texas. His son was killed by mistake, instead of him, by a hit man that had been hired by George Parr, okay. And that's been documented as well, uh, in recent years and such. So there was a lot of political intrigue that was going on. They tried to end Parr's reign, control over Duvall County for decades, and it wasn't until 1975 that the guy committed suicide. That's when it ended, you know. But, before that, he controlled everything that was going on, and so you had Parr's people, and then you had those that were anti-Parr. You always had these two factions in Duvall County and Jim Wells County and Brooks County, and places like that. Premont, Falfurrias, San Diego, uh, that were – you had to watch who you hung out with. And what you said publicly, because if you said it too loud, and someone from the Parr side heard you, and news got to him, you dad all of a sudden would be fired. Or you mom would be fired. Things of this sort, you know. They could put a lot of pressure on people to move out of the city. Uh, fire you, uh, trump up charges against you, have you arrested, things of this sort. I remember seeing a cockfight broken up by Parr's men, who actually showed up with machine guns, because the guys that were there were anti-Parr, members of the Freedom Party. This was probably about 1955 when it happened, you know. But, I was about 3 or 4 years old at the time, you know - '56, '57 when it happened. But it was real close to my house, you know. It was a common event where men would get together on a Friday after they got paid, and the women would cook food inside and the men would hang out in the garage, and sometimes they would have roosters, and they'd be fighting each other, and money would go down, and Parr didn't like that. Boom, he'd come in and have them break it up, you know. At gunpoint, you know. I remember seeing that as a boy. So, I was pretty excited [laughter].

MR: Were they the police, or...

RR: It was the County Sheriff...

MR: Or, just general goons...?

RR: The sherriff and their deputies, but, uh, they were controlled by Parr. And it was such a small town that you couldn't help but know the families, the good and bad people. Even though Parr controlled the county sheriff, I knew his son. He lived down the street from me, and we hung out together, you know. And yet when my dad would find out that I was hanging out with the county sheriff's son, he'd punish me. "Don't you ever go over there," and I remember going to Parr's swimming pool, because it was the only swimming pool in the city, and people would flock over there, knock on the door, and ask his maid, "Can we use the pool?" And, you know, Parr would allow kids to use the pool, regardless of who your parents were. But when your parents would find out you were at Parr's house, "Pahhh!" You know, the back of the hand. "Don't do that, don't go there, he's my sworn enemy." People were that divided over the guy. He was a savior to a lot of folks, but at the same time, he was a bane to others, real bad.

MR: Did he have any – do you remember any relationship between the Parr family and any of the major employers around there, in terms of who owned the cotton fields, or who owned...?

RR: Yeah, Robert Driscoll -- Driscoll Hospital -- was one of the main rancher in Duvall County, okay. Parr had a big ranch as well in Duvall County. His brother had another ranch over here in Benavidez, which goes into Brooks and Jim Wells County, as well, you know, part of it. All those ranches had oil drilling, okay. Exon, Mobile, let's see, Texaco, all these companies would -- and then you had the drilling companies themselves go drill the wells, then you had the oil companies set up pumps and storage facilities, so they were all involved together, you know. There was also cattle raising. They raised cattle. They had horse racing as well, okay. San Diego was generally known -- sort of like the wild west of the area. Uh, there was prostitution that was legal. There was gambling that was legal. Or, at least it was not enforced, these laws. And so, it was seen sort of like, sin city of South Texas. You know, a lot of smuggling that was going on during -- I remember my dad telling me that they helped smuggle -- bootleg liquor during prohibition in the 1920s. They would go from the border to San Diego to San Antonio, you know. And they'd help transport, or change over transportation from one vehicle to another down in those areas. And I'm pretty sure that the Parr family benefitted from that as well, you know. So, a lot of that happened back in those times, you know. And I have uncles and brothers, and -- not brothers but -- uncles and relatives that lived through it that can give you much more detail than I could, you know.

MR: That's really interesting. Um...

RR: My father's remaining brother still lives today. He's 92 years old. He's in Hobbes, New Mexico, but, uh, he grew up down here. And I grew up picking cotton with his sons and daughters and such. You know, we were all together in it.

MR: Did you find when you were picking cotton, was it normally the same people on the fields all the time...

RR: Yeah, a lot of my cousins...

MR: Were there migrant workers who came through too, or just?

RR: No, it was the community. San Diego, you know, the entire town would go to a certain field, and I'm sure that in Benavidez they had a person there that owned a truck that could take families out to go pick. So, you know, my cousins, my sisters and brothers, and my friends were the ones that I was picking cotton with, you know. That I eventually went to school with as well. Uh, so it wasn't -- we all knew each other, and, for the most part, we're all related. You know, because I had -- my brother -- my father had a large family, his brothers had a large family, his other brother had a large family. His sister had a large family. And they all had extended families and they'd all pitch in together and go pick, you know. So, that would good.

Most of them were illiterate as far as formal education was concerned, you know. Uh, that wasn't for them. They worked. Going to school doesn't bring money into the house, you know. If anything, it costs money. So, that was the attitude that a lot of them had back then. I hope that helps.

MR: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

RR: If you can think of any other specific questions you want to ask, that's fine.

MR: Sure, sure. Well, maybe if it works for you, I'll take this and then, if you wouldn't mind, maybe I'll get a chance to talk to Christine and see if she has other questions.

RR: I have some, like I said, those newspapers that I have at home that deal with the walkouts and sit ins and La Raza Unita. Those are firsthand documents. One of a kind. If you wanna take a look at them?

MR: Sure, I'd love to, or I could take pictures of them.

RR: Yeah, right. Exactly.

MR: I guess, I'll stop this [recording] right here while we are chatting here.