

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Raul and Mary Lee Rodriguez

Interview conducted by Mark Robbins and Christine Reiser Robbins

Location: Robstown, TX

Date: September 7, 2014

Interview Transcription: Notes were taken down by Christine Reiser Robbins while Raul and Mary Lee Rodriguez shared recollections of the Robstown Labor Camp and related memories. Notes have been transcribed from the original longhand notes taken during the interview, and, when appropriate, reorganized for clarity.

Raul and Mary Lee Rodriguez (spouses)

Raul was born in 1938. In 1946, both of his parents died. His grandmother sent him with a troquero (a middle man who would find and transport workers to farms that needed harvesting) to West Texas on his own in 1947. When he first got there, he filled baskets of onions for two weeks without getting paid. He did not know that you had to report every time you filled a basket, so when he got in line to collect his payment he was told that he “hadn’t picked anything.” He went three weeks without getting paid. For onions, the wage rate was one penny per basket. It was hot, sweaty, and windy, so you got muddy. There were rattlesnakes out in the fields. Many workers, Raul included, slept in tents out near the barracks. Raul lived with the single men, since he was an unaccompanied child. He made his bed, and people respected that. He “did not get into drinking, smoking, or gambling.”

Mary Lee Rodriguez has been manager for 39 years of the GI Forum housing which is located on the site of the former Robstown Labor Camp. At the time that she became manager it had been open for three years. The GI Forum housing is specifically located on the site where the two-bedroom white houses were located, which included the Robstown Labor Camp manager’s house. Raul lived at the GI Forum. Today, there are 20 houses and 546 duplexes.

As an adult, Raul became a “troquero” – he used to go to the labor camp to pick up people to go pick cotton or get onions. He worked as a troquero for 27 years. Raul would pick people up, they would put cotton in the truck, Raul would weigh it, and then take it to the gin. He would receive \$1.50 per pound of cotton. It cost \$0.16/gallon for gas. Raul himself was a picker since childhood. He was a “1000-pounder” [could pick 1,000 pounds of cotton in one day] in other parts of the state and could pick 700 pounds of cotton in one day in Robstown. It was “harder” in Robstown because “there were green leaves here and you couldn’t see the cotton. In west Texas, it wasn’t green so you could see it.” Mary Lee’s younger sister was also a “thousand pounder.” Raul quit working as a troquero after 27 years because he was “told that he would have to get social security for his workers and he didn’t have the education to do so.”

According to Raul, the heyday of vegetables lasted until the 1950s. Then, it was just onions at the end. There were two ice houses in Robstown. Individuals would pick strawberries or tomatoes and put them in a shed and blow ice, then they would pack it on trains. Then,

refrigerated trains came and it changed the practice because people could now get the produce elsewhere in the country. It no longer made economic sense. Previously, there were transportation issues of getting crops to markets in the East. In addition, the Rio Grande Valley to the south got vegetables in a little earlier, which hurt the demand for vegetables from the Robstown area.

The labor camp contained housing and community areas. For housing, there were long sheds/barracks. The windows would open out, and you could prop them up with a stick. A “lot of people lived there, with families all living together in a little room.” They would just make room for more people/families by “putting up curtains to divide the housing.” The Robstown Housing Authority was not created until the late 1950s; so, “where else were they going to go?” There were also two central buildings at the camp: (1) a big laundry and (2) a community center, for which they “put some bolts and a roof.” In addition, there were outhouses.

They used to have dances at the labor camp and “musicians would come from everywhere to play.” Solomon Ortiz [later, a U.S. Congressman] would go out to the camp to a big hall and interpret church ceremonies. The Robstown Cotton Fest (celebrated currently in 2013) started at the county park where the labor camp once stood. It is a music festival honoring musicians who used to follow migrant workers.

When they took down the Labor Camp, FEMA brought in trailers because of the housing crisis occasioned by Hurricane Celia. Mary Lee’s mother helped with loans for people who were in need due to hurricane loss. GI Forum Village – housing needed. [Before Celia, during the Johnson Administration?,] talked with Lyndon Johnson. Permanent housing came after trailers after Celia. Federal money given. Mary Lee’s mother was very active in the GI Forum. After Celia, VISTA [?] Program, Mary Lee’s mother would walk the streets with petitions. She and others were called “Solomon’s [Ortiz] Cheerleaders.” Mary Lee’s job as manager of the GI Forum Village housing which was established on the site was “intended for her mother,” but her mother said “give my daughter a chance.”

In Raul and Mary Lee’s minds, it is a “lot of progressing now” – people come from all over to use the county park that was established on the remainder of the labor camp land. An Easter egg hunt is held. People “are always walking there day and night.”