

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Jim Elliff

Interview conducted by Mark Robbins and Christine Reiser Robbins

Location: Corpus Christi, TX

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Interview Transcription: Notes were taken down by Christine Reiser Robbins while Jim Elliff 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.

Elliff's memories of the Robstown Labor Camp derive from the late 1940's and 1950's. Elliff was born in 1946. He lived at the camp from 1946-1949, right after World War II. During this time, they lived in one of the two-bedroom, one-bath houses at the camp (before his father was camp manager). His father had finished his service as a Seabee during World War II and was doing construction in Corpus Christi. He "went broke" and "owed \$40,000." He got a job with the Mexican government vaccinating cattle and the family moved to Mexico (Jim Elliff was around three years old at the time). The family spent three years in Mexico, "three years of eating beans and tortillas, and he paid everything off." They returned to Nueces County when Elliff was six years of age and lived in Corpus Christi for a while. They built a house in Banquete. Then, Mr. Willard Martin, camp manager of the Robstown Labor Camp, said to take the job at the Robstown Labor Camp ("probably political"). Elliff's father knew Willard Martin well. He had a son, Bill, who was a year older than Jim Elliff, and a daughter, Vicky. His sister is Vicky. Martin got into the lumber companies. Elliff's father took the job and moved his family (a wife and three sons) to the Robstown Labor Camp. Elliff's father would spend the first part of the day, until noon, at the labor camp and then farmed the remainder of the day. His father never wanted to owe any money again, so Elliff thinks he liked the job and it allowed them to farm.

In describing the layout of the camp, Elliff observed that it was "almost like two different sections. Almost like a white section, with the road that curved around and the 10-15 houses, then the manager's house." In one section of the camp there was a big loop road with two-bedroom houses. They had lived in those earlier. The house they lived in at the Labor Camp was nicer than the others around it because his father added a bedroom and bathroom at the end of it. His parents' room and one other room had an air conditioner. Elliff's did not, but they rigged a fan. Along the same road of two-bedroom houses, another family was that of Marvin and Yetta Leshin, with their son Richard Leshin. Marvin Leshin owned a family department store in Robstown. They live today (2013) in a high rise on Ocean Drive in Corpus Christi.

Across the road was migratory housing. People lived there seasonally or year-round. At the peak of residential usage of the camp, during Elliff's memories of the 1950s, around 100 or perhaps 150 people lived at the camp. In Elliff's mind, "camp was 30-40 acres. The southern half was cleared with mesquite trees. A road went around and a row of 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom houses on the south and west (about 10-15 houses). These were typically rented most of the year, probably by low-income families." The northern half had a road that turned in past the old wood

gym/office building. There was a “crude, concrete floor auditorium, then long buildings. Almost had a concentration camp look to them. I’m sure these cost less,” Elliff indicated. Elliff further noted that “in summer, African Americans lived there.” Elliff does not remember them being in racially separated housing. Additionally, he described that “One of the buildings on the migrant side was a rinky dink grocery store. It smelled like a wax whistle. There was a nickel baseball pinball game. You’d win a free game if you won – so I got in trouble with daddy because I wasn’t supposed to gamble.”

Elliff’s memories of the facilities included a perception of “bare bones conditions.” People “took care of their own laundry – there was a lot of hand-washing” and overall, the camp housed some “pretty poor folks.” Elliff is not aware of difficulties his father might have encountered in getting funding for repairs.

The Mungia family was one family who lived there year-round, and were poor. According to Elliff, his father would “holler over the P.A. system – ‘Victorocio, come to the office.’ He was one of the top hands who would help [Elliff’s father] with maintenance. My brother, Mike, and I had a friend, Joe Mungia. Mike called him ‘Onions.’” However, mostly Elliff was friends with the permanent residents. In speaking of the camp residents, Elliff recounted that “they were a wild bunch, as I recall. My brother and I set up a snow cone stand in summer. My daddy had a gold nickel-plated .45 and on Saturday nights they’d get drunk and rowdy and something would happen and he’d go in with his gun, waiting for the constable. He wore a gold one at his hip, and had one in his pocket. He’d say ‘this one’s for this, this one’s for go.’ There was a bare lightbulb in the room and it would catch the light off the gold.”

Various farmers all knew Elliff’s father. They would set up relationships with people who would come through to pick cotton. “Lots of kids” helped pick cotton. Elliff wanted a motorcycle so he decided to pick cotton. He lasted two days. “It’s a tough region to make a living,” he concluded.

With regard to social relationships, Elliff indicated that “everybody pretty much got along. There was some resentment between Latinos and gringos.” He remembers playing baseball with Latinos at the labor camp; “they loved it. They put their heart into it. They’d run into you, wouldn’t stop. They’d yell whitey, ‘huero.’” His father was fluent in Spanish. Elliff had come back from Mexico fluent at the age of six but “lost it.” Not much baseball was played in the summer when the crop was being harvested. Elliff recalls that African Americans played baseball, too, with them.

When asked whether he recalled a school being present at the labor camp, Elliff indicated no. He has looked at annuals, and does not see the Mungias. A lot did not go to school. Elliff does not remember any medical care coming through the camp.

Elliff described the town of Robstown during that era, saying “Main Street in Robstown was busy. It was a completely different town.” Lynn Dugger and his oldest son, Richard, would stand around on Main Street with Elliff and his father, and “the two daddy’s would stand around and talk for hours and we’d be so bored.” Labor camp residents would shop on Main Street. As Elliff

recalled, "It was a great town back then. The families that had money and the families that didn't, they all ran together." Marvin Leshin and Beauford Duggar were classmates. Duggar could remember kids taking horses to school.

When asked about how the Robstown community felt about the labor camp, Elliff indicated "I think okay. It was just there. Analyzing it now, as everything became more mechanized, people drifted away from field labor. It reduced the number of migrant families coming through. There were fewer and fewer in the 1960s and late 1960s, as I recall." When asked about the general feelings regarding this increased mechanization, Elliff suggested, "It was just the way it was. Looking back, I can see the machines taking over."

When asked whether Elliff recalled President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," [there were VISTA workers at the camp according to newspaper coverage] Elliff indicated that he "graduated high school in 1964 and does not recall anything like that." In 1968, there were racial tensions and La Raza was prominent. Charlie Guerra wrote articles in Austin and led a demonstration. Elliff's uncle was on the school board and "got a shotgun and ran him off."

His father had the job until about 1969 or 1970. When asked about the end of his father's tenure as camp manager, Elliff indicated "I can't recall how daddy left the job. My mom went back to school and became a Registered Nurse. They moved back to town in 1970." Elliff's father became a Justice of the Peace for 2 or 3 terms.