

South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Oral History Project

Interview with Congressman Solomon Ortiz, County Commissioner Oscar Ortiz, and Mr. Sam Keach

Interview conducted by Mark Robbins and Christine Reiser Robbins

Location: Robstown County Fairgrounds

Date: September 7, 2013

Interview Transcription: Notes written in the third person, taken down by Christine Reiser Robbins, while Congressman Solomon Ortiz shared recollections of the Robstown Labor Camp and other memories. Notes have been transcribed from the original longhand notes taken during the interview.

Brief personal background of Congressman Solomon Ortiz

As a youth growing up in Robstown, Texas, he worked in the fields, picking radishes and other crops, and went to the movies for entertainment. He attended the “migrant school,” Bullard School on Main Street in Robstown. It was nicknamed the “Burro School” and operated until the 1970s. He became the first Hispanic County Commissioner in Nueces County, the first Hispanic sheriff in Nueces County, and the first Hispanic Congressman in Nueces County.

Connection to the Robstown Labor Camp: Solomon Ortiz was a young constable in Robstown in the early 1960s (1964-65), when the county owned and operated the Robstown Labor Camp. The county had acquired the labor camp in 1948.

Recollections of the Robstown Labor Camp

At the labor camp there were three sets of housing: Management housing (a white structure) on the corner of Bosquez and Maynor roads and (five) houses across; across the road, there was a section for Mexican/Mexican-American residents, with structures and fencing made out of lumber and chicken wire; and a section for African American residents, made out of aluminum. The camp was segregated by ethnic group at this time.

The camp had a camp manager. The last manager’s name was Haynie Elliff. Ernest Carrillo rented one of the houses; by that time, there were at most 10 houses left at the site. Foremen would live in the houses and bring people to the fields (like a *troquero*).

When S. Ortiz was a young constable (1964-65), he often visited the labor camp on weekends, where there could be gambling, knife fights, etc. There were dances, and musicians would come from everywhere to play. There were two central buildings at the camp: a big laundry and a community center. Downtown Robstown itself was also crowded and vibrant. Robstown was the hub in the area, serviced by and servicing, railroads and highways.

Four years later (1969), he was elected County Commissioner. In this role, he decided that the labor camp needed good housing. There was a lot of backlash against him for taking away the existing housing. But today, there is a good housing at the site.

On August 3, 1970, Hurricane Celia hit the Coastal Bend. Then Commissioner S. Ortiz helped to move FEMA-style trailers into the labor camp area to provide relief housing for families and individuals displaced due to the storm. HUD became involved, with Sylvia Singer helping to set up trailer housing. People thought it was “heaven,” because it was great housing and a step up in comparison to what was there before. Before there was one lightbulb, a dirt floor, and an outhouse. Commissioner S. Ortiz does not know whether the families had to pay for the housing.

Today, there is one foundation left between Maynor Road and the Community Center – that was the gathering center.

The labor camp encompassed 70 acres total – 35 acres initially, then when Richard M. Borchard became judge, an additional 35 acres were added. This latter section is the part on the other side of the drainage ditch, on the north side. Judge Borchard decided that they were not going to plant it.

How did the transition from the camp to the park take place?

Earlier, people thought the area was called “Ortiz Park” because it said “Ortiz Prec. 3” for County Commissioner Precinct 3. So people started calling it a park. Later, Commissioner S. Ortiz sought a grant to turn the labor camp area into a county park. The process to acquire funding and turn the labor camp site to a park took four to five years. The transition to a park was not without controversy. They received a call from the American GI Forum, specifically Hector P. Garcia, who wanted new housing at the site. There were people still living there and they were upset about their homes being taken.

Beto Escobar did an anti-political ad against Solomon Ortiz because of the housing (this is the south side of Maynor Road, not the park side).

Part of the site was already being used as a quasi-park. Part of it was vacant fields, so people put up a backstop and started using it. When S. Ortiz was County Commissioner, he started grading the land to be a park. Some of the individuals involved in making it a park included Solomon Ortiz, Oscar Ortiz, Richard M. Borchard, and Joaquin Villarreal.

There was federal assistance available, including money for elderly assistance. Richard M. Borchard decided we’ll get our own funds and applied for grants. This was the beginning of the Nueces County Senior Services. Precinct 3 has always been the most active and innovative precinct for services for people. They started getting some of the federal money.

Reflection on the Labor Camp Site and Robstown

What is really important is what it has become and what that means respective to where it started. It is heavily used now, with people using the site for kickball, walking, and baseball. It is a place for young people to go. The park also now has wildlife.

The Robstown County Fairgrounds are being built to honor the farmers, on which the city grew and flourished. The Robstown Cotton Fest, which started at the County Park, includes a music festival honoring musicians who used to follow migrant workers. He is very proud of the Cotton Pickers mascot.