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Oral History Project of Colton, CA – 1/28/14

Dr. Rivera: Good afternoon, my name is Dr. Tom Rivera, and I'm working on the Oral History Project for South Colton. With us this afternoon is Miss Connie Cabrera who was raised part of her life in Colton.

Connie, thank you very much for being with us this afternoon, [we] truly appreciate you taking time out from your schedule to be with us today to talk a little bit about Colton, living in Colton, growing up in Colton, owning your business in Colton, and raising your family in Colton. So thank you for being with us this afternoon; and let me start by asking you...

Ms. Cabrera: First, let me thank you for asking me. My biggest problem is not listening; I talk more than I listen.

Dr. Rivera: Did you take classes here at Cal State (California State University, San Bernardino)?

Ms. Cabrera: Well, I took some at Valley (San Bernardino Valley College), and then I took satellite classes from La Verne.

Dr. Rivera: La Verne College?

Ms. Cabrera: Yeah, and some of them were here at Cal State.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, you took some classes here at Cal State?

Ms. Cabrera: That's where I got my bachelor's and my teaching credential.

Dr. Rivera: So you're a Coyote...

Ms. Cabrera: We didn't play football...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: We still don't play football...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: But anyway, welcome back to your alma mater.

Ms. Cabrera: I always thought of education as a dream because in Jerome, [Arizona] where I was raised, you had to leave town to go to college. Of course, at that time, girls didn't go away from home, you know, they stayed at home. So, to me it was something that I thought was unattainable.

I enjoyed school, I always loved school, and I had been a good student, but I didn't participate in any outside activities a lot. But when I left Jerome, [Arizona], I had gone from 7th grade to 9th grade, I had not done 8th. It was still in the back of my mind but it was kind of hard to start in a new school in the 9th grade.

I didn't attend school in Colton; instead, I went to cosmetology school. [Later,] I thought: well, I'll skip that [because] there were jobs all over – or at least I thought [there were]. But I found out that [cosmetology] was not my calling. I loved working on hair but it was not quite what I wanted. It was too much like working in the store.

Dr. Rivera: Well you mentioned, Connie, that you were from Jerome. What brought your Dad here to Colton?

Ms. Cabrera: I think it was kind of a fluke. He came to get away from Jerome for a few days to get his teeth fixed. He knew we had some friends here [who] had moved when the mine closed down, but I think he liked Colton, I don't know what it was about it. He wasn't too big of a talker about things; I don't know what it was that he liked, but sent us word to sell our store over there because he had already bought one here. So we moved, and let me tell you, a month later we were ready to go back home – we didn't like Colton.

(Laughter)

Ms. Cabrera: We didn't like Colton [because] Jerome was like a little family. I mean everybody knew everybody, and we left our doors open – [we] never locked our doors. So when we came here, it was [during] the Pachuco era... and that kind of scared us.

Dr. Rivera: The mid-40s or so? 46-47?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes, 46-47; and that scared us a little. My brother was just growing up, he was 10, and my Mom didn't like the environment when we first got here.

Dr. Rivera: So you were kind of afraid being... what they call 'bumpkins' coming to Colton?

Ms. Cabrera: Well, no, let me tell you – I didn't feel like a bumpkin. I don't know what it was, but I felt different. I felt that I was not going to fit in, like I fit in in Jerome.

Dr. Rivera: How did you make the adjustment? You said you were ready to go home, but how did you make the adjustment... staying here in Colton?

Ms. Cabrera: My folks stayed here so I stayed here. I met people and I started to like the people, not Colton, but the people.

Dr. Rivera: You said your Dad owned a store in Jerome, and then he bought a store here in Colton? Tell us about your store that you had here in Colton.

Ms. Cabrera: It was a little neighborhood store; and that was nice because it helped us fit into Colton, and to meet the people. And [we found] out that they were not different from the people in Jerome, they were just brought up differently.

Almost every man picked oranges.

[Also,] when we came [to Colton,] the young men were in the service. A lot of their sons and their husbands were in the service; and the ones [who] were here were

working picking oranges, and picking grapes. Sometimes the whole families – they would go to Fresno every summer... or they went to pick pears from somewhere else. I remember meeting Mrs. Saldaña in school, and she would take her kids – and every year she'd come back and do a project at her house with what the kids earned. Others, unfortunately, did not – their dads would come and use the money themselves. But that store helped us meet the people and [that's one of the ways] we found out they were no different. We met families that we are still friends with. We met other families surrounding the store. The store my Mom built was next to the park, and the park had just been built.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned that you had the first store, [which] was on 'N' Street between 9th and 10th Street, on the north side of the street. What happened to that store, Connie? Why didn't you stay at the store?

Ms. Cabrera: After we left it, somebody tried to keep it up as a grocery store, but it didn't work because my Mother had opened one on 'O' Street – a new one. And she had different ideas about the business that she brought with her from Arizona. When we lost my Dad, she took over and applied those ideas.

Dr. Rivera: So the new store was maybe a block away from the old store?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes, about that – just a block. Because it was almost in the same position on the street...

Dr. Rivera: From "N" Street you moved to 'O' Street?

Ms. Cabrera: Yeah, but we lived on 9th and 'M'. So we were right in there...

Dr. Rivera: You were a couple of blocks away from the new store.

Ms. Cabrera: We felt very welcomed when we opened that store. At first, we just inherited Mrs. Gaitan's customers and friends. But when we moved – when my Mom opened her new store, we got our own friendship circle. We weren't competitive; in Arizona grocers helped each other, just like other people helped each other – they would all work together; [and] they would buy wholesale together.

When we came here, at first that's what we didn't like. [For instance,] Mr. Rodriguez had a store and was very selfish about customers. But we were welcomed by the customers...

Dr. Rivera: Well, Rodriguez had their market about a block-and-a half from your store?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned your neighbors – you said that your store was a central meeting place for the neighborhood, and people from that area.

Who were some of the neighbors that you remember?

Ms. Cabrera: I remember your Mother, and I remember the Rosales', *la Olivas*, the Gomez', Martinez', the (inaudible) -- although they didn't have yet people in the family, [they] were friendly. There were all the people that lived in the federal project at the time...

Dr. Rivera: Oh that's right—that's right.

Ms. Cabrera: According to the story... The only trouble was that Mayon had their pickle place across [or] next to the Valadez Building... it was very hard to break their power. They sat on the City Council and everything, and we weren't used to getting involved in those things in Jerome; so it was hard for us.

There was a man, I'll never forget... do you remember? He was a councilman...

Dr. Rivera: Mendoza. Henry Mendoza.

Ms. Cabrera: Yes. My Mother couldn't get a license for the store when she first started to build it. They said it was too close to the park, it was going to influence kids – I don't know in what way. But then, she tried to get a wine and beer license, [they didn't give her one.] [Later,] we found out it was because the Mayon people wanted that property, and so they were blocking everything my Mother applied for. Mr. Mendoza stood up at one of the council meetings and said: Here's a lady [who] isn't asking for welfare, she's not asking for help, she just wants you to give her a license to do what she wants to do – and try to support her kids, now that she's lost her husband. I think our main business was *raspados* by hand because during the war you couldn't buy the machines to make the crushed ice for the *raspados*. So, people came to the games at the park, and we got that trade.

Dr. Rivera: So your store, *La Tiendita*, was almost across the street from the park?

Ms. Cabrera: It's across the street, uh-huh.

Dr. Rivera: And the park was built in 1939, so you're right, it was a fairly new park.

Ms. Cabrera: I guess what they had planted new was all the palms because I remember going there just to get away from the store for a little while, and the palm trees were small, but the playing field had already been there. It was the park section that they had donated, later.

And so, it helped our business, plus the fact that a lot of the women liked going there because a woman ran the store, she understood them, and it was a nice meeting place for them to come and chat – and not just get their groceries. They would chat [about] their boys in the service or their husbands, and so it was a nice meeting place for that. It was not a restaurant, it wasn't a bar. At that time Colton was booming because of the [military men] when they came on leaves... I remember 7th Street was very active, they had a lot of restaurants, a lot of bars. But Mr. Juan Caldera had his finger in a lot

of projects for the Mexicanos, which I didn't understand at the time. They had to look for things to do in South Colton because they were not welcome in North Colton. He had a swimming pool, he had a dance hall, he had many things that Mexicanos could do without feeling left out... It was a lot of things for people to do because a lot Mexican activities were celebrated. The church was very active...

Dr. Rivera: Las Fiestas Patrias.

Ms. Cabrera: Las Fiestas Patrias was a big thing at the time – the big yearly thing. So about the time we came, some of the young people started coming back from the service and got more active in school. They started putting on plays like: La Mona, and participating in the parades for the 16th of September, and started youth clubs where they had healthy things to do. Father Valencia was very active in the community. He was a strict priest, but he was also very down-to-earth and wanted to get the people involved. So that was another activity that people got into—even the young people. They'd have their Easter celebration, they burned Judas and that was something we were not familiar with until we came here. There were healthy activities... The Pachucos mostly came from L.A. (Los Angeles), and they were the ones that came looking for trouble. It wasn't the Colton kids so much, it [was trouble that] came from other places.

Dr. Rivera: So both stores, *La Tiendita*, the first one on 'N' Street and the second one on 'O' Street, served as a meeting place for the neighborhood. It seems to me, from your description, Connie, that it was a support center for many of the moms and wives...

Ms. Cabrera: We didn't realize that right away. It took us awhile to realize that women were feeling their power in the home. They had a place of their own where they didn't have to be embarrassed about coming and hanging out for a little while. [They were in a place where they could talk about their kids being gone, and all that. So I think it was [a support center].

My Mom was a very special person. She didn't have a lot of schooling, she quit school at 7th grade, but she had the ability to pick up whatever she wanted to. She kinda led the women into thinking: you can do this, you can do that. I remember, to me, now, it's funny, you know, that I used to read and see movies where men went to little grocery stores, not just the bar, but little grocery stores and they were around the woodstove chatting about everything. And I had seen them talk about the mines, and all that, in Jerome, but it was nice to see women [gather] in the store. And at certain times, it seemed like they got to know when the other moms came, and they would talk about their projects and their things.

The girls were working at Norton [Air Force Base], and their moms were letting them go to work. They were going to meet them at the tracks when they got off the bus because they were working night shifts. Women went to work at the PFE ice plant, too.

Dr. Rivera: Pacific Fruit Express on 'M' Street, yeah. I didn't know that – I thought it was just a man's place to work.

Ms. Cabrera: During the war it was a lot of women working there... [And at that time,] women had money to spend the way they wanted to, it wasn't only the men picking oranges... [Women also worked] once a year picking fruit... [Again, at that time, women] had other jobs.

We met girls [who] had never worked before but they were working at Norton, and their moms were feeling good about it. They were not embarrassed to have to go work night shift, or whatever. The moms would get together and go wait for them, or they'd take turns waiting for each other's daughters, you know, one night one mother would go and wait for all of them, the other night another mother would go and wait, and to me that was just wonderful.

Dr. Rivera: What about the idea that many of the wives lost their husbands? Was that also a wonderful support group to be at the store and talk about...?

Ms. Cabrera: I remember the mothers more than [I do] the wives -- going through that. But that also, I think, helped meeting other mothers at work. They used to get together and pray the rosary with a radio at one house or another. So it was like a support group for all of them. It wasn't the golden mothers—it wasn't that—it was just our mothers from South Colton getting together to pray for our families and our husbands. And yes, they could come and talk about their letters from their sons, or their worries because they had not heard about their sons in quite a while. We were already here when the Morales' lost their son.

Dr. Rivera: Which Morales was that?

Ms. Cabrera: It was Frank [who] was killed. Joe, and I think Luis were in the service.

Dr. Rivera: They lived on the corner of 11th and 'O' Street.

Ms. Cabrera: Uh-huh. That was another mom who would congregate with the ladies there.

The Castorena's lost their older brother also, about that time.

Yes, it was a place where they could come and mourn and talk about their worries, and talk about [what places their sons were]. Even if they were not educated [enough] to know where certain places were on the map, they could talk to other moms about where their kids were: [whether or not their sons] were in a danger zone. That was something else that was kind of new to us. When we came [to Colton], we hadn't lost a lot of boys, they were in the service but we hadn't lost a lot of them...

We came at a different time to Colton -- than the people [who] lived here [and who] we met. We came from another environment completely different.

Dr. Rivera: Well, tell me about the Depression years? You mentioned because of the Depression, and also the war -- that there were not too many things available for people to buy.

Ms. Cabrera: The Depression [back then] was different from this Depression. There were a lot of things available, but the people could only buy what they needed. President Roosevelt started the WPA Program (Works Progress Administration) about that time. So people still worked for what they got, you-know, nothing was free – you still worked. There was the WPA, there was a CCC Program (Civilian Conservation Corps), which was for young men going into the forest planting trees...

Dr. Rivera: And fighting fires...

Ms. Cabrera: ...It was a Conservation Program, and it opened up a new world for our mining little town.

When we came here [to Colton] we missed that because it was during the war, by then. And even though people had more money, things were scarce, and things were rationed...

Dr. Rivera: What things were rationed, Connie?

Ms. Cabrera: Everything that I can remember that a home needed. Coffee was rationed, sugar was rationed...

Dr. Rivera: Gasoline?

Ms. Cabrera: Meat, gas, tires, shoes, people had to have a stamp to go buy a pair of shoes.

Dr. Rivera: A stamp? A coupon?

Ms. Cabrera: It was like the Blue Chip stamps, [or] the [S&H Green] stamps, you got issued a stamp for each person. Sometimes older men didn't use them—so we young people would kind of play up to them to get an extra stamp for an extra pair of shoes.

It was funny because we had to use chicory coffee at the time, which didn't taste that good all, but you could buy that without a stamp. So people started using that as coffee.

Dr. Rivera: What about sugar and flour?

Ms. Cabrera: The sugar was rationed, and I think it was because of where we got the sugar from – it wasn't for any other reason. The coffee and the sugar [was rationed] because we couldn't get it easily.

I remember my Dad having to put in for his car because you weren't allowed to just go buy a car, you had to wait your turn to get one of the cars that came in. And I guess in Detroit they were manufacturing war things instead of cars.

But it was an entirely different concept [for a] neighborhood grocery store because you had to limit your bologna, which was something people bought in a little grocery store. The bread, the bologna, you-know, the school things...

Dr. Rivera: I was gonna ask you, what kind of products did you sell besides bologna, and bread...?

Ms. Cabrera: We had all the canned goods, we had meat, vegetables, and everything. But the big thing was the things that you run out of in a hurry and you can't wait until you go to town to buy them. We had the big stores, which we were not familiar with.

In Jerome, we had the company store and then little neighborhood stores all over. Here, there were more stores available that we were not familiar with – so we had to battle against that.

Dr. Rivera: What about milk and eggs?

Ms. Cabrera: I don't remember that they were rationed. I remember it was something people depended on to get by, you-know, eggs and milk.

Dr. Rivera: [Also, what about] clothing and shoes?

Ms. Cabrera: Clothing I didn't know too much about [because] my Mom was a great seamstress, so we didn't bother too much with that. But the shoes – that made a difference, you couldn't buy all the shoes you wanted to match your outfits. The jobs people were doing – [for instance,] girls grew up needing different kinds of clothing just to go pick fruit. It was a whole new world for them...

Dr. Rivera: What about going to work in the office or at Norton, or some of those places?

Ms. Cabrera: [I've heard from others,] because I didn't experience that, but I've heard from friends – that counselors at school never advised Mexican girls to train for this-or-that. The biggest thing they could strive for was to be a secretary, you-know, to work at an office. That was a big thing! No one was advised to go on and be a teacher, be a doctor, be a nurse – nothing. The only thing they could hope for was to work in an office with someone. They were kinda limited to what they strived for.

Dr. Rivera: Or, for what they expected from you.

Ms. Cabrera: Well, probably so. I didn't go to high school here so I don't know that much except for what I've heard from my friends... But they're big thing was to learn shorthand, learn typing – because that's what you could strive for. You can work in an office and that's as high [as you could go]; or, [you could become] a telephone operator – and I thought that was great!

I went to look for a job – I wasn't tall enough, I couldn't reach the [telephone] board.
(Laughter)

Ms. Cabrera: So I wasn't hired.

Dr. Rivera: What about the bank? Bank of America, I think, was big also...

Ms. Cabrera: I don't know Tommy, like I told you, I didn't... To me a bank job would have been boring because I was tired of the store, so I never tried. But we didn't have all the banks we have now. You-know, there was a Bank of America, and I think a Security [Pacific] Bank – those were the 2 banks. Now, there's more banks available for people to go work.

Even though the boys were in the service, you would have thought more girls would have had a chance for jobs. [But] I really don't know that part of it – [whether or not it was easy...]

I know when I found out that Hilda Garcia worked in a bank in L.A. (Los Angeles)...

Dr. Rivera: ... Because the Garcia's were your neighbors...

Ms. Cabrera: We were neighbors at that time... and I thought that was great! And then when I found out she was an airline stewardess: I couldn't believe it! A Mexican girl being an airline stewardess!

But like I say, I don't know what was out there – my parents thought it was more important to help them in the store, and there were no checks then. That's when my sister went to work for another grocery store, she wanted a check to go with her work...

(Laughter)

Ms. Cabrera: But, my Dad met Mr. Castorena, and his daughter was a beauty operator.

Dr. Rivera: Which Castorena?

Ms. Cabrera: Porfirio

Dr. Rivera: Oh, *esta* Lina Castorena...?

Ms. Cabrera: She was the beauty operator, and my Dad thought that was pretty good. So he encouraged me to take that course: I took it, I enjoyed it, and I made new friends

out of Colton. [But] it was the work I didn't like too much, it was too much like grocery work – you were pleasing people. I think I had always wanted to be a teacher; from the time I was small we played school and I was the teacher, never the student... To me, there was nothing else that really interested me that much, you-know.

Dr. Rivera: Let me ask you: what did you do for entertainment? Dances, or going to fiestas, or parties?

Ms. Cabrera: We went to fiestas when we came here. Like I told you, we had the 16th of September celebration over there [in Jerome]. So that was familiar to us and we went to that one. There were dances at the Masonic Hall on top of the Mission Drug Store, upstairs.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about that, I'm not familiar with that – is that downtown Colton?

Ms. Cabrera: As you go up under the bridge now to get to the main street over at La Cadena – the business [part], there was a Mission Drug Store and a Buttercup Bakery, and upstairs was a Masonic Hall that people rented for parties and dances to raise money or dances for weddings. I don't remember much of any other [activities] at the time... So, that was [the place where we went] to dances; that's where we went for the 16th of September fiestas; and the church...

Of course, the Sombrero was a big thing at the time, and they'd have dances. But gradually, it got a little too rowdy...

By the time I met Nacho, I remember him coming back from the service, and they had dances at the Orange Show and at the auditorium in San Bernardino.

Dr. Rivera: The auditorium was located in downtown San Bernardino?

Ms. Cabrera: Downtown San Bernardino, and the Urbita, where the Inland Center is...

Dr. Rivera: Urbita was where the Inland Center Shopping Center is now.

Ms. Cabrera: We had big name bands that came there at the time – so that was a big thing to go to a dance there because you danced to the big band music.

Dr. Rivera: Was that the swing bands like Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington...?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes, we got to see Harry James, Xavier Cugat, and Louis Armstrong, which was one of my favorites. Then there was the Orange Show, of course; everybody looked forward to the Orange Show in the Spring. They had big name bands too; a lot of really good entertainment in it. It was more of a participating thing: you had the hobby show...

Dr. Rivera: I remember the displays – the Orange Show displays.

Ms. Cabrera: Well, that was something that was different from any other place, you know. At that time [their displays] were all made with oranges; and then they had the carnival part of it, which a lot of the kids looked forward to when they had a free day—when school kids could come free. The schools participated by taking their bands to play. Of course, that was something big because parents came out to hear their kids play in the Orange Show.

Like I said, at that time, there was something going on most of the time that you could attend that was healthy. It was different to us, but the people here were already into that... They looked forward to certain times of the year for different entertainment. Out of the families that we met, there was a lot of intermarriages there. When the boys came back from the service, they met, again, almost like different people because the boys came back different. The girls had gotten more independent, too. So we were here to see that...

Dr. Rivera: To see the change that happened after the war...

Ms. Cabrera: We didn't see it before the war, so we weren't too much in that but, we did see what happened after the war, you-know. Kids who had just been neighbors before – were now boyfriend and girlfriend when they came back in their uniforms. At dances they were very important because they were young men in their uniforms and they were very proud of them...

Dr. Rivera: So the community was proud of our boys who served in the service?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes. The South Colton community was very proud of their young men... Evidently, there was a difference in the way they were treated, and these young men expected to be treated differently after being in the service...

Dr. Rivera: Some of the numbers that I looked at of young men who served in World War II out of Colton were 395 Mexicans—out of South Colton. There were 5 females who served in the war effort also. So all together from South Colton we had about 400 people that served in the military.

Ms. Cabrera: Just from South Colton... That gave them a different feeling from, I guess, from the way they felt before. They were part of all of Colton, not just South Colton. To me it was so nice that they started going to higher institutions. They started having the nerve... The government would give them money to continue in education according to whatever schooling they had. Now, my brother-in-law, Tommy, qualified to get into a county... (inaudible).

Dr. Rivera: Tommy was your husband's brother?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: And he lost a leg?

Ms. Cabrera: He lost a leg and had a lot of scars all over his body. In a way, it made him want to show people that he could still do a lot of things. He didn't give up because of what happened [to him with losing his leg and the other injuries he sustained]. With [Tommy,] it worked really wonderful because he felt okay. [He was aware that his benefits weren't] free, he earned the right to go to school and [to] let them pay for it.

From talking to him, because I met Tommy before I met my husband, Nacho, he would come to the store and talk to us about his experiences. [I remember Tommy saying that when] he [returned home from the military,] he could do things, now. [He felt that he didn't] have to hide in South Colton anymore.

So he took accounting, and he [became] a state auditor for many years until he retired. It was great because Tommy felt that [he didn't have to stay in South Colton]. He could go live anywhere he wanted to and he could do anything he wanted to do. He got married and raised a family, a wonderful family.

My husband, [Nacho], could not have hoped for a better thing than being a barber because he did not graduate. Being one of the older ones in the family, he had to quit school to work.

Dr. Rivera: What grade level was he when he quit school?

Ms. Cabrera: Nacho said he had stopped at 7th [grade] because Tommy had skipped a grade and was going to be in his class.

Of course, Nacho's Mom was thrilled to death that he was not going to waste time going to school anymore because, to her, being in sports and going to school was a waste. She had been a widow trying to raise her kids by herself. So he was welcomed at home because now he could go to work and help her.

They used to give [students] a \$50 dollar a month stipend to live on while they were going to school. When [Nacho] went to apply, he had to struggle [because] he had to get 2 teachers that he remembered having to write letters [on his behalf, stating] that he could handle some kind of an education. Maybe not a profession, but some technical thing that he could learn. So he picked barbering, and he said he didn't even

know why, but that was one of the things that he could pick. That opened up a new world for him because he wasn't with just older men working. [Nacho also] worked in the orange groves and he had worked at the cement plant with older men. His ideas were kind of [like] old-man ideas; but this [career move in becoming a barber] opened up another world to him [because he realized he didn't] have to go work at the cement plant.

While he was going to barber school, I was going to beauty school.

We met [at] a wedding, like a lot of people...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about that meeting – because I was going to ask you: How did you meet your husband, Nacho?

Ms. Cabrera: We met him at the store because he had to go by our store to get home—on his leave, so he met my Mom; he didn't meet me until way later. [Anyway,] he met my Mom and they got to be friends, but then, he was engaged to someone... and the sister or cousin was getting married, so he was supposed to be the best man with the girl he had been engaged to, which, [by the way,] he was no longer engaged to [this girl]. I was just a bridesmaid [at this wedding], [and] we met at the reception. We were going to school for almost the same thing, and [that was] something [for us] to talk about. He was shy, he was not a very outgoing person, at the time. [Nacho lived there in Colton,] so we got to see each other at the store, and we had a lot to in common. So we started going out to places... on short little excursions. Our big thing was taking the bus all the way to Shandin Hills; sitting there while the bus turned around and then [we'd] ride back to the beauty school; and [we would have] coffee at the little coffee shop right next to the beauty school.

It was just a slow kind of friendship that grew, and I'm glad that it kept on growing. We were married for 30-some years before he passed away. I think we were still learning about each other, or teaching each other things, which made it very nice. I didn't realize what a good marriage I had until I started hearing from other people.

Dr. Rivera: How many children did you have?

Ms. Cabrera: We just have 2 boys.

Dr. Rivera: And their names are?

Ms. Cabrera: There's Ronnie, and he's the oldest one, he's 5 years older than Ernie. We raised them in South Colton, a block from where my husband had been raised. Nacho came from Barstow when he was only 7 years old, and then lived in the other section of South Colton, in the beginning. He lived over in the Palomas, I believe that's what they called that area.

Dr. Rivera: The barrio – La Paloma, uh-huh.

Ms. Cabrera: When we got married, he had this home built for us... It was right on the street where my Mom had the store built.

Dr. Rivera: Across the street from the park?

Ms. Cabrera: Across from the park, right on the corner of 10th and 'O'. We raised our boys – they went to Wilson, and it was kind-of-a sore spot that people would still say: Send them to Lincoln, Wilson doesn't have good teachers, you don't want to keep your kids at Wilson School, you don't want them to know that you live in South Colton...

Dr. Rivera: It was a big stigma, eh?

Ms. Cabrera: It was! I didn't live it, but I heard it from my husband and other people – that the tracks were the dividing line. South of the tracks was the Mexican section; if you were out in North Colton you were out of your area – go back to South Colton where you belong...

But after the service, young men started to think: We belong anywhere, we can go anywhere we want to as long as we behave.

When we got married he was working at the Santa Fe [Railroad] – but his dream was to have his own shop. He worked part-time at the Santa Fe [Railroad], and then part-time for Mr. Ornelas, Mr. Llamas, Caldera, and Cruz Ornelas, who is part of the family now. His grandson is married to my niece...

Dr. Rivera: When did he open up his own shop?

Ms. Cabrera: He opened his shop—must have been around 1955. But he rented from (inaudible) – right on La Cadena; and that even made him want his own place more and more.

Dr. Rivera: It was the corner of La Cadena and ‘N’ Street?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes. He rented a place there and was kind of happy there, but he still dreamed of having his own little place – fixing it up the way he wanted. So we got a chance to buy a little corner place across from Mr. Navarros’ little grocery store.

Dr. Rivera: That was on ‘N’ and 7th ?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes. So with quite a struggle we built a little shop for him there, and he was so proud of it that even after he lost his eyesight he didn't want to rent it to anyone else because he thought he would regain his sight and go back to work.

Dr. Rivera: Well he did a good job, [he was] very successful because everybody wanted a haircut from Nacho.

Ms. Cabrera: You-know the other part of being the barber and living there in South Colton, (inaudible) it opened up a new world to him because now he could put a lot of his ideas into other peoples minds. [Ideas] of what he had thought and what he had

done. This was a big part of his job to him, not so much just cutting hair. He was very proud of a good haircut. You never left his shop with a ruined haircut, or you wouldn't pay for it. If you had a boil in your head and he had to stop – he wouldn't charge you for the haircut. You had to come out of his shop with a perfect haircut. I remember they were wearing flat tops...

Dr. Rivera: Yes.

Ms. Cabrera: I swear, he used a ruler to [cut customers flat tops] because he was so proud of his flat top [haircuts]. He was a young person and he could understand young people, even when their parents brought them in. He could kind of fix it so that both were happy: the dad or the mom, and the child.

He was able to praise what people did, share ideas with them, [and] help them attain what they thought they couldn't – that was a big thing to him.

Dr. Rivera: Connie, there was a Colton Chamber of Commerce – did he belong to it, or was he allowed to belong to the Colton Chamber of Commerce?

Ms. Cabrera: I don't know if he was before the war. But after the war, you could see... There was Mr. Mendoza and Johnny Jeremiahs...

Dr. Rivera: Johnny Martinez Perez...

Ms. Cabrera: He was a young man that dared to speak up and who wanted to get into those places. Some of the older people might have had ideas but they didn't think they could do it. I think that's what Nacho liked... So that others would say: Yes I can! I can do this! I can belong to the council! I can do what I want to now! I have a right!

Dr. Rivera: The thinking started [with] Pasqual Oliva, Pete Luque, and Manuel Padilla... They all thought that we should participate in our community, and we should start running for office.

Was Nacho influencing them, or did they visit him and ask for his advice?

Ms. Cabrera: You-know, the Oliva's were a very proud group of young men. Mr. Luque was independent – I think he thought for himself, and he always [did]; but they thought their businesses could not go further than South Colton.

So they started thinking: we can move out of South Colton; we can belong to other committees, other places [where there are not just Mexicans].

Mr. Luque was an icebreaker for that; but very criticized by some Mexicanos because, of course, they felt he [didn't] have all the education he needs. But he had the power to convince people, and my husband did help him. I don't think he got ideas from my husband, but my husband helped him when he needed to run for offices, when he needed to get people to listen to him. Also the Oliva's...

My husband joined the American Legion when he got back from the service.

Dr. Rivera: Was that the Fidel Hernandez Legion Post?

Ms. Cabrera: Yes. That was the man killed who they named [the Legion Post] after... Nacho started telling people his ideas, and maybe at first he was a little shy about getting into running for office himself, but he was very good at making [people] feel good about [themselves], and helping them campaign, and all that. He would spread his ideas in the barber shop because a lot of men were getting a little more positive about themselves and thinking: yes, what I do know is important.

That was something that my boys inherited from my husband – that you can do anything you want to – I don't care where you were born. And you can learn anything you want to and no one can take it away from you. They can take material things from you but they can't take what you learn.

Because Nacho didn't have an education and didn't have opportunities because of the lack of education – that was a big thing with him.

Dr. Rivera: Your son, Ron, [who] was a good ball player in Colton High School...

Ms. Cabrera: That was another thing, my husband had not been allowed to play sports. When the boys wanted to participate, he was right there. If they wanted to play baseball, he was there coaching [and] helping the coaches. [Nacho helped to] raise money for the teams. If they wanted to go try a new sport where no Mexicanos went, you-know, like bowling – we went and we learned to bowl with them so that they could participate. They won trophies...

Nacho took them to miniature golf, he took them bowling, even a simple thing like going to the beach [because] he had never been able to do that when he was growing up, so he didn't think too much of that – but the boys liked it... Nacho loved horseback riding [and he taught the boys] how to ride horses. Ronnie was under 3 years old when he started going with him. He taught them to fish – [it was] good clean fun that he liked. He loved the mountains, he loved being out in the open and enjoying fresh air, and all of that.

But the schooling, as far as he was concerned, led to everything. And music, he loved music and he was good... He learned to play different instruments without any lessons. When our boys were taking lessons he would help them with their [playing] ... Both the boys grew up being in a school band, which, I guess at one time was not open to a lot of Mexicanos either. But by that time, Nacho was the president of the parents club, so that he could do something about the raggedy uniforms that they had. [To raise money for new band uniforms] we sold corn-on-the-cob at the 16th of September fiestas, which he never would have done, but because it was to raise money for the high school, he wasn't embarrassed about doing it.

(Laughter)

Ms. Cabrera: The boys were very involved in recreation because of their love of sports... I'm very proud of both of them participating in just about anything, and doing the best they could.

Dr. Rivera: As a matter of fact, I ran across a little girl, she's an adult now and has kids, but I remember Nacho was Santa Claus, and he went to our house for a couple 2, 3, or 4 years – and the little girl still remembers [when she was 3 or 4] years old – getting a present from Nacho as Santa Claus.

Ms. Cabrera: Really!!?

Dr. Rivera: Yes.

Ms. Cabrera: You-know that used to please him so much. His big dream was raising funds to give a toy to each child, not just a little bag of candy but a toy. That was a big event [because] we used to get together to buy the things – and when he joined the Legion, they didn't participate in a lot of community activities, it was mostly men activities. You-know, [if] you're a Legion member you get together Fridays, you drink a beer, and you talk about things. But when he joined [the Legion] he had a purpose. Nacho loved being Santa Claus. He had never had that opportunity when he was little. There was no Santa Clause for orphaned kids, you-know, [who] didn't have relatives; so that was something he really loved doing.

To this day, when I see a picture of Santa Claus or a party with a Santa Claus it [reminds me of him] because that was his big thing of the year dressing up as Santa, parading all over Colton, and advertising to the kids that they were going to be passing out candy at the church. At first it was at the corner of La Cadena...

(Background disruption – inaudible)

Ms. Cabrera: [Our] boys continued [dressing up as Santa] when I was working with little children. They would dress up in [Nacho's Santa costume] to pass out candy to my kids that I worked with – both Ronnie and Ernie.

It was part of Nacho's life...

I remember the little (inaudible) boy, Tony's little boy, I forget his name – [anyway] he was out in the yard when Nacho went by in a truck advertising where he was gonna be. The little boy ran inside the house to tell his mom, and his mom said... we're not going to take you... that's for needy kids. But the little boy told his mom that Santa knew his name and that she had to take him... Santa wants him to be there to get a bag of candy...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: People do remember that...

Ms. Cabrera: And Nacho was so happy when he found someone who remembered him as Santa – he just thought that was beautiful...

Thank God he encouraged me because – I wouldn't say I was timid, but I was used to working with adults – [and] I didn't have a very good self-image of myself.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned that you didn't like working at the store, you didn't like to be a beautician, and the other thing was that you taught – you were a teacher. How long did you teach?

Ms. Cabrera: I only taught 12 years, Tommy, because I didn't go back to school until I was 48. I graduated with my teaching credential at 52. But I think that had been my dream... I love teaching. I worked first as a volunteer at school, and then when Dr. McCoy opened her program and you were in the advisory group at that time, I remember I got really excited about it. It wasn't a teaching job as a full blown teacher, but I was going to get to work with children. I had done that as a volunteer since my kids started school. I got my feet wet working with kids; and [Dr. McCoy] opened up a home tutorial program. She kept taking me to conferences where there were only teachers. So when (name inaudible) opened up this program to teach bilingual teachers, you-know, they offered it to people [who] were bilingual, first of all. Second, [they offered it] to people [who] had experience working with children – and I got chosen. To this day, I don't know who recommended me, but I was afraid. I was afraid because I'd never graduated from high school. I was afraid to tackle a college career, but my husband encouraged me.

Dr. Rivera: Good!

Ms. Cabrera: And so did my boys.

Dr. Rivera: Well, you were a teacher and, Connie, you also wrote about your sister, Rachel, and her restaurant. You wrote a little story that's in the Colton Museum. How did you like writing?

Ms. Cabrera: I love writing because I was shy and writing was one way I could tell my feelings, you-know; and so I think if I hadn't been a teacher I would have loved to have been a journalist. [Writing] about people, not tragedies and of bad things, but about people, I love people, I'm a peoples person.

I wanted people to know that my sister had struggled. Kids didn't seem to see it, they took everything for granted. I had seen her raising five kids, and with my brother-in-law working, he was very helpful; but it was something to me – and I wanted people know. So, because I like writing, I started to, and I was so fortunate that an article came out of the paper asking for [people] to write about Colton citizens. And I thought, well, people need to know about [my sister], and that's when I tried writing--and I loved it. The man [who accepted my work] was so encouraging. At first, it was just a newsletter for the museum... Of course, by then her kids were really thrilled about it and they were happy that I was doing it. I remember her son asking me, what gave me the idea to write? That he never knew all those wonderful things about his mom; and that's what I liked about writing -- telling people something.

I wrote about my husband, about him and his plants, and what plants meant to him. I wrote about Ronnie, when he participated in the California tournament at UCR. I wrote about little kids living as *Mexicanitos* in the United States. [This was about] all the things that were coming out [about bilinguals], the ideas about Mexico, and how things were in Mexico. But our children were not in Mexico, they were here. It was a very different thing, you-know.

So I wrote about Frankie and Libby's little girl, and her little experiences.

Dr. Rivera: What's their little girl's name?

Ms. Cabrera: Andrea Gonzales. [She had questions that I answered such as]: Yes, we are Mexicanos, and yes, we do love *raspados* and we eat Mexican food. We have barrios, which – I didn't know about barrios when I came to Colton, and I didn't know I lived in the barrios when I came to Colton.

[The written material that I read were by doctors who were] writing books about Mexicanitos and about Mexico, but not about here. So that's why I got encouraged to [write].

I took a literature class [and my teacher] advised me to write children's books. But I'm not very creative, I couldn't think up stories...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well you picked the right subjects and the right topics.

Connie, I thoroughly enjoyed reading your story on the Dell's restaurant... It gave me a wonderful sense of history of the restaurant; and also some of the things about the evolution that it went into developing the restaurant as it is now.

Connie, I want to thank you, again, for being with us this afternoon. Thank you so much, I thoroughly enjoyed our discussion this afternoon.

And like I said, once we finish this project, I'm going to give you a copy of this audiovisual that we did today.

Ms. Cabrera: Well, you-know, my kids dream of me writing about my childhood in Arizona. When I talk to them you should see my daughter-in-law, they wanna know this, and they wanna that... [My boys tell me:] Mom write while you still [can]... while you still have all your marbles.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well, we're looking forward to that. Again, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon.

Ms. Cabrera: Thank you, Tommy, I enjoyed it too. It was very pleasant.

I've known you for years, and let me tell you, I've always admired you. You were one example I'd always set-up for my kids: Look at Tommy, look at Ernie Gomez and Ernie Garcia – that's who you want to be like.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well thank you, I appreciate that.

Transcribed by Pat Ricé-Daniels, Library Services Specialist, Special Collections