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Oral History Project of Colton, CA – 11/18/13

Dr. Rivera: Good morning, my name is Tom Rivera. I'm the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Emeritus, and again, Emeritus means that I've been retired for a couple of years. Today is November the 18th, and it's approximately 10 o'clock in the morning, and we're in the Pfau Library at Cal State San Bernardino (California State University, San Bernardino – CSUSB). We are working on the Oral History Project for South Colton. Our guests this morning are Mr. Ruben Aguilera. Ruben, welcome this morning to Cal State San Bernardino.

Mr. Aguilera: Thank you.

Dr. Rivera: And Mr. Ralph Medina. Ralph, welcome to our project this morning.

Mr. Medina: Thank you.

Dr. Rivera: Delighted to have both of you. We will be discussing life as you experienced it when you were growing up in South Colton. We're looking at, possibly, if you can relate to us, your experiences as a little kid growing up in South Colton. Maybe tell us a little bit about [your] Mom and Dad, and maybe a little bit about where Mom and Dad came from.
Let me start with Ralph. Ralph, were you born and raised in Colton?

Mr. Medina: I was born and raised in Colton.

Dr. Rivera: When were you born?

Mr. Medina: When? December the 13th, 1929.

Dr. Rivera: So you are how old now?

Mr. Medina: I'll be 84 in December.

Dr. Rivera: Ralph, you graduated from Colton High School?

Mr. Medina: From Colton High School in 1948.

Dr. Rivera: When you were getting your education in Colton, where did you live?

Mr. Medina: I lived in South Colton. 438 West 'M'.

Dr. Rivera: You had to walk to which...?

Mr. Medina: We had to walk to school, to Garfield or Wilson Schools. It was grammar then junior high, and then to high school.

Dr. Rivera: So you went to Garfield Elementary School? Kindergarten, first, second, third...?

Mr. Medina: Yeah. And then we went to junior high which was Woodrow Wilson School.

Dr. Rivera: [You went to] Woodrow Wilson School for 7th and 8th? Or was that 6th, 7th, and 8th?

Mr. Medina: I think that was 6th, 7th, and 8th.

Dr. Rivera: And then from there you went to Colton High School?

Mr. Medina: Colton High School.

Dr. Rivera: Now tell me, were you the only child in your family?

Mr. Medina: I was the only boy. There was only 2 of us: my sister and I.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh. So that was rare that [there were only 2 of you] in one family.

That was very, very rare.

Your Dad, your Dad came to Colton? Do you remember when?

Mr. Medina: He came from Mexico when he was about 14 or 15 years old. [He came here] for a better life.

Dr. Rivera: Ralph, why Colton? *Porque?*

Mr. Medina: There were more people there... So they usually look for a place where there is somebody to give them refuge, you-know, where they can come in and have a place to stay.

Dr. Rivera: Oh-so, Colton was a place where he knew people from his *pueblo* in Mexico, and it made it easier for him to come to Colton.

Mr. Medina: He wasn't educated in Mexico, he never went to school.

Dr. Rivera: Okay.

Mr. Medina: When he came down here he went to school to learn English and learn how to write.

Dr. Rivera: How old was he when he came to Colton?

Mr. Medina: He was just a young boy, maybe about 14 or 15 years old.

Dr. Rivera: Ok, ok. What town in Mexico did he [come from]?

Mr. Medina: He came from the state of Guanajuato.

Dr. Rivera: Guanajuato.

Mr. Medina: My Mom came from Guanajuato too, but they didn't know each other up there. They were neighbors from the area but they didn't know each other until they came down here. Then they met and they got married when they were about 23 years old.

Dr. Rivera: They met in Colton?

Mr. Medina: They met in Colton.

Dr. Rivera: Where did they meet in Colton? En escondidas?

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Did they meet in church? Or in school?

Mr. Medina: No, [they were] neighbors.

Dr. Rivera: They were neighbors—okay. You said when they got married your Dad was 23?

Mr. Medina: He was about 23.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember how old your Mom was?

Mr. Medina: She was about 2 or 3 years younger.

Dr. Rivera: Ok, so she must have been 19 or 20, or so?

Mr. Medina: 20 some years.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh. [Did] they [get] married at the Catholic church there in Colton? *O se la robo?*

Mr. Medina: No, no, no they got married in church.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh.

Mr. Medina: It was a small wedding because they had no money.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh.

Mr. Medina: But they got married in church.

Dr. Rivera: And your Dad worked in Colton?

Mr. Medina: He worked different jobs and then he wound up working at the cement plant, which was a typical place with the guys who worked there; and [that meant] when you got a job there you were set for life.

Dr. Rivera: So he started working at the cement plant... [How long did he work there?]

Mr. Medina: Maybe 40 some years.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, [that was] a long, long time.

Mr. Medina: He died [from] a rare disease, and he died when he was still working. He got sick and then he...

Dr. Rivera: How old was he when he passed away?

Mr. Medina: He was 59.

Dr. Rivera: He was young.

Was the cement plant located close to your house?

Mr. Medina: Oh-yes, we lived up about 4 blocks from the cement plant.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, very, very...

Mr. Medina: It made it easy for all the guys around there working there to live nearby because they could walk to the job.

Dr. Rivera: So most of the good people that worked at the cement plant lived close by?

Mr. Medina: Mostly all... and they would ride there bike or whatever.

Dr. Rivera: And that barrio was called La Reserva?

Mr. Medina: Well, we were near there at the borderline of La Reserva.

Dr. Rivera: Well which barrio were you at?

(Laughter)

Mr. Medina: Well, we were known as from La Reserva... but we used to sit around with the Caldera boys who lived in the other area, and [we would] hang around with the La Reserva boys, which were next door to us. We knew each other, we went to school together and everything, there was no difference.

Dr. Rivera: So you guys paled around together, had games together, went to school together, *asiando travesuras* together...?

Mr. Medina: Yeah. The Caldera boys were a big family—a bunch of boys.

Dr. Rivera: Who of the Caldera boys was your friend?

Mr. Medina: Marcos, Johnny...

Dr. Rivera: Ok. Let me move over to Ruben. Ruben, were you born and raised in Colton?

Mr. Aguilera: No. We arrived here when I was 5 years old, I think, from La Habra, Whittier, Rancho (inaudible), and Orange County. I was born in La Habra.

Dr. Rivera: Oh-ok. You were about 5 years old when you came to Colton? Why did your Mom and Dad decide to come to Colton?

Mr. Aguilera: My Mom came to Colton with my Grandpa. My Dad stayed wherever it was in Mexico, as far as I know. We came with my Grandpa to Colton.

Dr. Rivera: What was your Grandfather's name?

Mr. Aguilera: Filameno Garcia.

Dr. Rivera: What was your Mom's name?

Mr. Aguilera: Well, they called her Chana but her name was Crasencia. My Grandpa started working there at the cement plant just like Ralph [said his Dad did]. Most of the men who worked at the cement plant or at the PFE (Pacific Food Express Co.) were repairing the boxcars or putting the ice in the boxcars. When Kaiser finally showed up my Stepfather started working there at Kaiser.

Dr. Rivera: That was in the 40s?

Mr. Aguilera: Um-hmm.

Dr. Rivera: Now growing up in Colton – where did you go to school?

Mr. Aguilera: Well, all the people that I know say that I was like an “Uncle Tom”.

Dr. Rivera: Why were you an “Uncle Tom”? Is that a good thing? Because my name is Tom.

(Laughter)

Mr. Aguilera: That's what they called them when you were supposed to be a Mexican but you were going to the White schools.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, you went to the White schools?

Mr. Aguilera: Well, according to them... The schools were above the railroad tracks...

Dr. Rivera: North of the railroad tracks?

Mr. Aguilera: The railroad tracks was the dividing line of South Colton and North Colton, and those who were above the railroad tracks...

Dr. Rivera: North of the railroad tracks?

Mr. Aguilera: ...The school that I got enrolled [in] was at the top of the hill on the north side of the railroad tracks on 3rd Street.

Dr. Rivera: What was the name of the school?

Mr. Aguilera: Grant School, the US Grant School.

Dr. Rivera: Did you start there in kindergarten all the way through 5th or 6th?

Mr. Aguilera: Yeah, I went through to the 6th at Grant School, and then went down the hill to Roosevelt Junior High School, which was part of that “Uncle Tom”. After Roosevelt [it] became, at that time, it became 6, 7, 8 – then it went back to 7th and 8th and then high school.

Dr. Rivera: Ruben, how did you happen to wind up north of the railroad tracks?

Where did you live?

Mr. Aguilera: I lived on ‘L’ Street, west of 3rd. But I don't know exactly how I wound up over there – but that’s where my Mother took me – to Grant School.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: The name of your barrio was what?

Mr. Aguilera: Well, Beverly Hills...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Now we know the reason Ralph, why he went to those other schools – Beverly Hills barrio.

Mr. Aguilera: That was at the base of the cement plant: Slover Mountain. The Slover Mountain had the story that it was bought from some Indian for practically nothing.

Dr. Rivera: They started to produce cement there in 1881, *creo*... It closed down in the 90s, or so.

Both of you went to Colton High School?

Mr. Aguilera & Mr. Medina: Um-hmm, yes.

Dr. Rivera: Ralph, you graduated from Colton High School when?

Mr. Medina: In 1948.

Dr. Rivera: And you, Ruben?

Mr. Aguilera: '51, 1951.

Dr. Rivera: What was your experience like at Colton High School? I know that you were very involved in athletics.

Mr. Aguilera: Well, I never had any problems there at high school. But, you-know, it's just like it is now when a person of a different race [comes] to a town – they normally try to find out where the barrio is, or where is the Mexican area, and what is the other area that you're not suppose to be. So... most of the time at the high school the majority of the Mexicanos, men mostly, would run home for lunch; and if there were some that took lunch – it was usually what they call burritos, now, but to us they were tacos. [Anyway,] you'd gather over there where *tan todos Mexicanos comiendos los tacos* for their lunch because they didn't want to come out into the open to the gringos to show them what they were eating. The gringos were eating their sandwiches, and we were eating our tacos.

Dr. Rivera: *Les da verguenza entonces?*

Mr. Aguilera: Well I guess you would call it... to me it wasn't *verguenza* it was just not sharing what we ate with them because some of the gringos wanted to see what we were eating and they would [ask:] I'll trade you a sandwich for one of your tacos—I've had one of them before and they're good.

Mr. Medina: Yeah, they liked them (the tacos).

Mr. Aguilera: Yeah, they [wanted to] swap... But those Mexicanos didn't really care too much for the peanut butter and jelly.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: So there was an area where you guys would hang out and have your tacos during the lunch hour, and some of the kids would run home for lunch. Ralph, what about in your case, did you experience something like that in high school?

Mr. Medina: Yes. I think it was very common at that time. If you had a White friend that would be your close friend you'd give him a taco and he'd give you his sandwich, or you'd just give it to him... Usually, your Mom would [give] you more than what you needed.

Mr. Aguilera: That's one of the things I found kind of weird, that now they call them burritos and to us they were just tacos—made out of anything, whatever was left over.

Dr. Rivera: Beans, rice, potatoes, huevos...

Mr. Medina: ...With some chili.

Let's not forget we had the other school, San Salvador School.

Dr. Rivera: Oh-ok, tell me about San Salvador?

Mr. Medina: The Isagaries who lived on 3rd and 'M' – they went to San Salvador. They were part of the people that lived on 5th Street [and who] went to San Salvador Grammar School.

Dr. Rivera: So San Salvador was on Mount Slover and Rancho Blvd., 5th Street – in that area, eh?

Mr. Aguilera: Agua Mansa...

Dr. Rivera: Agua Mansa, I'm sorry...

Mr. Medina: Right at the base of the cement plant.

Mr. Aguilera: But see, that was a county school.

Mr. Medina: Oh, was it?

Mr. Aguilera: It was a county school, it wasn't part of the Colton school [district] it was county.

Dr. Rivera: Ralph, did you play sports while you were in high school?

Mr. Medina: No, I never played sports.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh...

Mr. Medina: I was underweight.

Dr. Rivera: What do you mean underweight?

Mr. Medina: I was underweight and scared.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Were you always working after school?

Mr. Medina: Well working, I would go with one of my uncles who used to be an orange picker (inaudible)... On Saturdays he would take me... *la rata* – the one who

picks [from] the bottom... because I was too young to get a ladder. So I would be there helping him [and] trying to learn. Then, one day he caught me lifting the ladder [and] trying to balance it on my shoulder. He started laughing and he said: do you think you can make it? I said, yeah I think so. He said, well next year we'll give you a try. And then the next year I tried it, I was kind of unbalanced going back-and-forth but I made it. I wasn't too much of a good picker anyway, but I tried it.

(Laughter)

Mr. Medina: Some of those guys could make a lot of...

Dr. Rivera: Those were big, huge orange crates that they had to fill with oranges or lemons, or *toronjas*—grapefruits.

And the equipment to pick oranges, you had what? (Inaudible)

Mr. Medina: Yeah, on the shoulder, and the clippers... and you'd fill up the sack on the tree, and then you'd dump it in the box. You'd put them where the truck would pick them up later on with your number that you were given to keep a record of whatever you picked.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh... You-know, many of our guys [who] lived and worked in Colton picked oranges because we had contractors. I remember when I was in junior high school I picked oranges and the contractor would pick us up in front of the park where the big rock is at Veteran's Park. We'd get in the big covered truck, flatbed truck that was covered on all sides. Then, we'd head over to the orange grove; and like paratroopers we'd jump out of the truck... get our ladders, put on our sacks...

Mr. Medina: Your parachute...

Dr. Rivera: Our parachutes, our clippers and off-and-at-'em.

Mr. Medina: Juan Colunga, Sarco, Muratalla, Eduardo, and Senior Rivas...

Dr. Rivera: The contractors...

Mr. Aguilera: *Piscado con orroya*

Mr. Medina: That was a measure for the size of the lemon, wasn't it?

Mr. Aguilera: When I started it was on-account of the *toronja*. Yeah, they wanted a certain size and you had to learn... until you got the eye to where [the ones you picked] were good enough – so you didn't have to go measure them anymore.

Mr. Medina: Tomás Velasquez was a contractor, too.

Dr. Rivera: Ralph and Ruben, tell me who were the contractors, [again]? You mentioned Tomás Velasquez, Evanisto Castillo, Eduardo, Juan Rivas, Juan Colunga, any others?

Mr. Medina: There was another guy...

Mr. Aguilera: *Que sí es Frijol...* that nickname.

Dr. Rivera: Who is this Frijol? What was his name?

Mr. Aguilera: He was from La Reserva... I don't know what his real name [was]... Araiza was his last name.

Mr. Medina: Frijoli or Frijolito, remember? [He was] short and kind of chunky.

Dr. Rivera: So we had a number of contractors in Colton that would take all of us...

Mr. Medina: As long as they had a truck we were able to be in contact...

Dr. Rivera: ...In contact with a citrus grower... and then bring in the workers to pick the crop.

Anyway we were talking about sports, Ruben. You played sports in high school, what did you play?

Mr. Aguilera: Football, basketball, track, and in my senior year I tried baseball for a little bit.

Dr. Rivera: Did you letter?

Mr. Aguilera: Yes, I lettered in football, and I lettered in basketball, and I lettered in track.

Dr. Rivera: So you were pretty good then?

Mr. Aguilera: Well you have to remember that I went to the gringo school in junior high. In Roosevelt, estaban maestro Carson Finch – he was the one that was into basketball quite strong. He's the one that gave the high school all the stars that played basketball because they all went to his junior high...

Dr. Rivera: ...They went through his program.

Mr. Aguilera: He's the one that taught us everything about basketball.

Dr. Rivera: What position did you play in football?

Mr. Aguilera: For being short, I played left-end... At that time there weren't too many Mexicanos going into sports – for the simple reason the word had gotten out that McIntosh...

Dr. Rivera: Who was McIntosh?

Mr. Aguilera: He was the principal and the superintendent of the high school. He didn't really care for too many Mexicanos in sports. They really had to be real good athletes in order to be in the sports. So a lot of them never even went or tried [out] for sports.

The other thing too, was the guy who came from Bloomington, he was involved with the county museum so much that he did more for the county museum because his boss was Dr. Smith... Dr. Smith was the one who had the county going left-and-right. The guy who was in charge of Grand Terrace and didn't want [the responsibility] – so he quit, and I wound up taking Grand Terrace. The guy that was over here at Bloomington was too involved with the county – because if anything came up with the county, the superintendent at the time was Smith, so Smith would call him and he'd drop everything that had to do with the school district to go take care of the county stuff.

Dr. Rivera: How many years were you with the school district?

Mr. Aguilera: 42, more or less.

Dr. Rivera: 42.

When did you meet your wife? Was it in high school also?

Mr. Aguilera: No. I was in the service. I was stationed at El Toro. I used to hitchhike from El Toro to Colton almost on a daily basis... One Sunday, or a couple of Sundays, I'd go by Rudy Contreras house there on 'L' Street, this side of the railroad tracks, and I'd stop by there to shoot-the-shit before I went to La Cadena to put out my thumb... When I hitchhiked back, one day he started telling me that his cousin, who lived [nearby], her good friend was my wife because they had a little clique of 4 or 5 girls that were always together. So he told me: Why don't you ask [about] so-and-so, she wants to meet you, she wants to go out with you, and all that bullshit that goes with it, right? So I told him – yeah. So he told his cousin Alice, and she went and got on the

phone and called her; and about half hour [later,] I guess, she showed up. So that's how we started.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: What's her name?

Mr. Aguilera: Josie.

Dr. Rivera: And her last name?

Mr. Aguilera: Josie Rodriguez.

Dr. Rivera: You've been married how many years, now?

Mr. Aguilera: We'll have 59 in April.

Dr. Rivera: And how many kids?

Mr. Aguilera: 3 kids, 9 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren.

Dr. Rivera: Good, that's a good size family, *tambien*.

Let me switch over, I just thought about it – but we only have a few more minutes to go, but I wanted to hit this. Ralph, you're very Catholic, *verdad?*

Mr. Medina: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: ...I don't know about you Ruben...

Mr. Aguilera: What?

Dr. Rivera: Being a Catholic...

Mr. Aguilera: Oh yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. You live around the corner from the church Ralph, and you've always gone to [Mass on] Sundays, and you always participated in church activities. You knew Father Valencia very, very well...

Mr. Medina: Yeah, he was well-known with everybody.

Dr. Rivera: He was there in the 30s, middle 30s, I think, until he passed away in the 50s, or so. Tell us about Father Valencia?

Mr. Medina: He was really a very popular priest because he liked sports. He would always backup his Colton boys [in] basketball, handball – anything for Colton. He knew all the boys that played sports...

Dr. Rivera: Because they were all part of his parish?

Mr. Medina: Yeah. He always backed them up.

Mr. Aguilera: He'd always load up his car with boys to go to the game.

Mr. Medina: He'd go to the games, take them to the games...

Dr. Rivera: I remember, was it a Plymouth, a white Plymouth? 46, or so?

Mr. Medina: Yeah, a 41 wasn't it?

Mr. Aguilera: Somewhere in there...

Mr. Medina: He used to take a whole bunch of kids in the trunk, in the back of the car – it was a coupe. But he always went to the games.

Dr. Rivera: He was also a handball player...

Mr. Aguilera: A *rebotero*?

Dr. Rivera: He was a *rebotero* – he played handball.

Mr. Aguilera: There used to be courts in the high school, and after high school there would always be a bunch of them who would gather there and see who would beat who.

No mas que padre era padre pero tambien era mu chapucero.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, I remember people saying that.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: *Chapucero* means that he kind of fixed the game a little bit...

(Laughter)

Mr. Aguilera: He bent the truth a little bit...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: But he was very, very supportive of all the guys who were in his parish in terms of encouraging them to play ball; supporting them by attending the sports activities; and also, he participated in handball.

Mr. Aguilera: I don't know if you ever went to the Los Revoteros on 'L' Street, or either Los Torres; I don't know if you ever seen that wall or not, but that was a tall wall. How tall was that wall?

Mr. Medina: There was another name too for them, the Revoteros, remember? We used to call them Torres...

Mr. Aguilera: They built that big tall wall, and they used to have tournaments there...

Dr. Rivera: Who were the Torres'?

Mr. Medina: Paul Torres, Tony Torres, Tony was his older brother.

Dr. Rivera: [Well, it's time to bring this interview to a close. Thank you very much for coming to the university today to share your thoughts about growing up, living and working in Colton. Thank you so much Ralph and Ruben.]

Transcribed by Pat Ricé-Daniels, Library Services Specialist-1, Special Collections