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12-16-2013

### Bobby Vasquez & Rudy Oliva

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#### Recommended Citation

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**Oral History Project of Colton, CA – 12/16/13**

**Dr. Rivera:** Good morning. I'm Dr. Tom Rivera and I'm a member of the Colton Oral History Project.

To my left is the Dean of the Pfau Library, Mr. Cesar Caballero, and Cesar will do us the honor of giving us a welcome this morning: Cesar.

**Dean Caballero:** Yes, welcome Dr. Rivera and our guests, and of course, always our fellow audience. You don't see them but they are very prominently seated in front of us.

We are here at the John M. Pfau Library at Cal State University, San Bernardino; we are the headquarters of the Colton Oral History Project and collection and where we are about to hold this oral history interview.

So, again, welcome and we hope to have another rich and rewarding interview that will become part of the archives for future generations as they would like to learn their history.

**Dr. Rivera:** Thank you Cesar, and I truly appreciate all of your support on the project – thank you so much.

This morning we have Mr. Bobby Vásquez who was a long time Colton resident, and still lives kind of in upper South Colton in Grand Terrace. [Sitting] next to him is Rudy Oliva, and Rudy is a lifelong resident of the City of Colton...

Why don't we get started: Tell me about La Calle Siete, 7<sup>th</sup> Street, I hear that it's described as the Broadway of South Colton? Why would they call it the Broadway of South Colton?

**Mr. Oliva:** Probably because that was where most of the businesses were, and the restaurants and bars; so that's probably one of the reasons. La Calle Siete actually ran where most of the businesses and bars were from 'K' Street all the way down to La Cadena.

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**Dr. Rivera:** Ok.

**Mr. Oliva:** Some of the businesses we had there was, first of all, there was the markets that were there; there was a little market owned by the Morales family; further down there was a little—like a craft shop [named]: Iris; and across the street was the bakery: Panaderia Martinez; and across from that was at one time the Canales Market. Right next door to them was the Caldera Hall, where at one time there was a *tortillaria* on the bottom floor, it was a two-story building. Right across the street was El Sombrero, a well-known nightclub where they had music [and] dancing. Then, as far as the bars go, you go halfway down the street and there was El Bolero; and across the street was – what was the name of the bar across the street?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Tampico.

**Mr. Oliva:** Tampico. And, that's about all the businesses that were there. But at night there was a lot of people hanging around, walking around, going to these places, and that is one of the reasons they called it the Broadway of South Colton.

**Dr. Rivera:** You also had the church on the same street.

**Mr. Oliva:** San Salvador. The church had been there for a long time – I couldn't say the years. But then, I think they tore down and rebuilt a new one with the help of the community. Most of the labor was put in by the local parishioners, and it stands still today.

**Dr. Rivera:** The church was built in the early 1900s, away from the Agua Mansa vicinity.

Both of you were raised on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, or in that area, tell us about those experiences growing up?

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**Mr. Vásquez:** There was also a man named Mr. Llamas, and he owned a liquor store right on the corner of (inaudible) and 7<sup>th</sup>. He also had a barber shop next door; and next door [to that] he had a pool hall where we could go to play pool, and all that. (Inaudible) Across the street from the liquor store there was a gas station owned by a man called Chayo, Chalito, who was the father of Perez, Jeremiahs – Johnny Perez.

**Dr. Rivera:** The first councilman of Colton...

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah, Johnny Perez. But he was a professional fighter and he fought under the name of Johnny Martinez – a well-known fighter, he fought big time, you-know. I think one time they hired him in Hollywood to participate as a boxer against John Garfield in a movie “The Champion.”

**Dr. Rivera:** He did look like John Garfield, the movie star, *verdad?*

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah.

**Dr. Rivera:** Also, there were some schools there, was Garfield School there in that area?

**Mr. Oliva:** Garfield School was on the far end of 7<sup>th</sup> Street. There's a bridge there over La Cadena, now...

I went to Garfield Elementary School from kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. From there we went to Woodrow Wilson, which was right next door. From there we went to Colton High School.

**Mr. Vásquez:** In 1938 they built Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. It was an empty lot east of Garfield, and [that's where they built] Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. That's when Roosevelt came out with the WPA (Works Projects

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Administration), [which was a program that hired] unemployed people to build schools, bridges, and whatever... [They also built] Washington High School.

**Dr. Rivera:** So Wilson was built in 1938.

When did you go to Wilson as students?

**Mr. Oliva:** It must have been from about 1944 until about 1947...

**Dean Caballero:** What is your memory of attending school at Garfield and the schools in that City, and the time [period]? How diverse were they? Were these schools diverse in their student body and their teachers?

**Mr. Oliva:** Well, it was about 100% Mexican-American students, and most of the teachers were Anglo, except there were 2 that I remember [who] were Hispanic.

**Dr. Rivera:** What were their names Rudy?

**Mr. Oliva:** Mrs. Gonzales and Mrs. Ayala.

**Dr. Rivera:** Okay. What did they teach?

**Mr. Oliva:** Probably social studies...

**Dr. Rivera:** We'll leave the schools for a minute—and tell me, Rudy, you wrote an article in one of those 3 books that are there (the books are displayed on the table). In the middle book, you have an article that you wrote about the swimming – all the swimming that you did in Colton because we could not go to North Colton [to swim in their pools]. But we had our own watering holes, *verdad?* Our own swimming holes – tell us about that?

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**Mr. Oliva:** Well, the thing was that we used to go swimming where we could find a place to go. The park in North Colton was off limits to us because it was all white and no Mexicans were allowed. So, we used to go wherever we could find a place to go swimming. There were a lot of places that we found: canals...

**Dr. Rivera:** Tell me about Los Coninos?

**Mr. Oliva:** Los Coninos, it was a very popular swimming hole for us, and we thought we were the only ones going there. There was a bunch of fellows that used to hang around together. But it turns out that later on that everybody was going there from South Colton.

**Dr. Rivera:** Where was Los Coninos located?

**Mr. Vásquez:** The Santa Ana River on La Cadena where the bridge [is in that] area over there.

**Dr. Rivera:** Going south on La Cadena and then crossing the bridge? Was it on the right hand side of the bridge?

**Mr. Vásquez:** There was a canal that used to go underneath La Cadena and continue up the mountain (inaudible)...

**Dr. Rivera:** And you guys had a lot of fun there?

**Mr. Oliva & Mr. Vásquez:** Oh-yeah!

**Dr. Rivera:** Rudy, you also talk about La Sección, and there was another watering hole there that you guys went to?

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**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, and La Sección – the reason they called it La Sección is because right next to that canal was some boxcars where railroad workers used to live... [We used to go swimming in that canal there] – and it was known as La Sección. Back to El Cuadrito, it was in an area by the hillside and that was known as Los Coninos. El Cuadrito was the canal that went by there but it was (inaudible).

**Dr. Rivera:** You also mentioned in your book that there was a canal on 5<sup>th</sup> Street that you guys used to swim there too.

**Mr. Oliva:** That was really one of the very first ones that I remember... They put a cement cover on it, and that was in the early years and I don't remember ever going swimming in there.

**Dean Caballero:** (Excuses himself from the interview...)

**Dr. Rivera:** Bobby, you mentioned that canal on 5<sup>th</sup> Street would tie in on 'L' Street?

**Mr. Vásquez:** This canal originated from the canal that came from behind the cold ice plant, remember? (He looks at Mr. Oliva) And it ended up on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, somehow it came out on 10<sup>th</sup> Street; and from there it went down 'M' Street; and from 10<sup>th</sup> or 'M' Street it went all the way down to the railroad tracks in front of all the houses... It went under 7<sup>th</sup> Street and it continued going up to the railroad tracks. Somehow or other, it went underneath the railroad tracks and came out on the other side of the railroad tracks up to 5<sup>th</sup> Street. From 5<sup>th</sup> Street it disappeared, it went underneath someplace and it came out again on 5<sup>th</sup> Street south of 'N' Street... And it continued going all the way down to Agua Mansa Cemetery...

**Dr. Rivera:** Okay. Because I wondered about that covered area before when I go through 5<sup>th</sup> Street.

Tell me about Jap Hill, you guys swam in Jap Hill, *tambien?*

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**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah. You can still see part of the canal there if you're going up (inaudible) the hill. If you look to the left you can see the canal.

**Dr. Rivera:** And you used to swim there?

**Mr. Vásquez:** We used to walk up there and swim too, huh? (He is looking at and asking Mr. Oliva)

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, we did.

**Dr. Rivera:** [Rudy,] you described your trip from your house on 7<sup>th</sup> Street through Colton, passing the park and then crossing the Santa Ana River; and Bobby talked about taking off his clothes and crossing the Santa Ana River, and crossing the alfalfa fields, and going up to swim at the Jap Hill canal.

**Mr. Vásquez:** We used to swim naked sometimes in the Santa Ana River, huh? (He looks at Mr. Oliva)  
(Laughter)

**Dr. Rivera:** When you guys were young, your books talk about your entertainment, the radio, what were some of the stations or stories, or programs that you would tune in on the radio?

**Mr. Oliva:** Well, I remember one of them that was very popular was "The Shadow".

**Dr. Rivera:** "The Shadow Knows" –

**Mr. Oliva:** "The Shadow Knows" – we use to listen to that. I don't remember if it was nightly or once a week. Anytime that it was on we were there listening.



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**Mr. Vásquez:** “The Lone Ranger” –  
(Laughter)

**Dr. Rivera:** Can you remember some of the others?

**Mr. Oliva:** Not quite – I can’t remember any of them.

**Dr. Rivera:** Bobby, in your book you wrote about all the bands that we had in South Colton; all the music that you guys were exposed to—the swing years, will you tell us a little bit about that?

**Mr. Vásquez:** (Inaudible) We started listening to the music of the bands, the big bands, which Benny Goodman changed it to the ‘name bands’ – and there were all kinds of different bands played on the radio.

**Dr. Rivera:** What was your favorite?

**Mr. Vásquez:** My favorite band at that time was Harry James.

**Dr. Rivera:** [Do you] remember the song, your favorite song by Harry James?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Harry James played a lot of good songs: ‘Cherry, Cherry, Baby’ was one of his favorites... He had a couple of vocalists [including] Frank Sinatra...  
(inaudible)

**Dr. Rivera:** You talked about the Valley Ballroom and the auditorium in downtown San Bernardino, tell me about that?

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**Mr. Vásquez:** [The Valley Ballroom is] where the big bands used to come down. The Municipal Auditorium was a huge building with a big dance floor and it had a balcony on top for people who didn't want to dance but would just sit and listen... Just about all the bands came down to play there: Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, et al.

**Dr. Rivera:** Did Lionel Hampton ever come to play?

**Mr. Vásquez:** No, he never did come down...

**Dr. Rivera:** Tell me about the Kingsmen? Who were the Kingsmen?

**Mr. Oliva:** It was just about 4 to 6 of us guys who used to hang around together.

**Dr. Rivera:** The 4 or 5 guys were the guys who put the books together, *verdad*? Who are they?

**Mr. Oliva:** There was at that time, Gil Alvarez – I think it was his idea. We used to hang around together, we went to high school together, and I think it was him who came up with the idea for forming a club. The name Kingsmen came up, so we liked that. We had some jackets made with the name 'The Kingsmen'.  
(He asks Bobby --) Did they let us wear them to high school?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah, the jackets had a crown in the back, a big crown in the back, and our name in front with a little crown. They were maroon with grey stripes on the arms. We went to Redlands—Pratt Sporting Goods, where my first basketball coach used to work; he was part owner, and they had the jackets made there.

**Dr. Rivera:** Rudy asked if you could wear [the jackets] at the high school.

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**Mr. Oliva:** I don't recall if they let us wear them at the high school, or not.

Anyway, with other things that we did, Gilbert got the idea of getting some white caps and attending football games, and we used to sit in [a certain] section of the stadium and we used to cheer, and everything... At that time, Tony Muratalla had an old, old car, I think it was a 3 seater convertible – really an old car; and we used ride it to school...

**Mr. Vásquez:** The reason we [formed our club was because] there was a club of white guys who also wore jackets... McIntosh wouldn't say anything when they [the white boys] wore their jackets to school. But when we started to wear our jackets to school he put a stop to it – he didn't want us to wear our jackets to school.

**Dr. Rivera:** What did he tell you?

**Mr. Vásquez:** He just told us that we're not suppose to be wearing all kinds of club jackets to school. The only way we could wear them is if we took the crown off...

**Dr. Rivera:** So, you didn't wear them to school?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Well after that, no. We wore jackets without a crown and designs.

**Dr. Rivera:** So Rudy, you were just guys getting together from La Calle Siete?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah. Most of us guys lived close to each other and we used to hang around because we had some things in common, like sports and music, we had some good times.

**Dr. Rivera:** You mentioned one or two guys, and you had other guys who were from La Calle Siete that were your pals: Joe Lucero.

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**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, he was one of them but I don't think he was a Kingsmen, but he was one of our good friends.

**Dr. Rivera:** And Dr. Rudy Serrano who was at San Jose State as the Dean, and Frank Sanchez was also part of your group.

**Mr. Oliva:** Uh-huh.

**Mr. Vásquez:** Johnny Cabrera

**Mr. Oliva:** Johnny Cabrera, he got killed in the Korean War.

**Mr. Vásquez:** He was the first casualty in the Korean War from South Colton

**Dr. Rivera:** What about the first casualty from World War II – Fidel Hernandez?

**Mr. Oliva:** Oh *sí*, Fidel Hernandez.

**Dr. Rivera:** Didn't they have some type of chapter for him?

**Mr. Oliva:** Well, what happened when they came home, the soldiers from Colton decided to form an American Legion Post. All these fellows were veterans, so they decided to form an American Legion Post—and of course, they picked his name. It was the Fidel Hernandez Post 754 – and their meeting place was at this Caldera Hall.

**Dr. Rivera:** On 7<sup>th</sup> Street?

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**Mr. Oliva:** On 7<sup>th</sup> Street, across the street from the El Sombrero. They used to meet up on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. They did a few good things getting organized like that.

In fact, one of the returning veterans, Ralph Cervantes, was seriously injured in the war; and when he came home, he got married and was trying to purchase a house in the north side of Colton, and they wouldn't sell him a house because of the discrimination. So he contacted the Fidel Hernandez Post and they went and fought for him. They got him permission to buy a house there in North Colton.

**Dr. Rivera:** That was in what year? '53 or so?

**Mr. Oliva:** Well, it was after the war. '45 was the end of the war, right?

**Mr. Vásquez:** At that time they wouldn't let Mexicans live in North Colton and buy houses...

**Dr. Rivera:** Yeah, it was a separate community – the Southern Pacific Railroad was the dividing line. So anything in North Colton you couldn't crossover; and I understand there was a curfew of 9 o'clock.

**Mr. Oliva:** I don't remember that...

**Dr. Rivera:** Rudy, I also understand that your brother had the same problem as Ralph Cervantes – that he could not purchase a house in North Colton?

**Mr. Oliva:** Right, and consequently, not being able to find a home in Colton where he wanted to live – there was nothing available. They bought a house in Loma Linda. One of my other brothers, I don't know if it was because he couldn't find a home [in Colton], but he bought a home in Fontana, [which was closer to his work at Kaiser].

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**Dr. Rivera:** But definitely, [your brother,] Angel, just couldn't find a house in Colton?

**Mr. Oliva:** That was his main reason why he went to Loma Linda.

**Mr. Vásquez:** One of the protesters who was protesting against Ralph Cervantes from buying a house in North Colton was McIntosh, the principal of Colton High School, because he lived right there on the same street...

**Dr. Rivera:** It was tough when you guys were growing up in South Colton. I understand your brother, Angel, who bought a house in Loma Linda, was a World War II Veteran, and he was very active in setting up the American Legion Post of Fidel Hernandez?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yes he was.

**Dr. Rivera:** He was very active in social justice issues in Colton.

**Mr. Oliva:** Also, my other brother, Pasqual, used to work with the [American Legion Post including other political or civic organizations like: The Trabajadores Unidos... Both of them [Angel & Pasqual] were pretty active.

**Dr. Rivera:** What about Congress of Community Clubs? I understand they were also part of that?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah.

**Mr. Vásquez:** I also want to mention that Rudy's brother, Pasqual Oliva, was the first Mayor of Colton for a couple of years, right?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah.

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**Dr. Rivera:** What year was that Rudy, do you remember?

**Mr. Oliva:** I'm not very good with remembering dates.

**Mr. Vásquez:** It was around the 60s.

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, he was elected mayor, and he was the first Mexican-American Mayor in Colton.

**Dr. Rivera:** Well, you-know, Johnny Martinez was a councilman in '41, and that was 54 years before Colton was chartered in 1887.  
After Johnny was Pete Luque?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah.

**Dr. Rivera:** Your brother, Pasqual, was a councilman, and then he became mayor. After that we had Abe Beltran who became mayor, we had Frank Gonzales who became mayor...  
But Angel was quite a person, *verdad?*

**Mr. Oliva:** Yes he was. He was very involved.

**Dr. Rivera:** How old is Angel now?

**Mr. Oliva:** He's 96 now...

**Dr. Rivera:** Does he still live in Loma Linda?

**Mr. Oliva:** He still lives in Loma Linda in the same house they bought when they moved from Colton.

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**Mr. Vásquez:** His other brother, Frank, lives right there in...

**Mr. Oliva:** Frank lives in Colton... off of Rancho Ave. and 'C' Street.

**Mr. Vásquez:** How old is he?

**Mr. Oliva:** I think he's about 91-92 years old.

**Mr. Vásquez:** He doesn't go out much, huh?

**Mr. Oliva:** No, they had their good times; but age kinda tells you to slow down...  
(Laughter)

**Dr. Rivera:** Bobby, you talked about being very involved in athletics in Colton High School. As a sports guy, you lettered in almost all sports when you were a freshman.

**Mr. Vásquez:** When I was going to Woodrow Wilson Junior High School there was a man who came from Big Bear Lake, he used to be a principal up there in one of the schools. Mr. Gray was his name, and he became my 8<sup>th</sup> grade principal at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. This man was very active in sports, and he started getting us involved in playing softball, baseball, and basketball, and everything.

So the first thing we did was [create] a football team... He took us up to Big Bear to play a school that he used to [work] at... We played up there and we beat them.

Later on, he took us around to other schools... One time he took us up to Alexander High School in San Bernardino to play a football game there. We played, the score was tied...

[Mt. Vernon and Alexander schools] came to Colton to play and they beat us...

[Mr. Gray] also [created] a basketball team, and he took us all over playing basketball...



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**Dr. Rivera:** At Colton High School, you lettered in what sports?

**Mr. Vásquez:** When I entered high school, I earned letters in football, baseball, basketball, and track...

**Dr. Rivera:** Did you graduate from high school?

**Mr. Vásquez:** No, I left Colton High School in 1951.

**Dr. Rivera:** Why?

**Mr. Vásquez:** [Because of the discrimination from Mr. McIntosh.] He always put a lot of pressure on me – [so I decided] to get out... and I joined the Army.

**Dr. Rivera:** But you were also thinking of going to USC to play ball. What happened with that?

**Mr. Vásquez:** This teacher, Ms. Patricia Weiss, she had a master's degree from the University of Southern California (USC) – she was the Dean of girls at Colton High School... She used to tell me: Bobby, you've got potential in football, if you stick around, I know people in USC and I'm pretty sure we can get you a scholarship to go there. And she probably could have because you remember Wayne Kurlak? She got him [into USC] and he played and got hurt in his first year – he broke his leg and that was it, he couldn't play anymore.

**Dr. Rivera:** When you were in the Army, what base?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I went to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. From there they sent me to Fort Benning in Georgia for airborne training school.

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**Dr. Rivera:** And then?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Back to Fort Bragg.

**Dr. Rivera:** And then?

**Mr. Vásquez:** From there, I got tired of being there at Fort Bragg with the 82nd – all they did was train, train, train and I got sick of it.

**Dr. Rivera:** So you volunteered to go to Korea?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I went to the commander and requested to be sent... that's the only way to get out. So I got my request and I left Fort Bragg.

**Dr. Rivera:** So you told him: I want out of this – I want to go to Korea.  
While you were in Korea?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I was there 13 months, when the war ended.

**Dr. Rivera:** When you came home, you started working where, Bobby?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I worked for the Pacific Fruit Express (PFE) Railroad; and when that shut down, I went to work for Santa Fe.

**Dr. Rivera:** What year did the PFE shut down?

**Mr. Vásquez:** In '58-59 they shut the place down – I got laid off, and then I went over to Santa Fe and got a job there. I retired from the Santa Fe.

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**Dr. Rivera:** When did you get your high school diploma?

**Mr. Vásquez:** After I retired from the Santa Fe in 1995, I read an article in the newspaper about Washington (inaudible) an alternative high school for people who wanted to go back to school.

**Dr. Rivera:** So Washington High School was in Colton?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah, Washington High School is in Colton.

So I went down there and I asked if I could enroll in the school to get my high school diploma. They told me to come back [the next day] at 8 o'clock and they'll give me a test to see how much I know.

Apparently, I didn't do too [well] because they told me that I would have to start again from the bottom.

So I started again from the 9th grade, like it is in Colton High School, and I went there 2 years. I went to summer school, and all that; I took all the computer classes that they required – and I graduated from Washington High School in 2 years.

**Dr. Rivera:** Very good Bobby. What year was that?

**Mr. Vásquez:** 1997-98.

**Dr. Rivera:** Congratulations! After all those years... almost 20 years, or so, that you were gone and had left high school.

**Mr. Vásquez:** Washington was a good school.

**Dr. Rivera:** Well they got you a high school diploma, yeah.  
Rudy, you were also in the military?

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**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah. Actually what happened was I was drafted in 1954, I was 23, and I had recently gotten married.

**Dr. Rivera:** And that didn't defer you?

**Mr. Oliva:** No, no. Somehow or another, they must have made some kind of a mistake because I was classified before that, and I was classified—I think it was 4F, which meant there was something wrong with me, physically, even though there wasn't.

A lot of my friends got drafted, and they never called me until later on when I was 23 years old and recently married—I got a notice that I was drafted... Luckily, the Korean War had just ended and I went to Fort Ord for basic training; and then I was sent to Colorado for mechanics school. From there I was sent to Korea where I spent a year; after experiencing the weather down there, I was thankful that I hadn't been there during the war because it was mighty cold!

(Laughter)

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah, I remember when I got discharged in '54, I came home and I asked: "Hey, where's Rudy and Dick Colunga?" I was told they were in the Army.

(Laughter)

**Dr. Rivera:** Rudy, [when did your Mom and Dad come to Colton?]

**Mr. Oliva:** Early 1900s. They came from León, Guanajuato, Mexico. When they came, they had 2 of my older brothers with them... [My brothers were, maybe,] 2 or 3 years old. They were born in Mexico...

**Dr. Rivera:** Which 2 brothers? Was this Angel?

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**Mr. Oliva:** It was Augustine and Angel. Augustine was the eldest one, and then Angel. They were the first of 8 boys, and the rest of us were born here in the United States.

Angel was in the service so he became a citizen; and I guess Augustine went to school and became a citizen.

**Dr. Rivera:** So they came here in the early 1900s from Mexico, and they stayed in Colton?

**Mr. Oliva:** Yes, uh-huh.

**Dr. Rivera:** Bobby, you didn't come directly from Mexico to Colton, your parents went to, was it Kansas?

**Mr. Vásquez:** When they were in Mexico, [it was in 1910 during] the revolution of Mexico. They were trying to get their freedom from (inaudible) the President of Mexico. My Father was in the Army with the (inaudible) as a soldier, when he met my Mother. My Father was from Guanajuato, and my Mother was a Yaqui Indian; and when they met, they got married, and my Mother finally convinced my Father that he was on the wrong side. So my Father deserted the Army and [he] joined Pancho Villa... [Because there were no doctors or nurses, my Mother and the other ladies would nurse the injured soldiers].

**Dr. Rivera:** So she was kind of the original *Adelita*? The original *Adelitas* who helped the soldiers?

**Mr. Vásquez:** They called themselves *Soldaderas*; and some of them used to hold rank: like captains and colonels, and all that. They would fight along with Pancho Villa.

**Dr. Rivera:** From Mexico, where did they go?

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**Mr. Vásquez:** Well, at that time my Mother got pregnant... One of his friends told him [that since] he was a deserter from the Army he better get out of Mexico and go to the United States. So they crossed into El Paso around 1915 – and [during] that time a lot of people were waiting for Mexican people to come across to the United States.

There was a truck hired to take my Mother and my Father up to Salt Lake City, where my Father wanted to work for the railroad. They stayed up there for almost 5 years, and my Mother was pregnant, but she lost her first child. Later on, she had her second child there in Salt Lake City, Mary Flores, my older sister.

My Father heard there was a lot of work in the railroad in Southern California, so from [Salt Lake City] they came into Colton in 1929.

They rented a hotel room on the second floor of the building right there on 'H' Street and La Cadena... It was a building where Helman's Department Store used to be – they had rooms up there for rent...

One morning my Dad came down from the room to go buy something to read, and while we were looking down the street there was a man calling him... My Father turned around and saw that it was my Mother's brother. He asked where's my sister and my Father told him she was up there in the room; and my Father took him up to her.

[My Mom and Dad found out that her brother's family/my uncle's family] had come directly to Colton. My uncle told my parents that he had a surprise for them. He took them down to South Colton between La Cadena and 7<sup>th</sup> Street – and right in the middle is where Isa Lopez, my Mother's brother, and the rest of his family lived, which included my Mother's parents...

**Dr. Rivera:** So there was a wonderful reunion –

**Mr. Vásquez:** My Father and my uncle, Isa Lopez, used to work for the cement plant. My Grandfather worked for the cement plant too, but the only job he did was to feed and water the mules, and get them ready for work the next day because the mules was the only transportation they had to bring the cement down from the hill.

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**Dr. Rivera:** How many brothers and sisters do you have Bobby?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I had 4 brothers and 3 sisters.

**Dr. Rivera:** I remember your little brother, Raul, he played football with me in high school. He was a good football player. So it runs in the family, *verdad?*

**Mr. Vásquez:** What I heard was that he got in trouble one time, and they told him that if he played football they would not do anything [to punish him]. So he went out for football...

**Dr. Rivera:** We played the freshman year... He was a very good football player.

Let me change the subject a little bit.

In the middle book (displayed on the table), Bobby, you wrote an article on the Colton Mercuries – tell me about the Colton Mercuries?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Way back in 1938-39, there was a group in South Colton that wanted to make a softball team. So they picked [a few of us]... Robert Rosales, I don't know if you know him.

**Dr. Rivera:** He was my neighbor...

**Mr. Vásquez:** He lived up there where you used to live on 'O' Street.

[Robert] and Ralph Martinez – and a group of us guys built a softball team, and they played right there in that park on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and La Cadena, there was an empty lot there. They played there on weekends, now and then, in regular clothes... and they played anybody who wanted to play.

In South Colton there was a (inaudible) park with lights, and they had a Mexican guy working up there named Gabe Castorena who used to work for the City of Colton; and everybody was wondering [how or why] Gabe Castorena was working for the City of

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Colton because they wouldn't hire Mexicans in the City of Colton, then. But, apparently, being that the park was in South Colton, no white guy wanted to work over there – so they gave that job to Gabe Castorena.

Since there was a ballpark there with lights, he contacted the boys so they could use the ballpark to practice and play... That's where they started the Colton Mercuries.

**Dr. Rivera:** I heard they were pretty good.

**Mr. Vásquez:** The first guys that started was Robert Rosales, Gus León, Téo Duarte, Freddy Vasquez, Tony Garcia, Charlie Martinez, and Ralph Martinez. Charlie Martinez and Pat Carranza were the pitchers – they were from Highgrove, and [so was] Rudy Herrera.

Eventually, Gabe Castorena wanted to buy uniforms for them, so he went to the stores, the business area in South Colton, to see if they would donate money to buy the uniforms – and they did. They agreed to buy the team uniforms: red, white, and green... It was Martinez Market that put the money up to buy the uniforms because Baker Martinez used to be on the team.

**Dr. Rivera:** And he used to be with the bakery store?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah... From then on, they started playing games in San Bernardino... They started going out of town playing in Mexico, Tijuana, Calexico, and all those towns there... They always came back victorious, you-know.

**Dr. Rivera:** I heard that they were pretty good; and they decided in the late 40s to become pro. But each city could only have 1 semi-pro team, and they had the Hubbers – the Anglo team from North Colton. The Mercuries challenged them for a game – 2 out of 3, and whoever won would represent Colton.

**Mr. Vásquez:** They had this professional softball league, and the Mercuries wanted to join the league but because Colton already had a team playing there, which were the



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Colton Hubbers – nothing but white guys, they wouldn't allow 2 teams from one area to join the league.

Before the season started, the Mercuries challenged the Hubbers to play a couple of games... The Colton Mercuries beat the Hubbers... and the Mercuries joined the league.

The Hubbers were all white guys who went to high school with the Mercuries. [A couple of the names of the Hubbers:] Carl Swing, Dave Swing's brother, Hal Priest, and Ed Timby...

There was another team from Bloomington, the Cedar Lumbers, who also joined the league...

San Bernardino had a guy named Neal McDermott who used to own a bar in San Bernardino: the Prop Room – and he had a team that played in the league...

**Dr. Rivera:** I understand that the Mercuries played one of the major leagues that were training in Perris Hill, do you remember that team?

**Mr. Vásquez:** (He doesn't remember that; but he recalls a couple of softball players who played in the major leagues)

Ray Martinez actually played 2 years with the Oakland Oaks, the Pacific Coast Conference.

**Dr. Rivera:** How about Art Miguel from Corona?

**Mr. Vásquez:** He joined a professional baseball team, the Saint Louis Browns, of the old American League.

**Dr. Rivera:** What about the Abril brothers?

**Mr. Vásquez:** I played ball with them. We used to play American Legion ball in high school. The [Abril brothers] were very close and always together. Ernie Abril, in his

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senior year in Colton High School, he batted 700+, and that's why the Pittsburgh Pirates drafted him, and they drafted his brother, too.

So they traveled playing for the Pittsburgh Pirates, but the Korean War interrupted their career. After the Korean War ended, they [went] back to playing with the Pittsburgh Pirates...

**Dr. Rivera:** Let me get back to the politicians in Colton. We talked about Jeremias, 1941; we talked about Pete Luque in the 50s; we talked about Pasqual in the 60s; and Abe in the 50s, 60s, 70s; and Frank Gonzales.

Tell me about Manuel Padilla because when I read one of the dedication pages that you have in your book, you said that Manuel Padilla was one of the guys who helped Colton tremendously in social issues that involved our people.

**Mr. Oliva:** Yes, he was very involved with the political organizations and the civic organizations in South Colton. In fact, we were talking about Angel being active, he was very close friends with Manuel Padilla, and they used to work together. He did a lot of good for the South Colton community [such as,] parades, Las Fiestas Patrias, and he was involved with the Congress of Community Clubs.

**Dr. Rivera:** Where did he live?

**Mr. Oliva:** He lived on 'N' Street.

**Mr. Vásquez:** Before they built the underpass there.

**Dr. Rivera:** Oh, under the railroad.

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, that's where they lived. The Rubios lived right there next to them, and Rudy Serrano lived across the street. Abe Beltran lived down the street on the corner – so they were all neighbors.

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**Dr. Rivera:** Manuel was very involved in the Congress of Community Clubs and social issues.

Tell me about his sisters: Tula... I can't think of the name of the other sister.

**Mr. Oliva:** Tula was also very involved...

**Dr. Rivera:** She was very involved with the Catholic Church.

**Mr. Oliva:** Yeah, and also with the Fiestas Patrias. She was in charge of some of the speakers and the kids who performed...

**Dr. Rivera:** And she was quite supportive of the Catholic Church.

**Mr. Oliva:** She was.

**Dr. Rivera:** I've got a couple more questions—I'm almost done here.

Did you have any heroes when you were growing up in Colton? Think about that for a minute, and if you guys can chime in with any questions, we'd appreciate any of your questions.

[Again,] did you have any heroes?

**Mr. Oliva:** I, myself, most of my heroes were in the sports world. I was really into sports, and some of my heroes were Pancho Gonzales, the tennis player; and teams like the Boston Red Sox...

I don't know if I considered him my hero, but I respected him a lot and I admired him, it was my oldest brother, Augustine. My Father died in 1936, I was 5 years old, and when my Dad passed away, he left a family of 8 sons and a daughter, and Augustine was the one who took over the family. He was the one who really raised all of us, and I think he did a pretty good job. I would consider him one of my heroes.

**Mr. Vásquez:** He worked at Kaiser, he used to work nights...

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**Mr. Oliva:** He was a very hard worker; in fact, he built a house right next to where we lived. When he got married, that's where he lived – so he was quite a man.

**Mr. Vásquez:** You never heard him cuss or anything, he was very quiet...

**Mr. Oliva:** He didn't smoke or drink... He was a very respectable gentleman.

**Dr. Rivera:** So he was a good role model for you?

**Mr. Oliva:** He set a good example, even though, we didn't follow it to the letter.  
(Laughter)

**Mr. Oliva:** During the war with (my brother) Pasqual, when he was in the Airforce, he was a radio operator on the B-17, he also was in what they call: the Ferry Command. When he used to come home he'd bring all his gear: fur jackets, big old boots – what they wore when they flew, and we used to put them on when I was just a little kid. I also respected all my other brothers, they were all good people.

**Dr. Rivera:** Bobby, who was your hero?

**Mr. Vásquez:** My favorite hero was Cat Williams from the Boston Red Sox. Cat Williams was born in San Diego, and he went to Hoover High School in San Diego. His Mom used to work for the Salvation Army, and his Father died when he was young. He had a brother who turned out to be an alcoholic. Cat Williams played ball for Hoover High School and he became a very good player. When he graduated from Hoover, the Boston Red Sox picked him up and sent him out to the Pacific Coast League. A lot of players used to make fun of him because he was real skinny and tall, but he was a very good ball player. He stayed with the Red Sox for about a year in 1939—when they took him up to Fenway Park. So he played that year, and then in 1940 the war broke out with Germany. Before he was drafted, he was already hitting 400.

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**Dr. Rivera:** He was your hero while you were growing up?

**Mr. Vásquez:** [Yeah]...

**Dr. Rivera:** Let me shift from [this topic]... This was a question I should have asked earlier. Juan Caldera: he built a plunge on South 5<sup>th</sup> Street, he built a baseball field, he built a bullring, and he built a dance hall.

Tell me about Juan Caldera – you have a nice story about him.

**Mr. Vásquez:** On 5<sup>th</sup> Street, before you get to 4<sup>th</sup> Street, he had a house there. There was an empty lot across from where he lived... Caldera started digging in that lot and he found a box of coins; whether it was silver or gold, I don't know. But he found a box of money, and I guess that's why he started building all this stuff.

He built a boxing arena where they used to have fights, and then the bullring...

**Mr. Oliva:** Was the name of the swimming pool "Cubs Plunge"?

**Mr. Vásquez:** Yeah.

On the corner of Rancho and Agua Mansa Road, he had that baseball field that he built... He had a grocery store on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and 'N'...

**Dr. Rivera:** So that's the story about where Caldera got his resources to build all those different [businesses and recreational arenas].

**Mr. Vásquez:** [It was rumored] that early on, Juaquin Murrieta, the bandit from Mexico, [had traveled to that area] and he had buried some money there. But he never came back to Colton to collect it.

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**Dr. Rivera:** The story that I heard was there used to be a stagecoach depot there in that area. The stagecoach would go to Los Angeles and back, and to Tucson and El Paso, and that somebody from the stagecoach buried the box there...

We've been at this for [more than an hour] and I'll ask one last question—and I'll ask the folks here if they have any questions.

My last question is: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us regarding you growing up in South Colton?

**Mr. Oliva:** Well, I was looking over the list here and there's one thing I'd like to mention. When you were talking about entertainment: my brothers, Pasqual, Augustine, Frank, and Angel formed a band with the Martinez boys from the bakery across the street. Nick and Baker [Martinez] had a group, a little band, and they went by the name of the "Latin Lads" – and they used to play all over. In fact, when they first started, they were still going to high school. They used to play at the high school dances...

**Mr. Vásquez:** They had 2 white guys in the band...

**Mr. Oliva:** Another question here on the list is about how the World War and the Korean Conflict affected life in South Colton?

Well, it had quite an impact on the people from South Colton because it kind of opened up the door for people from South Colton. In other words, the white community relented a little bit and it broke down some barriers. After the war and after the fellas came back from the war they opened up the swimming pool for us and they did away some segregated sections in the theaters – we could sit anyplace we wanted to.

Jobs opened up... there were delivery drivers like the bread people that used to come to South Colton to distribute their bread. It was all white postal carriers... A lot of those jobs opened up.

The housing opened up for us and public places. The ice cream parlor opened up for us.

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So that's the way after the World War and the Korean Conflict ended – that's the way it affected a lot of people.

That was the only thing I wanted to add.

**Mr. Vásquez:** When I worked for the PFE, it was a nice job – the whites and Mexicans worked together. But when the PFE closed down, [most of us] who worked for the PFE went over to the Santa Fe and got hired over there. I got hired as a regular laborer, you-know, just doing this-n-that. My brother Sal was a journeyman...

[When we went to work there,] we couldn't believe the restrooms said "White Men Only"...

**Dr. Rivera:** What year was this?

**Mr. Vásquez:** 1958.

We had to [use the other restrooms]. [But some of the] guys from the PFE disregarded the signs and used those bathrooms anyway.

At the same time, the Santa Fe wouldn't let any Mexicans or Blacks go any higher than a helper – they wouldn't let them become journeymen, carmen, or welders...

Santa Fe had an apprenticeship school for locomotive machinists, welders, electricians, and sheet metal workers; but they would not let Mexicans or Blacks enter their apprenticeship schools.

After World War II, they started opening up a little bit, [which included] them opening up their apprenticeship school, too. [I went to their apprenticeship school and graduated...]

**Dr. Rivera:** So there were tremendous changes after World War II and the Korean War, eh?

We have couple of committee members in the audience, Mr. Henry Vasquez and Mr. Frank Acosta. Do either of you have any questions for our guests?

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**Mr. Henry Vasquez:** Something just occurred to me. [Can either of you] comment about the ability to speak Spanish at school at any time period?

**Mr. Oliva:** No, we couldn't speak Spanish; it was prohibited...

**Dr. Rivera:** What would happen if they caught you speaking Spanish?

**Mr. Oliva:** I don't recall ever being punished for it, or getting caught speaking Spanish. At the time we were going to elementary school, we didn't really speak English – it was mostly Spanish. [Even though] it was prohibited, I don't recall ever being punished or scolded for speaking Spanish.

(Mr. Oliva asks Bobby Vasquez if he recalls or remembers being able to speak Spanish in school)

**Mr. Vásquez:** In Garfield or Wilson? No, I don't remember that. We spoke Spanish outside of the classrooms; but in the classrooms it was mostly English.

Most of the teachers at Wilson were all white; and they had been teaching there for many years... I wondered how come they never left to teach at other schools; I guess they enjoyed teaching Mexican kids.

My English teacher was Mrs. French, and that lady was very strict. She taught us everything on how to speak English... All the teachers were good.

When we entered high school we spoke English pretty good.

**Dr. Rivera:** In one of your books, you mentioned that none of your teachers, even though they were white, ever transferred to new schools that opened up, they all stayed at Wilson or Garfield Elementary Schools.

**Mr. Oliva:** Let me say just one more thing about these 3 books that we published. We have to give credit to Dr. Rudolfo Serrano, he was the one who was behind the project. His main reason for doing this is because he wanted to let his kids know where he came from. Because when the kids were born, they were raised someplace else, so he



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did this so his kids would know where he had come from, what he had gone through, and why he became what he became. So I just wanted to give Rudy Serrano credit for being the one behind these books.

**Dr. Rivera:** I had that question listed but I forgot it – I'm glad you remembered, Rudy. Besides that, he got you motivated to participate in this project. What motivated you to participate in this project?

**Mr. Oliva:** We thought it was a good idea. It was Bobby, Frank Sanchez, Joe Lucero, Dr. Serrano, and myself. We got together and did the best we could.

**Dr. Rivera:** How long did the project take you?

**Mr. Oliva:** It took about 2 years, especially the last one with collecting all those pictures – it was quite a project.

**Dr. Rivera:** Well, you're certainly to be congratulated because those 3 books are what motivated me to start working on this oral history project of South Colton. Thank you so much for being with us this morning; I truly appreciate all of your help and participation with this project

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

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