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Gilbert and Mary (Van Aken) Garcia

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Oral History Project of Colton, CA – 10/17/14

Dr. Rivera: Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Tom Rivera, and welcome to our oral history project. We are on the 4th floor of the Pfau Library at Cal State San Bernardino, and it's approximately 1:30 in the afternoon. Our guest this afternoon is Mr. Gilbert Garcia. Gilbert, welcome to our interview this afternoon, and your wife Mary Van Aken-Garcia. Mary, welcome – you and I have known each other for many, many years, so it's a delight to have you here this afternoon.

Why don't we start with the interview: you-know, we have our cameraman, which is Mr. Frank Acosta. Frank had your children when he was teaching at Colton Middle School.

And then of course, we have my wife, Lily, over in the corner; and we have, Doreen Bennis, who is also with us – welcome Doreen.

Why don't we get started with our interview this afternoon; it's gonna be very informal. But I do want to learn about growing up in South Colton during the time that you were in South Colton. You-know, as little kids growing up and going to elementary school, middle school, and also, high school.

The first question is: how did you folks meet, how did you two meet?

Mr. Garcia: At a wedding.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Moises Flores' wedding.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about that wedding? Moises Flores, was a Colton person also. Who did he marry?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Rosa Rivera, from the Rivera family on 8th Street, you-know, right by the Wilson school.

Dr. Rivera: What year was that?

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: In '53.

Dr. Rivera: 1953. Was it love at first sight? How did that happen?

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: ...I was a *padrino* at the wedding.

Dr. Rivera: You were an usher?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah, and my partner was a *madrina*; she was a real good friend of mine.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: She was my best friend.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, so that's what happened... It was a conspiracy...

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He said: do you girls want to go for a ride in my car?

Dr. Rivera: What kind of car was it, Mary?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: A '52 Chevy.

Dr. Rivera: It was almost a brand-new Chevy.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: And we said, no, we want to go in this other one, which was a '53 Chevy that was his brother's – and he said, but he doesn't have a radio and I do.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: So we all said, well we'll go in the car with the radio.

And then, you took 2 of your buddies, and somebody else; and then we all piled in the back and we went to Lake Arrowhead?

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Mr. Garcia: Lake Arrowhead.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: We went for a ride up to Lake Arrowhead, took pictures, got back in the car and went back down to the wedding.

Dr. Rivera: No, Mary, how did that happen? Your Mom and Dad were very strict.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well, I was at the wedding, and they knew I was with Connie, and they didn't know I went.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I didn't tell.

And then, that night we went to the dance, and he danced with me.

Dr. Rivera: So that was the beginning?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: And how long did you date?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Off-and-on for about a year.

Dr. Rivera: A year? And then, you got married in '53?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: '54.

Dr. Rivera: In '54. And you were a young bride, how old were you?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: 16 and a half.

Dr. Rivera: Gil, *te la robaste*.

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(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: At the time, I thought she was about 18 or older. In fact, when I learned how old she was, I almost stopped dating her.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My stupid brother's girlfriend said: oh, you're not old enough to get your driver's license yet; and that's when he knew then I wasn't 16...

Mr. Garcia: I almost stopped dating her because she was a lot younger.

Dr. Rivera: You-know, at the start of this presentation, Frank took some pictures of your wedding, and we have them here on the wall; so we'll try and scan them and put them as part of this presentation.

Now, your wedding: tell me about your wedding? Was it a big wedding?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, we had a Mass at Immaculate Conception. And at that time, they had already built the new church... Because at 9 o'clock mass back then you had to get married early, you couldn't wait until the afternoon. We had the reception back at my Dad's, and he had a Black fella that barbecued for him; and you-know, those big things where they make cement? What were they called?

Mr. Garcia: A mixer.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, that was like on the ground, or on the table?

Mr. Garcia: Like a trough.

Dr. Rivera: Okay.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: And so they rigged it up and put a thing on it so he could barbecue. And then, Gil had got a, what, about a 200 pound calf, and had it all made into steaks so that he could barbecue the steaks.

And then, my Mom and his sisters – they made a salad and beans and rice, and all the trimmings.

Dr. Rivera: So it was a big, wonderful, beautiful wedding, then. Were your brothers in the wedding?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, yeah – there's a picture there (she points at the table) of the 2 of them.

Dr. Rivera: It was Freddie and George – they were both in the wedding.

Mr. Garcia: Even George-Robert, we called him Bobby. Here's a picture of him...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: We called him Bobby until he started dating a girl that had a brother named Bobby... (She shows Dr. Rivera a picture) That was his name, Bobby, he didn't have [another] name – so then we started calling him George.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, this is a nice picture.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: (She points at the picture) That's my brother, Fred.

Dr. Rivera: This is a nice picture. You were a tall guy, Gil.

Mr. Garcia: 5'8.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My Dad was over 6 feet.

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Dr. Rivera: Well listen, I'm gonna borrow this picture, and then we're gonna scan it, and put it as part of our project.

Now, where did you go to school?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I started out at St. Bernardine's, and went there to the 5th grade. On February [while I was in the] 5th grade, I forgot the year, my Mom moved us to Garfield. We went to Garfield just from February to June, and then to Wilson Junior High, and then to high school.

Dr. Rivera: So you went to school in the barrio?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Um-hmm.

Dr. Rivera: Garfield Elementary and also Wilson Junior High School?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: How about you, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: Well, when I moved to Colton, I was in the 6th grade – I went to Wilson Junior High, at the time.

Dr. Rivera: You said you moved to Colton? Where did you live before?

Mr. Garcia: Well, I was born and lived in Jerome, Arizona until I was 9 years old. My Father worked at the mine, and they closed that mine. So then, he moved to a place called Gold Road, Arizona, which was by Oatman, Arizona – do you know where that is?

Dr. Rivera: Yes, yes.

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Mr. Garcia: Okay. We moved there and that's a gold mine; and my father worked there. So we moved to Gold Road, and I lived there until '42. In '42 the government [began] the war, and one of mines closed because it was gold, so they wanted all those miners to go work in mines that were more essential like: lead and iron and copper...

Dr. Rivera: To help with the war effort...

Mr. Garcia: So they closed that mine. My Father didn't want us to grow up in a mining town because, you-know, you grow up in mining town you cannot progress...

Dr. Rivera: You become a miner, yeah.

Mr. Garcia: So that's when we moved to Colton. [When we] moved to Colton, [my Dad] had some friends here and they told him they were hiring at, what then was the beginning of Kaiser Steel. So he went to Colton to work at Kaiser Steel.

Dr. Rivera: That's when Kaiser Steel was just developing there. What year was that?

Mr. Garcia: 1942.

Dr. Rivera: And when you moved to Colton, where did you live?

Mr. Garcia: South Colton.

Dr. Rivera: What part of South Colton?

Mr. Garcia: ...On Georgia Street, just south of Georgia Street. There used to be a little store: *Bocanegra's*, a little grocery store – and right adjacent to *Bocanegra's* was a beer and wine store: Jimmy Reese's...

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Dr. Rivera: Oh, Jimmy Reese's beer and wine store.

Mr. Garcia: We lived right across the street from that...

Dr. Rivera: So you lived in the barrio of La Calle Cinco?

Mr. Garcia: La Calle Cinco.

Dr. Rivera: And when you were there, you said you went to Wilson Junior High School. As a 7th grader or a 6th grader?

Mr. Garcia: Junior high school in 6th grade, 7th and 8th and then, of course, you went to high school.

Dr. Rivera: You went to high school what year? Do you remember, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: I started in '45, '46, I think it was something like that.

Dr. Rivera: In '45 – and you graduated from Colton High School?

Mr. Garcia: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: What year?

Mr. Garcia: 1949.

Dr. Rivera: And Mary, you went to Wilson Junior High School?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Uh-huh.

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Dr. Rivera: Then you started Colton High School – and you fell in love with Gil, and quit school and married him?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah. I was supposed to finish school but he was going to UCR (University California, Riverside). He would drop me off at high school, and then he would pick me up, and we had to rush home to fix him something to eat and pack lunch because then he had to go to Ontario to the base to work. It was like scrambling, you-know, and so finally I said I'm quitting school. I said, I'll get a GED (General Equivalency Diploma) after – so that's what I did.

Dr. Rivera: You did get your GED?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: But family was first, and Gil was on top of the list.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. Now, your Mom and Dad: Fred and Sarah, they were quite a couple. Your Dad was Irish?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Dutch-Irish. Van Aken is a Dutch name.

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, Van Aken is a Dutch name. Your Dad was very Dutch-Irish.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: But your Mom was not. Your Mom, was she Mexican or was she Native American?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well, she was Native American, but her father was from Mexico, and my Grandmother was from L.A. (Los Angeles) – and she was born in L.A.

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Dr. Rivera: How did they meet?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I don't know, we never ever found out how they met. I know he came from Detroit and went to L.A. to work, and they met somewhere in L.A.

Dr. Rivera: Why did they come to Colton?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: When my Dad started working at Norton, for a while we stayed with my Grandfather in L.A. [He would commute to Norton] and he was living with some guys. Finally, he said, no, we're moving to Colton because I want my family here. So we moved to Colton.

Dr. Rivera: Where in Colton did you move?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: On Pine Street, like right across the street from the park. I don't remember the address.

Dr. Rivera: But it was on Pine Street before they built the housing projects.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well, the houses were still there – and they're still there. Then, he bought a lot down on South Pine and built a house, and then that's where we moved and lived.

Dr. Rivera: So you lived on Pine Street and that was La Paloma?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yes. Congress too was La Paloma wasn't it?

Dr. Rivera: Right, it was...

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Because in 1950 we moved to Congress... Now it's a parking lot.

Dr. Rivera: Your neighbors on Pine Street, you said there was an empty lot on the corner of Pine and Congress – and then who followed?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: The Gonzales.

Dr. Rivera: After that?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Then us, and then the Dominguez'. And [there was] another empty lot, and Kirk Street, I think, was a little street that went there.

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, and this was before the city took over the properties and built the housing project.

Now, across from you lived Mrs. Blakely: A Black family, I think it was the only Black family in Colton. Tell us what you remember about the Blakely family?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: She was a very mean lady, very mean; and she had a brother, an older brother, and I can't remember what his name was... Wilfred, or something like. She had like a compound of daughters and sons living all in these little houses around her.

Dr. Rivera: So her property was just a family kind of property, with lots of families living in different houses on the property.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Because I do remember John Blakely. My Mom [told] me that she went to school Juanita Blakely. Do you remember Juanita?

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, she lived there. She just died a few years ago, I remember reading it in the paper – because it had her maiden name and her married name. I said [to myself], I remember her – she was a very attractive Black woman. Next door to her on Congress were the Chavez’.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, Art Chavez and Jenny.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Next to them was an empty lot. Then [there] was the Matos. I know one of their daughter’s was Mary – she was an older daughter. But I don’t remember the rest of the family.

On the other side of the street was an empty lot; and [next to the lot] the Montanez’ lived there; and the Mercados lived next door to them. The whole neighborhood called them the Hatfields and the McCoys because they were always fighting, always – over anything.

Dr. Rivera: The Mercados and who?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: The Mercados and the Montanez.

Dr. Rivera: They lived on Flores or did they live on Congress?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, they lived on Flores Street. That street’s still there, but they’ve built new houses all over – even on Congress...

Dr. Rivera: It’s a lot different.

Now, Mary, what I remember about your Dad and your Mom, is that your Dad was very supportive of us as kids. You-know, we used to play softball on the baseball field in Veterans Park Square behind your new house. We had a little softball team: we had Danny Gonzalez, Ed Dominguez, your brother, Freddie, and we had Churo, Tommy

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Tomuir, and we had, you-know, all the guys in the barrio. Lucio Pérez was also part of that team.

But after the baseball season was over in the summer, your Dad would pile us up in his truck and take us to the beach.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: He would take us to Newport. And I remember your Dad doing that every summer...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, we used to go to the beach all the time.

Dr. Rivera: And your Mom was very active in the school. Tell us about your Mom...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My Mom and Dad: for years my Dad always had plants. I don't remember what plant it was, but he would save the [empty] cans [from] canned goods, and then, he would plant all these little plants – he had hundreds of them. We would sell them at the school.

[Do you] remember they used to rent a bus to take the kids places? I think my brother was in Mr. Hosea's class.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, yes, yes, yes –

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He was always very active taking trips here-and-there, and so that's how they would raise money.

My Mom and Dad also did the same thing for the Mercuries...

Dr. Rivera: Tell us about the Mercuries...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: We used to go across the street to the games every time they had a game.

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Dr. Rivera: That was just about every Sunday. The Mercuries was the baseball team that Colton had – a very good baseball team.

Mr. Garcia: I played with them for quite a few years.

Dr. Rivera: What position did you play?

Mr. Garcia: Second base. They had a [baseball team] that played on Sundays; and they also had a softball team that played. At that time, softball was very active at night [for] recreation, so I also played with them...

Dr. Rivera: What years did you play with the Mercuries, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: Well, I started playing when I was still in high school.

Dr. Rivera: Okay.

Mr. Garcia: I wasn't supposed to but quite a few was kids...

Dr. Rivera: The late 40's then?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah, we started playing with the Mercuries, and we weren't supposed to because they were considered semi-pro and the high school had rules... But we played anyway.

Dr. Rivera: You played [second base] for several years?

Mr. Garcia: For quite a few years...

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Dr. Rivera: Do you remember any of the players that you played with?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah, let's see: Mike Mercado...

Dr. Rivera: Yes, he was also from that area.

Mr. Garcia: Jim Bartho, he was a friend of mine. The Abril brothers: Ernie and Manuel... And the only way I could tell them apart was because Manuel bat right-handed and Ernie bat left-handed. But they were almost identical twins... I played with the Mercuries for years until I got married and had to quit to start working – and that's when I quit playing. Otherwise, I would have played forever.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: During the week you played softball with them?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: What cities did you play against? What other teams did you play against?

Mr. Garcia: Redlands had a team, San Bernardino had 2 teams: the Merchants and the American Legion Post 709; and there [were teams] that used to come from Riverside and Corona that played against us... But at that time, that was kind of before TV; and, softball games in the afternoons and at night was very popular – and we played a lot of softball.

Dr. Rivera: Especially on Sunday afternoon.

Do you remember who the Vince Scully of that time was who made the announcements for the teams? Was it Pete Luque? Or was it Gonzalez – I can't remember his first name?

But Pete Luque used to do some of the announcing...

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Mr. Garcia: But Pete Luque...

Dr. Rivera: Pete Luque was one of the announcers.
So you played all year?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned your Dad, how did your Dad help the Mercuries?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He would sell plants again to raise money when they were going to go to Mexico City. They needed money, you-know, to help for all the players to go, and so my Dad was always selling plants, and my Mom would fix stuff and sell it. They were always selling stuff.

Dr. Rivera: So, it was a tournament in Mexico City or Mexico?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Mexico City they had a big tournament down there.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember what year that was?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: In the 40's sometime...

Dr. Rivera: But your Dad was very active in raising money for the Mercuries.

Mr. Garcia: Not only that, but [her Father] was also very supportive of Boy Scouts.

Dr. Rivera: Troop 45...

I was a Troop 45 person myself – yeah.
And how did he support the Boy Scouts?

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Mr. Garcia: He'd have barbecues and he raised money to donate to the Boy Scouts. He used to transport [the food] in a station wagon. (Mr. Garcia asks his wife) [Your Dad] had a pickup too for a while, didn't he?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Mmm-hmm.

Mr. Garcia: He'd load [the Boy Scouts] up and take them to the beach, or just to different places where we were playing – so he was very supportive of the Boy Scouts.

Dr. Rivera: So he was very community and youth supportive. And your Mom, your Mom was in the PTA?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, oh-yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about her activities with the school?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Just helping out with whatever and whoever needed her to help out – she was always there.

Dr. Rivera: Did she get any awards?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, not that I can remember – not at the junior high [school] at all.

Dr. Rivera: Frank, did she get any awards?

Mr. Acosta: (He is off camera) [She received] the PTA's Honorary Service Award, and later, the Continuing Service Award.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, but not at Wilson – I don't think they gave things at Wilson, I don't remember that.

Dr. Rivera: Now, Mary, [what are the] other things that you guys did, you-know, in growing up before you got married? With other things that you did, how did you keep busy?

Gil, you [mentioned in] the first part of our discussion this afternoon [that] you flew jet planes. How did you get involved in flying because at that time it was very difficult for Mexicans to really get involved and be pilots? How did you get involved?

Mr. Garcia: I was working at Ontario Airport, I was working the night swing shift job – that was my choice, so I could go to school during the day. I was working there in the airport with the pilots... I was real active and I got the bug from them... So I went to flight school.

Dr. Rivera: What year was this, Gil? Do you remember? Was it after high school?

Mr. Garcia: Yes. I graduated from flight school in 1948 – so it was 2 years before that...

Dr. Rivera: In '48?

Mr. Garcia: In 48.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: We lived in Georgia for 8 months while he was going to pre-flight school. But the first one [he] went to was Lackland.

Mr. Garcia: It was just [an] introductory [pre-flight school that prepared you] to go...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Then the boys and I joined him in Georgia.

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Mr. Garcia: We went to primary – they called it ‘primary’.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: From there we went to Texas...

Dr. Rivera: Your training was very extensive? Very thorough?

Mr. Garcia: Even though it was for the guard, it was the same for an Air Force pilot; you had to go through the whole training. The only guarantee I had being with the guard, was that when I graduated, I came back to the guard. Of course, with the Air Force, you-know, you went where they sent you.

A lot of the pilots who were students with me at flight school were envious because they didn't know they could go to fires or multi-engine training afterwards. I was guaranteed [to become] a fighter pilot because that's what my squadron [was]; so they were very envious of me because I knew where I was going and they didn't.

Dr. Rivera: Since you were a fighter pilot, before we get into that, Mary, you mentioned different locations where he went to training. Gil, the first location was where?

Mr. Garcia: Well, I went to Lackland for an introductory...

Dr. Rivera: Where is Lackland?

Mr. Garcia: San Antonio, Texas.

Dr. Rivera: Okay.

Mr. Garcia: Then, from there I went to Spence Air Base in Georgia.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: In Moultrie, Georgia.

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Dr. Rivera: Okay, and then?

Mr. Garcia: After I graduated from primary at Spence, I went to Big Spring, Texas – the Webb Air Force Base and I went through my jet training there. Then I came home and got training for fighters here at Ontario...

Dr. Rivera: So you were a jet fighter pilot?

Mr. Garcia: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Wow!

Mr. Garcia: I flew 3 models of the F-86, which was real popular from Korea. I flew the 86-A, D, and the L. After that, I flew the F-102 Delta -- it was a really nice airplane. When I finished my career in flyting, I went to observation planes. My job as an O-2 was spotting targets – the fast-moving targets.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-huh.

Mr. Garcia: We carried smoke rockets on our wings in the O-2, and we'd fire the rockets at the potential target so the fighters could go in. 'Fast movers' is what we called them, and they'd go in, and we would guide them from the smoke rockets... The target, you-know, the target is 6 o'clock, 1 click or 2 clicks from my rocket – stuff like that...

Dr. Rivera: How long were you a pilot?

Mr. Garcia: 28 years (inaudible). Prior to that, I was an enlisted man in supplies, and then maintenance for 8 years – so I was an enlisted man for 8 years, then I went to

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flight school and became a fighter pilot and I flew for 28 years. Total 36 years of service for the Guard and the Air Force.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, you retired as a Lieutenant Colonel?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: When did you retire, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: In '83.

Dr. Rivera: In '83?

Mr. Garcia: It was R.O.P.A – The Reserve Officers Promotion Act. If you didn't have a slot to move up to Colonel you had to retire after 28 years – that's the max. So that's when they retired me because I'd been in the guard. But in the Air Force, they had to transfer you some place where there were openings for full Colonels. The guard was static and we only had 1 full colonel: it was the Group Commander, and he had just got promoted ahead of me. I tried to get him to retire so I could move up there but...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Gil, were you the only Mexican-American pilot that came out of Colton?

Mr. Garcia: As far as I know, yeah.

Dr. Rivera: I think so too.

Mary, when you were growing up, you had 2 brothers?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Mmm-hmm

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Dr. Rivera: Your Mom and Dad [were] very active. And then, your Dad and Mom supported a little softball team that we had: the neighborhood kids, and you were the bat: B – A – T girl, *verdad?*

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: [Were there] other activities, Mary that you did for entertainment while you were growing up? Can you remember other things?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, just the neighborhood kids would play different games and stuff.

Dr. Rivera: Like what kind of games?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: ‘Kick-the-can’. You-know, after dinner and the dishes were done and everything, we could gather out and play, and just get together and talk... Just got to enjoy all the neighborhood kids.

Dr. Rivera: What kind of chores did you have at home?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: [Doing] the dishes and help my Mom in the kitchen. My brothers were supposed to help take turns doing dishes, but when it was their turn, they would hide the pans in the oven. So when it was my turn, they would get the [pans] out of the oven and say: oh, you gotta wash these. I’d say: where’d they come from? I used to get so mad at them...
And when the Mercuries were playing I was always madly in love with Robert (Beto) Rosales.

Dr. Rivera: Oh yeah! He was the short-stop.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He was so good-looking. And not too long ago, I met him at Walmart; he's 91 now, and he's still a nice-looking man. So I went up to him and I said: Hi Bob, how are you? [While] we were talking, I said: I used to be so madly in love with you, I said, when I was a kid, and you played with the Mercuries. He said: Well I'm single.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I said, yeah, but I'm not.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, he was the captain and the short-stop with the Mercuries back then. What about dances? Did you go to dances? You mentioned the wedding, where you [two] met at the wedding...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, I didn't go anywhere.

Dr. Rivera: No?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No. It was always a family thing. When I got in high school, [there were] different dances or stuff they had [that] I could go with other friends, you-know, we'd get together and go.

Dr. Rivera: Who were your friends when you were growing up and going to high school?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Antonia and Linda Chavez.

Dr. Rivera: Antonia and Linda Chavez, they were neighbors?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah. [And] Roberta Dominguez.

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Dr. Rivera: Roberta was in my class.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: You-know, she passed away?

Dr. Rivera: No, I didn't know that.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: It was about two years ago...

As a matter of fact, Lupe Bautista had a birthday party. Gosh! It's already been five years ago, or so.

I saw Angie Mercado walking, and it was at the Knights of Columbus Hall, and so, she was over there talking to some ladies, and I told Gil: I'm gonna go over there and talk to her. So I went over and I said: Hi Angie. And she said: I don't recognize you. Then I said: I'm Mary Van Aken. She started crying, and she told the ladies that she was with: She taught me English. She said: I didn't know any English, at all, and she taught me English. And I said: Well I didn't know Spanish, so I had to teach you English.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Because we used to always, you-know, visit with them... We'd all get together because I think they had 13 kids...

Dr. Rivera: Yeah they did.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: They had a family.

Dr. Rivera: And Mike was one of the ball players. Candido was a good handball player.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I ran into him not too long ago at Stater Brothers, and he looked the same – that's how I recognized him, you-know, he looked the same to me. He was telling me that his wife has Alzheimer's real bad [and] she's in a home.

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When Gil was in the hospital for 13 months, a couple years ago, Candido's 2 sisters-in-law talked me into going to the senior citizens center at the Luque Center for lunch. So I met a lot of schoolmates there, you-know; and this one young man that was there, I went up to him and I said, are you a Mercado? But he was one of the youngest ones so he didn't remember who I was. And so, I said: yeah, I used to always be with all your sisters. I said, as a matter of fact, Rosalina and Angie were at the Wilson Reunion.

Dr. Rivera: Yes, I saw them.

Well, you-know, it seemed like you had nice, knit, close neighborhood.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, we did, all of us. We always kind of stuck together. When I'd go over to Tonia's, her mom would always have fresh flour tortillas. My Mom never made them [because] my Dad wouldn't eat them. So she said, do you want a tortilla with butter? I said: sure! And right away she'd warm me up [some tortillas] and put some butter on them – and I said: well, this is the joy of coming here...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: So you looked forward to going to the Chavez's house?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, because my Dad didn't care for Mexican food too much – he was strictly meat and potatoes.

Dr. Rivera: Talking about your Dad and Mom, and talking about you too – and you marrying young, was there any – how can I say this? Because you were a *gringa*, and Gil was Mexican, was there any feedback?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well, when we got married, and we were on our honeymoon, my Mom and Dad went to his folk's [house] to return some bowls and pans, and his mother told my mother this marriage will never work because she's a *gringa* and she's too young.

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We just celebrated our 60th wedding anniversary in July.

Dr. Rivera: Congratulations!

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: So I said, well, your mother is probably turning in her grave.

Dr. Rivera: But there was that attitude, wasn't it Gil? That never the twain shall meet or mix?

So, you went against the grain in Colton?

Mr. Garcia: There was quite a few prejudices against the Chicano's from South Colton and in the City of Colton.

I remember The Hub City Theatre, and the New Colton – we had to sit on the left side and I don't know why. They didn't want us to mix in with the *gringos*. The ushers used to always push us to the left side of those theatres. I always resented that – I wanted to sit in the middle.

The City had what we called the Colton plunge, and it was real nice and warm because the spring water was warm... But the only time they would allow us to go there to swim was a day before they were gonna change the water. I guess they didn't want us Mexicans to contaminate the water.

Dr. Rivera: Well, you-know, you're right about the plunge being filled with warm Spring water, the temperature was 83 degrees, so it was a wonderful type of temperature for swimming...

Is there any other thing that you remember, Gil? Because [where we lived,] you couldn't cross the railroad tracks. You had to stay on your side...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Didn't you live on 'O' Street?

Dr. Rivera: I lived on 'O' Street, uh-huh.

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Do you remember any other incidents, Gil, growing up in the 40's – that you were exposed to?

Mr. Garcia: It was quite an experience growing up in those days. But there's still a lot of prejudice against Mexicans, at this time.

Dr. Rivera: Both of you went against the grain; and you, Gil, being a fighter pilot, you-know, it was almost as if you were not suppose to do those things.

Mr. Garcia: [When] I went to high school, I was the first Mexican-American, Chicano that was ever on the student council... Then, I graduated from high school and I was second in the class -- so I was very proud of that. Clarence Lasby was number one, and I was number two; and he was just smart.

Dr. Rivera: Who was number one?

Mr. Garcia: Clarence Lasby -- he was very smart, he didn't have to study. I was number two because I worked my fanny [off]; I would really study hard and work real hard in my education; and I was real proud of the fact that I came in second. I couldn't beat him – he was just a smart kid.

Dr. Rivera: So, those were some of the incidents that you were exposed to, and you knew that there was that difference or that prejudice that existed.

Mr. Garcia: It was very apparent.

Dr. Rivera: And then, you-know, we couldn't buy houses in North Colton back then. And now you live in North Colton. When did you buy your house in North Colton?

Mr. Garcia: 1954-55?

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: January 1956.

Dr. Rivera: So, you were one of the pioneers to move in North Colton, also.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: On the whole street, the only other Mexicans were the Ayalas: Sal and Francis. They lived right on the corner... And now, it's mostly Mexicans that live there.

Dr. Rivera: But then, in 1955, during those years you were really pioneers. Were you Catholic? Were you a church goer?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: And you went to San Salvador?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, Immaculate Heart.

Dr. Rivera: Why didn't you go to San Salvador?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Because Father Valencia kicked us out of there.

Dr. Rivera: You're kidding?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No.

Dr. Rivera: Because Father Valencia was there in 1937 to 1966.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Until he got killed, yeah.

Dr. Rivera: If you were a devout Catholic, why would he kick you out?

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Because we were *gringos* – and he didn't want us there.

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: So you [experienced] prejudice from both sides of town: South Colton by Father Valencia and North Colton by the other folks. There's no winning Mary!

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: What did Father Valencia say exactly? Did he say, I don't want *gringos* here?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: It started with my older brother, George. [Father Valencia said:] *veta de aqui, ya no quiero gringos aqui*. And my brother started crying.

Dr. Rivera: How old was George?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He was probably, what, like 13? So he went home and told my Mom, and my Mom went up there, and [Father Valencia said:] *no quiero su familia aqui por que son gringo, váyanse*. So my Mom found the Immaculate Conception Church, and she said, well, we're going up there – it's further but, he doesn't want us there – so, oh-well.

Dr. Rivera: Immaculate Conception is in North Colton on La Cadena and Olive?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well at that time, it was right across from Valley College. There were some little buildings there, and we were in one of those little buildings.

Mr. Acosta: Who was the priest at Immaculate Conception?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Father Keene. He married us the first time we got married; and then, when we did our 25th, he married us again. [But he had died by our 50th

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anniversary], so for our 50th, we had Father Ed Gomez... And for our 60th, we didn't do anything because the year before our son died on our anniversary.

(She tears up a bit)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I said no, I don't want anything.

Our oldest son became a pilot, also – Dan. He now flies for FedEx; he's been with FedEx for 20-25 years, about 25 years – [and he is] still flying with them. They had said before, at age 60, they had to retire. Well now, they upped it to 65 because next June he will be 60 – so he said: I get to fly a little longer.

Dr. Rivera: So were you instrumental in getting him interested in flying?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah. In fact, he was very disappointed because I flew fighters all my life; and when he was in the late stages of his flight training, he had trouble flying formations. So, when he graduated, they stipulated that he could not fly fighters, TAC or interceptors – that's when he ended up flying C-141s. From there he went to fly for FedEx. But he was very disappointed that he couldn't fly fighters because he wanted to follow me.

Dr. Rivera: Ah-okay.

Mr. Garcia: He had trouble flying, I think, it was in his formation flying... [It] wasn't bad enough to flunk him out of flight school but, [enough] to restrict him when graduating from fire-interceptors or attack fighters, he had to go to multi engine.

Dr. Rivera: So, the legacy continues in the Garcia family.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My son's oldest daughter also joined the guard, and she tried to go to pilot training, but she flunked out—she didn't make it but she's still in the Air Force. Oh, she'll be a Major next year.

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Dr. Rivera: Gil, you mentioned that you played for the Mercury's, you played second base for the Mercury's. What other things did you do? Did you have pals, or a group of people? Like Mary had the Paloma Gang. What about you, did you have anybody on 5th Street that you used to pal around with or hang around with?

Mr. Garcia: I was an outcast, I guess.

Dr. Rivera: What do you mean, you were a nerd?

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: When I grew up, there weren't too many kids my age on that street... (inaudible). I started playing baseball in high school. In fact, in my senior year I was captain of the baseball team. From there I went into the service, and I played baseball in the service. [After that] I started playing with Mercury's, and I played with the Mercury's for years until I had to get a job. [I worked the] swing shift and I couldn't play on Sundays...

Dr. Rivera: But in high school, who did you pal around with in high school? Do you remember?

Mr. Garcia: I had this kid named Jimmy Barthal, and I met him when playing baseball. We became really good friends – and I palled around with him. I also played around with Paul Moodle, and Ed Morales, we called him Machteté.

Dr. Rivera: Yes, yes, yes, okay.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: And Ernie Garcia.

Dr. Rivera: Dr. Ernie Garcia who used to be the Dean of the School of Education here [at CSUSB], he calls you: cousin.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Tell him about the Air Force, when you guys were in the Air Force.

Mr. Garcia: We joined the guard to keep away from the draft because at that time, if we joined the guard or reserves, they would not draft you. But you had to join for three years, so we joined for three years to keep from getting drafted. And then the Korean War started, and they activated our squadrons.

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: [Afterwards], I got into flight school, and all that – so... 28 years, or 36 years later I was still connected with the military: 8 years as an enlisted man and 28 years as a pilot.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: How about when they did rollcall?

Mr. Garcia: Oh yeah, we were stationed at George at the time, George Air Force Base, and, of course, [Ernie and I] were in the same squadron. We had roll call in the morning, at 7 o'clock every morning, and Ernest Garcia being ahead, [alphabetically,] of Gilbert [Garcia]... So, we're standing there [during] rollcall and we heard them say: GARCIA, Ernest, and he said: "yo!" And then, instead of saying Garcia, again, they would say: AGAIN! So I answered...

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: I was [called:] AGAIN for a long period in the squadron...

Dr. Rivera: Do remember any of the guys from La Calle Cinco?

Mr. Garcia: I remember Jimmie Reese, but he was younger than me. His older brother, Ralph, I think his name was – he was real young when died.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember the Caldera swimming pool?

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Mr. Garcia: Yes and no. The Caldera Pool was on the verge of closing up at the time. In fact, we used to go to the swimming pool at the Colton Plunge – they used to tell us: Why don't you go swimming at the Caldera Pool – that's for you Mexicans.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, that's what they told you at the Colton Plunge?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: You go to the Caldera pool—that's where you belong...

Mr. Garcia: [Again,] at that time, they were on the verge of closing up, they didn't maintain it... That's why we used to go to the Municipal Plunge. Like I said, we were restricted, and I was really upset about that because they only allowed us to go the day before they changed the water.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember what day that was?

Mr. Garcia: I think it was a Thursday or Friday because they used to change the water for the weekend. They would let us go in the day before they knew they were gonna change the water – and that used to really upset me.

Like one time, we went swimming and there was a bunch of Mexican kids and a lot of gringos, and something was stolen from somewhere. And of course, right away they accused all the Mexicans. So they took us in the office and they checked all our lockers because they couldn't find the contraband. But it really upset me and I was growing up at the time, I was just 17, 18 years old, and I was really upset. When they couldn't find the contraband with us kids, why didn't they search the gringos? They didn't – and that really upset me at the time... that they would single us out. But when they didn't find the contraband, they never searched the gringos that were there to see if they had the contraband, which, obviously, they did because we didn't have it so it had to be them.

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Dr. Rivera: The double standards still continues?

Mr. Garcia: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Yeah. Now, let me ask you, you said your Dad came to Colton, both of your Dads came to Colton, did your Moms work?

Mr. Garcia: No.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My Mom did housecleaning for the doctors in Colton: Dr. Smith, Dr. Martin, and for that lawyer – what was his name? (She asks Gil.) I don't remember his name... but that's what she did for a while. Then, she became a cook at the Spanish Kitchen that was right next to the New Colton Theatre – it was a little Mexican restaurant.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. Was it the west side or the east side of the theater?

Mr. Garcia: Right across the street from the theater...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, it was right next door -- right exactly next door.

Dr. Rivera: She was a cook for how many years?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Probably, like 3 or 4 [years], and then she decided to stay home.

[My parents] got a foster home [because] they wanted to have foster kids – we had so many kids and babies.

Dr. Rivera: Oh, tell me about that experience. Your Mom and Dad applied and...?

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, and they got selected. So we would get kids that people didn't want anymore – and we'd get them. [Later,] they'd find a place for them – so they'd move them on. Pretty soon we got more, and then we'd get babies. It was so funny because – we got this one baby, he was missing a finger, the middle finger, and his other little finger was trickle. We kind of knew who the mother was, I went to school with her younger sister. [Anyway,] my Mom and Dad had gone to the high school for open-house, and they said: now don't let anybody come in and take that baby, don't even open the door... [Later,] this gal comes, [knocks on the door] and I opened the door, and she says: I'm Barbara (inaudible)... and I said, yeah, I know who you are. And she said: Can I see Michael? [But] my parents named [this baby] Tommy because when we got him he didn't have a name; so my Mom said: I like the name Tommy. So [Barbara] wanted Michael, and she said he's missing a finger. So we let her in and she looked at the baby and everything, and she said: Can I take him to show him to my grandma? And I said: No we can't let you take him. She says, will you guys come with me? So my brother, Fred, and I, said: Okay. We jumped in the van with her and we went to her grandmother's house so the grandma could see the baby... She took us back [home], and then, when my Mom and Dad got home, I said, we'd better confess, you-know. So we did, and man! we got in trouble. [My parents said:] What did we tell you? And we said: Well, we knew who it was, and we know it was her baby – so no problem, you-know. [My parents said:] Don't ever do that again! Then, we got some teenage boys that wreaked havoc all the time. They didn't want this, and they didn't want to eat that, and my Mom said: Well I don't know what to feed you. We're not gonna feed you something different from the family, you-know. Finally, [my parents] told the welfare to take them because we just can't handle them anymore. My Mom used to watch babies from teachers at Wilson. The moms had [just had] the babies and they were [still] nursing them – that way they could come at lunch time and nurse them... So my Mom watched those babies—about 3 of them... We got this one little girl, she was 11 days old, and we got her from Saint Ann's Catholic Home for Unwed Mothers in LA (Los Angeles). When she was a year and a half, the welfare said: We better move her because you're gonna get attached to her.

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And we said: Get attached to her, she's already part of our family. So they got a lawyer and adopted her.

Dr. Rivera: For how long did your Mom take care of foster children?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: For probably 10 years.

Dr. Rivera: That's a long time.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: And then, after we adopted Sandy, we said, now we have a baby in the house. Then, lo and behold, my Mother got pregnant, you-know. She was 44 years old, and she got pregnant with my sister, Kathy.

Dr. Rivera: I'll be darn.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: And it was just like, gosh! Somebody said, it seems like every time you adopt a baby – you get pregnant, and it proved to be true there.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about Sandy, she went to the University of Redlands?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Does she still live in the area?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, she lives in Encinitas. She never really did anything with her education – ever. She paints houses...

Dr. Rivera: She met her husband?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah. He taught at a school for wayward boys, like out towards the desert somewhere.

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[Sandy and her husband] met at a party at the University of Redlands... He was from Newport Beach, and so they clicked and ended up getting married; and they're still married and living in Encinitas. Two hippies, they're still hippies, old hippies.

Dr. Rivera: Lily and I, we bonded with [your parents], Sarah and Fred, because we gave our first scholarship to Sandy.

Your Mom and Dad were very appreciative – they would sponsor barbecues, so we could raise money for scholarships for Colton High School kids...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I would donate all these old toys and stuff I didn't want anymore, and they'd go and buy it all back.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: I'd say: Why do you guys do that? We donate so they can sell it to somebody else.

But they always remembered all those fiestas that they had there.

Dr. Rivera: Again, we appreciate your Mom and Dad sponsoring those barbecues to help raise funds for scholarships.

Gil, you-know, you graduated from Colton High School in the late 50s, you were very familiar with the Korean Conflict, and also being done with World War II. How did these two wars affect the attitude of Mexicans in Colton? Because we had a lot of our boys participate in World War II, and also the Korean Conflict. When they came home, was there a change of attitude?

Mr. Garcia: I don't know if there was a change of attitude, it was more of appreciation for living here in the United States. In my opinion, they were very patriotic. I never met Chicanos from South Colton that was anti-military or protesters. They were, in my opinion, very patriotic, and they still are.

Dr. Rivera: I guess what I was getting to was that we were not suppose to go beyond the railroad tracks. But after the Korean Conflict and World War II, there was the GI

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Bill, so you were able to borrow money and buy a house. Also, some of our boys saw that – wait a minute, I paid my dues and I should be treated as everybody else.

Was there a movement back in those years in the 50s to get involved with the City Council, or run for mayor? Or, who were some of the people that were actively working with people to get involved in the community?

Mr. Garcia: It was only a couple, Pete Luque was one...

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, Pete Luque was a councilman in 1952.

Pasqual Oliva also participated.

Was that a movement? Because prior to that, in the 30s, we didn't have any participation in city politics.

Mr. Garcia: I was approached quite a few times, they wanted me to run for councilman and all that – but, I was into my flying and raising my family, and politics was the last thing I wanted to get involved in, so I never did. But quite a few people approached me wanting me to run for City Council or mayor. But politics was not my agenda at all, and I just stayed away from it.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember Ralph Cervantes?

Mr. Garcia: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: He was the one that went to court in 52 or 53 because he wanted to buy that house almost across from the Colton Junior High School. He went to court and he won his court [case]. He was able to buy the house close to the junior high school. That's what I [meant] about coming back from the war, and saying that – well, I paid my dues; therefore, I should be able to buy a house wherever I want. There were also some benefits with jobs, you-know, some of our [guys] got trained in the military and were able to do some of the jobs that they were not privy to before.

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Did you experience that? Or, did you know people that just happened to be at the right place at the right time?

Mr. Garcia: I was kind of a hustler growing up, and my parents were poor; so, anything I wanted to do, I had to learn myself. Like, I remember working real hard to buy the first baseball glove I ever had...

You asked me if I picked fruit. I picked oranges, lemons, grapefruit, [and] grapes.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Tom Velasquez used to take him and a bunch of boys...

Mr. Garcia: Tom Velasquez had a truck, and he had like a contract to pick oranges...

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember what year that was? How old were you, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: I was a young teenager.

At that time, Tom Velasquez had a rule, he had his crew. Of course, my brother and I were just kids, and so my Dad talked him into taking us to go become a member of his crew and do some picking. He looked at us and said: You kids will probably go out and play and not work. My father said: No, listen, you take them, they'll work. If they don't work, you just come and talk to me and I'll take care it... My brother and I were hired as 1 adult... In fact, we used to pick oranges, and sometimes we would drop the ladder and we couldn't get the ladder up to pick. I remember Diego Rosales was in the same crew, and every time we dropped the ladder, he would come and help us stand the ladder up, and once we got the ladder up we could work... We did that for quite a few years.

Dr. Rivera: Well, you-know, the area was a citrus center. Lots of oranges, lots of lemon, lots of grapefruit.

Mr. Garcia: Especially, navel oranges in Highgrove and Highland. Of course, the grapes were in the Fontana area.

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Dr. Rivera: So, you were involved in picking oranges?

Mr. Garcia: Oh-yes.

Dr. Rivera: Were you ever a *cienero* that you picked a hundred boxes a day?

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: I don't remember ever accomplishing that.

Dr. Rivera: But did you [work in] the summers, Gil, or Saturdays?

Mr. Garcia: Saturday's, and every time I was off school like [during] Christmas vacation, Easter vacation – it wasn't fun days to go to the beach, I mean, you'd go pick oranges or whatever to work.

Dr. Rivera: How much did they pay you per box, do you remember?

Mr. Garcia: I remember 10 cents a box at one time, but it would vary depending on [whether] the crop was good to get paid 10 cents... It might go up to 12 cents or something like. But you couldn't bank very much, [we] just got enough to, as a kid, it was enough to buy my clothes.

I remember, I was so happy I was picking oranges so I had money enough to buy my first baseball glove and my first baseball shoes.

And then one time, I became kind of a real spendthrift, I guess, and I went out and bought some nice Kangaroo shoes, baseball shoes [that were] a real soft and a really nice [pair of] shoes. Well, the war came and I went to Korea, and I came back and I wanted to start playing again, and I went to hustle and hustle trying to find my shoes in my little house with my Mom. Finally, I asked her: what happened to my baseball shoes, my Kangaroos? She said, *mijo*, they were so soft and nice that I had my *Tata* take the spikes off, and I wore them myself...

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(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: ...They were quite expensive, I saved a lot of money to buy them. But she got them and she wore them out.

Dr. Rivera: Did your Mom and Dad always live there on 5th Street?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah, when we came to Colton, we lived further north than where we were at, and then we bought the house where we're at...

Dr. Rivera: Mary, your Mom and Dad, did they always stay at the house on Congress?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Mm-hmm, yeah. My Mom died living there, and then my Dad died.

He had signed it over—turned it all over to my youngest son, Mike. Then, Mike got real sick and he couldn't do anything with it, you-know. His wife and sister-in-law, they would all go [to the house] on the weekends – trying to clean it. But he couldn't, he got Addison's Disease, and he was on so much medication. Finally, he says, I'm gonna have to sell it. The city wanted to buy it, and he finally ended up selling it to them, and then they made a parking lot out of it. They tore the house down and made a parking lot. I don't know why it's a parking lot because it's in such a weird place – [I don't know] what it's for.

But they made those new baseball fields, and whatever there – so I don't know if there's a way to get from the parking lot to [the baseball fields]. [I don't know] if there's gate or what, I don't know.

Dr. Rivera: Well, let me ask you because you bring up another point that I just remembered. When you lived on Pine Street, next to the Blakely's, there was the old house project, *verdad?*

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, it was across the street, the old wooden ones, yeah.

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Dr. Rivera: The old wooden ones. I don't know how many they had but there were a whole bunch of them. Do you remember those, Mary?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Oh-yeah... I was in the 5th grade there at Garfield, and this one kid that was there, he was Hawaiian, Chinese-Hawaiian, and he was born in Hawaii, and his parents worked at the club Pago Pago.

Dr. Rivera: Ooohhhh, yes, yes.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Remember that night club they had there? The father was playing steel guitar, or something... and the mother danced. He was an only child, and so I got to know all the Hawaiians.

One day I invited them all to the house, and here I come up the driveway with all these Hawaiians barefoot. My Mom and Dad said: What is she doing now? I said, oh, these are my Hawaiian friends.

Dr. Rivera: And they lived in the projects?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: The ones that were entertainers at the Pago Pago?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, they were all entertainers, yeah, and that's where they lived. So we became really good friends. My Mom and Dad, you-know, would always have them over, and they would have [us] over.

As matter of fact, Gil and I went to Hawaii, and he was over there with the Air Force, and I flew over to meet him. And I said: I'm gonna look up my friend Paul, he used to play, you-know, in the band. So I looked in the phone book, and my God, there was like 20 Paul Changs. So then I said: I'll look up Basil, there shouldn't be that many Basils, and I think there were 3. And the first one I hit it – it was him and he said: Well,

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let me give you my dad's phone number. He said: I got a lot of company right now from England. Because they were pretty wealthy and they'd sent [Paul] to school in England. So I called [his dad] and he was so excited, he said: meet me at such-and-such a corner at the mall, at a shopping center, and then you're gonna follow me to the house because you cannot leave a rental car, you come back and it'll be stripped to nothing – when they find a rental car, they strip it. So we're there and it's pouring rain, and Gil says: How are you gonna know this man? You haven't seen him in 30 years. I said, I'll know him. So this Volkswagen bus drives up, and this guy gets out and I said: there he is! And I went, and sure enough that was him – and we hugged and everything. And he said: Okay, follow me up to the house. So we went up there and met his wife, his previous wife had died of cancer, and he had remarried. So then he said, we want to take you to this place to eat, and we went to this real, real nice restaurant. Then we went back to the house, and he said: I'm gonna play some really good music: *Trio Los Panchos*. My Dad had got him interested in that kind of music, and he loved it. He had all these albums, you-know, and I said, isn't that something we came to Hawaii to listen to *Trio Los Panchos*.

Dr. Rivera: But it's amazing that they lived there in the old housing projects, and they were all entertainers at the Pago Pago Club. And you befriended all of them – and they became semi-Mexicans.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Right. Because they were living with all the Mexicans, and they were probably the only non-Mexicans in the projects.

Dr. Rivera: Did they go to school?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: (Asking Gil) Well, you went to school with some, were they from the club too?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: ...The one that Gil went to school with – she was a beautiful girl, she was a dancer. She went to Harris Company to buy something, and she went in barefooted and they chased her out of there, you-know, you can't come in here barefooted. Well, she didn't know, you-know, in Hawaii they all go barefooted. Finally, I guess somebody told her, no, you gotta wear shoes.

Dr. Rivera: I'll be darn – what a small world, *verdad?* You never know...
Now, its [been more than an] hour that we've been chatting... Did I forget anything on my list of questions?
Gil, you have some notes there... do you want to go over your notes to see if I forgot anything?

Mr. Garcia: Well, you asked me [about] things that I did, like in my school years [during] 44 and 45. Of course, the war was real heavy...
I went to school on Wednesdays, but I never attended classes because my job was that I used to go to Garfield and Wilson Junior High – and go to every room and collect the money and take the order for stamps, and when they had enough for a bond. Then, I would go to the bank on my bike, if I had a flat, I had to walk. I used to buy all the stamps and war bonds and go back and distribute them at Wilson or Garfield.

Dr. Rivera: How did that work, Gil? You would go and collect money?

Mr. Garcia: ... And make a note [of] who it was, the person or student, and collect the money. Then, I'd go to the bank and buy the stamps and bring them back to the students. So I did that for a whole year, and like-I-say, Wednesday I went school but never attended class because that was my job... I used to go over to Garfield and Wilson and collect all this money for stamps, go to the bank buy the stamps, and then go back and distribute them to individuals. And when they had enough for a bond, then I'd have to go back, well, next time I would see whether I had to go... (inaudible) I used to buy the bonds for them...

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Dr. Rivera: You did that for a full year?

Mr. Garcia: For a full year, yeah. Like I said, I went to school every Wednesday, but I never attended class.

Dr. Rivera: The bonds were how much?

Mr. Garcia: \$18.75 for a \$25 dollar bond... Students could buy as many as 10 cents of the stamps and collect them until they got \$18.75 – then I'd go back and buy a bond for them.

Dr. Rivera: Gil, talking about the bonds, do you remember rationing?

Mr. Garcia: Oh-yes.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about rationing?

Mr. Garcia: Well, during the war it was rationing on certain items: like, I remember meat products, you could only buy meat on maybe three days a week, or something like, and that was limited on what you could buy...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Wasn't it flour and sugar too?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah, all of the commodities – it wasn't too restricted, but it was kind of cut back on what you could buy, and all that. It was during war years.

Dr. Rivera: How about gasoline?

Mr. Garcia: You were only allowed... I can't remember. I think it was 10 gallons a week, or something like that. You had to have stamps – you'd buy the stamps and

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then you'd have to use the stamps, not like money, but to buy 10 gallons of gas you'd use stamps that allowed you to buy it. Because you were restricted, you couldn't just buy gas for joy-riding, you had to use it to go to work and back or go to school and back.

Dr. Rivera: Okay. You mentioned your Kangaroo shoes that your Mom took.

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Now, where did people do their shopping, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: At that time there were two stores in Colton, primarily: Helman's and Brill's... and Willets. And of course, it was real popular at the time to order things from the Sears catalog.

Dr. Rivera: Okay.

Mr. Garcia: Sears catalog was like a Bible – every time the new came out, man, it was a Bible.

Dr. Rivera: Where would you get the catalog?

Mr. Garcia: They would send it to you, you'd apply for it—you could get one from Sears, and also Montgomery Wards had a catalog, and you could order through the mail.

Dr. Rivera: So a lot of people would buy out of the catalog?

Mr. Garcia: Yes. That's where I learned C.O.D. (Cash on Delivery). When you ordered stuff, cash on delivery. When they delivered stuff, you had to have the cash to pay for it.

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Dr. Rivera: Okay, I'll be darn. So it was kind of like an Amazon back then?

(Laughter)

Mr. Garcia: Not quite that fancy.

Dr. Rivera: Anything that I left out from your notes, Gil? Look at your notes again, is there anything that I left out?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: We all shopped at Stater Brothers. I think that was the only grocery store, wasn't it? And finally they got a Safeway.

Mr. Garcia: The Safeway didn't remain open too long...

Dr. Rivera: But, I remember shopping at Cervantes.

Mr. Garcia: Yep. Cervantes and...

Dr. Rivera: Esperanza, and the Martinez Bakery... The Tortilla Factory was next to it... La Calle Siete.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Doña Eulalia Morales where they had tamales, tortillas, and menudo...

Dr. Rivera: What was this?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Doña Eulalia Morales.

Dr. Rivera: Oh-yes, across the street or close to the church.

Mr. Garcia: She used to make some real good Menudo, man –

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Dr. Rivera: She did?

Mr. Garcia: Oh-yes. She only made it on weekends, I think... You'd take your little pot [to her] and she'd fill it up for you.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: A few years ago, I was at my brother's, who passed away, but my sister-in-law had a party for one of my nephews that graduated from high school. And the table I sat at – they all worked at Stater's, and a couple of them were high up guys in the warehouse. So, they started asking me: Well, where do you shop? I said: well, I used to always shop at Stater's, even before I got married, I shopped there with my Mom. But I said, now, I do most of my shopping at the commissary. I said, because we get everything cheaper and we don't pay any taxes, at all. So I said: we go to the commissary about twice a month and [spend] three or four hundred dollars [for] groceries. I said, the things that I need quickly – I get them at Stater's.

Dr. Rivera: Well, you were like your Father, your Father used to shop like that. He'd get everything at the commissary.

[Is there] anything else that I forgot, Gil?

Mr. Garcia: As a kid growing up, I got here [in] the notes that, my parents were poor so anything we wanted we had to work for it. I picked oranges, lemons, grapefruit, grapes, apricots, figs. [For] apricots, we went to Hemet, [and for] figs, we went up to Fresno.

Dr. Rivera: You went to Hemet too?

Mr. Garcia: Yeah...

Dr. Rivera: For the 5 or 6 weeks that you...?

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Mr. Garcia: Yeah, to do the harvest of the apricots.

The farmers and the ranchers used to provide us tents, outhouses, and showers. We used to go live there, and stay there and take care of the crops, and move on to the next ranch and they'd do the same thing.

Dr. Rivera: And you said you went up to north and central valley?

Mr. Garcia: I went to Fresno for the harvest... We used to go as a family up there and they'd provide a tent and just enough... (inaudible).

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: [They used to] sing "La Bamba" in the little camps that they had.

Dr. Rivera: So California grew and you picked it.

Mr. Garcia: Yes. I picked lemons, oranges, grapefruit, grapes, onions, potatoes.

Some potatoes were in the area of El Nuevo (Moreno Valley)...

I hated to pick potatoes. It was not a stoop labor... but that was not what I hated, what I hated was sometimes you would see a potato that looked good and you would pick it up to put it into your sack, and then it was rotten at the bottom. Those stinky rotten potatoes would really stink – and that's why I used to hate picking potatoes. But I picked onions, potatoes, and grapes.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: You said, where did we like to eat?

Remember down on Valley Boulevard, way down was the Derby house?

Dr. Rivera: Yes.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: My Dad loved to go there to eat.

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Dr. Rivera: What was his favorite plate?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Steak. Even though we ate that at home all that time. The first time Gil took me out to a nice restaurant to eat, he said: what are you going to have? And I said, I want a cheeseburger.

(Laughter)

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: A cheeseburger! You need to order a steak. I said, I eat steak at home everyday, I don't want a steak.

Dr. Rivera: Her Father was really a steak and potato man – he ate steak and potatoes everyday.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He'd raise a calf until it was big enough, have it slaughtered, and have it all steaks and roasts. There used to be a place in town where you got lockers, and you rented them, and they'd put all your meat in there for you. And then, when you wanted some you went up and got it -- so that's what he did. Ugh! And then, he'd raise a pig and we'd have pork – and that's all we ate.

Mr. Garcia: And chickens, you all had chickens.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: He bought a huge Amana freezer, I meant that thing was huge! Then we didn't have to go up there [to the rented lockers] anymore, we'd put it in our own freezer...

Dr. Rivera: Well, you-know, I do remember going with Freddy and your Dad to the freezer. I think it was located on Mill Street, in that area.

Mr. Garcia: He also rented [a locker] up in Grand Terrace someplace, a freezer.

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Dr. Rivera: I said, why are we coming here? And they would tell me the story that your Dad would buy the animal and slaughter it, and then just save the meat in the in the freezer.

Mr. Garcia: They used to package it for him, and they used to ask how many he wanted: 2 or 3 steaks or a roast, or whatever.

But they used to raise calves and butcher them and put them in the freezer. He had some pigs too that would grow up and he'd butcher them and put the meat in the freezer. Of course, he always had chickens in the yard for eggs...

Dr. Rivera: So, Mary, you had quite a family. Your Mom had a garden, a Camellia garden.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: No, my Dad had over a thousand Camellia plants. He loved plants.

Mr. Garcia: Camellia's was his specialty, he used to grow them, and he used to graft them. For us, he grafted one that had four colors on the same plant: pink, red, variegated, and white. And they were the type that would all bloom at the same time. So when they were blooming – they were beautiful, a beautiful plant. He had four colors throughout the Camellias on the plant – it was such a nice plant. We had a plant, of course, Camellias you have to place them in the shade on the north side of the house – so we had them on the north side of the house. We finally had to buy an air conditioner because the kids had allergies, and the only place to put the air conditioner [was where the Camellias were], and it's still there. They had to move [some of] the Camellia plants... the others survived because they were still there, but the one that was variegated – that one didn't make it, that one died. I was so sad about that because he grafted them, and he picked them so they would bloom at the same time. So here was this plant that had pink, red, white, and a variegated one – all at the same time – such a beautiful plant.

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Dr. Rivera: Well I remember your Mom used to sell them for boutonnières for graduation, and corsages.

Well listen, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: You can keep these pictures because Dominic printed them up last night.

Mr. Acosta is the one [who] got me into photography.

Dr. Rivera: (Speaking to Frank who is off camera) See Frank, [you're] a tremendous influence.

Now, let me ask one last question of both of you. As both lifelong residents of Colton, what was the best thing about living in Colton?

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Well like, when we bought our house, he was going to UCR (University California, Riverside), and we looked at houses in Riverside and we couldn't find anything we really liked. Then, we decided we needed to get a used house that had a yard in it because he didn't have time to put a yard in. So, we found that one on Valencia with a for sale sign, so we stopped, and the owner was one of the Smiths from the Smith Flower Shop... [we decided this was the house we needed to buy]. The elementary school is here, the junior high is up the street, and the high school is down the street. So, we had one boy at the time, and we said, that way the kids can all go to school right here. So that was the big selling point because the schools were all in walking distance.

Dr. Rivera: So schooling was one of the best things in Colton. The high school was just down the street too.

How about for you, Gil, what was the best thing about living in Colton, or the worst thing?

Mr. Garcia: Well the best thing was, I met a lot of really good and friendly people.

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Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Except the neighbors next door -- they didn't like Mexicans.

Mr. Garcia: The worst thing, I can't really think of anything that could be worse than living in Colton. I enjoyed living in Colton, it was good to me.

Unfortunately, when growing up – there's still a lot of prejudice that existed at the time. Like, going to high school, I was the first Chicano Mexican-American that was ever on the student council in the high school. I was the first one – I broke that barrier – just like I broke the barrier becoming a pilot. I think I'm the only pilot who ever grew up in South Colton – I think I'm the only one.

Dr. Rivera: So, it was good living in Colton because of family and friends, and good opportunities?

Mr. Garcia: Like I said, there was prejudice at the time, but I think that existed everywhere.

Dr. Rivera: Well, prejudice – that's the way it was... So people accepted that and that's the way it is.

Mr. Garcia: And that used to upset me in those days because, especially when I came back home from being in the Korean War. I came back, and I think that we needed to be treated [as] equals, none of this prejudice stuff, and that upset me in those days. But at that time—that was life.

Dr. Rivera: Well, Gil and Mary, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon. I thoroughly enjoyed our hour and a half together, and it brought back a lot of lost memories, lots of memories. Then, also, you-know, the Hawaiians being part of our Colton history...

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Yeah, and the projects.

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Dr. Rivera: Then, when you visited them in Hawaii, they were *Los Panchos* fans. So thank you very much for being with us this afternoon.

Mrs. Van Aken-Garcia: Oh, you're quite welcome.

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