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South Colton Oral History Project

Interview Summary

Interviewee:

Luis Contreras, Lucy Contreras

Interviewer:

Tom Rivera

Interview Date:

November 22, 2014

Interview Location:

San Bernardino, CA

Length:

01:12:52

Interview Summary completed by:

M. Camacho Nuno, 2024

Description:

Tom Rivera interviews Luis Contreras and his wife Lucy Contreras, both natives of Colton. Luis discusses his time in the service during World War II when he was drafted as a high school student. He also explains that during his 21st bomb run, his plane was shot down in Germany and angry civilians beat him up. Due to this, he suffered from disabilities that had stayed with him his entire life, up to the making of the interview. Rivera then goes on to ask about the Contreras' meeting and eventual marriage, which took many years and previous marriages. Both Luis and Lucy recollect their cherished memories of Colton. The interview ends with what summer was like for the couple as youth in South Colton.

Subject Topic:

- Prisoner of War
- World War II
- Ball Turret Gunner
- Disability and Being a Veteran
- The Great Depression
- Franklin D. Roosevelt
- Segregation in North and South Colton

Spatial Coverage:

Name of Site (if relevant)	General Location/Address
John M. Pfau Library	5500 University Pkwy, San Bernardino, CA 92407
George Air Force Base	Victorville, CA 92394 (Defunct Location)
San Bernardino Air Depot.	1601 E 3rd St, San Bernardino, CA 92408

Buckley Space Force Base	Aurora, CO
Camp Lucky Strike	St. Valery, France
Cortland Ballroom	San Bernardino, CA (Defunct Location)
Abraham Lincoln Elementary School	444 E Olive St, Colton, CA 92324
Garfield Elementary School	Colton, CA (Defunct Location)
Colton High School	777 W Valley Blvd, Colton, CA 92324
Caldera Swimming Pool	Colton, CA (Defunct Location)

Temporal Coverage:

1910s - 2014

Key Events:

- Luis is drafted into the war while in high school.
- The plane gets shot down and Luis gets beaten, permanently disabled.
- Luis comes back home and struggles with getting evidence of his POW status.
- Luis and Lucy live together for over two decades and got married recently.
- Memories of segregation and prejudice in South Colton.

Key Organizations:

- The Air Force
- Army Air Corps
- Colton VFW Post 6476
- Kaiser Steel
- The Latin Lads Band
- Pacific Fruit Express
- Library of Congress

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	00:05:17 - 00:13:41	Luis tells Rivera about his 21st bomb run and his time getting hurt by angry civilians.
Digital Video	00:25:27 - 00:27:06	Segregation in South Colton during the time of the Great Depression.
Digital Video	00:28:10 - 00:31:46	High School presidential run and the racist principal.

Digital Video	00:36:18 - 00:38:32	Rivera asks about how Lucy and Luis met and got married.
Digital Video	01:01:17 - 01:05:34	Luis goes to the bar and eventually sees the German soldiers.

Related Materials

Additional oral history interviews are available from the South Colton Oral History Project at CSUSB, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/colton-history/>

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

TOM RIVERA: Good morning. I'm Dr. Tom Rivera. I'm retired from Cal State, San Bernardino, and welcome to our oral history project of South Colton. Today is November the twenty-second, and it's about 9:30 in the morning, and we're on the fourth floor of the Pfau Library. And helping with the project is Frank Acosta, who's behind the camera. He's part of our committee also. And today's interviewees -- our guests today is Mr. and Mrs. Luis [Lopez?] Contreras and Lucy Contreras. Lucy Contre-- welcome. Welcome to Cal State --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Thank you.

TOM RIVERA: -- and thank you for being with us this morning. Thank you so much. I'm delighted that you were available today, especially a rainy day like [00:01:00] today. And, not only that, I picked you up early at the house. So, thank you so much for being ready.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Okay.

TOM RIVERA: Why don't we get started?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Okay.

TOM RIVERA: Luis, you were a prisoner of war --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- during World War II.

LUIS CONTRERAS: World War II.

TOM RIVERA: And you served in the service in 1939 to 1945.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, no. 1943 to 1946.

TOM RIVERA: 1943 to 1946. And, Luis, you were in high school when they drafted you into the service.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I was in high school and working for the George Air Force Base, which, at that time, was the San Bernardino Air Depot.

TOM RIVERA: Instead of -- it's Norton now --

LUIS CONTRERAS: It's Norton.

TOM RIVERA: -- but, in the old days, it was called...

LUIS CONTRERAS: San Bernardino Air Depot.

TOM RIVERA: San Bernardino Air Depot. And tell me, you were drafted. You were a junior in high school?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I think I was a sophomore. I forget. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. You were 18 years old.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And they drafted you, and where did they take you to [00:02:00] basic training?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Denver, Colorado, Buckley Field.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. And how long was your basic training?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I forget, but I went to my basic training, and I finished my basic training, and then I was told that they were going to send me to Chanute Field for more training on engine mechanics. In the meantime, they asked me about my - when I was in high school, I was in the high school band, so they put me in the Air Force marching band.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, you were in the Air Force marching band?

LUIS CONTRERAS: They did. (laughs) [They didn't know quite?] what to do with me.

TOM RIVERA: (laughs) Well, you were a good -- you were obviously a good musician.

LUIS CONTRERAS: So, anyway -- so, I was there about two, three weeks. And then, everything fell apart. They sent me to Kingman, Arizona for gunnery training.

TOM RIVERA: Kingman, Arizona for gunnery training, and that was the Army Air Corps?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Army Air Corps.

TOM RIVERA: The Army Air Corps.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: [00:03:00] And how long did you train as a gunner?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I don't know how long it took. I forget, but we had the shotgun, then the turret training, air-to-air firing, air-to-ground, and then ground-to-air, and then the shotgun.

TOM RIVERA: So, an extensive training on how to shoot --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, how to shoot.

TOM RIVERA: -- the weapons that the --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Moving targets and whatever, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And also the weapons on the plane.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Uh-huh.

TOM RIVERA: And then, where were you assigned after you --

LUIS CONTRERAS: After --

TOM RIVERA: -- went through the training?

LUIS CONTRERAS: After gunnery training, we were taken to -- [I forget?]. It was Rapid City, South Dakota, and that's when they had the pilots have to shoot the guns that they wanted. I don't know how that one worked, but I wound up with the [00:04:00] Blaine Thomas crew, and that's where I met the bombardier, the navigator, pilot, Blaine Thomas, co-pilot --

TOM RIVERA: And you --

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- Max Bartholomew.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. And then, you were in the 427th Bomber Squadron.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, I belonged to the -- [I'll forget this?] -- 303rd Hell's Angels Bombardment Group.

TOM RIVERA: Well, you have a cap here some place. Where's your cap so you can show us?

LUIS CONTRERAS: A what?

TOM RIVERA: The cap, la gorra.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh.

TOM RIVERA: No la pierdas, no la pierdas -- oh, here we go. Okay. Show it to the camera. First of all, you belonged to the Colton VFW Post -- what's the name of the post? A ver qué es. Post 6476. And then, on the side of the cap, you have...

LUIS CONTRERAS: [I see the side there?].

TOM RIVERA: (inaudible) lado so I can see. On this side, Luis. It says prisoner of [00:05:00] war of World War II, and, at the back, it says the 8th Air Force, and on this side, Luis, ¿qué dice? It says B-17 ball turret gunner.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: That's what you were. That was your assignment.

LUIS CONTRERAS: My assignment, yes.

TOM RIVERA: And they -- as a gunner, they took your squadron to England.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: And, in England, you had missions to fly to Germany.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Tell me about those missions.

LUIS CONTRERAS: To start with, our mission was daylight precision bomb. If the bombardiers didn't see the target, there was no bomb dropped. And, every time we went up, we only had one bomb run, which is murder. (laughs) When we were shot down on a -- we were supposed to make twenty-five missions, and we were told that, if we survived five missions, we were living on borrowed time.

[00:06:00] Well, it was true. And, on our twenty-first mission to Dresden, Germany, the last mission of the 8th Air Force --

TOM RIVERA: You flew 21 missions?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Twenty-one. We completed the mission, 21, even though we were on fire, but we made the first bomb run. [Then, the?] bombardier -- this bombardier couldn't drop the bomb because he couldn't see the target, so we went around the IP, back to the bomb run. The second bomb run, there was a B-24 squadron underneath us, so we couldn't release the bombs either. Third time, we were already on fire. We were still flying, so we made the bomb run, and the lead bombardier, he dropped his bomb. And the order was given to prepare to bail out, and I pulled my handle on the belly gun, and it wouldn't move because the hydraulic was all -- we were all messed up. So, the pilot said to the radio [00:07:00] man, said, "You crank him out, and if that turret doesn't move, when I give the order to bail out, you bail out." He says, "And that's an order." So, Walter Smith -- I called him [Smitty?], he cranked me out of the turret, put me on the oxygen bottle, and connected me to the harness, my parachute harness. And then, the pilot says -- when the order was given to bail out, the pilot says, "Let me know who's going out," because he wasn't going to bail out until everybody was gone. So, the tail gunner says, "Tail gunner's going out." Was Melvin Carlson. Then, Smitty, the radio man, says, "Radio man going out." And then, I said, "Belly gunner going out." And, when we bailed out, the prop was -- you couldn't move your hands to pull the ripcord. By

the time I got rid of the prop wash, [00:08:00] [the tension?] exploded, and I felt bad. I thought maybe the other guys were inside the plane yet, and that was one horrible spot. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Oh, it sure was. Yeah. But, Luis, they mentioned that the B-17s, as they left England, you could easily predict that 20 percent would be lost.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yes.

TOM RIVERA: And, in your case, you flew 21 missions.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Twenty-one missions.

TOM RIVERA: And then, you were shot down the twenty-first mission. And, when you were shot down, where were you shot down? Were you shot down in Germany some place?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, in Dresden, Germany. Our last mission, the 8th Air Force in Dresden, Germany, the marshalling yards. So, when I landed in my parachute, I landed like this, and all my left leg and my ankle was all messed up, and my [00:09:00] spine just cracked when the -- and so, before I could even get out of the parachute, about a dozen people like this, angry, angry civilians got a hold of me, cut my -- [ripped open?] the parachute, picked me up, dropped me on the floor, kicked me, cracked my ribs. Several times, I was picked up and thrown on the ground.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, so you were beat up by the --

LUIS CONTRERAS: I was beaten -- all of us were beaten up. And they threw me to the ground maybe four or five times, kicked my body, cracked my ribs. And then, they tied my hands behind my back and put my arms up on top of my neck, and my spine cracked. My -- dislocated my shoulders. [That day?], I was hit -- I don't know with what -- right here. You can see that I had a hole in my forehead. That's when I blacked out.

TOM RIVERA: [00:10:00] Well, the dimple is still there.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. [Right here?]. And so, I was so -- coming down, I guess I got hit because I was bleeding from here and from my kneecaps, and they pull a shrapnel here and one on my shoulder, here. So, at the end of the beating, I could hear these two airmen, which were [Eddie?] Eschinger and Melvin Carlson, the tail gunner and waist gunner. So, I heard the shots when they shot them. But civilians. It wasn't the military. It was civilians.

TOM RIVERA: That shot them?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Shot them both. And, after I came to, they picked me up, and they held me up between two haystacks, and they wanted to shoot me, but I could hardly stand up, [00:11:00] and here comes the German military, and they took me away.

TOM RIVERA: Ah, so the German military saved you --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- from being executed.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, they saved me from being executed, and they didn't do us any harm. Not the military. The civilians. And I could hear somebody say, "We didn't start this hmm hmm hmm war. You did, but we finished it." (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Aha. Luis, (inaudible), how old when you were shot down?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I was -- let's see. I was either 19 or 20.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, so you were young. You were in your twenties, then. You were very young.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I was a young man.

TOM RIVERA: You were very young. And then, how long were you a prisoner of war in Germany?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Not long because that was near the end of the war, so they took me to Czechoslovakia and brought us back to Germany, and they put us into this camp, prison camp, with the [00:12:00] English soldiers that had been there for many, many years, I guess. And then, this guy -- they had picked up the German lingo, being there that long, and they told us, "Tomorrow, they're going to march you out of here, and there's about a -- they call it a little forest maybe two hours from here, walking distance. And, when they get you there, they're going to shoot you. Yeah, so do whatever you can do." So, they took us out of the camp, and we started marching. Not marching. Just walking. We must have walked about over an hour, and it was a closed road, and this tank with a star on it turned around and threw a volley of bullets over their heads [until they?] dropped their rifles. General Patton and his Third Army division. And he saw -- he comes in the Jeep. This guy was in front of his troops. He wasn't in the [00:13:00] back, backwards.

TOM RIVERA: So, Patton will lead his troops, and these are the ones that rescued you.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, he came out on his Jeep, and he saw our condition, and, oh boy, (laughs) he went bananas. And, so then, he put me on the tank, and we had a [Colonel Francis?]. He put him on the tank and the other guys on Jeeps and took us back to the compound. And then, he ordered a P-47 and flew us to France, and they put us in the Camp Lucky Strike Field Hospital.

TOM RIVERA: Camp Lucky Strike Field Hospital?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Named after the cigarettes?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Lucky Strike, Old Gold, and Chesterfield, they had.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, they were field --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: -- camps.

LUIS CONTRERAS: But I was put in -- I was in the hospital when Germany surrendered. And so, [00:14:00] he put us there, and he put another guy in charge of us to find out how we were going to be treated, how we were going to get hospitalization aid, and then reported back to whoever. And then, when I went to the -- oh, boy. My brain is sliding. Anyway, I went to ask for help from the Veterans Administration, whatever, and so, he says, "Well, where were you treated?" I said -- and I told him. He says, "There's no record of you ever being there." I said, "What?"

TOM RIVERA: So, on top of being a prisoner of war, they couldn't find your medical records.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No. So, I went all these years trying to work. Finally, I couldn't work anywhere, so they put me on -- [00:15:00] what is it? What's the word that I'm looking for? You can't work as a young man, and --

TOM RIVERA: Disability?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Disability, but they put me on the thing that I didn't have to pay for medications, this and that. But not through the military. And I went to the VA hospital in Loma Linda couple of times, and they said, "There's no record of you ever being a POW." I said, "What?" (laughs) Yeah. It was not -- I wasn't there long because it was towards the end of the war, but it was long enough to destroy my body so I couldn't work.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. So, they were -- so, the injuries that you got when you were prisoner of war were just very severe and extensive --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- that it completely [00:16:00] disabled lots of parts --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- of your body.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I have a paper here. Get this. My thing.

LUCY CONTRERAS: (inaudible).

LUIS CONTRERAS: I should have gotten that before. I forgot I had it there. I didn't -- I went to the hospital last week, and I didn't take the papers out of there.

You can read it.

LUCY CONTRERAS: These?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. I'll show you what my injuries are here
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LUCY CONTRERAS: That's the only papers in there.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, they were -- I didn't take them out the last time we went. (pause) You can read that. That's what's wrong with me.

TOM RIVERA: (inaudible). Well, Luis, you are very, very fortunate because you were born in 1923, you said, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Mm-hmm, 1923.

TOM RIVERA: And how old are you now?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:17:00] Ninety-one.

TOM RIVERA: And, with all these injuries that you have -- oh, everything, Luis. The knees and different type of tissue that were injured. Your tibia. (pause) Your ligaments. Wow, Luis. Congratulations. You did it. You did it, Luis. You're a tough guy. You're a tough guy. Well -- and I'm not surprised, Luis, because you were born and raised in Colton, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: So, you're a tough guy to begin with, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: (laughter) Oh, not really. [Somebody's wondering?] because I was too short. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: Well, tell me about your mom and dad. Tell me about your mom and dad. Where are they from?

LUIS CONTRERAS: My dad was from San Luis Potosi, Mexico. He came over here. He said -- he told me [00:18:00] his aunt got him over here when he was five or six years old, and I don't know how old my mama was. I don't know how she got over here, but that was in the 1910s, I guess, when they had all the problems in Mexico, and my dad came over here with his aunt. And then, when she had her kids -- there was [Orville?] and all these guys.

TOM RIVERA: Yes, we'll talk about them in a few minutes, but your dad came over, and where did he work, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: (inaudible) he worked at Kaiser Steel, but in the younger days, before Kaiser, he was a orange picker.

TOM RIVERA: ¿Boluchero?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Boluchero, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Was he a cienero?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Cienero? Yeah. He was --

TOM RIVERA: He was a cienero --?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: He picked a hundred crates a day?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Hundred crates. Man, he'd be out there at six o'clock in the (laughs) morning.

TOM RIVERA: And was he working for [Gordo?]?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Working for Gordo.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. [00:19:00] And --

LUIS CONTRERAS: So was your dad.

TOM RIVERA: My dad also worked for Gor--tell me, now that you mention my dad, how do you know my dad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Well, I met him on 7th Street when I used to be on 7th Street there on the markets there. He was always laughing and happy-go-lucky guy, and he worked for Gordo, and then he would help Gordo pay the pickers. And he (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TOM RIVERA: Okay. On Saturday. On Saturday. On Saturday.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, Saturdays. He was just a joyful man. He was happy. He was never sad. He was always laughing and moving around. (laughter) Rumba.

TOM RIVERA: Rumba was my dad's nickname. Rumba. Rumba. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. That was -- he was just a... (pause) My doctor wrote something here. It says, "Workability," on one of these papers. I don't know whether I brought it or not.

LUCY CONTRERAS: It's about your last mission. (pause)

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:20:00] Here.

TOM RIVERA: Déjalo allí. Oh, yes. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Yeah, it describes the last mission that you were on when you were shot down. They shot down. Very good. Well, tell me more about your buddies on 7th Street, Luis. You mentioned El Gordo --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Gordo.

TOM RIVERA: -- was a contractor, and he would take the pickers to the orange groves, and they would get paid on Saturday. And my dad would help him make the payments on --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Payments. The payments of the pickers.

TOM RIVERA: -- of the workers on Saturday.

LUIS CONTRERAS: On Saturday, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Tell me more about some of the other guys. You mentioned that you knew the Oliva family.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. I met the family when we moved into that place, into the house there in 1933, [00:21:00] and that's when I first got interested in the music because I had the band, the [Latin Lads?].

TOM RIVERA: Okay. Okay.

LUIS CONTRERAS: And then --

TOM RIVERA: And who was the director or of the conductor of the Latin Lads?

LUIS CONTRERAS: The bass player, [Auggie?].

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh, Auggie...

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Was the?] bass player, and [Nick Martinez?] played piano and clarinet, and [Baker?] played saxophone, and they had three trumpet players, (inaudible), but the younger guy -- we'd [lock line?] all the guys -- he was a drummer. [Kiro Enji?] with a clarinet, and they had a good band.

TOM RIVERA: And you were a musician too.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Well, yeah. My uncle [John?] got me to start a music --

TOM RIVERA: John -- ¿cómo se llama?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Rios?].

TOM RIVERA: John Rios. [Juan?] Rios.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, Juan Rios. Yeah. He started teaching me how to read music when I was five years old.

TOM RIVERA: You were a young one, then.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah, [00:22:00] he --

TOM RIVERA: Young one.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Because my dad told me since I was just a -- he said, "You better do something (laughs) (inaudible) [up here?]." So, I started to learn how to read music when I was five years old. And then, he got me into the saxophone [deal?], (inaudible) alto that I played. I played my first jazz band when I was 12 years old.

TOM RIVERA: You were a young one.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, and --

TOM RIVERA: You were young.

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- I played with the older guys. (laughs) And (inaudible).

TOM RIVERA: So, you played in the Valley Ballroom and --

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, I played in the Pickering. I was 12 years old. I had to get out of the bandstand because I was too young. I didn't [have enough clout?] there. At that time, they played until one o'clock. (laughs) So --

TOM RIVERA: So, the --

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- I had to get out of the bandstand at 11 --

TOM RIVERA: Because of curfew.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Curfew [for you?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:23:00] Curfew, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Now, what places did you play, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I played there and most of the places there were, whoever hired a band, but mostly all the time at the [Cortland?] Ballroom. We'd go there and play.

TOM RIVERA: Which ballroom?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Cortland Ballroom.

TOM RIVERA: Cortland. Where is that located, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: In San Bernardino on L Street. It's gone now. (laughs)

This is in the dark ages. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: No, not really. Not really. When you were 12, that was the '30s, during the Depression. The Depression. How was the Depression? Did you -
- can you tell me a little bit about --

LUIS CONTRERAS: I --

TOM RIVERA: -- how it affected your family?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I never went hungry. We never -- to me, it was just -- we didn't suffer. My dad was always playing or doing something. But we didn't go hungry or anything.

TOM RIVERA: And then, everybody was poor, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Everything was [00:24:00] poor.

TOM RIVERA: Everybody's in the same boat.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, no. Everybody's in the same boat, yeah. But I never felt -- I guess I was never afraid. We were never afraid because my dad was always there with us. And then, When Franklin D. came into the picture, then I think that's when my dad started to do more things with his working deal.

TOM RIVERA: Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: The president? Okay. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: And that was a big change for my dad at that time, and he started working here and there, oh, boy. And then, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

TOM RIVERA: So, things got better.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, a lot better.

TOM RIVERA: Things got better under FDR.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yes.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, tell me, you were in high school when you were playing in the band.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Did you play for Colton High School also?

LUIS CONTRERAS: High school -- for the high school band, and, at times, I played for the high school orchestra. [We did?] because our friend, [00:25:00] the actor, Gene Evans, he was always making plays, and they needed to be in -- and another, [Eddie Serrano?]. We'd take us -- they'd take us to play saxophone for the play, and Gene Evans would say, "I want these two guys to play (laughter) in the band.

TOM RIVERA: Because Gene Evans was a Hollywood star.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And he starred in a war movie called *Steel Helmet*.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, and you were a buddy of his, huh?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. We were high school buddies. His dad ran a grocery store.

TOM RIVERA: Do you know where the grocery store was located?

LUIS CONTRERAS: 7th Street.

TOM RIVERA: 7th.

LUIS CONTRERAS: 7th and probably somewhere around there.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, in North Colton.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No -- oh, yes. North Colton.

TOM RIVERA: In North Colton. In North Colton. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, we'd go to the theatre [since?] I was a kid. They had one section for us guys and a section for the white guys.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, talking about growing up in a segregated [00:26:00] community --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, I went segregated school.

TOM RIVERA: You mentioned the theatre.

LUIS CONTRERAS: They didn't like us at all. They said we were -- I don't know -- animals, I guess. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Well, you were just segregated from North Colton and South Colton, and the division line was the railroad tracks.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: The railroad tracks.

LUIS CONTRERAS: The railroad tracks, and my parents could not go to North Colton at that time, in the 1920s, once a month.

TOM RIVERA: Why is that, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Because they were not allowed. We were not allowed to go to North Colton. Only Chicanos [lived?] in South Colton. When I was a young kid, and even in high school, me and [Chavero?], [Bernie?], we had roller skates. We'd go to North Colton to the park, Fleming Park, and the police would say, "Go to your side."

TOM RIVERA: And what year was this? How old were you?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I was -- heck, in the 1930s, '35, [00:27:00] '36.

TOM RIVERA: Okay. About 13, 14 years old?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Fourteen years old. Teenagers. And the only time we could go to North Colton was going to school. Then, I went to Lincoln School. I

don't know why they put me over there, some of us, and those guys did not like us.

They said we were --

TOM RIVERA: Lincoln School was on --

LUIS CONTRERAS: (inaudible).

TOM RIVERA: -- La Cadena and D Street or so?

LUIS CONTRERAS: In E Street. That's where the police station is right now.

TOM RIVERA: Okay. And City Hall.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And City Hall.

LUIS CONTRERAS: City Hall.

TOM RIVERA: Yes.

LUIS CONTRERAS: And the guys didn't want anything -- in the school class, the bigger guys, they'd see us young guys, and they'd just push us and whatever. It -- we were dirty. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: You mean, physically, they would push you --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: -- and pick on you?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, sure. They didn't like us. I don't know why that --

TOM RIVERA: What grade was this, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Huh?

TOM RIVERA: What grade was [00:28:00] this?

LUIS CONTRERAS: That was fifth grade.

TOM RIVERA: You were what? About 10 years old or so?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Right. Something like that.

TOM RIVERA: Ten years old. And so, school. Tell me about -- you went to school at Garfield Elementary School?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Garfield, Wilson. And, when I was going to Wilson School, that's when they put us in Lincoln School. And then, they brought us back to Woodrow Wilson. That's when I graduated to high school. In high school, [we'd see the paper deals?], the readings. "Keep our high school clean. Keep the dirty Mexicans out of here."

TOM RIVERA: No.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Why, yes, siree.

TOM RIVERA: No. What year, Luis?

LUCY CONTRERAS: I tell you, it was --

LUIS CONTRERAS: "Keep our campus clean. Vote for..." What -- who was running for president? [00:29:00] I forget his name. "Keep our campus clean. Vote for So-and-so," because [Joe Flores?] was going for the president of the student body. Joe Flores, [student body?]. Joe Flores.

TOM RIVERA: Joe Flores, okay.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. I forget who the white guy was, and "Keep our campus clean. Don't vote for a dirty Mexican."

TOM RIVERA: Against Joe Flores?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Against Joe Flores.

TOM RIVERA: Now, tell me, where did Joe live? Was he with -- was he a brother of [Moises?]?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, [Moi?] was in the same class with me and -- [not Barbara?]. I tell you, my mind is --

TOM RIVERA: Oh, don't worry about it. Let me ask you, was Ernie Garcia in your class?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Andy?] --

TOM RIVERA: Neto. Neto. Neto. Ernie Garcia.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Neto Garcia. No.

TOM RIVERA: No? He wasn't in your class?

LUIS CONTRERAS: He was not in my class.

TOM RIVERA: So, getting back to running for ASB president, they used that against Joe Flores?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, because -- [00:30:00] and whoever was in charge of that -- because even to some of the white guys, Joe Flores was a very well-liked man. What they did is they paid another guy to run, and then what happened [is they?] had two Chicanos and one white. Divide and conquer. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Aha. So, they were still -- and they still do that.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: They still do that.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Not as much now.

TOM RIVERA: But how was your high school experience at Colton High School? What was your experience like?

LUIS CONTRERAS: It was very --

TOM RIVERA: Did the principal like you guys?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Huh?

TOM RIVERA: Did the principal like you guys?

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, he didn't like us at all.

TOM RIVERA: And the principal was Donald McIntosh.

LUIS CONTRERAS: McIntosh. He said, "I will not and I cannot educate these Mexicans better than the white boys."

TOM RIVERA: That's what he --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Everybody heard him, and what was the name of the French teacher? I forgot his name. [00:31:00] He quit when he heard that. He

says, "We're here to teach." He says, "I'm out." He walked out, the French teacher.

We had the Spanish teacher. What was the Spanish teacher in high school?

LUCY CONTRERAS: I don't --

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Pesquera?].

TOM RIVERA: Pesquera?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Pesquera. Spanish teacher.

LUCY CONTRERAS: I didn't go to high school.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, okay. Pesquera, the Spanish teacher. So, there was a lot -- there was some white students that wanted to learn the Spanish, so McIntosh says, "No," so he got rid of her. (laughter) And she -- this is what my deal is. So, when I went into the service, and being the only Spanish-speaking guy, I thought they were going to put me down. Hey, when you're out there, man, my [00:32:00] experience with the service was beautiful because I was treated equal.

TOM RIVERA: Ah, so you felt --

LUIS CONTRERAS: That's when I became an American, not a Chicano.

TOM RIVERA: With the service, gave you that feeling of, "I belong."

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: "I'm an American."

LUIS CONTRERAS: I belong. I belong.

TOM RIVERA: And they're going to judge me on my merits and my ability to do things.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. And the pilot was the one that chose me because I -- remember, when we went -- my last deal, I went with Max to Washington DC for the 303rd reunion. I asked Max, the co-pilot, "How did Blaine get a hold of me to be in the crew?" He says, "Because," he says, "he was with my firing deal." He says, "He told me --" He says, "You heard him."

LUCY CONTRERAS: [Yeah?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: He told me -- he says, "You were in the top [00:33:00] 10 in the gunnery range, so he chose you." And somebody said, "Isn't he a Mexican-speaking guy?" Said, "Yeah, but he can shoot," he says, "and that's what I want. (laughter) I don't care who he is long as he can shoot." But, soon as I got into the crew, I mean, we were together. It was a wonderful feeling. And then, I had to -- lost Eddie, my buddy. Oh, I still have these men in here to this day.

TOM RIVERA: So, being in the service, Luis, made a tremendous difference on how you felt towards the world.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, because [if the guys were out?] there, I mean, we were just one happy family, the whole thing. Wow. It was beautiful. Scary but beautiful (laughter) because if you say you won't get scared, it's because you're not there. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. And it was completely different, what you had experienced in [00:34:00] Colton.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Oh, very different. Very, very different. So, I just -- I was just wishing that some of the guys that did me the shoving would be out there with me. [They're okay now?]. (laughter) Yeah. But that -- my crew members, my pilot, co-pilot, everybody, and the whole group was beautiful.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, Luis, let me change a little bit. How did you meet Lucy?

LUIS CONTRERAS: My sister introduced me to her, 1945, when I came from overseas.

TOM RIVERA: When you came from overseas --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: -- you were introduced.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And?

LUIS CONTRERAS: So, I took her to a dance, and we dated a couple of times, two or three times. But then, she had already -- you had already met [Frank?].

LUCY CONTRERAS: Not yet.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Not yet.

LUCY CONTRERAS: I met him after that.

LUIS CONTRERAS: She met Frank, her husband that she married.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Father of my children.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:35:00] Father of her children. And I met [Elsie?].

So, I met Elsie and I married Elsie, and she married Frank. And, all these years, and then Elsie and I, we divorced. Then, I stayed alone for a long while. Then, I met [Pat, Patricia Huggins?], and we got married, and we were married for 12 years, and then she passed away. So, I was widowed, and I spent a year by myself. Then, I met [Anne?], and we married, and she had a sickness, and the doctors told me, "Get her out of here," so I went to Stockton with her. And [00:36:00] so, I was already not working, and so, I got a place in Stockton, but I didn't buy a home because I didn't have the money. I rented, and I didn't buy my home until -- [what? Not?] recently at my age.

TOM RIVERA: Now, how did you meet Lucy?

LUIS CONTRERAS: When I brought my daughter back from burying Anne --

LUCY CONTRERAS: (inaudible).

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- she lived in Ontario. My daughter lived in Ontario. She lived in Colton. Oh, no. You lived in Fontana.

LUCY CONTRERAS: No, I was living in Fontana. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: In Fontana. And I --

LUCY CONTRERAS: I had just lost my husband.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I brought my kids home from the burial, and my niece told her that I was over here, so she [took over?] --

LUCY CONTRERAS: Your sister.

LUIS CONTRERAS: My sister.

LUCY CONTRERAS: [Laura?] told me.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Well, my sister told her that I was over here.

LUCY CONTRERAS: "Here's a phone number. Call him up."

TOM RIVERA: So, you jumped at the opportunity, huh, Lucy?

LUCY CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. I went, and I called him up, [00:37:00] and his ex-wife answered. (laughter) "Well, he's not here right now, but give me your number, and I'll have him call you." She never did give him the number. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: I don't blame her so. But how did you go through the --? I mean --

LUIS CONTRERAS: We'd been divorced for years, and then -- it's nothing.

LUCY CONTRERAS: So, I called back, and he was there.

TOM RIVERA: So, you were persistent.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: So, he was a dead duck.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: ¿Verdad?

LUCY CONTRERAS: Then, that Sunday, he came over. I was living by myself with my son in a little condominium, and he came over, and I had been working, and I got off at five. And my son says, "One of your friends are here looking for

you.” And I didn’t think who -- I didn’t think it was him, but he showed up at the door.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I showed up with my two dogs. (laughter)

LUCY CONTRERAS: Yeah, it was his daughter and granddaughter.

LUIS CONTRERAS: My daughter and --

LUCY CONTRERAS: Yeah, [Vickie?] and [Alicia?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: Alicia.

TOM RIVERA: And that was that, then.

LUIS CONTRERAS: That was that.

TOM RIVERA: That was that.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And how [00:38:00] long have you been married now?

LUIS CONTRERAS: We didn’t get married immediately because --

LUCY CONTRERAS: We lived together for 25 years, and we just got married about a year -- not even a year yet.

TOM RIVERA: Oh --

LUCY CONTRERAS: We did get married.

TOM RIVERA: -- you were living in sin, Luis.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, we’re living in sin.

TOM RIVERA: You were living in sin.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I wanted to be forgiven. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: But congratulations.

LUCY CONTRERAS: I told everybody he’d made an honest woman out of me when we got married.

TOM RIVERA: Congratulations.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Just out of the blue, he decided, "Let's get married," and I said, "Okay."

TOM RIVERA: That's good news. That's good news.

LUCY CONTRERAS: So, we went to the courthouse and got married. Then, we got married by church. We went the whole route. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: That's wonderful. That's wonderful.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Everything is in there.

LUIS CONTRERAS: The one that [Dr. Isaac?] wrote me about not being able to work, workability. My Dr. Isaac, he's a -- I think very highly of this doctor. He only -- he takes care of the POWs at the hospital there in Loma Linda. He's a wonderful doctor. He takes care of [00:39:00] me. I got to go see him next week.

TOM RIVERA: Luis, you mentioned that being in the service gave you a new outlook on life.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, [from my own?] --

TOM RIVERA: That --

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- and the way I felt about myself.

TOM RIVERA: That it was completely different growing up in a segregated community, where people in the north end didn't want us. The schools didn't want us.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No.

TOM RIVERA: And we were regulated to one side of the theatre. What about the Plunge, the swimming -- the Plunge --

LUIS CONTRERAS: We had our own swimming pool.

TOM RIVERA: Caldera.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Caldera Swimming Pool because the only time that they would allow us to go to the swimming pool in North Colton, when they were draining the pool. [00:40:00] So, what does that tell you?

TOM RIVERA: You're not wanted. You're not wanted. Stay on your side of the tracks. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: That's it.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. Now, you mentioned that there was that wonderful feeling that you had that you were an American.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: You felt American.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Because I was just as good or bad as everybody else.

TOM RIVERA: Right. Right. Now, with that feeling and coming home, Luis, and there was still that feeling of segregation when you came home from the service.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: The integration started in '53, when they integrated the schools, the junior high school. What was your feeling when you got home that -- were you going to take that treatment that you took before, or were you going to fight that treatment, or were you going to fight for people being treated the way they should be treated?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Well, when I went to the [00:41:00] military guys -- I forget the -- not the American [Mission?]. What's the place that I go to to --?

LUCY CONTRERAS: For what?

LUIS CONTRERAS: The -- for the veterans. Veterans Administration.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Yeah, the Veterans Administration.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Veterans Administration. When I went out there, they were really helpful, but there was no record of me ever being -- and they felt bad for me. So -- but they kept calling. They kept calling. And then, you read my disabilities right here, and I asked the guy. I says, “[On my?] paper, it says that the Purple Heart -- no way because they don’t have no knowledge of me ever being [00:42:00] treated at Camp Lucky Strike. They had a neck brace, spine brace, and a brace over here. You can see where the brace was hitting here.

TOM RIVERA: Mm-hmm, I see.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I got all these, but this is not enough. They have to have written that I was there, and they treated me for this, and all this that I showed you, they’re not --

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, they’re the injuries. But what I’m asking, Luis, is, when you came back to Colton, was there a feeling that, “I’m an American. I paid my dues, and I shouldn’t be treated like I was treated before?”

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, because I was treated -- we were being treated better when I came back. I mean, Jesus, man. It just -- it was a different attitude altogether.

TOM RIVERA: By whom, Luis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: By the white [00:43:00] people over in North Colton, and we got together, and it was a different feeling altogether.

TOM RIVERA: So, World War II did --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Changed it. Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: -- make change, made change the feeling somewhat.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Changed the feeling.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. Were you able to go to the theatre [without them?] --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Were you able to go to the swimming pool?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Were you able to shop downtown Colton?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: So, it was completely different, so --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Completely different.

TOM RIVERA: -- World War II made a difference, then.

LUIS CONTRERAS: It sure did.

TOM RIVERA: World War II made a difference.

LUIS CONTRERAS: And what I'm telling you is that it's just a wonderful feeling, but that feeling came to me in the service. (laughs) Wow. [My God?]. Man. It's beautiful to be accepted.

TOM RIVERA: Well -- and then, you feel that you still have that pride --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- that, when you want to get together with your service people, you want to get together with your buddies because you all share that feeling --

LUIS CONTRERAS: That's right.

TOM RIVERA: -- that we are brothers, no matter what our [00:44:00] backgrounds are.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes. And, in combat, you pull together. There's no way. It's hard to explain, but it's there. You feel it.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. So, like you mentioned before, I mentioned before, that World War II did make that attitude change --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: -- in the communities.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Even for buying homes and everything, but, when I went to try to buy a home, I couldn't work, so -- and then, I couldn't get anything going. So, that's when they put me on disability. I didn't buy the home that I'm buying now. I got it on a Section 8 on account of my injuries. [00:45:00] And so, then, the owners told me -- he says, "We'll make it possible for you to buy this home, but you have to get a VA loan." I said, "At my age?" He said, "Yes." So, they were a great help to me, so I'm buying my home now, at 90 years. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: So, you were able to buy your home through a VA loan?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, VA loan. Thirty-year contract.

TOM RIVERA: Very good. Very good. So, that was --

LUIS CONTRERAS: But I'm not going to last 30 (laughs) years, but --

TOM RIVERA: But that was one of the benefits that you got from being a -- let me ask you another question. Being a prisoner of war, do you get special privileges, or do you get special things that are assigned to you that you --

LUIS CONTRERAS: No.

TOM RIVERA: -- qualify for?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I -- there's a lot of stuff that I don't go for because I don't need it, but -- like I don't pay the card tax. [00:46:00] I don't pay those.

TOM RIVERA: Registration, uh-huh.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Registration. I don't pay those. I don't pay property taxes. I'm exempt. I'm exempt on a lot of stuff. I'm exempt. POW status. And that's all I need, and the people tell me, "Well, why don't you go out -- this and that for recreation?" Says, "Recreation? I love to fish. I can't fish anymore, so why?"

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, but there were some perks that you get because you were a prisoner of war.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, very good. Well, you deserve them.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes.

TOM RIVERA: You deserve -- you got beaten enough, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: You deserve them. Yeah. Tell me about some of your friends in Colton, in particular, [Tommy Cabrera?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: Tommy Cabrera. He just passed away. He was in the -- he lost his leg way up here. So did [Gilbert Palomino?]. Two of my buddies that lost his leg. [00:47:00] So, we were buddies from teenagers. We'd get together in the evening after supper in the corner right there, 7th and L.

TOM RIVERA: 7th and L? Okay.

LUIS CONTRERAS: 7th. And we'd just -- there was a big tree there, big one there, and you just talk. We didn't go putting graffiti, none of this stuff that these kids go to for that. No graffiti. We'd go to the dances. Our cars were open. The cars were open. Now, (laughs) --

TOM RIVERA: What about recreation, Luis? Did you guys --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Recreation --

TOM RIVERA: -- play rebote or handball?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Handball -- I couldn't play baseball because (laughs) nobody wanted me [for my sides?], so I played handball when I was in the third grade. I started playing handball. High school, handball. I even beat the coach in handball. [Gary Martinez?] and myself -- [00:48:00] Gary Martinez was the quarterback for the high school football. The --

TOM RIVERA: The Yellowjackets?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, Yellowjackets [sting?]. Anyway, Gary Martinez and me, we went to Bonita High School against this -- what was his name? This [cadet?] guy. [Doug Blanchard?] and this cadet guy I forget.

TOM RIVERA: Glenn Davis?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Glenn Davis. We beat him and this other guy, the two cadets in the school. We beat him for the trophy. We beat him three straight sets.

TOM RIVERA: Of handball?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Handball. I was good at handball. Man, I played handball at night. We'd paint the ball with this aluminum paint that you could see it at night. Man. [Not just hit it?] [00:49:00] with your hands. Yeah. And, boy --

TOM RIVERA: La mano [pelona?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: La mano [pelona?]. And Gary Martinez and I, we beat Glenn Davis and Doug Blanchard in the handball court, three sets.

TOM RIVERA: Well, they were quite a name back then.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, but in the handball, hey, no way, man. (laughter) And I beat everybody that played handball except one guy, [Sal Yala?]. I never could beat him.

TOM RIVERA: Now, tell me about Sal. Who was Sal Yala?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Sal Yala was a -- we started school together. He was in the navy, and he got hit with a kamikaze. His ship got kamikazes, yeah. He still lives in Colton now. He can't hear, and, oh, boy.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, he still lives in Colton?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, he still -- yeah, he's in Colton.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. Well, you said you got together with your friends under the tree on 7th and --

LUIS CONTRERAS: 7th and L.

TOM RIVERA: -- L Street. ¿Qué más hacían? What else did you guys do?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:50:00] We just talked about this and that and whatever, and some guy would say, "Well, I did this and all that." Just the togetherness because -- I couldn't stay out there too long because my dad told me - - he says, "If I can't see you from this porch, you're in trouble." (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: And how many guys would hang around with you there?

LUIS CONTRERAS: There'd be, and then [Tony?] -- about 10 total guys.

TOM RIVERA: Can you name them, ¿más o menos?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Más o menos, [Diego Gonzales?], (inaudible), [Bob Gonzales?], (inaudible), [Bernie?], [David de la Rio?], and (inaudible), and [Felix Negrete?], [Felix Cortez?].

TOM RIVERA: That was a good bunch of people.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:51:00] Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: A good bunch of people, like Felix Cortez that worked for the cement plant after he got out of the service.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Charlie Arredondo el Diablo?].

TOM RIVERA: Charlie -- you hung around with Charlie también?

LUIS CONTRERAS: He was in school with me. We started school together. Yeah. Kindergarten. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: With Charlie Arredondo?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Charlie Arredondo el Diablo, yeah. [Charlie?].

TOM RIVERA: He was a motorcycle guy.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. And then, Diego was a --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Diego Gonzales.

TOM RIVERA: He was a boxer.

LUIS CONTRERAS: He was a boxer. He won the Golden Gloves (inaudible).

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, he beat [Savas Roblero?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, he beat Savas.

TOM RIVERA: Roblero.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [La Gamarra?].

TOM RIVERA: ¿Cómo?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [La Gamarra?]. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: ¿Qué quiere decir eso? What --?

LUIS RIVERA: I don't know. (laughs) Somebody --

TOM RIVERA: That's his nickname? Tell me about nicknames. Did people have nicknames?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [La Gamarra, La Gargopeta?], El Diablo, (inaudible) Bruta. Oh, about three or four of them. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: But there were nicknames? There were nicknames?

LUIS CONTRERAS: [00:52:00] Nicknames, yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Can you remember some of them, Lucy?

LUCY CONTRERAS: All his friends have nicknames. I can't even -- I don't ever know any of them, their real name.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Well, my young days with my buddies, yeah. And then, what hurt, when they came home from overseas, I would go to their homes, and they says, "He got killed." And my buddy, [Frankie Morales?], he was my high school buddy. I went to see his house. And then, somebody stopped me and said, "Don't go because he got killed overseas." I said, "Oh, boy." And all of my buddies, they're gone from the war.

TOM RIVERA: So, we had quite a number of young men from Colton that participated in World War II?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. At least 10 of them. Man.

TOM RIVERA: They were your buddies, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I -- my high school buddies, my school buddies from -- we started from kindergarten to high school, and then into the war. Oh, man. That hurt. The one that hurt me the most is [00:53:00] my buddy Eddie Eschinger, the combat guy. We had a bicycle built for two in England with the red lights and... (laughs) Oh, we were close. We were close, and, boy, when I couldn't find him, and then they told me -- and then, my pilot went to overseas, and he sent me the place where he's buried overseas. I broke to pieces. Man, I'll tell you.

TOM RIVERA: Luis, World War II made quite a impact on you, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yes. It did.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. It changed your life.

LUIS CONTRERAS: It changed anybody's life that -- when you're looked down on like you're an animal, and then, all of a sudden, they treat you like a human being... (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: It's quite a change in perception, ¿verdad?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. Yes. Of course. Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Well, getting back to you buddies that hung around on 7th and [00:54:00] L Street, ¿qué más hacían? Did you guys go swimming at the --?

LUIS CONTRERAS: We went -- we would go swimming at the Caldera Pool, and everybody would be diving, and then -- they had good divers, but they wouldn't allow them in North Colton. No way.

TOM RIVERA: To compete? They couldn't compete in North Colton?

LUIS CONTRERAS: They couldn't compete, no. My uncle, John Rios, he wrote two songs in Spanish in 1937. That was what? (inaudible) '37, '38, '39 -- before the '40s. My dad and I, we took him, because he didn't drive, [to these?]

musical people in San Bernardino to get this thing published, and the [00:55:00] guy just come out real, “(grunts) and I’m King Kong,” and says, “This service is only for white people. You go and play your music in the [country?] but not here.”

TOM RIVERA: Oh, you really went through --

LUIS CONTRERAS: And my dad says, “You go to hell, you...” (laughs) That was my first time that I saw my dad mad and angry. He says, “This man --” And he composed two waltzes. Beautiful, beautiful music. So, a guy came from Mexico that Juan Rios had taught how to -- taught him music and taught him how to play trombone. They call him the Chicano Tommy Dorsey in Mexicali. When he heard us play that waltz, he says, “I’ll have it published in Mexico under your name,” [00:56:00] and my dad told Juan. Said, “Don’t give him the music because he’s not going to do right by you,” and he was right. He went to Mexico and published that song under his name. (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: And so, your dad was right, then. Beware.

LUIS CONTRERAS: We went --

TOM RIVERA: Beware.

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- over there to see it, and they announced it. The great composer of this Spanish music, and boom, boom, boom. And my dad went up there and said, “You dirty son of a--” (laughter)

TOM RIVERA: So, you dad was quite a champion in protecting this family.

Yeah. Did you guys ever go swimming in [Los Cuninos?]?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. ¿El [cuarito]??

TOM RIVERA: Sí.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. We went -- we’d walk over there, and we’d swim over there, and it’s cold. Ice cold. (laughter) Oh, yeah. We went out there

with Juan Rios's mother. We'd walk out there from 6th -- [00:57:00] no, 5th and L Street. We'd walk to the Cuninos from there. Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And spend the whole day swimming?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, watermelons and you name it, and oh, boy. Oh, man.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. So, you had a wonderful group of people that you grew up with.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yes. Of course. Yes.

TOM RIVERA: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And, Luis, did you -- you said you worked at Norton Air Force Base, and what was your job?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Engine mechanic. I worked on 1340 engines. I started at 1340 engines, small engines. And, when they would have the bigger engines, then we had to take them apart, so they'd take the cylinders and replace new cylinders on the engines.

TOM RIVERA: You were still in high school. How did you get that job?

LUIS CONTRERAS: They had an announcement that [00:58:00] anything that had to do with airplanes [selection unit?], you go over there and put your name, and it was open because they knew we were going to have to get working in the Air Force and air planes. The only thing that I couldn't do is work with small stuff. They gave me the [bomb's eye?]. I couldn't do it. "No, no," I says, "I need something [I can hold?] in my hands." They gave me a cylinder. It's this big, and that was right up my alley.

TOM RIVERA: And when you were working there, that's when they drafted you.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, and I was -- I went and told the guy. I says -- I had already passed my physical, and they gave me two weeks to go into the Army, and

I went and told the guys at Norton Air Force Base. [00:59:00] And I didn't know anything about getting a furlough from the job. I'd never even heard of the word furlough. (laughs) But the guys knew, but they told me, "You have to resign."

TOM RIVERA: Oh, so you could have gotten some type of leave. Some type of leave.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Correct.

TOM RIVERA: And when you got back after the service --

LUIS CONTRERAS: [He says?] --

TOM RIVERA: -- you could have gotten your job back.

LUIS CONTRERAS: -- "You resigned. You don't have anything here."

TOM RIVERA: So, they asked you to resign, and you resigned.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And lost your job.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Lost my job.

TOM RIVERA: When you came back, you didn't have a job.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I didn't have a job. So, I belonged to the -- what was it?

The 52-20 Club, 20 dollars a week. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: What is it?

LUIS CONTRERAS: 52-20 Club. Fifty-two weeks, we'd give 20 dollars a week.

TOM RIVERA: It was unemployment?

LUIS CONTRERAS: We just had -- your time of the day and your day of the week. [01:00:00] We'd go to San Bernardino and get 20 dollars once a week.

Twenty dollars is the time I was drinking hard. Wouldn't even last me five minutes in the bar. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Luis, you've had a hard life, ¿verdad? First of all, you couldn't booze it up as much as you wanted.

LUIS CONTRERAS: (laughs) No.

TOM RIVERA: And then, you got shot down in the place, and they beat the hell out of you in Germany.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, God.

TOM RIVERA: And then, after that --

LUIS CONTRERAS: I couldn't get a job.

TOM RIVERA: You couldn't get a job.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Nothing. I worked at Camp Ono three years. I was taking my dad's -- my dad got me to the doctor, and he had to pay for my pain pills so I could keep on working after I [got back?]. But that's it.

TOM RIVERA: Well, Luis, but you're 91. I mean, like el dicho dice: [01:01:00] La vida es dura, pero más aún quién lo aguanta.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, yeah. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: Life is tough, but the person that can stand it is tougher.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, I heard that saying before. (laughs)

TOM RIVERA: That's who you are, Luis. That's who you are. Yeah.

LUIS CONTRERAS: So, man. Camp Ono, when I came home overseas, I went to Mount Vernon in San Bernardino. Me and [Ralph Cervantes?].

TOM RIVERA: Well, tell me about Camp Ono. That's where we had prisoners of war here, San Bernardino.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yes, it --

TOM RIVERA: And it was located just outside of the -- close to the college here. Yeah, in this area here some place.

LUIS CONTRERAS: In this area, Camp Ono.

TOM RIVERA: Camp Ono. And we had Italians, and we had Germans there.

LUIS CONTRERAS: They had German prisoners of war. They had their own German uniforms. Ralph Cervantes and myself, we had gone to Norton. They had a [01:02:00] air show over there. So, we came back in the early evening, maybe between five and six. On 5th and Mount Vernon, here's these German soldiers.

TOM RIVERA: The [khaki cactus?]?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Huh?

TOM RIVERA: The khaki cactus?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah. There were these German soldiers, 10 of them, 20 of them, 30 of them on Mount Vernon, drinking beer in the street with their German suits on. And here's me and Ralph with (inaudible) on our shirts, POWs.

TOM RIVERA: And then, Ralph was also injured in the war.

LUIS CONTRERAS: He was also a prisoner of war, yeah. And we had our 45s. I had my shoulder-holstered 45. We went into this bar, cocktail bar there, and we took the last booth. And so, we ordered our drinks, and when the guy [01:03:00] was bringing in our drinks, he says, "You have to go to the bar because I want this booth for my friends." We said, "Okay, fine." Ralph and I, we didn't argue that. [These are?] friends. What the heck? We can go to the bar and drink. We got out of the booth. We started walking out, and his friends were four German soldiers with their uniforms, and I blew it.

TOM RIVERA: You saw red.

LUIS CONTRERAS: I saw red, and I pulled my 45 out. [I'd done it then?], me and Ralph -- or [I should say?] Ralph and I. And there was a bar across the street, [Mary Charter's?], had pizza and the whole thing. We had these four guys -- we were going to shoot them. I was gonna shoot the [boogers?], man. And so, the lady came out. Mary Charter says, "You boys don't want to do that. [01:04:00]

You're going to get in trouble because this is not a combat zone," and she kept talking to us. And we couldn't even talk, Ralph and I. We were -- and here comes the police. They couldn't handle us because we were military, so, before you know it, we had the [MPs?] in there, and he says, "What in the hell are these prisoners of war doing here with these guys just coming out of the POW camps?" And he said, whoever he talked to, "[Come across and?] get these guys out of here before there's murder committed in here," because there's more of us coming from prisoners of war in San Bernardino. There was a lot of POWs here. And, oh, man, what a mess. So, they (laughs) put me in the [guard house?] in Norton Air Force Base and all this stuff, and three days, [01:05:00] and then they turned us loose. But they even held dances for the prisoners of war here in Camp Ono that our women were going over there, dancing with them.

TOM RIVERA: So, that didn't fit well with you, ¿verdad? (laughs)

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, (laughs) that --

TOM RIVERA: Especially the experience that you went through in Germany.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No way. Man.

TOM RIVERA: Well, you were lucky on that one that you didn't shoot anybody, Luis.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, but, oh, we came that close. (laughter) Ralph couldn't even talk. He's just going like that.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, Ralph was quite a guy, ¿verdad? Because, when he came back from the war, Ralph wanted to buy a house in North Colton, and they wouldn't sell it to him, so we went to court, and he finally bought the house in North Colton, near the junior high school. Yeah, so he's one of the first Mexicans that bought a house in North Colton.

LUIS CONTRERAS: No, her father. Her father, before the war, bought the house because [that's where?] you were born.

LUCY CONTRERAS: [01:06:00] What? Yes.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Your father.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Oh, my dad bought (inaudible) house in 1923.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Because he had the name Bernell?].

TOM RIVERA: Oh, so they thought --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah. So --

LUCY CONTRERAS: I don't know how he -- a lot had to do with his last name. It wasn't a Hispanic name. It was Bernell.

LUIS CONTRERAS: French name.

LUCY CONTRERAS: He didn't have any problem, and he spoke English all the time. Broken English, but he always spoke English.

TOM RIVERA: Was he as light as you are?

LUCY CONTRERAS: He was from Mexico City.

TOM RIVERA: So, was he light?

LUCY CONTRERAS: Born in Mexico --

LUIS CONTRERAS: He -- was he light-headed -- light --?

LUCY CONTRERAS: No, he wasn't. He was my -- he was dark complected.

Not real dark, but he wasn't real light. My brothers were both real light -- all three of my brothers were real light complected.

TOM RIVERA: You were also born and raised in Colton?

LUCY CONTRERAS: Huh?

TOM RIVERA: You were also born in Colton?

LUCY CONTRERAS: I had three brothers.

TOM RIVERA: You were --

LUIS CONTRERAS: But you were born in Colton.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Oh, I was born right there on Valley Boulevard.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, so she's a Coltonite.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, Coltonite.

TOM RIVERA: She's a Coltonite. That's wonderful. Yeah.

LUCY CONTRERAS: 1934, he decided to go to [Brawley?], my uncle [01:07:00] that instigated it. There was a market for sale, little neighborhood market, and he decided to be his own boss, so he quit his job and went over there, ran that market for 11 years.

LUIS CONTRERAS: All the people in South Colton mentioned living [over?] the cement plant.

TOM RIVERA: That and the PFE.

LUIS CONTRERAS: And the PFE.

TOM RIVERA: Y la pisca.

LUIS CONTRERAS: La pisca.

TOM RIVERA: [La bolucha?].

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, that's it.

TOM RIVERA: And then, there were some that work in agriculture. You know Cooley Ranch?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: And then, my dad Rumba worked in construction with El Gordo.

LUIS CONTRERAS: El Gordo.

TOM RIVERA: So, we were self-sufficient in South Colton, right?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: We were self--

LUIS CONTRERAS: Self-sufficient.

TOM RIVERA: We had our grocery stores, y la calle siete was always jumping.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Our Sombrero?] dancing. We had it made.

TOM RIVERA: Yeah, we did. It was a self-sufficient community. Yeah. Luis, just thinking about living in Colton -- both of you, okay, Lucy? Both of you, just living in Colton. What was the best thing that you [01:08:00] can remember or can kind of think about that you experienced or one of the best things that happened to you while you were living in Col--? I know you still live in Colton, but what was some of the best things that happened to you when you were young that you can remember? One of the best things. And you too, Lucy. Which was a good experience for you living in Colton?

LUIS CONTRERAS: I can't even say, can't even think (laughs) that far back with my brain on ice skates. I can't remember half of the stuff. Let's see. I guess --

TOM RIVERA: Being a good handball player?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Well, that's what I liked because I enjoyed the handball, but what I liked about -- it's gathering with my friends. That's what I liked most, that my friends -- and then, my friend, [Billy Freeman?]. [01:09:00] When I went to -- when they took me to Lincoln School, he was one hell of a buddy, Billy Freeman. The Freeman Ranch in Colton, where I live right now. It was nothing but cattle and horse ranch, and he was not one of these guys that said, "Uh-uh." He was just with us [also?], and we became friends since the fifth grade.

TOM RIVERA: So, friends that you had in Colton.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: In South Colton and also Billy Freeman in North Colton.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, in North Colton. He was one hell of a guy. Him and -- see, I forgot his name. (laughs) The actor.

TOM RIVERA: *Steel Helmet.*

LUIS CONTRERAS: *Steel Helmet.*

TOM RIVERA: Gene Evans. Gene Evans.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Gene Evans and Bud Evans. They were good people [over there?]. They were good. They did -- they were just down-to-earth [01:10:00] guys.

TOM RIVERA: So, you remember friends and people that you became buddies with.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah.

TOM RIVERA: [Those were?] the good things that happened to you in Colton. What about you, Lucy? What about you?

LUIS CONTRERAS: She can't hear you. You got to --

TOM RIVERA: How about you? What are the -- a good experience that you had that you can remember living in Colton?

LUCY CONTRERAS: What I -- well, we left Colton in 1934. I came back in 1943.

LUIS CONTRERAS: He wants to know how was the best thing that happened to you when you lived in Colton.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Well, I was too small. I was seven years old.

LUIS CONTRERAS: How is the best experiences that you had to make you feel happy being in Colton?

LUCY CONTRERAS: I was -- I didn't live in Colton when I was young. I mean --

TOM RIVERA: No, no. I was --

LUCY CONTRERAS: -- I was seven years old when we went to Brawley.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, I'm sorry. I --

LUIS CONTRERAS: [Oh, God?].

TOM RIVERA: -- didn't explain it well. When you grew up --

LUCY CONTRERAS: The best things I can remember is our summers coming back to [01:11:00] Colton. My dad never rented the house out, so we just come back and move into the house again and spend the summer there, and then we go back to Brawley.

TOM RIVERA: And then be --

LUCY CONTRERAS: That was the best part of my --

TOM RIVERA: And then catch up. Catch up --

LUCY CONTRERAS: -- childhood.

TOM RIVERA: -- with your Colton friends.

LUCY CONTRERAS: Those trips from Brawley over to Colton.

TOM RIVERA: And then, catching up with people that you knew before. You didn't say the best thing, that you got together with Luis again.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Oh, you got together with me. But, see, we were never that close together until after we got widowed. [That's when?] we got together.

LUCY CONTRERAS: We used to spend the summers over in South Colton with the [Martinez?] family, and he said he was up and down 7th Street there, but I don't remember him --

LUIS CONTRERAS: Yeah, up and down L Street with my roller skates.

(laughs)

LUCY CONTRERAS: The roller skates all over the place.

TOM RIVERA: Oh, you were also a roller skater.

LUIS CONTRERAS: [I can still go to school with?] roller skates.

FRANK ACOSTA: [One minute?]

LUCY CONTRERAS: One minute.

TOM RIVERA: Well, listen. Is there [01:12:00] anything that I forgot to mention, Luis and Lucy?

LUIS CONTRERAS: Not that I can think of, no. You pretty well (inaudible).

TOM RIVERA: Well, listen, I want to thank you, both of you. I want to thank both of you because doing this interview again, and I got a call from the Library of Congress, Luis. They have a program called the Veterans History Project, and they want a copy of today's interview that we had today.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Okay.

TOM RIVERA: So, we'll make a copy for them and send it to them. And, again, thank you so much for helping with the interview.

LUIS CONTRERAS: Okay.

TOM RIVERA: Thank you.

LUIS CONTRERAS: All righty. (laughs)

P1: Well done.

End of Interview:
[01:12:52]