

# LLANO GRANDE JOURNAL

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The *Llano Grande Journal* is a publication of the Llano Grande Research Project, a *Rural Challenge* project based out of Edcouch-Elsa and La Villa schools in South Texas. The Project is staffed by Project Coordinator Francisco Guajardo, Researcher/Archivist Ricardo Gámez, and a number of student interns. You can reach them at :

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# The Purpose of *Rural Challenge*

The *Rural Challenge*, supported by a \$50 million, one-for-one matching grant, represents the single largest private investment ever made for the reform of the nation's rural schools. Like their urban counterparts, schools participating in the *Rural Challenge* operate in networks with external partners experienced in promoting K-12 educational reform. By uniting schools with each other and with community organizations, the *Rural Challenge* aims to overcome the isolation and marginalization that characterize so much of rural education. So far, thirty-two projects, serving approximately 300 schools in thirty states, are involved in the *Rural Challenge*. It is hoped that more than 500 schools eventually will join the project and plant the seeds of a substantial and lasting rural school reform movement.

The *Rural Challenge* works with schools and communities to develop a "pedagogy of place" that promotes "genuinely good, genuinely rural" schools. These are schools in which learning experiences are grounded in the local culture and context; where students address real problems in an interdisciplinary fashion and create products useful to others; and where learning often takes place beyond the school walls, in the laboratory provided by the surrounding environment. Organizers also hope to reverse the recent trend that equates success with moving away to an urban setting. Genuinely good rural schools, therefore, are expected to prepare students to stay, to leave, or to go for a while and later return to rural communities that they value and that value them.

Not coincidentally, the *Rural Challenge* has attracted allies from fields other than education: natural historians, anthropologists, environmentalists, ecologists, health workers, community developers, and other who all share a common concern for the future of rural places. This affinity is most likely due to the *Rural Challenge's* belief that the boundaries between school and community are not only artificially drawn but also inevitably harmful. Instead, schools and communities need to be mutually engaged; schools (and students) should play an active role in community revitalization, while the entire community must participate in the education of its youth. The *Rural Challenge* promotes this reciprocity by searching out and supporting schools that serve and are served by their communities, and in so doing, contributes to the renewal of both the school and their communities.

The *Rural Challenge* is governed by a national Board of Directors and administered by a staff of four, with headquarters in Granby, Colorado. A cadre of eight stewards, based throughout the country, assists the national staff in identifying and supporting rural schools, communities, and organizations already operating in accordance with the *Rural Challenge's* vision or on the threshold of doing so.

Excerpted from Walter H. Annenberg's *Challenge to the Nation: A Progress Report*, February 1998, pp. 27-28.

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Welcome to another edition of the *Llano Grande Journal*. In this edition you will see cosmetic changes, such as in format and cover. These changes were made to give the *Journal* a better look. But we've also made more substantive alterations. Those have to do with including more voices and with reaching a wider audience.

Whereas our last *Journal* featured but a handful of oral histories and another handful of student products, this edition increases the number of voices significantly. More than a dozen of our wise elders speak to us and share their experiences, just as a number of students and teachers publish their work and thoughts.

In our effort to reach a wider audience, particularly our Spanish and bilingual readers, we present a dual language format. We feel we're overdue in publishing in this manner. We've excluded too many from engaging in the dialogue through our *Journal*. Beyond the obvious need to take these stories to our monolingual Spanish-speaking audience, we also see a need to have our youth read these stories in both languages. To be sure, the loss of Spanish amongst our youth is an important reason for publishing in Spanish.

If there is a single theme that defines this journal, it is labor; most of the oral histories deal with labor. A number of the contributing authors relate their experiences working at the Vahl'sing packing shed, while others tell us of their labor at Engelman Farms, or with the Rotel cannery.

The numerous student authors entertain a wide range of issues, from genealogical studies to very personal reflections. Also included is a "hot off the press" David Rice fiction story about life and labor in the Rincón del Diablo in Edcouch. And in our effort to honor those who have passed on, we include two very personal eulogies.

In the young life of the Llano Grande Research Project, one of the most gratifying experiences we have thus had is seeing a number of our oral histories make their way into the curriculum of many classrooms. Particularly in English and Social Studies classes, the voices of Santos Layton, Jacinto González, Luisa Garza, and many others have been effectively integrated into the traditional canon of literature and into the historiography of the American experience. It's exciting to see how students sense a profound connection to the academic subject matter. We hope to continue building on this process.

Ricardo Gámez  
Editor

Francisco Guajardo  
Editor

**The following are reactions from people who have visited the Llano Grande Research Project:**

Paco,

I couldn't resist putting some thoughts together for the *Journal*. Fijate que this journal may be one of those vehicles that will begin to keep us connected. We are living in a time when distance is no longer an issue when it comes to having access to the appropriate

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**"It's fascinating to see how during our lifetime, we have experienced the death of distance."**

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resources. The old Chinese proverb, "we live during interesting times" is living itself out.

It's fascinating to see how during our lifetime, we have experienced the death of distance. Puedo mandar un mensaje a camaradas across the world and say, I will be there mañana. It's amazing, y una realidad that our parents, and some of us still can't comprehend.

But even with the technological advancements, many people have been left behind, and most of those are people of color, women and children. Mexicanos, mujeres, y niños have not had the power to be players and have not had a chance to sit at the table. We have not done a good job of educating ourselves. And when we do educate ourselves, we've done it under someone else's terms and values.

In Mary Clark's article on sustainable development in the recent *Journal of Social Issues*, she argues that to even begin talking about sustainable development, we must change the Euro-American value system. In particular, she argues that progress is not necessarily linear. Often, we must go backward in order to go forward. It is precisely this that the Llano Grande Research Project is doing. You, your students, and the experts of the community are looking back, and in the

process we are going forward. Thank you for privileging a los viejitos de la comunidad, los estudiantes del distrito, and as importantly, thank you for publicly taking the

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**"You, your students, and the experts of the community are looking back, and in the process we are going forward."**

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time and space to acknowledge those that have left us, and the memories they have left behind.

I recall a story a friend shared with me once that is very relevant to what you're doing. It's based on an old African tale, and it goes something like this:

A father was reading a story to his little boy. It seemed to be the father's favorite story, because he read it at least twice per week. It's about a man who goes hunting and fights the elements in the wilderness. He experiences many adventures, and at the end of the story, he wins the big prize: he gets the big kill. He hunts and kills, THE LION. One day the little boy asks his father, "Daddy, why does the man always win?" Puzzled, the father thought long and hard, and then answered, "Son, whenever the lion learns how to write the story, then he can be the winner."

The moral of the story is clear; we have been the lion for too long. Thankfully we are learning how to tell and write the story. This is exactly what the Llano Grande Project is doing, and for that les doy las gracias a todos ustedes....

The challenge, of course, is that as we tell and rewrite both the history and the ending to our story, the hunter will become more aggressive. This is our next challenge. Métanles ganas, for many of us who have left are in solidarity with you; our spirit is still there.

--Miguel A. Guajardo  
Urban Issues Program  
University of Texas, Austin

Dear Frank and Ricardo,

Taking advantage of my role as a Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Team member, I spent four days with the Llano Grande Project last December. Project Director Frank Guajardo knew that I wanted to see as many different Rural Challenge-inspired programs as I could in those four days. So we went to do interviews with three community members, where we talked to Mrs. Layton, the mother of musicians, and Mr. González who worked with the Vahl'sing and the Rotel companies. And we had a delightful interview with Mr. Arcadio Padilla, who after some friendly banter agreed to "lend" his one-of-a-kind photograph of the Vahl'sing Packing Shed to the project for archiving on the computer.

I met Mrs. Cura who runs the art program at La Villa High School and received a stunning cornhusk wreath for a Christmas present. I sat in on Delia Pérez's World History class and learned even more about the agricultural history of the Valley. I had the most fun tramping around Las Burras cemetery with Mr. Tamez and Mr. Gaston's middle school students who were connecting their family histories to the history of the Llano Grande land grant.



La Villa students reporting their findings at Las Burras Cemetery.

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**"This is one of the few Rural Challenge projects that has brought the community into the school and the school out to the community."**

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My overall impression of this Rural Challenge project is one of admiration and anticipation. I particularly admire the commitment of all those who have authorized, supported and participated in the design and implementation of the project, from the school board, the Superintendent, and to the students who produce the *Llano Grande Journal* and conduct community surveys. This is one of the few Rural Challenge projects which has truly brought the community into the school and the school out to the community. It's been done through a desire to connect their cultural history to the history of the place and the larger history of the state of Texas and the United States. In this respect, the Llano Grande Research Project stands as a model for all the other Rural Challenge Projects.

I anticipate that the next phase of the Project will continue its close integration with local community groups and agencies. I anticipate an integration of the Project with the goals of Superintendent Mary Alice Reyes, who envisions establishing a technical college to develop professional career opportunities for young people in the Valley. And I anticipate increasing integration between the Project and the elementary and secondary school staff as they begin to incorporate place-based themes into their classrooms and curricula.

To all the staff and students who have made this past year such a success, I extend a sincere congratulations!

--Julie G. Canniff  
 Annenberg Rural Challenge  
 Research and Evaluation Team  
 Harvard University

Dear *Llano Grande*,

Thank you for all of the good work that you're doing in preserving the history and culture of the community in Edcouch-Elsa. I recently had the opportunity to visit with you and I was very pleased to observe high school students who are interviewing senior citizens, teaching history to elementary school students, and developing some really creative strategies to improve their school and community.

Most high school students only study history, but you're giving them a chance to make it! I wish you all of the best for your continuing work and hope that your dreams for Edcouch and for Elsa come true.

Best wishes,

--Dennis Shirley,  
Annenberg Rural Challenge  
Research and Documentation Team

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Frank,

I am happy to announce that the Llano Grande Research Project has been selected to receive the highest award from the Hidalgo County Historical Commission. Your documentation of the local history in Edcouch, Elsa and La Villa has had a positive influence on the community. Your approach to gathering the stories, music, and oral histories is invigorating and contagious. We particularly appreciate the way the approach is being used to teach students; only then can our youth know about their community and heritage. Keep up the great work with your publications, and let me know if I can be of any help.

--William E. Foerster, Chairman  
Hidalgo County Historical Commission

**The following are comments written by students in the Llano Grande Research Project's Research Methods class.**

Working with the Llano Grande Research Project has been a great learning experience. Local history has been neglected for so long that many students don't even realize that our town has a history. There are many students who cannot imagine that Edcouch and Elsa were ever any different from what they are now.

Through my work as an intern for the Llano Grande Research Project, I have learned much about the area's history. I have learned that such things as discrimination and segregation in schools occurred here. This has given me a whole new appreciation for my history class.

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**"Knowing a place's history gives you a certain respect for that place."**

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Learning about how racism affected your home makes it more real than reading about how it happened to another group of people in another state. I also now know some of the stories of the town's vacant lots and abandoned buildings. Knowing a place's history gives you a certain respect for that place.

--Roel Valdez, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

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As an intern for the Llano Grande Research Project, I have gained new and unique experiences that I would not have been exposed to in a normal classroom setting. I took part in a fifteen minute documentary on the history of Edcouch and Elsa that was aired on PBS. I have learned of segregation between ethnic groups in our community, and of many abandoned buildings which were once thriving businesses in the community.

I have also been interviewed and quoted in relation to this project by *The Monitor* and other newspapers. These interviews have helped me realize that our work is of interest and importance to many people in the Valley.

I have also transcribed many interviews of community people who have had an influence in the history of our community; I've transcribed in both English and Spanish. I've always heard their stories of how life was then, but I still need to hear more to really understand our history. Because of these people the value of labor, culture, family, history, and money have become meaningful to me. I now know about what my community has accomplished, participated in, and I've gotten some understanding of how it fits into the success of our country.

--Christina Cavazos, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

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When I enrolled in the Llano Grande Research Project's Research Methods class at Edcouch-Elsa High School in January, I saw myself going into the community and interviewing people. However, it hasn't all been like that. The interviewees came to us. We have found so much information from interviewing our neighbors. From day one, we have been busy working on transcribing oral interviews of local people and preparing the next edition of the *Llano Grande Journal*, a journal we publish out of our office.

As an intern with the Project, I have learned much about the community, and I have learned to appreciate what I have, especially in relation to my community. I never knew that there was so much background to Edcouch-Elsa and the people who made the community what it is today.

I was also given the opportunity of a lifetime when I became part of a team to do a documentary of

education in our community, and we traveled with the class to New York to interview Ivy League college students from Edcouch-Elsa. We raised most of the money for the trip from private sources. The trip included visits to Yale, Brown, Columbia, and Harvard. Future plans are to produce a documentary of all these students to inform people of the many achievements of Edcouch-Elsa.

This class has been very beneficial to my classmates and me. I intend on enrolling in this class again next year, and I intend to be part of this research project after I graduate.

--Jorge Lozano, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

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**Students Roel Valdez, Christina Cavazos, and Jorge Lozano in the field in Edcouch.**

Working as an intern for the Llano Grande Research Project has taught me the importance of local history. It has given me great respect for my hometown. Since history books rarely mention South Texas, the class gave me a great opportunity to know things I wouldn't otherwise have learned.

I have had many new experiences through this program. For example, I have visited the Port Isabel Historical Museum and

visited Civil War sites in the Valley. We have been interviewed by *The Monitor* for an article on the impact of this project. We have been privileged to meet many members of the community who have had an impact on Edcouch and Elsa.

Many people have commented that Edcouch-Elsa has "nothing"; however, they don't know about this area's rich, diverse history. We have had the opportunity to make a difference in the community and hope to extend this opportunity to everyone else.

--María Teresa Ortiz  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

A central goal of the Llano Grande Research Project is to bridge the gap that exists between the schools and the community. Responding to that need, the Research Methods Class initiated the pursuit of a Kellogg Foundation grant called Managing Information with Rural America (MIRA). With our students, we organized a community cluster, applied for the grant, and won one of six \$200,000 grants given nationally. The process required that there be a great deal of student and community participation, and we got exactly that.

Subsequently, our communities gained an additional \$170,000 from the Kellogg Foundation to be awarded to community support organizations. We're pleased to report that students wrote the proposals that won the funding for those organizations.

The following are insights from several of the students who've participated.

### Editor

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Being an intern with the Llano Grande Research Project has opened my eyes as well as many doors for me. I have learned about how my community came to be, and how rich in faith and culture it is. That alone is something that makes me appreciative and glad that I joined the Project.

Another outcome of this project was something I never expected. Because the project got me so interested in the people who make up the community, I started to research the needs of the community as part of a team that applied for the Kellogg Foundation's Managing Information with Rural America (MIRA) grant.

The Kellogg Foundation found our place interesting and decided to make a site visit, and I was one of the students who showed them around during their visit. I don't know what I did or said, but I think the director of the Kellogg project, Caroline Carpenter, liked me. A couple of weeks later, Caroline invited me along with

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**"I'm glad I enrolled in this Research Methods class. It may have changed my whole life around."**

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Delia Pérez to go up to the Kellogg foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan, to be part of the proposal reviewing committee for the Community Support Organizations. I just got back and the whole experience was extraordinary. Not only did I meet some terrific people, but I also got paid \$300 a day to review proposals. I'm glad I enrolled in this Research Methods class. It may have changed my whole life around.

--María De Lourdes Peña, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

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Before I begin I just want to mention that this was a really neat experience for me. I never thought that I would be writing a proposal to the Kellogg Foundation, or to anyone else, until the day Frank Guajardo approached me at the Boys & Girls Club asking for one of my coworkers. Before I knew it three of us from the Boys & Girls Club, all students, were working hard to do a three-week proposal in a span of about 30 hours.

It took a lot of persistence because so much time and legal documentation was required. At one point, we were so exhausted from working on this proposal that two of us took turns typing or sleeping on the pool tables at the Club. Then the next day we worked from about 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Luckily that day was Tax Day so we had a little more time to get it postmarked. I was really satisfied with the outcome of our proposal, and I wish the adults from the Boys & Girls Club would have done this earlier, or at least told us they were not

going to submit the proposal. In the end, I have to say that I don't mind taking the initiative and volunteering my time to do something that will improve our community.

--Nick Rosales, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School



**Joey Hinojosa, a community team leader, introduces himself to the rest of the MIRA cluster members.**

It was a privilege to work on the grant proposal that we submitted to the Kellogg Foundation for a \$60,000 literacy center. I felt honored to be working on something that can have a great impact

on the community. I feel I have grown professionally because of this project. I had no idea what it was like to write a proposal, but my classmate Robert Almanza and I pulled it off. We helped each other with ideas for the narrative and worked on figures for the tentative budget.

As Americorps volunteers we were able to work on planning the technology outreach program for the Elsa Public Library. We see the needs of our patrons and know that this is a great project that our community really needs. This program will prove to be an invaluable asset. I feel deeply honored that I was able to contribute in some form to help improve the future of our community.

--Jesus Flores, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Many opportunities have passed us by in the past, yet we have stood idly by as they floated by in front of us, with only a few solitary individuals attempting to grasp the fading opportunities. One for all is our new motto, and allowing an individual to struggle alone is no longer accepted. A new era has arrived in Edcouch-Elsa, one in which excellence is expected and improvement is constant.

I have been captivated by this newfound fever of improvement, so much so that I took part in writing the Kellogg Foundation's MIRA proposal for the Elsa Public Library. If approved, this proposal will bring a much-needed Literacy Center to the Delta Area. Individuals will have the opportunity to broaden their horizons in several languages including English, Spanish, and Computer Literacy.

Working on the MIRA proposal has indeed been one of the most satisfying experiences of my life. Our community shall improve. More individuals will begin to take the initiative and in doing so will feel and witness the satisfaction that comes with improvement.

--Robert Almanza, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Writing the proposal to the Kellogg Foundation was indeed an endeavor. With very little time and enormous effort, I feel that my co-workers and I have helped the Boys and Girls Club greatly. With this grant, which adds up to about \$60,000, the Club will begin a Learning & Skills Development Center. It will provide computers and educational software for the members

**"Through help of the Llano Grande Project, we learned how to write the proposal."**

to use at any time. This is what the Club lacks in the interest of the children's education.

None of this would have been possible if Mr. Guajardo hadn't come into the office and told us about the grant being offered to the communities. This offer was just too good to turn down, in our point of view, and we knew something had to be done. Volunteering our time to this proposal was not easy because we had to put aside all our present high school studies. Through help of the Llano Grande Project, we learned how to write the proposal. I feel a sense of satisfaction in knowing I have helped the community and especially the children. I hope we get the grant.

--Oscar González, student  
Edcouch-Elsa High School



Oscar Gonzalez, Nick Rosales, and Roberto Almanza, among the grant proposal writers.

**Teachers and students from different campuses have begun work focusing on local themes. Slowly, we're beginning to see the value in place-based instruction and learning. The following are teachers' reactions to the pedagogy of place, and a sampling of students' work.**



Delia Pérez, teacher at Edcouch-Elsa High School. Photograph courtesy of Delia Pérez.

As I embarked on my first year of teaching, I anticipated the contribution I would make to the Llano Grande Research Project. But then, reality struck, and I faced rigid World History curriculum guidelines. The project I intended my students to work on was suddenly placed on a back burner, as I was overwhelmed with classroom objectives and curriculum alignment.

But somewhere during the first term, I found time to assign an independent local history research project to one of my classes. Most of the students responded favorably to the project. Two girls eagerly claimed their research topics, "The Economic History of Edcouch-Elsa," then engaged in a heated debate on which one of them would actually research the topic. Eventually, they reached a fair compromise. Other students chose to research varied topics. For example, the "History of the Music Department at Edcouch-Elsa High School," and "Issues Surrounding the Formation of Ethnic Identity," and "The Story of Engelman Gardens."

On the other hand, a few students complained that there was not a single thing they cared to learn about Edcouch-Elsa. One boy even proposed writing a research paper about the many reasons to leave this community. But in the end, even he grew to like the project and the community as he researched the Vahl'sing packing shed and presented his findings several times at parental and community meetings. The

students developed a curiosity toward their research and eventually developed a new appreciation for our small community. It is that novel pride in Edcouch-Elsa that conveys the success of place-based learning.

I felt accomplished in my role, not as a teacher, but as a facilitator for learning. I was amazed at the ease with which the students taught themselves, each other, and myself. I stopped forcing my students to learn about a subject that they considered completely irrelevant, and I opened the doors of self-learning. The students appreciated that opportunity, and I appreciate everything they taught me—not only about local history, but about the power of student potential and self-expression as well.

--Delia Pérez, Teacher  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

As a writer in residence and literature teacher at Edcouch-Elsa High School, I have plunged right into the very exciting activities and programming of the Llano Grande Research Project. When I came to Edcouch-Elsa, my intent was to teach literature from the traditional literary canon, though with some adjustments. The plan was to include Latino writers to give my students literature with which they could relate.

After seeing the work the Project was engaged in, I decided to change my instructional plan. I decided that my students would also be part of the literary canon. My students, I thought, should also be writers. If I can be a writer, why can't they? So together, we've begun to develop an instructional plan based on a specific place—the place where my students live. Preliminary results have been very positive. There is no turning back; place-based learning is where the action is.

--David Rice, Writer-in-Residence  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

**A number of classes throughout Edcouch-Elsa and La Villa schools have produced work based on our community. Here's a sampling of work, ranging from elementary to high school levels.**

**Ms. Olga González's second grade students at Edcouch Elementary School show some of their genealogical work:**

**The Story of Alicia Sánchez, by 2nd grader Amanda Bernal.**

Today is Tuesday Nov. 18, 1997. My name is Amanda Bernal, and I am interviewing my grandmother Alicia.

*What was your family life like when you were growing up?*

It was very nice. I had a very loving and caring family. I was an only child, and the first grandchild, so everybody took care of me. I had lots of people teaching and helping me with everything so that I could grow up to be a good adult. My parents taught me manners and respect. They took me to church to learn about God. My parents also taught me about God. They sent me to school too.

My parents didn't finish school. Their families believed that girls didn't need schooling. All the girls needed to learn was how to do housework and how to bring up children. Boys had to help out by working and making money in order to help the family. My parents believed that I needed to finish school, so every year they saw to it that I started school in September and stayed until May.



**Alicia Sánchez in Grammar School. Courtesy of Alicia Sánchez.**



Alicia Sánchez boarding a school bus in the early 1950s.  
Courtesy of Alicia Sánchez.

My parents were migrant labor workers so I stayed with my grandma and uncles. I have very good memories of my family. Even though we were poor, we were very close. We loved and cared for each other very much.

*What was school like when you were going to school?*

School was, well just a room with old desks, and our teacher was an Anglo who only spoke English. We had no cafeteria, and we had to take our lunch. The toilets were outside in what we called an outhouse. We had no flushing toilets, and no sinks to wash our hands. We had a faucet out in the schoolyard to wash our hands. Since we didn't know English and that teacher didn't know Spanish we raised our hands to go to the restroom: one finger meant we wanted to drink water, and two fingers meant we needed to go to the restroom. The subjects we had were reading, writing, and math. In the higher grades we learned about history and

geography. In the high school they taught us everything, plus typing, science, and homemaking (sewing and cooking).

We were not allowed to speak Spanish. If we did and were caught, we were sent to the office. Mexican Americans went to one school and Anglos went to another until we went to high school. The Anglo kids were okay; it was their parents who didn't want us to mix with them.

*Can you describe your social life? What did you do for fun? How did your family entertain themselves?*

For fun at home grown ups would visit out in the yard and children played hide-and-seek, tag, marbles, and hopscotch. Inside we would listen to the radio and talk to each other or read. On weekends we would go to the movies. It was 10 or 25 cents to get in, and 10 cents each for popcorn and cokes. We would also go to the drive in movies where it was 50 cents per carload. The movies were good family movies. *Tarzan* was my favorite. I don't remember ever seeing scary, violent, or gang movies. The movies were in black and white.

Sundays we would go to church, and afterwards we would go to visit relatives. We were not allowed to be in the adult conversations, but we had fun playing baseball and other games.

*Describe the clothing worn at that time.*

The clothes are about the same, only the length would go up one year and down another—jeans, shorts, dresses, etc. We didn't care about labels or brands of clothes or shoes. I remember my mom making most of my dresses. Back then the flour for making tortillas came in sacks made of material, so she would buy the same kind of sack until she had enough for my dress.

*Describe the local community and the type of work available to you and your family when you were growing up.*

The communities of Elsa, Edcouch, Monte Alto, and Engelman Gardens were growing communities. There was lots of work in sheds, or *bodegas*. There was a fruit shed, vegetable shed, and canning shed. It seemed like everybody had a job. The pay was not that good but the food and clothing and gas were not high either. I remember my dad getting 35 cents an hour but later it went up. My mom would pack fruit, but was not paid by the hour so she worked very hard. Then they closed because of a big freeze. So we went to California where my dad worked in the fields driving a tractor. My mom also worked in the fields.

*Can you name any social customs practiced at the time when you were growing up?*

This is not very clear as to what you need to know. Social seems to be something with the community. Customs within my family were Christmas and Easter. The best was Christmas because we did different things starting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December or maybe before. My grandpa would buy a pig around September, but in December, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, he and my uncles would kill it and fix the meat. They would make chicharrones, meat for tamales, and meat for the freezer. On the 24<sup>th</sup> my grandma, tías, and my mom would make about 50 or more dozen tamales. On the 25<sup>th</sup> we would go to church, open presents and eat, eat, eat. On the 26<sup>th</sup> my grandparents would make jabón de lejía or lye soap. I never learned what it was made of.

On Easter we went to church and then we would go to a park or a lake all day until very late and have a huge family picnic. Everything was cooked at home. We didn't have barbecue.

## **The Story of Felicitas V. Martínez, by 2nd grader Rebecca Cardoza.**

My great grandmother is Felicitas V. Martínez. We call her Mamá Fela. She was born on November 20, 1900. She just turned 97 years old. She is my mother's grandmother.

*What was your family life like when you were growing up?*

Mamá Fela's life was very simple. Her mother died when she was five years old. She had two younger sisters, ages three and nine months. They lived with their grandmother in San Nicolas, Mexico, near Monterrey.

*What was school like when you were going to school?*

My great grandmother did not go to school. They lived on a ranch, and she had to help her grandmother with the housework and cooking. Her grandmother was diabetic, and she felt sick much of the time.

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**"When Mama Fela was growing up, the houses they lived in were made from whatever materials were available. They were like little huts."**

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*Describe your social life. What did you do for fun? How did your family entertain themselves?*

Mamá Fela's social life was also very simple. She would play with dolls that her grandmother made out of cloth. She would also play marbles and jump rope. But most of the day was spent doing chores. She would walk to a well to bring water home to drink and for cooking. She would also go to a creek nearby to wash clothes.

*Describe the clothing worn at that time.*

The clothes that Mamá Fela wore were all hand-sewn. There was no electricity, so there were no sewing machines. Her grandmother made all their clothes, even their underwear. And the girls never wore pants.

*Describe the local community and the type of work available to you and your family when you were growing up.*

When Mamá Fela was growing up, the houses they lived in were made from whatever materials were available. They were like little huts. Mamá Fela says they don't have any around anymore. They had no running water and no electricity. They used oil lamps and cooked outside over an open fire. Almost everybody worked for themselves, raising cattle and growing their own crops. Everyone did their share in helping with the work.



**Felicitas V. Martínez with her family at the Cardoza Family home. Courtesy of the Cardoza Family.**

*Can you name any social customs practiced at the time when you were growing up?*

Mamá Fela grew up in Sharyland with her grandparents and her uncle. Her uncle, who was several years older than Mamá Fela, had a friend who was interested in Mamá Fela. His name was Juan Martínez. But they never dated. When Mamá Fela was 19 years old, he came and asked her grandfather for her hand in marriage. This was before he asked Mamá Fela, or even went out with her. Mamá Fela said she was a little nervous. But her grandfather convinced her that he was a good man and could earn a good living. So she married him. They got married in Sharyland. Then they moved to Donna and happily raised six daughters and one son, including a set of twins.



**Felicitas V. Martínez at her birthday celebration. Courtesy of Cardoza Family.**

*Do you have any other information you would like to add that will help me learn more about our local history?*

Mamá Fela moved to Sharyland when she was about 7 years old. She says they just went across the bridge. There were no hassles about coming across. It wasn't until later that they put restrictions on coming across the border. That is when people from Mexico started swimming across the Rio Grande River. But when Mamá Fela and her family crossed, they did not have any problems.



**Jonathan James Leal, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader at Edcouch Elementary School, writes about his conversation with his grandmother Mary Leal.**

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**The Story of Olivia Ortiz by 2nd grader Zelma Castillo:**

Today is October 2, 1997. My name is Zelma Castillo, and I am interviewing Olivia Ortiz about the town of La Villa.

*Describe the place where you lived when you were my age.*

Zelma, when I was your age everything was different. The streets were just dirt and there were lots of trees. La Villa was mostly woods.

*Tell me about your school.*

When I was your age I didn't go to school. The children would start school at the age of eight, and it was not required that you had to attend.

*Tell me about a special memory from your childhood.*

I remember my mother would tell us stories and fairytales.

*Tell me about a special family event or celebration.*

The nicest memories I have are when all the family would get together for birthday parties, my granddaughter's wedding, and for my daughter's wedding.

*What was your family life like when you were growing up?*

My family life was great.

*What was school like when you were going to school?*

Schools were very small with few children but it was OK.

*Can you describe your social life? What did you do for fun? How did your family entertain themselves?*

Well, we lived out in the country and we would go to town once a week and then we would have CCD. We would have church picnics and we had parties, birthday parties. We played out in the farm.

*Describe the clothing worn at that time.*

All the clothes we wore were made out of cotton.

*Describe the local community and the type of work available to you and your family when you were growing up.*

The community was about 2.5 miles from my farm and it was very small. We had a church and a school. There were about 1,000 families in there. The community was all one big family.

*Can you name any social customs practiced at the time when you were growing up?*

We celebrated Christmas gatherings, and Thanksgiving and every birthday in the family. We celebrated Halloween, and we had our Christmas tree. We had our Christmas turkey and we have the same family traditions now that we had when I was a little girl.

*Do you have any other information you would like to add that would help me learn more about our local history?*

Well, not at this time. It's pretty much the same now as it was back then.

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### **The Story of Maria Beatrice Porras, by 2nd grader Selena Porras:**

My grandma Maria Beatrice Porras is 59. She lived in Guanajuato in Mexico. She had seven brothers and sisters. She had to eat rabbits, cows, pigs, chickens, and eggs. She would clean houses and babysit for money because she didn't go to school.

My grandma remembers coming to Texas when she was 14, when she got married. She said she liked it so much because she had inside light and bathrooms. She also had not seen so many white people before.

My grandma's special events are when the whole family gets together for holidays. She loves that she had ten kids, 41 grandkids, and 7 great grandkids because everyone loves her, and it makes the parties better.

I love my grandma because she always tells stories that are scary and teach a lesson. She also always offers everyone food when they go to her house. She also takes care of my young cousin even though she is old and tired because she loves us.

**Brooks Gaston and Ron Tamez, teachers at La Villa Jr. High, took their classes to Las Burras Cemetery as part of their social studies genealogy project. These students mapped and identified a number of the tombstones. Some of the students had a personal stake in identifying tombstones in Las Burras Cemetery, located just north of La Villa. Some students looked for the resting places of some of their family members. The Llano Grande Research Project went along with them and took photographs of some of their discoveries.**

**Editor**

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By Brooks Gaston:

Seventh graders from Brooks Gaston's La Villa Jr. High class have been working as historians of their families' histories. As part of a six-week project, dedicated students investigated their family's history in the Valley. Many students wrote fascinating, and often moving accounts of their oldest known ancestor's arrival to the La Villa area. These histories demonstrate



**A La Villa Jr. High student examines the Spanish engraving on a tombstone at Las Burras Cemetery.**

a very raw oral history. Not all facts have been checked. These are the stories as told, or as understood by each family.

Jesús Solís came to the Valley in the year 1914. He came as a 14-year-old boy. It wasn't easy because he had to cross the Rio Grande, and when he did cross the river he went to Donna. After Donna he went to Harlingen, and after Harlingen he went to Edinburg, but Edinburg was not called Edinburg. It was called Chapin. After he went to Edinburg, he came to La Villa because he wanted to search for a better way of life. If he was alive, he would be 98 years old. He and his wife had five boys and two girls. He passed away leaving behind a lot of love. I loved my great great grandpa and wish he was alive because we loved him and his wife a lot too.

-- Sandra Villarreal, student  
La Villa Jr. High

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Reyes Arrived! My grandma Senaida Zúñiga Reyes arrived with Neil at La Fresa in 1944. They came from Montemorelos looking for work. Upon their arrival, they had their first son with them: Antonio. Antonio was two years old. By the way, La Fresa is now where Pablo Garza lives. When they arrived at La Villa, there were only a few houses there, and woods surrounded the rest.

To get to Reynosa they traveled by bus. My grandpa Amador worked on irrigation and drove the tractor. My grandma, on the other hand, picked tomatoes and strawberries. Enrique Zúñiga had a store where Fast Track is now. La Gloria was another store in La Villa, but it is now María's Restaurant. All the children attended school at La Villa. The children would be picked up by a bus in La Fresa.

-- Manuel Reyes, student  
La Villa Jr. High

In 1914 Apá Solís came to La Villa as a 14-year-old boy. He came on an old folk wagon from Doctor Coss, Nuevo Leon in Mexico. He came here because his parents sold him when they did not have enough money to feed themselves or the family. Apá

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**"One day, he was outside doing the restroom when a black widow bit him."**

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later married a great woman by the name of Amá. Together they had seven children, five boys and two girls. He was also a tough man.

One day, he was outside doing the restroom when a black widow bit him. They rushed him to the hospital and a few days later, he came out of the hospital. Years later he died leaving behind seven wonderful kids and a lot of love. If he were alive today, he would be 98 years old. I still miss him and his wife, Amá, but I know they are watching over me and all my family members.

--Juan José Muñoz, Jr., student  
La Villa Jr. High

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The first person to come to La Villa from my family was my grandpa José Angel Ortega. José was born on October 1, 1932, and lived in Edcouch for two years. Then he lived in Mercedes, Texas for his whole life, and still does. My grandpa said he used to work for a man named Fay M. Willis. José used to live in a small brown house. Mr. Willis always planted vegetables and grain. Later on, he shot himself.

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**"I wish I could be back in my 20s or 30s."**

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My grandpa took over and planted cabbage, tomatoes, and bell peppers in 1946. José also planted broccoli. My grandpa drove in wagons to drop off his father's friend. José also rode horses around town to exercise the horses. He also rode bikes to exercise. My grandpa said, "I wish I could be back in my 20s or 30s". I love my grandpa because he took care of me and he always gives me stuff.

--Nancy Natalie Ortega, student  
La Villa Jr. High

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The Mireles-Ortega family arrived in La Villa in the 1970s. My grandpa arrived here first. I believe he went to the agency and got a permit to buy a passport. My grandpa's name is Albino Mireles. After he got his permit, he came to work to get money to buy passports



**Tombstone uncovered by La Villa Junior High Students at Las Burras Cemetery.**

for my grandma Maria Concepción Ortega and her children: Jose Eloy Mireles, Joel Mireles, Alma Soledad Mireles, and Sergio Hugo Mireles. Later in 1972 San Juanita Elizabeth Mireles was born. She was born in Elsa, Texas, on June 24th.

In 1979 Mr. Garay was my mom's (Alma S. Mireles) teacher, and my uncle's (Sergio H. Mireles) too. My grandpa bought 10 acres of land from Davis Real Estate, when I was about five years old. Now I'm 12 years old, close to being a teenager. My grandparents and her children used to live in an *ejido*, a very small agricultural town where people farm their lands. That's where all the Ortega and Mireles family lives. The *ejido* is Veracruz y Progreso, a very poor small town near Nuevo Progreso in Tamaulipas.

--Maria Paula Bautista,  
La Villa Jr. High



**La Villa Junior High students at Las Burras Cemetery.**



Amy Gutierrez is a sophomore at La Villa High School.

***A show now playing in La Villa***  
by Amy Gutiérrez

Yesterday was a scary day,  
Wishing it would all go away,  
I wish upon the brightest star,  
Even if it's so far,  
My mother dragged me away from home,  
Not knowing I would feel alone.

And now in La Villa, oh what a bore,  
There's nothing to do but eat and snore.  
Oh, how I wish I was back there,  
With the family for whom I care.  
Those whom I love don't love me back,  
But those who I push away chose to come back.

Wanting to be accepted by those who chose to despise,  
I want not to wake up so I won't have to open my eyes.  
Realizing what is being done to me,  
I chose not to accept.  
This can't be happening to me, not now, not yet.

Feeling out of place,  
In a world with so much space.  
What can I do to feel accepted?  
What can I do to feel protected?  
So many questions, not enough answers;  
Why was I born, I do not know,  
Do I serve a purpose here, or am I just a show?

**Juan Guajardo's English students at La Villa High School wrote poetry reflecting their feelings about their hometown. Two of his students show their work:**



Adrian Hernandez is a sophomore at La Villa High School.

***Returning***  
by Adrian Hernández

Riding to school one winter day,  
I hoped to get an "A".  
I got off the bus,  
And met my friend Gus.

We walked to class,  
But suggested to smoke some grass.  
Sitting at the desk and sleeping,  
He asked me to go skipping.

I remember what I learned from my mother,  
So I decided not to bother.  
Gus went away,  
Till the end of the day.

Taking a test,  
I tried my best.  
Thought I passed?  
Was what I asked.

Riding back home was rough,  
Thinking the next day would be the same old stuff.  
While reading on my bed,  
I received a call that my friend was dead.

Waking up at night was not all that right,  
It was just a dream that was not a pretty sight.  
Tossing and turning,  
I was glad of returning,  
to La Villa.

**David Rice's literature classes at Edcouch-Elsa High School wrote reflective pieces about their life experiences.**



**Myrta Ventura, a freshman at Edcouch-Elsa High School, reflects on her migrant experience.**

I live in three states during the year. With my family I go to Utah, to Idaho, and then come back to Texas.

I spend my summer in Corinne, Utah. I live there from the beginning of June to the end of August. I like living in that small town of 600 people because the grass is always green. The air smells of snow melted into water. All the people are Anglo, but they're nice. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, we go to the small city park and play bingo.

My family goes to Corinne to work, and I really enjoy myself. I like the big 100-year old two-story house we live in. It used to be a bar. I remember the time a tour bus passed in front of our house. I could see all the cameras flashing away. We love it there and the work wasn't bad either. We pick cherries, raspberries, blackberries, peaches, and pears. I love taking a fruit fresh from its plant. I feel really honored when I do that.

We go to Burley, Idaho, from August to November, although I haven't gone there in two years. When I did go there, I would fly back to Texas so I wouldn't miss much more school. I remember the parks, with tall trees and nice grass, all in the large city.

A potato plant employs my parents. My mom is a truck driver, and my dad is a manager in the machinery shop. My grandparents own an old chapel of some sort. It has one floor underground. I like that house; it's a well-remodeled chapel. It is huge. I remember when we barely moved in. There used to be

a huge cross on top of the entrance. Idaho has a high population of Mexican-Americans, though most are laborers. I think this place is very cold and dark. It is all right, but there is a feeling of insecurity.

My grandma stays with all the grandchildren at home. She is wonderful. She is a great cook and a caring person. Although she is old, she still takes us shopping. It got boring there in Idaho. I felt lost there. Time passed slowly, and my parents would be gone from 5:00 a.m. to around 1:00 a.m. from Monday to Saturday. Sundays were good days that passed very fast.

Texas is the place I love. Edcouch is my home, even though I was born in Arizona. I like the school here and I like all my friends. I have many memories of school and my friends. We play sports, and laughter is my connection. I love this place because it feels like home. I can depend on this place during the holidays. On Easter we go to my *tío's* house and crack eggs, *crudos*. Then we all jump into the *canal*; it used to be clean and unpolluted. During Christmas vacation, all the neighbors and my cousin play hide-and-seek. I love this place.



**José Cruz, also a student of David Rice's, writes of his experiences.**

Standing, walking, and running are part of everyday life here in the United States. For many people in Mexico, the United States is the land of opportunity. Many people have risked their lives trying to cross the U.S. border from Mexico but for many U.S. citizens like me, nothing is complicated.

I was taken as a very young boy to live in Reynosa, Mexico. I lived there for five years, and when

I came back to Texas, I experienced many different things and saw things very differently.

As I was growing up along the border, I saw many people who were prejudiced. For example, in my hometown of Hidalgo, Texas, the United States Border Patrol was everywhere: in the parks, the streets,

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**“The U.S. Border Patrol caught up to the lady who fell, grabbed her, and then slapped her when she tried to get away.”**

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the Boys and Girls Club, everywhere!

I remember once being at a park and hearing people call the park “*La Convención de Mojados*,” or the “*Flea Market*.” People called it that because many undocumented people went there to rest. One day several people were in that park when someone yelled “*La Migra*,” and everybody raced like sheep. One lady fell and a young man ran very fast. The U.S. Border Patrol caught up to the lady who fell, grabbed her, and then slapped her when she tried to get away.

I have also experienced being bitten by a furious dog.

José Cruz,  
Edcouch-Elsa High School

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**Rainlilly Elizondo, a student in David Rice’s English I class, writes about experiences that have impacted her life.**

In my lifetime I’ve only lived in two places, Edcouch-Elsa, and Rochelle, Illinois. Both places are very different in culture, wealth, and their meaning to me. I had always lived in Edcouch-Elsa, so I was

accustomed with the people and surroundings. As a kid, I had a lot of friends and most importantly my loving grandparents in Edcouch-Elsa.

But I moved to Rochelle, Illinois, after the first six weeks into the second grade. I was pulled away from everything I knew. Moving to Illinois was similar to walking into a dark room. You can’t see what lies ahead of you or anything that may harm you. I’ve tried to forget most of what I experienced in Rochelle. Unfortunately I’ve failed, and memories haunt me as if they were ghosts from my past.

When in Rochelle I once got lost. I was with my mother, my aunt, and my sister. We were at a department store during a special one-night sale. The store was so crowded that night, that I couldn’t see my own feet. The four of us were looking around, when I got separated from my mom. I couldn’t see her anywhere. Fear came over me as I looked up and all I could see were strangers all around. I walked around trying to find a cashier, when I finally heard my mom calling. I tuned everything else out and went straight to her. That wasn’t the only time I felt lost in Illinois.

When I began to attend school in Rochelle, I went into a state of awe. The school was bigger than what I knew, and there were many more kids, none of whom I knew. I felt lost when all the schoolwork was unfamiliar to me, and I felt as if I didn’t belong when I would look around and I noticed everybody was of a different race. I didn’t experience harsh racism, so I made friends quickly as well as enemies. I soon overlooked the differences between classmates and myself.

But it all came back to me the day we were to take a state exam. The teacher read the instructions telling us what to bubble in. When we came to the bubble that asked what our race was, she instructed everyone to bubble in Anglo. But a minute later said that everyone *except* for Rainlilly. That one word, *except*, made a world of difference. It made me look like I was different from everybody else in that room. Heads turned over to me and just stared for a while. Whether she meant it or not at that moment, my third grade teacher made me feel as if though I was from another planet.



**Olga Cardoso, a freshman at Edcouch-Elsa High School, writes about the town where she was reared in Guanajuato.**

I was born in Yuriría, Guanajuato, Mexico, located in the central part of Mexico. I lived in Yuriría until I was six years old when my parents moved. In Yuriría, there are many stories that have been told and retold. Yuriría is not only famous for its legendary tales. It is also famous for its beautiful architecture. In Yuriría, there is an amazing church that is said to have been built by the native tribes who used it for protection at wartime. Yuriría also has beautiful plazas and *jardines*. The architecture there is very impressive. The people celebrate holidays such as *Día de los Muertos*, *Día de las Madres*, *Día de los Reyes Magos*, and *Día de las Tres Caídas*, which is one of the most famous holidays that is celebrated, and many others.

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**“The typical teenager in the U.S. is used to having certain privileges, ...This is something that American teens take for granted, while a Mexican teenager has to struggle to obtain her education.”**

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Yuriría also has a *laguna* that was once a volcano; however, this volcano erupted and became buried underneath water. My mother, who grew up as

a child and lived in Yuriría as an adult, has told me this tale. It has always interested me very much, and my mother and I often talk about it.

According to my mother, at times the *laguna* gets dry and the water becomes a hard crust and people would walk on it. At times the *laguna*'s water becomes green and smells really bad. The people of the town believed that this water could cure one who was sick, and so people came and collected this water and took it home to use it for several *remedios*.

Life is completely different in the United States than in Mexico. The typical teenager in the U.S. is used to having certain privileges, such as going to school without having to pay a fee. This is something that American teens take for granted, while a Mexican teenager has to struggle to obtain her education. Often teens have to get out of school to work and help out the family live day to day. Coming to the U.S. has been extremely painful to me, leaving all my loved ones and giving up the land where I was born just to go in search of a better life. I understand that my parents also



David Rice's English class discussing place-based literature.

sacrificed to give my brothers and sisters a better life. In fact, I am grateful to them, but I will never forget my cultural background.



**Sue Ann Saucedo Perez, a teacher at Edcouch-Elsa High School, eulogizes her grandparents Agustín and Felipa Saucedo.**

My *buelito* died in January of this year at the age of 85, when he slipped away in his sleep. It was a very peaceful death, and must have been a great release to him because he suffered from cancer for a long time. His wife, my *buelita*, died two years ago almost to the day. When she died it was hard, but we still had *buelito*. Now he is gone too. It is a loss twice felt because we have lost more than our grandparents. We have lost the last link with these old people that started it all for us. I'm trying to think of what it was about my *buelitos* that I will always remember. He was tough, and serious. He took each day that God gave him and lived it the way he wanted to. She was a more gentle soul but had a feisty side to her too. She was loving, fun, and had a great sense of humor. When I sat down to write this about my *buelitos*, I was somewhat at a loss. My father was in the Army for 23 years and my family and I did not grow up in the Valley; consequently I didn't really get to know my *buelitos* when I was growing up. I had to search my memory to find them. This is what I found:

I remember the times my *buelito* would give my sisters and me a dollar each behind my father's back so we could go to the "Lito's" store on the corner to buy candy as kids. I remember the time we lived with my grandparents right after we moved back from Germany, after my father retired from the Army. There was never any question that we would live with them until my parents could find us a place of our own. I remember a time when my *buelito* told me how he met my *buelita* when they were just children. I remember how he couldn't help smiling and laughing as he told me the

story and the look of love and admiration for his wife he had on his face.

What did I know about them? I knew they had met in Victoria, Texas, where their families had moved to a farm to work. I knew they had an early history together and that my *buelito* felt he would marry her the moment they met as children. I knew the love they shared could carry them through good times and bad, and did. I knew they lived a very hard life, one I will never be able to image. Yet, it was a life they lived together, and that was what helped them get through it. It was one of the only times I asked my *buelito* to tell me about something about his past. I regret now that I didn't talk to him more. I do, however, have my memories.

My *buelito* had special talents. He made the best pinto beans "a la charra" on this side of the border. He had his own secret recipe for Mexican pumpkin candy. Not even in Mexico could they make it taste the way he would. Fond and funny memories come to mind too.

My *buelita* would scream at us to shut her back screen door or the flies would come in, and we'd leave it open on purpose just to hear her scream, and then she would always laugh under a smileless face that made her whole chest rumble and filled us with warmth. My *buelita's* one



**Agustín and Felipa Saucedo on their wedding day. Courtesy of Sue Ann Saucedo Perez.**

sign of affection was to nibble our ears as children, which we hated of course. I remember the times my *buelito* bought fireworks for us and our cousins and let us pop them in his back yard, even though it drove my *buelita* crazy. My *buelito* taught my father his culinary secrets and it is a gift and talent not even my mothers cooking can equal. He taught my father how to roast a “cabeza” or beef head in a home made oven outside under the ground. My *buelita* saved every childhood momento my parents sent her over the years, even though we lived far away most of the time. Secrets and talents I thought died with them live in those of us they loved, shared



Agustín and Felipa Saucedo. Courtesy of Sue Ann Saucedo Pérez.

with, taught, and nurtured. These memories lead me to one person. My father.

I never thought I had anything to share with my *buelitos* or in common with them. But my father comes from these people. My father is like my *buelito* and *buelita* in many ways. I know the loving, caring man my father is. I always thought that I didn't know very much about my *buelitos* at all. I realize now that I'm wrong. I know how sensitive my father is and how much he loves me and adores my child and my husband. I know how my father thinks and how his values and beliefs have affected me. I have a respect and admiration that I thought I could never feel for my *buelitos*, and

it's because of my father. My father is a strong, hard man with a wild and passionate spirit. He is also a sensitive, giving, understanding, loving man as well. These qualities come from my *buelitos*. I know only a man with passion, desire, and love of life could love a woman as much as my *buelito* loved my *buelita*, and I see this same passion, desire, and love in my father when he looks at my mother.

I also see my Aunt Rose, who's so sweet and understanding of everyone. I hardly spend time with her but somehow I know I could always go to her with a problem and she'd listen to me and try to offer advice. My uncle Joe, how sensitive and loving he is with his family, and I admire the strong bonds he shares with his wife and our community. Everyone in Elsa knows who Joe Saucedo is. My Aunt Olivia, how kind she is and always with a smile or laugh to cheer you up or share with you. These people come from my *buelitos*, and those qualities come from them too. We, the cousins, we have our own children now. The loss we feel is great and yet...All I have to do is look at Korina's dimples, Roberto's chin, Benjamin's smile, or Elisa's eyes to see my *buelitos* again. I'm lucky and so blessed to be part of this family. To be part of these two unique people I thought I didn't know. Their blood runs in me and without *his* stubborn, loving, wild, hard, passionate spirit, and *her* loving, sensitive, funny, understanding, fun-loving spirit, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

As I sat in the church on the day of my *buelito*'s funeral, I looked around me and saw all these people, my parents, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces. I realized that if it hadn't been for my *buelitos*, and the loving relationship they shared with each other, none of us would be sitting there at all. We are all part of them and because I know I am part of that legacy, I know I can pass that on to my children. I know that legacy comes from my *buelitos*, two people I will always be proud to say are a part of me.

## A eulogy to Isabel Martínez Saenz, por Filomena Saenz Arcaute.

On January 5, 1998, my mother, Isabel Martínez Saenz, left us and went to live with God. The sixth of eight children born to Andres and Donaciana Martínez of Monte Alto, she was raised in an area close to Delta Lake, where her father worked at a ranch for Albert Hughes.

When my mother was 13, my grandmother Donaciana suffered a stroke and died. Immediately my mother and her sister Jesusa were forced to become the

caretakers of the home. They had to learn to take care of my grandfather and their two younger brothers. A few months later they moved with her oldest sister, Cruz Martínez, then to another house with another sister, María Guerra. Then, my grandfather bought a house in Monte Alto.



Isabel Martínez Saenz, Luis Martínez, y Jesusa Martínez Flores, 1936.  
Cortesia de Filomena Saenz Arcaute.

My mother used to talk about families camping at the Lake, much like our Winter Texans. After spending months there they'd leave, though often they left valuable things behind. On one occasion, my mom found a broken porcelain doll. My mom loved that doll. She treasured it forever.

Among her pastimes, she especially liked swimming and fishing at the Panchita Ranch Canal with

her siblings. She took pride in being able to swim across the canal. Another fond memory was using ditch reeds as fishing poles and straight pins for hooks.

She also talked about the Second World War when they had the so-called blackouts. Every night everyone in the community had to turn off the lights at a certain time, so everyone just went to bed early. She recalled that when large warplanes flew over her house, the entire family was afraid they were going to get bombed. After the War, on April 2, 1949, she married Francisco Saenz of Edcouch, a man who took part in clearing the lands in this area. Together, my parents raised eight children.

The last two years of her life she attended "The Bluebonnet Adult Day Care Center," where she made many friends. She liked baking cakes and making *taquitos* for her friends at the Center. She also enjoyed doing crafts. Even though she did not dance, she enjoyed seeing people dance when the Center hosted such events.

After my father was featured in the November issue of the *Llano Grande Journal*, my mother began to ask for an interview, so she too, could tell her stories. Unfortunately, she became ill about mid December. Doctors weren't able to find what ailed her. We lost her on the fifth day of the New Year. I hope these few words at least begin to tell her story.



Isabel Martínez Saenz.  
Courtesy of Filomena Saenz Arcaute.

## Oral Histories

Oral histories are at the core of the activities of the Llano Grande Research Project. To reconstruct the history of our community, we must hear the stories of the people. Much of the history of South Texas is not in the books we study, but in the folk oral tradition. To capture that history, we conduct oral interviews.

Oral interviews can be an integral part of any course's instructional process. Just as a history class can profit greatly from oral interviews, so can a biology class, or an art class, or any other class. A biology class, for example, can ask people specific questions which relate to plants, animals, and other life forms with which local people interact.

The oral interview process has a structure. First, students and teachers follow the process of identifying interview subjects, after which the student should ask the subject for permission to be interviewed. Then a questionnaire instrument relevant to the class and the interview subject is developed: included here should be objectives and goals of the interview. After fine-tuning

the questionnaire and securing equipment: a tape recorder, cassette, and photo camera if possible, students then conduct the interview. Then we transcribe the interviews. Finally, our students prepare narratives for publication in the *Journal*; the narratives are strictly based on the transcriptions.

The products, in turn, are now being used as literature in many of our classes. The following are personal accounts of people's experiences in the Delta Area.

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*To reconstruct the history of our community, we must hear the stories of the people.*

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Edcouch-Elsa High School students interview Edcouch resident Eddie González.

**Clarence Johnstone came to the Valley when he was eleven. At 17, he went to work at Engelman Gardens, a citrus operation north of Elsa, Texas. As the operation's accountant for over 30 years, Mr. Johnstone was intimately connected to the business, and as a photographer, he became a chronicler of the early years of Elsa community life.**

I was born on June 14, 1917 in Goff, Kansas, and came to South Texas on Thanksgiving day in November 1928. My family came to the Valley because my grandfather had bought a 20-acre orchard on South Val Verde road located Southwest of Donna, Texas, and he wanted somebody to live on it and take care of the orchard. I went to school in Donna, Texas, and graduated from high school in May 1934.

I went to work at Engelman Gardens in May of 1935 as a telephone switchboard operator where I earned \$10.00 a week for five and one-half days of work. Engelman Gardens was named after J. C. Engelman Jr., who purchased and developed the property. Mr. Engelman bought 10,534 acres of land during the mid 1920s. He cleared the brush off of the land, planted orchards, brought in people from the North in land

parties and sold approximately 3,000 acres of the property. Land was sold to approximately 250 non-resident owners. These people were farmers, merchants, automobile dealers, doctors, etc., from many of the northern states. Mr. Engelman developed an orchard service department to take care of the orchards sold to nonresident owners. He later built a packing plant, a juice plant and a dehydration plant to market the citrus products.



**Clarence Johnstone at his desk in the office of Hidalgo County Water Improvement District #6, circa 1937. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.**



**Aerial photograph of the Engelman Gardens Complex, circa 1950. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.**

Mr. Engelman asked me if I was going to be a switchboard operator all my life. I told him, "I hope not." He then told me he needed a stenographer and that he would like a male stenographer. Shortly thereafter, I went to Houston, Texas, to take a nine-month stenography course which I completed in five months. I came back in 1936, but unfortunately Mr. Engelman didn't have an opening for me at the time. In November of 1936 I was contacted by Mr. A. L. Cramer, General Manager for Mr. Engelman, and was hired as a bookkeeper for the Hidalgo County Water Improvement District No. 6, which was the Water District serving the Engelman Gardens area. Mr. Engelman died on Christmas Day in 1936.

The water district, the orchard service department, and the packing and juice plants were all institutions that were run under the management of Mr.

Cramer. There were approximately 5,000 acres of citrus, including acreage owned by Mr. Engelman, which had not been sold to non-residents, on the Engelman Gardens tract of which 3,400 acres were under the control of Engelman Products Company (Engelman Packing Plant). The balance of the acreage was under the control of the Engelman Gardens Association, a separate organization, located in Elsa, Texas.

It took a lot of laborers to operate these entities and there was a labor camp on the headquarters of Engelman Gardens where approximately 300 people lived. Most of the laborers were of Mexican origin.

When the “wetbacks” started coming over from Mexico, they filled the camp. A “wetback” was a term used to describe the Mexican illegals. Though in the earlier days they weren’t considered “wetbacks.” When the Bracero Program went into effect, the Engelman Products Company processed the first batch of 75 *braceros* at Hidalgo, Texas.

A *bracero* was a Mexican laborer who was hired to come to the United States on a temporary legal basis. They were processed through some government agency at the bridge. I was involved with the picture-taking process of the *bracero*. In order to be processed, the *braceros* were required to have three pictures (size 2 inches by 2 inches) in connection with their application. The *bracero* permits were processed for a certain period of time, but their permits could later be renewed.

As the laborers needed a place to purchase their daily needs, the Engelman Mercantile store was provided. The store contained a grocery department, meat market and a dry goods department. The store usually made a small profit up until the freezes that destroyed the citrus orchards, but after that it did not break even, and eventually it was closed.

I got my first camera when I was eleven years of age. I still have that camera, and the Kodak 35, which I used to take the *bracero* pictures. I took pictures of 1,076 *braceros* between April and August of 1947; I have a journal of the *bracero* photographs I took that year. I made three prints of each *bracero*, or a total of 3,228 pictures. I would go out to each farm early in the

morning, set up the floodlights, put the camera on a tripod, and the *braceros* would sit on a stool while an assistant wrote down the film number and name of the *bracero* as I took his picture. I then went to the office for the day, and that night I developed the film, printed the pictures and put each *bracero*’s pictures in an

		INCOME	
			PAGE 1
4-13-47	Engelman Prod Co	176 @ .75	132.00
To 8-31-47	Rio Farms, Inc	132 @ 1.00	132.00
	Woke McKim	2 @ 1.00	2.00
	J. J. Ballouway	14 @ 1.00	14.00
	Eng. Dan. Assin	69 @ 1.00	69.00
	Wiley Co. Water Dist	40 @ 1.00	40.00
	Eng. Dan. Assin	2 @ 1.00	2.00
	A. E. Atkinson	1 @ 1.00	1.00
	Clarence Wise	1 @ 1.00	1.00
	Wiley Co. Water Dist	6 @ 1.00	6.00
	G. O. McDaniel Co.	9 @ 1.00	9.00
	Shirley Shroyer	1 @ 1.00	1.00
	Moctenas Farms	39 @ 1.00	39.00
	E. G. Pinkerton	5 @ 1.00	5.00
	Leonard Farms	9 @ 1.00	9.00
	Weissen Farms	26 @ 1.00	26.00
	Evergreen Farms	44 @ 1.00	44.00
	John Roberts	1 @ 1.00	1.00
	Bill Murray	5 @ 1.00	5.00
	Juan Moran	7 @ 1.00	7.00
	Valking - Elsa	105 @ 1.00	105.00
	- Elsa	6 @ 1.00	6.00
	- Edinburg	46 @ 1.00	46.00

A page from Clarence Johnstone’s journal of photographs he took of *braceros*, and for whom, in 1947. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.

envelope with his name on it for delivery to the farmer. Each *bracero* had to keep a picture with him at all times, another copy would go to the employer and the third copy would be attached to his application. During the early years of citrus planting the Valley had several freezes that set back the orchards one to three years each time a freeze occurred. In 1949 and 1951 severe freezes killed most of the orchards. All but a few acres of the 3,400 acres of citrus under the control of the Engelman Products Company were completely killed by the 1951 freeze.

It took a full year, operating day and night, to remove the trees and get the land ready for farm crops. The land was then planted to cotton, grain and vegetable crops. Later on a portion of the land was planted to sugar cane. As there was no longer a need for the packing

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**All but a few acres of the 3,400 acres of citrus under the control of the Engelman Products Company were completely killed by the 1951 freeze.**

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In October of 1941 I was employed by the Engelman Products Company as the office manager/accountant and was there until the freeze of 1951, which destroyed the citrus groves. After that I remained as the accountant of the Engelman organization until 1967 at which time the Engelman Interest was sold to the Vannie E. Cook, Jr. Interest, who operated the property under the name of Engelman Farms. A few years later the Engelman Farms Interest was sold to an entity not located in the Valley. I continued to be the accountant for Mrs. Engelman, widow of J. E. Engelman, Jr., until her death in 1991. At the same time, I moved to McAllen and began working at Mayfair Minerals, Inc.



**Bulldozing the frozen orchards at Engelman Gardens after the freeze of the early 1950s. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.**

plant equipment, I went to Montemorelos, Mexico, to sell the packing plant equipment. I took my friend, Lalo Flores, with me as an interpreter; Lalo worked in the packing plant and was the only employee who stayed with the company after the plant closed to look after things.

**Candelario “Lalo” Flores moved to Elsa in 1940, when he began working at Engleman Gardens. A lifelong resident of South Texas, Mr. Flores was a Civilian Conservation Corps worker during the 1930s, and was able to stay out of World War II when management at Engleman Gardens petitioned to keep him here.**

I was born on October 6, 1913 in Mission, Texas. My parents were Reyes Flores and Felipa García from Doctor Coss, Nuevo León. I come from a family of seven, four sisters and three brothers, though two died. I don't remember the two very well because we were so young when they died. My mother was a housewife and my father cut wood to light stoves from those days. There were only those kind of stoves that needed wood to cook and heat our homes. My father would cut mesquite, but he didn't take part in clearing brush. He would plant seasonally for other people. Back then, there was no irrigation.

I was raised in Mission, Texas, and lived there until 1940, when I moved to Engelman Gardens to work. After being there for three years, I got married. I learned English at Roosevelt School in Mission, although I only went to school up to the sixth grade. After that, I worked to help my father provide for the family.

My first job was shoveling dirt and loading trucks with dirt that were being transported from La Joya to Mission. This was in 1930 or 1931. This dirt was to fill the ditches or holes that were by the side of the street. The streets in those days were very narrow, and there were holes or ditches on both sides of the street or how do they call them nowadays “highways.” After that I worked in a packing shed in Mission, receiving fruit from trucks so it could be packed.

In 1936 I left Mission and went to California. I was in the CC Camp [Civilian Conservation Corps Camp] for six months. It was a government program for people with limited resources. Only those people were accepted into the program; people who had the means to live better were not accepted. Some of the young men that were there would send money to their

homes. We earned about a dollar a day, or thirty dollars a month. They would take five dollars from our checks for our expenses at the camp, and the rest was sent home to our families. Sometimes the parents felt sorry for us



**Candelario Flores (sitting center) aboard a truck during his stay with the Civilian Conservation Corps in California, 1936. Courtesy of Candelario Flores.**

and they would send the money back in a money order. If the captain found out, he would send it back, because the men didn't have a need for money. That's what the CC Camp was about.

While we were there, sometimes they would take us to this place in Los Angeles where we'd pay twenty-five cents and we could serve ourselves all we wanted to eat. If we went in the morning, we could drink coffee and have five donuts. Five dollars was enough money for a month for those of us who didn't have habits like smoking and drinking.

In the CC Camp I belonged to the group that fought forest fires. Others would make way so the trucks could go up the mountain in case of fire. The trucks with water would go up the mountain. I was lucky I was in this group. I didn't get to fight fires. I was in Los Angeles, I think it was north Los Angeles. To tell you the truth, I was always lost. We were in Bear

Canyon, that's where our camp was. There were a lot of Latin men from all over, even from Laredo and the entire Valley.

When World War II started I was called to go, but I was working at Engelman Gardens and was granted permission twice not to go because I worked in agriculture. The manager of the operation got me the permission; his name was Bill Hughes. Here at Engelman there were two people that did not qualify to go to war, Mr. Geronimo Arce and myself.

I came to Elsa because they brought me to work. They knew my work, and they knew I unloaded trucks with wheelbarrows. I got here on October 6, 1940, on my birthday. Mr. Joe Foster brought me to work at Engelman Gardens. The work was hard, but I had to do it. The following year I was in charge of unloading trucks at the packing shed; they were trucks of fruit.



**Candelario "Lalo" Flores on an Engelman Gardens dock with a load of citrus, 1941. Courtesy of Candelario Flores.**

Then I was in charge of ripening the fruit. We would put the fresh fruit in a room, and we'd put in gas and heat to make the fruit ripen. I had to make sure the timing was right, or the fruit would spoil. When the fruit was ready for packing, we'd get it out of the room and put it on a conveyor belt that would take it into a big tub of water to be washed. After that they'd be put to dry. The fruit was then passed through a machine that waxed it and applied artificial coloring. I was in charge of all that after a little more than a year. My job was always strenuous. As manager in charge of the warehouse, I would work just like all the other workers. Sometimes I would work up to 18 hours a day.

At Engelman Gardens, we packed about 18 train cars per day. The product was usually oranges, grapefruit, or lemons. Anglo women packed the fruit because Mexican people didn't work there. The Mexicans would cover the boxes of packed produce with nails and some with wire hangers. In 1945 the Mexican women were the ones who checked the produce to see if they were good or not. They were called graders. The women were the ones who packed produce, not the men.

The men worked in jobs that were heavier, like unloading the fruit. When I got there in 1940, I was paid twenty cents an hour. They later gave me a raise to thirty cents an hour. I believe that is the most I earned and I worked really hard. I worked very hard and received days off from work. I would work seven days a week.

I bought a trailer house and was permitted to park it near the packing shed. But when the brutal freezes of 1948 or 1949 hit, and when the last big freeze in 1951, there was no more fruit to pack. After the freezes, we began to sell the machinery. I stayed with the Engleman Farms taking care of the machinery while it got sold. I knew what was being sold, and I also knew what would be taken from there.

When the company sold the machinery, I went with Clarence Johnstone to Montemorelos, Mexico, to sell machines to another company. I was Johnstone's interpreter and work companion. Clarence was the secretary of the company. We were good friends. I



**Candelario Flores and Clarence Johnstone dining in Montemorelos, Mexico. Courtesy of Candelario Flores.**

would talk to him in the little English that I knew, but he would still understand me.

Later I stayed on at Engelman Gardens as a mechanic until I retired in 1975. For two or three years I worked part time at the Cotton Gin in Elsa. I didn't want to continue working because my wife got sick. I continued with life with what Social Security paid me. I'm receiving Social Security only because there was nothing else, not even from Engelman. We didn't have insurance, so when our children got sick we had to pay from our pocket.

Mr. Engelman had died before I came along to work for their company. He came from the north and got married with his secretary. That is what Mr. Cramer would tell me about them. When Engelman died, his wife buried him in the yard in front of their beautiful home. Later the widow sold the ranch and dug out Engelman's body and took it to Edinburg.

I got married in 1943 to Hilaria Sandoval from Mission, Texas. We had four children. In reality we had five, but one of them died at birth. Candelario, Jr., Maria Estela (Cipriano), Criselda (Villalon), and Arturo. Our children were raised in Engelman Gardens, but never worked there. They attended school in Monte Alto and graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School. Our children picked cotton. They were good cotton

pickers. They could make thirty cents per pound or sometimes 40 cents if they worked real hard. All of the money went to their mother. I would tell them to do that because she was in charge of the house. Most of their money went to buying clothes for school.

During World War II, there were a lot of jobs available because the packing shed was in full force as was the juice plant. Because of that, there were many people working. I can't really say much about how the people were in the town because I never really left the *Ínglamo*. I only left when I would go to Mission to visit my parents and siblings. I knew very few people here.

My life was more difficult than my children's. My parents couldn't send us to school. I only got to the sixth grade and dropped out. At that time, it wasn't mandatory to go to school. One of my brothers got to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. My brothers and sisters only got to the eighth or ninth grade, but nobody graduated from high school. I wanted my children to continue with their education so that they wouldn't suffer like I did. I wanted them to have the advantage of having money and being able to buy good things in life. The raising of our children was the most important thing in our lives. We gave them everything we could afford. All the hard work I did was for my family. My wife was a dedicated housewife.

The youth of today have a lot of freedom. When I was growing up, the teachers used to punish us as they saw fit, and there was no one to tell them anything. And when you got home, if your father found out, you got another one. Today if a student does something bad, they call their parents and then the parents come and argue with the teachers, at least that's what I hear. They don't want anyone to touch their kids, so compared to the way it was, kids today have too much freedom. For the most part, I don't say that all kids are that way. This freedom has affected the way that these kids see their own reality, if they even have a sense of it. It affects them because they don't see each other with respect, because they are just, I don't know, just somewhat out of control. It was just very different before than the way it is now.

**Ida Montalvo grew up at Engleman Gardens, graduated from E-E H.S. in 1950, and today is among the most civically involved women in Edcouch.**

I was born on April 13, 1932, in Edcouch, Texas. My parents were Pedro Rivera and Juliana Farías, both from Elsa. When I was born, a *partera* named Ida Wise brought me into the world. We used to live on the outskirts of Edcouch. I was the oldest of 12 children, nine girls and three boys. My father used to call us the 12 Apostles. My mother's family is from San Isidro where the Farías Spanish land grants were. My father was born in Cuevitas in the Los Ebanos area, and they lived there until they moved here to farm. My father was born in 1897 and he began to farm here when he was 18. My mother was born in 1911.

I mostly grew up in the Engelman area because that's where we were living at the time. We had a nice



Ida Montalvo as a teenager in Elsa. Courtesy of Ida and Alex Montalvo.

big house with some other smaller houses around it and had other extended family members living there too. In the evenings we would gather in the patio, and my grandparents would tell us stories and we would play games. We would play a mix of Mexican and Anglo games. We would play *colores*, *la roña*, tag, and red rover. My mother's father was very into literature. He would always recite poems. There's one poem he used to tell us that I don't remember completely. All I remember is that he would say:

*“El amor y el interés  
Se vieron en el jardín un día  
Pudo mas el interés  
Que el amor que le tenía.”*

He also taught us to dance, and to this day, I love to dance. My other grandfather would tell us about cattle and farming, and we always had a great time.

I first went to school in Monte Alto when I was eight. I had to wait until my younger sister turned seven and could start school so that we could walk together to the bus stop on Highway 88 north of Elsa. The first day of school, they put us in a beginner's class, then in first grade, and finally, in second grade. They kept moving us up because we already knew English and many other things such as colors, the seasons, numbers, and the days of the week.

Monte Alto had a wonderful school, and we made many great friends who were Anglo. We didn't know the difference. We didn't realize that Mexican Americans weren't supposed to have Anglo friends. We came to Edcouch-Elsa for high school and there we had a rude awakening. That was my first real encounter with discrimination. The Anglos at Edcouch-Elsa wouldn't talk to our Anglo friends and the Mexicans wouldn't talk to us. Edcouch-Elsa was a completely different world.

Later on, I learned why Monte Alto and Edcouch-Elsa were so different. In Monte Alto, everyone went to school together. We had Anglo teachers, and Mexican children went to the same school

as Anglo children. In Edcouch-Elsa, there were separate schools for Mexican Americans and Anglos, and that's probably the seed that started this discrimination.

I graduated third in my class, the Class of 1950. The two people who ranked above me were Anglo girls. The valedictorian was Mary Ellen Kuehn and the salutatorian was Loyce Renfroe. I was the highest-ranking Mexican American in my class, but I wasn't recognized at graduation, though they did recognize the highest-ranking boy, Manuel Pérez. But that didn't matter to me. I enjoyed learning, so I gave school my best effort.



**Ida Rivera, Edcouch-Elsa High School senior photograph, 1950. Taken from Edcouch-Elsa High School, *La Avispa*.**

After high school, I took a few classes at Pan American. I had to do it at night because I was always working. I took some accounting courses, but not really with intent of finishing. When I married Alex, he encouraged me to take classes, so I took more classes, but finally I had to stop because I had three kids. I figured that by the time I finished I would be too old and too tired.

Right after I graduated from high school, I got a job working at Engelman Gardens. I worked at the mercantile store there and made 27 dollars a week, which was very good money. I did payroll, bookkeeping, profit and loss statements and other work like that at the store. Later I got a job with the gas company, but I only worked there for 2 1/2 years. After that I got a job at Central Power and Light. I remember that they paid Anglos more than they paid Mexican-Americans there.

I remember after they hired me, they hired a lady who didn't show up to work some days, or she gave

reasons why she was out. She was paid more than I was. One day I told my boss to find a replacement for me because I was quitting. He asked why, and I said because if I wasn't worth more to the company than a brand new employee who didn't show up to work much, then I didn't want to work there. After that I received a raise. It wasn't much, but enough to keep me there. After a few bad years, I began to enjoy my job. Before I retired, I became customer accounts supervisor, which actually meant that I was in charge of operations at the Elsa office, because the boss that was over us was in Edinburg and didn't come out here very often.

I retired in 1987, and since then I have spent my time with projects, grandchildren, and community activities. My husband and I were active in the volunteer fire department. He was a volunteer, and I was an auxiliary. In fact in 1979, I was state president of the auxiliary.

I think that my parents were good role models for me. I remember my mother telling me that when we come into the world, we could be either flowers, or weeds, and she said, "Don't be a weed."



**Photograph of the interior of the Engelman Gardens mercantile store, circa 1950. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.**



**Israel Garza Jr., a sophomore at Edcouch-Elsa High School, presents an essay he prepared for his World History class.**

Fred Vahl'sing was known as "The Henry Ford of Vegetables." The son of a farmer from Long Island, New York, the young Vahl'sing began his career at the age of 12 by asking his father if he could sell the family's vegetables. His father took the challenge, and Fred exceeded his father's expectations when he brought home \$12 instead of the \$10 his father expected. Thereafter, his father decided to have him sell all his crops, and this was the beginning of a very prolific career in produce for Fred Vahl'sing.

Vahl'sing's ambition would take him far from New York. He wanted to travel the country, so he took to the railroads and ended his travel in Houston, Texas. While working in a Houston-based real estate agency, he saw short films promoting an area called "the Magic Valley," a fast-growing place soon to be known as the "Rio Grande Valley."

Seeing an opportunity in South Texas, Vahl'sing packed his bags and came here. Upon his arrival he saw the abundance of rich soil, and the great potential for farming. He returned to New York to acquire capital to invest in South Texas. He earned money by working in a law office in New York City. As soon as he felt he had enough money, Vahl'sing sent his good friend Melvin Giese with \$10,000 and four pounds of broccoli to plant. In 1928, Giese would come directly to Elsa, a brand new town born the year before, when the Southern Pacific Railroad was built.

But one may ask, why broccoli? The truth is that Vahl'sing's New York upbringing taught him that many of the people living in Brooklyn and Long Island enjoyed broccoli in their cuisine. However, the extremely cold

weather prohibited the raising of broccoli in the Northeast, so during the winter there was a shortage. Elsa, Vahl'sing reasoned, would be the ideal place to grow broccoli precisely because of its warm climate. With this product he could feed the hungry markets in New York. Vahl'sing's broccoli operation during the early years ran so well that Vahl'sing had few competitors. During the Great Depression, the Vahl'sing shed would become a center of economic activity in the Valley. In fact, Guinness Book of World Records recognized the Vahl'sing shed in Elsa as the "World's Largest Packing Shed Under One Roof."

Though Fred Vahl'sing did not live in South Texas, many of his business associates did. Melvin Giese, who was the general manager of the produce operation, and fellow New Yorker, Frank A. Smith, who managed the daily operations, lived in Elsa. Giese would later become mayor of Elsa for many years as well as a cornerstone of the Anglo-American community in Elsa. Smith would also become an important community leader especially since he worked much more directly with Mexican-Americans. Along with thousands of workers, Giese and Smith would help Vahl'sing build a produce empire.

Through the 1930s, workers at the shed were paid about seven and one-half cents per hour. Thousands of people worked with the operation, either in the shed or out on the fields. Men, women, and many children worked there. One photograph of the shed taken in 1941 shows 40 trucks with an average of about 12 to 15 people in each truck. Vegetables were shipped from the shed to all parts of the country by railroad car. To keep the vegetables fresh, workers sprayed the cars with ice. Elsa had several ice plants and Vahl'sing even built a very large ice plant in Edinburg. It cost about \$105.00 to ice a car. They would send the railcars north, where they'd be iced down at locations such as Texarkana. During the War, Vahl'sing produce was even shipped to the European war front.

When I first began my report I thought that Fred Vahl'sing's packing shed operation was the reason Elsa was made. Now, however, I believe that people from Elsa actually made Vahl'sing into the wealthy man he became, just as much as he helped to make Elsa.



**Frank Smith was raised in Elsa and graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1957. His father was one of F.H. Vahl'sing's friends from New York who came to Elsa to manage and operate Vahl'sing's produce enterprise.**

My father, Frank A. Smith, first came to Texas in the late 1920s, from Long Island, New York, to work for F.H. Vahl'sing. My father became an orphan boy at a young age. After his parents died, when he was about eight, he ran away from home with the intention of looking for work. He came upon a farm near where Kennedy Airport is today that was owned by a German couple named the Schmidt family, and lived there until he was a grown man.

My father got acquainted with Fred H. Vahl'sing probably when he was in about the fourth grade. He first worked for Mr. Vahl'sing on the market in New York City. He became lifetime friends with Mr. Vahl'sing despite their 10-15 year age difference.

When my father came to Elsa, he met my mother, Olive Bingham from Choate, Texas, and later married her in Kennedy, Texas. They met in Edcouch late in the 1920s but returned to where my mother's family was to marry. My grandmother, Mrs. Bingham, first came to the Valley with her older brother, uncles, and aunts to farm. She was one of the very first to settle in Edcouch, Texas.

Shortly after my father got to Elsa, he began to run the Vahl'sing shed, which was the largest vegetable packing shed in the world. I was born in 1938, and I recall when I was growing up that I seldom saw my father because he was always working. He worked 20 hours a day. I never saw him when he left; I never saw him when he came home. He was pretty busy, especially during harvest season. He used to keep all his papers

in shingles, which he stuck in his overalls and just walked around with them. He took notes and stuff like that in those shingles. But none of those papers are around anymore.

He worked with his crew of several hundred men day and night, and he got to know everybody pretty well. He later sold most of them lots to build a house on, and probably financed a lot and a house for them, especially later on when he went into the lumber business. My father got along well with everyone. He even learned to speak Spanish fluently.

The packing shed used to ship dozens of freight cars that contained vegetables everyday. The Vahl'sing packing shed employed several thousand people. Mr.



**Frank A. Smith, Sr. (center), was a foreman for F.H. Vahl'sing, Inc., 1937. Courtesy of Frank A. Smith, Jr.**

Vahl'sing owned many sheds including a farm and a shed in Santa Rosa and a farm in Panchita Ranch, located north of La Villa. My father stopped working for Vahl'sing after twenty years, when the shed closed down.

The reason I think the Vahl'sing business closed down was due to the changing economy, the freezes of 1949 and 1951, and also because Vahl'sing went into the freezer plant business. First, he went into freezing vegetables, and he did that by using the large freezer

plant place north of Edinburg. But later he went into the plastic business. I believe that Mr. Vahl'sing saw how many bags he was buying to freeze the vegetables, and thought it would be a good idea to produce the plastic bags in Elsa at a plant. That's when he opened up the Texas Plastics business. My father built Texas Plastics, and he built all those plants that Vahl'sing wanted built. This was after Vahl'sing closed his shed. Anytime Vahl'sing wanted something built, my father built it for him.

My father built most of the houses here in Elsa during the early years. While he worked for Vahl'sing, he began his own lumber business by collecting all the crates that were thrown away at the shed. My father started to recycle all the crates and pallets that were being burned up by the Vahl'sing shed along with the wood thrown at his own shed, which he opened later, and started to make houses out of them. That's how he started in the lumber business.

My father made most of the houses built in the early days of Elsa. He sold them for about \$200 and up. He used to build hundreds per year, and then they'd move them out to all parts of the Valley. He financed most of them out of his pocket. He took anything as down payment, anything, sometimes two to three dollars, just enough to have people move into them. Then he'd go around and collect. I used to go around with him on the car on Sunday mornings, collecting. Collecting was easy when he caught them; he couldn't catch them all, of course. My father would collect two dollars, five dollars, whatever the people could pay him. I don't believe my father ever repossessed a house.

My father also owned three hardware stores. In the hardware store he would sell the bricks that were made in Mexico, in Rio Bravo. I remember he went over to Rio Bravo a lot to get his brick. I remember going over there and watching them dig the clay up, put straws in the clay, and put them in the kiln. Some of the Edcouch-Elsa schools were built out of my father's brick and so was what is now called the Golden Cue.

Dad opened his own packing shed in Elsa right after the War. He had the shed right across from the Rotel tomato processing plant, south of the railroad

tracks. The patent brand at that shed was called FAS vegetable brand. The shed's foundation, by the way, is still there. He also had sheds in Edcouch and Mercedes. He operated the Elsa shed for about 10-15 years.

My father applied for a patent on how to build a base for a packing shed. He had a pretty good idea. His



**Smith shed in the aftermath of Hurricane Beulah, 1967.**  
Courtesy of Frank A. Smith, Jr.

idea was to build the base of the shed with dirt while building the walls with concrete; then, on top of the dirt, he'd lay the concrete. You see the old way of building a shed was to do the base of total concrete, and he came with the idea of putting the concrete on top of the dirt and save a lot of money. He applied for a patent on that, but it fell by the wayside when he didn't pursue it.

He also went into the sulfur business with C.O. Foerster. I can't remember exactly when, but I think it was about the early to mid 1940s, during the Vahl'sing days. He went into the sulfur business because it was used to dust the vegetables to keep all the insects away, and he felt it was useful. I remember going to an area by the railroad tracks in Elsa and seeing piles of yellow sulfur stacked up there. Then sulfur began to be regulated and became harder to use, so my father and C.O. went into the uranium business. That was back in the early 1950s. They were in several adventures

together. They still have that stock in the business. I think that's the one that Willie Ruth Foerster is in charge of these days.

Growing up in Elsa, I have a lot of fond memories. I worked with Mr. Galloway on delivering milk, though what I loved most about that was that we could drink all the chocolate milk we wanted. I went to work at a restaurant my father built when I was about nine or 10 years old. I worked putting water out. I remember once getting a *cinco peso* tip from Billy Agnew. That was a lot of money back then. I had a great time with it. At that time, downtown Elsa was all filled up. There were restaurants, such as Zamora's Dry Goods, Zamora's Pharmacy, a 5-10 cent store, and a bunch of other places. I even remember Santa Claus flying into Elsa just about every year during the 1950s, maybe even in the 1940s too. He'd land right down on Main Street and would give things to the children. We also had a rodeo every Cinco de Mayo. Bill Foerster says we lost that rodeo to the Stockshow in Mercedes.

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**I even remember Santa Claus flying into Elsa just about every year during the 1950s, maybe even in the 1940s too.**

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I graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1957 and went to Rice on a football scholarship; it was Rice Institute at the time. I graduated from Rice in 1961, and the first job I had when I returned was working for my dad at his lumberyard for a year. Then I had an opportunity to go with Sinclair Oil Company, a wholesale oil and gas business. I bought that in 1962. I remember the day I bought it in 1962 because there was a terrible freeze in February; all the citrus froze the day I went into the oil business. I didn't pay much for the business, but I wound up giving it away to my cousin—just about; it's now J&E Oil and they have

about 150 stores. The old warehouse is still there. I sold it to my cousin because he bought from me, and I was glad to get out of that business, because I was trying to develop my car business. I was getting ready to move to McAllen with my car dealership.

I got into the automobile business on June 20, 1966. C.O. Foerster came into my office in Elsa one day to show me a little 1964 Datsun pickup he had just bought. He had bought one of the first imported cars in the Valley in Santa Rosa, I believe, and he handed me a brochure of a Toyota. It was the first time I had ever heard of or seen a Toyota. C.O. wanted to know if I wanted to be a dealer. He told me I should take it on. I didn't show much interest in it, but C.O. got on the phone and called a guy in Houston to tell him he had a prospect in the Valley for a Toyota dealership. I didn't think much of it, but a couple of weeks later the guy from Houston came down and spent a whole week with me trying to convince me to take it on because everybody in McAllen and Harlingen had turned it down. We drove the car he brought, took it to Morrison's to check it out to see if he could find anything wrong with it. C.O. and I were convinced it was a good car, and we got into it.

We bought four cars the first year, and showed them next to the Sinclair station in downtown Elsa, across from H.E.B. It took us a whole year just to sell the first one, and even then I practically had to give it away. My father-in-law, W.B. Garrett, who was a deputy sheriff, felt sorry for me one Christmas and gave me a little bit of money for that first car. But Mrs. Fulfer, a teacher in Elsa, actually bought the first one; in fact, it's that red car you see out in the show room (in the lobby of the McAllen dealership). We survived during those lean years because my wife Joyce was teaching there in the Edcouch-Elsa schools.

By the way, you can find the story of the Smith and Bingham families in the book my mother Minta Olive Bingham Smith wrote, *The Bingham and Smith Story*. In fact, my mother wouldn't die until the book was printed. My mother just recently died. My father died of cancer on July 13, 1969.

**Luisa Garza, a 101-year-old Elsa resident, was interviewed at the Con Cariño Adult Day Care Center in Elsa, Texas, by Daniela Guardiola and Cindy Lee Perez, students in Delia Perez's sophomore World History class at Edcouch-Elsa High School.**



**Luisa Garza at the Con Cariño Adult Day Care Center, 1998.**

My name is Luisa Garza. I am 101 years old. Don't even ask me when I was born because I can't remember. You can tell me something and if I turn around, I forget everything. I don't have my faculties like I did before.

I have lived in Rio Grande City, Beeville, Alice, Mercedes, Chicago, and here in Elsa, Texas. All the towns I lived in, I have worked in. I worked at sewing. I would make dresses for brides and ladies. Now I can't. I can't do it. There were only three in my family, one son and two daughters. The oldest doesn't know anything. She is like me. She can't walk, she doesn't come often to see me at my house. But we take care of ourselves. I learned that from my father and my mother. Because we were many and only one of my parents was the worker, that was my father, my mother could not work because she had so many in the family to take care of. How was she supposed to work?

We were very poor. I'm still poor. Just imagine. We were five boys and seven girls for one worker. How do you think he raised us? I've always been poor. My parents, Bernabé Fuentes and Dionicia Hernández, were always poor. And we were many. The only schooling we got was in the fields. That was the school that our parents made us go to. We cut cane, corn, we fished, we did everything ourselves. That was the school where I learned. When I was growing up, things that we have today didn't even exist. There were no doctors, there were no priests, and there was no church. There was nothing. It was all work.

I had six children, three lived, three died. My husband worked when he felt like it. He was lazy when it came to work. When I had just had my last girl, my husband went to Mexico with his cousin, and he never returned. The kids were very young when my husband left me. He left me when I was still very innocent. He never returned, and I struggled to finish raising my children. I haven't needed a man since my husband left. Besides, nowadays there are no real men left.

In those days, when the cotton season was over, the owners did not want old cotton sacks that were torn. The torn ones they burned. I would follow the truck and take the torn sacks home and sew them up and paint them and make clothes for my children. I would go and put little pieces of a plant in the water with the sacks to color them. You put the sacks in a tub of water with the plants, and it would color them.

I raised my children in La Villa. Lots of people there knew I did a lot of things. Whatever was asked of me I did. I made tamales, *empanadas*, and tortillas, and my youngest child would go out on the streets and sell, so that I could feed them and dress them. There in La Villa, I had a lot of female friends that helped me support my family. And then my children got married, and I went back to work in the packing shed. Then my son, the only one I have, moved my house from La Villa to Elsa, so I could be close to work.

I never went anywhere. I didn't have time to go out or have friends. How could I? If sometimes I went out with a friend, I would look for something for my daughters, so they could eat and dress. I was never a crazy woman. There were crazy women, but I wasn't one of them. I never left my children alone so I could be in the streets. Now that I'm old, I'm finally getting money. And now I'm waiting for some men to fix my house, because my house is too broken down. I have suffered too much.

I worked in Chicago for many years, but I also worked in the fields for many more years. I worked at the Vahl'sing packing shed when it was just starting. We started when it was just a canvas tent. I worked there for years. Then they brought all the machines. From there on, they kept bringing machines everyday

and putting canvas on top. So when it rained, we worked under the canvas.

One time the Border Patrol came to the Vahl'sing shed and took most of the workers. Only four of us were left. All the rest were sent back to Mexico because they were from Mexico. But in the



The Vahl'sing shed when Luisa Garza began to work there, and before it was destroyed by a hurricane in 1933.

Courtesy of Frank A. Smith, Jr.

morning they had all returned. The Border Patrol would just leave them there on the bridge on the other side. But they just crossed over.

I stopped working at the shed because we were told that it was going to close down. The reason that the shed closed was because the main owner died. He left it with another man, and he let it go. He didn't pay, and then he began to allow this and that to happen and the shed finally closed. When the shed closed, the company sold all the machines and the tools to Mexico. We suffered because we couldn't earn money. I cried when I heard the packing shed was going to close. I cried, because I did not know what we were going to do.

One of the owners of the shed was a very good man. He is the one who got me my Social Security number. But then one day a woman said they didn't need any more employees. And they told me there was no work. And then I asked the man, "What am I going to do? I don't have a husband that can help me. If there is no work, what am I going to do?" And they said they couldn't give me a job because I was too old. I said,

"Okay, so what am I to do? I don't know any other jobs, just the fields. I can't go to the office and ask for a job because I'm not smart." That's what I thought.

They kept telling me I was too old. But I could still peel tomatoes and put them in buckets. You had to do five buckets in about an hour, but I would fill five buckets in a half-hour. I told the man, "You can't find someone to fill five buckets and you want to let me go. I can fill the buckets." He said, "No Luisa, it's the law. It is the law and you're too old, and if you hurt yourself we will have to pay for everything." He was the one who got me my Social Security number.

I had to eat and dress. I had to pay my bills, but what was I to do? And then a man said I had to bring three papers, the Social Security number, registration, and birth record. All I wanted was to get a job. Well, the next month the old man brought me a check. And he said, "With this check you won't have to work." I said, "Yes but my bills are many. And so he paid for the water. And he asked "Do you eat well?" and I said yes. It's because of that man that I get checks.

I haven't bothered much with asking for help, and a few times he came to my house to give me a check and some papers. And from there I gave thanks to God, because I didn't know what was best. If I knew how to read, that would be a different thing, but people like me don't know.

My life has been a lot of work. I thank God because I have never been sick. I was never sick. Even when it was cold outside, I would be in the fields. Everyone would come in if it rained. I would stay out there. I would cover myself with a piece of plastic and continue working. There are a lot of people here who know my life and how I raised my children. And I thank God that my daughters didn't become bad. No, they didn't leave me. I took care of them with my sweat and theirs as well. How did I do it? Well, by working. I worked by ironing clothes, by making tortillas and *tamales*; I made them all. I was a woman who worked hard to earn my pennies. Each month I made two or three dollars from tortillas and *empanadas*. But it was something for me so I could feed my children.



**Neal Galloway's parents lived in the area before this land became Elsa. Born in 1926, Mr. Galloway and the town of Elsa have shared each other's lives. "I've had a**

**long love affair with this community," said Mr. Galloway in a moment of emotional reflection. In many ways, the life of Elsa is the life of Neal Galloway. Edcouch-Elsa High School sophomore Israel Garza interviewed Mr. Galloway last November.**

In 1919 my grandfather came to the Valley for the first time with his son, David, who was a land salesman. Then in early 1920 he sent his delegation of four sons, one daughter, and her husband to farm the land they had bought. My parents were John Frank Galloway and his wife, Ruth Marie Carlson. My father was born in Illinois and my mother was from Kansas. They came to South Texas on about the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 1925, already married. My parents had three children; I was the eldest. I was born on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of September 1926, in Weslaco, Texas. My brother, who was three years my junior, and my sister, who was five years younger than my brother, are both deceased.

I have a picture taken in 1913 of my mother's family, the Carlsons. My mother, Ruth Marie, is the teenage girl in this picture; she was 13 and is sitting on the bottom right, next to her mother, Marie Carlson. My grandfather, Carl Oscar Carlson, is the man with the beard in bottom middle; the eldest is my aunt Sigred Lilljestrang; at the top left is the oldest living brother, Adolph Carlson, who still lives in our community; then towards his left is his brother, Emanuel Carlson, then Joseph Carlson, David Carlson, Philip Carlson, and the youngest in the family here is Amos. There were three other children who did not live to be adults.

Some of my first memories are helped by stories that my parents told me when I was growing up, and

from what I heard from other people. When my parents came here, it wasn't a town at all. I remember Elsa when there were only seven or eight houses. I do remember the people who lived close by when I was young, the people we went to church with, the people that my mother and father associated with. Some of the old families that were here were the Fry family and the Harper family. I remember our neighbor to the east, Mr. O.V. Gingrass, and his wife, Minnie. They had come down here from Kansas in the early '20s, and theirs was one of the demonstration homes sponsored by The American Land Company in Mercedes. The Land Company would build demonstration homes where they would bring the potential land purchasers out to see what they could do on this land. In between my house and the Fry home, there were fields and an irrigation canal. There was a small cotton gin called the Valley Gin Company, I believe. There was a business called George's store, which Elsie George ran. That store was located where the Elsa Fire Department is now. Elsie George, by the way, was the woman after whom the town was named.

When I was growing up, Elsa was growing too. By 1930, there were about 25 houses that I remember.



**Carlson Family Portrait referred to by Mr. Galloway, 1913. Courtesy of Neal Galloway.**



**Galloway Dairy milk bottle lid. Courtesy of Neal Galloway.**

As soon as I was old enough to carry a milk bottle, at about age four or five, I started delivering milk to these houses. I would go with my father down these dirt roads, and run to the doorsteps to leave the milk.

I started school at the Edcouch Elementary School and finished Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1943. I went to Texas

A&M University in 1943, spent a year there and then joined the Navy. While I was in the Navy, I spent some time at Oklahoma A&M, which is today Oklahoma State University. After the service I went back to Texas A&M and finished my Bachelor of Science degree in 1948.

Fred Vahl'sing, as I remember it or as I was told by my parents, came to Elsa when they brought the railroad in 1928. This community was hardly a community when he first came. We were just beginning. I can still remember when I was in school in 1940, after the census time. There was a sign on the east side of Elsa that said, "Elsa, Population 1,006." And on the other side, where Little Caesars is now located, was a sign that read, "Edcouch, Population 2,930." So, Edcouch was a much larger community at that time, but half the people who lived in Edcouch worked in Elsa. Everybody who worked in Elsa either worked in their own business or worked for Vahl'sing. Engelman Gardens was four miles out northwest, and they had a big headquarters, a commissary, a labor camp, and everything. Those people from out there in Engelman Gardens, a lot of times they'd come to Elsa, maybe once a month. They had everything they needed out there, but it was just so far out there. So everybody had a job—in this area, anyway.

The vegetable business really began when Vahl'sing came in and sent in the cabbage seed. Mr. Vahl'sing was a very innovative man, and fortunately he chose a very intelligent man to run his business down

here. He sent Melvin Giese, an associate of his from New York, with 200 lbs. of cabbage seed and told him to get it planted, grown, and shipped to New York as soon as he could. Melvin Giese came into our community alone, contacted all the farmers, and got them to grow cabbage for him on a share contract. He would furnish the seed for a price or he would furnish the seed for the first ton of cabbage that was harvested. My father, and probably my uncle, were some of these first growers. Most of the people that were in this local community who had land available, planted cabbage for him as a form of sharecropping. This was an early form of vertical integration, or an industry's attempt to control a market. It put money not only in Mr. Vahl'sing's pockets, but also in the farmers who grew it and in the community.

My dad grew lots of vegetables for him. We hauled cold vegetables away from that packing shed and fed our cattle with them. My father and I, and all of us really, were at the packing shed on a daily basis when it was operating.

The Vahl'sing shed was the center of community life. Levi Matthews had his hamburger stand right south of the shed. All he served was coffee, milk, Coca-Colas, and hamburgers. If you'd come over and ask for a



**Edcouch-Elsa class of 1943. Courtesy of Neal Galloway.**

“lonche”, you’d get a hamburger. There were no French fries offered. All you’d get was a great big hamburger for a dime and a pint of milk for a nickel. Matthews would make as many as 150 hamburgers and had them stacked up on the stove, and when the Vahl’sing workers came over during their break, why, all the hamburgers would be gone. Doña Sixta Tijerina, who came to Elsa in the mid ‘30s, set up this beer joint and restaurant on the north side of the tracks. She operated there for years and had constant business, especially when the shed was in season.

One of my first recollections as a child was being in the field when people would come and contract to plant the cabbage plant in the row. See, originally, all the cabbage was planted in seedbeds, and then it was all transplanted by hand. The American Land Company had already set up the irrigation system before they began to sell the land around 1910, I believe. It was all

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**“. . .this is when we had the first broccoll in the Valley. It was shipped from the packing shed in Elsa. It was probably part of the first broccoll in the country. . .”**

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earthen canals, and it was laid out to serve up to Mile 18 on the basis of the fact that that’s where the Spanish king had given water rights, from the river up 18 miles from it. When they formed these irrigation districts, they went to the state government and got their water rights doubled.

We got started right in the beginning of the Great Depression, three or four years before it actually hit this part of the country. Even though the stock market crashed in ‘29, it didn’t affect us until 1932-33. By then though, Elsa was beginning to mushroom. Sometime in the early 1930s, maybe the late 1920s, Mr.

Vahl’sing got so many pounds of broccoli seed from the southern part of Italy. He sent it to Melvin Giese in Elsa, and told him to plant it, but not to let anyone get a hold of it because no one else had it, and he wanted to corner the market. And this is when we had the first broccoli in the Valley. It was shipped from the packing shed in Elsa. It was probably part of the first broccoli in the country; at least it was in the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Vahl’sing’s shed foreman, Frank Smith Sr., even



**Workers unloading trucks into freight cars to ship produce from the F.H. Vahl’sing packing shed to points throughout the United States.**

gave my dad a pinch of the seeds, and my dad planted them in our home garden.

In the 1930s crop-dusting was hardly done. A lot of the poisoning was done with burlap sacks. People would carry these burlap sacks and, riding a mule, would shake the poison on the crops. Then we got much advanced and got a Johnson duster; they’d put dust in a hopper, drop it into the fan and it would spread out into pipes that would carry it out and put it over the vegetables. One thing about using dust is that you needed dew to cling to the plants, so we had to do this in the early morning hours after the dew had fallen. It was a very exact art.

Up until Vahl’sing opened up and started operating, there were very few Mexican-American families here, because most of the northerners did most

of their own work. This was an Anglo community until the shed started functioning and attracted people in with \$.75 a day wages. By 1941, the packing shed was a quarter of a mile long. People from everywhere started coming since there was no difficulty in people crossing the river to come and work over here. There were no vegetable tractors; it was all done with horse, mule, or hand labor. But when you've got a lot of people working like ants out here, all of a sudden you can consolidate and ship 50 rail cars a night like they used to do here in their peak time. It was the largest shipping point in the world; we shipped more vegetables than anyone did in the Valley.

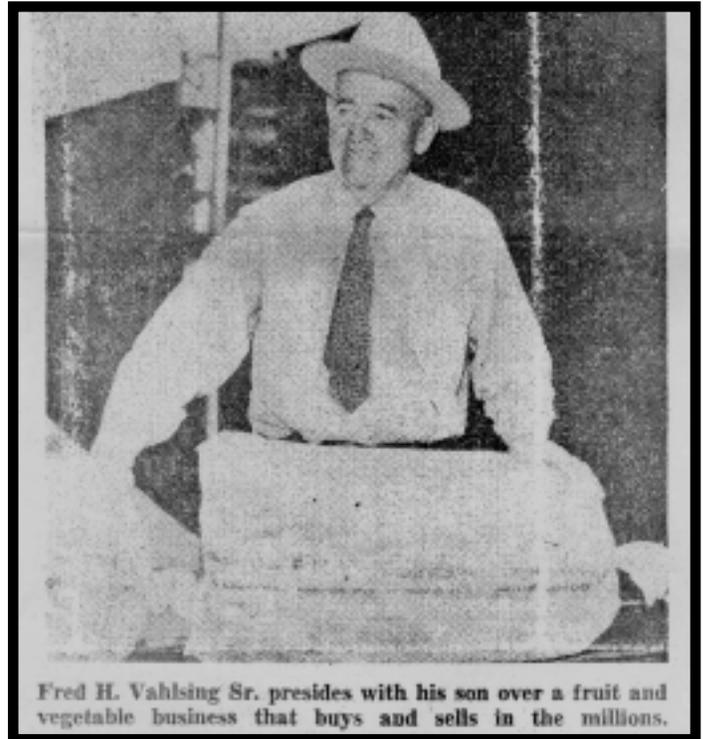
Then, Frank Smith was sent to run the packing shed. Melvin Giese, as General Manager of Vahl'sing's Texas enterprise, was Frank Smith's immediate boss. Under Smith's leadership, this place was really going. Mr. Giese was a terrific manager and Mr. Vahl'sing was a terrific salesperson, and they organized and got good people in here. Mr. Vahl'sing became Mr. Wealthy; he had a large operation in California where he sent Giese's brother Johnny to run that operation, and he had an operation in Idaho growing potatoes, and a tomato-growing group of people in Yoakum, Texas. Vahl'sing

also had a freezer plant in Monte Alto. He ran the plastics plant in Elsa, so he'd have bags for his freezer plant and his other operations. He had a vertical integration type of monopoly.

The Vahl'sing Company was in its heyday until the freeze of 1951. That really took a lot out of this community. We had a heavy freeze in 1949 that destroyed a lot of the citrus, and the



**Melvin Giese, general manager of the F.H. Vahl'sing packing shed and longtime mayor of Elsa. Courtesy of William Foerster and Ezequiel Granado.**



**Fred Vahl'sing Sr. featured in the *New York World Telegram*, July 27, 1962. Courtesy of William E. Foerster.**

farmers had a big loss. Then, in 1951, we had a terrific freeze that killed almost all of the citrus out there; it nearly put Engelman Gardens out of business. That was followed by the drought of the early 1950s. There was no water in the Rio Grande River, so we had no irrigation water for two years. During those two years, they moved vegetable growing from this community to Progreso and all the way up the river on to Rio Grande City because they could get well water in those areas. We didn't have any here because the water carried a high salt content and has soluble boron in it, which causes the soil to be hard and impermeable. Because of the drought and the freeze, the vegetable business moved away from this area to places that could consistently have water. Vahl'sing first closed down during that period of time. He also had some problems with his management employees here; there was a certain perception of thievery. He fired them and closed the plant. Mr. Giese became ill and died in the late 1950s.

**“Fred Vahl’sing went from a 10-year-old kid peddling produce on the street to owning a produce empire. He got so big that he could break the market in New York.”**

Fred Vahl’sing went from a 10-year-old kid peddling produce on the street to owning a produce empire. He got so big that he could break the market in New York. You’d have a situation where a commodity was in short supply, and he did this more than once. He’d have them ship a boat of cabbage, for instance, from a boatload of cabbage from South America or from Holland, and ship it to New York City and unload it. He’d put so much cabbage on the market in New York City that he would break the price maybe from \$7 a crate down to \$2 a crate. And he’d say he did this to protect his customers from too much cost, and because he made a lot of money doing it. Sometimes he put his competitors out of business. It was like Wal-Mart coming in. And that’s the way he operated. He was an innovative, tough, and brilliant man. And he looked



Temple Lumber Company in Elsa, circa 1950. Courtesy of Clarence Johnstone.

for and got smart people to work for him. He got people like Frank Smith, gave them an opportunity, and told them, “Go!”

The old man flew an airplane; first he had a single engine crop plane that he flew, and he would go from place to place. Often times he traveled alone. In fact, he died at one of his farms in Maine; he had flown up there to check things out, and they found him dead in a farmhouse. I think he was 87. I think he died of a stroke, but I do not know for sure.

His kids grew up in New Jersey. His daughter Margaret came to Elsa and worked in the Texas Plastics. Fred, Jr. came down also, there was tragedy in that Fred, Jr. He did not have the integrity and the honor that his father had. Vahl’sing was a man whose word was his bond. He traded hard, and once he traded, win or lose, he never welched, and he wouldn’t let you welch; a deal was a deal with Mr. Vahl’sing. He was honest.

Vahl’sing was not only a dreamer, he was a doer. He was a guy who would dream about something and then figured out how to do it. If something hit him that he thought was good, he worked around and figured how to get it done. He never kept hours or time; he just worked at it until he got it going.

He always chose somebody that was smart to get out and get after it; he never did it himself. He told them what he wanted, and they did it. He brought C. O. Foerster to Elsa. C.O. did a lot of work for him. He came here as a fertilizer specialist for Mr. Vahl’sing, and helped run his fertilizer plant on the east side of the packing shed. One of the first things that happened when Elsa started was that Temple Lumber Company came in and set up a lumberyard. It was all because it was a new town and because of Vahl’sing, and all that sort of thing. Everything stemmed from that one character coming in here and plunging [in]. And that’s what he did—he plunged. He bet his socks on it, and that’s when he began to make money. He had some money that he had earned in New York, but when he plunged here in Texas, that’s when he exploded. He made his moves and he just kept going. I think he really felt connected to Elsa.

**Jorge Lozano, a junior at Edcouch-Elsa High School, studied the Vahl'sing workers reunion the Project organized last December and prepared these remarks.**

On December 11, 1997, over 30 people in our community met at La Hacienda Restaurant in Elsa to take part in the historic Vahl'sing Reunion. Throughout the meeting and luncheon, some of the older members of the Delta Area recalled many interesting memories of working together, not only inside the F.H. Vahl'sing packing shed, but in the fields as well. People reunited with old friends, some of whom they had not seen in years, and shared smiles, hugs, and tears.

In attendance was Agustín Saucedá, an 85-year-old member of our community. It was a very special meeting for him, and certainly one of his most memorable. This would be Mr. Saucedá's last public appearance.



**Agustín Saucedá and Israel Cavazos at the Vahl'sing Workers Reunion, December 1997.**

Another special member of the community in attendance was Mr. José Isabel Gutiérrez. Don Isabel claims he was one of the first pioneers of Edcouch-Elsa, "*Yo fui el pionero de Elsa,*" (I was a pioneer of Elsa) he stated. The 97 year-old takes much pride in his hometown. Every morning he rises and prepares for his daily trip to "*El Blubone,*" (The Bluebonnet Adult

Day Care Center) as he calls it. At the adult day care center, Don Isabel gathers with his friends to exchange stories of the past. His friends say that Don Isabel is the most popular amongst them.

Arcadio Padilla, a 95-year-old member of our community, made many interesting comments that caught

not only my attention but also the attention of everyone there. For example, he told of having two birthdays, one in Mexico and one in the United States. He stated, "*Yo nací en México en 1903, pero aquí dicen que nací en 1904.*" (I was born in Mexico in 1903 but here in the US they say I was born in 1904.) Another story he told had to do with a certain trip to the bakery. Mr. Padilla happened to go into a bakery and asked for a *chiche*, (referring to a specific piece of sweet bread called *pecho*, which translates to "breast"). The people in attendance found his story very amusing and hilarious.

Adan Escamilla then followed with another boisterously entertaining story. His family sold fresh bread to the Vahl'sing workers daily. One afternoon, he was sent to deliver the bread, by foot, when he was attacked by birds. After the attack was over and done with, Mr. Escamilla discovered bird droppings all over the bread. He returned home where he was later told to clean it off and go back to the packing shed. The men would enjoy that same sweet bread that day.

This gathering's purpose was twofold: first, to reunite friends, some of whom hadn't seen each other in many years; secondly, to thank these pioneering citizens for their lifetime of hard work and dedication to the communities of Edcouch and Elsa. On behalf of the Llano Grande Research Class, we would like to thank everyone who attended the Vahl'sing Reunion for making the gathering memorable for all.



**Pedro Salinas pointing at 1937 photograph displayed during the Vahl'sing Reunion. Courtesy of Julie Canniff.**



**José Tamez was born in Elsa, before Elsa was even a town. He worked at the Vahl'sing shed, he drove trucks, and he raised a family in Elsa. He shares numerous stories with us.**

My name is José Tamez. I was born in 1924 in Elsa, before it was Elsa, and I've lived in this area all my life. My parents, Nicolás Tamez and Petra Serna, came from Nuevo León. My father was born in 1897, and my mother in 1912, I believe. My parents used to tell me that I was born next to a labor camp that was next to where the Cáceres store used to be on 9<sup>th</sup> Street. It was a camp for people who grubbed and cleared the lands. Those were transient people who moved from place to place in search of work. From there we went to La Blanca, where I was raised. We came to Elsa when I was a teenager.

During that time, we didn't have the opportunities people have today. Today most children have a chance to go to school, but I recall when things were different. When I began going to school, I had to walk two miles to catch the bus and two miles back. One day my father asked his boss if he could use his influence to get the school to bring the bus closer to the ranch where we lived. And I wasn't the only kid. There were other children from the ranch who also went to school. When the weather was good, walking the two miles was not a problem, but during bad weather, if it rained, or if it was cold, well we didn't have the clothes to wear. We didn't even have shoes.

When my father asked his boss for that favor, I remember the man told my father that it was not educated people that were needed in the United States. He needed people who would grow up strong enough to work the fields. What hope were we to have that we'd be given a chance?

I've never forgotten the name of that boss. His name was Sherwood. I'll never forget that experience. And like that boss, there were many others. They weren't interested in having us Mexicans learn a thing or two. If we went to school, then they wouldn't have any workers. That's the way it was.

The Vahl'sing shed was already here when we came from La Blanca. My mother and I came to work in the packing shed, and we earned seven cents an hour then. Between the two of us, we made \$1.40 per day, and that was a lot of money in those days. That was during the 1930s. There was plenty of work here. This little town grew and grew because of the Vahl'sing shed. I recall that that shed was called the largest packing shed in the world at that time. It was about a quarter of a mile long. It operated 24 hours and employed thousands of people.

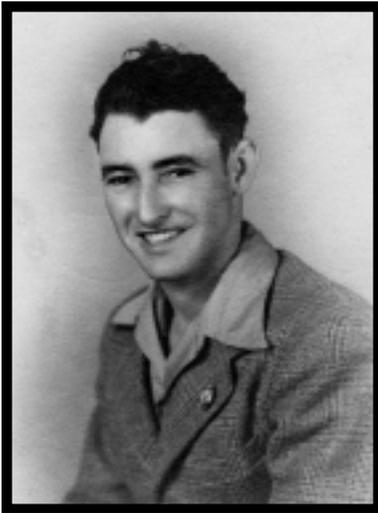
I began working with Vahl'sing when I was 12. My mother and I worked in the fields because my father was unable to work due to an accident. Because of that, I was given a chance to drive trucks to take the produce to the shed. I started driving trucks when I was 14 and spent 12 years driving trucks. I drove trucks filled with vegetable from the fields to the shed. After I left the vegetables at the shed, they were washed and packed to be shipped by train.

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**“ . . .the man told my father that it was not educated people that were needed in the United States. He needed people who would grow up strong enough to work the fields.”**

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After the vegetables were washed, they were packed in boxes. There were no cardboard boxes, so vegetables were packaged in baskets, or wooden boxes called wirebounds. First they packed a layer of vegetables, then a layer of ice, then another layer of vegetables, and another



José Tamez in 1945. Courtesy of José and Timotea Tamez.

of ice until the box was full. The ice came from Edinburg, where the ice plant was.

The machines from the plant were extremely noisy, and if you were not used to the noise, it would keep you awake all night. But once you got used to the noise, it didn't bother you. I think that the water for the ice probably came from the canals. I don't remember ever getting sick because of the

water. I don't think that the water was treated. It must have been a little bit contaminated, but we would just go get a bucket of water to drink and never worry about getting sick. I don't think I ever heard of anyone getting sick because of the water.

I think the shed closed because there were some bad deals going on with some of the employees. I remember Johnny Stokes, the man who paid us every Saturday, had your pay predetermined. He told you how much you worked and how much you earned. You were paid in cash. There were no checks, nor any other ways to keep track of how much you worked, so you could not prove that you were underpaid. What little you earned you were paid in cash. The money was kept in sacks, and they never worried about thieves because Mexicans were more humble back then, and besides, we weren't thieves.

The white people kept the Mexicans humble. If a white employer told you that you weren't doing your work, you couldn't talk back because he would fire you. You were afraid to talk back because if you were fired, it was very difficult to find another job, so the fieldman would scold you, and you would take it because if you didn't work, then you didn't eat. When we worked in the field there were

men who watched over us, and if we weren't doing our work right, they sent us home.

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**"You were afraid to talk back because if you were fired, it was very difficult to find another job, so the fieldman would scold you, and you would take it because if you didn't work, then you didn't eat."**

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Once there was an incident where one of the fieldmen told my father that we were going to pick 300 acres of cabbage in Raymondville. So we went to Raymondville and loaded our trucks. Then some other trucks that we did not recognize showed up, and we were told to load those too. We loaded those trucks and went back to the shed to unload. We never saw those other trucks arrive at the shed to unload, only ours.

In the late 1940s, Vahl'sing came down and fired many of the people there, but it still did not save his business because by the early 1950s, the packing shed operation had pretty much come to an end.



**E z e q u i e l Granado knew F.H. Vahl’sing when he was but a little boy, and Mr. Vahl’sing knew him. “He called me Zeke,” Mr. Granado recalls of his friendly run-ins with Vahl’sing. Mr. Granado was raised in Elsa but moved to Edinburg when he took a job at the Vahl’sing ice plant at the famous “La Hielera.”**

I was born in Baytown, Texas, in 1927 and moved to Elsa in 1928. I lived in Elsa until 1958 when I moved to Edinburg and have lived here since. My father was Albino Granado and mother Sixta Padilla Granado; she was the sister of Arcadio Padilla, who is in his 90s and still lives in Elsa. Both my parents were born in Mexico, Dad in Mexico City, and Mom in Monterrey. They both came to this country as youngsters.

My father’s dad got killed in Mexico City when my father was very young. My grandmother then married another fellow. After a while, she came north and made arrangements to cross through Brownsville. Soon after, she went to see an acquaintance in Houston, but she couldn’t take my dad along, so she left him in East Donna with some kinfolk of her friend from Houston. My grandmother promised to come back for him, but other things happened before she did.

The story goes that my father stayed with a man who beat him whenever my father did something wrong. My father was only eight years old. One day when the man sent my dad on an errand to get some smoking tobacco, my father decided not to come back. He actually was going to get the tobacco but he first went to some sort of carnival that was in town. Well, he stayed at the carnival too late,

and when he realized it was pretty late, he decided he wouldn’t return home. Going back home would mean getting beat up pretty badly, of course. So my dad went into the brush instead.

While wandering in the brush, he was found by two Texas Rangers. They started asking him questions and wanted to take him back to where he belonged. He said he didn’t want to go back. So one of the Rangers, a fellow named Robert Puckett, asked him, “So what do you want to do?” “I don’t know,” my dad said. So Ranger Puckett said, “Well, if you don’t want to go back home to where you belong, if you ever find your way back, ¿Te quieres ir conmigo?” My dad said, “Yes!” So my father went with Mr. Puckett to his ranch out by Red Gate. Thereafter, the Pucketts raised my father, first in Red Gate, then in the Brownsville area.

Dad left the Brownsville area when he was about 21 or 22. He married my mother about that time, and they moved to Baytown because some kinfolk from Baytown helped my father get a job with Humble Oil Refinery, which later became Exxon. I was born there in ’27, but my mother didn’t like that area, so they came back to Elsa in ’28.

On September 11, 1933, one of the worst storms we’ve ever seen hit the Valley. Dad had bought a piece of a building from Mrs. Marciana Zavala’s parents and attached it to another building Dad had started to build. Our house was in the area north of the railroad tracks where the Mexican people lived, and it would be a place where many people would stay that night in September. When the storm came, we were out by Mile 17½ picking cotton that had been left over. We



**Ezequiel Granado in the Vahl’sing shed in 1947. A Russell Lee photograph from, “Out of the Forties.”**

noticed some dark clouds coming but had no idea what was happening. You know there was no media for us in those days, so we had no forewarning.

All of a sudden the storm was here. The Cardozas, the Padillas, and I don't remember who else, but it was quite a few people, they all came to the house that night to seek refuge from the terrible storm. I remember Dad spent all night throwing wires and driving stakes in the ground to keep our house and some of the neighboring houses down.

And across the street Mr. Tomás Castillo, who had a real nice house, took in probably the whole town of Elsa, or at least the Mexican people who didn't trust that their houses would stay up. On the south side of town, of course, the Anglo people stayed in their houses because many of them had sturdier houses than what we had. Our houses, which were made by Frank Smith, well some were sturdy; even so, many of them just crumbled down during that storm. At the Castillo house some people were taking care of the wounded because some people had head injuries, others had broken legs, and things of that sort. That hurricane was terrible, even bigger and worse than Beulah.

Growing up in Elsa in the 1930s, I always went to school. In fact, I don't even remember when I learned English. I've always known it, since I can remember. I always practiced it. Where I was, there was always English. When I was in school I used English, when I went into the service I used English, and when I was working I had to deal with Anglo people. I went to business school in Weslaco for two years under the GI Bill, got my certificate in 24 months, and of course used English throughout there; this was about '50 or '52. School was in the morning from 7:30 to 12:00 p.m.

and in the afternoon we'd work. A bunch of us would drive from Elsa to Weslaco everyday. It was Pablo Ramírez the barber, Adan Pérez, Pedro Salinas, another barber, and myself. We used to drive in a Model A car that I think Pablo had. It was about a 1929 or 1930 model.

When I came out of the service in 1947, I drove trucks for Marvin Nattinger who had contracts with the F.H. Vahlsing packing shed and with the Bell Brothers' cotton gin in La Villa. I also drove a truck for Charlie Johnston who is from the Panchita Ranch Johnstons from La Villa. In 1948, I started working with Juan Morón, the old man Juan Morón, who had brand new '48 trucks. I hauled cottonseed for him to the Stokes Gin there in Edcouch; old man Apolonio Gutiérrez ran that John Stokes gin. I also worked in the scale house of the gin. Me and Obe Leal, who I played a lot of baseball with, and Oscar Cardoza, who drives a bus for the school district these days, and a bunch of other guys, we used to work the gins. We did that during the cotton season. During the vegetable season, most of the people who worked in cotton then moved on to work for Vahlsing, myself included.

During the off-season we loved to play baseball. I used to love to travel around the Valley to play ball. We



La Hielera at its height in Edinburg, Texas. Courtesy of Ezequiel Granado.

used to go to Alice and all the way south into Mexico. We had a team in Elsa called *The Merchants*. I played along with Obe Leal and a bunch of other guys. Before *The Merchants*, Vahlsing had a team; they called themselves the *Bonitas*. Hector Salinas, who was the main timekeeper of the shed, and Victor Zavala were in charge of the team. Hector Salinas, Jr. was the mascot of the team. That's where little Hector got his start. He went on to play baseball at Pan Am and now coaches somewhere in Corpus.

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**"...Into the War years, they used to ship, by rail, 35 to 40 carloads of ice...to the Vahl'sing shed in Elsa every night..."**

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Oh yeah, baseball was a big deal here in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Teams came down from Austin and even Dallas, but nobody could compete with the Vahlsing team. They had a real good team. They had a field there south of the Vahlsing shed around 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets where the housing projects are now. They had bleachers and everything there.

I married in 1951 and we started having kids and I started working day and night. When I started working here in La Hielera in '54, six months out of the year my average working hours were 21 to 22 hours a day, seven days a week. I don't know how I did it.

La Hielera was built in 1927. It was a very important place for the economy. Back in the late 1930s and into the War years, they used to ship, by rail, 35 to 40 carloads of ice from here to the Vahlsing shed in Elsa every night to be out there in the morning to be spotted. Each car carried 160 blocks of ice, each block weighing 300 pounds. That's how much ice they needed in the Elsa shed every 24 hours. As you can imagine, most of Vahlsing's profit was going to the ice plant, but he needed to buy ice to ship fresh vegetables out of Elsa. So he bought the ice plant from the Pacific Fruit Express, I think about 1941. Once he manufactured his own ice, he had everything.

I worked here at La Hielera from 1954 until I retired, and I ran the whole thing for the last 15 to 20 years that I worked there. I was the janitor, timekeeper, foreman, payroll clerk; I did just about everything in that ice plant. I had five million pounds of frozen fruit there on a given day that I was responsible for.

Fred Vahlsing, Sr.'s vision and good fortune made La Hielera big during the 1940s and 50s. When Vahlsing first came to the Valley during the late 1920s, his main product was broccoli. He came over at first and bought what became known as Elsa Farms on Mile 6. That's where they grew the first broccoli in this area that was then shipped to New York. The story goes that Fred Vahlsing himself was on that first train that went from Elsa to New York. He carried a shovel in the train to ice down the vegetables.

When I was about five or six years old, Dad was a night watchman at the Vahlsing shed in Elsa, and I would stay with him overnight sometimes. Mr. Vahlsing would make periodic trips to Elsa, and I remember seeing him and talking to him while I was there with my dad. He got to know me pretty well; he used to call me Zeke. He treated me like I was one of his sons, because he knew me since I was about six years old. When I started working here in '54, he came by once and he remembered me. Shortly after that, he turned me into assistant manager. He showed a lot of confidence in me. Then one day he said, "Zeke, you are no longer assistant manager, now you're manager of the whole plant." And he told his son Fred Jr., "Freddy, you better take care of this man because he's been taking care of us for a long time," and that was that. I also told him that I wanted to live in one of the houses on his property. He wound up giving me a house and the land the house was on.

I had an experience in November of 1954, an encounter with a fellow named Angus Katzberg, a man who I didn't know. He was, in fact, the manager of the ice plant, but again, I didn't know. Anyway, I was working in the office as a timekeeper. I had gotten that job, because I had worked as a timekeeper for a company in Mercedes, by hand, for 600 employees and had to pay them every week. At the ice plant here, I worked in the office with Mrs. Angie Stewart from Edcouch. She knew what I could do. And one day all the employees were coming in to fill out their

W-2 forms. But one fellow forgot to sign his form, so I went out after him. As I went out to catch him, I noticed he was pretty far away, so I whistled at him to stop him so he could come back to sign his form. At that same moment, this big German-looking man turns right around and just cusses me out from top to bottom.

He got really close to me and I could only see him into his chest area because he was about six and a half feet tall. But whatever he was telling me, I answered him back in the worst language you could imagine—no nice words at all. After we had that really heated exchange, he turned

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**“...nobody has ever talked back to me at all. Everybody is always ‘yes sir, no sir’ but nobody ever stands up for himself. You’re the first one who has defended himself against me...”**

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right around and waved a trailer to come into the dock. My whistle, you see, had stopped a trailer this man had been waving in. It was all just an accident. I went pale back into the office, fuming. As soon as I stepped inside Bobby Burns says to me, “Zeke do you know who that man you were fighting with is? He’s Angus Katzberg, the vice president of the company.” “Well,” I said to them, “I may not be around here tomorrow.”

Well, about three days later, Mr. Katzberg called me into his office and says to me, “Zeke, first of all, I want to know if you’ve forgotten what I’ve told you?” I said, “Why?” And he says, “because I’ve forgotten what you’ve told me.” “Well,” I said, “it’s forgotten.” And he stretched out his hand and shook my hand and said, “I want you to be my floor manager. You know, Zeke, as of that day when you and I had that exchange, I’ve had the best night’s sleep of my life. I’ve been here 27 years and nobody has ever talked back to me at all. Everybody is always ‘yes sir, no

sir’ but nobody ever stands up for himself. You’re the first one who has defended himself against me since I got here. I think I just needed somebody to talk back to me, and you’re going to be my man.” And I was his man for some 30 years. We turned out to be great friends.

You understand that the people Mr. Katzberg was talking about were mostly Mexican people who wouldn’t dare answer back at him because they feared for their jobs, and often times for their homes too. Many of the workers came from Mexico and lived in the little houses provided by the company. People just took it, even when they were treated like something pretty close to slaves.

I changed all of that when I became manager of this place. I told the workers they had to get out of the labor camp they were in and go look for a small property close by that they could call their own. I told them I was going to tear all those little shacks down so none of them would remain dependent on that terrible housing. “Work hours are going to be fairer; You’ll only work from eight to four o’clock”, I said. “I might need you at two in the morning, but I’ll pay you overtime for every hour you work after four in the afternoon.” I told Mr. Katzberg I was going to do all that if I was going to run that place. I guaranteed him that we’d get more production from people if we worked them only 40 hours per week and paid them overtime when they came in after four. And Mr. Katzberg agreed. And we did get much more production.

The whole idea was just to treat people with dignity, just to treat them like human beings. That’s all.

**Valentín González came to Elsa in 1928 and brought his young wife Beatriz in 1939. He worked at the Vahl'sing shed when it had just opened nailing crates for shipping. They shared their stories with us this winter.**



**Valentín and Beatriz González.**

“I was born in 1914, on the 12th of March,” said Valentín González. “I came over here in 1928 from Saspamco, Texas. I came in a Model T with my mother and my sister. We arrived in three days. We took so long because from Falfurrias to here there were no paved roads. It was all sand and getting stuck in those days. My father’s name was Pedro González and my mother was Carmen Castañeda. I have only one brother and two sisters and two others who died in Saspamco.”

Beatriz Gonzalez, Valentín’s wife, then said, “José López, my father, was born near Kingsville, and my mother, Hilaria Hinojosa López, was born in Premont. I think my father lived in the King Ranch. My grandparents were also from around Kingsville. I lived in Rio Hondo until I was seventeen.

“When I came to Elsa, it was 1939, on July 2. I remember because it was the day we got married. We met in Panchita Ranch, close to La Villa when my brother got married. We got married in Rio Hondo. Our wedding was not a big wedding because we did not have much money for a big wedding. There was no dance, or anything but a dinner and everything was over in the afternoon. My father

killed a calf and made *carne asada*, *carne guisada*, and other things. We have been married for 58 years now.”

When Valentín spoke of coming to the Valley, he said, “I came in 1928. My father’s friend came too. He was also from Marín, like my parents were. He and his children came to Weslaco. Two of his sons went up to Saspamco and planted certain illustrations in our minds. They told us the Valley was really great, that there was a lot of work in the sheds, and so on.

“When I came, I began lining boxes with paper, but at the beginning I placed the logos on the boxes. Later I started to make the boxes. That was when we hammered them by hand. After the boxes, they sent us to Mississippi because there was a lot of cabbage and there was no one there making boxes, and they sent us there for about three weeks. They sent us there to make boxes so that they could pack the cabbage. Later I learned to manage the machines and the electric ones that came later on.

“I worked on the presses that nailed the lids, and later I put ice in the trucks.

They brought the ice from the ice plants in Edinburg. We also had some of those here in Elsa. There was a big one next to the railroad tracks, where the Evergreen Apartments are today. At the Vahl'sing we worked from eight or nine in the morning until two or three in the next morning. We



**Valentín González in the box department at the Vahl'sing packing shed, 1934. Courtesy of Valentín and Beatriz González.**

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“ . . .we worked from eight or nine in the morning until two or three in the next morning. We were paid 15 cents an hour. If you asked if it was enough, I have to say it had to be enough because they would not give us more . . .”

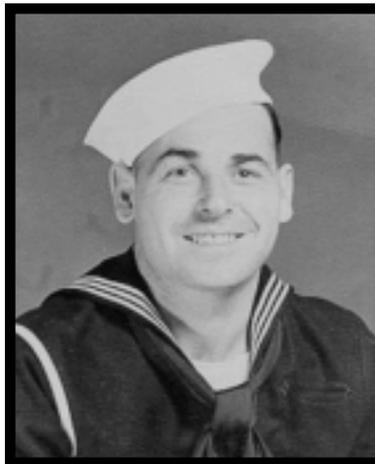
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were paid 15 cents an hour. If you asked if it was enough, I have to say it had to be enough because they would not give us more, but I kept getting higher and higher wages, until we began to make good money. They gave me the job of foreman, but the other foreman did not want me to be foreman.”

Beatriz added to Valentín’s commentary when she said, “The reason that they did not let him be foreman was because not many liked him, and those that liked him had left. There was a lot of envy. They did not want others to rise. They did not want to see people rise. There were few foremen. Frank Smith left it to the others. Vahl’sing was really good with the people. The ones that mistreated the workers were the Mexican foremen, because they wanted to show that they could make a lot with a little. We had very little money. We did not demand much from the foremen.”

Beatriz also spoke of Valentín’s brother’s tragic death: “His brother died in a crash with a train in 1941. Four people died.” Recalling the same event, Valentín said, “We had worked until five in the morning, and I came home. My brother and others had stayed working, and later decided to go out, especially because we had all gotten a one-dollar Christmas bonus. They had just left the Vahl’sing shed when they crashed with a train.”

Speaking of his work experience, Valentín recalled that he worked “until I got bored and went to another shed. I left Vahl’sing and went to be foreman at the shed next to the Rotel tomato cannery. From there they sent me to



**Valentín González in his US Navy Photograph, 1943. Courtesy of Valentín and Beatriz González.**

Falfurrias. When I went to Falfurrias, I ran another shed. Then I decided to join the Navy. Even though I was in the Navy, I never got assistance from the government.”

Beatriz also spoke of her work experience: “At first I was a housewife because I did not have the children very far apart. Later I went and worked with Mr. Wilson

at the pharmacy. They also had insurance at that place. I did not work long in the pharmacy because I made more money packing fruit than in the pharmacy. Later I worked with the school. I stopped working in 1989, after working 20 years with the Special Education department at the Edcouch Elementary School.”

Again, Valentín reflected on the local economy: “The packing sheds began to close down because the vegetable industry was dying. It was like now. There are no more vegetables and no sheds either. Edcouch had about 13 packing sheds.”

Then, in an emotional moment, he recalled his friends, “All my friends died, and only I remained, but I really liked living here. After all, where else would I go? Now at 83, I can’t go anywhere.”



**Eighty-five year old Máxima González came to Elsa when it was all brush. She worked in a number of capacities and recalls labor strikes, schools, and community life.**

My name is Máxima, Lerma from my father and González from my husband. I was born on May 22, 1913, in Hidalgo, Texas. I was raised on the San Juan Plantation on the Old Military Highway. My father worked as a border patrol agent that would stop the border bandits who crossed liquor and stole cows from this side to cross over to the other side. Billy Brewster hired my father, and his primary duty was to take care of bandits stealing the cattle, and also bootleggers, but cattle were his main concern. It was a bandit who killed my father, when I was more or less five years old.

My mother died in 1949. She was from Brownsville. She couldn't speak English or write it. My father spoke English, but very little. My parents had 11 children, though there are only six alive today. I was the fourth born. We managed because my father owned many cattle and goats and planted corn and beans. From there we would have milk, meat, and cheese and whatever else we needed.

I married Benito González when I was fifteen years old. He was from Mercedes, but lived in Elsa at the time. We met while at a dance that was held at a ranch near Alamo. On the second of April of 1934 we came to live in Elsa where the water plant now stands. There were some houses there for rent that belonged to Frank Smith. They were small wood frame homes with two rooms. There were about six homes built there. Frank Smith is one of the ones who founded this town, and he bought land and built houses. He spoke Spanish real well because he was raised among the Mexicans at the Vahl'sing shed. Paula Alaniz lived there

and also Telésforo López. Both have died already. Arcadio Padilla and others came later.

My husband worked at Rio Farms in Monte Alto. He built all the buildings around the Delta Lake Area, from the pavilion dance floor to the rest rooms. He also built the houses for the Rio Farms workers using blocks and tin sheets for the roof. I was mainly at home while he worked, until 1949 when Elsa Canning Company started. I worked there for 19 years, until it shut down. It went well for me there since I was the one who knew English. Many of the workers there were from Mexico and couldn't speak or understand the English language. Even though I went to school at the San Juan Plantation, I learned very little, since we spent a lot of the time just drawing. I really didn't know much English until I started working and learned it from the different jobs I worked in. I've worked in day cares and also with the Image program in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At the Elsa Canning Company, it was those who knew English who got better positions. I was a checker and would check the big aluminum cans filled with freshly peeled tomato. We were paid by the hour. I would make

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**"When immigration showed up, they took 50 to 60 ladies and loaded them up in buses and returned them to Mexico."**

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45 cents an hour, and the workers at the conveyor belt earned 35 cents an hour. The men were in charge of hauling the bins of tomato to the boilers, and the ladies peeled tomato and filled the large aluminum cans. They had to make at least four cans per hour to earn their wage. Even though many of the ladies lived here in Elsa, most were from Mexico. When immigration showed up, they took 50 to 60 ladies and loaded them up in buses and returned them to Mexico. The company got better established when the workers hired were from here legally and not from Mexico. Many who

came from Mexico started making legal arrangements to become citizens.

I remember when there were union strikes, and they wanted us to join, but we did not accept because we did not want to pay the César Chávez labor union. They came from California in 1950s, at the busiest time, but we still didn't join because we knew when work was over we wouldn't have any money to pay the union anyway.

Early on, my husband didn't want me to work, but he left it up to me. Since we didn't have any children, I really didn't want to be at home. My first son was born in 1947 and my aunt took care of him for me. I also worked at San Carlos, but since it was night work, my husband baby-sat. I only had two sons, Roberto and Raul.

Both my children went to school here in Edcouch-Elsa. Both went to Kennedy for elementary. My children went to the Mexican school and the Anglo kids went to another school. There was no mixing until they went to high school, and even then they did not like the Mexicans. I don't know why. The Mexican kids were more "Texan" than the Anglos. The Anglos were from other states. But they soon calmed down; they had to. But no one used to say anything, until they got used to living with Hispanics. The Anglos had no choice. They did not want to mix, even in the neighborhoods. And the Anglo side of town slowly ceased to exist. Now it's all Mexican. The only one left is Neal Galloway.

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"Before, kids were more interested in playing with one another and really treated each other like kin. Not like today, where the major worry is what wall to write on or what window to break."

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Elsa Canning Company, or Rotel, closed in 1968 because Mr. Rotel became ill. He had cancer on his face. He had opened around 1949 and was in business for a long time. You can still find "Rotel" products in the H.E.B. Some have heard that this picante sauce was his maid's idea, but I don't really know. It might be, because his maid, Paula, was from Mexico. When she was here, they lived in a large white house made of block just north of the H.E.B. Mr. Rotel passed on the business to a man from San Benito by the name of Gabito. He was the one that decided to close the cannery down.

Elsa has changed a lot. The friendships are not the same as before, and the families are very different as well. Before, kids were more interested in playing with one another and really treated each other like kin. Not like today, where the major worry is what wall to write on or what window to break. It's probably because parents just don't pay that much attention to their kids.



**Jacinto González's family was among the pioneering families in Edcouch. His parents operated a store during the early days of Edcouch, and his father was a school board trustee during the early years of Edcouch - Elsa Independent School District.**

My family came to Edcouch late in 1932 or 1933, when I was but a baby. My father Jacinto González Sr. and my mother, Natalia Lozano, came here because they believed there would be opportunities to do good business here in Edcouch. So we came and this is where they raised their ten children and ran their store. My parents had a store along the main street, or Llano Grande Street in Edcouch. They raised us with the little money they made at the store. The way the store came to be is interesting, though.

My father somehow got a barrack, an old-time military barrack, to use on the east side of Llano Grande Street, or 1015 sometime about 1933 or '34. About that time, he decided to move the barrack to convert it into a store, but he did it on the west side of Llano Grande. That was unacceptable because Mexican American people were not supposed to live there, much less own a store on the west side of Llano Grande. I think my father understood this, but he wasn't one of those people who would give into the rules of segregation. My father expected to be able to do things, and he did them.

Of course, my family also had to put up with a good deal of hostility, especially in the early years. When my father moved the store to the west of 1015, just days thereafter, the KKK put a big cross in the front of our yard. As soon as my father saw it, he went and got his brothers. That night they waited, and sure enough the KKK showed up. Shots were fired that night between my family and the

KKK, and then the KKK took off. They wore the white hoods and robes. This was about 1933 or '34. And the reason it happened was because my father had moved his store to the wrong side of town. Mexican American people had a certain place in the community life; there were things they were supposed to do and things they weren't supposed to do at that time. Many people just didn't like Mexican people stepping beyond their place and my father was one who would not be contained by those restrictions.

Now, you have to understand that politics and activism in my father's history went back to before he came to Edcouch. When my father ran a little grocery store in Weslaco, which he had one block behind the old Cortez Hotel, he also ran a printing press from that same location. In fact, that building my father built is still there. Anyhow, from that printing press he ran a Spanish-language newspaper. At that time, Mexican American people had civic clubs, and through those clubs they brought in authors, poets, musicians, and other thinkers from different parts of

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**"My father was a leader. . . within the Mexican American community, and they organized themselves to listen to some of the prominent thinkers, authors, and other writers from Mexico and the Valley."**

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the Valley and Mexico. They organized presentations and talks and socials and things of that sort.

My father was a leader in putting those events together. He was one of those civic leaders within the Mexican American community, and they organized themselves to listen to some of the prominent thinkers, authors, and other writers from Mexico and the Valley. At that time, Mexican newspapers reached throughout the

*frontera* and even up to San Antonio. There were papers like *La Prensa*, the *Brownsville Herald*, which was bilingual, and some others. So my father was part of that intellectual life in South Texas and learned many ideas and had great experiences.

Of course, some of his ideas also got him into trouble on numerous occasions. The ideas my father held dear were things like equality, and he especially worked against segregation, because at that time many things were segregated. When we came here, Edcouch was segregated. I went to school at the North Edcouch Elementary School, which was a school for Mexican kids. Weslaco was no different either; they had segregated schools too, just like they also segregated other parts of community life. My father fought against segregation and for equality.



Natalia Martínez González, circa 1925. Courtesy of Olga Reyes.

I remember the time when my mother was pregnant with my brother Raul; she must have been close to nine months pregnant. Well, it was election time and my father had been supporting candidates that were not in favor with the establishment. Because of my father's politics, I remember my father saying that he got a visit from a couple of Texas Rangers, or at least they looked like Rangers. It appeared they had come to the store to pistol-whip my father, but right at the time they were grabbing my father, my mother came out with a shotgun. She was able to startle the men enough so that my father released himself. My father then got a hold of an ax handle and beat up on the two men. Imagine the sight of my mother, nine months pregnant, holding a shotgun across her

body. Well, the men left beaten that day, but my father knew they would come back the next day, so my family left to Mission that night to escape them. The next day my brother Raul was born.

I suppose my father was a bit unique for his time, because he had some measure of formal education. He was born in 1895 and went all the way to the eighth grade. My grandfather, who for years carried mail between Roma and Brownsville, wanted to have his son continue his education, so my grandfather sent my father to the Durham School of Business in St. Louis, Missouri. At the Durham School he learned bookkeeping, accounting, and things of that sorts. He used those skills for the rest of his life. He used them to run his store, and I remember he did a lot of work as a notary public.

My father's skills actually helped him come across some really interesting people. I remember him talking about this one old man from Edcouch named Samuel Treviño (though Samuel may have been his son) who fought in the Indian Wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was with those forces that took part in the "civilizing" of these lands. And not only him, there were others like him; there was a Silguero man, and others who my father helped to get pensions. Many

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**". . .the history books and television talk about the Rough Riders being from Montana and Wyoming and other places, but nobody ever mentions that some Mexican Americans also served under Teddy Roosevelt."**

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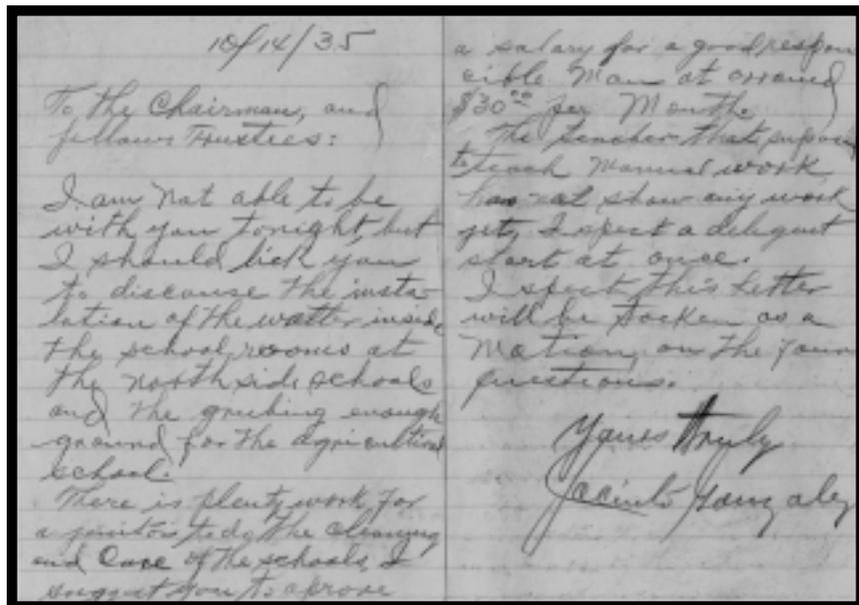
of these men either did government service or worked in the railroad industry and were getting old. My father understood pensions and other sorts of retirement benefits these people qualified for, so he helped them find those resources.

In fact, my father even talked about helping some locals who had been with Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders during the time of the Spanish-American War. You know how the history books and television talk about the Rough Riders being from Montana and Wyoming and other places, but nobody ever mentions that some Mexican Americans also served under Teddy Roosevelt.

You see those are the kind of things my father fought against, things like being excluded, being suppressed, and being kept out. He was very courageous and very aggressive. When he first ran for public office back in the early 1930s, he would go door to door talking to people. He first won a seat on the Edcouch-Elsa School Board about 1934, if not the year before, and as far as I know he always looked out for the interests of Mexican American children.

Surprisingly enough, I remember there were many Anglos who came by the store to share their ideas with my father about how to improve the schools. There were those Anglos who really looked after the interests of all the kids. But of course, there were those who didn't, those who wanted to keep the status quo. Those people thought segregation was right. They justified what they wanted; what they did was right to them. It was more important to them, in their point of view, to give the new books to the Anglos. After all, the Mexican was supposed to work in the fields. Or if a Mexican did well, he may work as a clerk for an Anglo. Therefore, it's okay for them to use the secondhand books, even if there's a page missing. In their minds, they'd rather not change things.

I'm not exactly sure how my father communicated with the Anglo school board members, because he was not that fluent in spoken English. He may have written pretty decent English, but even then you could tell how he was thinking in Spanish and translating into English. You have to understand that he had been a Spanish language publisher, so Spanish was pretty well ingrained in him.



Letter by school board member Jacinto González Sr. to the school board in 1935. From E-E ISD School Board minutes. Courtesy of Amparo Bazán.

I think one thing about my father's generation that was really impressive was the sense of community that people felt. People did things together and felt good about it. People worked hard and they were proud to be from Edcouch, even with the problems we had. We had a really good community and pretty good schools too, for those who were lucky enough to stay in them. I remember that when I went into the service after I graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1950, I had few problems with the training. My schooling in this community really prepared me for life after high school. I had good skills. I had good training in the Edcouch-Elsa schools. It's served me well in my adult life.

Most graduates from this school from those years have done well. Those who graduated with me have done

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“...after mechanization hit, many people lost their jobs. I think many people began to feel they were losing their livelihood.”

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well, and those who graduated with my brother Jorge have done exceptionally well. In fact, I heard someone say the other day that just about every Mexican American who graduated with my brother, the E-E Class of 1954, went on to college. There's my brother Jorge, there's Elva González, who is a counselor at the high school, there's Aron Peña, the attorney from Edinburg, Rosie Zamora, who is an executive of some sort in Houston, Ben Villalón, who has a Ph.D., and some others I can't recall now.

When I was growing up we had nothing; but then again we didn't need anything. It was a good time growing up in Edcouch back in the 1940s and 1950s. We didn't go anywhere to spend money. We mostly played games in town. I remember fondly the afternoons when people came home from work on the back of trucks. When they had gone to pick oranges, the men would throw oranges for the kids to eat. If they picked broccoli, why they'd throw broccoli to us. There was a whole lot of sharing done also. Those were pretty happy times here in Edcouch, even if we had many other problems. And people didn't make much money either, but they all worked and they were proud. All we needed was to have tortillas, some beans—just something on the table.

Through the years, though, we lost a lot of that pride. In retrospect, I think several things happened. People began to lose jobs to machines, and I think the honor, respect, and pride began to fade away slowly starting with that. Before, workers could work the cotton fields or any other field before the machines came in, but after mechanization hit, many people lost their jobs. I think many people began to feel they were losing their livelihood, losing their chance at steady work, even if that work hadn't been high paying.

Within a matter of about five years, things totally changed. The machines began to take over. Then shortly after that, welfare started to come in, and many people who felt they were losing their livelihood began to take part in welfare programs. That, unfortunately, created a dependence. These changes seriously impacted a culture that was very proud, super proud. Before, word of honor was important, sharing was important. But with the economic changes, mechanization, and welfare, all of that

changed. Instead of retraining our people for the new technology, our people got welfare. The investment was made in welfare instead of on people, and that changed a lot of concepts that we were used to.

That has been part of the demoralization of the Mexican American. The people I knew when I was growing up were straight, moral people. I know we have many moral people coming up today, but I think many of our people became handicapped when the new economic situation came. And I think government made a serious mistake when it gave Mexican Americans welfare instead of training. I think many of the problems we have today with jobs, economy, and with the youth were born then. I'm not sure we've been able to recover from it.

I also think that people from my generation also failed our community. Many of us, myself included, left Edcouch and Elsa and got trained, educated, and created opportunities for ourselves. We followed the jobs and bettered ourselves, but we didn't bring our new expertise back. For whatever reason, we didn't return to improve our community. We could've been great resources for our community, but we didn't act on that belief. I don't know why. Maybe we didn't see it that way, but then again, we knew exactly what conditions were like here; our families were here and we kept in touch with them. I wish we had done something about it.

It's a complex thing, figuring out what the root of our problems is. If we can just regain our morality, the good respectful way of dealing with people, I think we'll be all right. But we need to work hard on doing that.

**With her husband, Timotea Piña Tamez raised her family in Elsa during the 1950s and 1960s. Thereafter, she began work at Vahl'sing's frozen food processing plant in Monte Alto. She worked there in a supervisory position for 26 years. Early on, people recognized her leadership skills and capitalized on that by giving Mrs. Tamez a supervisory position.**

My name is Timotea Piña Tamez, and I was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September of 1927. I was born in Donna, Texas, and was raised there. We came to this area in 1937, first to Edcouch, where we stayed for a year before coming to Elsa. My mother was from Donna and my father from Brownsville. My father was an orphan and helped to raise his brothers. He married late. In my family, we were eight children, and I was the oldest.



**Timotea Tamez at age 17. Courtesy of Jose and Timotea Tamez.**

I went to Runn School in Donna when I was a kid. I learned how to write my name, and I learned English in that school also. When I came to Edcouch, I kept going to school in some army barracks they put up in an area referred to as the *Rincón del Diablo*. I went there for a year, and after that I kept going to school in Elsa in a school close to the Aqua Club swimming pool. I went up to the seventh grade. When my mother fell ill, I quit

going to school, because I was the oldest in the family and had to tend to my mother.

My father was a businessman his entire life, and he came to this town looking for a place to open a store. We came in search of opportunity, in search of a better life. My father didn't like Edcouch, so we came to Elsa where my father opened his own store. And we stayed there for a time. We'd go to school and after school we'd go to the store to

help my parents. But later, my uncle Juan W. Cáceres opened his own store, and my father went to work for him. Later my uncle's store closed and my father was unable to stay with them.

Then we began migrating. When we returned, my father and his brother opened a theater. He knocked down the old store and built the theater in the same place. The theater was called the Teatro Paris. It operated for about four or five years. We got married in 1949 in that same building, after the theater had closed down. The theater closed when Benítez brought his theater to Elsa. His theater was there on Broadway. It came about 1945 and was in the same building where Max Furniture has his storage. We still have the movie machines from the old theater. My sister has



**Jose and Timotea Tamez on their wedding day. Courtesy of Jose and Timotea Tamez.**

them. They're like the old-fashioned type that you have to turn. I used to go with my uncle Ramón Piña in an old car to announce the movies showing. He taught me how to drive. I would drive and he'd announce. My husband says that I liked to drive by his house to see him, but it was only part of the route.

My father was very strict, and that's why we never dated. My father wouldn't permit it. When my eventual husband sent his men to ask for my hand in marriage, my father said no. He said they'd have to wait for him to respond when he was ready with an answer. After 18 days, he said yes. I always listened to what my parents said. I appreciate them very much, to this day.

When I married, we had 200 dollars, and I already had everything I needed. I had my embroidered sheets, pillowcases, towels, and everything. I had everything a woman should have when she marries. I even knew how to sew because my mother had taught me. And it was a huge wedding. Many people went, despite the very cold weather. It was the 30<sup>th</sup> of January of 1949; it was one of the coldest winters we've ever had here in Elsa. We had food the entire day and the orchestra at night. We got married at eight in the morning because at the time there was only one mass given every day. We married at the Sacred Heart Church here in Elsa, and we celebrated all day. It was a very large wedding.

We had four children, two boys and two girls. María Alicia, who is the school superintendent now, is the oldest, and then Norma, and Cesar, and the youngest is Oscar. After the children grew up, I then began to go outside the house to work. I started working for Vahl'sing at his frozen food processing plant in 1963, when it opened. I worked there for 26 years. I worked for 10 years at night and 16 years during the day.

During that time I was in charge of about 600 women, nearly 300 during the day and nearly 300 more at night. I worked for 15 or 16 hours a day because after my shift was over, I had to figure out the totals for all the other women who worked there. I had assistants to help me run the place. During the 26 years that I worked there, the plant must have changed owners at least six times, but I still kept working. I was one of the few people who managed to work there for so long. The reason that I kept my job for such a long time

was that the old owners recommended me to the new owners every time ownership changed.

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**"I was dependable and never showed up to work late. I think that's what made me a good manager. You treat people well, you work hard, and you're a good manager."**

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At the plant, we produced frozen vegetables. We processed broccoli, spinach, carrots, beets, and other vegetables. We also processed french fries at the plant. The potatoes were peeled, cut, bagged, frozen, and shipped out of the plant. There was also the lab, where the products were inspected. If the vegetables had insects or too much pesticide, the lines were stopped and we had to inform the fieldman on what to do to remedy the situation.

I think I kept my job because of the way I ran the plant. I always took care of the products and made sure that no good vegetables were thrown away. For example, I made sure that if good vegetables were spilled, they would be packed again. I also made sure that the ladies who inspected the vegetables did not throw away any good vegetables. I had good workers that took care of me and worked hard, and not just when I was supervising. I also took good care of my workers. I never had any complaints and never went to court for swearing at or mistreating my workers. I was dependable and never showed up to work late. I think that's what made me a good manager. You treat people well, you work hard, and you're a good manager. I think that if you enjoy your work and try to do better, no one will hold you back.

I remember once my husband had to go to the manager's office. On his way out, the manager asked him why he had the same name as I did. He said it was because we were married, but the manager did not believe it. My husband explained that I was there to do my job, and he was there to do his job and that he had no business being with me while I was working.

**Santos Layton is a wonderful storyteller. When we visited her house, she told us about her work, her family, and her community. Here's a glimpse of her experience.**

I first came to the Valley in 1939 from Goliad, Texas, where I was born. My mom, my aunts, two cousins, and I came in 1939 when I was about 17. From my immediate family, it was only my mother Albina Alvarez, and me, because my parents were separated when I was four months old, and I was the only child. When we got to the Valley, my daddy was living in McAllen. My mother was from Brownsville, my father from Hebronville.

We got here about 11:00 on a Saturday night in late November of 1939; I think it was the 25<sup>th</sup>. I remember the day very clearly. I remember only a few dirt roads in the town. The Vahl'sing packing shed was in operation then, and everybody seemed to be working there. The shed looked like a town.

On Monday of the following week, I started working at the shed. My job at first was labeling broccoli bunches so they could be distributed to stores. I got that job through a friend. I did that for a while, but after that I worked packing carrots and putting them into cellophane bags. The third job I had at the Vahl'sing shed was as floor lady, where I was in charge of 60 ladies. That was a pretty good job and a lot of responsibility.

I think they found out I was capable of handling that many women because they saw that I had a certain way of dealing with

people. I guess they saw that I could lead others. That is a gift I got from God. I always loved people. I tried to talk to people, and I always tried to keep my smile. I don't mean to say I never lost my temper, because I'm human. But I think God blessed me with being able to keep a conversation and things like that.

The girls were good to deal with, especially on Saturdays when everyone wanted to go to the dance. I'd tell them, "Girls you want to go to the dance? Hurry up, let's hurry, if you want to go see your boyfriend at the dance." And the girls worked harder. They went to the dance, and I'd go home to my kids. We went to dances often too, but I had kids during most of the time that I was a floor leader at the Vahl'sing.

I worked as floor lady for about five years, though I did it for only about six months out of the year. That was the in-season for vegetables. The other six months we spent in Hereford, Texas. There we worked carrots, potatoes, and sugar beets. We kept this schedule until we decided the kids were missing too much school. I didn't want my kids to be like me, without an education. That's when I told my husband I was going to have to find a permanent job so we wouldn't have to migrate so much. So I worked at the Vahl'sing shed from 1939 to about 1951.

I applied for a job at the Rotel and worked as a floor lady there too. But work at the Rotel cannery was seasonal also, so I kept looking for a permanent job. Finally,



**Santos and Pablo Layton on their wedding day. Courtesy of Santos Layton.**



**Santos Layton arriving home from work, circa 1964. Courtesy of Santos Layton.**

about a week before the season was over, I went to Monte Alto to a big place over close to Delta Lake. I think it was a Lutheran religion nursing home. I got the job and was told to be there at 6:30 the next morning. So the next day I got there early and worked the entire day in the kitchen. They also told me the job would be only part-time. "Fine," I said, and kept working hard.

Well, the next day, they called me into the main office. "Oh my God" I thought to myself, "What did I do wrong?" It turns out they liked my work from the day before and offered me a permanent job as a nurse. "We've been observing how you've been working and we've decided we can make a good nurse out of you," said the supervisor of the nursery. "We'll turn you into a good nurse." So they paid for my training, and I became a nurse. I continued working in different nursing homes until 1979 when I injured my back and retired.

When my husband and I married in 1944, I remember this clearly too, we had no transportation, so we got on the train here in Elsa and went to Brownsville to buy a suit for my husband. My husband, who was born in Palo Alto, was raised here in Elsa. He was born in 1913. We had five wonderful children together. When the kids were young, we migrated every year. We'd go to Hereford, and put the kids in school there. We'd stay there until December, though some years if the crop was real good, we stayed there through Christmas.

My kids used to play marbles, they played with tops, and they played ball out on the street, when they had time. But in June of 1956, we had an accident in the family that just changed our lives around. Our oldest son Pablito was killed when a car ran over him. Two months after his death we again migrated to Hereford. Shortly after we got there, my husband decided to buy an accordion for the kids.



**Bennie and Rene Layton with the original instruments bought by their parents, 1956. Courtesy of Rosie Zamora Garza.**

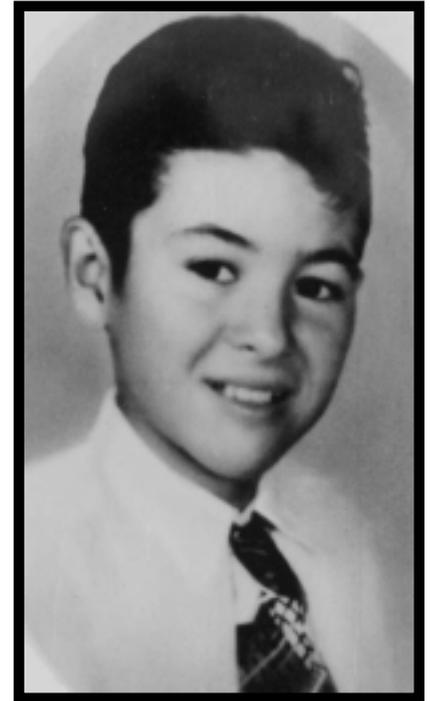
I was mad at him because the accordion cost \$49. I told him, "Honey, why would you want to pay that much money for an accordion when you can use that money to buy more important things, like clothes for the kids, or things for school." "Mommy," he said, "I want to buy that accordion for the kids, because even if they don't learn how to play it, they'll be kept busy inside. I don't want to lose another child like we lost Pablito." So I agreed to keep the accordion, and that was the beginning of music in our family.

Really, the accordion was meant for Rene, then our second oldest boy, but Bennie, the youngest boy, just loved to play with it. My husband kept saying, “don’t let Bennie play with that accordion,” because he thought Bennie saw it as a toy. And it was a toy for him. My mother, who lived with us, used to love to whistle tunes for Bennie, and he played the accordion to my mother’s tunes. And since Bennie was my mother’s favorite, she really encouraged him to play. *A las escondidas* my mother and Bennie made music together, my mother whistling, Bennie playing the accordion. Boy, was my husband surprised when he first heard how well Bennie could play.

About a month after my husband bought the accordion, Tony and Rene said, “Mom, we need a guitar.” “Oh my God,” I said. I knew nothing about guitars, and besides we had to drive all the way to Amarillo, about 100 miles away, to the nearest place where guitars were sold. Luckily, one of our friends from Elsa, who worked with us

in Hereford, offered to sell me a guitar for \$5. He offered it to me after he thought I had a problem. “What’s the matter, Mrs. Layton, you look worried.” I told him I had been thinking about that guitar my children wanted. To my surprise, he said he had three of them and offered to sell me one. I quickly bought that guitar, and the kids then had two toys.

That’s how they started. The rest is history. As you know the Hermanos Layton became one of the biggest bands around. Tony, Rene, Bennie, and Norfi, who started singing with the band when she was 14, have been playing together for years. They even gave Roberto Pulido his start way back when he was a kid. Now the band has even been featured in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The bad thing about it is that I had to lose a son.



**Pablo Layton , Jr., 1956. Courtesy of Santos Layton.**



**Los Hermanos Layton in Brownsville, Texas, in the late 60s  
Courtesy of Santos Layton.**

## "The Devil in the Valley"

by David Rice

Gloria Gutiérrez watched her granddaughter Michelle close the curtains to the living room. "There is too much light for the video recorder," she said as she pulled the cloth over the windows that looked out over Gloria's beautiful flower garden.

Gloria did not answer Michelle. She instead relied upon her granddaughter's belief, smart though she may be, in the ancient myth that the old had very poor senses. But Gloria's fine-tuned ears heard the questions, and her eyes still could guide her steady fingers to thread a needle. She watched how firm Michelle's lips were when the words left her mouth.

"Mama Gloria, Mom says that you once saw the Devil here in Edcouch, *aquí en El Rincón del Diablo*."

This was a question that Michelle had been told not to ask, but she had too much of her grandmother in her not to do so. Gloria looked at the electronic equipment surrounding her: video camera, tape recorder, portable scanner and laptop computer. All designed to record the present retelling of the past. The black boxes so still, listening and watching so as not to miss a word, a sound or movement, all waiting. It gave Gloria a sense of, dare she think, immortality.

Gloria did not have to search for the memories as the young do. They have not had the decades of dreams or the years of feeling their consciousness gently submerging into the subconscious, where the truth whispers and madness never sleeps.

There is no occipital lobe, no frontal lobe, no cerebellum, no thalamus, no medulla oblongata, no left hemisphere and no right hemisphere. There is only the mind. And the questions she answered always made her cry. Some would say it was too painful for her to talk of her dead husband, dead daughter, dead son, dead father, dead mother and dead brother and sisters. But they were tears of love, and how grateful she was just to be able to answer questions of their past. For a moment she would be there completely: the scent of the time, the touch of the colors, and the sounds of the movements would all be with her, here.

"*Ay Dios, sí*, I haven't forgotten the Devil. I saw him in 1953 when he burned the church down, him and his demons, but it didn't do any good. Everybody in Edcouch

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**...they were tears of love, and how grateful she was just to be able to answer questions of their past."**

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from *El Rincón del Diablo y el barrio de la nalga* and even some from Elsa got together and built a church out of bricks. It was hard work, but at least we were working for God, instead of working in the packing shed for people who didn't even like us."

Michelle edged forward, and her grandmother stopped for a moment and became still with her eyes closed so that she could see inside of herself.

"I was 13 when I started working in the packing shed inspecting vegetables and fruit, and it would get so hot in that packing plant. But it was better than picking them outside. *Sí*, outside in the hot sun, *no más no*."

The year was 1920 when I was born here in Edcouch, before it was even a town. You know, my father was one of the founders of the town. He and Don Isabel Gutiérrez, who is still alive, (they'll probably want to talk to him, too) cleared all the land, pulling out all the mesquite trees and then putting in all the pipes for the water, and even dug the canals.



Road leading to the Rincón del Diablo, 1998. Photograph by David Rice.

Me and my father and mother and little brother used to plant flowers and trees around Santa Theresa, before it became a church. And we prayed that God would watch over us, and he did. *Pero*, that was before a real church was here and the devil already lived here in *El Rincón del Diablo*. So I think God spent a lot of time protecting us, but the devil had help from those other people.

I worked for those people for seven years in the packing plant, but I didn't want to. I wanted to go to school. Edcouch built this brand new school in 1933 and one day we tried to go there, me and my brother and a bunch of us from *El Rincón*. *Bueno lo que pasó era que*, when we got to the new school the principal met us at the door, and told us we had to go to another school, and it was this old tin warehouse that was even further away. So our parents thought that we might as well work with them in the packing plant, inspecting vegetables and fruit.

*Mira*, once the land was cleared, all around Edcouch, Elsa, La Villa, and Monte Alto, *bueno* as far as a horse could walk, *que bárbaro* it was very rich land. Vegetables and fruits grew with such sweetness and color that all the state knew, just by looking at it and smelling it that it was from the Rio Grande Valley. The owners of the packing shed told us that 'Only the Best' leaves the Valley and everything else stays.

Everybody in my family, my mother, my father, my brother, my sisters, my *tíos* and *tías*, and everybody else we knew worked for the packing plants. If brown hands were not picking vegetables or taking fruit off of the trees, then they would be inspecting them or boxing them up and driving them away to other cities.

My father was a truck driver for the packing plant. Him and my *tío* would drive the trucks filled with vegetables and fruits every morning except on Sundays. We all got up with the roosters and went to work and my father would drive off with my *tío*. My mother and my *tía* always had *velas* lit for their husbands.

1938 was the year I fell in love with and married Enrique, who was a truck driver. That's why my father let me marry him. He was such a handsome and strong man. All the women at the packing plant thought so, too, *pero* it was me he wanted. We were so young then. I thought nothing would happen to us, that we would live forever. But my mother said that one night the *velas* we lit for our men must have gone out.

When our son Ernesto turned four, Enrique took him on a trip with my father and *tío* to deliver some tomatoes to Mathis. It took a day to drive there and back. I told him not to take Ernesto, but Enrique said it would be good for his son to travel with his father and grandfather. '*No más los hombres*,' he said with his heart.

I still don't know how the accident happened. They never told us. I didn't believe that my husband and son were dead until I saw them lying very still facing each other. It took two days for the company to bring them back. The owners said it was because they didn't have any empty trucks, because it was the peak season for tomatoes.

It was springtime when it happened, but it didn't feel like spring. Summer came early that year, and so did death. It felt *como que la canícula había llegado*, when they brought them home in the back of a truck, and had

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**"That's when I knew that everything breathes, even the dead. My mother said that they had their mouths open because the dead like to talk to each other, and they also talk to the living."**

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them covered with a black canvas. When they pulled back the canvas all of them had their mouths open, and I swear that I saw Enrique take in a breath. That's when I knew that everything breathes, even the dead. My mother said that they had their mouths open because the dead like to talk to each other, and they also talk to the living. Even today, when it gets real hot, and the wind blows, I think I feel my husband's and son's breath, and everyday I still hear their voices. I don't know what they are saying, but I know what they sound like.

I kept going to church to pray with my mother every Sunday, but I was mad at God. I didn't feel like getting on my knees to plant flowers in the garden of Santa Theresa, and it was even harder for me to kneel before the altar in the church. I didn't listen to the priest anymore. When I

did, I didn't believe him. He just works for the church and says what they tell him to say. And besides, he would never marry and have children. How could he know what it's like to lose a child, or a wife? *Y* Santa Theresa only loved Jesus. She didn't know how to love the imperfect, is what I thought, so I stopped going to church.

After my family was taken away, I worked harder than before at the packing shed. I started working sixteen hours a day and walked home at ten at night, sometimes even at midnight. I was told not to walk home by myself because the devil might get me, but people didn't understand that there was nothing inside of me for the devil to get, and nothing for God, either.

Everyday I passed a cantina called *El Gato*. It looked like a fun place. It made me happy because a band was always playing. I could hear the music before I reached it, and once I passed it, I could still hear it from blocks away. Some of the girls who worked at the packing shed quit their jobs to work at *El Gato*. The men called them *las chulas*, and the women at the packing shed said any woman who worked at one of those places was *estúpida* or a *cantinera*. I didn't know what to think because I was working too much to think about anything, but I knew they made more money than any of us, so then who was the *estúpida*?

There were nights when I walked home that I stopped outside of *El Gato* for a while, just to listen to the music. They said that many evil things went on in there. But with all the laughing and music, it just didn't sound like they were suffering. At the packing shed, we never laughed.

Early in the summer of 1947, more than a year after I lost my husband and son, I stopped working and just watched thousands of tomatoes go by on the conveyor belt and saw all the women with sweat dripping down their faces. 'Only the Best' could leave for market. And me, *pues*, I had been there 14 years, and I realized that some of the women had been there since before the War. Most had been there as long as me, and none of us were ever going to leave.

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**"Our pain made them happy. Do you know why?"**

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Photograph of women working on conveyor belts. Courtesy of Emilia Zavala.

Everyone there looked so tired. *Fijate*, I was only 27, but felt older than I feel now. My eyes were tired and my feet were always numb from standing all day. The women and men looked so old, not just me. But, you know the owners never looked tired. They smiled and patted each other on the back. The harder we worked, the people inside the plant, the men driving the trucks and the ones in the hot sun on their hands and knees picking vegetables for them, the more the owners smiled. Our pain made them happy. Do you know why? Because that is the only way to please the devil.

I was in charge of the women and many times I helped deliver babies in the packing shed. I listened to their problems about their husbands and children, but I didn't think I was doing them any good. My real job was to make sure they worked hard, no matter if they were sick or pregnant. And for what? Not for us, but for the owners. To make them rich and richer. I had been there all those years and was still making the same as when I started. After all those years, I finally got tired.

One day I walked off the line, stood in front of the switch that I turned on every morning to make the belts carry all the tomatoes, and I turned it off. When I did that, all four belts stopped. Nobody had ever turned off those belts during work. *Es más*, those belts never broke the whole time I was there. But that one day, for just a couple of minutes, the belts became as silent as the workers.

Nobody said anything. And I began to point at women, just pointing to whoever, and began asking, '¿Cuántos años tienes aquí?' Most said they'd been there more than ten years. '¿Y pa' qué?' I said. 'Yo tengo 14 años aquí, y todavía me pagan lo mismo.' I told them all, women and men, that we deserve much more money per hour. But as quiet as it was, no one listened. One of the managers, a man who did not speak a word of Spanish, told the workers to get back to work, and they all did. All except Conchita.

Conchita took a step back and in a loud voice said, 'es cierto.' She was a big woman, bigger than all the women and even bigger than most of the men, so everyone heard her. She walked up and stood next to me, and then I shouted, 'no se dejen.' We could see the manager looked a little worried. In English he said that everybody better get

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**"One of the managers, a man who did not speak a word of Spanish, told the workers to get back to work, and they all did. All except Conchita."**

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back to work or that no one would get paid. They all turned back to the resting conveyor belts and began reinspecting the tomatoes. The men shook their heads and continued filling and lifting boxes of produce.

The manager walked over to the switch and turned on the conveyor belt and gave Conchita and me an evil smile. I took off my apron and hat and threw them onto the vegetables going by. Then Conchita got real mad and threw her apron and hat on the ground and called everybody *pendejos*. We walked out together. For the first time in five years I felt cool fresh air on my chest.

We laughed as we walked towards *El Rincón del Diablo* because we knew that no packing shed plant would hire us again, and since Conchita called all of the workers *pendejos*, *nombre*, we were not going to get invited to any parties, and that made us laugh even more. My mother and *tías* were mad at me. They said they were embarrassed

and that I should say I was sorry to the manager and ask for my job back. That's when I said that Conchita was wrong when she called everyone *pendejos*. I told my mother and *tías* that Conchita should have said *pendejas*, too.

It didn't take long for the whole town to hear what happened at the packing shed that day. Most people were happy about what I did and said they would have done the same if they didn't have a family to support. I was like a hero to a lot of people. Not just me, *pero* Conchita, too. Everybody knew who we were, not just in Edcouch, but all around. From Weslaco to Edinburg, and even out of the Valley. *Sí*, we did the right thing.

It was just two days after me and Conchita quit the packing shed, when Riche and his brother José came to my house. It was a good thing my mother was not home because she would not have let them in. They were the owners of the cantina *El Gato*, and Riche had driven trucks with my father years ago. But Riche didn't just drive for the owners of the packing shed; he drove for others too.

They said they heard what I did at the packing shed and wanted me to work for them. *Bueno*, I needed a job, but I was not going to sleep with men there. I made sure I told them that. 'No,' they said, 'we want you to be in charge of *El Gato*, to be the manager. I would be in charge of keeping the cantina in order and in charge of the women. In charge of everything. They told me I would make three times what I made at the packing shed, and I could even have a bedroom. I wanted the job, but then I thought of Conchita. So I tried to make an agreement with them. I would only take twice what I was making if they gave Conchita a job there, too, making as much as me. At first they said no, but I said that she stood next to me at the packing shed and would stand next to me if trouble should happen at *El Gato*. Again, they said no. Right at that very moment guess who knocked on the door and walks in like it's her house? Conchita.

The men saw how big she was when she walked in. She stood a foot taller than them. She had big arms, huge legs, and her hands could almost go around a grapefruit. She could lift the boxes of oranges easily. As soon as they saw her, I said, 'This is Conchita,' and just like that, we both got hired. We moved into *El Gato* that same night.

My mother was mad, and said no man would marry me as long as I worked there. She missed being loved, but I didn't want to be in love, and I knew that love would

never find me in a *casa de cantineras*. If it did, then it would have to be true love.

That first night in *El Gato* we didn't sleep because the music and laughter kept going until we could hear the roosters sing to their chickens, and the walls were very thin and you could hear everything next door. *El Gato* was a place where people could pass out, but not sleep. Riche and Jose introduced us to all the girls we were going to watch over, and they were very young. We found out that a couple were only 15, but they brought in the most money so we couldn't do anything about it. We had twelve girls and the oldest was 20, but they acted so much older at night when the lights were low and their makeup was bright red. During the day they played and made fun of the men they had to be with, and the things they said . . . no, I learned so much about men through those young girls.

After some time I became the older sister they never had, and Conchita was the sweet mother they had always wanted. They didn't like me as much as they liked Conchita, until I broke a broomstick over a man's head. It was a busy night because it was a full moon. Then something got into this man who was with Rachel, our prettiest girl, and he started hitting her. When I heard her screaming, I knew she was in trouble, so I went to see. When I got into the room, there was a fat naked man on top of her, slapping her like she was an animal. I jumped on top of him, but he was possessed and threw me off like a doll. When I fell to the floor, I saw a broom in the corner and grabbed it. I hit that

*cabrón* over the head as hard as I could; I broke that broom in two. Then he got up, but he was stumbling. I dragged his stinking, naked body by the hair on his head to where everyone was drinking and dancing and just let him fall on his face. Everyone stopped and then I said, '*Nadie jode con mis chulas.*' Riche and José looked worried, but then the man's friends started laughing and everybody went back to dancing and drinking. I don't know how long that naked man lay on the floor, but I didn't care.

After two years there I learned that most men were cowards. They don't have the inner strength to make decisions, because making decisions takes courage. They came to *El Gato* because they didn't have to open up to the girls, but the *chulas* knew that only the scared men drank, hoping to drown their fears. They came in to complain about the long hours and low pay at the packing shed, but they never did anything about it. They fought with each other over stupid things like little boys did, and if they lost an argument, they went home and hit their wives. But they would never say anything to the owners of the packing sheds. They were even afraid to walk home at night because they said the devil might get them. But when you are afraid, the devil has already beaten you.

All this also happened during the time that the packing shed owners began to hire *braceros* from Mexico. Owners made an agreement with the rich in Mexico so that they would send two thousand young men with strong arms to work the fields. There was so much work that more people were needed, and with more people, it meant the packing sheds didn't have to give our old workers more money. *Pero*, no one said anything, no one except Javier.

It was the freeze of 1951 and everything was dying by the touch of the north winds. One man died of a bad cold, and the owners made many of the workers go home, but kept working the *braceros*. It wasn't fair to us and it wasn't fair to the *braceros*. The men at the bar complained, like they always did, and Javier, who was from Michigan and had only been living in Edcouch for two months, stood up and banged the bar with his fist.

'*¡Como chingan, pero nunca hacen nada!* Every time I come here it's the same. All you do is cry like babies.' The men said nothing. Then I stood up, too, and when I did I felt like we were together.



View from Edcouch towards Elsa, on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Photo by David Rice.

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**"They were even afraid to walk home at night because they said the devil might get them. But when you are afraid, the devil has already beaten you."**

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'He's right! *Por qué se dejan,*' I said. 'You need to stand up and do something.' The men looked at each other and Pedro, the head truck driver, and said there was nothing they could do. Javier said that there's always something that can be done. He was young and I knew that he could do anything. And I thought to myself that if my husband were still alive, he would say the same thing.

I said that they were the truck drivers and that they could refuse to drive the trucks until they were paid more. Javier smiled and said I was right. He tried to organize them and after a while everyone agreed. Over the next month the truck drivers started meeting in El Gato to see what would be the best day to stop driving the trucks. They were excited, but a little afraid. But not Javier. He kept saying that if they were all together, brother to brother, that it would work. *Ay, pero mi cariño Javier nunca leyó la Biblia. Él no sabía el cuento de los hermanos, Cain y Abel.*

Many things happened when Javier was here. My life meant more to me because I was in love, but I didn't want him to get too close, because if he left me then I would finally fall away from myself. *Sí*, nothing ever happened between us, but people thought so. He would stay with me at El Gato and we would talk until sunrise. I wouldn't let him leave. I would tell him to stay because between midnight and sunrise the devil would be walking around and there he was safe with me.

El Gato was filled with truck drivers the night before the walkout. Almost all of them were there, many with their wives, and the women had said that if the men walked out, they would follow their husbands. Javier was very happy even though Pedro, who had been helping him the most, left early along with a couple of other men. Pedro said that everyone should go home to get some good sleep for the

big day ahead of them, and that tomorrow night they would celebrate. But Javier said, 'Drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die.' He was in the army in World War II and someone told me that that was what the soldiers used to say when they were over there.

That was the night I held him so close trying to take him all inside, but he was like a cloud or like feathers. He was so light that he floated in my arms and in the morning he was gone. I got dressed and got Conchita up. We went outside and it was so cold, *ay qué frío*. That's when the first day of the freeze started and it was even too cold for Javier. We walked down to the packing shed to cheer for the men and women, but when we got there they were all outside, and they weren't going to do anything.

Jorge and his wife Lara, and a few others came up to us and asked us where Javier was. I haven't heard him or seen him since that night. But once in a while when I'm laying in bed I feel like I'm floating, and then I know that I'm in his arms.

The manager and owner came out and they knew what the truck drivers were up to, but they also knew that they were not going to do anything. Pedro stood next to the manager and owner, and said in Spanish, 'What are you waiting for? We need to get those trucks moving.' At first the men didn't move and I thought, *por fin*, they're going to stand up, but then Pedro said, 'Javier is not here.' And the men began to walk into the building. Conchita and I looked at each other and said nothing.

I called Javier's house all day, but I knew he was not there. Conchita said we could walk over to his house, but we both knew he wasn't there. And besides, I was watching Rachel's baby girl.

Rachel had got pregnant on purpose by her boyfriend and moved out, and I still delivered the baby.

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**"They were excited, but a little afraid. But not Javier. He kept saying that if they were all together, brother to brother, that it would work."**

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During the day Rachel and her boyfriend, Ricky, were moving all their things to Weslaco, where they were going to live. You could tell that they were in love, and I was happy for them. Rachel was my favorite girl and her baby daughter was the most beautiful child I had ever seen. Conchita said the baby looked like me and she was as light as feathers as she slept in my arms. Around six-thirty, when the sun was going down, Rachel and Ricky were coming back on mile 1015, and drove into one of those cotton-picking machines. Everyone knew it was the man's fault that was driving, but they never did anything to him because he owned lots of land.

We heard about the crash as soon as it happened and José took me, the baby, and Conchita to mile 1015 to see if Rachel and Ricky were okay. It was a very cold night and as we drove up to where the crash was we could see white cotton blowing across the road. Rachel and Ricky were still in the truck, but they were covered in soft red cotton, and they looked like they were in a deep sleep, dreaming of laughing. To me the dead always looked happy.

Some of the cotton was high in the air above the fields but it was going against the wind, and it was flying like doves. It was everybody I had known. I held the baby tightly and whispered to her, 'We are going to fly.'

We went back to El Gato and I began to pack. Conchita didn't try to make me stay. She knew it was too much. I packed a box and we tied some rope around it, and José drove us to the bus station and he didn't try to make me stay either. They all knew better. I had saved almost two thousand dollars and Conchita had put close to a thousand dollars in the box we packed. I didn't know it until I opened it. *Ay, que Conchita*. I went as far as the bus would take us, and that was Chicago. I came back once to see my mother in 1953, and that's when I saw the devil."

Michelle looked over at her boyfriend, who held the video camera steady and focused on Gloria's face.

"So you really saw him?"

"*Como no*," Gloria said with a nod. "And not just him but his demons, too, burning our church down."

"Did he have horns, like they say he does?"

"Oh yes. He had horns on his head, like a goat does."

"And did he have a tail, too?"

"*También*. He had a long tail that dragged on the ground and he even had chicken feet," Gloria said, and then

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*". . .they were covered in soft red cotton, and they looked like they were in a deep sleep, dreaming of laughing. To me the dead always looked happy."*

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she began to whisper. "And his eyes were yellow and his teeth so white."

"What else?" asked Michelle as she moved closer to her.

Gloria smiled and chuckled, "*Ay*, he smelled so bad. *Como caca y chi*."

Michelle laughed with her grandmother and said, "*Como caca y chi*?"

Gloria nodded and put her hand to her chest and said, "*Sí m'ija*. You don't think the devil is going to smell good, do you?"

Michelle nodded her head and grinned. "Well, did he have skin like a snake? And was it red?"

Gloria took in a breath and her smile faded, "*Como no, m'ijita*. Yes, he has skin like a snake." She paused and let her breath out gently with a sigh, and looked at the floor while touching her rosary. Her eyes looked up into the naïve eyes of the young child.

"*Pero*, his skin is not red, it's white."