

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Yolanda G. Birdwell

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdes

Date: May 4, 2007

Transcribed by: Carol Valdes

EV: I've explained to you about what we are going to do with these interviews, and I'll be sure to give you a copy.

YGB: Ok

EV: First of all we will have to do this all in English because the transcriber does not speak Spanish. I say for myself as much as for you.

YGB: No problem, even though it may be some frustration

Now, will you give me your full name please for the record.

YGB: My name is Yolanda Garza Bermea and I was born in Tamaulipas, and I came here as a student and I married Walter Birdwell and I now Yolanda Garza Birdwell.

EV: Where did you go to school when you came here?

YGB: I went to business school in 1961. My grandmother lived here and all my father's sisters were here right there on Canal St. close to Ninfa's old restaurant. I was invited to come here when I was 16 years old. I came after I finished my schooling in Mexico I told my father I wanted to come here. It took me a month to file my papers and I was able to come here.

EV: What part of Tamaulipas were you from?

YGB: I was born in Tamaulipas, my father was in agriculture. He was a farmer.

EV: He had his own land?

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YGB: A piece of land, yes. He had a ejidatario title which was the land that was given to them after the Revolution. He had about 25 acres. Somebody who is familiar with Mexico would know that came up after the troubles that went on. And my father lived in the United States from the time he was six years old. He married my mother here in Texas and he decided to leave and we were all born in Mexico. One of the reasons that he left, that he told us, was because of racism. My father was tall, dark and worked in construction and one time he was ejected from a restaurant because there was a sign that said, "No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed." So my father left and we were all born in Mexico. He did not let us come to the United States until we had the minimum knowledge of English, at least two of us ended up here in the United States. So when I came to the I had a dictionary that he bought be in Brownsville, Texas and I studied it and I was able to understand the basic English just to help me. I decided to stay and I went to business school.

EV: But your father was born in Mexico.

YGB: Yes, he was born in Mexico about 1906, and he lived here six years in a row and I understand that my father and his mother, who had become a widow – my grandfather who worked on the railroad, Garza, Agapito Garza, I understand, he crossed and they only had to pay \$.25, that's the story that was told, and they could come and go, and when my father came it was \$.25. So then that's how my father ended up here most of his youth. He used to play baseball, here.

EV: And he spoke English?

YGB: Very well.

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EV: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

YGB: Yes I did. We were a total of six sisters, no brothers. My brother died and, again, my father was in agriculture. And all of sisters live in Mexico, with the exception of another sister and I are the only ones that live here in the United States.

EV: So your father, he missed the Mexican Revolution, right?

YGB: He missed it, however my mother came a little bit later before they got married and my mother remembers things and places. She was from Coahuila, groups of people used to put up *campamentos* [encampments].

EV: What part of Coahuila?

YGB: Villa Uniones. That's where my mother from. They said a lot of girls and my grandfather had to come this way to pick up work which is close by there at Sandy Point, here close to Freeport, that's where my mother and my father met and that's where they got married. So my mother's family, maybe not my mother in particular, they picked cotton in that area of Sandy Point.

EV: Cotton?

YGB: Pick up cotton.

EV: Give me an idea where they lived, Musquiz, Monclova, Nava?

YGB: Monclova. My mother was from Coahuila, my father was born Nuevo Leon. That is their background.

EV: Any you have a son, what does he do?

YGB: My son is in real estate.

EV: Does he speak Spanish?

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YGB: Some. Uh-huh, yes he does.

EV: You made sure he does...

YGB: Of course, he does.

EV: Like you father sent you here with a little bit of English, you sent your son out with a little bit of Spanish.

YGB: Yes, yes. Walter, my husband, studied Spanish too.

EV: Did he really. I didn't know he was bilingual?

YGB: Walter is bilingual.

EV: Was he bilingual when you met him?

YGB: Yes, he came from Missouri and when he went to the university, and his bachelors degree one of the major criteria was Spanish and that's the reason he was sent to the University of Texas and then to Houston and that's where we met when he was in the army.

EV: When you decided to stay in Houston after school, you said you weren't going to back to Mexico, what was your first job, how did you start your career?

YGB: As I say, my grandmother was here, and I come from a family of six, my father and my mother were very liberal in many ways and conservative in many ways. We lived in a very small town, about 800 people, which I found it at the time to be very dormant, very boring, so I decided when I came here as a visitor, because I knew English after all, but I wanted to be seen as a good Mexican woman...at my time, a girl could not leave the house if she was not married. So the only way was...I married someone else before, Mr. Rangel, and when I

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married Birdwell I had been divorced. But originally the idea was, ever before my first marriage, was to come into a city environment.

EV: So then you began your career and finished your schooling....

YGB: Yes, and I've been here...I went to business school then before I married

Birdwell and my first marriage hadn't turned out very well, so I went to

work...oh, and I took English classes at night over there on Canal, right there at

Navigation, there used to be a school and I accelerated my English knowledge. I

used to take buses to ride Houston around just to learn how to speak English. So

the first year I was a cashier and then I a payroll clerked with a company here.

Then I took the time to raise my son, then I married Birdwell, then after I married

Birdwell it was in the 60's and it was the time of Martin Luther King uprising and

I had heard that there was going to be a big demonstration at the Herman Park and

that's where I heard the first speech by the Mexican American, Gregorio Salazar.

And that's how I connected to the Mexican American Youth Organization.

But prior to that while I was working I was very surprised to see that the company I was working for was very prejudiced company and I became very uncomfortable because even though I come from a very rural area, I was not exposed to different nationalities, when I came here, I was exposed to other groups. During that period of time I was working, and the national movement was going on, demonstrations were everywhere against the Viet Nam war, I made a choice...I wrote a letter to...I don't know...a Mr. Peña...somebody in office in San Antonio, or some political person...

EV: Albert Peña?

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YGB: I believe so. I have the letter here where I wrote where I wrote him for reference...to direct me where to go...because I wanted to become active. In my family, I was told by my father and my mother to always question everything. You just don't accept anything...question why, where, when, etc. So, I was very uncomfortable about racism because in my job first as a cashier then as a payroll clerk, I was told by an Anglo lady that I could not speak to the workers to explain the insurance because they were sweaty, they were not nice to look at, they were only workers. So the reason was the most horrible situation. Obviously, I had to follow the procedure but I was very uncomfortable. So that made me very aware that something was wrong, so I felt very uncomfortable so that's when I wrote that letter and I made connection with the first time to a demonstration when Gregory Salazar was already organizing a Mexican American organization, and Carlos Calbillo and others. When I heard he was speaking about racism and things like that, of course coming from my father's background that he also told me about the racists, and that was very very important for me to fight racism whatever I saw it. So that was my first organization that I ever belonged to and after that organization I can say that that organization more than any I had ever belonged, that was the most effective, that was the best lessons, that was the best brotherhood and sisterhood I ever had, and also the best ideas ...around people who thought like me. So that year, I'm talking about 1960 something...1968 until now early 1970's... had been the most....it made the most impact on me.

EV: You used a word I did not quite understand. You said, 'The first time around you had been around" I don't know, maybe I can pick it up on the

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tape when we transcribe it. Number One, you came here with the the ideas of racism your father had told you about?

YGB: Yes..

EV: Now, on your job did you experience any racism aimed at you?

YGB: Of course.

EV: OK

YGB: Not only on the job, but in my house, in my area, where....we bought our first home in West University, we bought for only \$20.000 and it was a good investment, I believe. I used to have braids, long braids, the black braids since I was younger, and I remember cutting grass and numbers of people asking me how much I would charge for cutting grass. (Laughter). I also remember this, we had a party on the street, they would block the street, and a lady asked me, I had a neighbor's child, a relative, and someone asking me how much I charge for taking care of children, and I am not saying those are demeaning and that I would not do those kind of jobs, but I'm just saying they did not expect a Mexican with my looks to be living in West University, so that was very interesting.

But I have been a victim of racism even thought I haven't more or less

been deprived of economically, but racism, yes, it was here.

EV: Once the fire was lit inside of you by Gregorio, did you join his group right away?

YGB: Yes sir.

EV: Do you remember the fist demonstration you were involved in with him?

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YGB: First we met, we used to meet in the Northside, in an old gasoline station and I remember the first demonstration...well, the group I had first mentioned in the interview...we were young, we did not care...we discussed it...to please anyone. We wanted just to be the voice of our people because we felt we were being ignored by the media. We were not even mentioned on television. I remember seeing "Speedy Gonzalez," something like that, very minor, we [Mexican Americans}didn't even exist, we were invisible, I mean we invisible, I know, economically, but we were even worse than [unintelligible]. So what we chose to do was not to be conservative, now there is something that I have to mention, we made it very active...a were conscious that we were not going to be mainstream. We were not going to accommodate anyone, we were going to do our own thing and the way we think it should be done. And I remember the first demonstration was at the school board...excuse me....the first demonstration was in asking the Presbyterian Church to allow us to use their facility that was closed on the Northside, it was closed up...the Presbyterian Church...uh...San Marcos Presbyterian Church and we went through all the procedures to ask them to permission to use the facility and they denied us. We went to three or four meetings with different board meetings, etc and nothing so then we chose at that time to take it over, which we did. We just actually, physically took over the church but we used all the procedures and so...we pushed the envelope in the legalities of the issue. However, we didn't break anything and we were established, we established ourselves....

EV: (Laughing) Pushed the envelope, pushed open the door, and all that...

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YGB: Actually what happened is that we broke into the back window, we had a child go in, and we replaced the little window right there. So when they came in and asked us, "How did you get in?" and we said, "a miracle." (Laughter) And that's how it happened, we never told them, I just telling you how it happened. Actually, we fixed it...we broke in, we fixed it then we said, "miracle."

After that we conducted classes, games, we boycotted...at the time we were boycotting the schools and we had meetings. And I remember one time having over 500 people in the community there.

EV: So you broke into San Marcos when they had the "huelga" [strike], the, HISD strike so that was in 1970 or 1971...

YGB: Well, maybe so, but I do know that was one of our first demonstrations that we pushed the system a little bit and of course we uh...they tried to evict us by the police several times and it was a lot of exchange with the police and we became very well known, some people agreed with what we were doing and some did not agree but...but the ones who agreed, we got a lot of money, cash money, so we kept going.

EV: OK, did the presbytery, the owners of the church, never argue with you or did they...

YGB: Again, as I told you we went...

EV: I mean after you took over.

YGB: Yes, by that time we were already in there...they were exposed again. This is something we had to defend against each institution. The church, with respect to all, it delivers...you have to question the churches and again, in this particular

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case, and I would do it again if I had the situation, institutions that are empty, that are not being utilized and don't pay taxes and we have to pay taxes, why should they remain open. This is something of the failure of these so-called democracies that we have...that I'd like to talk about it.

So therefore they were put in a situation that they had to validate what they doing in a Latino community...an Anglo community that was prominent at one time but they do not live in the community any more, they have an empty building. So we put them into a situation where they had to explain and I know there were some who agreed with us. I went there about a month ago because I had an interview in relation to this and guess what, the place has a fence now and is very well kept, nothing like when we took it over. But when we took it over I have to say, never was there any drug arrests, never was there any destruction...nothing. Everything was for the purpose for making the people proud of ourselves...but, yes, to be radical, yes. That's another thing about MAYO, questions have come up, "Why was this MAYO more radical," or that what they say you were...I don't know...this is somebody else's interpretation. We felt that we needed to raise the questions that other people could not ask for whatever reason, we asked it. Why? Why we were so much neglected in the Latino community? Why were these schools so run down? Why was so much trash? That's another thing that we one time we asked the city of Houston to come and pick up trash and we said if they don't come pick it up we will take it to the City to force them to clean it up, they picked it up in one street. So those were the tactics that we used to use at the time, because we did it. I mean if we said we

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sere going to do something, we did it. We took action even if it took meant arrest

– I was arrested probably more than 5 times with MAYO, probably, if I am not mistaken.

EV: How many people were in MAYO at the time?

YGB: We were...at one time we were...when we took over the Shamrock Hilton we were about 100 people involved...but in the core, I would say not more 20 people.¹

Whatever took place we cannot give credit to one individual, it was a collective and the Chicano movement was very very active at the time and the ideas came and a lot of support came from intellectuals like yourself...people who went to school, people who knew more than we did, we were only in the community, so I agree with you. The only thing we did was we made tortillas, we made tacos, and we made uh...we had lemonade and something that would not make anything that would dirty the plates and we took them [these dishes and drinks] in and we served ourselves and we sat down and we ate there with them.

(Laughter).

EV: Did you make any studies on your own of any revolutionary writers, thinkers, and philosophers?

YGB: My father always emphasized...we were from an non-urban environment...and he always had books and he monitored....you know he didn't

¹ This was in protest of a group of Mexican American bureaucrats from Washington D.C. who came to Houston under the pretext of wanting to establish communication on the local level in an effort to developing meaningful social programs. However, the meetings were all held at night, in times and places inaccessible to the people, thus this visit by government officials was seen as a sham by the activists in Houston, especially when it was discovered that they had leased a fishing yacht in order to do some deep sea fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

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want us to read all those newspapers that we called the “red papers,” you know there was a lot of killing.

EV: A lot of what?

YGB: Killing. Yeah, he did not bring that home, but I remember my father emphasized on the issue of land, the importance of the land. If you do not have education and you don't have land, you are to have a very rough time. So when I read....that and then also...I picked up that from him...and I also read Mexican writers. *Labyrinth of Solitude*...

EV: *Labyrinth of Solitude*?

YGB: Yes, before I came...that relates to

EV: By Octavio Paz?

YGB: Ocatavio Paz, yes...and that relates to the issue of the dynamics between the Mexicans and the Mexican Americans. Actually after that there was a study made that they book was not very well received in favor of the Mexican Americans...

EV: No it wasn't, because of the chapter he had on “Zoot Suits” was very insulting.

YGB: Very insulting, yes. And then I read that and also another book I read, remember the Cuban Revolution when the CIA killed Guevara and his head was brought to the United States.

EV: I didn't hear that part.

YGB: Yeah, the head. It was a CIA agent that killed...and I was in Mexico at the time and I remember my father not being a pro-Fidel or pro-Castro, but he was

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very sorry that they did that. Then I come here and in some quarters where I was working there was like a celebration in contrary to what I was telling, so I picked up from my father, and I'm saying he was not a revolutionary or anything, but he was a political person, he was also very political. My father was a member of the PRI, is not very...but I mean active. So, when I came here and I saw that Fidel and also Che Guevara were looked at as if they were not humans, y'know, so they were totally different. Then I also read a book, it was the most magnificent gift to myself that I read *Occupied America*, by Rudolfo Acuña.

EV: Si!

YGB: Now, I ...I say it again, and I wrote to Rudolfo Acuña about 2 years ago, I sent him a note saying "Thank You" for writing that book. I have the history of the struggle between Mexico and the United States and in my dictionary and in my reading, it was stolen land...in the same way they are trying to take over the territory of Iraq. The same situation, the same situation as here, they are trying to do in Palestine taking the land from the people. So when I came with that understanding that was my understanding because I had already read my history and it is totally different opinion from what happened in Mexico. The invasion of the United States when they went to Vera Cruz...what they did in Matamoros. What...the killing and then the picture that they send out....the writing that they send out saying that we were all "greasers" and they describe us as inhuman. That's what I had read before I came here. Then I picked up Rudolfo Acuña. And I want you to know and not meaning disrespectful to anybody, Rudolfo Acuña has been the most important book to me than anybody in the world

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because he gave me tools to understand the dynamics. So when I came from Mexico and my accent, I still have it, I was able to understand the dynamics because we were all, even though had from different levels, of development, we were all in the same boat. We were subjects of colonialization and subjects of colonialization when they are uprooted, they uproot, and when you are rooted you do not root and that is the danger right now, not for the system, for the present system, if they keep uprooting us, if they keep uprooting the indigenous people, if they keep uprooting, we are not going to be true democracy. So that is the reason I was very strong that this is my land, I belong here, no one....it just because a situation of history that I ended up with that, but I have been here longer prior than any Anglo that was invited here and they were invited except that they took over.

EV: Yeah. At the time, take yourself back to the 60's and 70's, because I remember that there was some type of ideological separation, not ideological, but tactical separation – ideas of how we were going to do things – between Gregorio, UOIC, PASSO, LULAC,...and when we first got involved in the Movement, although we kinda of talked to one another, there wasn't any kind of coordinated effort and often times we would argue with each other about what we were gong to do. Now, my question is, at some point we began to talk to each other and say, "Look, we are fighting the same battles. Why don't we sit down and we give Gregorio and his group, MAYO, their space, but don't publicly bad-mouth us because we are doing it more conservatively and we got with LULAC who was doing it more conservatively than we were and said...so we had kind of an

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understanding. Do you remember anything about that, or is it just my own memory.

YGB: I remember...

EV: Let me ask, did you ever have those kind of feelings that UOIC, PASSO, and LULAC were too conservative, we need to be more liberal or they are not part of us...we are separate from them?

YGB: Hmm.

EV: Gregory was kind of a charming guy (laughter)

TGB: We had a lot of meetings and I remember that particular phenomena, that it only dominated for about 2 months. We fell out, "We don't want anything to do with them. They are too conservative, they want to do it...yes. But then, remember, there were a lot of people with a lot of different experiences, everybody read different books and different experiences and that is the beauty of that particular organization, and again, for me I find it very educational. That at one point there was the issue of having other people from other races in our organization. So we had a different process, we were learning how to be...I have never been in any organization, you know coming from Mexico...and I remember that phenomena did exist, but then we also became a little bit smarter...not to get involved to fight each other in public. And if you recall, the Shamrock of Houston was someone else's baby, or some else's trouble, which...we just got in and they allowed us to go on...we asked for the conference to be placed in the barrio....

EV: Exactly.

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YGB: and they didn't want to do that, but I would have to say, what you mentioned, it did exist but then the organization changed a little bit because we became aware after reading...yeah, we read everything...we read Marx, we read Lenin, we the Cuban Revolution we were very aware of what was happening in Africa....remember, the times, we could not be separated from what was happening all over the United States. Everyone was questioning the intervention in Viet Nam and the...so some people had the idea, "Let's do out thing and let's try to minimize the rupture, yet there were some personal ruptures in people but that happens in everything. I know there are some people right now that couldn't stand me because they consider myself...I was living in West University and they??? 345 and my husband was a mail carrier. I mean how he made a living was a blue collar worker, the only thing...he chose to do that. He had a degree and all that, the thing was he chose to work in a job that would allow us to do the things that we wanted to do, which was to be active. So yes, it minimize.because we worked together on some issues.

EV: I find as I read today, about writers who write about that time, but they miss this. They don't see what a concerted effort it was. It was probably our greatest moment at working together from different classes, social, professional, that's ever happened that I've seen in Mexican American movements, and that was...I remember Leonel [Castillo] and I think somebody documented that...in Guadalupe's [San Miguel] book, that Leonel worked with Gregory but with the agreement that we wouldn't try to influence each another.

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YGB: And that makes sense...when Leonel was working closely with the HISD, we were working... Leonel was very nice...I have nothing, nothing...I never had any personal conflict with Leonel at all and we...at the time MAYO never did because at the time Leonel had the ability to work very well with us. Leonel was ??? 369 to MAYO but in some way he was able to be a voice when we could not be in those meetings. And I remember one particular case when they wanted to fire someone in the HISD or something and we outside, we learned from someone else that there was going to be a meeting and we kept bumping the door, maybe you were inside the meeting and that had something to do with whatever they were going to do with this particular person that they wanted to fire that was representing us. And Leonel was inside when he got up he said, "Hi, how are you?" and he went on to his meeting. No one outside....we did not, y'know...if you recall the situation...that was directly working with Leonel and also when we were in a demonstration and we got on top of the tables at HISD they did not allow us to speak. We asked permission to speak, we were on the agenda, ??? 376 they did not let us speak ...so we had to get on top of the table because we had to do it. So I say to you that that is a very good observation. I even realized, I did not ask the people to do what I did...I chose to do that and I still don't regret it because I wanted to do that. Who was going to do it if we did not do it?

EV: As we progressed in the city, and a few doors opened up here and there – HISD hired more people [Mexican Americans] and people got into office...

YGB: David Lopez

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EV: Exactly, David Lopez...as these things began to happen and you've got some kind momentum going on in the city, that's when LULAC came through for us, and they were as conservative as they were back then, they still giving us "quevradas" (breaks) where they could but a lot of the MAYO, who were the ones that were at UH?

YGB: MECHA

EV: MECHA, I did too, I bad-mouthed LULAC all the time but I didn't know that other people from other sources were working to let us have what we wanted but they were doing in the halls but you still needed the people from the side pushing.

YGB: Absolutely. Two things I wanted to mention that are very important. One time I was invited...we went to a...we were invited to a lot of places in Texas and we went to Dallas to a meeting. Where we had a meeting with LULAC where they invited to speak and I remember speaking right there at LULAC which is right there at the beginning of Montrose and it was full, the house was full from LULAC ladies very well dressed. And of course...and I remember telling them this...which was very...remember English was a little more rougher than now because I have been here longer...but I remember when I went to Dallas, to save money we slept in the same room; Gregorio, Poncho...all the guys, and there was another young lady and I, another young girl and I, to sleep in the same room, just to save money, because we didn't have any and my husband stayed home to work. So when I came to this meeting I remember saying to the LULAC, "Well, you know, I know the people are saying this about MAYO, that this and that. I want

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you to know that these are wonderful people. Last night we all slept together."

(Laughter). But it was true, but I wanted to mention that they treated me with the most respect.

EV: Did they?

YGB: Yes, so that was what I was saying to you, when I mentioned that we slept together that would have been the have been worse. LULAC so the other thing was that...another situation, we were invaded by persons who wanted to invade our organization, someone called me from Houston, a prominent person, had told me whatever was going to happen. So yes, we did have people who did not like what we were doing. We had a lot of support too, because this particular person tells that this person is going to be a Chicano with an Anglo woman and they are coming to infiltrate the organization. I knew the voice, and knew who this person was and to this moment I keep it as a secret, but that was a tremendous insult obviously we were not doing anything illegal, everything was out in open but at the same time we did not want to be infiltrated so that...so people did cooperate with us.

EV: So if you won't tell us who your informant was can you tell us who the people who came to spy on you?

YGB: It was very interesting because my husband was living in West University, which is a very fancy neighborhood, you lived in West University. So this is interesting, these guys appear and say they call us and said they wanted to really get into the movement and the radicals. Walter loves guns because he is a hunter, right, so we put guns in every corner of the room and then one on the table. When

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they arrived, and we said, "God, we welcome you blah, blah, blah...." We played a good game, because remember Walter was in the Army intelligence, so he knew a lot about how to question people, so we put on a big show and Gregory was here and Alex, and he said, "We welcome you, but we know someone is betraying us, we are ready to use whatever means necessary to prevent that." Well, it was so obvious that they knew they had been exposed so they left.

EV: Do you remember what their names were?

YGB: No, but I do have 1,000 pages of my FBI, it is all blacked out and in places. But I wanted to show you how lucky we were – we were always sure no drugs, we were always sure to do everything....yes, we were radical, yes we picked up the table and this and that but we did not do anything that would jeopardize, embarrass the community, so, yeah...they didn't get us. So in the pages of the FBI, they name [unintelligible] which is an insult to the Mexican, for me. I have one page that says, "The District Attorney of Houston," and I have a copy of it and I'd like for you to have a copy...

**EV: Oh, yeah, absolutely...

YGB: He says, "This woman appears...." Oh, they came to arrest me in my house because I made a speech in a ??? 465 that did not???? Me???? And I forced a woman that had been mistreating Mexican American children in a public meeting. The woman, Mrs. Monroe, charged me with interfering with her employment...they come and arrest me. ??? 470. When they did that, they saw my books, because I had to take them back, I was cleaning, so they saw my books, in ???473 they called everybody. They picked up my ID where I became

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a US citizen but they have in this report this letter says, "Mrs. Birdwell is to be investigated because she appears to be very well balanced and revolutionary thinking. She may be a Cuban agent or something." I ???? and it was from the District Attorney here in Houston.

EV (laughter)

YGB: So can you imagine, so a Mexican could not have been for the rights of a Mexican, and against oppression for representation in the schools, and house cleaning ??? 483. She had to be a Cuban." And I have it, and that's from the District Attorney and that'sthey forgot to...??? 488 and I have it at my other house.

EV: Yeah, I'd like to include that

YGB: About 8,000 pages so yeah, we were infiltrated about 2 or 3 times.

EV: Your husband got arrested once didn't he get terminated from the U. S. Postal Service for awhile? Because he was a communist?

YGB: Yes....Well, after I left MAYO, I became involved with a bookstore...a bookstore from China, books from China, The People's Republic of China, China used to be an enemy of the United States, still is, but not as....as a super power coming up...

EV: Now it lends us money to carry on a war (laughter)...

YGB: Exactly. So what happened is I went to China and a friend of mine and I had a bookstore on Elgin and my husband, again we were infiltrated for that one too we learned later on, the Ku Klux Klan came to interrupt a meeting...a ceremony that we had for Mao Tse Tung, at the time Mao had died, so they threw

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a big rock through the window and they thought we didn't have a gun, but we had one gun and Walter shot him back and Walter was fired, yes.

EV: I thought it was...my memory....

YGB: Of course, if it had been any other person that comes to your store and you were selling American flags, we had a right, but because we were promoting books about China, it was communist, that's why he...arrested, I was arrested...

EV: Most of you guys were part of the communist party, right? Carlos was had the communist philosophy, no? Carlos did, because he told me.

YGB: Yes...all of us were looking for an alternative to capitalism, all of us. I can tell right now, I am...even in the United States...the most capitalist, the super power, but I think the system is not working. I think an alternative is necessary or a reform because it's not working and at the time I was not working I was much more involved, I had more...prior to the Soviet Union coming down...I had much more hope for another system. I still do believe that the system we have now, the value system...this is something that I believe in and I wanted to make sure that before ...up to now, I believe that the present system that we have is not working. We need a new system and I hope that the oppressed people from other countries can help us together to develop ??? 534 because this system is not working. We cannot have the richest country in the world and ???

EV: How did you all at MAYO arrange your targets or who you were going to confront? How was that done?

YGB: Meetings. We met almost every night. Of course, you have to remember, again, we had a lot of ??? 008 in that week. We always made it a point to go out,

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and we met in homes. My house in West U was...I could say was the headquarters, the second headquarters besides Gregory's back garage. We met and we normally decided, less than 12 people and then we reviewed the dynamics of the activities. For example, the dynamic of one San Jacinto Day, there was going to be the governor of Texas was going to come to San Jacinto to celebrate the day they took over the day of taking the land from Mexico, blah, blah. Well, we didn't like that. You know, we thought that the write up, I don't know if it was the Post or the Chronicle, we didn't like it and so we needed to do something. So we decided discreetly to be there. So we made sure that we wanted to ask to ??? 015 our position and we wrote it up saying...and actually we were trying to include how many Latino names had been involved in that particular ??? that they would ignore every time...the Zaragosas, and you know...So they didn't let us do that and they brought horses and as I was telling you before that they put me between two horses, trying to corral us, to stop us and at the time there were a lot of us because we surprised them, that is another thing...??? of the surprise, was that MAYO was the greatest threat. Finally the governor said, "I think this is the shortest speech ??? not a speech." So we disrupted that particular ??? but we chose it on basis of the means and basis to make a point that they would not....when they talk about Texas history...they were not including those people who fought, the Tejanos, to obtain the land that belonged to Mexico.

So we did that at the time and I think the picture in the Chronicle...I got so upset because they maced me put some liquid on our faces to Poncho and I so I

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spit on them, so I am...??? 024 not to them but on the horses. So that was the element of surprise.

Another time that we thought was a good time was to disrupt the meeting at the Shamrock Houston, that was also the element of surprise because when we approached it they didn't expect that someone was going to go in so someone approached the table distracted the people at the table and they went behind and by the time they caught us we were already inside, most of the people were inside that was how it was. In other words, it was tactically done to distracting the people at the table who were letting people in and we went in without ??? 031.

EV: You know that was Herman Short at the time, as chief of police?

YGB: Yes

EV: The governor you were talking about was John Connally...

YGB: No, it was Clements, and if you go back in history Short was rumored to be very friendly with the Ku Klux Klan. ??? Very anti-Brown, very anti-Mexican. So, its true that we chose those issues but the reason we did it because it was so racist...it is still racist and very well alive. As you know recently a young man was brutalized by some young ??? 38 young kids. But, at the time we were completely ??? negated by the system. So that's why we had to do it.

EV: I suspected that after the Shamrock Hilton demostration...do you remember back then they were arresting guys if you didn't carry your draft card even after the service, because I was already a veteran and I carried my card that night but when I walked up to the meeting, and I don't know if you noticed it, but I learned later that someone had leaked to the police department that we were going to be

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there. That is why, if you remember they were all Mejicano police officers there and they were led my Sgt. Zamarrón.

YGB: Yes, absolutely, you have such a great memory....

TGB: They handled it extremely well..

EV: Extremely well.

TGB: You recall also that we were asked please not to break anything and we promised them and we kept our word that we would not break anything. We wanted to make a political point. And that's another thing that people may say that we may not have ???? 49 but everything we did was strategically chosen to make a political point. Yes, we were very political, we were not apologetic for what we did, and yes we were radical and that's another thing that came out...and has become very obvious in the subsequent movement. If you are radical, ?? among ourselves there is a little bit ofis not very welcome ??? 52. Especially later on in the United States has become even more conservative. I have been in meetings and still meetings where if I show up, for example, I....the last organization I was involved in was "Latinos Por La Paz," against the war in Iraq. We went to the City Hall and asked them to please ??? a solution to not....for Houston to be part of the cities not to support the war in Iraq.

Obviously there were some elements, right wing elements, that we have, there some very nice, positive, for our side but they were a lot of them making.??59.and I remember that we where like (sighing), you know like a ??? but look five years later. We were correct that Iraq was a complete failure, the invasion, so what I mean in still in some quarters it was ugh!, we didn't want that

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to be part of that cause for ??? 063 in Iraq. So I have always been involved in things that are not very popular.

I remember one time I was asked if I wanted to run for an office, like Gregory run for the school board, remember, and he got a lot of votes? And the wanted to me to tone down my politics but the thing is I don't believe ????. I believe that democracy, the democratic system, only gives you – this is the whole thing that is cut ??? 067only gives the majority, the vote of the majority. It does not guarantee you a job or anything else and democracy in the United States is democracy that money...is the best democracy that money can buy, so if you have money you can run, so what kind of democracy do we have? So this is the thing that we have to remember when we talk about....I don't want in my history people to think that I have not been fighting for people to go and vote. Yes, it is important to go and vote, it is important to be part of the system to go and make a difference, but you have to go even beyond that because as we have seen in the United States that we have, supposedly a democracy, and look what we have. We have a lack in the schools, we're losing against to other countries because we lack of education, lack of health care, so we are going to need a new system value for us to go beyond in democracy or to go beyond the corporatons because we now we have the issue of fascism. Fascism, according to the description in the dictionary is the following, and I am to be corrected if I'm wrong, it's when the corporation works closely with the government – show where that is not happening in the United States. Who controls the media? Univision, supposedly we have Latino media, Univision is owned by Israelis rich corporations. The wall

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that they going to establish on the border was an idea of an Israeli company that is going to build that fence. Who is Israel? It is a colony of the United States that is pumping money and they are the ones that have got the idea and they are the ones that are going to build it. And where are we? We are subjects of these two institutions, the United States government, which is run by the few rich people and the rest of the people suffer.

So what I am saying is that generally I have done, ?? 89 all my life, and that includes what I have done in defending my rights, but at the same time I am not comfortable, I'm not happy, I will give everything I have here, I will give it if I have an institution, or have an organization where we can move things to another level, which is economic.

The only freedom that we are going to have, in my opinion, is when we can differentiate that we are dominated economically. Economics is the only thing that is going to liberate us. Right now we are important – the Latino – because we consume, but don't ask any questions then we become very horrible, like Yolanda Garza Birdwell for asking questions. But, I prefer to be disliked by my enemies and be liked by myself, I like myself because in this country you are a very good Mexican, Chicano, whatever you want to call us, if we do not question. If we say, "Oh, I like the system," – to hell with the system, it is rotten to the core.

EV: So part of what you are saying is, "As long as the Mexican American are good consumers, we are great....

YGB: We are excellent!!

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EV: ...but the minute we want to share the pie, then we are not good any more.

YGB: Absolutely! We are distasteful, we are unwanted, we are not doers.

EV: I've not thought of that context and it's interesting.

YGB: And they want us to vote, but they want us to vote for those that they...those rich guys that they put up there. Because remember that this is the best democracy that money can buy. When do we have people we can put to run when people to run? They have to have money.

EV: What do you anticipate? What do you see happening if you have a society...I mean, we have Mexico where they [the rich] run everything, that's fascist too, economically and politically and that's all run my Mexicans. How do we answer that?

YGB: OK, Mexico....

EV: Well, excuse me, let me qualifying statement....or if....well go ahead, I'm trying to formulate....

YGB: I'm saying to you that being in Mexico, obviously being Mexican, because it is tremendous, it makes you feel good that they have their independence, that they...we have our own country. Unfortunately, the same system that exists in the United States is the same system they have over there, because we do have a class of people...remember this is where the class situation enters, it is less than 10% that runs the whole country. We have the richest man in the world in Mexico

EV: Exactly.

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YGB: And that person has billions and billions and billions of dollars and that person he is a ??118. With Gotari [former president of Mexico now in exile] that is in Ireland, he stole a lot of money, when they have a birthday for Bush...the older Bush...they meet in River Oaks. This class of people is 5%, and I'm giving you 10, but it is less than that. And this class of people they are on the same board of directors, the same people that control the media in Latin America, which isescapes my memory right now....a very rich man in Central America and they are very good friends of the Bush family. So therefore, you have to understand....this is very good that we defend our rights, as you are doing now to write the history, to write what we have done - the indigenous people, but at the same the big one, the big stroke is going to be to define for example, if it's a ?? 126 and an Aranda's, which ?? do you think I would go to, myself, politically, which one do you think I would go to? Obviously I'd go to Arandas, because Aranda is owned by a Mexican company and Aranda was the company that when the first of Mayo last year when the immigrants rights, the company closed up so the workers could go to the demonstration. That is my consciousness. Why should I go to Starbucks that that is the company that is run by a few rich people – Israelis ??? 132 that ask ??? so I can be ??? so they can oppress me? Obviously, I'm going to Arandas. That is the kind of consciousness that besides democracy...and that's what I say, I vote, I've already voted, I voted for Ms. Noriega because I feel she is ??135. I always vote and when I don't find a good candidate I vote for myself, I write it out...(Laughter) I writer it out or....because

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it's a protest but at the same time, we are not going to get anywhere if we don't
??? 138.

EV: But here is my question, don't you think that economics is really....the
question you are saying is right, I mean I agree with what you are saying, but it is
transnational. It's crossing borders.

YGB: Absolutely. In Mexico...in the United States, the reason they allow
Mexico to function is because they have their hands all over Mexico. ???? I read
that ???? the Soviet Union...that's the when the Soviet Union collapsed, because
they had their hand on that. They had more agents, after the Soviet Union, which
is Russia now, they had more agents in Mexico: FBI, CIA, why? Because they
have the neighbors right there and they have to have it under control with the
same value system...the value system is the following: greed, consumerism, ???
148 so they can keep making money out of us. Now, what I am saying, like a
book I am reading about economics about how you can develop something that
you can only...you can have *coperativas* (cooperatives) where you can only buy
what you need and when you need housing, health, education, and ??? 151 and
that's what I'd like to see and I know that in some parts of the world they are
trying to do that and places in Asia, so that is the kind of thing that we are going
to have to go, because you are right, these kind of societies, these problems is ??
154, the US is the big one because the US is the strongest, economicall, so far,
but now China is knocking at door. Does that make sense to you?

EV: Very much, I understand what you are saying. I just want to recap in terms
of the past [i.e., the 60's and 70's], that the main three thrusts that you have was

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school demonstrations, San Jacinto, and Shamrock Hotel, right? These were the three main things you all got involved with.

YGB: And the demonstration at the school, you know.

EV: You also had some conflict with the Pacifica Radio, no?

YGB: Recently? Yes, I have.

EV: (Laughter)

YGB: Very interesting. I'm glad you asked that. In my journey, MAYO was my ??? 165 organization. Maybe it was my youth, who knows, but I'm telling you that is the one that nobody hurt me, nobody....I learned a lot but it was like a jot of *compañirismo* [camaraderie], really beautiful, nobody will take it away from me. Yes, KPFT is a liberal organization and I made the mistake to deviate, I never had ??? 166, I always was an activist, activist????169 left because I was a ??? with October League. Then I went to the Palestine ??? meeting, which is very, very....you know you just don't do that. I was a member of the Palestine ??? for 29 years. So I did a lot of political work with people in the left, the left politics. Lately, about 2 years ago I was approached to run for the ??? at KPFT and I won the election. I was the third, there were two people ahead of me. I learned a lot from this liberal organization. My experience is the following: I'd rather work with someone that tells me "I took something from you and what are you going to do about it" than someone who says "I took it away and I want you to like me, and to love me" And I am not going to do that, I made that mistake and the reason I say this is because this is a liberal ??? 183 and it's true that they sent some programs such as "Democracy Now," and "Nuestra Palabra" something

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that is beneficial to our community. I am not saying they have not, but they raise a lot of money and they pretend to be liberal, they represent to be progressive but they only let you go so far. You are manipulated by a way of thinking that is, “Yes, we want you to have certain rights, certain...uh, get ahead but we want to keep ??? them out 189, which is the same thing that is happening with anything we do. In other words, it’s all you can raise a little bit, but I am the one with the ownership. Ant the reason I say that is because I raised the question in relation to unions, in relation to speak about ????? 193 sign, just sign this...

EV: Labor unions?

YGB: Labor unions are well infiltrated by a wave....if got out in a political situation, the control it....there is a certain way of thinking, you know the way it is, its democratic but not too much to the left, no, no, no. They keep it too much under control. So when I raised the question of having a more...on a...rider ???

199

EV: the rider what.....?

YGB: I’m going to give the book to read..

EV: Oh, thank you, ...Petra, “The Power of Israel Over the United States.”

YGB: Again, this shows you how the unions have control, and I talking about recently. So, what is happening is these people are not bad people but they don’t want things to get out of hand. See, if you are really for learning, you have to ask uncomfortable questions. You can say yes you can say no, if they don’t want to go in a certain way, because they control this money and I was in the ??? 211 department and I didn’t want to be part of the asking for money when I knew that

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they were not all the way to speak the truth, not because they want to do it, or

maybe because money is coming in, but yes, I did ...

EV: So was their feeling of trying to keep out the Palestinians....

YGB: The Israeli question does not come up, you want to be negative in this

???217 you probably have observed that, bring nothing and...??? You will

probably have to hide the book. For example, a lot of unions have their money

invested in Israel, I mean I am not anti-Israel...anti-Jewish, its just that Israel is a

country that has hurt us a lot, a lot of Latinos. I'm telling you, I have a name of

the companies all over the world. They going to get the contract, and they got the

idea, the got the idea ??? 225. So what I am saying is when I go to ??? 225,

because I'm very passionate about Palestine and the reason I'm passionate about

Palestine is because Acuña, it is another situation of colonialism.

EV: Which companies are going to build the wall?

YGB: I had the ??? 226, I sent an e-mail to a professor at the University of Texas,

and ??? it is an Israeli company and ?????. So, that is the situation, so my ??? is

this, liberal organization are more detrimental because they make yo believe you

are getting ahead when you are not because they got it!! They want to hold it and

so, so I tried to ??? it ??? I left the company. I left and said to them, "I don't want

to be any part of it and that 232 ???? because I want to be ???? on my political

situation, I don't want to be a part of... and yet we have the other voices. But,

God, those people raise so much money and they are friends of mine and we share

in conferences. You see in all that ??? 235 we brought the best speakers, they

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boycotte us because they...??? have so much power. I tell you, it should be the

United States of Israel. (Laughter)

EV: Do you get the feeling that we are...maybe this is what you are trying to say and I'm thinking of it in other terms, and that is that even though we think that we could sit right now with this Democratic advantage that we got in November elections, it's really not the advantage we think it is...for those of us who really some changes.

YGB: It's not, who says...Petra ??? 247 lectures in Latin America.

EV: Latin America has had some dramatic changes.

YGB: That's another thing, the U. S. is losing ties, losing the control of Latin America. And they are very afraid...you know what happened in Mexico...it was very afraid, they almost lost control but they put a lot of money with the new guy that was But yes, ??? 249 Mexico had the same problem that the United States and that is the only a few people run the show???.

When you put into world context, we are not a minority and we are not going to lose. It is going to take us some time we've got to understand the economics, that's my...

EV: What scares me is that no one I've ever found is more economically than a Latino rich man, they are horrible. Because the billionaires you were speaking of in Mexico they're not putting those billions back into Mexico, those billions are sitting here in San Diego, Miami, Houston, Switzerland....

YGB: Absolutely and that's what I'm saying we need a new set of consciousness with the indigenous people because this thing of getting rich and all this from the

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European is not going to cut it. And look at the environment, what are we going to have, where are we going to put the millions if the environment is ruined. I mean...

EV: You were also, as I recall, you were fairly active in early feminist movement, no?

YGB: Never was in any organization of women.

EV: No, I didn't mean in any organization of women. Didn't I see you in some meetings back...

YGB: Gloria Guardiola, who is still my friend and she was in MAYO too, wrote a pamphlet called, "The ??? 301", which is the reason why the professor in California interviewed me, and I have a copy which is in the other house. We were presented these seminars in reference to sex, the ??? of sexuality and we wrote a little pamphlet and we presented it in the first Chicana Conference in 1971 at the YMCA, right there on Navigation. And we were....Maria Jimenez was also involved...but she with another group, she was MAYO university group...It became controversial because they thought it was appropriate to speak about sex and that's what we did. We actually had a picture of a man dreaming of another woman, and visa-versa, a picture of a woman in bed dreaming about a man, just to make a point. And of course it created so much, so much...

EV: I remember that, I forgot all about that... (Laughter).

YGB: Yes, and it was very good because you know we felt that sexuality had to be discussed because of the situation of pregnancy and I am very open-minded but I think a woman has to treat her body as a temple and if she allows somebody

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to have sex that's fine but not without her consent but she also choose to be very open and understand her sexuality and that just because engage with you sexually does not mean that other things will follow. The romance is ??? 325, marriage also has to be economic, you know. It has to be evalued with a value system so we talked about that, and we talked about orgasms and all that and ooooh, it was not very interesting. (Laughter) And I was in charge of that seminar with Gloria Guardiola. I always felt I wanted to do something different and I thought is was ?? 330.

EV: Yolanda, who was that little girl that was at that law school (UH) when we were protesting....and we wound up that night at the Shamrock...

YGB: Angie.

EV: ¿Una chiquilla, no? [a young girl, no?] And you told her to let loose or something....

YGB: Yes, ??? yes, she's beautiful.

EV: Is she still here?

YGB: I saw her one time...she's married...I only saw her one time...but that girl was wonderful wasn't she?

EV: Oh she was beautiful, yes, I wish we had a recording of that. (Laughter)

YGB: You do remember how the ???? 338

EV: She was only 13 or 14

YGB: She was very young, but that's the think about us, MAYO...Maybe that's the reason I loved it so much, everytime....we had so many young people. One time, one of the tactics that we used to make sure we were not entrapped or that

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somebody didn't set us up, we asked youth to walk around with their pockets....to walk with their pockets outside of their pants so that way nobody could put anything on us.

EV: Oh the pockets inverted to the outside...oh.

YGB: Because we had mail that people sent us; materials on how to make bombs. So you see how they wanted to entrap us, we were not like that? We never had been like that, we were radical with ideas, with ideas, that challenges, look at it, put it down, look at it from all directions, that is what I really believed in. Of course, I never believed in somebody kicking me out the door because I would hit them back, that is for sure. So when we started receiving that type of information and when we were infiltrated and asked to ??? 356 with guns and all that ???? .. We were very careful who we trusted.

EV: I'm sure you all got threats in the mail and telephone all the time, huh?

YGB: Oh yes, but remember again, we were living in ??? neighborhood, we got a call from the Ku Klux Klan saying, "We are going to come and beat the hell out of you," and Walter said, "You come over and we'll be waiting." So we called the police because, I mean we were citizens in this little town, you know. They didn't like it but they had to protect us because they didn't want the neighborhoods...because, as I said we were not doing anything, why would they arrest us for anything other than politics. That's it. And I'm proud of my political background, but yeah....but then they called and they passed by and the police followed them and they passed again because they couldn't do anything because the police were watching them.

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EV: What was the longest you ever stayed in jail?

YGB: Two days. That was when I tried to enter with a petition at the Israeli
counsel and I was arrested by the state, so I was two days???? 375.

EV: Did you ever have any convictions?

YGB: Before the conflict at the school board, I think...

EV: Did you all just plead guilty and pay a fine?

YGB: No, the lawyers played it up, remember...?

EV: Who were the lawyers?

YGB: It was a Jewish lawyer who was killed in an airplane, he was
defending...Friedman. He was a very good lawyer.

EV: Mel Friedman?

YGB: Mel Friedman and he also involved....so he also defend us...so that's
another thing I wanted to bring to you. One time, I was in a ??? 382 again to go
to the parking lot of one hotel to pick up \$2,000, \$3000 donation. So people did
support us, and I don't remember exactly but no more than \$3,000, \$2,800 about.

EV: Where did that money come from?

YGB: Oh, no, somebody called and said, "You go to this place and it's going to
be a lady and she's going to give you this money." I had no idea but I'm saying
to you is yes we did have – gasp!! – some people would be scandalized – gasp!! –
but somebody would say "???? 390. Never knew who it was. And then we had
letters, I had letters from professors – remember when I told you my husband was
arrested for the Ku Klux Klan, I had letters from people who would send us \$10,

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\$15, \$20, to help for when my husband lost his job. So, yes we ??? people that

??? or we were ??? but then we had some who liked what we were doing.

EV: The suspension of Walter, was that just for 30 days?

YGB: No, it was more because I had to go to work in a fruit company, packing fruit at 2:00 in the morning and my ????? with prostitutes, with ??? but I had to work because other things to do during the day. To make ??? 401 and then after that he was reinstated, obviously the man was not guilty so they gave us our money back and then we....

EV: Did he win like a court victory or was it the Post Office own investigation?

YGB: No. The Post Office had to suspend him, not fire him, until the case came to court. And remember, I was in charge and my friend, I had a friend that owned the bookstore that was very well to do and she had a bank account and everything and I was in charge of the bookstore. So I was on the checking account and all that so I had a right to protect, remember we ??? 413 we protect our business.

When we went to court to show I had...she was the owner...I had the accounts...so these people invade me and we defended ourselves. We became very political ???.

EV: So they dropped the charges and it never went to trial?

YGB: They dropped the charges, yes. So then Walter got reinstated and that's it, but you are right, absolutely. So we play, we played right there but I wasn't arrested at that time.

EV: Are you involved in any way with the immigration situation we are having now?

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YGB: I was last year, last conference I had with the ???? I showed to you. I had the last conference at the Centro....from the Guadalupe Church.....(leaves to get some literature) That was my last conference.

EV: Ah, Teatro Bilingue.

YGB: Yes that was my last, and no I haven't been active in anything accept that.

EV: Is there anything that I did not bring up that you think you might like to include.

YGB: I would like to say that according to what I'm reading or at the cost of the political scene, we are, we are going to be facing a tremendous way of racism to where ??? Latino is going to become very heavy. It is already developing by right-wing groups that they are coming, not like they did in our time, from the 60's, they are coming on because of what according to what I'm reading, you know, the material, the atmosphere what this country needs to survive with aggression, military ??? 452. My feeling is that if we do not find a way to connect with Mexico or with countries ??? of most people here to say, "Look, develop something economically and lets keep people over there and let the United States deal with...for them not to have anybody to pick up their government or whatever because we're going to be loosing a lot of our blood here, where this new racism is coming up, in my opinion.

EV: Are there any individuals you think we to make a part of this history for the archives? And I don't necessarily want big names, I mean people who just lived day to day...

Interviewee: Birdwell, Yolanda**Interview: May 4, 2007**

YGB: I will have to think about it and if I remember some names I will contact you. What we did, what we were, was not...they didn't look good upon what we were doing are now passé...look what is happening now, it's completely different. Now, I want to tell if I were young, I would do it again, I don't regret at all what I did. I wish I had known more but I keep on reading, keep...on...my new journey is to go back to Mexico to regain my citizenship and go to the Mayan sites and go back to the indigenous way of thinking because I have been too much with the European Americans here and I need to connect because I feel that this disconnection is not been enough consciousness and I need to regain my consciousness in order to understand what is coming up, because we are going to face a very challenging time.

Transcriber this is the end of the interview.

