

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

”Mexican-American History”

Interview with: Carmen Orta
Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés
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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
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EV: Lets go over some basic stuff, minute I've explained to you what we are going to do with this interview is that right?

CO: Okay.

EV: And you've already signed the release on it. Do you have any questions about that at all?

CO: No.

EV: Will you give us your full name please?

CO: Carmen Villarreal Orta.

EV: Okay, Carmen Villarreal Orta. And we are taking this interview at your offices at 55 Lyerly, Suite 110 in Houston, Texas at 3:00 in the afternoon.

CO: Right.

EV: Okay, now can you tell us when you were born?

CO: Born March 6, 1941.

EV: And where?

CO: Methodist Hospital in Houston, Texas.

EV: How do you spell?

CO: Methodist.

EV: Okay. And were you, you went to school here then I take it?

CO: Yes.

EV: Where did you go to school?

CO: I went to elementary school, really I went to elementary school...I went to elementary school at Saint Stevens when it was a little school house and then I moved to Sacred Heart, Sacred Heart over there on Fannin. And then high school was Saint Anges High School.

EV: And is that downtown?

CO: It used to be downtown yeah in 1959.

EV: Okay. And did you go to college after that?

CO: Not immediately, no. Later on I went to HCC and took some business courses and marketing courses and those kinds of things but no.

EV: What did you do immediately after high school, what did you do?

CO: Immediately after high school when I graduated I really didn't know what I wanted to do so I was looking for a job but my father found me a job for me. And I went to go work, believe it or not at Felix Mexican Restaurant.

EV: At where?

CO: Felix Mexican Restaurant.

EV: Oh really?

CO: Because Felix was a real good friend of my dad because they came from the same ranchito over there at Victoria and so he called Felix and said "This girl was looking for a job and I don't think she's looking hard enough so put her to work." (laughter) And so I

had to go to work as a hostess and sit people there at the restaurant. But in the meantime I was taking some business courses at that time. It was a school that taught business courses. So I would go from school during the day and then I would go to work in the evening from 2:00 until whenever they would close.

EV: How long did you work for Felix?

CO: For Felix, probably I don't even think it was six months or so that I went to go work again, under certain circumstances. Again, I'm looking for work, I'm going up and down Main Street trying to figure out where to work. Then I went to Texas Employment Commission to see what jobs they had. Well I ended up working for the Courthouse, the Tax Office.

EV: At the County Courthouse?

CO: Uh huh (affirmative) County, I was working in the Tax Office.

EV: Under Hardy, was it Hardy?

CO: Uh, no. What I know, at that time the commissioner, I don't know who... lets see who was _____ (inaudible 3.2) it was way back. I don't remember who the County Judge was at the time. But it's when everybody had to go downtown to get their license. They didn't have no substations. They were lined up outside...

EV: Oh the license plate thing, yeah it went around the block. God it was a nightmare.

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative) yeah all around the block. And I walked in and they hired me on the spot and they put me at a typewriter and I went to work. But I never got hired full time.

EV: Really?

CO: Never did. I worked there off and on for about ten years and never, never got on full time.

EV: In the same position?

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative). And I would supervise people and I would, you know, I worked in all the different departments within the license plate section.

EV: Why do you think they didn't give you the permanent position?

CO: I'm not sure there was only one other Hispanic girl working there. And John Herrera's son worked on the other side of, we were probably the only three at that time that were working there. And I'm not sure, you know, it was 1960, I'm not sure at that time you just wouldn't really complain a whole lot. I mean my Dad thought that was a wonderful job, to have an opportunity to work at the tax office. But I would run into issues there while I was working and it made it difficult for me at times. But from the first day when I applied, since my Dad was from Mexico, and he came to the city, he ended up here in Houston. He was real strong about being in America, he really was. And to him if we were born here, you were an American. And he would tell me, "When they ask you who you are, you put "American." Even though I know you are a Mexican-American according to what they hold, but you put American," so I did, I put it on there. I got called to front office and was asked to change it to "Mexican."

EV: They told you to change it?

CO: Uh huh. (in the affirmative) and I said, "Well I'm not a Mexican. I'm an American." And she said, "Well you have to change it." I go, "No, what are you?" She

said, "Polish." I said, "Well did you put Polish?" She said, "No." "Well then why should I put Mexican?" So I said, "No." And then she says, "I'm going to have to take this to HR." I said, "You can take it to whoever you want, I'm not going to change it," I said, "because I'm an American." I said, "You take this to your HR..." (I'm still young.) I said, "You will definitely hear about this because I will contact the media that I am being forced to put Mexican on my application." I never changed it. They left it alone.

EV: They let you keep working.

CO: Yeah.

EV: But you never got full benefits.

CO: No. Never did, never had benefits.

EV: No benefits either?

CO: No benefits it was hourly.

EV: Wow.

CO: Hourly wage of I think I started at \$1.00 an hour in those days and ended up at \$1.50 or something. It has a lot of stories here at the courthouse about that.

EV: About how Mexicanos are treated?

CO: Yeah.

EV: Like what?

CO: Well that was one example. You know every day I would have to listen to comments about, "Did you weigh in on those Mexicans that were dirty?" And little comments here and there constantly, you know. There were questions like..."what do

you all like..." Oh there was a distant, distant cousin. They started hiring a lot of other part time people because then we started changing a little bit as to as the sub-stations and that. You know, she... they would ask us stuff, "What are you all going to eat tonight, guacamole and tacos and enchiladas?" (laughter) Jesus Christ! Just drive me crazy! (laughter) Wait until they hear this transcript... they drive me crazy! You know they thought that was all right. And I go, "I don't even like Mexican food okay. I like fried chicken and mashed potatoes for God's sake." But we would hear comments all day long that finally one day I had just had it. And finally just, I shouldn't have done what I did but I did get upset and I said, "Carmen, Carmen, Carmen..." That was one thing my supervisor liked me, she did. And she would help me take in a lot of overtime so I could make a little extra money so she liked me. But the rest eventually just they finally accepted it and I left and ended up at the City.

EV: Ended up where?

CO: At the city.

EV: Oh really?

CO: Yeah.

EV: What department did you work for in the City?

CO: Well at that time the City of Houston, remember Manpower Planning and all those...

EV: That was in the mid sixties or sometime, or late?

CO: Yeah later on yeah. They, well after that I was getting married to Roy and they realized that at that point Rose said, "You know what you don't have to work here. You

can go get you a job anywhere you want. Or you don't have to work if you don't want."

And so I told them I said, "I have a choice where I don't have to work or do anything."

Well by then they wanted to keep me so they offered me a full time job with benefits and everything. But I told Roy, "If I wasn't worth it... You know all I've been doing for all this time is license and titles and... I mean how many places can you go to? Banks or car dealerships you know." And so it just happened that... What was it, I'm trying to remember the Judge's name ...because this girl worked for the judge and she was a friend of mine from the neighborhood. And we parked in the same parking lot. And, you know I'm just walking trying to decide what to do. And she said, "What's going on you look a little worried or something." I said, "I don't know... I have this going on and you know what? I don't want to stay in that job. I'd really like to just do something different." And she says, "You know what there is a job coming up. Where the Judge and the City, the Mayor have a summer youth program." Remember the Summer Youth Programs?

EV: Summer Youth yeah.

CO: And they were looking for a secretary. And I said, "Secretary, I haven't done that either.... Years, you know." She said, "But, you know give me your résumé and I'll talk to them about it." Well I got hired. And I went to work for a basketball player and a football player. They had no idea of what regulations or anything... but they were hired. The Director came in from the Judge's side and the assistant or vice director came in from the city and then me.

EV: Who was the judge, what was his name?

CO: That's what I'm trying to think.

EV: When you say a Judge was he like from the city municipal courts?

CO: The Commissioner Court.

EV: Oh the Commissioner.

CO: You know...

EV: You're talking about the county judge. Was that Bill Elliot?

CO: Bill Elliott. Bill Elliott I could not think of his name and she worked for him at that time. So I got on the program and then right after that Manpower Planning came up with... the city came up with Manpower Planning and so the director there came to me because they were going to move the youth program into that and asked me if I would like to go work with him. And I said, "Well yeah..." you know. But the thing was is that the highest I could go in the level of positions was like a Clerk 3. But then I thought, "Well I'll just get in with them and then work myself up." So I went to go work with Manpower Planning at the time. And I did everything over here for these other two guys because they had no earthly idea. I would put all the reports...

EV: Who were "they"?

CO: They were a football player and a basketball player.

EV: Do you remember their names?

CO: You're talking about 40 something years...(laughter)

EV: You weren't a sports fan I take it? (laughter)

CO: No. And I would have to do everything. I really did.

EV: Oh you're talking about football, are you talking about one of the Houston Oilers?

CO: Yeah and...

EV: And one of the Rockets?

CO: And then, well no not the Rockets it was the other... what was it?

EV: Baseball?

CO: No what was the first basketball team then back in the 60's?

EV: It wasn't the Rockets?

CO: The Rockets, no?

EV: I don't know.

CO: I just knew he played basketball. Played a lot of golf. Ernie Ladd used to come by.

EV: Oh yeah. He was huge wasn't he?

CO: Oh, he took me to lunch, he puts three trays on his... you know the cafeteria and here I am with my little tray. I'm with him and there was a guy named John White. He also played football with Ernie Ladd and both of them are huge. I'm in the middle. You can't even see me. You know, going down the line. But they were so nice, I mean those two guys were just really good guys, you know. So they helped us out with some of the things that we did.

EV: Those were all part of those federal programs right?

CO: Yeah part of the federal programs. I think I went through every federal program they had.

EV: Did you really?

CO: Yeah, I did eventually I ended up going through just about because they would merge or change and then it became CETA and, you know...

EV: Yeah they are always changing.

CO: And I would always end up staying because I had been there the longest. So I went through about three different directors and they would keep me anyway. You know...

EV: Did they... before I get too far away from it.... Where were your parents from? You said you father was from...

CO: My dad was from el estado de Coahuila [state of Coahuila]. He was born in Laredos, Coahuila. He was born in 1897 so the story is that he was like 16 years old when he came to Texas. But he ended up in Innes, Texas which is right outside Victoria but my mother was born in Bloomingdale which is right there around Victoria, so she was born here in Texas. So when he came he sent for his mother and his brothers...

EV: Did your mother fix you with papers? Was your mother an American?

CO: At that time to tell you the truth, I don't know what the deal about papers, I really don't. I never really...I know that he became an American citizen but I don't know when.

EV: You think he used the "pasaporte"? [literally "passport" but in along the border it referred to a "Border Crossing Card."]

CO: Yeah and so he ended up in ranchito working the fields here for some man that owned the ranch there. And all these families that lived around there and that's how he

met my mother's family. My mother was very young. Her mother had passed away so my grandfather raised the children by himself.

EV: Really?

CO: Yeah.

EV: Your Mother's dad?

CO: On my side. Yeah I think her mother was 40 or so when she died and she was only like 7 years old and she had a little sister, so she was kind of the one that would help my grandfather with the kids. But, las tias [the aunts], they would come and help so that's where she met my father's family because she never really met my dad. Because she was only... she said the first time she saw him was when he would ride in a carriage, you know, on the road and she would hear about him, that he liked to dance, that he was like a "Casanova..." you know. Naturally to her... (laughter) and I don't know maybe he was. (laughter) But that he was good looking and stuff. But anyway she met him and before she knew the family come by and asked for her hand.

EV: Oh really? The old way.

CO: So she married him, she tells us she was 14. Okay. She never would change that story. What difference would it have made if she was 14 or whatever? And they got married and lived out in the country. And she said, "I was so young that I still would... you know he'd be gone all day and..." My oldest, oldest brother that I never met, she would play with him like he was a little doll, which is because she was so young. But she, you know, had a hard time because she was young and living out there in the ranch....

EV: You said she took care of your little brother or your older brother?

CO: No, she had a sister that was little...

EV: I see...

CO: So she would... so she continued to taking care of her little sister. The brothers were older. They ended... I think there was 13 children but several did die from different fevers and TB and things like that, very young. So she only had 3 brothers that lived, you know, a long time.

EV: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

CO: There was nine of us. [REDACTED]

EV: And are they all still living here in Houston...or are you guys scattered everywhere.

CO: No, they have all lived in Houston. My oldest, oldest brother the one I never met, he died when he was 13 and my oldest sister right now she's going to be 81 I think. There was nine, I'm the youngest. [REDACTED]

EV: La concientida? [the favorite?]

CO: Oh yeah I don't deny it my daddy had me totally spoiled, totally spoiled. I had three brothers, three boys and six girls.

EV: Wow, three boys and six girls. So I guess your mother did learn how to take care of a family?

CO: Oh yeah. Probrecita, [poor soul] by the time she was 28 she had nine children.

EV: Wow.

CO: Yeah and so...

EV: But she got married at what 14 right?

CO: Yeah. So they, there was a time during the depression my Dad decided that my Dad would maybe come to Houston and try to do something else, you know.

EV: What did he latch on to?

CO: Well when he left, he left her behind. They sold everything they had so that she would have money to be taken care of and for him to have money to come here. What the story, to me, and Leonel Castillo told me the story, was that he was hitchhiking to Houston.

EV: Leonel told you this?

CO: Yeah.

EV: How did he know?

CO: Because Leonel's father was driving to Houston, saw him on the road and picked him up and gave him a ride.

EV: Leonel's father gave your dad a ride and he was hitchhiking? How did you fall on that story? How did you ever make the connection?

CO: Leonel told me.

EV: But how...

CO: His family told me. So Leonel's father brought my dad to Houston but Mr. Castillo went to Galveston, they chose to go to Galveston because that's where they lived. And so Dad came to Houston and he saw a little grocery store right there on Jensen, where my father used to be... where TBH [Teatro Bilingue de Houston, i.e., The Bi-Lingual Theater of Houston] is now. Right on the corner and across street from the

Guadalupe Church, there used to be a little grocery store, and I have pictures of the store and all... I have pictures.

EV: Oh wow can you let us get copies of those?

CO: Yeah. And he opened up a little grocery store and then sent for my mother. But meantime he found another grocery store which was on Preston back by where the police station is, all around there. I guess, he felt that that had more potential then the one over there. Well they had a little area in the back where the bedroom and bathroom and kitchen and so that's where we all lived in the back of the grocery store. And my sisters would work there and my brothers would deliver the groceries and all that. So that's where more or less we were, the first few years.

Two interruptions the door and the phone...

EV: Do you remember where we were?

CO: Yeah we were talking about the grocery store and living there and working there.

EV: Wasn't there around Franklin and Congress around Allen's Landing wasn't there a Mexicano barrio back there?

CO: Oh yeah. That's what they still call it 6th Ward. It's really where Preston, Franklin... back there where the post office is and now there's the fire station. Well where the fire station, there was a market, food market, big I mean vegetables and everything. That is where we would go and get all the stuff for the grocery store. That is why I was so close to my dad because I would go over there with him. *En esa marqueta* [in that market] we would spend all day just going through picking vegetables and stuff. Over on the other side across from... there used to be a train station where the post office

is. There was a train station and then across from that there was an ice company and that's where we would go and get the ice for our Coke machines and stuff. All around there that is where you would get the food supplies.

EV: Isn't that ice building still there?

CO: Probably.

EV: I think its a little building.

CO: Well back the way Allen's Landing is it may not be. But where Spaghetti House is all around there, all those little places that is where we would spend time going to get, you know, all kinds of supplies, candies, canned goods, everything. He would spend like a day just going to get that. And we would get the ice. But they would deliver the ice to the boxes. And so over at the market we would spend time talking to everybody buying their vegetables and stuff and so that's how he would get his things.

EV: And where was the store?

CO: It was Preston, Number 8 Preston. It was right where they park all the cars for the police station, for the policeman. It's got a fence. Right there, there's all those families right there, right where we were we had the grocery store. Right next to us was a beer joint. Okay, next to that was like a little Barber shop, Mexicanos, they owned it, they owned that little place. Then they had a Salvation Army was right there and then at the corner the Arriazas had a restaurant, a little restaurant. The Arriazas, one of their daughters, her name is Helen, Helen is married to Louis Welch, Helen Morales.

EV: Louis Welch's wife?

CO: His wife died.

EV: Uh huh.

CO: And her husband died. She had worked for Louis Welch forever. So they ended up together. They have the restaurant there. Coming back the other way on the other corner there was a jewelry store, Frank's Jewelry, Frank Galvan. Then go a little further, Olga Solis family had the auto repair right there. Then down that one street they had a big huge building that made, they sewed dresses and clothing and a lot of people worked there. There was like a housing project, that's the best way I can describe it, all these Hispanic families lived there, I mean hundreds of kids lived there. All in the back there were all Hispanic families. There was houses back there. There was people... gosh I'm trying to remember one family that owned... you know little businesses, they all lived back there. But in those days people would come in and they would get their groceries and we would have a little book, you know with their name on it. And they would walk in, "Oh Mr. Joe I'm taking a gallon of milk." "Oh Mr. Joe I'm going to take this...." Because it's Joe's Grocery, so he had these little books. Well at the end of the week they would come and pay whatever they charged. But there were many that didn't and we didn't know that until Weingarten's [a local grocery store chain] came in. My dad knew then, "It's over for me." Weingarten's Then is going to take over. But somebody wanted to buy the grocery store so he was going to sell it, and he did. He actually became owner after a while from the guy that he had gotten it from, he had bought it, he finally had bought it. And so when that happened right at that time, a little before that, we had moved from there. My dad had bought a house. And he bought it over there off of Houston Avenue and Woodland Park, White Oak...

EV: The Heights now?

CO: Yeah part of it, but it's still on this side, you know. He bought a house, well the freeway came back through later on, the I-10 freeway just went through just all the properties and so they are all gone. So when he realized that was going to happen he decided, "Maybe I'll start something else." So he started with the furniture business, and he was still running both for a while. You know, because he was still working out everything. But and so there was an old two story wooden building there and he went ahead and rented it, people lived upstairs and rented rooms and stuff and all he could start with, he started with appliances. He would sit outside and sell lawnmowers and toasters, you know, anything he could put on a table and so he started selling that and my mom and them were still at the grocery store. Well next to us at the grocery store, at the bar, The Cadallic Bar, in those days some real tough people, *pachucos*. In this particular family they were called the Coyotes and they controlled the drugs, all the crime activity they controlled in that area. When my dad moved in he told... he went to them and said, "Look just leave my family alone, I don't see anything, I don't hear anything, I don't want to know anything. Do what ever you do and leave my family alone." Oh I forgot one part. Meantime when we are in the grocery store my Dad starts this spice company making spices in the garage. And he left the door open one night by accident. The Coyotes called and said, "Mr. Joe you left your door open do you want us to close it for you." (laughter) so he said, "Yeah!" (laughter) so that's the respect he had even with the Coyotes because they were bad guys, they were really bad and later on they finally caught up with the Coyotes and I happened to see it because I was only allowed to play

from “here to here” and my mother had a little window and made sure... you know I was... my little tricycle or whatever I was playing and some girl there in the bar, I don’t know, you know there were a lot of prostitutes and all. I don’t know what she did but she started to run and we were up high and she ran across the street, he shot her. One of the Coyotes shot her and they finally sent him to prison. They [police] never came to us to ask us anything. I was like 7 or 8 years old. And so that kind of ended the Coyotes being around. They closed up that bar down there and everything. But one other time what Dad is up front and got up to go I guess to the restroom or somewhere and one of the Coyotes, they had a lot of young boys that would commit crime, took off with a lawnmower and was running down the street with a lawnmower. So my Dad calls the store and says, “Hey catch that guy that is running down the street with my lawnmower.” So I took off over there and they caught him and he was one of their guys and so one of the Coyotes came and told him, “Don’t ever, ever steal anything from him...ever. You leave that family alone.” And so there were things like that that would happen that they just respected him and the family. So we were okay living there while we lived there. Then we moved. He started the grocery store and he finally when he sold and everything then he bought a few appliances, bedroom sets, you know things like that. Before you know it we just had a business going. He was just one of those guys that there wasn’t anything that he felt that he couldn’t do. He’d do it. He could sell you anything. That man could sell you anything. Felix Morales one time, you know, came to our house and said, “Say Joe send me a three legged pig” playing around with him. Dad sent it to him. And then

Mr. Morales said to him, "What's wrong with you, why did you send me that pig?"

"Well that's what you asked for." (laughter)

EV: Now pay me.... (laughter)

CO: All those guys, Felix Morales, so many families that we all knew each other, I mean you couldn't go from one neighborhood to the other that they didn't know and especially us because we had the grocery store and then we had the furniture store and then he expanded and started getting...

EV: Is that the church that you went to down there on... Father Patrick Flores? Was that the church you all went to?

CO: Saint Joseph?

EV: Was that Saint Joseph?

CO: No.

EV: Right across from the police station now, what's the name of that church?

CO: Oh that's Saint Joseph.

EV: I thought Saint Joseph was down there on...

CO: No that's Saint Joseph.

EV: On Jefferson or something.

CO: I didn't get to go to Saint Joseph. I ended up at Sacred Heart.

EV: Okay. So after all of this, the drama, did you...

CO: To me I find it drama but it's also experiencing what families can go through...

EV: Oh yeah that's life in the barrio.

CO: ...things that you remember, you know so it stays with you and it kind of gives you direction on how your life will be later, you know. I think work ethics and respect and a hand-shake, that kind of thing... he was real strong about that. He always used to tell me, "Don't open your mouth unless you mean it, unless you really mean it. Because once you've said it, you can't take it back. That's it. So think about it before you say something. If you make a commitment or a promise, you keep it."

EV: Did you all speak both languages at home?

CO: Yes. My Mother never learned English. She never learned English, but my Dad did, and some words he would say a little different. But my Mother never learned English, she could read it but she couldn't speak it. And so to her reading was real important. She would make me do the summer read and books, books... you know, and even though I would read them in front of her in the kitchen, she just knew I was reading because a lot of words she didn't understand. But he learned English and he was a good writer. He had a radio station, you know he had a program on the radio and he would ad lib the whole program.

EV: Over at...

CO: KLVL.

EV: KLVL. And what was about, just gossip or....?

CO: Well no, it was for the furniture store he would have a 15 minute show announcing his sales and stuff, for sale at the furniture store. But at the same time, if he was... especially if it was like my birthday, the whole program, okay... for the baby. (laughter) Of course my sisters and brothers... "Happy Birthday" maybe five minutes

but I get the whole program. Anyway.... people up to now, really people still if they, you know they'll say, "Carmen Villarreal, were you José Villarreal's daughter, and I'd go, "Yeah." "Ah, La Hora de Villarreal," that's what he would call it. "Oh, I heard your Daddy speak, and everything." He loved his show.

EV: Even though it was 15 minutes he called it "La Hora de Villarreal,[The Hour of Villarreal]?

EV: That's kind of neat.

CO: That was kind of neat.

EV: Did he get involved in LULAC or any of those programs or clubs?

CO: No. He never, never...

EV: I mean Felix [Morales] was such a big gun.

CO: Yea, but he just didn't really....It was just not him. His brother Ernest and mi tia Lala [and my Aunt Lala] they were. They were in a lot of clubs: Familias Unidas, [unintelligible], what are some of the other ones that were around. Well LULAC naturally.

EV: Sembradores de Amistad?

CO: Yeah they were probably around. I wasn't familiar with them at the time. But Club del Mar?? and Familias Unidas were real strong.

EV: Clube de que"

CO: Club del Mar?? There was family type organizations and but it just, he really... never really attended banquets and things like that. Now come into him for help. My God, I don't know, he has helped...like I told you when we found those receipt books.

There were hundreds and hundreds of dollars that he never collected. He never collected from the people. And that's just the way he was. And at the furniture store, I mean they would come by for all kind of things and he'd help them. Never ask for it, no money back. I mean that's just the way they both were. And sometimes that's why my son's say, "I can see where you got it from because you are always, giving and giving." But you know. But that's the way he was. He would help everybody that would come by and take care of them. But then the grocery store, the furniture store grew because there was so many generations that would come over there. You know Grandpa would bring one and before you knew it you would have the whole family as customers. And we would have to go collect, that is the way that people would pay. Who went with them? Me. We would go on a Saturday all day long. That was my part of what I had to do and my sisters would work the store, my two sisters and brother. It was going hand collecting and clean all the furniture, which I hated but I had to. That was my job. And he would show me how to collect. You know he would have a little card, \$2 a week, whatever the amount. Get out, knock on the door. Get the furniture, get my \$2 and I would collect. We would go from over here from Navigation St. all around. We'd be gone all day. And that's how we would collect. That was a service, that is what he used to call it to make sure he got his money....he would go collect. But people would come in and pay too, you know. But I learned how to do that at a real early age. I learned how, I learned the (inaudible phone ringing), I learned contracts...

EV: Yeah you had to.

CO: I knew what it was to go to the bank at a very young age, you know. I learned all of that from him. I used to have to stand on boxes to give out the receipts when customers came in.

(interruption)

EV: So let me ask you, did you ever go down and visit your family in Mexico, his family?

CO: Oh yeah. Oh yes we would go every year. He would go every year. He would take no less than two weeks. He would go and see all his relatives. While he'd have some Rosita and Allende and then Morelos knows where he was from. Actually, I went several times with him, all of us would go. But most of the time it was their vacation for Mom and Dad. And they would stay for two weeks and stay with family and we would stay behind and take care of the grocery store and they'd better take very good care of me while they were gone... so." (laughter).

EV: It's a wonderful place to live.

CO: It is, yeah.

EV: I mean except for those coal miners get killed...

CO: Well we had an Aunt and Uncle Ben and Sophia they had a little place out in the country. And actually he had worked here in the states for many years and decided to retire and go to Rosita and have a little place up there.

EV: Your father did?

CO: No, one of my uncles. And so that's why he and my dad were very close so that is where we would stay most of the time with them.

EV: What years were those?

CO: But yeah. That was early, like in the early 50's. And actually, later on after I met Roy, well you know he was a diabetic and he had one leg that was amputated and so I think Roy and I were married like three months. He wanted to go and visit and he liked Roy a whole lot. He just really liked Roy and Roy just did everything for him anyway. And Roy had never had a new car. And so when we got married we bought our first new car. He says, "Oh your husband's got a new car. I think you need to take me down there. Let's go. I want to go visit my family." And Roy says, "Okay Mr. Joe." So that night Roy and I and Mom insisting that we take the boys because those were his little favorites, Ramiro and David, the wheelchair and everything. Well, just so you'll understand my mother had started a bridal shop. So we would go over there to buy the ??, the bouquets the coronas and all this stuff. So Dad says, "While we're there lets go ahead and buy the stuff." So we are going in the car and Roy and I had never driven it [the route], so we're trying the map, you know. Well he didn't use a map, Dad just says, "Just go this way, go that way, do this..." He says, "Yes sir, yes sir..." Well before you knew it he was way off. We ended up getting to the border at like at 2:00 in the morning okay. So we get to the border and for some reason I picked up the baptism instead of the birth certificates when I left and I had mentioned it to him. And he says... (I don't want to say it on tape.) He says...

EV: He kind of buttered your way across the border?

CO: Oh that man, he was incredible. So he decides... oh he says, "You know en Mexico nunca llueve, [it never rains in Mexico]" They had the worst hail storm, right

when we were driving through. And he says, if we come to a stop you have to go left or right. Mother says, "Es para la izquierda [it's to the left]" "¿Ay, tu cres que me vas a decir donde estamos? Da le a la derecha" [Do you think you are going to tell me where we are, take a right]" So Roy's trying to figure out which way to go, so Roy takes a right. "And just keep on going." "Mr. Joe there is no road." "Oh yeah there's one around those trees." Finally I said, "Dad, stop!" It's 3:00 in the morning. Please there are no roads back there. We saw lights and we went up. And he said, "No take the road." I'm telling you by the time we got to there I could just see it in Roy. What a trip! But he never would complain about him whatever he wanted. So he visited and he had a great time over there with Uncle Ben. They stayed up all night, you know, smoking the cigar, having a little drinks and talking.

EV: Yeah I like it down there a lot.

CO: Oh yeah. I haven't been. And you know it's strange you asked me that. I want to go. I want to take the boys now that they are older and just go back. There's a little church, a little mission there that my oldest sister, every December has to give her a little money that she sends to the mission.

EV: Well you know I baptized my children in Agujita...

CO: Agujita! Really, I didn't know you all were from over there.

(Paused to look at some photos)

EV: Okay. Give me some more of your talent. Let's just go over your talent. This tape should be made for TV. No we had a group and we would sing for fun at school. And before we knew it everyone was watching us sing so we would sing there at the

school auditorium. And then we started singing at the some of the CYO's [Catholic Youth Organizations] and then we started singing, after school some of the events that they had, we would sing there. And then we heard that about Larry Kane over at the Majestic. We didn't have no music. We went and we would sing every Saturday and the Latins would go and sing every Saturday. And then so he ran a contestant type...

EV: Talent.

CO:talent show and our parents knew that we were doing it. They figured, "Keeping themselves busy..." like practicing. Because we would practice, practice, practice all the time. Well we won the local. Then we were going to go to state in San Antonio.

End of Side 1

EV: This is side 2 of tape number 1. And you were telling us about you won some competition in San Antonio.

CO: Yeah a competition and when they realized, when we went to the town and hit 1 that's when they realized, "No it's over, you're not going anywhere." So that was the end of our...

EV: Career.

CO: Career.

EV: So you could have been a contender.

CO: Famous. We could have been famous.

EV: Alright, so when did you start getting involved in civic affair and politics and...it had to be around the '60s because before that...

CO: Actually, you know what? When I was very, very young my Uncle Ernest actually ran for School Board in the early 50's. I was what...like 14 years old.

EV: Villarreal?

CO: He was Villarreal, Ernest Villarreal. And those were the days that you would have to pay for your poll tax. Well they used to charge you for that poll tax. I don't remember if it was \$1 or...

EV: That a dollar seventy-five.

CO: Well families couldn't afford it. And so he had a mailer that he sent out to potential voters. I don't know how you would figure out who the voters were, I don't know that part. So I remember stuffing envelopes to send out to voters to pay for the poll tax.

EV: When was that about?

CO: If I was 14, I was born in '41, '51, maybe I was even younger. I would have to ask my cousin Ernest because I don't remember.

EV: Did he ever run again?

CO: No. He's the one that used to own the funeral home on Navigation, Villarreal Funeral Home.

EV: So was there a mega leap from then until the '60s or so?

CO: From there, well yeah from there and then, you know. After that it's high school and all that kind of stuff. So the first campaign or stuff that I got involved in was in 1960. I got involved and that was because of Lauro Cruz because he was from neighborhood. In the early '60, when he ran, I helped him on his campaign. But not two,

I had already helped him before. And that's how I started to get involved. And then I got involved at that time. We both joined, after we got married we joined LULAC and I got real involved.

EV: Which counsel was that?

CO: It was a couple of mixed counsel. It was Counsel 389....

EV: East End somewhere?

CO: No it was 389, a lot of the members were guys and girls they had just come out of college they were architects and engineers. They all had real good jobs and stuff. Very, very smart guys and so we were going after all kind of projects, housing projects and doing things those other counsels weren't even thinking about. And they decided to run me for president. And I ran and won. And I was probably the first woman in a couples-type thing that became president of LULAC of counsel. And that wasn't too much fun.

EV: Why wasn't that fun?

CO: Because a lot of women didn't like it. A lot of women didn't support.

EV: The women didn't like the fact that you had gotten there?

CO: No. They were not supportive because I would always be the one that would be selected to sit on the SER board or some of the other boards or programs that LULAC sponsored and they just didn't like it. And Roy can testify as to how they would treat me sometimes, But we went on and helped. Roy and I and Jesse Garcia at the time, we put together the proposal for the LULAC Educational Service Center. We're the ones that brought it to Houston and it's still there.

EV: The educational what?

CO: The Educational Center. Rosanne Blanco runs it and she is still there. We hired here and she's still there.

EV: Oh really...what is her name?

CO: Rosanne Blanco.

EV: And what year was that that you all got it.

CO: She's been there thirty something years. (laughter) That was 1970, maybe 1972... Steve was little he wasn't even... he was still crawling. I was there like 1971, yeah like 1971, 1972.

EV: And what is the purpose of that?

CO: That was, well... it was a lot of kids didn't have access to funding and applying to colleges and stuff so the educational service center would help them do that. So we have to put a whole board together, advisory board together for representing different areas of the community. And then we... we actually have an office upstairs where Martinez Auto, was it Martinez Auto on Canal?

EV: Yeah right there on Sampson and Canal.

CO: Yeah and we would have an office right there. Now Narciso was involved with it wasn't he? Narciso, he was involved in our counsel. So it was Cecil and Frank Urtiaga.

RO: That was at the same time that they had the LULAC Junior counsel and they had like one that Ninfas son was in it.

CO: Roland [Lorenzo].

RO: Roland.

CO: In fact Roland worked with us.

RO: They were all teenagers back then.

CO: They were right out of college.

RO: Is that the one that started the ... (inaudible) (7.6)

CO: Nothing else except the guy's name.

RO: SER, they were the ones that started SER and they were just teenagers when we were at LULAC.

CO: Froggy. Froggy Hernandez.

EV: Froggy [Froilan] Hernandez?

CO: He was on staff too, Roland and Froggy when we first started the center. Then here comes, after we do all this work, it took us months it really did, out of our own pocket, our own money and everything just to put this whole thing and get it funded. Here comes some other LULACers and just took us off the board and took over.

EV: Really?

RO: That Hernandez guy took it.

CO: No Ernest was still with SER. So they took over and that was the end of us being a part of it, but it's still there. It's still doing work and still keep in touch with those.

EV: But you've been keeping, you've been involved with it the whole time no?

CO: Oh yeah. After that it was all kind of campaigns from local to national.

EV: Democrats I take it.

CO: Yes always. Through all of that, because of Lauro and Robert Rodriguez, he was here in Houston went to San Antonio and Richard Holguin and some of those guys. I don't know for some reason I always happened to be the only woman among these guys

okay. So they would always nominate me to be on different things and one of those was that I didn't know that they were going to do it, Lauro [Cruz] ended up working for Dolph Briscoe, you know on his staff. And they were putting together....Jimmy Carter was putting together his platform committee and they submitted my name and there was like 143 names that were submitted throughout the nation and they cut it down to 15 and at that point it was between me and another guy from New York, that actually... last name was Castillo.

EV: Castillo?

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative) that was that guy's name from New York, and the National Democratic Chair was, I can't remember his name... and he had to make a choice and I got picked.

EV: Really?

CO: I got picked.

EV: For the National Committee?

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative).

EV: For the Democratic Party. Wow! This was for Jimmy Carter?

CO: Uh huh.

EV: I didn't know you were that famous girl.

CO: So it was 15 of us and let me tell you that had to have been the most exciting...politics in Houston, I tell Roy, "You have no idea..." And actually PASSO was around. Ben [Reyes] and all of them are saying, "How did SHE do it?" You know, but I got there, I went to Washington.

EV: Wow. That had to be really exciting stuff.

CO: Oh, you know Dukakis was the Chairman of the....

RO: Then the one from...

CO: Kennedy.

RO: The one from New Mexico.

CO: Which one?

RO: One from New Mexico that he, he was something of New Mexico.

CO: Governor?

RO: Yeah something like that.

CO: Yeah I know Dukakis was there, Kennedy was there, when I got to Washington Johnson's son in law. One of Johnson's sons-in-law.

EV: The Lieutenant? He ran for Virginia Senate?

CO: He was like my liaison person so when I got to the hotel there was a note from him welcoming me and if I had any questions...just call him. So he came over to explain what was going to happen and everything. Then they were having a reception and so they called me up in the room and said, "Your limo's here." "Oh, okay." (laughter) so I go in a limo. And they take me to this... to Georgetown and I knock on the door and I walk in and, you know, I mean it doesn't look, they just have a front and then when you go inside it's just a big place. You know with beautiful antiques and everything, it's somebody's home. and when I walked in they were all waiting for me. And they go, "You know we kept hearing Carmen Orta from Texas. We expected this big girl walking in from Texas. Look at her!" (laughter) Some of them were teasing me. That was such

an amazing experience like you wouldn't believe to be sitting right there with all these top aides and a red phone for Carter to call in. Well what happens? I took my personal vacation. I took my personal time to do this.

EV: From the Model Cities program of the city?

CO: I was at the city working for... anyway, he, what was his name? He... No I was at the Mayor's office with first it was Mr. Earl and then he came in and later it was John Castillo. Well I was told that, my staff called to tell me that I was fired.

EV: Who had fired you?

RO: Ben Reyes.

CO: No, the director. But I think it really came along from Ben Reyes and them.

EV: Why was he?

CO: Because I was chosen and not one of them, okay.

RO: Well they didn't go to them so....

CO: They didn't go through them they went through the state, the governor's office.

So I went in and told Governor Dukakis because that's what he was at the time. And he said, "You can't leave, there's no way you're going to leave. Who is doing this? What's going on?" And I said, "Well they tell me I've got to get back home or I'm going to lose my job." So they made the phone calls to the governor and everybody else and it came back and it said, "You're staying and you'll have your job when you get back." Well...

EV: Who was the mayor, who was the governor? Was that...

CO: Briscoe.

EV: Briscoe.

CO: At that time. So I came back and it wasn't the same and I knew it wasn't going to be the same. So I knew the time was close that they were going to find a way to happen. But I went ahead and went in there and told him, "You know what, you can just keep this job, I don't have to put up with this." So I left. But on my terms.

EV: Yeah... and who was that do?

CO: Because even the mayor, Fred Hofheinz at the time, even the Mayor said, "Carmen you can stay. There's no reason for them..." and I said, "But you know what? I don't want to anymore. I really don't want to stay." I mean because there was no reason for that.

EV: But who was the guy who was firing you?

CO: Se mi olvido los nombres [I forgot the names].

RO: Wasn't it George....?

EV: I'm going to say, "No," (laughter). What was his position?

CO: He was a director of ...

RO: He was one of those Court's...

CO: No he was black, Hon.

RO: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. And then you ended up becoming one of the ??

CO: Yeah, he... no no no. He wanted me to support it. After he does this, I went in there and told him what to do with his job. And I said, "You know what? It's okay. But someday you'll see me again." Well he ran for office later on for one of the counsel seats and he says, "Oh Carmen how are you doing? Can I depend on your support?" I go, "What?" And he has a stack of cards, you know. He gives them to me. And I says,

“You know what I’m going to do with this?” He says, “What’s that?” I threw them in the trash can. (laughter).

EV: He didn’t win anyway.

CO: So I see him every once in a while, he’s still out there. Actually, he...

RO: He married an Anglo girl.

CO: Yeah his secretary. Those secretaries, they are dangerous.

EV: I’m telling you.

CO: And he owned a bus... Oh yeah he did want a phone system, you are right because we went to his office one time. And he had an independent bus company, Goodman Busses or something. I can’t remember.

EV: I remember that.

CO: And so I don’t know he’s out there somewhere. But I continue after that it was different campaigns and I would be asked here locally...

RO: Which is the one that you went to go work for...?

CO: I ran, I went to go work for the State Democratic Chair.

EV: Well let me get back to the national though. How, you stayed on the committee for how long on the national level?

CO: Actually we had to travel to several cities because you allow cities to submit their concerns. So you have all these organizations for and against “this” and for “that.” I mean I would get so much mail at my house it would be all over. Remember hon? All over the place! And, you know, the organizations, different issues on every issue from abortion to war to smoking to...

EV: And these were sent to you by whom?

CO: By organizations.

EV: Wanting the issue to become a plank of your platform?

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative) yeah on the plank. So it was funny.

EV: This was on Carter's campaign.

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative).

EV: So did you stay on the committee just as long as Carter was president?

CO: No after you write the platform and it is submitted and everything it's kind of like over...

EV: It's over.

CO: Yeah. But I have the book. I have the...

EV: Did you keep all those letters and stuff?

CO: Yeah I have a lot of stuff from then. It's put up.

RO: Jimmy Carter's mother had given her a pen. (Inaudible)

EV: Really?

CO: So it was just a real experience that you will never see again. I mean that's probably once in a lifetime, something like that. But I did go and work for the State Democratic Chair in Austin and I stayed there for like three or four months during the campaign and he won, they still ran against him. But he won. And so I worked that. I was always involved. Once you do one. I guarantee they will come and look for you.

EV: Yeah.

CO: So you get on different campaigns. Just like Bill White, I didn't even know him. But since we had been involved and now my children have been involved like Ramiro. Ramiro had been close to Ken Benson and doing his campaign Ramiro helped him out. He worked with Ken several months. He was on staff. Well, you know, once that happens your name gets around, you know running in those courts, since they were little they would go to, when we would do all these mail outs they were always with us, or voter registration...you know they would go with us. So they knew all that kind of stuff. So they knew about delivering lunches, putting out signs, making signs. They... he knew all of this stuff. So, and these [redacted] go from one campaign to the other so when they got to Bill White's campaign they said, "You know what, there's one guy out there you really need to call. He can tell you these precincts; he can tell you everything there is that's about a campaign." So they called him and then they also said in that thing, "they go, and also his mother. So maybe that's one you need to call." We didn't even know very much about him. I had heard about him but I didn't know him.

EV: Carter?

CO: No this was Bill White, so we ended up with Bill White. And so I mean we were with Bill White from day one when everybody didn't think he could win and everybody is upset and telling me all kinds of stuff because I'm supporting him and not Orlando [Sanchez]. And so I stayed with him. I liked him. He was brilliant, He is brilliant. From day one I liked what he was saying and how he handled issues, so I stayed on with him and we became like, he always tells me about his girls, an extended family of mine.

EV: Did he, didn't he, wasn't he from San Antonio?

CO: Yes.

EV: From the barrio?

CO: Yes

EV: And he has a brother, a half brother by the last name of Avalon.

CO: Ya se murio. [He's passed away.]

EV: But he passed away he was a great musician a composer.

CO: Composer, artist, everything.

EV: Why is he white and the other one Avalon do you know? Oh he took his mother's last name.

CO: Maybe he used that.

EV: Yeah that's right.

CO: I think he did use her maiden name.

EV: Was she Mexicana?

CO: No. Not either one.

EV: But they were just raised...

CO: They were teachers in the barrio.

EV: Do you know which one was...?

CO: Both of them were.

EV: I mean which in San Antonio?

CO: I know it was the East.

EV: Oh the West.

CO: Whichever was where all the tough schools were, that's where they taught.



EV: Yeah Edgewood was bad over by Saint Mary's.

CO: They are still around, they are so cute.

EV: Really?

CO: Oh yes. They are something else.

EV: Okay, so at the present time you have continued to be involved, you are sitting on some boards now? Which ones?

CO: Uh huh (in the affirmative). Well I sit on the Metro Board. I sit on the Girl Scouts of San Jacinto Board. Also, I just got appointed to the Diabetes Association. I'm on that board, just got appointed had my first committee meeting yesterday.

CO: No. I used to be. I've gotten off a lot of them since Metro because the time is so consuming. But I also sit on the AMMA CDC, separate apart from AMMA. And we're building that elderly project and, over there in the east end. I sit on that board but we meet quarterly and does the San Jacinto, they meet quarterly. So those are not too bad to attend. But I've been on every board in town. I'm telling you it's a list.

EV: I was going to ask you, do you have a resume?

CO: I'll have to get you that because I can't remember all of them. (asking someone else) Do you have my resume? I was President of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

RO: She won Best Business Woman.

CO: I won Business Woman of Houston, Texas and US.

EV: I think I heard about the one in Houston but I didn't hear about... congratulations!

Effectively this is the end of the interview. Following comments are related to photographs and certificates.

CO: I went all the way to the US. Yeah. That was the party. That's the party they gave me when I came back from receiving the award from the U. S. Chamber.

EV: Wow! God I thought that was Mario Silva in the blue jacket.

CO: Probably is.

EV: Is it?

CO: (Laughing) Oye, y que le paso a Mario Silva [Hey, whatever happened to Mario Silva]?

EV: Lo vi...[I saw him] the other day. we went out to dinner and he works for AFLAC.

CO: Oh you're kidding?

EV: No. And he's got a...

RO: He was selling them water things last time I...

EV: Yeah there was a time there where I lost contact with him...

CO: Then I heard he was working for Greyhound, one of those bus companies.

EV: He's doing pretty good, you know. But this guy looked just like Mario.

RO: He was a real good friend.

CO: That's ??? Garza, remember ????

EV: That looks like.

CO: That's....

TAPE CUT OFF at 24.1