

**Interview: Librado Estrada Chavez**

Q: That was one story about --

A: Right.

Q: -- how it got named.

A: To me, I think that is the original one that I believe more because the other one is like a get out if you can. You can't get out because you're too poor. You haven't got money to go any other place and you don't know nothing. What are you going to do if you leave this place? Like that. That I don't believe it's the right one. Because I believe it was the script they had told our parents.

Q: About the rain?

A: Yeah.

Q: Now, physically what did it look like? The streets were not paved.

A: Well --

Q: There were no sidewalks?

A: There was no sidewalks, no streetlights, no pavement, no running water, also again. Outside --

Q: Toilets?

A: -- toilets.

Q: No sewers?

A: No sewers. It was just like being back in the other

places, you know. Only this was a little bit more rundown because it was -- seems like the houses were -- the street was narrower.

Q: What kind of houses?

A: Well, the houses were kind of old.

Q: Kind of shabby.

A: Kind of shabby. We went into one -- I don't know how this little -- this garage. We got there, we needed a place to stay and we went almost like house by house, asking "give me room, give me room." Finally, we came to a house where this old man used to live by himself and a caretaker. He had a big house and in the back he had a little garage. So we went into that garage. Somebody -- I don't know how it was but -- it would rock, you know, you'd step in it and the garage would rock from one side to the other. But I remember this one being a dirt floor so it couldn't rock. And this old man said that we could sleep there. So OK, we said how much is it going to be? He said, where are you from? We said we come from Arizona. Oh, so don't pay us, don't pay me nothing. I think he was from Arizona also, something like that. So we stayed there for awhile until we could find a better place. But when it rained, it would leak. The roof would leak in the rain. It had old shingles and there was some misting and you could see the

daylight through. So when it rained, we had to be putting pots to catch the water or else we'd be stepping in mud.

Q: Now your family was working in the fields. Now you were too young to work. What would you do? What would they do with you?

A: Not really. I used to go --

Q: You used to go, too?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What would you do?

A: I picked prunes because that anybody can do. Pick prunes, apricots, walnuts -- anybody could do. Anything that could be picked from the ground, any little kid could do it. And I was in there helping. I had my little own can. One of those eight pound large cans. My mom used to buy those a lot. The little bitty ones are four pounds and then the eight pounds or nine pounds. Well, after they were all empty, my mom would save them. There was one of my little buckets, I'd fill it up with prunes and go dump it. Work all day long alongside of everybody else. Didn't do much but I was a contributor. We all did. Everybody. We had to in order to make some money.

Q: Now you were working in orchards around town and then you went to work for some (inaudible) Orchards in the hills around San Jose?

A: Right.

Q: And you lived out there? And wasn't it a pretty decent place?

A: It was OK. The house was very nice. At first, we would drive over there. First, I remember because my dad had an old Studebaker. We had to go up the hill and the car wouldn't make it all the way. So we had the owner, (inaudible), come and pull us the rest of the way up. He had a big Desoto or something like that. One of the big thirties cars also. Our Studebaker was a '29 Studebaker. It looked like John Dillinger's car. It looked like that. Big with big tires and all that but the motor doesn't have enough horsepower to go up all the way up the hill. So the guy would -- we could only go so far. And that's as far as the car would go, so then the guy would pull us all the way up. In the afternoon, it was OK because we were coming downhill. But that would be every morning until finally the guy says why don't you guys move up here. There's a house I'll let you have. Fine. That's when we moved up there.

Q: And left (inaudible). So you were happy to get out?

A: Oh boy, yeah. It was a very nice house.

Q: Hot water.

A: Yeah.

Q: Butane stove.

A: They had everything, yeah.

Q: Electricity?

A: Exactly.

Q: Bedrooms.

A: Yeah. Some of us -- we never had before. Yeah. Although it was -- if I can remember it was close to the ravine. If you didn't watch out, you'd fall down the ravine easily. Way down there. As a matter of fact, the little prune buckets went down there. We never went after them. We couldn't.

Q: What kind of bucket?

A: The prune -- the buckets we used to pick prunes. Because everything was --

Q: It was real steep?

A: Yeah, it was very steep, yeah. Everything was on a hillside like this. We picked prunes in the hillsides. When we put the bucket down, we had to make sure it goes like this in the dirt. Make it level so it wouldn't lose balance. But every now and then we'd forget and bingo the bucket would go all the way down. See how steep it was? The owner had to use horses and a sled to get the boxes of prunes out of there.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

A: No, no. That we filled.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: Yeah. No tractor because a tractor would tip over. So steep it was. (laughter)

Q: Then the work was done and you went to Oxnard for the walnuts?

A: Yes.

Q: And you lived, again, in the colonia. And there was a lady who let you pitch a tent in the back of her house in Oxnard. Do you remember that?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: This was in wintertime. This was in the winter of '39-'40.

A: It was --

Q: Wet and cold.

A: I forgot the name of the lady. She took a good liking to Caesar. I think it's the same one, yeah.

Q: And you lived in a tent?

A: Yeah.

Q: In the backyard?

A: The backyard.

Q: And your father dug a ditch around the tent so the water would flow away?

A: Flow away, yeah, drain away from the -- yeah, that lady -- what was her name? I forget. Nevertheless, she helped us

that way.

Q: Remember Caesar and Richard sleeping under some canvas?

A: Yeah, they -- well no I don't remember. There in Oxnard?

Q: Mmm hmm.

A: No.

Q: Do you remember going to school there?

A: I didn't go to school in Oxnard.

Q: You didn't.

(break in tape)

A: Yes.

Q: Who took you?

A: Caesar and Richard, yeah. It was the first time I remember going to a movie. So I saw the Lone Ranger was one of them and the other one was Alexander's Ragtime Band. I'll never forget because of the song. It stuck to my mind.

(laughter) The first time. You know, when we were in Brawley (sp?) one time, they sent Caesar to the store, my cousin, to get some food, some pet food for the dog -- in the can.

Q: You had a dog?

A: My cousins did. Not us. Caesar says, "Lenny go with me." I said, "OK." We went to the store and we found what they wanted and when we went to pay there was this huge guy -- big guy -- there talking to the cashier. I don't know what

they were talking about. He said, "But you see some like this can." He says what I'll do. He got the can all full of the dog meat and just went like this and squashed it a little bit, dented it. And then the guy says oh that's what they were talking about. So we paid and went home. When we got home, we gave the can to our cousin. He says, "You dropped this, didn't you?" He says, no. Yes, you did. Look, it's all bent. No sir, I didn't drop it. Well, how come you bought a dented can. It wasn't like that when I got it (laughter) the first time. What do you mean? He says this guy there by the counter got it and just went like this. You know, they believe this. They said no you dropped it. Ask Lenny. Ask me. So they asked me. That's right. It's a big man. He just went like this and that's what he did. They just looked. I don't know if we can believe you guys that that's what had happened. They didn't want to believe Caesar because they said he had dropped the can and dented it and all that.

(break in tape)

Q: -- what it was like to work in the fields back then.

A: Well, take the grapes. We were picking grapes. They were for raisins. They were going to be raisin grapes.

Q: This would have been what around Fresno or --

A: Yes, in Viola.



Q: Viola? In Fresno County?

A: Fresno. It's very close -- I don't think it's a city. It's a little town or something called Viola. Right by Fresno about ten, twelve miles from Fresno. And that's where we were and this guy said he was going to pay us. Well, we worked in the -- for the first week and there was no pay. The guy said something had happened between this and that -- we'll pay you next week. So we worked the second week and, again, says oh, can't get the money, this and that. But you know what, he says I'm going to advance you five or ten dollars. My dad said we need something. So he says I think I'll advance you five or ten. And then the third week something like that happened again. Hey, we can't be doing nothing. We've got to get paid. You know, we need the money. He says, you know what? For sure, next week you're going to get it all. I'll give you another ten or five -- five I think it was. My dad said, well it's better than nothing. Next week, the guy gets paid and we never see the guy at all. Didn't pay us, he didn't pay nobody.

Q: How many in the crew?

A: I forgot how many families were there. There was about seven, I guess. And that guy just skipped, took off at nighttime.

Q: Labor contractor?

A: Yeah, the labor contractor. (inaudible) labor contractors. Another one would say -- would promise, come over here. We have big, say, pears. We have big pears. They'd pay a dollar and a quarter an hour. Come and there's a lot of work for so long. You'd go over there and he says, well, we only have for two or three but pays only a dollar. We'd find out that he was keeping a quarter of it. From every man that was working.

Q: An hour?

A: An hour. The guy had about 60 workers at a quarter each, an hour. The guy was making over \$400 a day, taking it away from the workers. And then other places we'd go say like (inaudible) pick tomatoes. As soon as it started, they would start taking what they called a bonus. They would hold 2% or 3% of your pay because they wanted you to stay there until they finished everything. If you didn't, you'd lose that money. So 2% or 3% would run into few dollars, you know. So the reason is because at the end a lot of people would just go for the first and second pickings, which were good. They'd make a lot of money and take off.

Q: But the third or fourth picks --

A: Right.

Q: -- the field wasn't so good.

A: Right. And you had to be there to finish it. Somebody had to finish the whole thing at the end until there was nothing else left. So if you didn't, the contractor would keep that money for himself. So we usually had to stay until we'd get it. If we didn't, we'd lose. There was a lot of ways they'd rip us off.

Q: Somebody would offer more -- they would attract you to the job saying they were going to pay more money than they could.

A: Yeah. Then you'd get there and they'd say, sorry, you can change, do this and that. I remember one guy taking tomatoes. We were going to go back to Oxnard to pick tomatoes. This time it was going to be green tomatoes, OK? Instead of red tomatoes. In Oxnard, no rather, Santa Barbara. It was in Santa Barbara -- there by Santa Barbara. They took samples of tomatoes. They ate tomatoes like that. You can fill a bucket or box easy.

Q: Large ones?

A: Large ones. When we got there, tomatoes of a pit size.

Q: About half the size?

A: Yeah. Way different. We were there already. What can we do?

Q: It meant that you had to pick more to fill up a bucket? Or

basket?

A: Yeah, the bucket -- excuse me -- boxes.

Q: Boxes?

A: Boxes.

Q: So you were making less money?

A: Right. You'd make less money. And then when -- and once they get you there, they never want you to have to try something because you're broke. So it's a lot of -- mostly all those contractors were -- every now and then you'd find an honest one, but most of them were crooked guys that would rip you off any way they could.

(break in tape)

Q: -- job with the promise of decent housing?

A: No. (laughter)

Q: No.

A: They would say there's places to pitch up a tent and they would say it's got a wood floor and it's got wood sides up to so high, about three feet high, and then the tent would come up. We had those kind of tents. You won't be able to -- on the dirt -- but you'll be on a platform. So that was good. That was great. But as far as housing, very seldom you'd find anybody who would offer housing.

Q: What was the hardest work?

A: To me, it was the cotton. To pick cotton.

Q: What did that involve?

A: Well, it involves -- you know how the cotton bush grows like this and then it's got capulio (sp?). I don't know what it is in English. But where the cotton originates, it then opens up. The ball of cotton when it's green. But then when it ripens up, it opens up like this and the cotton is right in the middle. What you have to do is stick your fingers in there and pull it out. Those points of the cotton ball when it's dry are like sharp needles. If you hit it like this, bing you get cuts and all the blood comes out of there. So you have to go just right so you can get it. That's one thing. The next thing is --

Q: And you had to work fast.

A: Yeah, you had to work fast also because cotton doesn't weigh -- in a way it weighs a lot and in a way it doesn't. But you had to fill up -- you had to tie a sack around your waist, OK. And then you start putting the cotton in there. So the more you put there, the heavier it gets. OK? And as you keep getting farther and farther, it keeps getting heavier and heavier until you have a load of 80, 90 pounds, whatever you can stick in there, you know. Then you have to pick up that sack, put it on your shoulder and walk with it as far as where the scale is -- depends where they put a scale. Because they're going to weigh --

Q: And that could be some distance?

A: It could be some distance. It could be about from here to the Alamark (sp?) Avenue.

Q: 100 yards or 300 yards?

A: Oh, easy, yeah. And then you have to walk all the way over there and then they have a cart back there with the scale which they hook your sack there and they read the amount of pounds. Then they give it back to you. You put it back on your shoulder and here comes the nice part. You have to climb up a stepladder to get on top of a rack and walk on a board about 12 inches wide. Get your sack, push it over, open the bottom, shake all that cotton out of the sack.

Q: You mean like a trailer?

A: It's like a trailer with a rack, with big high sides. You've seen them.

Q: Sure.

A: We'd have to walk up the stepladder, then onto that plank, there's nothing else to hold or anything. If you'd lose your balance, you'd fall, usually if you'd fall inside it's good because it's a ball of cotton. You wouldn't get hurt. If you fall outside, the dirt is hard. It hurts. So you'd empty the sack, then you'd throw it down, you'd get off the stepladder -- but you're not there by yourself. There's people like this going up.

Q: There are people waiting?

A: Right. And there's two, three, four up there doing the same thing at the same time. Now sometimes the guy is good. I mean, if the contractor is reasonably good, he'll have two stepladders, one to go in and one to come down. If he's not, you only have one. So after you're up there, you have to come down. You have to come down the same stepladder. And that to me is the hardest. After that, would be the short-hand --

Q: Short-handle hoe?

A: You have to clean out the crop, you know. Because when they plant, say they plant -- what is it? Anything they plant, they plant it --

Q: Celery.

A: OK. It goes do - do - do - do - do - do -- they throw the seeds like this. And now everything's coming out. For the crop to get good, big and all that, you have to clean out (inaudible) to go, right? You have to take one out and leave one in. Take one out, leave one in. To do that and be extra careful not to knock everything because if you knock everything down, there'll be no crop.

Q: Can't damage the plants when you leave?

A: Right. If you kill them, nothing will come up. You have to leave one, take one and you have to be accurate. So the

closer you are to it, the more accurate you can get.

Q: And you're working with hoes that are, what about 18 inches long?

A: Right. The handle. So there you're just bending over all day long. Eight hours a day or nine, ten hours a day. Yeah, you stay up -- every darn day you'd get up, relax your back, but I mean that's not enough --

Q: Sometimes a foreman might want you to get up.

A: Right.

Q: Sometimes they want to see you working all the time.

A: Exactly. Especially if they was paying you by the hour, you know. They don't want you even to go drink water.

(laughter) They would have you -- they wouldn't bring you no water. You had to take your own sometimes. And then you couldn't carry it with you. You had to leave it in a certain spot. And when you got thirsty, well you had to walk over to the water. A lot of times they say, Lenny, not time for water. Get back over there.

Q: There were no restrooms in the fields then?

A: Oh no. If you had to go, you'd have to go and hide yourself someplace. Make sure you were prepared because you had to take some paper, something with you, in case you had to go. Then you had to go hide behind someplace where nobody would see you.



Q: And that would mean also taking time away from work?

A: Right.

Q: And they didn't like that either?

A: They didn't like that either. Usually, though, they would pay you by the row.

Q: Pay you by the unit?

A: Yeah.

Q: Or it was piece rate?

A: Piece rate. Exactly. So then, it's up to you how fast you do it. But they would check (inaudible) to make sure you were doing it right. I didn't do that very much. I just did it very little.

Q: How old were you then?

A: When I did that, I must have been about 12, I guess, 14. But cotton, I can't remember when I started going to the cotton.

Q: Caesar, once I heard him say that he thought that that was one crop that he welcomed mechanization on.

A: Cotton?

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. (laughter) That's why.

END OF INTERVIEW

