THE 20th CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

JESSIE DeLaCRUZ

United Farm Workers

by

Anne Loftis

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

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VITAE

JESSIE DeLaCRUZ

Jessie DeLaCruz was born in Anaheim, California, in 1919 and was raised by her grandparents and two older brothers. When she was seven or eight years old, her family joined the stream of migratory agricultural laborers traveling up and down California. Her life as a migrant child consisted of working out in the fields with the other members of her family, many times living and sleeping outdoors, and attending school only a few months each year.

DeLaCruz married in 1938 and subsequently raised six children. The DeLaCruz family supported itself by doing farm work throughout California. This work ranged from picking grapes at Christian Brothers, which required lifting 75 pounds 500 times a day, to thinning beets with a short hoe, another back-breaking job. Without pity she states: "Because as migrant workers, that's the hardest life anyone can lead. And that's how we were forced to live--as migrant workers."

In the spring of 1965, just prior to the historic Delano grape strike, DeLaCruz joined the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). The NFWA merged with the Agricultural Worker's Organizing Committee in 1966 and formed the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO. DeLaCruz became one of the United Farm Workers' first woman organizers--from the field--in 1967. In addition to organizing and counseling workers about food stamps and other benefits, DeLaCruz managed the UFW's first hiring hall in Fresno County.

In 1973 DeLaCruz took the leading role in starting a farming cooperative near Raisin City, California. This Co-op began with six families and has grown to include over 150 families, the majority of whom lease their land. An interesting note is that this Cooperative, concerned with the harmful effects of pesticides on agricultural workers, is organic.

Though DeLaCruz completed only four years of formal schooling, she has testified before Congressional committees and the Department of the Interior. She has been consulted by the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and is a vigorous proponent of bilingual education for Chicano children.

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December 14, 1973

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INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask you first of all how long you've been associated with the Farm Workers Union.

DE LA CRUZ: I became a member in 1965.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know it had been going that long.

DE LA CRUZ: When I first became a member it was 1965, I think, but it had been going on before then; but that's when we first heard about it and my husband used to attend the meetings. He was not a member at that time but he used to attend the meetings. This date is when I became an organizer, December 31 of '67. Let's see, I became a member on May the first of '65.

INTERVIEWER: And they had the emblem of the eagle then?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: National Farm Workers Association, it was called then? Then it became The Organizing Committee . . .

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and connected with the AFL of the CIO.

INTERVIEWER: And now it's the National Farm Workers of America.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I've been reading some papers of an earlier organizer named Ernesto Galarza associated with a different Farm Workers Union in the 50's. They had a very hard time getting any successful action because of the Bracero program and so I was very upset when I heard there was a proposal to start the Bracero Program again.

DE LA CRUZ: We are against that. Yes, we've been sending letters and all that at our meetings and this is one of the things we discuss. And we were trying to get the Mexican representative from Mexico who is here in Fresno to have a meeting with us but he said he could not get involved with politics. What we were going to ask him was to draft a letter and send it to the President of Mexico in our behalf for farm workers here. But he said he could not come to one of our meetings because he could not become involved here.

We are very much opposed to the Braceros because what the growers are trying to do is just do away with our Union.

INTERVIEWER: You were just saying that you didn't get anywhere with that consul. I suppose that's what he is--vice-consul.

DE LA CRUZ: No. The reason we are opposed to the Braceros is because the growers haven't found any other way to destroy our Union, so they feel by getting the Braceros out here they will destroy the Union. But it will only cause a lot more fighting among Mexican people, fighting each other. This is what they have always been doing and besides that, they will try to pay lower wages, get cheaper labor out here. And by experience, from what I saw when the Braceros were coming out here, it would be just terrible to bring them back. They were mistreated, fed very poorly, and were given food they weren't accustomed to and most of them were sick. We lived in a labor camp where they had these Braceros. And say at noon--see, they had a cook house, a cook shack out there and they had hired some cooks; and the cooks would fix breakfast for them. And they would just pack them up a sack lunch consisting of macaroni between two loaves of bread. That was their sandwich, and so they were sick. At noon they would sit outside the houses we were living in and throw it up on the roof and say, "Who can eat this garbage?" Every day was the same. They were always complaining about the food and the way they were forced to work for lower wages.

I know, because my husband used to go up to Stockton to pick tomatoes. He was getting 25 cents a box for picking tomatoes--those 40 pound boxes--and when the Braceros came back these same picking was paid 12 cents, half of what we were getting.

INTERVIEWER: And what about the illegals that come in? They are also a threat to the Union, aren't they? Aren't they used as scabs, strike breakers?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, they are. As a matter of fact, I have had to call the Border Patrol quite a few times on them. First, a grower was complaining that there were no illegals there, but we knew there were. We talked to some of them and they told us they hadn't been told there was a strike. They just were told there were more jobs out here; transportation was provided. So they came and then they

DE LA CRUZ: started working and they saw what was there. They didn't know what was going on until we talked to them. And we told them to get out and they said they couldn't because where would they go? As soon as they got out of there, they would be picked up. And I said, "Well, you're going to be picked up anyway."

So we told them they could go somewhere where there wasn't a strike, where we weren't picketing and we wouldn't bother them. And I told them if you keep coming back, we're going to get the border patrol on you.

So I came out to the border patrol. I kept calling first, you know, telling them about it. And they said they were so busy they couldn't do anything because there were only seven men to work the Livingston and Fresno areas and Merced. And so I started going through their office. The first day I was there all seven of them were there in that room, and it was air-conditioned and they were playing cards and they had their feet up on the desk--all seven of them. Mind you, they said they didn't have enough men to go around. Then the next day I went back and the same men were there. Border patrol--they were supposed to be working out in the fields. They were there and so I told them you will either have to go out and kick these illegals out or I'm going to do something. They said, "Well, we have orders from Washington that we can't cross a picket line to get out the illegals from inside of the field." And I said, "When did that law go into effect?" And they said, "Well, we don't know but those are our orders from Washington."

I went home and called Bernie Sisk [B. F. Sisk] in Washington, a congressman from Fresno. I called him but couldn't talk with him. So I called his representative, I guess you would call him, Tony Coello, and I asked him; and he said that's not true. He said they are supposed to go out there whenever there's a report there are illegals out there and they're supposed to go out and pick them up. I said there were a few busloads driven out here and they're breaking a strike, so as soon as I found out no orders from Washington to the border patrol not to act on picking these men up, I gathered up some students and some farm workers and we took our flags and we picketed the border patrol's office.

So right away the man comes out, and he says, "Mrs. de la Cruz, you surprise me this morning." And I said, "Well, yesterday you surprised me when you told me you had orders from Washington not to go out to the fields."

So right away they got in the cars and they got a bus and they drove off. And right after them, I went out to the field and in Dinuba the border patrol men were just walking off the field, and they said they couldn't find anybody.

DE LA CRUZ: So I asked the pickets out there what happened. They said they knew the border patrol was going to be here, because we saw these men running. They ran everywhere, they're hiding. And this is why the border patrol couldn't find them. So that means that the border patrol told the growers that he was going to be there.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, tipped him off?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, that's what they usually do. So by the time the border patrol got there the men were all gone.

INTERVIEWER: So then the border patrol would play it both ways?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, we've known this for many years.

INTERVIEWER: Was this last summer?

DE LA CRUZ: Summer before last. So then we went back to the man and I said, "Apparently the grower was tipped off and I know I didn't do it. I know that only you and I knew that you were going to do it. You were going to be out there, so who do you suppose tipped him off?" And they didn't answer; they had nothing to say. And so I said, "I want you out there, at the corner of this street and that street. I want you there at 6 o'clock tomorrow morning, and you just stop all the cars going through there and the buses. I'm going to be there tomorrow morning to see that you do it."

So I went the next morning. By the time I got there they had all the jails full in Reedley and Dinuba and they had about 70 illegals just waiting for the buses to come in and pick them up. And this grower who the day before had over 100 workers had this day about 17. And they claimed they were not illegal.

INTERVIEWER: The buses came and took them to the border?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, they processed them in Fresno. Then they took them to the border--I don't know where they take them to transport them to. And so I talked to a fellow and I told him, "You see what happens? You see, these growers are using you to fight us. Why do you allow yourselves?" They said, "Well, we need some money and we weren't told that there was a strike." And I said, "Well, the man claims he gave you a paper to sign." And he said, "Lady, I don't even know how to read. They gave me a paper to sign, I sign it."

That's the way they go about it. Now that they know we won't take that, that we'll fight them back any way we can, they're trying to enact a law that will bring them back legally for the same purpose of breaking our strike.

INTERVIEWER: How did the growers recruit them in the first place--state agency?

DE LA CRUZ: No, they just sent buses to the border to pick them up. Labor contractors drive these buses. And they go to the border and they pick them up and drive them up here. They even hire great big charter buses. I have a nephew who was out there picketing with us and he heard somebody calling out his name from in the field and he said to me, "How would somebody out there know who I am?" So he waited to see who it was calling him and he said, "Is that you?" And that was his uncle out there and his uncle was here illegally. And he said to the uncle, "What are you doing here? You're breaking our strike." And his uncle said, "I didn't know I would be a strike breaker. They went out to the border and they asked me if I wanted to work so I said yes. And they told me to get on that bus and they brought me out here along with all these men."

So we talked to others and they told us the same thing. And this is how we know it--that the growers sent for them. Yet the border officers out there, who are supposed to be doing their job, they're not doing it. They just look the other way.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me what's going on in Livingston right now?

DE LA CRUZ: In Livingston I know they're picketing. My son was working for Gallo, and he's out on the boycott in Los Angeles. And they're picketing all Gallo wines up and down the state because Mr. Gallo refused to renew the contract after the workers that had been working--some working 15 to 18 years for the same man. And when they walked out on strike they were replaced by other workers who were brought in by the Teamsters. The Teamsters had been there talking with Mr. Gallo while they were negotiating a new contract. They were out in the field trying to sign up the old workers with the Teamsters Union. The Teamsters were chased out of the fields by the farm workers with clods or whatever they could find. They said, "We don't want anything to do with you."

INTERVIEWER: So the company announced over their heads that they were going to sign with the Teamsters?

DE LA CRUZ: No, he said he was acting in good faith by sitting down to bargain with the Committee for the Farm Workers' representatives. He said, "I am signing up with you."

In the meantime the Teamsters tried to sign up the workers out in the field, but all of them were union members and were very strong. They came up to the office and they told him, "Stop the talks. This meeting is just a farce, because while you talk with Gallo and his lawyers are talking with you, the Teamsters are out in the field. How is it that even the supervisors are not at the field right now, because they know that the Teamsters were going to come in."

So they stopped the talks and they went out to the fields and

DE LA CRUZ: they all told him the same thing. At the next meeting that they had with Gallo, the Teamsters went out to the camp and were trying to sign up the workers. The workers chased them out again. So after that the workers walked out on strike when they knew what Gallo was doing--working both ends, you know. So they walked out and were on a picket line and Gallo brings in the Teamsters with their crews--labor contractors, you know, with their crews--and now he has an announcement out in the newspaper and on Safeway stores saying that the people that are picketing against Gallo are not his workers; that his workers are still working out in the field. They were even evicted from their homes.

INTERVIEWER: That's what I heard--they had company housing and they were evicted. Did they live there the year round?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, the ones who are picketing right now. And the migrants came in from Texas and all over. They walked out on the strike, too. They are very strong. I know a young man and his wife who had their first baby and she was expecting her second baby and they were being evicted. And he said, "I can't take my wife out on the street, so they had a meeting at their house and they said, "If they try to evict you, they'll have to carry all of us out."

There was about 20 persons in that house with them. And so when they finally got evicted they had to go to Texas, and on the way to Texas--the baby was sick already; the year-old baby that they had was sick when they were living here at this camp--and so on the way to Texas the baby died and his wife was very, very sick. I think it was the last few months of her pregnancy when the baby died. So now his wife is in Texas and he's back on the picket line.

But this just goes to show how much money Gallo can spend--millions of dollars--to build a big image of himself in the news, say the television and the magazines, but he refuses to spend the money for his own workers who make all this money for him. And he's not the only one. Most all of them are the same.

INTERVIEWER: Some of these workers are Portuguese, aren't they? Doesn't he bring them over from Portugal?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Does he pay their passage?

DE LA CRUZ: I don't know how that's done. I've talked to them but we haven't talked about that. My son would be the one to know because he got to know them very well. But I know some have come to my house with my son. And some of them can't speak English nor Spanish and it's hard to communicate; and I really have to pay

DE LA CRUZ: real close attention to pick up a few words to know what they're talking about. But they are very active with the Union; they are very strong.

INTERVIEWER: And so when Gallo said they had taken a poll and the workers preferred the Teamsters, that was fraudulent?

DE LA CRUZ: That was fraudulent because the people that were polled were the Teamster people that were there. And how come he didn't call his workers in--the ones who were picketing?

INTERVIEWER: Why wouldn't he stay with the Farm Workers Union if the workers wanted it?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, I don't know. This is what we have been trying to talk to people about to find out what's happening. It's because--they just refuse to talk. You see, ours is what you would call a Chicano union. It's not really Chicano, but the leader is Chicano. So they are very much against not taking orders but having to do something that a Chicano will tell them to do, after having this Chicano on his knees all his life. Now this is the only way you can see it. What else, what other reason could it be?

INTERVIEWER: Supposedly they don't like the hiring halls--they would rather have the labor contractor.

DE LA CRUZ: That would just be going back to what used to be.

INTERVIEWER: No, I meant that the bosses prefer the labor contractor which they have with the Teamsters to the hiring hall which they have with the Farm Workers Union.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, but that would be helping the farmers; it wouldn't be helping the farm workers, because we know from experience--we've worked under a labor contractor most of our life. This labor contractor will have a pusher or somebody that works real hard up ahead pulling the people, you know, to just work as hard as they can, and then they take part of the farm worker's wages. And if there is any grievances, the labor contractor won't go out to the growers and tell them about it. They won't solve anything.

INTERVIEWER: They're out for themselves?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. They're so used to living off a farm worker's wages they don't work themselves. They just live off the farm worker's wages plus what the growers give them for each person they bring in that they wouldn't know how to support themselves.

INTERVIEWER: Who are they, anyway? Are they former farm workers?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, the majority of them are. First, they start--I've known

DE LA CRUZ: many who started; they weren't labor contractors--they just had a station wagon, they'd get 10 to 12 people to ride with them, and they'd go to a small farmer and say, "I can bring 12 people to work here. How much will you pay me to bring men in?" Then the labor contractor--not the labor contractor, but the farmer would say, "Well, I'll give you so much"--20 cents, 15 cents or 10 cents or whatever it was. So he says, "Oh, I'll bring them in."

So he'd drive them to work and back and he got paid a ride. First he started out with 50 cents, then he went up to 75, and I think what they're charging right now is $1.50 to ride to work and back with the labor contractor. Then they got bigger and bigger as they got to know other people; they got a bus, they got 2 or 3 vans, and then they drive these people to work, back and forth, and they were living off, say at the time I'm talking about, I think they were paying 75 cents, 80 cents to the labor contractor, 80 cents an hour; but he would only pay 75 cents. He kept out of each hour out of each worker, they kept 5 to 10 cents, and then the grower would give him 20 or 30 or 50 cents for each worker that he brings in. So this is how they support themselves. This is how they can afford to have new cars, nice homes, and everything without working. They call it work but it's not work. It's like bringing somebody to do the job for them. So they are the ones: when they say farm workers are against the union, it's not the farm workers who are; it's the labor contractor, his sons and say, their immediate family and friends.

INTERVIEWER: Because it cuts them out. There's no place for them. They have to go back to being like everybody else.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, like working.

INTERVIEWER: Well, the union puts all the workers on an equal footing.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, like out there where I work at Christian Brothers. We have a list of names and how many hours each person has put in since they first started working there. When work starts, they pick at the top of the list down, and they call us to go out there to work. Say there are 75 persons that are ready to go to work and the company asks for 80 or 100 they'll take whoever comes out; but why, say, the labor contractor would not do that. He would just sort of look around for the hardest worker, the youngest ones, the strongest ones to go out there and do the hard work. And out there with the hiring hall it's not that way. If a person can work, he can still work even though he's 70 or 80 and he can still work, he has a job.

INTERVIEWER: Because he has seniority?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, which is the best part of the Union. You see, I'm old. I'm 54 years old right now. If it was up to the grower he'd hire my daughter before he'd hire me even though I could do

DE LA CRUZ: a better job. I have more experience; I've worked out in fields all my life. But my daughter would be stronger and probably could work longer hours and harder than I could. This is why we need the hiring hall.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Because you have that list.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. And then with the Teamsters we could never have any benefits at all. Say we have some there at this company that work a certain amount of hours and they have paid vacations coming to them--two or three weeks out of a year. You know, the ones that are on the lower rung who have been working there would take a one-week vacation. The one who has been working the longest would take a two-weeks vacation and get paid for them because they are working at the same place all the time. While with the Teamsters that work one place and from there may have to go to another place and then to another, and they never have enough hours for a vacation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you work only at Christian Brothers, or do you work other places?

DE LA CRUZ: Well yes, we work other places when, say like right now, Christian Brothers only grows wine grapes. He has no other fruits or nothing. That's all the work we do--just the vines and picking the grapes.

INTERVIEWER: When you go and work for another grower do you accumulate vacation hours for that work too?

DE LA CRUZ: We work under a signed contract, which are I would go out there and my hours would be accumulated for my medical benefits . . . Say we had five or six signed contracts here around Fresno. And I work for one company, say for one month we got through working, then I look for another place at the hiring hall where they needed workers under a signed contract. I would go out there and my hours would be accumulated for my medical benefits and vacation.

INTERVIEWER: You said you had been working all your life. How old were you when you started working?

DE LA CRUZ: As far back as I can remember.

INTERVIEWER: As a child?

DE LA CRUZ: As a child, along with my grandparents, who helped raise me, and my two sisters. I think as far back as I can remember--I was about seven or eight years old. And my grandparents came from Anaheim--you know, that's where Disneyland is. That's where I was born. They would come out here to San Jose sometime in August to pick prunes and on the way back they'd stop after the prune picking was over. They'd stop and pick, say, a week's grapes because it was almost the end of the grapes, and then

DE LA CRUZ: they'd go to Arvin around there, stop until the end of December. November and December we'd start back to Los Angeles and then we'd stay there the rest of the year until the following August.

INTERVIEWER: So it was an annual cycle? And did you travel in a car?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, an old car that we had.

INTERVIEWER: And where did you sleep at all these places?

DE LA CRUZ: In the trunk, or my grandmother would bring out blankets or whatever she had and spread them over the ground and we would sleep there.

INTERVIEWER: So you would camp out.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, this is why whenever they ask me do our children ever go camping, I say, "Are you kidding? We camp out everyday." It wasn't recreation or fun. It's been a hardship because we had to do everything, we had to cook, do everything out in the open. Later on, as a married woman we had to do the same. We had to go on from place to place, and if we were lucky enough to have a tent we'd use that tent; if not, we were under a tree. Had to do our cooking. What we'd do when we used to come to pick grapes, we'd get one of those big-sized boxes and just fill it with dirt, and then on top of this dirt we'd just put some rocks or bricks or a griddle or something or a wire or something to hold our pot and pans there for cooking. And we were forced to do this for there was nothing else.

INTERVIEWER: No housing was provided?

DE LA CRUZ: Nothing. Right here, about 15 miles, in Biola. Even up to 1949-1950 we had to live out in the open under a tree. The only thing between the cow and the horse that this farmer had was a screen--not a screen but a wire fence. We had no tent; we had nothing. We were given those boxes just to sort of separate, to close ourselves in.

INTERVIEWER: But you were squatting right out there?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. So many flies, so many sick children.

INTERVIEWER: You mean there was not just your family?

DE LA CRUZ: Say about 15 families.

INTERVIEWER: All out in the open? No housing?

DE LA CRUZ: No, nothing.

INTERVIEWER: I thought there was supposed to be state inspections that came

INTERVIEWER: to see that conditions were sanitary.

DE LA CRUZ: Maybe at that time there were, but they weren't enforced. Just like every other law that goes into effect to help the farm worker, it's never enforced. Say, like sanitation out in the fields. The law existed but it was never enforced until we made them enforce it. We had hearings and we pushed them, and we told them we wanted bathrooms and individual drinking cups and fresh water and a place to wash our hands in. That's when we got it. Same with child labor. Yesterday or the day before as we were going to work, there was this lady and she had two children with her trimming vines and I think one of them was about 10 years old and the other about 12. What were they doing out in the field when they should have been in school? Because the law isn't enforced. And the grower is not going to enforce it.

INTERVIEWER: And so they were helping her?

DE LA CRUZ: They were helping her. They were helping their mother. You see this every day, even this last grape season when they were picking grapes--I don't know if you heard about it over in the Bay area; we heard about it--I think there was a three-month baby run over by a tractor out in the field while the mother was picking grapes. You see, with us that doesn't happen, because we see to it. We have stewards--I'm one of the stewards--where we work, and there was this lady for the first time came to work with us and we were pruning vines and she had two children in a station wagon. We told her she couldn't bring them out to the field. She either had to hire a baby-sitter or she would have to stay home and take care of them. So she found a baby-sitter and the baby got left at home. She couldn't bring him out to the field.

But the labor contractor and the grower, they won't see to it that this thing is enforced.

INTERVIEWER: So since you were 12 you have been associated with the farm laborer over the years?

DE LA CRUZ: Even before then, because my grandparents were farm workers and they were migrants where every time it was the season to harvest.

INTERVIEWER: Did they work in the citrus down at Anaheim in the winter?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, my grandfather did. I didn't.

INTERVIEWER: And did they go back to the same prune grower in Santa Clara every summer?

DE LA CRUZ: Most of the time this is what a lot of people do. They have a place where they work and they come back every year. Every year to the same.

INTERVIEWER: Now they don't have many prunes any more.

DE LA CRUZ: I think it's gone into machinery or houses. Back there where we used to pick around San Jose and Morgan Hill it's just terrible.

INTERVIEWER: Well, there are some still.

DE LA CRUZ: But not many; not nearly as many as there were. Where there used to be prunes, now there are apartment houses--great big apartment houses, drive-ins, supermarkets, that sort of thing. I saw what it was like when I was out there last year. There's just everything.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me, how did you first hear about the Farm Workers Union?

DE LA CRUZ: When I first heard about it, there were 3 men that came from house to house when we first heard about it.

INTERVIEWER: You were here in Fresno?

DE LA CRUZ: In Parlier. That's when I first heard about it, because my husband had first been attending meetings in Fresno where they had an office. That's when I first heard about it because he was attending the meetings, but I didn't know about it, for he never talked about it. [The 3 men] they talked to us about the Farm Workers Union, that we had to unite to work together to solve the problems we were facing each year about what we needed, about enforcing the law, and that sort of thing. Well, we liked it and later I heard that one of the men who came out was Cesar Chavez. At that time I didn't know him. I hadn't even heard his name. So after that, I started reading everything I could find about the Union. We were mailed pamphlets and leaflets. I kept up with everything that was happening and then I started talking to other people about joining the Union which we had discovered and telling them about how by joining the Union we could change all these things we had been suffering from. I say suffering because that's what it's been. So I got a lot of people interested: they would write in and telling them that through me they had heard about it. So they became members and after that in '67 I was made an organizer and this is one of the things I am very proud of. I was the first field woman organizer in the Union. Of course, there were men organizers, but for a woman that works in the fields, I was the first one!

INTERVIEWER: Now tell me what an organizer does.

DE LA CRUZ: Talk to people, have meetings. I would have meetings at my house and sometimes I would meet a friend and say why don't you have a meeting at your house? Then I'll come and talk to them. My husband and I used to talk to them and I'd bring my book along with me. And they wanted to know everything--what benefits, you know, everything that we were going to do. So they became

DE LA CRUZ: interested and after learning about what we are doing, they became members. I signed them up; they paid their dues. We were right there and they became members. So I got a lot of members that way.

INTERVIEWER: How many farm workers are women?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, I'd say about half are farm workers because if my husband works by himself out alone in the fields he does not earn enough to support us. That means that I have to go out with him and help him. So I'd say almost half of the work force out in the field are women.

INTERVIEWER: And when you say you go out with him does that mean you are actually doing the work with him at the same place, at the same time?

DE LA CRUZ? Yes. Same type of work at the same speed and everything.

INTERVIEWER: So women really do the work the men do--the heavy work?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Would women be tomato pickers?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, prune pickers, pruning vines, everything. I used to hoe. Well, I've done all types of work out in the fields. I used to work at the hardest that there is, which is thinning beets with a short hoe. And my back feels bad from doing that, and working out cleaning lettuce is the same kind of work.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't there some law to outlaw the short hoe?

DE LA CRUZ: I don't think it's passed yet.

INTERVIEWER: Is it still used?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, it is used out in Southern California. Out here you don't see very much of that any more. But out there it is. Everything you see out there is people bending over using those short hoes.

INTERVIEWER: But now the sugar beets are cultivated by machinery.

DE LA CRUZ: Well, no, not all of them because I think that's what they are doing out there. I think it must be sugar beets. No, not all of it is machinery, because I know here from Fresno there's labor contractors who have buses to take people out to thin beets. And out there in the Imperial Valley and near Los Angeles, I don't know whether they are thinning strawberries. I don't know whether strawberries are thinned, but I know lettuce is and many other crops which I don't know, which are thinned with the short hoe handle. And that's still being done.

INTERVIEWER: Why the short hoe instead of a long one?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, the farmers say you can do a better job, you know, if you have a short hoe handle. We have proved it is not true because some have gone along with a long handle and a good job is being done.

INTERVIEWER: What about, what's involved in tying the vines? Do they give you plastic strips to tie them with?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, we have tie-ems that they call them. They are little strips of wire. Yes, with plastic on the end and the pruner leaves, say, about three long vines on each side when they prune. So we take these vines and we wrap them around the wire and then we get these little twisters on it.

INTERVIEWER: Following the pruner--you follow the pruner?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. Mostly it's done that way. But with us, because they get a week's work ahead of us, they work for a week and then the women start to tie and that's when I go in.

INTERVIEWER: What do they mean by girdling the vines?

DE LA CRUZ: That this, this type of work is done for table grapes, girdling it, but not for the wine. Well, yes, I think some wine grapes are because they want the better flavor to them or something: they are girdled. They take a little stock of some other kind of vine and they just make a little slit like that and inject it in there and then they use some kind of tar around it. And that makes it--say for instance, if you want I don't know from some kind of . . .

INTERVIEWER: Oh, it's like grafting--crossing varieties.

DE LA CRUZ: No, I was talking about grafting. But girdling, you just pull off the little things off the branches.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see--cleaning it up.

DE LA CRUZ: When it's little, very young. Say there are three or four branches. There's a lot to do on a vine, but I don't know what they call it. I know I've done some kind of work that if there are three or four branches together we have to take out a few of them so they will grow bigger. And there's another kind of work where you cut off part of the leaf around there. I don't know what you call them, but I know I've done that.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever worked in the Imperial Valley, or do you just work in the San Joaquin?

DE LA CRUZ: I went--I think it was about three years ago--I tried to pick tomatoes in the Imperial Valley but I got into an argument with

DE LA CRUZ: a labor contractor and I walked out. And my nephew was working with me, which was terrible for . . . see, out here you see we've changed a lot of things. We've been able to out in the fields, but out there it's hard because as soon as we asked for something, say for a restroom, drinking cups or fresh water, they all just fight us back--the labor contractor--and he says, "If you don't like it, you can just quit and I'll get some wetbacks for tomorrow."

So I was out there picking tomatoes and we had to carry those 40 pound lugs almost as far as two city blocks. They were empty but they were heavy. We had to take as many as we could up to where we would be picking and then fill them and carry them to the end of the row, then stack them there for the checker to come out and check so many boxes to this name with this number. So I had to carry some and I slipped and I fell. That made me angry and I took the boxes to where I was working--I could only carry 3 boxes, and I filled those and I carried them to the end of the row, and I asked the labor contractor why couldn't they bring those boxes in to where we were working. And he said, "Well, we'll ruin a lot of these tomatoes." And I said, "You are going to ruin them when you come to picking them up in the field, so what's the sense of having us bring them from way out there." And he says, "Well, that's what you have to do. Everybody's doing it."

So my nephew went and got the next load of boxes. Then I wanted to go to the rest room and I asked him, "Where's the rest room?" And he said, "You see that little thing way up there?" And you couldn't even tell it was a rest room; you couldn't even see a white spot way out on the field. And I said to him, "Why do you keep it out there?" And he says, "Well, that's where it's been." And I said, "Why don't you take a picture of it and give each of us a picture for all the good it's doing?" And so he says, "Well, you can just leave right now if you don't like it." I said, "Fine, I'll leave."

Then he comes out there and some of the people working there couldn't speak English and the owner comes in and he started arguing with the labor contractor about the tomato vines being turned over. So the labor contractor turns around and says that there's a whole bunch of cattle working there. So when I come back, this lady tells me, "Oh, I wish you had been here a minute ago," and she says this labor contractor came out here and said we were a bunch of cattle. Oh, I got so angry that I told him off and then I quit. I'm not going to work for him. But then I asked the lady, "Why don't you quit?" She says, "Lady, I live across the border and I had to pay somebody to bring me here to work. And if I earn a dollar, that is bread for my children." So they couldn't complain.

INTERVIEWER: So the very fact that it is closer to the border makes a difference

INTERVIEWER: in the conditions because they can more easily get in. Was that down next to Calexico?

DE LA CRUZ: It is in Calexico. That's what I'm talking about. I was working in Calexico at the time and went to work at El Centro. But everywhere around there you see the same thing. And then when the local farm workers walked out on strike they had people from across the border and they had kids up to nine and ten years picking cantaloupe--that was the cantaloupe strike. Eight to ten-year-old children out there picking those cantaloupes.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever worked with a tomato-picking machine?

DE LA CRUZ: No. I refused to. I was offered a job picking and I said, "No, thank you." I was offered a job there, but that meant if I was offered a job there I would have to work from 4 o'clock in the afternoon until 8 o'clock the next morning.

INTERVIEWER: At night?

DE LA CRUZ: Standing. On top of that machine there sorting. You know they have a light and you work there all night.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you pick all night?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, day and night. Those tomato machines work day and night. And then whenever anyone works there who wants to go to the rest room, they can't go until the machine stops and then they say, "All right, everybody go." They don't get any breaks; they don't get nothing. And they have to work hard, you know, sorting those tomatoes.

INTERVIEWER: You mean one size goes to one bin, and another to another?

DE LA CRUZ: I think there's about four or five working on one side and four or five on another, and there is this conveyor belt. And they have to keep sorting out the green ones or the rotten ones, the smaller ones, the riper ones. They just have to keep working at it all the time.

INTERVIEWER: And are you riding around while all this goes on?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, jumping up and down all day, all night--the ones who work all night. So I felt that if I was going to work and pick out there I would rather pick where I could put the tomatoes in a bucket and take them out to a box and dump it and come back for some more.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever worked in lettuce?

DE LA CRUZ: No, I've worked in lettuce, but not for the market. I've worked out on the west side [of Fresno]. They had fields of lettuce and

DE LA CRUZ: what we were doing--these were for seed--and what we were doing was just bending over and take this lettuce and push it down and pull it out and there were little things left there, and they grow about and these grow about so high and these have the lettuce seeds and then they harvest that and put it in sacks for seeds.

INTERVIEWER: And then this is the seed that is embedded in some sort of plastic strip or something?

DE LA CRUZ: I don't know; I don't know what they do. I think they put them in packages or sell them to a beet grower by the ton or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: You spoke about planting onions in a cooperative. What is that cooperative?

DE LA CRUZ: Four families got together and we had 10 acres apiece.

INTERVIEWER: Together? So 40 acres?

DE LA CRUZ: 40 acres between the four of us. We had 10 acres between us.

INTERVIEWER: All connected?

DE LA CRUZ: Four families--there were six families last year. We had our land and we managed to take what little money we had saved between the six families for a down payment on the land in Carruthers-Raisin City area. And we found out that we couldn't plant this year because last year it rained a lot and we didn't have a pump and we wanted a well dug so a pump could be installed. It got late in the season to do that because of so much rain, so what we did, we rented six acres of land and we planted cherry tomatoes and all of six families worked from planting, through tying, irrigating and picking and sorting and packing. We worked together, and we earned enough money to pay the rest of the money on the 40 acres, plus for digging of the well, the installation of the well, and the leveling of the land. And two families pulled out, so we gave them their share of the money that they had coming and that left four families in the co-op. So this is why we say we get 40 acres apiece but we are all working together. We are going to plant more tomatoes--cherry tomatoes. We are planting onions right now.

INTERVIEWER: And how do you market?

DE LA CRUZ: We have a buyer. He is being very helpful; he has been helping us a lot. He comes out there and looks at what we are doing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you need the well for irrigation?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: And so the onions would be the winter crop and the tomatoes would be the summer?

DE LA CRUZ: No, I think we will start harvesting sometime [onions] in April or in May. And then by that time our tomato plants will be in.

INTERVIEWER: In a different place?

DE LA CRUZ: At the same place. I think we're planting 3, about 12, about 20 acres of onions and the rest will be cherry tomatoes. And we're all working; the children will help during vacation and over a weekend--we all get together and work.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have to fertilize the land in between the crops?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, this grower is telling us how to do it, about how much it needs. But we are going organic. We are not using pesticides which we have been fighting for so many years.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever had personal experience with pesticides?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, I've never been told that was what causes my illness, but I think that's what it is. Like my foot on this toe, this nail--I've been sick for about 7 to 8 years. It hurts all the time. It's not ingrown but it turns white and it's loose, but it's not loose enough to pull, and yet it's not like my other nails. It keeps growing and I keep trimming it but if it gets about halfways, the new nail starts turning white and that's been going on all these many years. And I go to a doctor and he tells me soak it in hot water and I do, but that hasn't helped. I think it's due to that. And then my fingernail. See this black spot right here? When I was marking--see, we have a stamper, ink for our boxes when we were picking tomatoes; that ink and I don't know how it got through here--well, it broke through here and it didn't come off. It just went down that way and it broke off. My nails are like this all the time. See where it's broke right there? Well, see, you can see that little spot right there. Soon as it gets up there, it breaks off, breaks off, and the ends and everything. My nails have always been like that. And I think it's due to that. And then I have headaches all the time. It could be from that; I don't know. First I thought it was my eyes but then I got glasses and that didn't help very much. But I think working with these pesticides, that's what caused it.

INTERVIEWER: There wasn't very much concern about pesticides . . .

DE LA CRUZ: We weren't aware of it. We didn't know that we were being poisoned. I would read some of the labels from these cans that were left out in the fields, but I didn't know they were poison until Cesar Chavez set up the first clinic in Delano. When they found out that this was what was causing all this illness with the farm workers and the children, this was when we became aware of what was happening to us. But before then we didn't know anything.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the [1972] Democratic Convention in relation to the Farm Workers. I seem to remember on television that there was a lot of support.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, everywhere. I was so happy to hear that some states were 100% in favor of the lettuce boycott, or the grape boycott. Oh, that makes me feel great. The only people who were sort of against this were the George Wallace people. They had lettuce all over the floor, in their hats; they had a hat with lettuce on top. You know, they had lettuce everywhere and they were just eating it, but we just ignored them.

INTERVIEWER: Were you the only organizer from the Farm Workers Union that was a delegate?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, a woman organizer, from the field.

INTERVIEWER: And did you ever get a chance to speak?

DE LA CRUZ: No. It was a great experience. I felt so good about it because for the first time--well, we did have meetings and we would discuss or listen to what was being said and then we would go out to the convention center; but during these meetings I learned a lot. And I got to vote on some of the proposals there at the meetings or made suggestions, like a Chicano caucus out there and all that stuff. But I told them the most important thing we had to do is get education for our children. That's the most important thing. And this is why we were asking for bilingual education and ethnic studies and all this. You know, even here in the city we've been talking about that. Because we need that--we need our children to know their background. We need them to know how we were raised, so they won't have to go through the same things we have had to.

INTERVIEWER: I'm also trying to find out about farm workers and farm labor organizing in other states. I know that the Farm Workers Union had some contracts in Florida.

DE LA CRUZ: With Coca-Cola.

INTERVIEWER: Coca-Cola, yes. I saw them at the Convention. Do you know anything about--there was some decision of the Supreme Court the other day against giving medical benefits and retirement benefits to farm migrants. I really don't know too much about it, but it came out from a case in New York State. I just wondered if you knew anything about that.

DE LA CRUZ: What do you mean--medical benefits?

INTERVIEWER: I take it they were trying to make a law mandatory that migrant workers should have the same sort of guarantee of unemployment benefits . . .

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, this I am familiar with, for we have been after these for many years. I am one of the persons that has gone with different groups to Sacramento to talk about it and ask for unemployment benefits for the farm workers. We are not covered by unemployment, and it went from the House of Representatives to the Assembly, everywhere. It passed but when it got to Reagan, he just vetoed it. No unemployment for farm workers. So we are still pushing for it. They keep telling us that it can't be done, that this type of work is seasonal. The packing shed is seasonal; the packing shed can't be worked before we do. As long as we work, the packing shed works. So how can the packing shed workers in the canneries have unemployment and the farm workers not have any? It's because the growers have been out there talking to Reagan, they give him money and to Nixon and all this, and this is why we haven't got it. But we'll get it. It might take a few years, but we'll get it.

INTERVIEWER: I don't think even if you lose any more contracts that things will ever go back to the way they were.

DE LA CRUZ: We won't take anything less than what we've got right now. We might have to go without our contracts for say this year and probably next year--I don't know just how long, but we'll get them back. You see, the growers, they just refuse to listen to us but when it comes to money and they're losing the money, oh, they'll turn out. That's the only way to hurt them--that's through the pocketbook. This we've learned.

INTERVIEWER: That's the result of the first grape boycott that brought them to the bargaining table? Was it also pressure from the Catholic Bishops?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, plus support from people who lived in the cities; from everywhere. We had a lot of support, a lot of help, and we still have it. And people are more aware of what's happening right now than they were at that time. Because a lot of people, you would say 'boycott' and they didn't know what you were talking about. Something funny happened when I was picketing Safeway during Easter, out there near Palm Springs. There was this Safeway where most of the people who have money go out there for summer vacation--you know, well-to-do families from San Francisco and all over. They have money so they go out there, and I was out on the picket line talking to them and along comes this lady. "What do you think you're doing? What do you think you're doing?" And I said, "Well, I don't think I'm doing; I know what I'm doing." Then she says, "Well, Cesar Chavez doesn't know how to go about it. You should do it the way we're doing--we're boycotting meat." And she said, "We don't picket. We don't make a...."--how did she say it? Like say that they weren't crazy to be on a picket line, you know. It amounted to something like that. And she said, "What we do is go from store to store and we tell them you are either going to lower your prices or we won't buy here.

DE LA CRUZ: And we go from that store to another one and we look at the prices. And we only shop at the stores where they have lower prices. And this is how we go about it and this is how you should go about it."

And I said we couldn't do it. And she says, "Well, you should learn to boycott like us; our meat boycott." And I said, "What do you mean a meat boycott? Didn't you learn to boycott through the grape boycott?" I said, "Nobody ever heard of boycott until the grape boycott, so don't you come out here trying to tell us how to do it. Besides what you are fighting for is not what we are fighting for. We're fighting for our lives; we're not fighting to have steak two times a day. We're fighting for a loaf of bread for our children working out in the fields." I say, "You don't know anything about it. You know the people, the ones with the meat boycott is middle-class American housewife and I say we're not the lower rung; we're the grass root, the farm workers who put all the fruit and vegetables on your table." And I say, "This is why we're asking you to help us." Then she says, "You're crazy," and she just walked off.

She just couldn't see what we were doing. I don't think she had ever talked to Chicanos before, because there was one boy at school, Juan Perez, who hardly speaks any Spanish but he's dark-skinned and she said, "Does that boy understand English?" She asked Jim Lippe, who is an Anglo who speaks plain Spanish and English. So he says, "I don't know; let me ask him," asks him in Spanish, then Juan turns around and says something in mock Spanish. [laughter]

You see, they were making fun of that lady. Just because he was dark-skinned, she thought he couldn't speak English; probably thought he was a wetback, a twenty-two year old boy. But she didn't know what she was talking about.

INTERVIEWER: How did the boycott idea first come up?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, first we would go out there and talk to the store managers about not handling any scab grapes, and he says, "Well, I'll keep them here and as long as people will buy them, I don't care what you are going through." So after having a lot of meetings in Delano--at that time all the meetings were in Delano--some people started suggesting why don't we ask the other people not to buy grapes? Instead of just only not buying ourselves, why not ask other people who don't know what's going on, and that's how it all got started--spreading the word around, "Don't buy grapes."

INTERVIEWER: Astounding that it got all across the country, isn't it?

DE LA CRUZ: It was an international thing, because we had international grape boycott on I think it was March the 10th of 1969, or was it '70? I don't know. I still have my big banner from that day.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever hear of that previous former union in which Galarza was involved--National Farm Labor Union?

DE LA CRUZ: No, I've heard the name and I've met the man. I've seen him; I haven't met him. I heard him speak.

INTERVIEWER: I guess that just never took off.

DE LA CRUZ: Well, it must have been just like other strikes--I've been in other strikes before this one. Back in 1933 out here in Madera. Yes, farm workers walked out on strike.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that.

DE LA CRUZ: I was only about 13 years old, 13 or 14, maybe even less. And my uncles and my grandmother said we were going to pick grapes. That was the first year we were going to pick grapes. So we came out here and we asked around where do we go if we want to pick grapes. And they said, "Well, there's a camp up there where you can camp on a river bed, you know, a little ways out--that's in Madera County--but it's on the edge of a river, Madera River. And they said there's people camping there and you can go out there and then from there you can go out and look for a place to pick. So we had a small tent and that was used for my grandmother and the girls to sleep in and my brother slept outside. So we heard about this man who would give us a job. So my brothers instead of taking the whole family decided to go out there and look first before we could pick. So they left early in the morning and it took almost the whole day and then they came back and they said there's no jobs nowhere. And we said, "How come? Is it too many people?" And he says, "No, nobody's working. There's a strike." So that's all I knew about a strike--that we were not supposed to work. But we just stayed there and when the cotton picking time started we went back to Dos Palos where we came from to pick the cotton. But we didn't pick any grapes that year. But that's the first time I saw some of the farm workers....

Oral History Interview

with

JESSIE DE LA CRUZ

June 15, 1976

by

Anne Loftis

INTERVIEWER: Let's start first, then, with the Westlands, because where I left off, I think that was just beginning when I saw you in 1973. What have been the developments there?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, I probably told you then, or did I tell you that we had gone into farming?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you told me about the cooperative farms that you had with four other families, I think--wasn't it?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, six families altogether, and that was leased land. We did not have enough money to buy land. But first of all, did I tell you about this festival promoter who came out here from New York to one of our meetings and he told us that he could have a festival out here for us where he could raise about three million dollars so we could buy the land? In the hopes of having this festival, and he kept coming back to our meetings from New York and since he was flying here all the way I thought, well, this is a man who could help us because he's really interested, to take time and his money and come out here, offering to do this festival. But then we went to the Board of Supervisors and they said we couldn't get a permit from them. And we did form a committee and I was part of that committee when we went to talk with Mr. Russell Giffen. He was one of the big growers in the Westlands district that had to sell. And we knew that he was selling his land, and we went to his office and we told him that we were interested in buying the land. And he didn't say he wouldn't sell, but he just asked me if we had a half-a-million down payment. So I really felt like--in other words, he was saying no, because he knew we didn't have a half-a-million dollars at that time. And I pointed out that my husband and I had worked for him for about 15 years--10 hours a day when it wasn't raining--and that we had practically measured his land by the inch because we were hoeing his weeds and his cotton and everything

DE LA CRUZ: with a hoe, oh, about this wide. And we did this 10 hours a day and for this many years we feel that we measured his land by the inch. But that didn't move him. He didn't say nothing. I said if anyone should be given a chance to buy land is us the farm workers who helped make you rich. But that didn't move him, so I came back and reported to the group out here and a lot of families--we had close to 200 families attending our meetings, and they became discouraged and they left but except for 6 families. And that's when we rented 6 acres from a friend of ours who offered to rent that land, and we planted cherry tomatoes. It was hard. It wasn't spring yet; it was still the rainy season and it was cold and we were out there on our hands and knees. All 6 families doing the planting. And there was always the fear of our plants freezing, it was that cold. But we did manage to plant all of them. And there was the 6 acres. And we weeded, we irrigated and did all the work on 6 acres, and at the end of the crops--I mean after everything was picked and we went down to see how much we had earned--we made $64,000 on these 6 acres.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you cleared that--all of it?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. Well, no, after we paid for our plants and fertilizer and labor, because we do pay our wages, so we had enough money left over so we could buy 40 acres for 4 families. And that's where we're farming right now. We each have our 10 acres.

INTERVIEWER: You bought the land?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and for the last--this is our, let me see, 1974, '75, '76. This is our third year farming our own 10 acres.

INTERVIEWER: And where is the land located?

DE LA CRUZ: It's in Raisin City. It's about southwest, 20 miles southwest of Fresno.

INTERVIEWER: Is it in the Westlands?

DE LA CRUZ: No. This is why last year, see, our pump broke and we lost half of our crop and we had to sink a new well and install a new pump. This cost $20,000. And we couldn't irrigate and we lost half of our crop, but that didn't discourage us. I mean, we're still going on. Now we have a new pump; we have a $20,000 bill to pay. We'll say we really did something. We can manage between the four families to pay those $4,000 and the plants and whatever goes into farming these 40 acres. Even if we don't have any money left over this year, maybe next year.

INTERVIEWER: Now do you have onions as well as cherry tomatoes?

DE LA CRUZ: No. Year before last we had 100% organic onions, but it seems like everybody went into onions that year and we sold about half

DE LA CRUZ: of our crop, which was about two and a half acres, and the rest we gave away. We don't plow them under like the big growers. We give them away.

INTERVIEWER: And do you do all the labor yourself with these families? You don't have to hire people to help you?

DE LA CRUZ: So far we haven't had to. Last year, I think towards the very end when school started, we did have to hire two young men to come and help. But that was about the last two weeks.

INTERVIEWER: How do you market the crop?

DE LA CRUZ: We go through a buyer in Reedley. You see, we pick our tomatoes, we sort them,we pack 'em, and we see to it that the best goes into those boxes. We have our own label. And we deliver them to Reedley to the cold storage; from there this man sells it for us. He's a buyer, he's a packer and has a cold storage,and for this we pay him 15% of whatever we make.

INTERVIEWER: So altogether it looks good. And do you think it will expand?

DE LA CRUZ: Oh, yes. You see, the first year there were six families. The second year, as I was talking to the families--we were still having meetings--and I was talking to the families and I was telling them about how we had, well, made it, you know: made it not moneywise, but working our own land and our own hours. And so I kept telling the other families and then 50 families became involved last year.

INTERVIEWER: 50!

DE LA CRUZ: 50. And this year another 100 families, so that makes it about 154 families who are farming right now. But we are the only ones that own our own small parcel. The others are leasing. You see, there is this program, Westside Planning Group, who leases the land. They have the money and they lease the land and they rent it to families who want to go into farming. And right now in Huron there are about 15 families today are picking cucumbers and chilis--hot chilis--and in Pixley there's another group of about 13 families. Then us here and around here in the Fresno area the rest of them are--it's leased land, land that some of the farmers don't plan to use, so they lease it out. But our hope is to buy some of that excess land in the Westlands district because that's where the good land and the water is; and we can make a go of it.

INTERVIEWER: And what does the group call itself? What's the name?

DE LA CRUZ: We call it Rancho el Bracero, and the other ones that don't own land Los Ranchitos.

INTERVIEWER: And so the whole organization seems to be growing and expanding.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, because through Westside Planning these families were able to buy their land because in Pixley, the families out there had their own green house, hot house, or whatever they call it to start the plants. Because before that we had to go through a seller out here who is rich already. So this year we bought our plants from Los Ranchitos in Pixley, who are the same family farmers. They are small groups that have started, and we got it for less--we paid less money for it and we are still helping these families. And whenever we need any money, we borrow from Westside Planning and we pay back so they can help other families.

When we first started talking about farming our own land, these families that were there, there were a few who came up with the idea. They said why don't we ask the government for funds? There's funds for everything. And since we're a group, we can ask the government for funds. And I said, no, whatever we get we're going to pay for. I just hate to be gagged. I mean, if I'm going to get government money, they're going to tell me you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't go here, you can't go there, and I refuse that. We refuse to be slaves to anyone. We want to be free, like if I feel there's a picket line, even if it's not a farm working group, and I want to be able to go and to help without anyone coming there to say, "We're going to cut your funds off."

INTERVIEWER: Right.

DE LA CRUZ: So that's how I say we want to be free. There would always be a threat that the funds would be cut off, and I just don't go along with that.

INTERVIEWER: And how does the Westlands Water District come into all of this? And the hearings?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, let me tell you the truth. I didn't go to school. I only attended grammar school four years, so whatever I read--I do love to read. Anything I can get I read. At first I used to hear about reclamation law, the Bureau of Reclamation and all this, I didn't read that because I felt well, that's not for us; that's for the farmers, the big growers. But then about six years ago I started hearing more about the law, the 1902 Reclamation Law, where the big growers after using federally funded water for 10 years they have to sell their excess land. And that's when I became interested in reading everything I could find on it and I felt, well, within a few years we will be able to buy some of this land. But it turns out they won't sell to us. They claim that they are selling, that they are obeying the law by selling 160 acre parcel; they aren't. But they are selling to a family with 15 or 20, with the in-laws, the cousins, and the grandchildren, and everybody in that family gets 160 acres, and

DE LA CRUZ: then they lease it back to the original owner, and it is still being run the same way. But these people are only what we call these paper farmers, because they have offices in Manhattan. There's even a Japanese-based group who got some land out here in the Westlands District, the Jubel Farms, and there's many, many farmers that don't want to farm. They're just land speculators. They just want to get money from leasing these lands. And they have the money to do it and so they are doing it. But we feel that this is illegal, because it is breaking the law.

INTERVIEWER: So they're breaking up these big combines but only on paper, and putting it back the way they had it before?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, what we're trying to do right now is stop these sales until this law is really enforced.

INTERVIEWER: What about the hearings by that committee that came out here, that congressional committee? Did that expose all of this?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, because last July I went to Washington and I testified before Senator Nelson and Senator Haskell and George Ballis was out there. And about three of our group were there before I went out and we testified to the fact that the small farmer is not really out. They want people to believe that the small farmer can't make it. So when I testified, I asked Senator Nelson and Haskell and everyone that was listening there to come to California where the farm workers were, where the people who do the farming lived, and that they could hear us out here in California because only I could go to Washington and not the others who wanted to be heard. So they did come last February. We had hearings here in Fresno where a lot of people testified. And they were the ones who wanted to buy land to go into farming and the ones who owned the land, and they hung themselves. By this I mean that during the hearings, when they were questioned, some came out like one in the Five Points area. He came out saying he had his land up for sale. And when they questioned him about wasn't it true that with the land they had to buy the jeans and the tractors and no matter what condition they were in, whether they worked or not, and all the implements they had in the landing strip along with the land. And he said yes, and he was asking, oh, I don't know how many millions of dollars for that land. Of course, he couldn't find any buyers. And so that's what I mean; he came out here and he hung himself.

INTERVIEWER: Well, do you think that with all the increased publicity that this has received that they may be able to break up these big combines and let small owners lease and buy the land?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, this is what we're hoping for, because I mean they've been exposed. Every day, most every day, you read about it, you hear about it. And even Mr. Brody, he's been on TV I don't know how many times trying to explain his way out of all this mess that

DE LA CRUZ: he's made. Of course, he gets $85,000 a year.

INTERVIEWER: Who is Mr. Brody?

DE LA CRUZ: He's district manager for Westland Estates and so he is protecting his money, his $85,000 a year, so he comes out there saying it's legal. We did it, we sold the land in 160-acre parcels and so we know that he's worried. And he's been pressured by everything and by everybody that keeps writing about it and questioning these sales.

INTERVIEWER: I was quite encouraged by those stories in The Chronicle--oh, no, The Examiner.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, yes, The Examiner. You see, they've come up to our place. We have a bus tour a month.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, that's right. Blanche was telling me George Ballis runs it.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and if you'll like to go on that bus tour, you'll pay $7.50 and you leave at 4:30 in the morning from our office and you get a tour through all the Westland District, all these big farms, all this land out there where you don't see any houses at all; no farms, just a few buildings, you know, for tractors, to put the tractors in or something like that; and this cattle company out there in Five Points West, I think. I don't know how many thousands of heads of cattle out there in one square, I don't know how many acres there. And you get to see that and the aqueduct and you come to small farmers like us and some others. They keep saying that small farmers are out. We have small farmers who have been farming the land for over 50 years and they've been able to support their families, put them through college and buy a house and leave them the land. So I don't see how they can say the small farmer is out. The only people who believe that the small farmer is out is on the west side of Fresno County. On the east side wherever you go there's small farms.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and the towns on the east side keep growing a little at a time but they keep growing in small businesses, and in Huron. Huron has been there I don't know how many years. We were the first people, well, some of the first people, to arrive in Huron back in the 1940's and it was just a small town. It was mostly bars and it's still like that. Just a few houses built by self-help enterprise for the families who built their own homes, get government funds and then they start paying for their homes. It's the only housing that has been built out there all these many years and the town is run down and there's no built-up small businesses there.

INTERVIEWER: And on the east side?

DE LA CRUZ: On the east side, any town you go through there, there's a Chamber of Commerce, there's all kinds of clubs for young and old. On the west side there's nothing. So whenever I go to Huron I keep telling people you don't have to attend the meetings because I hope to move back to Huron. And we want to make a good community for people out here where we can have recreation for the young kids instead of running around the streets or being taken out to the field with their parents. We want a place, you know, where they can enjoy themselves. We can't, as farm workers, send our children to camping. But at least we should have a place where, well, a playground.

INTERVIEWER: Let's back up a little. Tell me the name of the organization of the hundred families you mentioned.

DE LA CRUZ: Los Ranchitos.

INTERVIEWER: Oh yes, I see. And then, the other organization.

DE LA CRUZ: Ours? It's Rancho el Bracero Co-op.

INTERVIEWER: El Bracero? Oh, I see.

DE LA CRUZ: And that means, well, you know what bracero is--the Mexican people who work with their arms. But a lot of people, you talk with them about bracero, right away they think about all the people who came from Mexico under government visa or something to work out here and then were taken back. And see, maybe the reason we came up with this is because many of the people who were coming there to the meetings, most of them came in as braceros. Most of them stayed here, they married, they raised a family; all of them have American citizen children and all of them are what we call "The Green Carder"--they are here legally. So that's why they say, "Well, I came in as a bracero," and now would like to have this place called "bracero" because they are always--how shall I put it?--always being cheated out of their money and nobody liked us, called us "dirty Mexicans," and we want to show them that we can be good community people and leaders.

INTERVIEWER: Who started this--the leadership?

DE LA CRUZ: I hate to talk about myself. But I was the one. My husband and I started going to other families visiting in Del Rey, talked to these families about what they think about getting together and try to buy a piece of land--because that's always been our dream, and even our fathers and grandfathers before us--owning a small farm where we could do our own farming, raise a few chickens and be able to stay in one place. Because as migrant workers, that's the hardest life anyone can lead. And that's how we were forced to live--as migrant workers. But we're all farm workers. There's always in the back of your mind

DE LA CRUZ: even while you're working,"Oh, if only this land was mine." And actually you put all your sweat and all your work on that land, you want that land, you know. You want to own the land that you work in.

INTERVIEWER: So it was you and your husband that had this idea?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and we started it with other families and then those families talked to others and invited them to the meetings and after we had organized a large enough group, one of the men who came out here and attended the meeting was Roger MacAffee[?]. I don't know if you know his name--he's quite famous. He bailed out Angela Davis. Well, and he's a small farmer and he's always talking about helping people. He calls himself a Communist, but I don't know what it takes to be a communist, so I couldn't say whether he's a communist or not. But to me he's just a man--I mean, somebody who's just helping people. And if I'm called a communist for helping people, or I'm called whatever I'm called, that's all right. Like when I was out on the picket lines I was called a communist and so many ugly names and I said that's okay, just call me anything you want. Just sign a contract and you can call me anything you want. So that didn't hurt me.

INTERVIEWER: So he came and helped?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, he's the one who rented six acres to us. So I say he gave us the start.

INTERVIEWER: And he's a farmer around here?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and he's involved with helping other people. He just gave us a start and now we're on our own. I hardly ever see him but I feel he gave us a start by leasing his land and nobody else did. He came up and offered his land for us. He came up and said, "I see that you are dedicated people who really want to do something, so I will lease my land to you." Six acres, and that's where we got started.

INTERVIEWER: And what year was that?

DE LA CRUZ: 1973.

INTERVIEWER: I guess that was going on just about the time I first met you. And are you still working as a farm worker, or do you have time?

DE LA CRUZ: No, I don't have time any more. Three years ago the doctor told me--you see, I've always worked very hard, like picking grapes, wine grapes....

INTERVIEWER: You were working for Christian Brothers?

DE LA CRUZ: Christian Brothers, yes. And I had to lift about 75 pounds about 500 times a day into a gondola of wine grapes and that's

DE LA CRUZ: almost a killing job, especially at my age. So I didn't feel very good that year and I went to the doctor and that was in '74 because after we started our own farm we worked for Christian Brothers, and I had to go to see my own doctor and he told me I had to give up the hard work because my heart wasn't very good and I had to take it easy. So now I do work, but at my pace. I mean, if I had to work for someone, nobody would hire me because they know something like this, that I could have a heart attack or anything out in the field. They wouldn't hire me. So at our place I go out there and I work and as soon as I feel tired, I--even my sister and my daughter and my daughter-in-law--you go back and sit in the shade for about fifteen or for whatever time you want, and I can do this.

INTERVIEWER: You don't have any pacesetter standing behind you?

DE LA CRUZ: Like yesterday, we were out there, and between twelve and four it was hot: 98 degrees. So we didn't work those hours. We stayed there under the shade, and when it cooled off, we worked until it got dark. And we can do this at our place. We can't do this any other place.

INTERVIEWER: How about organizing activities for the UFW? Are you still an organizer?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, no, I haven't been an organizer for about five years, but any time they need me, I'll be there. I had a reporter once tell me, "Jessie, I found out I can't talk to you without you talking about the Union." And this happens everywhere, no matter who I talk to, and I always talk about the Union because that's the best thing that ever happened to the farm workers. And it gives me great pride to know that I had something to do with it--that I was involved, that I was organizing people. I organized a lot of people that were really hard to organize: the people that came in from Mexico. The people that come out here every year and then go back.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, the green carders? Tell me about that.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. You see, when the Bracero program ended, the growers had to find a way still of keeping the wages down, so they recruited whole families from Mexico. And these families come out here and there's always hundreds of them coming each year. You know, this year there were 700; next year it will be nine, ten hundred people coming out there from Mexico. Each year there's more families coming out here from Mexico and this keeps the prices down, especially with the illegals coming from across the border, too. And this is how they found out. They had to find a way of keeping the wages low, so this is when they recruit the whole families to come out here in San Joaquin Valley to pick the crops. And these people are really hard to organize because they keep saying, "What do I care, what do I care what happens out here?

DE LA CRUZ: As soon as the harvest is over, I'm going back to Mexico."

So I kept going into their homes and explaining to them that they were not only harming us but themselves because while they were coming out here to work at lower wages and they had no benefits, and I explained everything about the Union to them. And then they became interested and then the following year they invited me again and they became Union members, and they're the best supporters we have. I mean, once they've joined the Union, nobody's going to tell them what is good or bad for them, because they know that it's good for them.

INTERVIEWER: But it was just convincing them originally that was hard?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, and like the prior year I had the first hiring hall. All the small farmers around there knew me because at one time or another we had worked for them--I mean, throughout the years. We lived in Parlier for fifteen years and so they knew me, and when I had the first hiring hall that I was an organizer, they called me and they said are you going to work for me this year? They didn't know I had the hiring hall. I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll call you back." So they kept calling and then the one that I'd worked for the last five years--well, during the time that I was an organizer, he came to the house after calling me several times, and he came out there and he saw this great big banner and he says, "Well, I guess you're not working for me anymore." And I said, "No, I'm not, not unless you sign a contract." He left and he never came back.

It was hard, because we had the growers and the people that came in from Mexico to fight. But we convinced the people that came in from Mexico,but the growers still haven't been convinced. They say that we are communists and that it's going to put them out of business. And I kept telling them it's not true. I say you get together, you small farmers, get together and fight the big corporations. They are the ones that are buying you out.

INTERVIEWER: Did you run the hiring hall in Parlier?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. The first hiring hall in Fresno County.

INTERVIEWER: And you ran it?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And tell me how that works. How do you run it?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, since I am bilingual, and let me give you an example. When many of these people come from Mexico and they go into a migrant camp in Parlier, these migrant camps open about two months before work starts. And these people, when they come from Mexico, they have to borrow money to get out here. Even

DE LA CRUZ: from Texas--they come from Texas--they have to go to a finance company and borrow money to get them to California. Then they come to this migrant camp. There's no work, there's no food, there's no money, there's nothing, so they came out to the hall. They heard that we had social services for farm workers and they came. They talked to me; they had no food. And I said, "Well, go to the welfare department. The farmers got you out here. Now you go to the welfare department and tell them that you don't have any food." And these people came out here and some were given staples, you know, what they call powdered milk, corn meal, and this kind of food that Mexican people don't eat. You know you can't make tortillas out of cracked corn meal. And we don't eat cracked oats or powdered milk or anything like that. So, but they were given these, and they used whatever they could and the rest they buried, because they felt if they didn't eat it, they wouldn't get the butter and peanut butter and the things that the children ate. So then we started talking about the food stamps. But in the meantime, the people that had to come to the Welfare Department couldn't speak English.

I was telling you about--I had the Welfare Department deliver the food around Parlier to these people that needed, that didn't have any food and they had no money. Some of them didn't have a car. So they started delivering the food out there. This is the kind of thing I went through, and then we got bilingual education in schools. And we got the food stamps for the people that needed meat and fresh vegetables and fresh milk.

We had hearings here in Fresno and I was one of the speakers. And this is the sort of thing I just love to do.

INTERVIEWER: But did you also run the hiring hall and dispatch people to jobs?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. Like, we had a seniority list from the ranch. We asked for a seniority list. This means that if a person worked there for twenty years, or fifteen, or twelve, you know, it goes down until the last people that were hired. And we have the whole list, so if the company calls and they say, "We need 20 hands up, start calling the people." They were supposed to send a written letter 72 hours before we could send the people in. And I would call people and I would tell them you have to be at work at this date, at this hour, and they were there. The first time that we had a contract something happened that we had to enforce the contract, because the supervisor at Christian Brothers called on the telephone. And he calls--I think it was Friday night--and he says, "I'm going to need twenty hands for Monday." "All right, I'll try to send them in that Monday." I couldn't find all of them. Saturday, you're not going to work, you're going to be visiting somebody or you're going into town. And Sunday, you're not going to be home because you don't expect to work Saturday or Sunday and you're waiting for a call so as they can send you to work, you know, probably during the

DE LA CRUZ: week, not over the weekend. So he kind of made a point of calling Friday night and then he still had to say, he said that we could not provide the workers. And he calls Cesar Chavez and he told him that we couldn't, you know, provide the workers. So Dolores Huerta comes out there, and Mr._____had never seen me; he had just talked to me on the telephone. So that day I was out at the ranch 'cause they had a grievance out there and so I was out there. And then he comes up, then he told Dolores, "We have a signed contract and you're not obeying what you said you would. You couldn't send enough people."

So I said, "Mr. _____, you know there is a clause in the contract where 72 hours prior to sending the people out to work we have to have a written statement saying that you need so many people. And I never got this. You call me on the telephone on Friday night. Saturday I could find a few but Sunday I couldn't find anyone. So I couldn't send them Monday, and I sent them Tuesday." That was our way of enforcing the contract. After that, every time they needed people, they sent in a letter.

INTERVIEWER: Now, did any ranchers who didn't have UFW contracts call you, too?

DE LA CRUZ: No. But there was a Labor Department office set there, too, in Parlier. And the man that was going to run that office--it was a little trailer house--he called me and he said he wanted to work together with me because it seems I knew a lot of the workers, that we should work together. And then he says, "I would like to talk with you. Could you come into my office?" And I went and he talked to me, like he got calls from the farmers where they needed people to work and where he could call me, and I could refer them to him, and he would send them to work.

And I said, "Well, yes, I'm willing to do that. I'll send the people out here, but you'll have to show me a signed contract before I will do that." You know, he was trying to use me in order to say, "I'm doing a good job." So I told him you show me a signed contract, and whenever you show me one of those, I'll send some people. So that didn't work out. He never called me again.

INTERVIEWER: So in other words, you sent workers, your members only to ranches that had a contract with the UFW.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Then supposing that there wasn't enough work on those ranches. Then the workers would have to make their own arrangements on other ranches?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. And this is understood, because they know that you just can use so many people at one ranch, and these people that call

DE LA CRUZ: them in and say they'll need 200 and they'll call their names. And these 200 people come and they're sent out to work. The rest of them know that they couldn't make it because it's just a small one: at that time it was just one contract--Christian Brothers. Then we got more and as we got more, more people started working under a contract.

INTERVIEWER: But farm workers also would have to go to ranches that didn't have contracts, but they do that on their own, right?

DE LA CRUZ: Right, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Because there wouldn't be enough work for them just at the ranches like Christian Brothers. That wouldn't provide enough work for them?

DE LA CRUZ: No.

INTERVIEWER: I see. So they can only accumulate their seniority and their health benefits and so on when they are working under a contract?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. And this is when they pay their dues. It's deducted. We deduct it when they start working--their first paycheck.

INTERVIEWER: And the seniority system works on the basis of how long they've worked on a ranch or how long they've been members of the UFW.

DE LA CRUZ: How long they've worked at a ranch. And then because we feel--see, at a ranch under a contract, if that person is 70 years old but is still able to work, he should be allowed to work. See, 65 and he's still able to work, he should be allowed since he's been working there all these many years. Farmers can't do--when you get old, too old, they say, "When you get old, too old to work, I'll have to replace you," and he's just kicked out. And a younger man takes his place. And with the Union this does not happen. Because if I hadn't become sick I could still be working out there for as long as I could, under the Union. Even now if I could find where there's a signed contract that there is light work that I could do, I could work. But farm work is never light.

INTERVIEWER: And if you have to lift 70--did you say 75 pounds?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, from 70 to 75 pounds about 500 times a day. And I'm telling you, that's killing. It's hard work. You have to keep going fast, because if you go slow, you're not going to make any money; you're not going to make a living.

INTERVIEWER: I remember you telling me earlier you had worked thinning sugar beets with the short hoe.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, bent over double. And that's still bad for my back.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back to the beginning now. When did you first start farm work?

DE LA CRUZ: Oh, as far back as I can remember--as a child. I went with my grandparents.

INTERVIEWER: You lived with your grandparents?

DE LA CRUZ: Down in Orange County--Anaheim; that's where I was born. My grandfather used to work for a water company where he built--he was making cement pipes for a water company. And then he became injured; he crushed his finger with one of the pipes and he had to stay off of work, I don't know for how long. Then when he went back, he had been replaced. He was out of a job and that's when we started migrating. Oh, I must have been about six or seven years old. Maybe before then, I guess, but I don't remember. That's when we became migrants. Every year we would go out as soon as school was out or as soon as the crops would start, we left. We came up north, as far as around Sacramento, Brentwood, around there. Then we'd start going back, you know. On our way back home we would start picking prunes and cotton. So in December or January we ended back in Anaheim.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, so you only went to school for half a year?

DE LA CRUZ; Not even that, because like all the time that we were here we would be looking for work. Even there in the city we were moving from town to town because there was no work. My grandfather was always looking for work and he couldn't find it, so we'd move to another.... One of his friends told him, "Well, you might be able to pick some oranges out there," and we'd go out there. He might work three or four days, and then that was it. So he'd start looking for some more work, so we went from town to town. But we were living in a house in the city.

INTERVIEWER: Anaheim?

DE LA CRUZ: No, even Watts. In Anaheim, yes, but after we lost our home and my grandfather died in 1930, then we lived in Watts, we lived in Fullerton, we lived in Claremont, everywhere. A month here, two months there, you know. And when I'd start attending school, we moved, and then I'd have to start a new school again. I was always the new kid in school.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about that?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, it wouldn't have been so bad if I had known how to speak English when I started school. I'm going to tell you something that happened to me that was quite an experience, and this is why I fought so hard for bilingual education in the schools. Not for the people that stay here all the time, but the people who come from Mexico each year. Their parents don't speak

DE LA CRUZ: English, and the children come out here and they can't speak English, and they are put into a public school. They sit there in the classroom and they don't know what anyone's talking about. And so I remember the experience that I went through when I was a child when I started going to school in Anaheim. One day there was this nurse, this lady, that came in and she was dressed all in white and she sat on a chair. And the teacher lined us up. All the kids were lined up and as they came to that lady, she would tell them to open their mouth, apparently, because they opened their mouth. And she stuck out their tongues in their mouth, and then the next one would go there. I think they were checking for tonsils or something, I don't know what. But when it came to my turn, she told me to open my mouth. I guess she did because she went "Aah," and I did, too. And so she put her stick on my tongue, and at that time I vomited. I couldn't help it and I got her dress messed up, and I started crying--I felt so bad about it. And then my teacher comes out and she starts shaking me, telling me something and the harder I cried, the more she yelled at me. And then she shook me and she was really red in the face because I wasn't minding. You know, I wasn't doing what she was telling me to. Not until years later when I learned English I knew what she was trying to tell me. "I'm sorry," but those words stuck in my brain as she was trying to tell me to tell the nurse, "I'm sorry." But I didn't know. So she just kept shaking me. And I got to where I was scared of teachers at another school. My grandmother, who raised me, didn't have money in the 30's. You know, that was during the Depression.

[sound of telephone ringing]

INTERVIEWER: Is he in Congress?

DE LA CRUZ: No, he works under Land Management, investigating in the Department of Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity.

INTERVIEWER: And he's heard about what you are doing?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. And he said that friends of mine told him what I was involved in now, and he wants to do everything he can.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, very good. That sounds like the right department--the Department of the Interior.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, that's where I was last July.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's where you did your testimony?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. Oh, no, it's Select Committee of Small Businesses and Committee on Internal and Insular Affairs. That's where I was last July, and we had the hearings out here in Fresno in February.

INTERVIEWER: There's a priest back there named Father Vizzard.

DE LA CRUZ: I know him. I've known him for years, and I saw him in Washington last year.

INTERVIEWER: He's a great friend of mine. He asked me to clip all the newspaper things about this, for this is his special interest outside of the farm workers. So I've been sending him all this stuff. There was an article in a magazine called, let's see, California Today--it's a new magazine--about Ben Yellen, and so I sent him that. I didn't know too much about Ben Yellen, but I guess it's all part of the same thing in a way.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, it is. Because out there in the Imperial Valley the same thing is happening as it is here--the Reclamation Bureau. And Father Vizzard was here last February.

INTERVIEWER: I knew that. I think he's coming back to California next summer or sometime soon. He has very bad health.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, I knew that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's get back. We left you in school. That's a long ways back there.

DE LA CRUZ: Oh, the other thing that happened to me is like my grandmother didn't have money to buy any clothes for us, so out of an old shirt she used to make....

INTERVIEWER: How many were there--you and your sister?

DE LA CRUZ: She had seven of her own and three grandchildren, which were three girls--my two sisters and myself. She had an old pillow case--I mean, she had to rip open a pillow of red material which she had, a cushion, because I needed underwear, pants. Well, she made me a pair of these and then one of the girls at school--I was about nine at that time, because I started school when I was eight, and I was around nine and even before then; no, it was right after I started at school--and I was playing there with some of the kids and one of them happened to see my pants and they were red. And she started teasing me and she started trying to pull my dress up. And then the other girls did, too, and I didn't know how to tell them to stop it. And they kept trying to pull my dress up and then they pushed me and I fell. And when I fell one of the girls--I don't know what she was saying because I didn't understand English--and she tried to pull my dress and I kicked her. And then she started crying and the teacher came. And she said, "What happened?" I couldn't tell her; I didn't know. But this girl explains and so this teacher turns around and slaps me, just because I couldn't tell her that this girl was pulling my dress up and they pushed me and I fell. I skinned my knee and I was crying. And I really--after that, after those two incidents, well, I was really scared of teachers. I really dreaded going to school, even one I had

DE LA CRUZ: been in before, say a year before. I felt something right here in the pit of my stomach every time I had to start a new school, because I knew what I was going to have to go through. But my oldest brother said, "You have to go to school." He wouldn't let me miss, you know, unless we were moving, even on foggy days. If we missed the bus we had to walk. I mean, he made us go whenever it was possible. This is why I pushed so hard and testified for bilingual education in the school. I hear a lot of people say, "Well, if you can't learn the language, go back to Mexico." We've been here forever and to have some of the people tell me this when I'm talking about bilingual education, of course we that were raised here in California and have stayed here know the language but the people that come across the border every year, they can't speak English. And many of the green carders who have been here for ten or fifteen or almost twenty years, they say, "Why don't they go to school?" Well, had these people tried working ten and twelve hours out in the field and then attend night school and then get up at four o'clock the next morning? They never had. So this is why they say they don't want to learn English, send them back to their country.

INTERVIEWER: When do they have time to do it?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. They have a family to support and then if you miss work, you're out of work. And that means food off of your table. So this is one thing they can't understand. They say, "Well, they've been here so many years. Why can't they speak English?"

INTERVIEWER: That's a good point. Then how did you get up to this part of California--to the San Joaquin Valley?

DE LA CRUZ: Well, in 1933 we came out here for the last time. Our truck broke. We had an old truck that was left to the family by my grandfather when he died. And we piled all of our stuff on that truck because my oldest brothers--there were two of them older than me--couldn't find any work. I was ten, so that means they were between thirteen and eighteen then.

INTERVIEWER: Were they running the family then?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, they were in charge of the whole family. They said, "Well, the only thing we can do is go up north where the younger kids can help us pick cotton." Then we came out here in December of 1933.

INTERVIEWER: Your brothers, yourself, your sisters?

DE LA CRUZ: And my grandmother--the whole family. We came in this old truck and we just spent a few days picking cotton and then the rainy season set in and there was no more work. And that left us stranded here, in Mendota. And then from Mendota we went to

DE LA CRUZ: Firebaugh, where there was a cabin there in this camp some people told us, "Well, why live in a tent here in December when it's raining and it's freezing? You should go to Firebaugh. At least you'll find cabins our there." And we went out there to Firebaugh and we did find a cabin in this labor camp and we stayed there during the winter, crying from hunger and half freezing during the winter because there was no work. We had to survive on mustard greens and mushrooms and fish out of the canals and right now, even now, I say it's a miracle that we're alive. It's a wonder we didn't poison ourselves, eating, you know, all these things.

And my grandmother was old at that time and she couldn't work, but we did go to work but she couldn't do anything. I mean, she felt helpless, and the only thing she could do was cry with us. But it's a terrible life.

INTERVIEWER: That was the bleakest winter--was it the winter of 1933?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Well, did you ever hear of the great cotton strike of '33? You were probably too young.

DE LA CRUZ: No, I was in that cotton strike at Bakersfield in 1933. As young as I was, I was out there. We were coming from Los Angeles. We came through Bakersfield and we stopped at this ranch, hoping to pick some cotton--that was in December. And they'd been on strike, so we couldn't work. But we did go on. While we were in this old truck we met all these people who were on this caravan. You know, they was just blowing the horns, and yelling and all, so we joined them. And we started yelling with them. I didn't know what it was all about but I knew it was something to do with helping the people. And so I started yelling and then we found out there was a strike; so since we didn't have any money and no food we decided to come to Mendota. That was in December. And we stayed. We've gone back to visit, but not to live.

INTERVIEWER: I see, I see.

DE LA CRUZ: We stayed here. In 1938 I got married. And I've been a resident in Fresno County since 1933. And even out of the county doing the crops my husband and I would go up north, like Sacramento, especially after our kids grew up to the ages where they could help us pick prunes or apricots or whatever needed picking. We'd go out there because picking grapes is hard, and oh, it just hurt my heart just to see my children, my baby out there where it was so hot. It was cooler up in San Jose or around that area, so that's where we went. We wanted to work under a tree and not under the hot sun. And that's why we didn't pick very many grapes until oh, '57, '58 and then, but before that

DE LA CRUZ: we went up north.

INTERVIEWER: When were your children born?

DE LA CRUZ: My first one was born in 1939.

INTERVIEWER: A girl?

DE LA CRUZ: A boy. And my youngest was born in November of '47--a girl. I finally got my girl.

INTERVIEWER: How many boys?

DE LA CRUZ: Four boys and one girl.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes, between '39 and '47.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. And now I have a younger girl who was my sister's daughter and my sister died when Susan was four months old. So I raised her and so I have another daughter--she's nineteen right now, and she's working. So I raised four boys and two girls.

INTERVIEWER: And they're all grown and off now.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, yes, and they have young children now.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, how many grandchildren do you have?

DE LA CRUZ: Thirteen grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Oh my!

DE LA CRUZ: When we get together--we're very close--And for like next Sunday everything has been planned. I mean, each of my sons is going to give me $15 to buy whatever it needs to have a picnic for my husband. And we do this on birthdays, on Christmas, and I do most of the managing of the food and all of this for them on these days--the cooking and the preparing of things--and they'll give me the money. I don't have to spend any money or nothing. They'll just say, "Mom, what about a picnic?" My youngest boy is the one who organized the whole thing. He's an organizer for the Union in Stockton so . . .

INTERVIEWER: Oh, is he?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes. He's the district manager, organizer there in the Stockton area. He's in the office there. And so he calls and says, "Mom, what are you planning for Father's Day?" And I said, "Well, I haven't given it much thought." And he says, "Well, we'd better plan something big for my Dad. It's about time--we haven't had anything big for him. Of course, on his birthday we all get together and have a dinner. But I'd like a picnic,

DE LA CRUZ: and then the whole day off for my Dad, and we'll get everything together and we'll take him to the park." So this has been planned. I don't know how we'll do it because my husband from early till late, he wants to be out at the farm, he wants to be working, and it's hard to get him to take a day off.

INTERVIEWER: You'll have to think of something.

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, we'll have to tie him up. My youngest son said, "I'm going to get him to that park even if I have to tie him and drag him." But you see, this is the sort of thing.... Like my son that lives in San Jose, he lives in Mountain View--he's a doctor--he's coming and his wife. And then Bobby from Stockton and his wife and their brand new baby, a two-months old baby. And then my oldest son who lives in Kingsburg and my daughter--my oldest daughter--who lives in Kingsburg, and another son who lives in Reedley--they're all coming from out there to get together here.

INTERVIEWER: And they're bringing all the children?

DE LA CRUZ: They're bringing all the children.

INTERVIEWER: That's nice.

DE LA CRUZ: And they'll bring friends and other relatives.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how are you going to manage this with all the activities of this next weekend? Isn't it this weekend they're going to have the . . . ?

DE LA CRUZ: Yes, on Saturday. Saturday because like for Mother's Day last year I was to speak at some rally in San Francisco and I just wrote them a letter and I said I just refused to go any place while my children, while my family were expecting me at home. I wish I could be two persons at once so I could be there and be here. But my family comes first, so I didn't go to that rally. I wanted to but I felt it my....

[phone rings]

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