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Tony Avalos

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
David Washburn
in 2002

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Interview with Tony Avalos
Interviewed by: David Washburn
Transcriber: Brendan Furey
[Interview #1: November 6, 2002]
[Begin Audio File Avalos1 11-06-02.wav
[audited by Shannon Page, 1-19-05]

00:00:11

Washburn:

Today is November 6, and we are at the home of Tony Avalos in Richmond, California, and he is being interviewed by David Washburn, and assisting him will probably be his wife, Esther Avalos. Tony, I just want to start off with some easy basic questions. When and where were you born?

00:00:42

Avalos:

October 15, 1927, Richmond, California, on First Street, South Side.

00:00:53

Washburn:

On First Street. What are some of your earliest memories about your place on First Street?

00:01:05

Avalos:

Well, family, brothers?

00:01:11

Washburn:

Yes, family memories.

00:01:11

Avalos:

Well, I had six brothers and one sister. We only had a two-bedroom house and one bath. My grandmother lived with us, and my dad and my mom. We had ten of us in that one house. At the time we didn't have a bath tub, either. My dad came from Mexico. He could have picked any house around really at the time, but he picked that one, because it had the wide open spaces from First Street all the way to Point Richmond. It was all fields. It reminded him, probably, of back home, Mexico. So we had a cow and a goat, chickens and vegetable gardens, so we did pretty good with that. He worked at Stauffer Chemical Company. It was mostly all Mexicans.

00:02:15

Washburn:

At where?

00:02:15

Avalos:

Stauffer Chemical.

00:02:15

Washburn:
Stauffer?

00:02:16

Avalos:

They called it Stege. I worked there during summer vacation. It was pretty dirty work, with fertilizer and stuff. He worked in boxcars, loading boxcars, and they didn't have no respirators or nothing. He used to put a handkerchief around his face, and he'd come home with his eyes all dirty. Real hard. But with a big family like that, he had to work someplace. He worked there until he died. That place, at that time, we used to dump everything in the bay. Can you imagine doing that now? All this stuff.

00:03:11

Washburn:

I've talked to a bunch of people, and the name Stauffer Chemical hasn't come up. Where was it located?

00:03:23

Avalos:

They call it Stege. What street would that be? [to wife]

00:03:28

Esther:

It's where the field station is.

00:03:30

Avalos:

Yes, where the university field station is now.

00:03:35

Washburn:

So, towards the point?

00:03:38

Avalos:

No, it's on Cutting, about Fortieth.

00:03:46

Washburn:

So, he didn't work around the neighborhood?

00:03:51

Avalos:

No, he worked there. My grandfather worked at Santa Fe [Railroad]. That's where mostly all the Mexican people worked—at Santa Fe. When we grew up, we all went to Nystrom School, grammar school.

00:04:21

Washburn:

Let's talk for a second just about your dad, because it's hard to talk about everybody at once. So, your dad, he worked at Stauffer Chemical out kind of on the other side of town

from where you lived. The people I've talked to worked closer to where they lived. You guys lived on First Street, and he worked all the way out there.

00:04:44

Avalos:

In them days it was hard to get a job, if you didn't work for Santa Fe or Standard Oil or the foundry. That's about the only place, it was dirty, a dirty job. He used to get a ride with another fellow that used to live on the other side of town. When he didn't have a ride, they had a trolley that came in that they had for the shipyards that used to stop right by where you worked, see. I had a bicycle that I used to use for a paper route. He used to take that once in a while. Anyway, he worked there, and one day he was waiting for the train to come home, and another train coming the other way kind of scraped—hit him in the back, and he was sick for quite a while. All he was worried about was getting back to work. Later on, the lawyer told him that he could have really cleaned house on the people, but he was just worried about working and taking care of the family. He wasn't worried about a big lawsuit or anything. Later on from where he got hit, the problem for him getting sick and stuff. He finally had a stroke and lasted about eight years. My mother almost went down with him, taking care of him. He was bedridden for eight years. But he had a strong heart.

00:06:20

Washburn:

When did he come to Richmond?

00:06:25

Avalos:

Probably in the twenties, 1920 maybe.

00:06:30

Washburn:

Why do you say 1920?

00:06:32

Avalos:

Well, because I got my older brother and he's going to be eighty, so they were here about a year when he was born, I think.

00:06:50

Washburn:

So, yes, that would be like the early twenties, '22 or something like that?

00:06:54

Avalos:

Yes, 1923 maybe. Then my sister was born, then me.

00:07:04

Washburn:

As far as you can remember, why did he come to Richmond during that time?

00:07:07

Avalos:

Well, during the—in Mexico, they were having the Revolution, and he got out of there just in time. In fact, they hid my mother trying to bring her over here. Things were bad over there. In fact, later on, the family, people, were talking about taking a cruise to Mexico. They didn't want no part of Mexico. They were so anxious to get out there at the time, because there was rough times over there. So, they fled over here, and that's where they ended up.

00:07:44

Washburn:

I know a lot of Mexican folks came here because of the Santa Fe, and they just ended up here because that's where there was work.

00:07:53

Avalos:

That's true. My grandfather worked the Santa Fe.

00:07:53

Washburn:

Your grandfather. Do you think that that influenced your father's decision to come here?

00:07:58

Avalos:

Yes, all of them came at the same time. My grandfather, my grandmother, my mom, my dad. So, I think they made a short stop in Winslow, Arizona. My aunt met her husband there. Anyway, we've got cousins over there.

00:08:26

Washburn:

So your grandpa worked for the Santa Fe?

00:08:27

Avalos:

Yes.

00:08:28

Washburn:

So, was working for working for Stauffer Chemical your dad's first job here?

00:08:35

Avalos:

Yes.

00:08:36

Washburn:

How long did he work there for?

00:08:38

Avalos:

Until he died, which was about—

00:08:49

Esther:

Fifty-three.

00:08:50

Washburn:

Do you want to sit here with us? Come sit close.

00:08:52

Avalos:

Come on.

00:08:57

Washburn:

It'll be more cozy.

00:08:57

Avalos:

About 1953 he died.

00:09:07

Washburn:

So, what can you tell me about how your family got along financially? It sounds like your dad worked and your grandfather worked. How did everybody bring money to the family?

00:09:18

Avalos:

My grandfather he died when I can barely remember. I was about four, so I didn't see how—but my dad, he was making about twenty bucks a week. We had our own vegetables. We had our own cow and goat, so that helped out. There used to be a little grocery store on Sixth Street, and he had a charge account there.

00:09:50

Washburn:

What was that grocery store called, do you remember?

00:09:53

Avalos:

Sixth Street Market. It might still be there. There were bars all over.

00:10:03

Washburn:

Where did you guys keep your cows and such?

00:10:04

Avalos:

In the back. You know that whole lot belonged to the Santa Fe behind, right on First Street, and then it goes all the way to the point. There wasn't no homes or nothing, just empty lots. We had the cows out there. We had a shed for them, too. Me and my dad used to milk the cow in the morning before I went to school and he went to work. I was just the right age at that time. My other brothers were too young. Once in a while the cow

would kick over the bucket. It would be my fault because I had a ring on or something. My dad, he kicked me in the butt, and kicked the cow a little bit. I didn't like the idea of having to go to school with the cow stuff on my shoes and stuff like that. Not only that, but there was a Mexican family that lived over on the other side of town on First Street. I used to have to deliver milk over there from the cow's milk. The goat's milk, you know, Mexican people at that time thought goat's milk was like penicillin, they thought, that it would cure tuberculosis. That's what they thought. So it was really precious, the goat's milk. To me it tasted terrible. I'd deliver that to a little lady over there. I don't know, about ten cents.

00:11:43

Washburn:

Not very much, huh.

00:11:44

Avalos:

No. I always joke with them, Alvarez family. I says, that's why you guys grew up so healthy and big, because you used to drink the milk from my cow. It's a standing joke. I still see them kids every year.

00:12:04

Washburn:

So, you guys brought in some money, selling cow's milk and goat's milk and stuff.

00:12:12

Avalos:

Yes. There used to be a—it was like a bar, it was a hotel. It was a dump really, but we nicknamed it The Flamingo to make it sound—there was this Mexican guy who owned it, and he couldn't speak English at all, so my brother used to do his book work for him once a week. He used to give my brother fifty cents. With that fifty cents, he used to take the six of us to the show, and buy us these jawbreakers at two for a penny. With that fifty cents, we all got to go to the show.

00:12:53

Washburn:

What show?

00:12:51

Avalos::

The State Theater. You've probably heard of it. It's on Fifth and Macdonald. The Rio was between Fourth and Fifth on the other side of the street.

00:13:05

Washburn:

What time are you talking about now? Are you talking about the thirties?

00:13:07

Avalos:

No, that was—let's see—

00:13:08

Washburn:

How about just before the war or after? That's the easy way to talk about things: before, during or after.

00:13:18

Avalos:

Maybe '39, '40.

00:13:29

Washburn:

You said that you and your brothers went to Nystrom Elementary. What are some of your memories about going to school there? How the classroom was, the games you played, stuff like that.

00:13:48

Avalos:

All four of us were there at one time, except my older brother was in junior high already. I was the traffic boy there. At that time, that street—Tenth Street—used to flood up in wintertime. Traffic boys had to wear hip boots, boots that come way up to here, and help the kids cross, sometimes carry one. They had planks going in, and the water got so high, there was a friend of ours named {Sonny Borgan?} who used to water ski there on the street. He had a car pulling him. He was a regular skier. He used to ski at Point Richmond a lot. They took a picture and it was in the *Richmond Independent*, he was skiing down the street.

00:14:54

Washburn:

That's great. Your whole family went there. Did all the kids in your neighborhood go to Nystrom?

00:15:05

Avalos:

Yes, everybody from the railroad tracks to Cutting, to Twenty-third, I think, went to Nystrom. The kids from the other side went to Lincoln. She went to Peres from Macdonald to North Richmond, to Peres School. Then from there, we all went to Roosevelt Junior High School, when you got out of the sixth grade, and everybody met at Roosevelt. Kids that went to Peres, Lincoln, Nystrom, Washington, Stege: we all met there, see. Everybody knew everybody. Then Roosevelt, that junior high school, in '42—was it?—burnt down. So we had to go to Richmond High. The kids that went to Richmond High already went in the morning, and the kids from junior high school went from twelve to five o'clock in the afternoon. You had two shifts. You had to sit two in a seat at Richmond High.

00:16:14

Washburn:

Is this during the war?

00:16:15

Avalos:

Yes, '42.

00:16:17

Washburn:

Yes, I've heard about them having a couple different shifts because it was so crowded at the school. Was it crowded because Roosevelt burned down—

00:16:24

Avalos:

Yes.

00:16:25

Washburn:

—or because there were so many kids coming because of the war?

00:16:32

Avalos:

No, it was just—well, you had all the kids from Roosevelt. That's why we went in the afternoon. The kids that were going to Richmond High already went in the morning, from like eight to twelve, and all the junior high kids from Roosevelt went from like twelve-thirty to five. And you sat two in a seat. There were just too many kids.

00:16:54

Washburn:

How long did it take them to rebuild Roosevelt High? Do you remember?

00:17:05

Avalos:

I don't know. By that time, they had Harry Ells coming on.

00:17:10

Washburn:

Did you end up finishing all your time at Richmond High, or did you go back to Roosevelt?

00:17:18

Avalos:

Yes, because we was in the ninth grade already.

00:17:19

Esther:

You left in the eleventh grade.

00:17:19

Avalos:

No, I mean that we went seventh, eighth and ninth, and then tenth, eleventh and twelfth at high school.

00:17:31

Washburn:

So, did you and your siblings—you worked also while going to school?

00:17:43

Avalos:

Yes, off and on I was working during summer vacation, and I worked with my dad.

00:17:47

Washburn:

What would you do?

00:17:48

Avalos:

I was loading boxcars too, but I was only fifteen or something like that, that was summer vacation from school, see. My dad got me in there, but I didn't last long. They worked us loading boxcars with sulfur sacks. They didn't even have tow motors at that time. They used to use hand trucks to push them into the cars. There was this other Mexican guy—Sal Herrero was his name—he was the foreman there. In fact, my dad broke him in, but my dad couldn't speak English or read or write, so he couldn't be a foreman, but he broke this other guy in. He had gone to school here. He was breaking me in, and I couldn't wheel the sacks—it was five hundred pounds—up a ramp into the boxcars. I would get to the top and I would come down. I was in pretty good shape in them days, too. He said, “What's the matter, Tony?” I said, “I don't know Sal, I can't get it up there.” He'd throw another sack on and he'd wheel it up. There was just a knack to it, like breaking a barrel over {__?}. There's just a knack to everything. It was backbreaking job. Most of the people that worked there were big husky guys, tall. I could get the sacks, and I had to throw them up high you know, hundred-pound sacks. Actually, it was a two-man job. At that time, they had people waiting in line for the job. I didn't want to leave my dad in bad, because he got me the job, so I told him I was getting drafted, which I was only fifteen or sixteen at that time, so I left on good terms without getting him in trouble.

00:19:47

Washburn:

You said your dad didn't read or write English at all.

00:19:52

Avalos:

No.

00:19:52

Washburn:

Did you guys speak Spanish in the home?

00:19:56

Avalos:

Well, yes, mostly. With my grandmother—my mother could speak English. So, my older brother and my sister and me and the brother next to me would speak Spanish, but the other ones didn't learn it at all. They would talk to my mom all the time. She spoke English. Spanish, they didn't speak. My grandmother spoke to us all the time in Spanish;

that's why we learned. My kids are upset because we didn't talk to them. We have one granddaughter that really wants to learn. She talks Spanish with us. She's eighteen.

00:20:47

Washburn:

Was your mom from Mexico also?

00:20:49

Avalos:

Yes.

00:20:49

Washburn:

Where was your family from?

00:20:55

Avalos:

Michoacán.

00:20:56

Esther:

{ Chorincio }

00:20:57

Avalos:

Chorincio. Don't tell me to spell it.

00:20:58

Washburn:

In Michoacán. I know of a Janitzio.

00:21:04

Esther:

Jalisco.

00:21:07

Washburn:

Jalisco is the state. I know of a Janitzio. I've been to Michoacán before. So, they were from Michoacán. A lot of folks came from Michoacán, a lot of folks.

00:21:23

Esther:

My father was Michoacán, but it is a hard name to say.

00:21:30

Washburn:

Yes, I know a lot of folks from Michoacán. So, about Spanish, did you and your siblings—do you ever remember speaking Spanish in Nystrom?

00:21:44

Avalos:

No.

00:21:51

Esther:

You weren't allowed to in those days.

00:21:58

Avalos:

I was having a hard enough time with English, I think. It seemed like my older brother, well, they learned Spanish first and then English. That's what makes it hard for the kids if they don't speak it at home. It's pretty hard to learn in school. They didn't want us talking in Spanish anyway in school. It didn't bother me. I didn't speak it there; there was nobody to talk to.

Anyway, one other thing: me and my older brother, on rainy days we used to eat lunch in the auditorium. My mother used to make us bean tacos, tortillas and beans. We were kind of ashamed of that. At that time, everybody had sandwiches. We used to stick our head in the bag and take a bite, act like we had a ham sandwich or something. Nowadays, that's all they sell in the schools, is burritos and stuff like that.

00:23:03

Washburn:

Yes, things change. Tell me, you said you didn't speak Spanish in the schools. I learned there were a lot of Italians and Portuguese that went to school there. Did kids get along pretty well? Did you ever remember people teasing you, or anything like that?

00:23:28

Avalos:

Not really. Everybody got on. When we went to Nystrom, there were only two colored families going there. They used to come and visit us at our house with the big family we had, and they used to eat with us sometimes. One of them ended up being a cop in Richmond. They were poor. In fact, their father worked at Santa Fe, too. He knew my grandfather.

00:23:53

Washburn:

What was their name?

00:23:54

Avalos:

Graves. They were four brothers. They lived right down the street from us. Then there was one more family that lived like on Fifteenth Street, the Ellisons. Doug Ellison, he ended up being a Richmond cop. He was a professional fighter. He fought professionally. He had a couple of brothers.

00:24:22

Washburn:

So the Graveses came over to your guys' house?

00:24:19

Avalos:

Yes, we used to play with them. Sometimes they used to get a little rough with us, but my brother could handle a couple of them. We'd be out in the fields picking up scrap iron or stuff like that. They'd spot us out there and coming running after us. A couple of them were a lot bigger. I could always outrun my brothers, so I would make it into the house. They'd catch him, and my dad would say, "You get out there and help him." There was no fight involved; they were just bullying us around, see. They loved tortillas and beans, so we used to give them tacos. We used to have these balls that we used to get from the ballpark, chasing balls. We used to give them a couple of them to leave us alone for a while, but it wasn't nothing. We were still friends.

00:25:15

Washburn:

They'd come over to your house, too?

00:25:20

Avalos:

Yes. There wasn't a lot of prejudice.

00:25:21

Washburn:

You guys got along pretty well. At those times, though, people did discriminate against blacks.

00:25:30

Avalos:

Oh, yes, and I had a little bit of that myself, too.

00:25:40

Washburn:

What do you remember about that?

00:25:40

Avalos:

[pause] People would come from Oklahoma, they weren't used to seeing or being around Mexicans or blacks. Some lived right down the street from us. They used to call us dirty Mexicans, and we used to call them pigs. [laughs] Everybody was kind of poor in them days, so nobody was out-dressing anybody. I had a few run-ins later on, but nothing serious like stuff that could happen. During the war they had Zoot suits, and they caused quite a bit of ruckus with the sailors, the guys that came from New Mexico or Los Angeles, from all over the place.

00:26:47

Washburn:

Was that here in Richmond, or down in Los Angeles?

00:26:47

Avalos:

Here.

00:26:49

Washburn:

Well, tell me about that.

00:26:51

Avalos:

Here—Oakland, San Francisco.

00:26:53

Washburn:

But in Richmond, did you have kids dressing in Zoot suits?

00:26:56

Avalos:

Oh, yes. Behind my brother's house during the war, they built all of these dormitories for single men. They had a whole bunch of them so—it was mostly Mexicans. They used to dress with Hollywood haircuts and drapes. I even had a pair of drapes, but my dad cut the knees off. He didn't go for that. [laughs] But everybody was dressing like that. Not only the Mexicans but the whites too at that time, corduroys. Then when the sailors used to come, when the ships used to dock and you'd go to a dance—one of the dance halls was Schwartz Ballroom, it used to be on Tenth Street. They had a few fights over there, you know, so they put a sign outside that said: No dogs or Zoot-suiters. So we kind of stayed away from there, whether you were a Zoot-suiter or not. At that time, everybody wore their hair long, like the hippie days. We called it a "Hollywood haircut." I seen a lot of fights at the dances. Not only here, but in Oakland and San Francisco. We had big-time fights, like a riot. In San Francisco one time, they had to call the cops from Oakland. Me and my buddy were there from a dance. We weren't involved, but they kind of chased us out of there. We had to take off really quick.

00:28:46

Washburn:

Who were the fights between?

00:28:51

Avalos:

The sailors and the Zoot-suiters. Well, not only Zoot-suiters, but Mexicans. Not as bad as in—L.A. was the worst, but they had it here real bad.

00:29:04

Washburn:

Would black folks get involved, too?

00:29:04

Avalos:

No, they weren't involved with the Zoot-suiters. These were mostly during the war when they'd come from the—because you got people from all over, good and bad. Everybody was working, you know. There was so much work, so they had money to buy their clothes and stuff, the way they wanted to dress. They used to pass by my house. The dormitories were behind First Street all the way to the point. They even had dormitories for women there, single women.

00:29:40

Washburn:

Do you know what they were called, the dormitories?

00:29:46

Avalos:

Just housing. That's all.

00:29:49

Washburn:

Okay. Was it government dormitories?

00:29:54

Avalos:

Yes. In fact, one of my brothers used to shine shoes over there. On Sundays, they used to have dances in Oakland. Sweets Ballroom, they called it. We all went. My wife used to go before I even met her. So these guys used to come from down on Cutting to First Street, and they'd walk right in front of my house to catch the bus on First and Macdonald to go to Oakland. So maybe ten or fifteen of them would come by in my house. I knew them because I worked at the shipyards with them. They were all decked out, you know, and they'd stop by my house and whistle at me to join them. I wasn't a Zoot-suiter, but I used to wear semi-drapes. And I had my hair long. I used to go down, a friend of mine that was going to dances and change my clothes, because my dad wouldn't let me wear them. They weren't bad. It wasn't {one of them hang?}, just semi.

00:31:20

Washburn:

Semi kinda tapered, huh?

00:31:22

Avalos:

Like a seventeen-inch cuff, which twenty—wasn't a big deal. It was easier for me to talk with these guys and be friendly with them than to be enemies, because that's a tough situation. These are all guys, and not only the fifteen that come—there was a lot of them. Not troublemakers, though.

00:31:53

Washburn:

Are you talking about sailors or are you talking about Zoot-suiters?

00:31:54

Avalos:

No, Zoot-suiters. Sailors come in on ships and get off and go to the dances. There wasn't no big time. Maybe a little too much drinking, and one guy would say something. There were no knives or shooting. A lot of fistfights.

00:32:19

Esther:

Long jackets. Those weren't that bad.

00:32:27

Washburn:

Yes, I'd love to look at this. I want to look at this, actually, after we talk. I definitely want to look. That's great, you have these pictures. Those are fantastic. So, there were Zoot-suiters in Richmond?

00:32:36

Avalos:

Oh, yes, big time.

00:32:38

Washburn:

And did they live down in your neighborhood there?

00:32:41

Avalos:

That's where they all stayed. They were all single. At that time, if you were fifteen, you could work the shipyards. It was no problem getting a job at the shipyards. I'd quit one yard and go work the next one. I went to three different yards, until I met my friends at Yard Three. We were fifteen or sixteen. We had to go half a day to night school on Monday. It was the state law. Even when I was going to Roosevelt, the coach said, "Why don't you guys go work in the shipyards? You'll make more money than I am." You know, everything was so messed up in them days. He almost encouraged you to quit school and go to work in the shipyards. {Doc Warrenberg}, I'll never forget his name. He was the coach.

00:33:30

Washburn:

So, am I right to say that the Zoot-suiters were single guys who lived in the dormitories and worked in the shipyards?

00:33:44

Avalos:

Yes. Well, we all worked there, so we would catch the same buses all the time, any way you could get to work. They had a trolley. These trolleys they brought from, I forget from where.

00:33:57

Washburn:

From New York, huh?

00:33:57

Avalos:

Yes, I think from New York, and they'd come from Yard Three all the way to Berkeley.

00:34:07

Washburn:

I kind of got ahead. I kind of want to go back to your childhood, because there are some interesting things there. I don't mean to focus too much on race or anything like that—

00:34:20

Avalos:

But that happened.

00:34:21

Washburn:

—and a lot of people don't like to talk about it, and it was—

00:34:26

Avalos:

I can just tell you one more incident. It had nothing to do with Zoot-suiters. They had like a jubilee, and a Richmond parade, running for queen. She [Esther] didn't run, but her friend that graduated—you've got her picture—Frances, she won the title. They were having the ceremonies at the Moose Club, which was on Tenth Street at that time. A lot of them are light-complected like my wife, but her boyfriend was real dark, so he couldn't get in. They wouldn't let him in. That was one incident that this club was still redneck. I belong to it, but as far as I'm concerned, it's still redneck, the one here.

00:35:15

Washburn:

The Moose Club, was it a dance place?

00:35:20

Avalos:

No, it's a regular club, like the Elks, the Moose.

00:35:22

Esther:

Organization. Moose, Elks and—

00:35:24

Washburn:

Okay, like the Elks Club. When was this?

00:35:26

Avalos:

Oh this had to be—

00:35:31

Esther:

Forties.

00:35:31

Avalos:

Early forties.

00:35:31

Washburn:

Did they exclude all Mexicans, or just this guy because he was dark-complexioned?

00:35:38

Avalos:

Yes, because he was really dark. Ain't that tough?

00:35:45

Washburn:

Yes, that's too bad. So you said you were friends with the Graveses. Did anybody ever tell you, "Don't play with them because they were black," or anything like that?

00:36:00

Avalos:

No. We used to play baseball with them. At that time, nobody thought—well, every once in a while the kids would get mad, and call them a nigger or something like that.

00:36:22

Washburn:

I think all kids call each other names. I did read something, a little history somebody wrote about the black community in town, and one person said—and the black community was so small before the war—and this one black person said, "You know, if the war hadn't come along and more black people came into town," he said—or it might have been a she—said, "I probably would have married a Mexican person, because there were no blacks around."

00:36:54

Avalos:

North Richmond was the only, but see, North Richmond had the Italians, Japanese. There were ranches out there. Later it turned out—right now it's bad, too.

00:37:08

Washburn:

But it changed. But I'm wondering what you think about what that person said. Why do you think that person said, "I would have married a Mexican person," rather than an Italian or Portuguese? Do you think the blacks and Mexicans at that time intermingled more than others?

00:37:28

Avalos:

No, I don't think so. More now than it was then. Now it's no big deal. At that time, if any girl got in trouble, she'd probably do herself in. It was such a big disgrace. Now it's just the opposite. Think you've got to live together before you get married.

00:37:47

Washburn:

So, you didn't see too many interracial couples?

00:37:53

Avalos:

No, not really.

00:37:57

Washburn:

I'm kind of interested in learning some more about what that neighborhood was like down there. Sal Chavez said him and his friends used to call it La Planta Baja. Do you remember what you called that neighborhood? People have called it a Mexican village and stuff like that, but I've never heard a certain name. What would you say to somebody if you are working with your dad over at Stauffer Chemical and they say, "Where do you live?" What would you tell them?

00:38:31

Avalos:

South Side.

00:38:36

Washburn:

From South Side. What do you think they thought the South Side was?

00:38:47

Avalos:

Well, we knew each other, all the Mexicans. She was on the other side too, the same as Chavez and all them. It seemed like all the Mexican people lived on her side, say from—where? Fifth Street to Eighth Street?

00:38:59

Esther:

And on B Street, C Street.

00:39:04

Avalos:

They all knew each other, because the neighbors all went to Peres School. I don't have a picture of grammar school, Peres. So it is Mexicans and blacks—at that time—a few Italians, in school pictures.

00:39:19

Washburn:

Before the war?

00:39:21

Avalos:

Yes.

00:39:23

Washburn:

What do you remember about that Santa Fe yard or the Santa Fe housing? What can you describe about that?

00:39:31

Avalos:

Well, that was a sección.

00:39:34

Esther:

Don't forget the Indians.

00:39:34

Washburn:

Oh, I know about that. I've actually read something about that, but I haven't read anything about la sección, which is section housing.

00:39:44

Avalos:

You don't hear too much about that, really. Well, people lived, that worked Santa Fe, lived in them, you know. It was pretty rough living in them places. At the time there wasn't nothing else. People were just poor, until they managed to get out of there. I think the Santa Fe used to—I don't know if they got a free ride on that.

00:40:10

Washburn:

I think Sal said they got a free ride on that. Can you describe what the structure was like and all that, try to describe a picture of what it was?

00:40:22

Avalos:

I don't know because—I know that Santa Fe was small. They were yellow. I didn't really hang around that area too much because we had our own... I knew everybody over there. We were all friends. The early part of the war, so many people came in. We had our own thing going on the South Side, playing ball and stuff like that. We had different teams. These guys, you know, come from Oklahoma and stuff. I had mostly all-Mexican teams.

00:41:13

Washburn:

You're talking baseball team?

00:41:13

Avalos:

Yes. We had a field out behind where we lived. It wasn't too smooth. We had some good games out there. These guys weren't used to being around Mexicans or blacks. If they weren't like their parents... We got along well. In fact, they helped me out of a couple of scrapes. Tough guys, too. We were pretty rough, too, ourselves. We never got in no problem, though. They went to school, too, the same school as we did. There were a lot of them. Then they started building—out front of our house, they started building the dormitories and the families started moving in, from there all the way to Twenty-third Street. Those buildings went up for \$20,000; they're worth about \$120,000 now.

00:42:16

Washburn:

Exactly.

00:42:16

Avalos:

There wasn't enough room for people to sleep. They were sleeping in the shows. The Studio Theater, it was open all night, and people just got off work and went over there and slept. If you had a garage, you could rent it out. Just was too many people. You could work—like I told you, you could quit one shipyard—I worked in Yard Two, Yard One, and the Prefab. And Yard Three. I worked four of them. I was selling papers in the shipyards when it first started. A couple of weeks later, I was working there.

00:42:57

Washburn:

What do you remember about living here and then seeing all these people from out of town come into your—what do you remember talking to your family about, and how you felt about that?

00:43:15

Avalos:

Well, I don't know. It was such a big change, at that time. Behind our house, the soldiers had tents out there and {anti-aircraft?} gunsmen. They had them all over the fields out there, behind our house. In fact, they were hooked up to our house for electricity. Before that, when the shipyards, where they were, we used to go out there and swim. But anyway, they pumped all that muck behind our house to build—for the shipyards. They had these big pipes, ten foot in diameter, to pump. Behind our house, which is on First Street, they pumped that all the way to the railroad tracks, and then all the way almost to Point Richmond. All that was empty, from our house. You've heard of the Plunge [Richmond Municipal Natatorium], haven't you?

00:44:30

Washburn:

Yes.

00:44:32

Avalos:

We had a path from our backyard to the Plunge.

00:44:37

Washburn:

I heard that they pumped a bunch of mud and sludge. That was to make the canals for the ships.

00:44:45

Avalos:

Yes, they went up maybe about seven feet behind our house. Our house was flat. It used to flood up in the wintertime when it rained. You could almost swim out there. Then when they pumped this stuff in there... Anyway, that ended our path to go to Point Richmond. They built everything up. It was a standing joke about all the kids walking through the fields when they were burnt with tennis shoes on. You could imagine how your feet get. So they'd say we used to leave a ring around the swimming pool, the Plunge. You know how you leave a ring around the bathtub? We used to leave a ring around the Plunge because, you know, they used to have a pan before you went into the

pool. You went from the showers into the pool, and they had a pan that you were supposed to soak your feet in there before. They used to have straight Clorox for us guys. [laughs]

00:45:52

Washburn:

You walked on the path without tennis shoes?

00:45:55

Avalos:

No, we had tennis shoes on, but that family that I was telling you, they used to play out there barefooted.

00:46:07

Washburn:

Which family?

00:46:03

Avalos:

The Graves. Their feet were tough. Either that or they had no shoes. We didn't have too good of shoes either.

00:46:17

Washburn:

So I've heard a little bit about the Plunge. Did you go there as a kid?

00:46:20

Avalos:

Oh, yes, we all went there. The little store across the street. It's there, but it's not the same one. We'd get candy and stuff there. All my brothers, we all learned how to swim there. They've been wanting to get rid of it, but I think the people in Point Richmond have been fighting it.

00:46:39

Washburn:

I've seen the sign on there, it says, "Save the Plunge." Was anybody excluded from going to the Plunge, though?

00:46:43

Avalos:

No. At the time, when we were kids, we was going—there wasn't too many—blacks went there, no problem.

00:46:57

Washburn:

So, it was all intermixed?

00:47:01

Avalos:

Yes, there was no problem there. Different things they had around there.

00:47:11

Washburn:

What other things do you remember, kind of like the Plunge?

00:47:14

Avalos:

We used to walk home down Cutting, that street we was on. Well, on First and Cutting, there was a shrimp camp there. The Chinese owned it. They used to get the shrimp out of the bay. They'd bring it in. They'd lay it all out and dry it out, and they used to sell it. We'd come by and they'd let us grab a handful. By the time we'd come out of the Plunge, we was hungry swimming there. It was quite a thing. So all that area where that was and where the shipyards, we used to swim there. We used to swim the channel. That was our swimming hole where Yard One was. It was on Fifth Street. The shrimp camp was on First Street. Down the end, by Garrard, where it ends by the water, we used to swim out there. They had stingrays there. Then they had the sugar wharf. I don't know if anybody has mentioned the sugar wharf to you. It was on Tenth Street, right by the water, and we used to fish off of the pier there. They used to get the sugar from C&H [Sugar Refinery] in Crockett. They used to ship it there until it got too expensive, and then they started using railroad cars. That was the sugar wharf. We used to play there. All them places—

00:48:38

Washburn:

The "sugar wharf" you are calling it?

00:48:39

Avalos:

Yes, or the sugar harbor. All them places in that area we used to play in as kids, we used to swim in them. Keller's Beach, they had at Point Richmond.

00:48:57

Washburn:

I saw Keller's Beach just yesterday.

00:49:07

Avalos:

Yes. Keller himself, he used to kill shark in it. We used to go over there to the beach—it wasn't much of a beach, but it was there.

00:49:16

Washburn:

So, it sounds like a lot of your time as a kid was spent there over in the open field there, where Cutting kind of ends and towards the water where the shipyards were built.

00:49:29

Avalos:

Yes. That's true. We had a lot of fun growing up as kids. We did everything there was to do as kids.

00:49:35

Washburn:

It kind of sounds adventuresome.

00:49:38

Avalos:

Yes, we were the first paperboys in Atchison Village. We had a sunny route. We had double routes.

00:49:50

Washburn:

What about Atchison Village? What do you remember about it being built and all of that?

00:49:57

Avalos:

Well, it was just flatlands like the back of our house. It was flat all the way to the point. They used to land Piper Cubs, airplanes. Small planes used to land out there. They used it for landing and then take off. There was no airport there. The field was flat and there was so much room, so they used to land out there. Even one landed behind our house one time, which wasn't—the plane was kind of out of control, and he went as far as he could get. Nobody got hurt.

00:50:36

Washburn:

What do you remember about Atchison Village being built? What are some of your memories about that?

00:50:49

Avalos:

Well, I don't know. There were so many things going on in them days that I didn't pay too much attention. The ones behind our house, I seen them all go up. We used to go play around there.

00:51:08

Washburn:

Nobody's houses were there before Atchison Village?

00:51:13

Avalos:

No.

00:51:17

Washburn:

It was just open field?

00:51:17

Avalos:

That's why my dad bought that house, because it reminded him of open fields. That's where he came from. I guess that's what he had. So, from First Street to the point, which is flat except for the railroad tracks going by. That's all flat, and Atchison Village the same way. On First Street they had a ballpark.

00:51:42

Washburn:

Do you remember hearing about that there was going to be some housing put in there, before they started working on it? Did people talk about that?

00:51:51

Avalos:

No, they just started popping up all over the place. There were so many people, they had to do something. The village turned out to be pretty nice. In fact, there was a waiting line. When we first got married, we tried to get a place there; too many people waiting. People that stayed after the war, because after the war, the shipyards closed, so people had no money, no work. A lot of them went back from where they came from, I guess. There were some pretty nice places.

00:52:28

Washburn:

They're still there.

00:52:28

Avalos:

Her sister still lives there.

00:52:33

Washburn:

Did your sister Emma, when did she move in there?

00:52:39

Esther:

I think at the end of '79, is that right?

00:52:43

Washburn:

Okay, so she wasn't one of the original inhabitants?

00:52:47

Avalos:

No, no. At that time when you lived there, if you wanted to sell, you had to sell back to the corporation. You couldn't just sell it to another person. They're cheap and they're nice, too. You can't get in there now, there's so many people waiting.

00:53:13

Washburn:

So, down there on A, B, C and First and Second, was it mostly Mexican families that lived down there when you were a kid?

00:53:21

Avalos:

Yes. That's all there was. We had cousins that lived over there.

00:53:24

Washburn:

That's all there was? Let's talk about before the war. How many families do you think lived down there before the war?

00:53:33

Avalos:

That's all that was down there, it would be hard to say. I'd say about a hundred families from the area down to B Street? Maybe.

00:53:46

Washburn:

Maybe a hundred families.

00:53:48

Esther:

Just on our block, that was Third Street, the 600 block on Third Street, there were only two white families that lived there. All the rest were Mexican.

00:54:05

Washburn:

All Latino folks?

00:54:06

Esther:

Yes. And Fourth Street was almost the same.

00:54:13

Avalos:

So from Fifth Street down to where Sal Chavez lived down there on A and B Street was all Mexican.

00:54:18

Washburn:

From Fifth down to Garrard?

00:54:21

Avalos:

Not to Macdonald.

00:54:28

Washburn:

Not to Macdonald?

00:54:29

Avalos:

No, maybe from—how far down?

00:54:31

Esther:

Let's see, where the Lopez family lived—

00:54:33

Avalos:

Yes.

00:54:34

Esther:

—that was the last street towards Garrard. That was C?

00:54:44

Washburn:

Atchison Village is on—what street is that right there?

00:54:45

Esther:

That's Macdonald and Garrard.

00:54:47

Washburn:

So, I guess it was Macdonald then, huh. Macdonald on that side, and then on the other side up to what? There's Barrett.

00:54:57

Esther:

That's where the sections were, across the street from Atchison.

00:55:02

Washburn:

Here, we've got a little map right here. I don't really know the boundaries.

00:55:11

Avalos:

The railroad tracks to Cutting were "South Side." I can't see.

00:55:23

Washburn:

There's a Macdonald up, I guess, to Pennsylvania, huh?

00:55:30

Avalos:

Yeah right, there you go, Pennsylvania. That's where Peres School was.

00:55:33

Washburn:

So, from Fifth.

00:55:39

Esther:

Where's your glasses?

00:55:39

Avalos:

If he can name them out, then I know.

00:55:47

Washburn:

Yeah, we got it. I don't mean to ask too simple of a question, but why do you think that was the section of town where a lot of Mexican families lived?

00:55:59

Avalos:

I don't know. I guess the homes were probably a lot cheaper.

00:56:07

Esther:

When we bought our house, it was only a thousand dollars. On Third Street.

00:56:12

Washburn:

You bought your house on Third for a thousand bucks?

00:56:17

Avalos:

My dad, he paid about eight hundred bucks, I think, for the house. I don't know why he picked that one. There was a lot of nicer ones. The further you went up, the better the homes were: Second, Third, Fourth. The kids that were better off, most of them, their father worked Standard Oil or something like that. You could tell, because they were wearing the better clothes and stuff. They had better paying jobs. You could almost tell, at that time, where your dad worked. Levi's—I didn't have my first pair of Levi's until I was in the seventh or eighth grade.

00:57:11

Washburn:

Was that a symbol to have, to be wearing Levi's?

00:57:16

Avalos:

Yeah, Levi was the best. Most of the kids whose fathers worked at Standard Oil would wear Levi's. Most of the kids who lived in Point Richmond, their father—there was only a few Mexican families in Point Richmond. It must be all the other ones that we knew, their dads worked at Standard Oil. Some still live out there.

00:57:43

Washburn:

Sal actually said that Standard Oil wouldn't hire Mexican folks. For a while.

00:57:49

Avalos:

No, the only way is if you could work for the contractors, but to just work for Standard Oil itself... Her brother did get in, but he was lighter. If you were light-complected you could sneak into some of these places.

00:58:11

Esther:

It made a difference.

00:58:11

Washburn:

So you think it did make a difference for some of these Mexican folks, if you were—

00:58:13

Avalos:

Oh yeah, I'll tell you a story.

00:58:15

Esther:

If you were light-skinned, you had the advantage.

00:58:16

Avalos:

I was dark-skinned. My brother was light—very light. We went to a bar—

00:58:28

Washburn:

Hold on, I'm going to stop you, because this videotape is about to end, and I've got to change this. I'd like to hear that story. I hate to do that, but otherwise you are going to get cut off. This will take just two seconds. All right. [changes video tape] So you were just about to tell me a story about the difference between being more light-skinned and dark-skinned.

00:59:34

Avalos:

There was a bar on Cutting, Sam's Club, it was pretty redneck. We went in there and I think the beer was—they charged my brother thirty cents, and they charged me a dollar. At that time I'd be out in the sun all the time and I was a lot darker than I am. He's like you are. That's the first time that I really felt prejudice, that I fully felt it. I knew the score, but I kept my mouth shut. That place was pretty rough. They used to have some pretty big guys that used to go in there, some truck drivers. It was a rough joint.

01:00:35

Washburn:

So they charged him less than you.

01:00:42

Avalos:

In other words, "You ain't coming back." In other words, they didn't want you in there.

01:00:45

Washburn:

So they are going to charge you more.

01:00:47

Avalos:

It's a good way to keep you away.

01:00:48

Washburn:

Was that a lot for a beer at that time?

01:00:50

Avalos:

Oh, yeah.

01:00:53

Washburn:

So you didn't ask him, "Hey why are you charging me?"

01:00:57

Avalos:

Well, I was going to say something, see. We were kind of outnumbered too, and my brother can't take care of himself too good. I was by myself, you know. I can outrun him, but he couldn't run very fast. I would pop one guy and then take off, but I had my brother with me. He couldn't run. He still can't run.

01:01:25

Washburn:

When was this, about?

01:01:30

Avalos:

Well, we were underage, you know, but you could get into bars. Not that we patronized them a lot. We didn't have that much money back then.

01:01:46

Washburn:

If you don't mind me asking, why were you going to that bar if you recollect about it being kind of a redneck bar?

01:01:51

Avalos:

I didn't find out until later. We were on our way home from someplace, and we just stopped there. They weren't all like that. Maybe we shouldn't have stopped there.

01:02:10

Washburn:

Sal told me that he did a lot of his shopping over at the commissary for the Santa Fe, because folks working for the Santa Fe were running a tab with the company, so they weren't getting cut checks every week. Where did your family do—where would families do their shopping in the neighborhood? You mentioned the Sixth Street Market.

01:02:32

Avalos:

Yeah, that was one. That was closer. We used to go to the store for bread or stuff like that. There was another store on First Street. We knew the people; the [Diaz?] family owned it. We had kind of a charge account there, too. Then my mother used to go to Fourth Street Market. There used to be a market on Fourth Street. There used to be a druggist, somebody [Dervant?]. Did you ever hear that on Fourth and Macdonald? What was the name of the drugstore?

01:03:08

Esther:

[Savin's?].

01:03:11

Avalos:

He spoke Spanish real good, see, so all the Mexican people—like my mother and my grandmother—they wouldn't go to the doctor, they would go to him for their remedies, their medicines and stuff. You know, Mexican people they like to go places where they speak Spanish. The medicines seemed to do the job. Of course, a lot of the old-timer Mexicans have their own remedies. My grandmother had a lot of remedies when we were kids and we got aches and sprained arms and stuff. A little bit of voodoo too.

01:03:48

Washburn:

Yeah, sounds like it.

01:03:51

Avalos:

My aunt used to believe a lot in that. Different things.

01:03:54

Washburn:

Was this guy—what nationality was he?

01:04:00

Avalos:

Savin's. S-A-V-I-N-S? A lot of money, that guy.

01:04:08

Washburn:

But he wasn't Mexican?

01:04:08

Avalos:

No, but he could speak Spanish. That's why my grandmother and mother liked him.

01:04:17

Washburn:

You said, before the war, you guys sold milk to some of the families. Was there kind of little family-to-family businesses going on?

01:04:25

Avalos:

Not really, it's just that at that time cow's milk and goat's milk was supposed to be better for you. We had more that we could handle really, because we'd milk in the morning and then at night too. With my goat, I had a dog, his name was Buck, and when I was milking the goat, he'd stay there and I'd {__?} him. That dog got healthy, I'll tell you that.

01:04:57

Washburn:

You gave him some milk, huh? [laughs]

01:05:00

Avalos:

Yeah, because we had so much. It wasn't wasting any. He was a tough dog. There wasn't a cat ten blocks in that area. We had jackrabbits behind our house, and when it used to flood out there, you know, water in the deep part, he would always catch them. As soon as they got in the water they were gone. Jackrabbits, he'd kill them. They had skunks out there and snakes. We came off the subject. I just get things that I can remember.

01:05:39

Washburn:

No, that's great, because—

01:05:41

Avalos:

We had a good childhood, no trouble. One time we broke a window playing ball in Nystrom School. Just a little pane like that. My dad heard about it, and the other kids that were with me, we would have to pay for it. We were scared to death, just one little window. The teachers were pretty rough, too. They could discipline you real good. When my dad would get home, if he found out, you'd get another one then, too. My dad was pretty tough. He'd sit in the kitchen and watch my mother cook all the time. Then my aunt was living there, too, with us. She didn't like that. He'd just sit there and watch everything that was going on. With my brothers, we were all a couple of years apart. When my mother couldn't handle us, then my dad—where he sat, the table right here, my mother would be cooking over here, and then there was a wall here. He could take off his strap and you had to hug that wall to get by him, but he had it timed just right, where the tip would catch you. He'd double it up. Like I say, he didn't hit us for nothing. With six of us, it was pretty rough. Boy, once he cut you with that belt, you didn't do it. That's because my mother couldn't—you know. I knew we had it coming. When we had company—

01:07:28

Washburn:

Was this when you would do something bad or you'd mess around?

01:07:33

Avalos:

Yeah, with mine. Sometimes we'd have company and he'd be sitting against the wall in the front room. The house was so small. So, with three of my brothers behind me and I used to tell them: "Make sure you step on everybody's toes." [laughs] We were just kids, I mean smaller. My older brother Joe, he'd take the blame for us a lot of the time, 'cause he was the oldest and he was supposed to. We respected him, too. He'd stand there, and my dad would go to lay one on him, but my aunt that lived with us would stand in front to protect us. My dad wouldn't do nothing. Like I say, he didn't hit us for nothing. It's a bunch of kids making a lot of noise and not minding. We respected our parents. Just, sometimes it would get a little out of hand.

01:08:41

Washburn:

There was a lot of people in that one house. There were only two bedrooms, you said? Where did everybody stay?

01:08:47

Avalos:

We used to have bunks, and we'd sleep on the couch, the chairs and the floor. Then we'd have our cousins come over from Arizona sometime, and there'd be four of them. There wasn't no problem with the food. On New Year's, my mother used to make tamales. She'd have the neighbor woman come and help her, and they'd stay up all night, making tamales for New Year's. Then we'd have people over. We could fit thirty people in that house, standing up, standing room only. But, it was so nice, because it was just the people around you. Everybody was related anyway. I had some cousins that are over here now. I was working at Stauffers, when I went to work there. He was a cousin, but nobody told me. The guy said, "Hey that's your cousin." My dad never did tell me. Then I found out later.

01:10:01

Washburn:

What about festivities and stuff like that.? What would people in that area do like on the 16th of September or something like that?

01:10:19

Avalos:

Oh, yeah. Okay, that's another thing, too. We had Alvarado Park and East Shore Park, where they had Mexican doings. On the weekends, huh? They had Mexican music and dancing and food.

01:10:33

Washburn:

Where about?

01:10:33

Avalos:

Alvarado Park. It sits up on McBryde [Avenue] up there.

01:10:36

Washburn:

And what was the other one?

01:10:39

Avalos:

East Shore Park. It's down by Stauffer Chemical, where my dad worked.

01:10:43

Washburn:

So people would get together on Saturday?

01:10:46

Avalos:

Yeah, or Sunday. I don't know. During the day. They had picnics, special holidays and stuff. Real nice. Everybody that went, you knew everybody, because we all knew... Good times. They had all kinds of games for the kids. They would grease a pig. Try and catch the pig, you get a couple of dollars. Climb a greasy pole and get something up on top. All kinds of games; they were good times.

01:11:14

Washburn:

Would you guys get together every Saturday?

01:11:16

Avalos:

No, no, just certain—

01:11:17

Esther:

Special occasions.

01:11:18

Avalos:

Special occasions.

01:11:21

Washburn:

Maybe a birthday?

01:11:23

Avalos:

No, this was like for the whole town.

01:11:28

Washburn:

It wasn't just the Mexican community?

01:11:31

Avalos:

No, anybody that wanted to go, but it was mostly Mexicans.

01:11:36

Washburn:

So, you're saying for the 16th of September, Cinco de Mayo, New Year's?

01:11:43

Avalos:

Yeah, and they used to have parades.

01:11:48

Esther:

Not New Year's.

01:11:49

Avalos:

No. Parades down Macdonald, stuff like that.

01:11:54

Washburn:

You said there was music; was there a band that would play at the park?

01:12:00

Avalos:

They played the mariachis, and then they had music.

01:12:05

Esther:

The Jimenez Band.

01:12:07

Avalos:

Yeah, the Jimenez Band.

01:12:09

Washburn:

What was the Jimenez Band?

01:12:14

Avalos:

They lived over there by her house. They played. It was a pretty good band.

01:12:19

Washburn:

What kind of music would they play?

01:12:20

Avalos:

They would play like big band music from the forties, early forties. You know, Glen Miller stuff. They didn't sound like Glen Miller, but it was nice. They used to have dances on Sixteenth and Macdonald on Saturday nights.

01:12:42

Esther:

It was Memorial Hall, wasn't it?

01:12:43

Washburn:

Would they play some Mexican music also, sometimes?

01:12:47

Avalos:

Yeah, I guess. You knew everybody there, so it was a pretty nice gathering.

01:12:57

Washburn:

About how many folks do you remember would show up?

01:12:59

Esther:

About a hundred.

01:13:01

Avalos:

About a hundred people. A lot of kids. Mexicans always take their kids with them.

01:13:07

Esther:

A lot of little kids, huh.

01:13:09

Avalos:

Yeah, running around. In fact, that hall you were talking about, Winter's Hall, when I was a kid—

01:13:16

Washburn:

What do you remember about that?

01:13:19

Avalos:

Well, my aunt used to take me, because she lived with us, and she used to take me so she could get out to go to the dances. That's where they had the dances. So, she'd take me along. I'd be running around, like kids do at a dance hall, sliding on the floor, stuff like that. Later on, my aunt kinda taught me how to dance. I was young, I could care less about dancing, but she'd get me out there on the floor when she didn't have nobody to dance with. I picked it up like that. The jitterbug they used to call it. Now they call it swing dancing.

01:14:06

Washburn:

When were there dances there?

01:14:09

Avalos:

In the late thirties? Before the war or after? No, before the war. Yeah, before the war.

01:14:15

Esther:

When you were small.

01:14:20

Avalos:

Oh yeah, when I was small, but they kept having them, and then I grew up.

01:14:25

Washburn:

When would there be a dance?

01:14:27

Avalos:

It was just a regular thing they would have.

01:14:29

Washburn:

On the weekend or something?

01:14:30

Avalos:

Every so often they'd have it.

01:14:34

Washburn:

And would they charge money to get in?

01:14:40

Avalos:

Yeah. It wasn't much, though, whatever it was. It was nice.

01:14:43

Washburn:

You said that there were dances at Memorial Hall, and at Winter's Hall. Were the dances at Winter's Hall more for the Mexican community?

01:14:50

Avalos:

No, they were all the same, and they had a Machinists Hall, too, on Sixteenth. One was on Sixteenth, Memorial was on Twelfth, and Winter's was on Tenth. So you could walk to any one of them. But they didn't have them all at the same time.

01:15:07

Washburn:

Sal kind of described that at Winter's Hall there were Cinco de Mayo dances there, do you remember that?

01:15:19

Avalos:

Yeah, probably was. See, Sal's a little older and can remember some of this stuff.

01:15:23

Washburn:

He's a little bit older, but about the same age, though. So you guys were at Winter's Hall, Memorial Hall, and what was the other hall you said, Machinists Hall?

01:15:26

Avalos:

Machinists Hall.

01:15:30

Esther:

On Sixteenth Street.

01:15:32

Washburn:

So, Winter's was on Macdonald and—?

01:15:35

Avalos:

Tenth, I think.

01:15:35

Washburn:

Memorial was on?

01:15:37

Avalos:

Twelfth.

01:15:38

Washburn:

And Machinists was on?

01:15:39

Avalos:

Sixteenth.

01:15:42

Washburn:

So, they were all kind of right there in a row?

01:15:42

Avalos:

Yeah, we all walked. In Richmond, everybody walked in downtown. You told me you were over on Wall Street, I said, "Why are you walking around out there at night?" The area, it was so nice, you could walk. Nobody bothered you. During the war, everybody was working. Nobody was hitting anybody on the head for money. The town was so crowded. On Saturdays, everybody was shopping. We didn't have too many stores.

01:16:27

Washburn:

Do you remember the neighborhood there on Macdonald where Winter's Hall, Memorial Hall and Machinists Hall, do you remember that area really building up during the war?

01:16:40

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:16:41

Washburn:

What do you remember about it?

01:16:41

Avalos:

They kept the park. Memorial Park they kept for quite a while. Now they got housing there. They tore it down. Machinists Hall, there was already houses around there, old houses. There are a lot of them still there. They tore some down and built stuff around there, too. Winter's, everything is still there. The buildings are still there.

01:17:12

Washburn:

You know, I've talked to some people about the Rio Theater also. What do you remember about the Rio Theater? It was on Fourth and Macdonald, right?

01:17:23

Avalos:

Was it? Me and this kid Paul, we used to sneak in that show; before they were selling tickets we'd be sitting down inside. I'm talking about way back. Then later on, they used to have the Mexican movies there. I think they had them at the State too, didn't they?

01:17:46

Esther:

Liberty on Twelfth Street.

01:17:52

Avalos:

Yeah, that's what I thought, too, but somebody else told me no, and I know we went to Liberty Theater. That was on like Twelfth and Macdonald.

01:17:57

Washburn:

They had some Mexican movies there, too?

01:17:58

Avalos:

Sure. They used to give plates away, kind of raffle tickets, you know. My mother and my grandmother—

01:18:12

Washburn:

I looked through the newspaper and I found the Rio Theater and—

01:18:13

Avalos:

It's still there.

01:18:13

Washburn:

It's still there?

01:18:15

Avalos:

The buildings are still there. It's a church now, a holy roller thing.

01:18:21

Washburn:

I looked on Fourth and Macdonald and I didn't see it. Which corner was it on?

01:18:27

Avalos:

It's between Fourth and Fifth.

01:18:29

Washburn:

Okay.

01:18:33

Avalos:

It's on the right-hand side coming uptown. Say you're coming from the Point, it would be on your right-hand side.

01:18:41

Washburn:

Okay. There's a church there now?

01:18:44

Esther:

It's across the street from that big park over there, where they deal a lot of drugs.

01:18:51

Washburn:

Yeah.

01:18:51

Avalos:

You were at the library, you told me, on First Street?

01:18:54

Washburn:

Yeah, I was at the library.

01:18:55

Avalos:

They used to have just a little lawn in back of there. A bunch of us would go back there and try and play a little touch football or something like that. We would have loved to have what they've got over there now. You see the area they got? And now they're doing wheeling and dealing out there, and drinking and selling drugs. We would have had that when we was kids, we would have had a ball out there. But we had nothing like that.

01:19:25

Washburn:

In the papers, they showed the Rio Theater only showing Mexican movies on Tuesday nights.

01:19:31

Avalos:

Certain nights they'd have Mexican movies.

01:19:33

Washburn:

Do you remember it being a thing to do on Tuesday nights?

01:19:40

Avalos:

My grandmother and mother, you know, where we lived on the South Side, used to walk to a show at nighttime. Nobody would bother you. We're not talking about the area now; you wouldn't get half a block. I know 'cause my brother still lives down there. Sometimes I give him a ride home, when he is out, like he goes to Kaiser, there on Eighth Street. He can't see very good, so I have to go pick him up. You go down there where he lives, one or two o'clock in the morning—

01:20:16

Washburn:

It's rough, huh? How many seats did the Rio Theater have? Can you kind of describe a picture?

01:20:25

Avalos:

That was the smallest theater, really. I don't know, you could probably get a couple of hundred people in there.

01:20:30

Washburn:

Would it fill up on Tuesday night?

01:20:36

Avalos:

Yeah, all the Mexican people. It was all people that—everybody knew everybody. It was nice. Liberty too, later on, certain nights they had Mexican movies, too. It was great for all the Mexican people. You're getting something that you can understand, like I say that druggist. He wouldn't rip them off either.

01:21:07

Washburn:

In the paper, there wasn't much of an advertisement for the movie, or a description. How did people know what movie they wanted to see?

01:21:19

Avalos:

By word of mouth.

01:21:25

Esther:

It was in front of the show; it was advertised. Marquee.

01:21:30

Avalos:

They would show it there probably on the same day.

01:21:35

Washburn:

Well, I have some of it, and it would say—let me see what I've got here. I went back, they have old newspaper clippings still around. So here's one that says. There's a Rio right there, from '55. I'll show you one, too. You might need your glasses.

01:22:03

Avalos:

I can make it out.

01:22:03

Washburn:

It wouldn't describe anything more than the name of the actor and what the movie was. How would people follow?

01:22:11

Avalos:

Actually, in them days, it wasn't too much the actors, it was the singers that were popular. They had Jorge Negrete. Pedro [Infante?], really popular singers. They were the ones that sold it. Most of the Mexican movies—

01:22:30

Esther:

They even had the drive-in theaters.

01:22:32

Avalos:

Most of the Mexican movies had singers.

01:22:37

Washburn:

So people would go because they recognized the singer?

01:22:42

Avalos:

Plus they had their records. We still got some records of them.

01:22:49

Esther:

In those days, there was no TV neither.

01:22:50

Avalos:

Yeah, there wasn't no TV. We used to listen to the Joe Louis fights on the radio. That was a big thing when Joe Louis fought. You'd listen on the radio.

01:23:02

Washburn:

So, it would be like the equivalent of Vicente Fernandez now?

01:23:07

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:23:10

Washburn:

So he'd be singing, and he made movies also. So you knew who the singer was, and so you'd go see that movie?

01:23:16

Esther:

Then they used to have Mexican programs on the radio.

01:23:22

Washburn:

On what station? [pause] But you did remember there were some Spanish language radio stations?

01:23:32

Esther:

Hm-mmm.

01:23:33

Washburn:

There were. Would they have just music or they'd have talk also or sports?

01:23:42

Esther:

Yeah. No sports.

01:23:44

Washburn:

No sports, but they'd play music?

01:23:45

Esther:

Hm-mmm.

01:23:45

Washburn:

You don't remember the dial number?

01:23:51

Esther:

My brother has the memory. My sisters have—

01:23:55

Avalos:

They had a Philco radio, though.

01:24:02

Washburn:

The Rio seems like a pretty neat spot. Once you got married, did you belong to any clubs or anything like that? You said you went to the Moose.

01:24:16

Avalos:

I used to belong to it. We joined it because it's right here close. You'd have, like, fish fries on Friday. They'd have brunch Sunday mornings. Once a month, they'd have a birthday dinner for all the people with a birthday that month. Stuff like that, just something to do. It's close. She doesn't care for it too much. It's still a little shaky there. If you don't have white hair—

01:24:40

Washburn:

Oh, really.

01:24:44

Avalos:

It's a clique.

01:24:48

Washburn:

There's no black folks that belong to it?

01:24:53

Avalos:

No, so far they haven't. They're still fighting it. I think they might have—I don't know. It hasn't been that long since we could get in.

01:25:06

Washburn:

The Moose Club?

01:25:08

Avalos:

It kind of changed—picketed quite a bit. It ain't a place where you—my brothers belonged to it, that's why I joined. We used to go once in a while.

01:25:27

Washburn:

Well, somebody described to me—Ned Durán and his wife said they were part of a club called the Latin American Club or something like that. Do you remember hearing that name? I'm just trying to find out more about some community organizations and social clubs. The Rio Theater to me seems like a place where people got together from the community, and at parties and festivities, but was there anything more formal, like a society or a—?

01:26:03

Esther:

[Forum Club Tournament?]

01:26:05

Avalos:

Oh, yeah, we had a—

01:26:07

Esther:

A Mexican {_____?}

01:26:08

Washburn:

What's that?

01:26:10

Avalos:

I used to belong to one that—it broke, didn't last—

01:26:10

Esther:

Mostly veterans.

01:26:15

Avalos:

Yeah, it was a—it broke up, though; it didn't last too long.

01:26:27

Washburn:

It was a veterans' club?

01:26:29

Avalos:

No. It was built around a softball team first. We had an all-Mexican softball team.

01:26:46

Washburn:

It'll come back to you. It's not important. There are so many things you try and remember but you can't remember.

01:26:53

Avalos:

Yeah, I'll remember them probably when I'm laying in bed, this and that.

01:26:53

Washburn:

Sure, and you can write it down and give me a call. I'd really like that.

01:26:58

Avalos:

Another place where the Mexicans worked was the foundry. That was a rough—that was mostly all Mexicans and blacks. I worked in three or four—let's see, where did I start? The enamel room. It was pretty hot in there. I worked in there. The further back you went in that foundry, the worse it got. They were grinding tubs in the smallware. Farther back, they had them in the big furnace. You had to have overhead cranes, and it was dark in

there. They had a lot of blacks, big guys. Little guys couldn't do it. They were always singing, humming you know, like the slaves in the old days. Every time I felt I had it bad, I would walk back there and take a look at them guys, and I'd see that I didn't have it too bad. They used to come around and give you salt tablets and candy bars so you wouldn't pass out. The first time me and this other guy went to work there, they had four shifts in that enamel room, where I worked. I went in around twelve and I kind of passed out, so they put me in the room there, put cold towels on me. So this other friend of mine, he'd come in—I still had a couple hours to work on my shift. He'd come to work, and he says, "What's the matter, Avalos, can't you take it?" He was kind of a big, tough loudmouth. I said, "Just wait." So I went back to work, and when I came back, he was laying there. He'd passed out too. That's how bad it was. Yet, you had to—[the fork?], about from here to the door. With the button, you'd pick up the tub. The doors would open, and that heat used to hit you. You'd put it in there and then you'd have what they called the rimmer and the enameller. Then they'd spray it, and you'd take it off—and the same thing, as soon as that door's open. You're soaking wet all the time. That's why they give you that—some kind of pill, a candy bar or something to keep you going.

01:29:48

Washburn:

Sounds like rough work.

01:29:51

Avalos:

And hot. I've worked in every place in Richmond; that was the worst. That's why I went to work for the schools, and I never had it so good. I always thought for a kid to work in the hardest place, they'd appreciate going to school a lot more and learning something. In them days we didn't have much choice, because there weren't many places to work. The canneries were pretty rough work, too. That foundry, and they had a brass plant in the other foundry. Most of the white guys wouldn't work there. It was rough. You didn't have much choice.

01:30:40

After, I went to work Jacuzzi pumps. It was an old family from Italy. They started off making aeroplane propellers, and they invented this hydro-massage pump you put in the tub. I was working there when I got married. It was a nice place to work. When I was going to high school, I had three periods of woodshop, and I ended up in a machine shop. [laughs] I liked it, the money was good. We used to work Saturdays half a day. Maybe nine hours a day. So, I was making about a hundred bucks a week. That was in '49, '48. They decided to move to Missouri or someplace cheaper to make stuff. You know how they're always moving out.

01:31:47

So, I went to work for the schools. My brother-in-law, her brother-in-law, was head custodian. So, I knew I was going to get laid off sooner than later. I had been about eight years there. He says, if you've got any bills, pay them off, because the pay here is—I used to get paid once a week, making a hundred bucks a week. So I went to work for the schools and they pay you by the month, and boy, they didn't pay you too much. Where I was making almost four hundred a month, I was making about one-eighty when I got

paid. We used to live down on Sixth and Ripley, about that area. I didn't have no bills. I had a car, paid for. We only paid forty dollars rent, renting a house. When I'd get that check, and in two weeks we would have to go down to my mother's house to eat. I couldn't make it. I had a steady job, but that just wasn't enough money because I went from a hundred a week, maybe, to about fifty. I was making like four hundred a month in Jacuzzi's, and when I got my check, by the time I got through with taking everything out of it, I was bringing home maybe a hundred and seventy a month.

01:33:19

That's when we first got married. Nobody had any fancy furniture or anything. A lot of hand-me-downs, like her brother would give us stuff. We had a kitchen table, but we had no chairs. It didn't bother us. We had people over, and whatever you had, nobody's checking you out to see what you got. Everybody was about the same. My family and her family worked the school district, too. With her family and my family, in the directory there was about twelve of us: Avalos and [Alcaraz?], that was her maiden name. So, you walk around the different places in the school district, and guys used to say, "Be careful what you say, these guys are all related." Just joking, you know. But it's a pretty good place to work. This one kid that I know—he's not a kid—but he used to say that a Mexican can't get ahead, here and there. But it was his own fault. All her brothers were foremen, leadmen, in the school district. I was a typewriter repairer. I was my own boss. So if the jobs are there, you put in. If you're qualified, you get them. It wasn't that—this guy had a friend that, you know. I didn't see any prejudice.

01:34:54

Washburn:

Working for the Jacuzzi company you made four hundred a month. Why was it so much better than what the school paid?

01:35:04

Avalos:

See, that was four hundred a month because the overtime, because they were moving. The plant was going to move to Missouri, so I would have been out of a job eventually.

01:35:13

Washburn:

Did you look any other place for a job other than the schools?

01:35:19

Avalos:

Well, yes, I went to the City of Richmond. In fact, I think I could have worked at the port there too, but the city and the schools are about the same, as far as the retirement. It paid off for me pretty good. I started as a custodian, and I got to work right over here at Woodrow Wilson School. All my kids went there and my grandkids all went there. Anyway, it turned out pretty good for me, except the money wasn't that great in the school district. Now they give—even with the outside work. Let's say, in them days, a carpenter, electrician, a plumber, or whatever all made the same pay, as a journeyman, so they all got the same, unless you were a leadman or a foreman, then you got 10 percent more. Like my older brother, I said, "Why don't you go work for the schools, Joe?" He said, "I can't live on that." It was getting paid once a month. He's an upholsterer. He

made good money all his life, but now we pensioned out and he's working for himself. All he's got is Social Security. Upholsterers don't have a big union where they pension you off. They don't have nothing. If it wasn't for his Social Security. He made a good living at it, but now, he's still upholstering and he's going to be eighty and he does it in his garage, because he can't make it. That's where it paid off for me and her. We went to the school district. She worked for the child care center.

01:37:08

Washburn:

When did you guys start working for the school district, about what time?

01:37:09

Avalos:

Fifty-five, I think.

01:37:10

Washburn:

Fifty-five.

01:37:12

Avalos:

She went later, when the kids got bigger.

01:37:14

Washburn:

I like to learn what people did for their first job after school. Did you graduate high school or did you go—you said something about eleventh grade? What happened?

01:37:25

Esther:

The Merchant Marines.

01:37:32

Avalos

Yeah, I got in the Merchant Marines. I did a lot of things when I was fifteen and sixteen, I tell you. When the war ended, I was on a ship that was docked in San Francisco. In between, I was working at American Radiator I told you about. They turned that into—they were making incendiary and hand grenades. So, I worked there, too.

01:37:52

Washburn:

American Radiator?

01:37:57

Avalos:

Where the foundry was.

01:37:58

Washburn:

I thought it was American Standard.

01:38:02

Avalos:

Yeah, that's what it is, but they'd call it both: American Standard.

01:38:03

Washburn:

American Radiator. So, when did you start working there? Just during the war?

01:38:10

Avalos:

Yeah, in '44. School—I was bouncing back and forth. My brother was pushing me to graduate. He says, "You've got to graduate." I said, "All my friends are all dressed up. Everybody is working, making money." Where they were making bombs and stuff, it was all women. Mostly all women there. Most of the other guys were in the service.

01:38:47

Washburn:

I don't know about this. Describe to me where they made the bombs.

01:38:48

Avalos:

They were incendiary bombs and hand grenades. It was the same thing, a foundry. I was out where they finished them. Real interesting. In between, I was on a ship, too, you know, but it was real lax at that time. The ship was docked for six months, so I could come and go as I pleased. But I joined the Merchant Marine. At the time, all my friends were shipping out. We were all sixteen. You could lie about your age and get on a ship when you was fifteen.

01:39:26

Washburn:

Going into the army, you are talking about, or the Merchant Marine?

01:39:30

Avalos:

Merchant Marines.

01:39:31

Washburn:

I don't know quite the difference between them.

01:39:34

Avalos:

You could join, but they were drafting you until you were eighteen. So, we all joined the Merchant Marines. I'd get seasick, so I'd get a ship that was going overseas but it would stop like in San Pedro, or someplace. I'd get so sick, I'd get off the ship and come back on a bus. I didn't jump ship, I did it the right way. I did it four times. Then I was getting close to the draft. I'd get a ship, then I'd get a six months deferment, I'd jump ship and work in the shipyards. So, somehow or other, this lady at the draft board, her name was [Mrs. Reid?], she knew all us guys were doing that, that guys were shipping out to stay out of the draft. So, finally, somehow or other I messed up on my time, on my six months deferment, and I got my envelope. I got drafted. So that ended everything else.

01:40:48

Washburn:

So what happened?

01:40:49

Avalos:

I went overseas. Well, talk about seasickness. Everybody told me, “Well, you were not gone long enough.” I’d be out two or three days and come back. I was on a ship that was going to leave from Point Richmond out at [Richfield?], you go through the tunnel out there. The boat was still docked, and I was already getting sick. I had motion sickness. Even in the back of a car, I used to get—when I went to carnivals I couldn’t ride on anything. So, it’s chronic seasickness. I was on a ship, I went to Japan, I was on it fourteen days. I was sick every day. The guy says that it was something that I couldn’t get over. It’s a good thing that I didn’t go in the navy. I’d have been dead.

01:41:36

Washburn:

So, did you dock in Japan and stay there?

01:41:40

Avalos:

Yeah, I was in there.

01:41:41

Washburn:

So, this was during—

01:41:41

Avalos:

After the war.

01:41:46

Washburn:

This was during the occupation of Japan?

01:41:46

Avalos:

Yeah, just before Korea. All this stuff I was doing, I wasn’t really dodging the draft, because I was working where they were making the ships. Everything was for the war effort, right? And everybody was doing it. The merchant seamen did a lot, delivering all that stuff. Just up to now, they are starting to get rewarded for it. They delivered it. I had quite an exciting time growing up. I did a lot of things. I would do them over again.

01:42:32

Washburn:

It sounds really neat. When did you come back from Japan?

01:42:33

Avalos:

Fifty, I think. Just before the Korean War.

01:42:40

Washburn:

How long did you stay over there?

01:42:42

Avalos:

Almost two years, I think. But see, they come out and said all the draftees come home and spend five years reserves, which you had to go to meetings once a month. Summer vacation you had two weeks in, like, bivouac or something. So I say, "Heck, yeah, I'm coming home." That was just the draftees. The guys that joined, they've got to stay, see. So, as soon as I got home, right after I got home, the Korean War started. See, we were ready to go. Almost everybody that was in my outfit, they got wiped out. They were there. They already knew something was going to pop. That's why they called it the "ready reserves," see. They were in Japan. A few other guys that come home with me got called back. They goofed up a lot with people that had already seen time and service. We had a friend of mine that was with the Merchant Marines. At that time, you had to have like thirty-two months' sea time in enemy waters to be deferred from the draft, but he got drafted. The ship sunk and he survived, something like that, you know? There was nobody that could—

01:44:08

Washburn:

A bunch of people in your unit went over to Korea and died?

01:44:10

Avalos:

They got killed, oh yeah, because they were the first ones there.

01:44:14

Washburn:

So did you lose a bunch of friends?

01:44:16

Avalos:

Oh yeah, they weren't from Richmond, but they were guys that—

01:44:24

Washburn:

You had spent some time?

01:44:25

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:44:26

Washburn:

That's real sad.

01:44:28

Avalos:

It was, yeah. So, I was lucky to come home.

01:44:33

Washburn:

So all this talk about working in the foundry, it was all when you were still in high school?

01:44:36

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:44:39

Washburn:

How did you go to high school and work at the same time?

01:44:44

Avalos:

Summer vacation I was doing a lot of this. Then I'd go back to school for a little bit. They used to have low ten, high ten, low eleven. So I only had about a year to go. Before I left Japan I went to take the GED test for a diploma and I left before I got it. I got the credits and everything. I never did get the diploma. But, you know, a lot of the time it gets your foot in the door for jobs and stuff. I never had to use it, all the time. I was lucky. But my brother wanted me, and I wanted, to finish too. All the guys that were my age, guys that I hung around with, and everything, were all working. See, I'd go back to school and they'd keep working. Finally, I said, "Hey, what the heck." I made a good choice.

01:45:40

Washburn:

So, when you came back, what did you do for work? You said you didn't start working in schools until '55 or something like that.

01:45:51

Avalos:

Well, that's when I worked Jacuzzi's, when I went to work first.

01:45:54

Washburn:

So you worked for the Jacuzzi company first?

01:45:56

Avalos:

Yeah, first, then I went to the schools.

01:45:58

Washburn:

So you worked for them for a bunch of years?

01:46:00

Avalos:

Maybe, yeah. It worked out just right. In '55 I went to work for the schools. I don't know, maybe seven years at Jacuzzi's, something like that. I was pretty lucky for getting jobs.

01:46:21

Washburn:

How long did you work for the school district for?

01:46:24

Avalos:

Thirty-four years, I think. She retired from the schools too.

01:46:26

Washburn:

Both you guys worked for quite a long time.

01:46:35

Esther:

He worked there longer, I only worked there eighteen years.

01:46:39

Washburn:

That's still a long time, though.

01:46:42

Avalos:

We used to ride to work together. She worked two blocks from where I worked. She started a little earlier, so I got my boss to let me start early, so I wouldn't have to take her and wait so long. We worked right close together. We would ride to work together and ride home together. I retired one year before she did. So I had one year while she was working, but that year I had to take care of my granddaughter, so I was home a lot.
[laughs]

01:47:21

Washburn:

That's real sweet, you guys got to commute together and everything like that.

01:47:28

Avalos:

It worked out good. It's close enough that I used to walk a lot of times on nice mornings. I still walk.

01:47:31

Washburn:

Could we talk a little bit about the schools? That sounds like it then provided you a pretty stable job for quite a long time.

01:47:45

Avalos:

A lot of people didn't care because the pay wasn't that good at that time, but it was a steady job. Custodians when I was going to school were just old Italian guys. That's all they had when we were going to Richmond High. They wore the coveralls and stuff. Now they have all young kids doing that. The money wasn't there; that's why a lot of people stayed away. It paid off for the guys that learned a trade and everything.

01:48:14

Washburn:

So, did you guys have to join a union when you got in there?

01:48:17

Avalos:

Not right away. When I first went to work there, it was my early twenties. I signed up and I got the job. The guy asked me if I wanted Social Security. "Social Security? I'm only twenty-three," I says. People are ready to die at sixty-five. What am I looking at sixty-five? When you're that age, you're—so I didn't get it. Later on, I started to realize. I was still going to get my pension, but I didn't have enough quarters to get my Social Security. Some guy had a business. They kind of put me down on some payroll for a few bucks, until I got my quarters. But I got the minimum Social Security. If I would have took it out when I—but, at the time, I wasn't making enough money. I would barely make ends meet. I was telling you I was going down to my mother's house to eat two weeks after payday. I couldn't afford to take any more. It would have made, like, five hundred dollars more a month for me right now, if I would have taken it.

01:49:37

Washburn:

Well, you were young and you don't know how these things are going to work out.

01:49:40

Avalos:

When you are twenty-two, are you worried about sixty-five? I says, "My dad's not even sixty-five yet."

01:49:44

Washburn:

You want the money then.

01:49:46

Avalos:

Yeah. My brother always thought that, too.

01:49:53

Washburn:

We haven't talked about the different houses you lived in.

01:50:01

Avalos:

Not too many. [laughs]

01:50:03

Washburn:

Well, that makes it easy.

01:50:05

Esther:

We've lived here forty-four years.

01:50:07

Washburn:

You said you grew up on First Street, in between Nevin and Barrett?

01:50:11

Avalos:

No, on First Street, I lived between Ohio and Maine. That's on First Street. You know where you came up today?

01:50:20

Washburn:

Yeah, is that where you grew up?

01:50:21

Avalos:

Yeah. I lived there until after I got married.

01:50:29

Washburn:

So you didn't live over by the Barrett and all this neighborhood over there.

01:50:31

Avalos:

She did, she lived on Ripley.

01:50:37

Washburn:

So you lived between Ohio and Maine. That's why there were all those fields right there. You were right on the edge there.

01:50:44

Avalos:

My brother is still there. He stayed with the house. He didn't get married. The house is still there, what's left of it.

01:50:52

Washburn:

I'd love to go to check it out. He lives there?

01:50:55

Esther:

No, you wouldn't. [laughs]

01:50:57

Washburn:

Does he live there, in that same house?

01:51:02

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:51:02

Washburn:

I'd love to check it out. Where did you grow up?

01:51:03

Esther:

Near Peres School on Pennsylvania and Ripley.

01:51:07

Washburn:

On Pennsylvania and Ripley? On what street?

01:51:08

Avalos:

Third.

01:51:09

Washburn:

It seems like from what you describe, the Mexican American community was down by where you lived. So, by you, what was it like out there? Was it kind of like country or something?

01:51:27

Avalos:

Yeah, from First they had a few families scattered out. Not like in her area. It's mostly all races except—just the two black families that lived down the end. One on First Street and one on, like, Fifteenth Street or something. Where my brother lived, there was an empty lot. Then there were Mexican families lived there on Second Street; just one that I know of. My dad used to plant corn in that empty lot. Them days you could plant, you know. Then, when the war came, they built the housing right there in front. From there on, every place there was an empty lot they put up housing, different family—units, the families lived in. There were maybe four or six families. So, every empty lot, from First Street on, where there was an empty lot, they would put one of them up, housing. That's where everybody lived. Every place they could find a place to put people.

01:52:50

Washburn:

Did you live there until you got married?

01:52:52

Avalos:

Yeah.

01:52:53

Washburn:

And Esther, you lived on Third until you got married?

01:52:56

Esther:

Hm-mm.

01:52:56

Washburn:

So where did you guys move once you guys got a place together?

01:53:00

Avalos:

That's how I told you we was looking for a house in Atchison Village, but we couldn't get one there. Then we got into housing on Fourth and Ohio, but we only lived there for a short time.

01:53:12

Esther:

For a month.

01:53:13

Washburn:

Oh, just for a month, huh?

01:53:16

Avalos:

Yeah, and then we went to Matthew Court, between Sixth and Ripley.

01:53:23

Esther:

Fifth and Sixth.

01:53:24

Washburn:

There's Matthew, I see it. Then you moved there. And how long did you live on Matthew?

01:53:27

Avalos:

Until we came here. We lived there—

01:53:36

Esther:

Seven years?

01:53:39

Washburn:

You moved out here to the place on Thirty-seventh in what year?

01:53:45

Esther:

Then we moved here.

01:53:46

Washburn:

What year?

01:53:47

Avalos:

How many years have we been here?

01:53:50

Esther:

Ah, '58.

01:53:54

Avalos:

This house, I bought it for eleven thousand dollars. I had three loans going.

01:53:58

Washburn:

Where did you get your loans from?

01:54:04

Avalos:

From the bank.

01:54:07

Esther:

That's when he first went to work for the school district.

01:54:07

Avalos:

Yeah, so I had to borrow money from her father, but her father made me pay it through the bank, see. I couldn't just pay him just when I felt like it. He made sure he got his money back, which was, it was all right. Now these homes here, that house across the street is selling for four hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. This house on the other side of this one is sold for two hundred and sixty-seven thousand dollars. It's smaller than mine. But I'm not moving. Where am I going to go at my age? I'd have to go buy another house.

01:54:45

Washburn:

Let's talk about buying the house. Were there other Mexican American families living in this area?

01:54:54

Avalos:

Not really.

01:54:54

Washburn:

So it's mostly Anglo folks.

01:55:03

Avalos:

Yeah. On this street, a lot of them must have died. It was all retired people. This was a good part of town in the old days.

01:55:13

Washburn:

What do you guys remember about moving in here? I think at this time there weren't really restrictive covenants still, but people did want to sell to certain people. I know my mom's family is Jewish and I know they had to, at some point, lie about whether they were Jewish because if they said, they wouldn't sell them the home. I know that's for black folks, too.

01:55:37

Avalos:

For the black folks it was the worst.

01:55:42

Washburn:

For black folks it was the worst, but what do you guys remember about moving in here, about being one of the only Latino families in the neighborhood?

01:55:55

Esther:

It was fine.

01:56:03

Avalos:

You should see my grandkids, they're all light-complected. They're as light as you are. No, we didn't have no problem. There were a lot of kids in the neighborhood that my kids played with. They all went to the school over here. In fact, I was the custodian at that school, so all the kids knew me. All the teachers liked me because I used to do a lot of extra things for them. When I was cleaning the rooms, when I'd get to the playground, the kids were getting out of school, and I used to kick the ball to them. I used to kick it up pretty good and I'd give them a dime if they could catch it, see. A lot of the kids still remember me from then.

01:56:44

Washburn:

Why did you guys move into this house instead of one in some other part of town?

01:56:50

Avalos:

It's just, at the time—

01:56:53

Washburn:

Do you remember why you picked this house?

01:56:56

Esther:

It was close to the school, and he worked there at the time. It was a good neighborhood.

01:57:04

Avalos:

The junior high school, well, it was Adams, and the high school, Harry Ells, is right here on Macdonald. One thing, when my daughter—they kind of had boundaries at that time.

01:57:20

Washburn:

What you mean “boundaries”?

01:57:27

Avalos:

Well, it was—at that time it was a black, Indian—I forget how it was. What was that called?

01:57:38

Esther:

Certain areas went to certain schools.

01:57:43

Washburn:

Certain districts?

01:57:45

Esther:

Yes.

01:57:48

Avalos:

They were trying to split them up. Harry Ells was right here. They put my daughter in Kennedy. Strictly.

01:57:58

Esther:

When it first opened.

01:58:02

Washburn:

Strictly what? More racially mixed?

01:58:14

Avalos:

Yeah. I knew the principal real well—[Antone?]-and I said, “Were do you draw the line on this?” I said, “My daughter—I bought in this neighborhood and she's got to walk through Harry Ells to get to Kennedy.” Then he asks me... It had something to do with race. But anyway, I got her out and put her over here. I forget what it was, the ratio; they had to have so many—

01:58:53

Esther:

They were supposed to have a certain amount of Latin kids, blacks and whites.

01:58:59

Washburn:

Like quotas or something?

01:59:03

Avalos:

See, they were busing them, too. They had a lot of problems with that. People buy in certain neighborhoods to go to school close, then they got to bus them across town. That's when they started busing a lot to Pinole, De Anza, from this area. That's when they started having lots of problems. People started going left and right. People buy in certain neighborhoods for the school.

01:59:23

Washburn:

And they want their kid to go there, yeah, and things change. I spoke to a lot of folks... I got to change this again. This thing, you only get one hour. We'll talk for maybe another fifteen, twenty minutes, and then—you already talked for two hours. I told you it goes by quick. You don't realize it, but it goes by real quick.

01:59:53

Avalos:

I'm trying to think of stuff, but I just can't—

01:59:56

Washburn:

No, you have some really wonderful things to share with me. Some of your descriptions are fantastic.

02:00:12

Avalos:

We had good times growing up. Real good.

02:00:16

Washburn:

Yeah, it sounds like it.

02:00:19

Avalos:

Compared to the kids—my kids didn't get to...

02:00:23

Washburn:

It sounds kind of like some Mark Twain kind of things as kids.

02:00:27

Esther:

That's what he tells me. He says these kids nowadays don't know what it is to have fun.

02:00:28

Avalos:

Yeah. We used to go up the hill and take potatoes with us and light a fire and burn them and get some salt. Yeah, Tom Sawyer days. Make rafts and stuff.

02:00:47

Washburn:

I talked to a lot of folks that I've interviewed who lived down towards Garrard and First, Second and Third, and a lot of them moved out to San Pablo and El Sobrante and El Cerrito, and you guys moved over here. What can you tell me about the people you grew up with down in that neighborhood and where they live now and when they started to move out of there?

02:01:25

Avalos:

I've got three brothers that live in Pinole. I have two brothers in Pinole. Her brothers are all in Hercules, Pinole.

02:01:32

Esther:

Rodeo.

02:01:35

Avalos:

Rodeo.

02:01:39

Esther:

Better homes.

02:01:40

Avalos:

Better homes. First, one of our friends moved to Pinole who lived around here. He was the first one to move out of the area and go up that way. Everyone thought he was paying big bucks, which wasn't big dollars, but everyone said, "Jeez, how's he going to make it?" This and that, you know. The price was right really, the interest and everything. After that it seemed like everyone started moving out.

02:02:13

Washburn:

When was this? You guys moved in '58.

02:02:21

Avalos:

I was still living here and then they built them homes.

02:02:21

Esther:

Seventies?

02:02:28

Avalos:

Yeah. A lot of guys were actually ready too, buying their first home, and they chose to go out that way. I liked this area. When I moved over here, this was one of the best areas around.

02:02:50

Washburn:

Were you guys some of the first of your friends and relatives to move from that neighborhood? When you guys moved over here, were still a lot of your friends and family living down there? South Side.

02:03:03

Avalos:

There were still some, but most of them didn't move like in the same area. Like they moved out to Pinole, buying their first home. Most of them are renting down there, you know, in that area. We chose to stay on here. So it worked out good for us.

02:03:23

Esther:

Not now.

02:03:27

Avalos:

All the kids are gone, you mean?

02:03:31

Esther:

You can't walk the streets in the morning.

02:03:33

Avalos:

Oh, yeah. See, we were used to—frankly, it's dangerous walking at night. I never ran scared, you know, I still don't, but I have more sense, too. She lived way over there and I used to go over there to see her and then I'd walk home. In that area, and nobody bothered you. You could walk down the street any time at night. It was beautiful.

02:04:07

Washburn:

When did the crime rate start kind of going up in Richmond?

02:04:14

Avalos:

I guess, after the war when people lost their job. A lot of people out of work.

02:04:30

Esther:

When they started that riot where Travalinis store used to be.

02:04:33

Avalos:

Oh, yeah.

02:04:37

Washburn:

What happened then?

02:04:37

Avalos:

When did it start? Somebody got killed there.

02:04:43

Esther:

And they burned that store there.

02:04:45

Washburn:

About what year was this?

02:04:46

Esther:

Sixties, huh?

02:04:47

Avalos:

Mid-sixties? Before that. The chief of police was rough that we had at that time. Too bad he's not here now. There was a lot of guys cruising, blacks cruising down Macdonald. Every other car was a cop's car. Because they were expecting the big-time, because they'd already burned this—I forget why they were rioting. Somebody got killed, like in prison or something. But it turned out all right. They had a few scrapes with the police.

02:05:42

Washburn:

But in this neighborhood, when do you feel it kind of changed and you felt it wasn't as safe as it was before? I don't mean to say—to me it seems reasonably fine, but you guys—

02:05:56

Avalos:

Well, let's put it this way, there's a lot of places worse. This area, it's not something that happens every day, like downtown Richmond or North Richmond, South Side or Easter Hill they call it. The iron triangle.

02:06:14

Esther:

When he said you're on the South Side, I said "ooh."

02:06:19

Avalos:

You said Wall Street—[laughs]

02:06:22

Washburn:

I'm used to going to all kinds of different places right now.

02:06:25

Avalos:

You gotta be careful.

02:06:30

Washburn:

I've traveled all different places. So when did you feel like this neighborhood started to—
?

02:06:40

Avalos:

It's not. Really up to now it's not bad, because the colored live up on the hill up there. They walk by here. There are families scattered—all not blacks. I'm not blaming the blacks, you know. There's a house right across from us that's a drug place right there. These guys come all night long, you know. You can tell they are wheeling and dealing. We've seen the sheriffs over there a lot of times with their dogs sniffing around and stuff. Like I tell her, you mind your own business, because these kind of people, they're goofy with the drugs. They come and go. You don't know where they're from. They can shoot you and take off. They'll never find them. So, as long as you mind your own business they don't bother us. But that's not all the time. Just payday.

02:07:34

Washburn:

I was born in East Oakland. My folks lived in East Oakland. It's not like—there's plenty of nice, great families that live around. But at night there are some people that cause problems and you got to watch out. When do you feel like this neighborhood started to change a little bit that way?

02:08:01

Avalos:

Actually, I can't really complain about this neighborhood. It's just walking from here to—you know, like—

02:08:06

Washburn:

Church or something?

02:08:10

Avalos:

Yeah, last Saturday I went to St. Cornelius for four-thirty Mass on Saturday. I walked. Nothing happened, but I don't usually walk. I was still in the church and it gets dark at five-thirty now. Then I got talking in there. Jeez, I come out and everybody was gone and here I'm still walking home. I still got to walk. It ain't that far, but—

02:08:38

Esther:

That afternoon there was a shooting.

02:08:42

Avalos:

Yeah, they just had a shooting down at Nicholl Park. I kind of keep my eyes open. I shouldn't be walking at night. It wasn't late, but it was dark. You got a lot of young kids walking around, and I always keep an eye on them when I'm ready to leave the house, because—breaking into homes. They know that people are working and stuff like that.

You got that all over. I don't care where you live. In fact, a guy come by last night wanted to sell me a—

02:09:14

Washburn:

A car radio or something? A burglar alarm?

02:09:18

Avalos:

No, he was legit, but it was dark. I said, “You better be careful walking around.” He says, “Oh, I’m all right.” He was wanting to sell me an alarm. He says there's a couple of homes that have been broken in down the street. He let us put this sign up. [phone rings] Take it in the other room [to his wife]. But anyway I says, “No, I've been here all these years. I keep my doors locked. I ain't got nothing for them to steal.” That’s for when you go out during the day, you see. They catch a lot of these kids once in a while, when they are roaming around in backyards.

02:09:54

Washburn:

One thing we didn't talk about was going to church. Did your family go to St. Mark's there?

02:10:09

Avalos:

Yeah, all the time. I was kind of like an altar boy there at one time. My mother and my grandmother—they really didn’t go to church that much. My older brother Joe and me, we used to—everybody went to St. Mark's, in fact my aunt, she got married there. Just ten years ago she had her fiftieth anniversary there at St. Mark's. Her husband just died, and he had a priest from St. Mark's give him his last rites.

02:10:45

Washburn:

This is just recently?

02:10:48

Avalos:

Yeah, about two weeks ago.

02:10:51

Washburn:

I think Father Nieto was telling me about somebody—

02:10:51

Avalos:

A young priest?

02:10:53

Washburn:

Yeah, somebody who had gone there for a long time just had a memorial service there. Did you go to that?

02:10:54

Avalos:

Yeah, oh yeah, because we are related.

02:10:56

Esther:

That was last Friday.

02:10:57

Washburn:

Yeah he just told me about that.

02:11:07

Avalos:

He was pretty young.

02:11:10

Washburn:

I'm going to stop this.

02:11:10

Avalos:

That's enough for—unless you want to ask me some more.

02:11:15

Washburn:

I do want to ask you a little bit more. I'll let this keep running because it's almost done. I wanted to ask you about St. Mark's. Your earliest memories of going to church, was that St. Mark's?

02:11:29

Avalos:

Yeah, when we were kids who used to go there. They kind of remodeled it since we went there.

02:11:37

Washburn:

When you guys went there, was Mass in Latin or English or Spanish?

02:11:42

Avalos:

English.

02:11:44

Washburn:

English?

02:11:47

Avalos:

At that time they didn't have no—

02:11:51

Esther:

I saw a picture in there of Father Garcia.

02:11:51

Avalos:

They used to have one father, nickname of Blackjack. He was kind of rough. He didn't like nobody coming in to Mass late or standing up. A lot of people like to stand in the back. He would make them sit down. He would stop the Mass and make them sit down.

02:12:09

Washburn:

But you don't have any memories of Mass in Spanish?

02:12:12

Avalos:

No, I really can't remember. Maybe they did.

02:12:19

Washburn:

I have this old ad here that shows that in the fifties, they had Spanish Mass the first Sunday of the month.

02:12:23

Avalos:

They probably did, you know. Of course they do now, a lot. In them days you knew everybody that went to church. Now at St. Cornelius, they have a Mexican Mass at twelve. I don't know one person, one Mexican there. They're all Mexican. They load that place up. They all bring their kids in. Of course, they are all younger. See, that's how it's changing. Before, I used to know every Mexican family in town. Now I don't know any. I tell you one thing, they're moving down—in the South Side and all over, the Mexican people. A lot of the blacks are moving out. My daughter said that a lot of them are going to Fairfield and that area where the homes are a lot cheaper. I'm not prejudiced, but I just had a good joke about them. They're not considered a minority no more, the blacks. The Mexicans are getting in and putting their two cents into it.

02:13:38

Esther:

At Easter Hill it's full of them now. In that area down there, like Atchison Village. There's a lot of Hispanics in there. And St. John's Apartments.

02:13:54

Washburn:

I see it when I drive down there, sure.

02:13:59

Avalos:

See, a lot of people are trying to get away from the blacks, but Mexicans move right in. They probably had it rougher—a lot of them—where they come from. A lot of them are moving to North Richmond, too.

02:14:17

Washburn:

How would you compare that to when you guys lived in the neighborhood during the war? A lot of families who came from other places—like the Gonzalez family, who came from out of town—did you notice a lot of families coming from out of town and moving in?

02:14:32

Avalos:

From out of state.

02:14:36

Washburn:

From out of state, I mean, yeah.

02:14:37

Avalos:

That's all there was.

02:14:38

Washburn:

What was that like for the community down there?

02:14:39

Avalos:

It was all right. The young kids, a lot of them went to school with us. It was the parents that were still prejudiced. Not the kids.

02:14:53

Washburn:

Which parents are we talking about?

02:14:54

Avalos:

The people that come from, you know, all over.

02:14:57

Washburn:

The Latino families?

02:14:58

Avalos:

No, no.

02:14:59

Washburn:

Okie families. You didn't tell me about the Latino families that came, like the Gonzalez family, or something like that. How that kind of maybe increased the size of the community or how it changed things?

02:15:16

Esther:

Well, they were scattered. They weren't in one place.

02:15:20

Avalos:

The Gonzalezes had a restaurant there on Thirteenth Street. Everybody knew them because there weren't too many Mexican restaurants in that time. They went from Thirteenth. They've still got one up here on San Pablo. We was raised on Mexican food, so we don't go to Mexican restaurants too much. I considered my mother the best there was at cooking. You know how, when you grow up on that food...

02:16:03

Washburn:

Sure. So you're saying that if there was a Latino family that came from out of town—the ones I've talked to did move down to the neighborhood.

02:16:10

Avalos:

You know what? A lot of them seemed like they were born and raised, not born and raised but the kids were all born and raised... They didn't come one big family. The parents were here, then the kids were raised there. All the ones that I know were all born in that area. The kids who went to school with us. They're all seventy-five, eighty years old. The parents would come on their own, like my dad and mom. We were all born in that house. My grandmother was the only nurse we had. That's the way it was. The parents came and then the kids were all born. Most of them.

02:16:50

Esther:

But you're talking about during the war?

02:16:47

Washburn:

I'm talking about during the war. I got to change this. Hold on.

[Start audio file Avalos2 11-06-02]

00:00:02

Washburn:

So, you were saying that the folks that you knew that came—Latino folks that came—were single men, you were saying, Tony.

00:00:17

Avalos:

Yeah. The Mexicans were mostly all single that I know. The parents didn't come with them. Most of them were in their late teens, sixteen up.

00:00:30

Washburn:

These were the zoot suit kids who were living in the dormitories and stuff.

00:00:42

Avalos:

Yeah. I didn't see too many parents there at the time. They probably stayed wherever. A lot of them were New Mexico, Texas, all over.

00:00:52

Washburn:

Well, like if Joséfina Ramirez who I talked to, she moved on to Barrett somewhere, near Second or something like that, and the Gonzalez sisters they said they lived on B Street. I'm trying to see that since you guys knew that neighborhood so well, when these folks from out of town—

00:01:17

Avalos:

How old were they?

00:01:18

Washburn:

They were about your age. These folks came from out of town and moved into these houses. Would you know that these people were newcomers?

00:01:28

Esther:

Mm-hm.

00:01:29

Washburn:

Did you notice a lot of newcomers come in?

00:01:31

Esther:

Oh, yeah.

00:01:32

Avalos:

My mother and my grandmother knew of the parents mostly. They had a club like Guadalupana. Did you ever hear of that? Did Sal tell you that?

00:01:45

Washburn:

No.

00:01:48

Avalos:

It was a Mexican club.

00:01:50

Washburn:

Where was it? What was it called?

00:01:57

Esther:

Guadalupana.

00:02:00

Washburn:

Guadalupana. And what was it?

00:02:03

Avalos:

It was a Mexican deal, you know. When a Mexican person died, after the priest had the ceremony then they had the special talk for the person, that club. They just made the funeral last a lot longer. They'd talk there, and then when they buried them they would talk again. They had their regular flag from the club, you know.

00:02:34

Washburn:

So was it like a social club?

00:02:39

Avalos:

They didn't have too many meetings. It was mostly, I think, when you died—

00:02:46

Esther:

They had an insurance. Remember, he used to go—?

00:02:46

Avalos:

Oh yeah, they had some kind of insurance.

00:02:54

Washburn:

So did they help families out when somebody died?

00:02:54

Avalos:

Yeah, that's what it was mostly about.

00:02:59

Washburn:

But it wasn't like a company or anything?

00:03:01

Avalos:

No, no. They were just all local people.

00:03:05

Esther:

It was a club.

00:03:09

Avalos:

Yeah. In fact, this guy's father used to come over and collect the dues from us.

00:03:14

Washburn:

So what would you pay to the club?

00:03:17

Esther:

In case—for a death insurance, you paid.

00:03:21

Avalos:

Most of the Mexican people, if you ever go—of course, you haven't been to the cemetery at St. Joseph's? They've all got their own area. All the old-timers are on one side. My folks, they are all buried there. All the old ones. They're all on one side of the cemetery. My grandfather—

00:03:36

Washburn:

I'm interested in the club. You guys, would you pay dues to the club?

00:03:39

Esther:

Yes. Remember, Mr. Alvarez would come?

00:03:41

Avalos:

Oh, yeah. Not us, our folks.

00:03:48

Esther:

Yeah, your folks.

00:03:49

Washburn:

Oh, your folks would pay? This was when you're younger?

00:03:53

Avalos:

Yeah, we were kids. We would see them walking down—they'd be coming. Nobody had a car. We'd walk down our house. My brother, he had a saying for them: "Here they come 'I wanna' from the 'Wannalupana'."

00:04:14

Washburn:

[laughs]

00:04:17

Avalos:

They'd come out with their hands—it wasn't that much.

00:04:18

Washburn:

What would they do with that money?

00:04:22

Avalos:

They put it in a kitty, I guess, and insurance. Some kind of insurance for when they died. I think they'd get paid to bury them. Most of them, they all had their plots. All the Mexican people got their plots already. Of course, they're all buried now. My dad, he's still got room. My younger brother's...

00:04:41

Washburn:

When your folks died, did someone help you out?

00:04:49

Avalos:

Yeah, they had the—not us.

00:04:53

Washburn:

Explain how that worked.

00:04:55

Esther:

Well they used to come for the “I Wanna.” They used to come for his money. That was for the burial.

00:05:07

Avalos:

They paid dues and they'd get buried. They paid for most of the funeral itself. Most of them already had their plots. You know, you have to pay the mortuary, stuff like that.

00:05:17

Washburn:

So how long did this club stay in existence for?

00:05:24

Avalos:

I think it still might be going, I'm not sure.

00:05:28

Washburn:

No way, really?

00:05:29

Esther:

When they have the rosary—

00:05:31

Avalos:

If it's not, it hasn't been too long since it quit. I really haven't seen any. I was kind of expecting one for that last funeral, but they didn't have it.

00:05:49

Washburn:

Was that a club, or just a tradition?

00:05:52

Avalos:

Tradition, I think, mostly.

00:05:54

Esther:

Do they have that in Mexico too?

00:05:58

Avalos:

Maybe, they probably do.

00:06:00

Washburn:

I know of a tradition one of my Mexican friends was telling me about. I forget what it's called. You have ten guys get in on something, and everybody puts in a hundred dollars one week and then you draw numbers. If you draw one, you are week one. All of the ten guys put in a hundred dollars, you get a thousand dollars that week. If you are week three, you get the thousand dollars on week three, but you've got to put in every single week. Maybe it was something like that?

00:06:20

Avalos:

No, it wasn't like that.

00:06:22

Washburn:

It wasn't like that.

00:06:24

Avalos:

The thousand dollars are like a million.

00:06:26

Washburn:

No, no, no, no. I'm just saying was it maybe a kind of an informal—

00:06:32

Avalos:

No. It was just everybody—the Mexican people that knew each other, they'd get somebody else to join or something like that. It was all the old-timers. In fact, when they used to collect for us—in fact, this kid right here used to come and collect. That was his

father that used to come and collect, and then he got into it, the dark-complected one. They tried to pass it down, see. That's why I say I don't think it's still going.

00:07:07

Washburn:

These are great photos.

00:07:10

Esther:

They are reproduced.

00:07:12

Washburn:

Are they reproductions?

00:07:16

Avalos:

See, that's what they call—we weren't zoot-suiters, but everybody wore their hair like that.

00:07:19

Washburn:

Can I borrow these for a while?

00:07:21

Avalos:

Yeah.

00:07:22

Washburn:

I'll return them.

00:07:23

Esther:

Hm-hm.

00:07:27

Washburn:

Could I? It would be great. I could make reproductions myself. I'll get them back to you. That would be great. Fantastic pictures. Where are the originals?

00:07:40

Esther:

My brother.

00:07:42

Washburn:

Your brother. Does he have a lot of pictures like this?

00:07:44

Esther:

These are the ones he has, and I think that was during the war, wasn't it, Ton?

00:07:46

Avalos:

This guy here, Al—

00:07:59

Washburn:

I want to record it. All right, go ahead.

00:08:00

Avalos:

Oh, but this didn't have nothing to do with that. When he went into the service, he'd come home on leave, you know, and somebody—maybe a Mexican guy—hit a cop and put his eye out. So him and a good friend who went in the service with him, they were home on leave, and the MPs picked them up, and had them in jail. They tried to say that they were the ones. Even though they were home on leave, you know. They had to get the Mexican consul, was it, in San Francisco to get them out, and they caught the guy that did it later on. They used the sticks on them and stuff to make them confess. That will show you about what I was talking about. Somebody said there was a short Mexican with black hair and a mustache. That's like going to China and saying a guy with slanted eyes, you know. All us guys have black hair and a mustache. They got a raw deal out of it.

00:09:27

Washburn:

What can you describe about these haircuts?

00:09:31

Avalos:

The people that didn't like them called them ducktails, but at the time—this guy was our barber—they'd call it a Hollywood haircut. All they did was go in the back and kind of part it down. It wasn't long.

00:09:47

Washburn:

So it was parted in the back?

00:09:53

Avalos:

Yeah.

00:09:59

Washburn:

That's a great photo.

00:10:02

Avalos:

We used to go to Oakland and get them haircuts. It was funny.

00:10:09

Washburn:

Well, you guys have had some great things to share with me.

00:10:15

Avalos:

There's a lot more, but I just can't remember stuff, just stories. Different stories that would probably take you off the subject.

00:10:18

Washburn:

They're great stories. They really are. I think that's probably about it. We've gone for about two and a half hours.

00:10:29

Avalos:

It gets interesting. I tell you stuff that I forget. You kind of brought it out of me.

00:10:33

Washburn:

I'll give you my phone number, and if you remember anything, you can call me and that would be great. I would like to interview you too, but I've interviewed—I need a split between men and women, and I need more men.

00:10:51

Esther:

You know what, Jesse Alvarez would be a good one.

00:10:53

Avalos:

Yeah, but he can't hear.

00:10:55

Esther:

He's hard of hearing.

00:10:58

Avalos:

He'd blow your machine out, the way he talks.

00:11:01

Washburn:

He is a good talker, though?

00:11:04

Avalos:

Yeah. He worked in the shipyards, he's older. We all worked at Yard Three. There was about fifteen of us. Good friends.

00:11:16

Washburn:

From the neighborhood?

00:11:17

Avalos:

Yeah. That's the reason I went to work out there because they were all out there, see. That's how easy it was to get a job. At lunchtime we would all eat together. His mother always made him a nice lunch. Anything he had left over he wouldn't give it to you. He would sell it to you. He's noted to be—he's got big bucks. So it's funny. At the shipyards, every day he would bring something home, maybe a bolt or a nut in his lunch bucket. I don't know how he got the paint out, but he painted his house. There's still one part of his house—it's a funny thing. I said, "That's the color of the ships down at the shipyards." You know, real gray, ships. He painted his house with that. Up to this day, I'm talking how long it's been—'45—he's got one side of his house that he hasn't finished painting. I says, "You know, you can die from that lead in that paint, you know, nowadays." Anyway, this guy is so comical. He's got big bucks and he needs a hearing aid so bad. We were all together—after the funeral we all went to Estrada's restaurant to have lunch. He's really familiar with the cemetery, the people that work at the mortuaries. Great guy, you know. He used to get food and bread from Safeway and take it to people all over that needed it. But anyway—he said it jokingly—that these guys they take to the mortuary, a lot of them have hearing aids. It wouldn't be no problem to get one of them hearing aids. [laughs]

00:13:33

Washburn:

Oh, my God. He's a scavenger, huh?

00:13:40

Avalos:

This guy's worth over one million bucks. I know. But he is comical as heck. Like, he'll go to Reno, go on this bus. My brother's been with him. They go to, like, Las Vegas on a bus, like a seniors' thing. They make different stops for about five days. In fact, her sister went. He got a money belt. He'll take ten grand with him and anybody that needs money, he'll loan it to them. He's real generous. But anyway—just one more story on him. We were down at the hospital, she was going to go in for a gallbladder operation. He was there for appendicitis. A ruptured—what was it? A hernia. In and out, you know. So, all of my family, we were all there, but he didn't know that she was getting surgery. So it might have been twenty-five or thirty people. He thought they were all there for him, see, for his surgery. But anyway, he told his wife that just in case—'cause he keeps money in the house in different places. From his hiding places, he took all the money out and put it in one place and told his wife where it was. Plus he wrote the kids that owed him money—his own kids, his grandkids that owed him money, he had a list of how much they owed him, just in case he didn't make it through the surgery. He was going to get a hernia operation. He was in and out in forty-five minutes.

00:15:27

Washburn:

He still wrote that list?

00:15:28

Avalos:

Yeah. “Just in case I don't make it.” I says, “Christ's sake, they can do that to you at home.” Anyway, she was the one who had the big surgery.

00:15:38

Washburn:

What can you tell me, briefly, about you and your friends and brothers or anybody you knew from the Mexican American community that got a job at the shipyard? Did you know a lot of people who started work there?

00:15:56

Avalos:

Oh, yeah. Everybody I knew—I mean, if you weren't working, it was because you didn't want to go to work. The more people that went to work there, the more money Kaiser—there was so much work. All you had to do was a little bit. Show up. I worked in the sheet metal shop. I was kind of lucky. I was learning. If you wanted to be a burner or a welder, whatever, they would send you to school for a week. A lot of women. Then at lunchtime, they would have entertainment. Movie stars would come. The Andrews Sisters were there—of course, you don't remember the Andrews Sisters.

00:16:52

Washburn:

No, but I've heard about the entertainment that went on there. I'm interested to know about the Mexican American community that worked there.

00:16:58

Avalos:

Yeah, I know what you're getting at, but it was mostly the people who were established, the ones that worked.

00:17:11

Washburn:

That's what I'm asking. This stuff applies for anybody who was here before the war, but because we're talking about the Mexican American community, you can help me answer that. The people who already had established jobs—let's say at Santa Fe or the foundry, or something like that—did they then drop those jobs and go work at the shipyards?

00:17:32

Avalos:

No, no. Not like that. No. My dad stayed, most of them stayed where they were at, really. Mexican people are—like, my dad always worried about his job.

00:17:46

Esther:

They were dedicated.

00:17:48

Avalos:

Dedicated.

00:17:51

Washburn:

Why didn't he move from Stauffer Chemical to the shipyards? Could he have earned more working for the shipyards?

00:17:56

Avalos:

Probably, but he'd been working there for so many years. Like her father worked at C&H in Crockett. He wouldn't have went to work the shipyards.

00:18:10

Washburn:

He did? He didn't.

00:18:16

Avalos:

No, they were dedicated to the job.

00:18:21

Washburn:

But you said you did have friends who worked there. Were they generally younger?

00:18:29

Avalos:

Yeah, most of the guys my age were there. There was so much work. If they were younger they couldn't get a job. They were too young. My brothers were working—most of them worked at the cannery. Three of my brothers. Then, my mother and my grandmother and all of the Mexican women worked at the cannery from where you're talking about. From that area, they all worked at the cannery.

00:19:01

Washburn:

The F&P on Tenth Street?

00:19:09

Avalos:

Yeah, all from that area. All the ladies, they could walk and they all worked over there at the time. It was mostly Mexicans and Italians working at that cannery. Women.

00:19:19

Washburn:

Was that before the war? When was that?

00:19:23

Avalos:

It was before and during the war, I guess. They had the Ford plant and Harvester. The town was booming.

00:19:31

Washburn:

Harvester, yes, somebody told me about that. International Harvester? What happened there?

00:19:40

Avalos:

They were on during the war.

00:19:41

Washburn:

What did they make?

00:19:45

Avalos:

Different machine parts.

00:19:46

Washburn:

Was that farm equipment and stuff?

00:19:48

Avalos:

Yeah, nuts and bolts and everything that went along with it.

00:19:53

Esther:

Mary Lou's husband worked there.

00:19:55

Washburn:

Right, that's how I learned about it. Was there a lot of employees? Was it a really big company?

00:20:01

Avalos:

Yeah, it was pretty big. It didn't break up until about—Danny used to work there about ten years ago.

00:20:11

Esther:

That was on Ride Avenue.

00:20:13

Washburn:

On Ride Avenue. I hadn't heard about it until Mary Lou told me about it.

00:20:26

Avalos:

Well, Polly used to work in the cannery. In fact, I worked there one time and she was my boss.

00:20:34

Washburn:

When did you work in the cannery?

00:20:35

Avalos:

Wait a minute, I was working for the schools and I needed some extra money so I went to work nights. My brother worked there. He knew the superintendent at nights. He was a good friend of ours. So I told him—his name was Eddie. I said, “Eddie, I work days. I want to work a couple of weeks and get some extra bucks.” I had to pay insurance, something had come up and I needed some. I said, “I don't want nothing rough.” He was a little younger than me, you know. So he put me one place and, jeez, I was running my butt off. Finally, he put me in fruit cocktail and that's where Polly worked. It's not hard work; it's fast. I guess I was going too slow, because she told me so. You gotta put so much pears, so much of the other—fruit cocktail. I was missing half of them. I was too slow for her. Then they put me up on top where the cans come down the conveyor—the empty cans—and they'd get stuck, so I had to run up, hit them, and get them straightened out. I said, “Goddamn, don't you have any sweet—” “You want my job?” he told me. I wanted something easier. In that department you had to work late. They'd get off maybe eleven or twelve, but then you've got to stay and clean up until maybe two or three in the morning, hose everything down. So I wasn't getting much sleep, because I had to work the next day, so I only lasted a week.

00:22:25

Washburn:

But it sounded like a lot of people came in and out of the canneries, maybe for a season or two.

00:22:30

Avalos:

My brother had a steady job that worked in [vacuuming?]. He worked there about twenty years. He had a steady job there.

00:22:36

Washburn:

Where did your brothers work?

00:22:40

Avalos:

All of them worked at the cannery at one time, but later on, one of them went to work at Beckmann Instruments. That's where Mary Lou and her worked, at Beckman Instruments. Two of them stayed at the cannery for about twenty years, until they closed up. My older brother was an upholsterer.

00:22:59

Washburn:

That's right, you told me about that. That's great.

00:23:04

Avalos:

Are you getting sleepy? [laughs]

00:23:07

Washburn:

I've gotta get going, yeah. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it, Tony.

[End of Interview]