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Mary Fierros

Rosie the Riveter  
WWII American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
David Dunham  
in 2015

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Mary Fierros, 2015



Mary Fierros, 1941





1942



MIKE R FIERROS  
SGT US ARMY AIR FORCES  
WORLD WAR II  
AUG 28 1918 + APR 27 2012  
BELOVED HUSBAND

MARY J FIERROS  
ROSIE THE RIVETER ID # P-02617  
WW II  
APR 20 1920  
LOVING WIFE

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## Interview 1: May 30, 2015

01-00:00:05

Dunham:

We're here on May 30, 2015 with Mary Fierros in her lovely home in San Jose for the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front Oral History Project. Mary, I know we covered some of this, but I want to focus on your many experiences during the war years. So can you remind us what was your first job during that time or the first job you tried to get?

01-00:00:32

Fierros:

The first job I tried to get was when my husband was transferred to Long Beach, California. So I packed my little suitcase and drove all the way to LA. I have a sister. Her name was Vera Jiménez Vázquez, bless her. She asked me to move in with her so I would be able to see if I could get a job.

So we went to Douglas Aircraft, and they gave me an application. I filled it out, but they said I had to have a physical before they would hire me. So no problem. My sister said yes, we will do that, being that I didn't have any money because my husband was drafted and I wasn't working, and so my sister paid for the physical. And then I went to Douglas, turned in my report, and they said they were sorry that they couldn't hire me because they found I had my tonsils. They said the only way they would hire me was if I had my tonsils removed, because they felt the company didn't feel that they would have to pay in case I had to have an operation. Well, the doctor, when I went back to the doctor again, he told my sister, "Vera, she does not have a history. There's no illness, no—nothing wrong with her." My sister explained that I had to have a job because my husband was in the service. So he said all right. They went ahead, and he operated on me right there in the office. Two weeks later he gave me a release that I could be able to go to work. I go back to Douglas and see if they would hire me.

01-00:02:32

Dunham:

Do you know, Mary, how much that operation cost?

01-00:02:35

Fierros:

No, I don't. Being that my sister took care of the bill I couldn't say. But at that time all the money my husband was getting, as you must be aware, it was only \$75 a month. What that meant—\$50 would be for me, \$25 would be for shaving lotion or toothpaste and that. So when I went in and turned in my release from the doctor they were pleased. They hired me and put me to work right away. I was working in the B-29s, and I had to crawl. Being that I was small I had to crawl. My job was inside the wings of the B-29.

So my partner and I, we were working on the second day. All of a sudden I went like this across my mouth, and I noticed I was bleeding. And I kind of panic, and so did my partner. I was a riveter and she was a bucker. She was bucking the rivets that were shot into the wing. So she immediately told me, "Mary, you're bleeding." So when I went over my mouth I noticed my sleeve

was full of blood. So I kind of panicked, and so she got out and called the nurse, and they came and they said I had to go home, that something was the matter with me. So they sent me home and I got home. My sister was usually waiting for me, so when I got there she said, “What happened?” I said, “Vera, I don’t know. I was working with my riveter gun, and all of a sudden my partner said that I was bleeding, and when I run my hand over my mouth my sleeve got full of blood.” So immediately, she took me back to the doctor, and the doctor said that being that the operation was done there at the office and I was in a sitting position, there was blood that went into my throat, and I had blisters of blood in my throat. So the doctor said with the shaking of the riveter machine I must have busted those blisters, and that’s how come I was spitting out blood. So I had to wait for a week and a half. Then I had to go back to the doctor, got a release from the doctor, and they put me back to work.

01-00:05:17

Dunham:

All that time off, of course, you can’t be paid—you’re not paid. Is that right?

01-00:05:20

Fierros:

I know, especially where all the work I used to do before my husband and I—we used to work in the fields, because discrimination was very, very strong. We had to start working at three o’clock in the morning to be able to go to the field. They used to have a tractor that would elevate the carrots, and we used to claim a certain amount so that we would start tying carrots when the sun came up, because three o’clock in the morning my husband and I, we were right up to our waists, because the carrots were so high and dew. So we had to wait until the sun came out after we pulled out our carrots and put them in the row. Then he would start bunching at one end, and I would start packing in the other, because we had to pack them in crates, and we had to do that out in the field. So we did that, and we never, never complained. We felt this is our kind of life and we’re going to have to get used to it. So we worked in the fields until he was drafted, like I said. I got a job at Douglas Aircraft; then he was shipped—

01-00:06:49

Dunham:

So when you’re at Douglas I’m assuming it was a lot better money, albeit the rocky start.

01-00:06:55

Fierros:

Oh definitely, yes, yes.

01-00:06:58

Dunham:

Do you recall what the salary was?

01-00:07:00

Fierros:

I don’t recall what it was, but I know it was quite more than twenty-five cents an hour or seventy-five cents an hour. That was a lot of money, and naturally I wanted to help my sister because she had three children. I felt here I’m getting lodging, I’m not paying for rent, and she’d wait for me when I got off of

work. I used to work the swing shift because this way I'd get a break to see my husband when he'd get a pass, because he was stationed in Long Beach. So she would wait for me at the porch, and I'd be running up the hill so that I—I knew she was waiting for me. Then I noticed, being that I had to take the trolley from where she lived—she lived on Bunker Hill—and I had to run all the way down to catch the trolley so it would take me to Santa Monica. That's where Douglas Company was located.

01-00:08:08  
Dunham:

Did the trolley run twenty-four hours a day during the war?

01-00:08:11  
Fierros:

Yes, yes, yes it did. But then I noticed there was this man that was always watching me, and I got scared. So about a week later I walk up to the conductor. He'd wait until I'd get up and I'd be standing by the door to get off, and he always used to wear a hat and an overcoat. And that went on for over a week. Then finally I went up to the conductor, and he asked me, "What seems to be the matter?" I said, "Sir, if you look over the mirror you will see there's a man with a white overcoat and a white hat. Every time I get off the trolley car he gets off, and I run all the way up to where my sister lives. And he said, "Don't worry. I'm going to watch him. You stand way over there by the first door, and I will not open the back door," because he noticed as soon as I got up, he'd get up. But the conductor told me he was not going to open the second door. So I went up to the first door, close to where the conductor was at, and he opened the door for me to get down. I got down, and then I kind of glance. Sure enough, he was standing by the second door but that door was never opened. I got off and I ran all the way to where my sister was waiting for me. And she said, "What is the matter?" I said, "There's been a man that's been following me, but the conductor said he wasn't going to let him out. So I don't know if he got off afterwards." So my sister looked up and down the street, and no, he wasn't around. And I never saw that man again, so he must have been turned in for some reason or other.

01-00:10:19  
Dunham:

Had he ever said anything to you? Or he just—

01-00:10:22  
Fierros:

No, no.

01-00:10:23  
Dunham:

It was just that he was following you.

01-00:10:24  
Fierros:

He was just following me.

01-00:10:25  
Dunham:

Yeah, that's scary.

01-00:10:27

Fierros:

It was scary, you know. I was only nineteen years old, and my husband—I was two years younger than him. So my husband was always concerned and always calling my sister to see if I was all right.

So I worked at Douglas Aircraft for a year.

01-00:10:52

Dunham:

So when you met your husband, when he was able to get a pass, what did you guys do?

01-00:10:55

Fierros:

We'd go dancing at the Palladium. We only had to pay twenty-five cents to get in. And we danced to Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey—oh boy! Because we loved to dance. Sports and dancing and working was what our life was then. We were both young. When we were first married, being that we had to live with our in-laws, it was very difficult. There were times that we didn't have money to put our share for the food, so we'd go up the hills and cut mustard. We cooked the mustard, and that's what we ate. Cactus. My husband would peel them and I'd cook them, and that's what we ate. We were never trying to compete with the Joneses; we never even thought about that competing. But I was able to be there until my husband was shipped—I believe he was shipped to Sheppard Field, Texas.

01-00:12:06

Dunham:

I want to talk a little more about your time at Douglas, if that's okay.

01-00:12:08

Fierros:

Okay.

01-00:12:09

Dunham:

You were there a whole year, and you had, I know, a rocky start. Did you get training? Or what kind of training did you get?

01-00:12:16

Fierros:

Yes. Yeah, well they had to teach us how to handle the rivet machine. They had to show us how to position it, because we could easily make holes in the wings. There was always somebody supervising us, to make sure that we were doing it the right way.

01-00:12:33

Dunham:

Was there a class outside of the facility, or it was all on-site?

01-00:12:37

Fierros:

No, all in-site. They were very strict. I was asked many times, "Did you have any pictures of when—?" Oh my gosh, no. No pictures, no nothing.

01-00:12:51

Dunham:

And was the building camouflaged?

- 01-00:12:50  
Fierros: Yes, yes it was.
- 01-00:12:53  
Dunham: What other security measure were there?
- 01-00:12:57  
Fierros: Yes, we had to make sure we had our badge, show our credentials, and then we could go in. Once we were in there we didn't wander around. We stayed in our own section, and they had a special section for our department so we could have our lunch or whatever. But there was no association with anybody. They were very strict.
- 01-00:13:21  
Dunham: What was the makeup of your department in terms of race or gender? Do you recall?
- 01-00:13:27  
Fierros: I remember my department was climbing up the ladder and going into the wing, staying there, get down for my lunch. Go and eat in the little section, go back, climb the ladder and go to work. There was no visiting. There was nobody selling any cakes or sodas or anything like that. Besides, we didn't have the money, so they were very, very strict with us.
- 01-00:13:59  
Dunham: Was it hard work?
- 01-00:14:02  
Fierros: Compared to the field, I don't think it was. Compared with the field work that I did, it wasn't that hard.
- 01-00:14:09  
Dunham: Was it fun?
- 01-00:14:13  
Fierros: To me it was, it was, because I had somebody I could talk to. My partner was a young lady also. Her husband was also in the service. So our association was with wives of soldiers that were in the service.
- 01-00:14:30  
Dunham: What was your partner's name and where was she from?
- 01-00:14:36  
Fierros: That I don't recall, because we never asked questions. Oh my God! We never asked questions—she knew I was Mexican because I could speak Spanish, and let me tell you, my Spanish is not the best. But it sure helped me. But yes, but we never asked—
- 01-00:14:55  
Dunham: How did it help you?

01-00:14:58

Fierros:

It helped me to associate—probably somebody that couldn't speak English that would speak Spanish, so they would ask me if I would translate or relate to her what they were trying to tell her to do. That I could do. But my Spanish is not the best. I can speak Spanish, but you'd be shocked; I don't write it or read it. So I didn't get a chance to go much to school, but like I say, it was entirely a different world from what I was used to.

01-00:15:39

Dunham:

But your English is so good. How did you study English growing up? Because you had to work young as well.

01-00:15:45

Fierros:

Well, let me tell you, my English—I made up my mind that I had to learn. My education was only the seventh grade. I changed to many grammar schools because at that time when I was small we traveled, like in a caravan, in a group. There was many families, my aunts and uncles, my grandmother, my grandfather. We were all in a caravan. So we spoke Spanish, but English I started when I was five years old and I went to school. And that was in Idaho when I start going to school. There was nobody to teach us the As, Bs, or Cs because my mother, bless her, she had so many children. There was nine of us, so that kept my mother cooking. And I had grown sisters that—they were the championship on cutting beets, chopping beets, and all that. That was our lives. So I started school and I tried to learn how to speak English. Fufi's father, for instance, he was a determined person, and we had so much fun with my brother. But we used to go to school—we used to go on sleds, because the snow—it was fun. And in the summertime they'd take us in wagons, and my brother had a pony.

01-00:17:44

Dunham:

I want Candice to hear that, but I don't want to wear you out, because we did cover some of that in the first interview. So I'm sorry, Mary, to interrupt you, but let's go back to Douglas. I'm curious because you mentioned the translating. Were there many Mexican-American women or men working there, and/or did that number increase a lot during that year you were there?

01-00:18:05

Fierros:

Well, there were, to my knowledge, being that my communication was from the gate into the wing. So I cannot tell you how many other kind of nationalities there were there. You had an area. You were not allowed to get out of that area. So the women that I worked with were not that many—inside the wing there was just her and I.

01-00:18:35

Dunham:

Did you do some translation there at Douglas? Or was that elsewhere?

01-00:18:36  
Fierros: No, right there when they had a problem with one of the girls, then they would call me to come down and try to tell me what she was trying to explain to them.

01-00:18:49  
Dunham: What might have been an example of that?

01-00:18:51  
Fierros: Of what the opinion would be?

01-00:18:53  
Dunham: What problem might there have been?

01-00:18:56  
Fierros: Oh, well let's say that she was having a problem with her babies at home and she wanted time off or she wouldn't be able to come in the following day. So then they would ask me why she was not going to be able to come. So then I would explain to them, you know. But she could speak a little bit of English, but not enough for the supervisor, for the questions she was being asked that she did not understand.

01-00:19:27  
Dunham: Once you explained a situation like that how did they handle it? Were they understanding?

01-00:19:31  
Fierros: They were understandable. They knew she was also, in some way, her husband must have been in the service. We never asked questions. We never wanted to know "is your husband in the service?" No. We never did. They were very strict with us as far as trying to give information or get information.

01-00:19:56  
Dunham: Was there a strong sense of patriotism at Douglas?

01-00:20:02  
Fierros: I didn't understand.

01-00:20:01  
Dunham: Patriotism—

01-00:20:04  
Fierros: Oh yes! Yes, there was.

01-00:20:08  
Dunham: And what was that like? How did that take shape?

01-00:20:09  
Fierros: Well, I felt my husband was in the service. I had to be extremely careful. Any questions that were asked about me or my husband I was not comfortable answer them. I would just say, "I am sorry. I cannot give you an answer to

your questions.” Because they were extremely, extremely careful with us. The security around us was unbelievable. Once we got out, then they knew we were going home. And the trolley wasn’t that far. They never had buses to pick us up and take us. We had to walk, which—the trolley wasn’t that far from the gate when we got off, it just—bunches of women getting into the trolley.

01-00:21:05  
Dunham:

Did you have air raid drills or anything like that?

01-00:21:07  
Fierros:

Yes. They trained us for drills, but we had to be within our area. And once the whistles went off we knew it was time to go for a drill, so we had to climb down from the wings where I was at and just get with our group and stay in line, not to wander around. Once that whistle came back on again that meant we go up the stairs and back to our position to work.

01-00:21:39  
Dunham:

Did you always know it was a drill?

01-00:21:40  
Fierros:

Yes.

01-00:21:41  
Dunham:

Were you ever worried—?

01-00:21:42  
Fierros:

No, no, no. No, we always knew—they prepared us for that. Once you hear that whistle that means that there is a drill, so you must come down. Stay within your section, stay in a line, don’t push/shove. Stay in line, wait until that whistle comes back on again. Then we would go up the stairs again and back to work.

01-00:22:10  
Dunham:

What did you wear to work?

01-00:22:13  
Fierros:

Jeans. We’d wear jeans. We didn’t have to wear a uniform because we couldn’t afford a uniform. But we wore jeans and tried to wear the same jacket or blouse. Thank God my sister was always there washing for me so I’d have clean clothes, so that I could wear. And of course it was just not tennis shoes—we couldn’t afford tennis shoes, but we had a pair of work shoes, like a little boot. So that’s what we wore because we couldn’t afford—we didn’t even know the name *tennis* in those days, until after the war we found out.

01-00:22:55  
Dunham:

What about when you went out and when you went to the Palladium? What types of things were you wearing then?

01-00:22:58

Fierros:

Well, then I had my dress clothes, my dancing shoes. There with my sister—and my husband would come in his uniform. And once they saw the uniform he got treated with royalty.

01-00:23:15

Dunham:

Did you or your family, or others you know, wear the zoot suit fashion? Were you familiar?

01-00:23:19

Fierros:

No. I had a sister, bless her; her name is Jenny. She was a riveter for three years in San Diego. But what she did, what was her job, I have no idea. I didn't ask. She would live in San Diego, and I lived in Los Angeles. She was staying with my other sister.

01-00:23:47

Dunham:

She worked on aircraft as well?

01-00:23:48

Fierros:

Yes, she worked—I don't know, it must have been aircraft. It's nothing like Berkeley where all they had was ships.

01-00:23:58

Dunham:

Richmond, yeah. Richmond and Oakland. Well, I was wondering if you—back to with what happened with the zoot suits. Did you hear of José Gallardo Díaz in 1942? The Sleepy Lagoon murder and the subsequent—

01-00:24:11

Fierros:

What was it?

01-00:24:11

Dunham:

It's what preceded the Zoot Suit Riots and a lot of really difficult situations, particularly for young Latinos in Los Angeles, and a lot of backlash and brutality directed towards them.

01-00:24:26

Fierros:

There were a lot of what they called them, zoot suiters. But you know, they never bothered me. They never bothered me. I guess it was because I would run from the bus to where my sister was waiting for me. I didn't leave the house unless I was going to go dancing with my husband. Then my outing was back—I'd always make sure that I got the swing shift. This way I was at home when it was night, and my sister was able to wait for me when I got off from the swing shift.

01-00:25:12

Dunham:

So was that like 4:00 p.m. to midnight? Or what hours were—?

01-00:25:15

Fierros:

I would start at 1:00 pm, and then I would work until 9:00 pm, so I made sure I always got those hours. And then this way I could help my sister with her children.

- 01-00:25:31  
Dunham: And five days a week?
- 01-00:25:33  
Fierros: Yes, five days a week.
- 01-00:25:36  
Dunham: Were they open seven days a week? Did they have shifts around the clock, seven days?
- 01-00:25:39  
Fierros: I believe they had shifts. I believe they had shifts all the way around. But I was grateful for the weekend, because then my husband would get a pass and then we could go dancing or sightseeing.
- 01-00:25:58  
Dunham: Yeah, do you remember some of the sightseeing you did?
- 01-00:26:00  
Fierros: Oh yes. We made sure we would go—we couldn't go too far, because salary was very limit and being that I didn't have that much money, but we would get the trolley and go around and go to that street, la Calle Olvera, in Los Angeles, and there we could hear the mariachis, and we could eat and spend the day there and get in on rides. So those were our outings. We'd go to the Calle Olvera and walk around there and that was it.
- 01-00:26:38  
Dunham: Beyond your immediate family did you make many friends in the area at that time, I know—during that year?
- 01-00:26:42  
Fierros: No.
- 01-00:26:43  
Dunham: The priority was hanging out with your husband and—
- 01-00:26:45  
Fierros: No, we would—like they asked me, did you make any friends with some of the other wives? We were always so careful who we associated with, and they couldn't ask any questions because they were in the same situation I was. So, but no.
- 01-00:27:07  
Dunham: Again, back to with the zoot suits, there was, at some point, a tremendous backlash against young Latinos, and there was some real violence.
- 01-00:27:18  
Fierros: Yes.

01-00:27:20

Dunham: From white soldiers towards them. Did you hear of that or know of people directly affected by that?

01-00:27:25

Fierros: No, no, I don't. No, I don't. Like I say, I was always in and out, and if there was any outing outside of that it would be with my husband. Other than that there was no—

01-00:27:41

Dunham: And was your sister—was her children's father there with you there as well?

01-00:27:46

Fierros: Yes, yes, he was, bless them. They're all gone.

01-00:27:50

Dunham: Oh, I'm sorry.

01-00:27:51

Fierros: That's what makes it so hard. All of my brothers and sisters from the first marriage, they're all gone. I'm the only one left.

01-00:28:01

Dunham: What was your sister's husband doing at the time?

01-00:28:05

Fierros: He first, I would say, he met my sister at the camp where my father used to be the contractor. And he used to be the cook for the men there. And he used to help supervise the men out in the field. So that was his life. There was no other kind of life, either out in the fields and that was our life.

01-00:28:31

Dunham: He did that in Southern California too then?

01-00:28:36

Fierros: Yes, oh yes.

01-00:28:37

Dunham: You helped out with your sister's, with the children?

01-00:28:42

Fierros: We helped them; I helped them all I could. That's the only way I could repay for their service. So I made sure—and whenever I had a little money I would buy them a little something. But other than that, it was very, very hard.

01-00:29:03

Dunham: You've mentioned that sometimes there was music at Douglas. They had events where they—

01-00:29:06

Fierros: They used to bring Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey and Jimmy Dorsey to entertain us there at the factory. And then they would give us a break, but we

couldn't go out of our area. Everything was like fenced in. You couldn't mingle or—so we would—but it was great that they would come and entertain us.

01-00:29:31

Dunham: Were there any other celebrity guests or speakers you remember coming?

01-00:29:36

Fierros: Oh yes! There were movie stars that would come with them, and they were always bringing somebody to entertain us. A very short period, because naturally we had to get back to work, and there were hundreds and hundreds of people working there. So they had to go from one section to—

01-00:29:56

Dunham: Do you remember some of the other celebrity visitors?

01-00:30:02

Fierros: Oh—Lucy, that crazy Lucy and—what was her husband's name?

Jiménez:

Lucille Ball?

01-00:30:09

Dunham: Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz? Okay.

01-00:30:11

Fierros: Lucy, yes. They would come and they would—they were always bringing certain movie stars to entertain us.

01-00:30:20

Dunham: I know you had a strong background, obviously, in farm work, but did you have victory gardens or know of victory gardens?

01-00:30:30

Fierros: At home?

01-00:30:30

Dunham: Yes.

01-00:30:31

Fierros: No, we didn't, because all our gardeners were out there in the field. We had to—no, there was none of that. We never had, which we could say, this is my background. Our homes were—we either live in the ranch where we never—you're not, probably you won't believe this, but we never knew what the Depression was, because there was always chickens, there was cows where we had any—all the milk we wanted. And my mother used to raise chickens, so there was always food. There was always apples and pears, trees of fruit that we—we never knew what the Depression was.

01-00:31:18

Dunham: How about during the war years with rationing though?

01-00:31:19

Fierros:

Oh my gosh, after the war came in we didn't even have the money to buy food. So I don't know if you want me to go back to where my husband was in the service yet—

01-00:31:35

Dunham:

Well, did you have rationing coupons?

01-00:31:36

Fierros:

Oh yes, they gave us stamps. And if you didn't have—well, after my husband was in the service they knew I was a soldier's wife, and if I go to the meat market and I would hand the stamp they'd say you keep it. And there I would have an extra stamp to buy—maybe sugar or butter or something that I could share with my sister, but it was very, very hard. There was—

01-00:32:06

Dunham:

During that period when you were commuting by car from this area to Los Angeles, yes? Then how did you manage the gas, since gas was rationed?

01-00:32:17

Fierros:

Well, I made sure I had a full tank of gas on that little, and being that I was getting \$50 a month from the government, I knew that was sure. So I would save enough so that I would have money to go to Los Angeles or Fresno, but I didn't have any money to pay for my room. So I would park my car in Safeway's parking lot, lock the doors, and that's where I would sleep. My husband made sure, in the little car, in the back area he put a cushion. He said, "So when you come to see me you can sleep in the car, but be sure you lock the doors. Be sure that they are secure." Once I went to visit, when I went to visit him, then I thought it's time I head back and find a little parking, then I would park my car in the parking lot and lock my windows. He'd bring me an apple or a peach, and I would eat that, and that was the food that I had. I didn't have money to buy food because I had to save for the gas to come back to San Jose or Los Angeles.

01-00:33:36

Dunham:

Did anyone ever bother you, or did you have any scary encounters sleeping overnight in the car?

01-00:33:41

Fierros:

Never. Thank God I was never—I guess my guardian angel was always watching over me. See, when my folks came from Mexico, and my grandfather, grandmother, and my aunts and uncles came, I was a baby. And my grandmother, I was very attached to her. So she showed me the most beautiful prayers as I grew older, that all my prayers—I'm teaching them to my niece here, in Spanish. But being that I was able to attend so many grammar schools, I was able to learn how to speak English and learn prayers in English, and thank God for that. But they never bothered me while my car was parked in there.

- 01-00:34:40  
Dunham: Well, that's good. I know you talked about that one scary incident for a week, of the man following you. Since you were separated from your husband and working independently there, did you ever have any other challenging encounters with men as a young, attractive woman?
- 01-00:34:53  
Fierros: No, no. Never, never. They were very respectful, and they knew my husband was in the service. And my outing was to work back to—there was no party-going here or there. There was none of that.
- 01-00:35:13  
Dunham: Did you hear about any other women having any challenges with that as young women in the workplace?
- 01-00:35:19  
Fierros: No, like I say, we never asked. [laughs]
- 01-00:35:23  
Dunham: Before we leave Douglas, I just wanted to ask—you had your partner. You were small, petite, to get in the little spot in the plane, but can you describe in some detail the riveting and bucking process that you would do?
- 01-00:35:39  
Fierros: Well, we had to go up the ladders to where the wings were at. Then we had to squeeze in between the wiring to get to the positions where we were at. So once we got there we made sure we had our aprons with our riveter and our gun, and whatever extension we needed. So she'd be working on one side and I'd be working on the other. But my materials were always in the pockets of my apron. They made sure that we had—so we wouldn't be crawling in and out.
- 01-00:36:18  
Dunham: So what all materials did you have?
- 01-00:36:19  
Fierros: So my gun and an extension, and the rivets that I had to use to put in the gun so that I could rivet them with.
- 01-00:36:29  
Dunham: And did things ever go wrong or any—?
- 01-00:36:34  
Fierros: Oh yes, there were many—
- 01-00:36:35  
Dunham: What kinds of—?
- 01-00:36:36  
Fierros: There were many rivets that had to be drilled out because they went in crooked instead of going straight. [laughs]

01-00:36:44

Dunham: Did you do that, or did somebody else do that part?

01-00:36:45

Fierros: But once I learned how to run that gun I was able to do my job perfectly.

01-00:36:53

Dunham: Great, so you did that same job for about a year?

01-00:36:56

Fierros: Yes, the same thing. There was no transferring. They trained you for this, you stayed there.

01-00:37:02

Dunham: How did your time at Douglas come to an end?

01-00:37:09

Fierros: My husband was shipped to Sheppard Field, Texas. And my sister and her family, they moved back to San Jose. So I stayed with two girls, that their husbands were in the service, for two months. Then as soon as my husband told me that he was going to be stationed there for six months I packed my bag, got in my little car, came back to San Jose, left my car with my in-laws, got on a train and went to be with my husband.

01-00:37:43

Dunham: Can I ask first, too, how was that two months when you were staying with the other women and working at Douglas?

01-00:37:50

Fierros: Being that they had this different shift than I did, they would work during the day and I would work the swing shift. So I was gone, and when I came back they were gone. So but we didn't have—but it was very, I was very grateful that they asked me to be—their husbands were in the service, and we were doing the same thing but different hours.

01-00:38:17

Dunham: Were they Mexican American also?

01-00:38:18

Fierros: Yes, yes, they were. Where they came, what state, no, I never asked.

01-00:38:26

Dunham: So then you dropped your car back in San Jose, and you're going to Texas or Louisiana at this time?

01-00:38:34

Fierros: Yes, I was there. I was in Louisiana, and it was very hard. On the way down we had to change trains because they had to get the servicemen first and then the civilians. So they got us off at Sheppard Field at one of the depots, and before we could get to the station where my husband was going to be stationed—and we were there for fourteen hours—we ran out of water and

food because just troop trains were going through. So finally the train got there where *we* could board. But then I found out that I couldn't board because I had to be with my husband before I could board the train.

01-00:39:30

Dunham: Why was that?

01-00:39:30

Fierros: Because only husband and wife were allowed to board the train.

01-00:39:35

Dunham: So single men could travel but not women without their husbands?

01-00:39:41

Fierros: No. So then there was this couple that saw how disappointed I was, and I had been there for hours and hours. They asked me, "Where is your husband stationed?" And I told them. They said, "Well, we're boarding that train." So they called one of their friends, and she said, "If you want to board the train will you let him say that you are his wife?" And I looked at him, and I crossed my fingers. We were taught when you are saying a lie to cross your fingers and God could forgive you. So I crossed my fingers and said, "Oh yes! Just as long as I could get to my husband." So as we get to the conductor he asked him, "Is she your wife?" He said, "Yes, she's my wife." I was dreading—what if they ask for credentials? Different last names? I said then I'll be in trouble. But my fingers were still crossed, and I said, "Oh, I'm—." So we got on the train. Oh, was my husband ever so glad to see when I got off. And I thanked the young man. I said, "Thank you." He said, "It's all right. You can go your way. I'm going to be sitting over here." I said, "What if they come back and say, 'Where's your husband?'" "Well, you tell them I went to the bathroom." So I was able to travel all the way to where my husband was stationed.

01-00:41:14

Dunham: Which was Louisiana at that time?

01-00:41:17

Fierros: Yes, yes, Louisiana. I was in Louisiana. I got a job there. I could get a job inside the laundries with the understanding that any money we found in the garments—because I had to put the number of the soldiers in their clothes—we had to turn it in if it was more than a dollar. If it was less than a dollar I could keep it. Anything above, I couldn't keep it. So if I ever found a quarter—oh, I said, "My God! I've got a quarter." I could keep that but nothing over a dollar. Everything had to be turned in.

01-00:41:59

Dunham: This is work on the base?

01-00:42:03

Fierros: Yes, on the base. It had to be on the base. Because a lot of the soldiers are being shipped out, and the wives were going home. So that meant a group of new soldiers were coming in, and new wives were coming in with their

husbands. So that meant there were vacancies in the laundry, and we were able to fill the job because the person that was there before me was gone. So that meant I could work there.

01-00:42:32

Dunham: Was that the first job you tried to get there?

01-00:42:33

Fierros: Yes, in the laundry. There was no other way I could get any other kind of work.

01-00:42:38

Dunham: I assume it was a significant pay cut from Douglas.

01-00:42:41

Fierros: Oh, definitely, definitely. So then being that I was working there at the laundry and the soldiers would go for their training every morning at six o'clock in the morning, I'd be waiting by the fence, waiting for an apple or a pear to come down the line so my husband would give it to me. So I had an apple or a banana—all day that was all I could eat. And there was nothing else, not unless I found a little bit of money, then I was able to buy a cookie or a little bowl of chili beans. That's what I did when he was stationed in Nebraska.

01-00:43:29

Dunham: Do you know what your wages were there at the laundry?

01-00:43:31

Fierros: At the laundry—it must have been about fifty cents an hour, and it was in the government camp, inside the government.

01-00:43:40

Dunham: Were you able to stay with your husband there?

01-00:43:42

Fierros: Oh no. I had to rent a room.

01-00:43:45

Dunham: So that cost a lot of your salary.

01-00:43:46

Fierros: It made it very difficult. In Fresno, when he was stationed in Fresno, I was fortunate that they made an announcement on the paper to give lodging to the soldiers' wives, so they would offer us a room that we could stay with one of the members that were—stay there in their home.

01-00:44:16

Dunham: How did you find a room in Louisiana?

01-00:44:22

Fierros: Oh my gosh. Could I say how I found a room in Fresno first?

01-00:44:28  
Dunham:

Sure, yes please.

01-00:44:29  
Fierros:

So I was—we were—that was, my husband was with me. So we went looking all over for a room. Finally, at the end of Fresno we saw a sign, Room for Rent. And my husband said, “Oh honey, we found a room.” We got down, and there was this little old man with crooked boots on and walking around, you know. My husband asked him, “Is your room for rent?” He said, “Yes.” And he says, “How much?” “Thirty-six dollars a week.” My husband looked at me, and I said, “I’m going to be here a week with my husband.” He says, “Okay.” My husband paid \$36, okay? So what happened? My husband went to the car, and we got newspapers and cracks all over the room, and the little old man was trying to see what we were doing. So we filled up all the cracks and my husband said, “See, I feel more comfortable now. Now that man can’t look in.”

So I was walking around, there was this little old lady washing clothes. So she looked at me, and she says, “Are you a soldier’s wife?” I said, “Yes, I am.” She said, “Please,”—there was three girls living there already—“don’t talk to those girls in there.” They had three little girls. And I looked at her. “No, don’t talk to them. Stay *away* from them.” I thought, “Gee, how can I do that when they gave me a little bowl of chili beans, and I was hungry?” So when my husband got, he got a pass and he came back and, “How was your day?” I said, “You know, honey, that little old lady told me not to talk to those girls, and they gave me a bowl of chili beans, and they have three little girls. How could I not talk to them?” He said, “Don’t pay any attention to her, honey. Just ignore her.” I said, “Oh, okay.”

So it must have been about eleven thirty that evening when they were pounding on the door, and I look out the window. Then I saw a police car; then I saw a paddy wagon. I said, “Honey, something’s wrong.” He said, “Why?” “Look!” He jumped out of bed and was putting on his pants when there was pounding on our door. I said, “Look, honey! Look what they’re doing.” So he had to go and answer the door, so he was pulling up his pants when he opened the door. And there was an MP standing at the door. “What are you doing here, soldier?” He says, “I’m here with my wife.” He says, “I want proof.” So my husband says, “Well, just a minute.” He went to the dresser and showed him his passes. “I want to see your marriage license.” And we carried that with us, so he showed him the marriage license. He looked at my husband, up and down, and he said, “Soldier, do you know where your wife is? Where you’ve got your wife?” He said, “This is the only room we could find.” He says, “It’s an input place,” where they had input ladies, and they were throwing them in the paddy wagon, taking them to jail with the little children. I said, “Oh my God.” It was a whorehouse. And here I was, “Look where you have your wife!” He said, “Well, we didn’t know.” He said,

“You should have gone to the Red Cross.” He said, “Here,”—he gave him a pass—“You go to the Red Cross, and you tell them that we sent you.”

We did, the next morning. We got in the little car and we went to the Red Cross, and they gave me an address. It was where they had all these little trailers, and I was able to be there with my husband for a whole week. I didn’t have to pay anything. They would bring me food, so that I could eat and I could be with my husband. But then they told us, “From now on if you need any help, you go to the Red Cross for help.”

So then from there my husband was shipped to Sheppard Field, and all of a sudden I was working again. I got another job again, laundry, outside.

01-00:49:26  
Dunham:

This is right after Fresno, or after Louisiana?

01-00:49:26  
Fierros:

Yes, after we left Fresno. And then he was shipped to Sheppard Field, Texas. So I worked a week, and then all of a sudden the loudspeaker. They’re calling my name. I said, “Oh my God. I hope nothing happened to my husband.” So I go to the office, and then I see the sergeant standing there. I’ve never forgotten his name. His last name was Flores. I went up to him, and I said, “What happened to my husband?” He said, “I’m sorry, Mary. He’s being shipped out.” “He’s being shipped out?” He said, “Yes.” “And what am I going to do? I’ve only been here a week, or days.” He says, “Don’t worry. I’ll get the money for you.” So I says, “Okay. But how am I going to get to where my husband’s going?” He says, “Well, he’s being shipped back to Fresno.” I said, “Oh, my God. Back to Fresno?” “Yes, but don’t worry. I’ll get you aboard the train.”

So I went back to the depot, and oh, Mike was so happy to see me. He says, “He found you?” “Yes, honey, but I haven’t got any money.” And then his sergeant said, “Don’t worry about that.” And that was a troop train. They got me in the troop train. They snuck me in the troop train, and they told me I had to crawl under the bench. My trip was from where my husband was stationed, back to Fresno under the bench. Every time the conductor would come around they would holler, “*Fierros! Ahí viene,*” I had to go under the bench again. So I traveled all the way back to California under the bench.

Then when we got to Fresno I look at the sergeant and said, “Now, what am I going to do? My husband is going to stay here, and I’ve got to go back to San Jose to do whatever I have to do, get ready, wherever they’re going to send him.” He says, “Don’t you worry. I’ve got a room for you already.” I said, “Oh, thank God.” So we got to the hotel. I guess he must have done many favors for other wives, and he went up to the desk and he said, “Yes, I want you to give her a room. She’ll be here overnight. She’ll be going back home tomorrow, but you’ve got to give her a room.” Okay, they gave me the room.

So my husband said, “What are you looking for?” I said, “I want to see how high the room is.” He said, “How high?” I said, “Yes, honey, if I’ve got to jump out the window I want to make sure the room isn’t on a third or fourth floor. So I went up and I tried to open the windows, and the darn windows are nailed! I said, “Honey, what am I going to do now?” He said, “Don’t worry. Nobody’s going to get in your room.” I thought to myself, “Okay, if he goes, if anybody tries to get in, I’ll just break the window and jump out, as long as it’s not too high.”

01-00:53:20  
Dunham:

Why did you think somebody was going to break in?

01-00:53:24  
Fierros:

Because I was always afraid. After my husband went back to camp I had to travel by myself, and I was only nineteen years old, and I was always afraid something would happen to me, and I would degrade my husband if anything would happen to me. So after my husband said, “Now, don’t forget. You move the chesterfield against the door.” I went up there and I said, “Okay, honey.” So he says, “So don’t open the door to anybody. Don’t move the chesterfield.” I said, “No, I won’t.” So it must have been about midnight when somebody was pounding on my door. I said, “Oh, my God.” All I could hear was, “No. Elizabeth is not there anymore. It’s a soldier’s wife,” he said. Oh my God! And I was already by the window with my purse. I says, “I’ll break it, and I’ll jump out the window one way or the other.” But no, thank God somebody hollered that I was a soldier’s wife, and he backed off. I was able to walk out the door that day, pack my little suitcase again, and went back here to San Jose to be with my in-laws until I get a letter from my husband telling me where he was stationed. So I would pack my things again, and thank God I was able to be with him all the time. I was ever, ever so grateful.

01-00:55:10  
Dunham:

Where was the next place after that then?

01-00:55:13  
Fierros:

Nebraska.

01-00:55:14  
Dunham:

Can we back up to then—so this is after Louisiana and Texas, right?

01-00:55:18  
Fierros:

Yes.

01-00:55:19  
Dunham:

Can you tell me a little more about your experiences there? Like how did you find a room? And I know that you did write about more direct racism that you did experience and/or observe.

01-00:55:29  
Fierros:

Oh, in Texas it was very difficult, but I made up my mind I had to find a room. I had to get on the bus and the first thing when I got in the bus is that,

“You go to the back.” And I looked, I said, “In the back?” “Yes, you go to the back of the bus.” So I said, “Oh my God, what did I do?” So I had to go all the way to the back and everybody was shying away from me. I was a Mexican. So I had to sit way back in the back of the bus. And I sat there and I said, “Oh my God. Now what am I going to do? How am I going to find a place?” So finally the bus stopped and I got off. I was looking to the right and to the left, and then they would go by and look at me up and down. And I said, “Oh God.” So I went into a restaurant and I sat down, and they said, “You move. You go over there.” I said, “I want to eat.” “That doesn’t make any difference. You sit over there.” So I had to get up from the table where I had sat down and I went way over to the end. And I’m looking to see if they’re going to chase me again. I said, “Well, I’ve just got to move again, I guess.” But no, I’m telling you, I was so faithful to chili beans because that’s all I could afford, just chili beans.

So I ate, and then I didn’t know how to ask how I was—how was I going to pay for a room? What was I going to do? So then I remembered that tag they had gave us to the Red Cross. I said, “Well, I’ll just walk up and ask and see if they can direct me how I can find the Red Cross so I can find a room. So I did. I walk up to the young lady, and I showed her my card. “You’re a soldier’s wife?” I said, “Yes.” “You’re looking for a room?” I said, “Yes.” “Okay, don’t worry. I’m going to give you an address. You go to that address and you can get a room there.” So I got the address that she gave me. I said, “Now, how am I going to find the street?” So I asked a gentleman if he could tell me what street, what address that was on. So he told me the name of the street. I start walking, with my suitcase of course. I found the place, and I walked up and asked if there was rooms available. They looked at me, and it was a good thing; they were not Americans. They were Mexican people there that were living there. They asked me if I was a soldier’s wife. I said yes in Spanish. I walk in, and they were able to rent me a room practically for nothing because they knew I was a soldier’s wife. So I was there until I got notice again that my husband was going to be shipped to Nebraska.

01-00:58:53  
Dunham:

Now, you wrote about another story, I think in Texas or Louisiana, at a dance hall where you were not allowed either.

01-00:58:59  
Fierros:

Oh yes, yes.

01-00:58:59  
Dunham:

Could you tell us that?

01-00:59:00  
Fierros:

My husband got a pass, and he came home and said, “Honey, I got a pass and we’re going dancing.” Oh my God! We hadn’t been dancing since we had danced to Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey. So I got all dressed up, and we went and got ready. We went to the dance hall, and they looked at me and

they said, “I’m sorry,” he told my husband. “*You* can go in, but she can’t.” “What do you mean she can’t go in? She’s my wife.” “That doesn’t make any difference. You’re wearing a uniform, and you can come in, but your wife is not allowed because she’s a Mexican.” That upset my husband so much, and it upset me. Here he’s willing to fight for his country, die for his country, and they won’t even let us go into the dance hall. So he said, “Okay, let’s go back.” So we got back on the bus, and as usual it’s a good thing it was an Army bus. We could sit anywhere because he was wearing a uniform.

01-01:00:19  
Dunham:

Was the dance an army dance, or was it a—?

01-01:00:22  
Fierros:

No, it was a private—it was a hall. So we got back, he said, “We’re going back to the camp.” So we went back to the camp, and at the gate he says, “I want to speak to the commanding officer.” “What happened, soldier?” He says, “You won’t be able to help me. I want to speak to my commanding officer.” It was Captain Doolittle. You must have heard of him.

01-01:00:47  
Dunham:

Oh yeah.

01-01:00:47  
Fierros:

That was his commanding officer. And he asked him, “What happened, Fierros?” He said, “Sir, this is what happened. I took my wife dancing at this hall, and they wouldn’t allow her in because she was Mexican. They would only allow me because I was wearing a uniform.” He said, “They can’t do that. You know, Fierros, that hall has been put out of bounds for servicemen.” And they didn’t allow any more servicemen to go into that club again. But it was very hard for me. I had never been to a state that it was—oh my goodness. Discrimination was all over. And even if you were a soldier’s wife it didn’t make any difference to them. But thank God that I was able to be there with my husband.

And every morning when he was in Nebraska there was this little lady. I was staying at a hotel that time. I believe it was five dollars for two nights, and I thought “Oh, I’m going to be with my husband.” And this lady, every morning she’d put out her little stand of chili beans, ten cents for a little bowl of chili beans. So she said, “You might like my chili beans a lot.” My husband tells her, “She says it’s the best chili beans she’s ever ate.” [laughs]

It was very hard, but I’m grateful that I was able to be with my husband so many times that I was so afraid, but with my prayers and my guardian angel I was able to be there with him.

01-01:03:00  
Dunham:

Were there many other soldiers’ wives at the different places you went? Or was it rare to have other wives there?

01-01:03:07

Fierros:

There were a lot of, a lot of them. But I guess there were—in these things, we didn't mingle. We didn't try to carry a conversation. We'd just sit there because we thought we might say the wrong thing, or they'll probably chase us out of here. So we never talked. If there was any talking to do it would have to be to either the sergeant or whoever was in charge with the group.

01-01:03:37

Dunham:

Were there many African-American wives as well?

01-01:03:39

Fierros:

Yes, there were. Yes, there were.

01-01:03:43

Dunham:

And did they experience similar or worse discrimination?

01-01:03:46

Fierros:

I am sure they must have experienced the same thing that I was going through, because oh, the colored people—oh my God! It was unbelievable. It hurt me to see what they would do to them. If they were sitting down they'd make them get off. If you go walking down the sidewalk and you run into a group of Caucasian people, they'd shove you off the sidewalk. If you weren't careful, you could fall. And it just hurt to see the discrim—if they were against me, being that I was a Mexican, can you imagine what they were when they used to see a black person entering a hall or a theater? It was unbelievable. It's unbelievable. But thank God I was able to come back home after my husband was sent overseas.

01-01:04:54

Dunham:

When you came back to San Jose that's when you went to work for Southern Pacific?

01-01:04:58

Fierros:

Yes. After my husband was sent overseas I came to live with my in-laws, and I was able to get a job at the Southern Pacific. They didn't ask any questions. I just told them I was a soldier's wife and they hired me immediately, and that was seventy-five cents an hour! That was a lot of money, a lot of money. And I was able to work—they told me I would be watering the engines, changing the oil, go around the roundhouse and make sure that I didn't fall off.

One day I was—again, I always asked for the swing shift—I was changing the oil to one of the engines when another engine run into the engine I was working on. Many years ago the engines used to run by coal, so they had to open the door to throw the coal inside to get the engine going, and the fire is shooting up. Well, I was up on top changing the oil when it hit the machine I was working on, and it threw me against the open door where the coal was. My legs hit the end of the iron, and the skin just peeled off. I don't know what kind of medication—they were worried sick. She's going to have scars on her legs; her husband can sue us when he comes back, so we've got to do

something. So they took me to O'Connor Hospital. I don't know what kind of spray they put on my legs, and would you believe it, they used to call me the lady with the fifty-dollar legs. They gave me \$50 because I had gotten hurt, and I didn't have a scar after the tissues were down. There was no scars on my legs. They were ever so glad, the girls—their husbands were in the service—“Oh, Mary, you don't have any scars on your legs.” “I'd better not,” I says, “because my husband always used to say those are my legs! You be careful with my legs.” [laughs] Oh my gosh. But that was—it really hurt, and they were worried.

01-01:07:49

Dunham: That's scary. Did you continue doing the same type of work after that, or did they—?

01-01:07:55

Fierros: Oh yes, oh no. That was the only job. There were no men around to do the job.

01-01:08:02

Dunham: How did you learn how to do that job?

01-01:08:03

Fierros: Pardon me?

01-01:08:03

Dunham: Did they train you on how to do that job?

01-01:08:06

Fierros: Oh yes, they had to train—

01-01:08:07

Dunham: Other women trained you?

01-01:08:09

Fierros: They had a foreman. They had a foreman that would train us, how we had to unscrew the darn knobs for the machine. Another thing they taught me also was that the freight trains with the troops couldn't stop. They had to keep going; they had to keep going. My job was to stand with a bucket of oil on top of my head, and they'd have a soldier by the legs, with a hook. As the train's going by I'm standing there with that bucket on top of my head. Wham, he'd yank it off my head. But the troop trains were not supposed to stop.

01-01:09:00

Dunham: How fast were they coming through, do you know?

01-01:09:03

Fierros: [laughs] To me it looked very fast!

01-01:09:06

Dunham: I'm sure! Did it ever spill on you at all?

01-01:09:07

Fierros:

No, no, no! They were real good at it. They had this hook. I said, "Oh dear God, please don't take me with them! I thought for sure if they missed that bucket, there goes Mary flying out of the—"

01-01:09:23

Dunham:

You have some great photos of you on the train. I wish we had a photo with the bucket on the—

01-01:09:28

Fierros:

Oh God, let me tell you. I learned a lot. I learned a lot, and I'm grateful. I was ever so grateful for the help I got from strangers and people. They were never sarcastic or trying to take advantage. Never. And I thank God for that.

01-01:09:57

Dunham:

While I understand there was more obvious or blatant prejudice when you were in the South, what about back here in San Jose at that time? Because it's still the forties, and there were still challenges, I'm sure.

01-01:10:08

Fierros:

There was that in Gonzalez and Soledad. That's why we always ended up working in the fields, because they would not hire us in the canneries, they would not hire us in the shows. Thank my brother Manuel, bless him—boy, he sure put up a fight for us. And when we went to the show we had to sit so close to the front that we were watching the movies like this. [indicating short distance] But my brother put a stop to that, and we were able to sit in the middle of the theater. But other than that, we ended—

01-01:10:50

Dunham:

Can you tell us that story again, of how he addressed that? How he put a stop to it, as you said?

01-01:11:00

Fierros:

On what was it?

01-01:11:02

Dunham:

For the movie theaters, for not having to sit in the front.

01-01:11:06

Fierros:

Oh, my brother, my brother got involved, thank God. He went to the newspaper, and he was telling them the discrimination that was going in the theater. He said when we have as much right as *any* of you, because there was Italians and Portuguese and all. But being that there was a lot of people, they used to have the bracero program, which being there was so many soldiers gone to war they were bringing in a group of people from Mexico, from the Philippines, to do the jobs here. So that's how the job was being done, and that's how they took advantage of us that were here. So we got a job, we moved to Salinas, and one of his aunts rent us a room. We got a job—and I hate fish. And we got a job at the canneries, working in the canneries, and I was—

01-01:12:12

Dunham:

So in Salinas they'd let you work in the cannery? But they had not—

01-01:12:15

Fierros:

No, it had to be in Monterey. In Salinas they wouldn't allow us to work in the packing sheds, so we had to go to Monterey to work in the cannery. You could see the sardine oil—oh, sardines. And I hate fish, because when I was a teenager I was very skinny, and there was this lady, bless her, had a crush on my dad. She told my father, "You'd better give her cod liver oil or she's going to be—tuberculosis." So my dad told my sisters what they had to do, so I had—my sisters were all grown up. One held one arm, the other one would hold the other arm, and the third sister would squeeze my nose, and the other sister would dump the cod liver oil down my throat. And I would go "Ohh." So can you imagine my going back to a cannery where all they had was sardines, and the smell in my clothes?

01-01:13:27

Dunham:

How long did you last there?

01-01:13:30

Fierros:

We were there until my husband was drafted.

01-01:13:32

Dunham:

So that was that early time.

01-01:13:38

Fierros:

Yes, but let me tell you, it wasn't—and then my husband would work the swing shift. And then he, over time, that meant that we had to sleep in the little car parked there in the cannery lot so that we could be able to continue working there in the cannery.

01-01:13:57

Dunham:

Well, when you came back to San Jose after your husband—San Jose, right, is where you worked at the Southern Pacific?

01-01:14:04

Fierros:

Yes.

01-01:14:04

Dunham:

How about that time period?

01-01:14:10

Fierros:

When my husband came back from the service we went to live in Los Gatos. He always was a union member, and he reports and they sent him to Los Gatos. They were going to build a dam. And in the meantime, after he got out my brother-in-law had a camp here in San Jose where he used to hire men to do the chopping of the beets. He told my husband after he got out of the service, "If you drive the truck for me—you can drive the truck for me and your wife can do the cooking for the men." There were eighty men. So my husband drove the truck for my brother-in-law. and I did the cooking for the

men. There were eighty of them. I had to really cook. And being that my husband had helped, when he was in the service, in the cooking, he told me, “You know what, honey? You’re not making enough rice.” So he poured almost half of a sack into those great big containers that they had. We had rice popping out of that oven right and left. I didn’t know what I was going to do. [laughs] But after we got through there I did the cooking, I cooked for the men. I got my wages. And then we moved to Los Gatos, and that’s when my husband got a job as a screen man. He worked for A.J. Raisch as a screen man.

I started going to Levi’s to see if they would hire me. I would get the bus every morning, and I’d stand by the gate and pray and hope I could get a job there. Finally, my guardian angel was there and I was able to get a job. I guess they got tired of seeing me there for three months. So then he said all right. He hired me, and he walked me in and said, “You’re going to be running one of these machines.” I saw the machine. Oh my God! I’d never seen a machine that big. So he said okay. He sat down. “I want to see you thread the needle.” Oh God, how could I thread the needle with the boss standing behind me? I couldn’t see the hole of the needle. My hand was shaking so much. And then he said, “Now, where is the switch?” I’m looking under the machine, and I said God help me find the—there’s a big switch to the right, and I turn it on, and the motor went on. I thought, “Oh! I’m going to run this thing!” I got scared. Can you imagine a power machine and not ever even seeing one? And then sitting there?

01-01:17:34

Dunham:

No.

01-01:17:36

Fierros:

And he said, “Now, you step on the pedal.” I said, “Oh God, this thing’s going to run away with me.” [laughs] I stepped on the pedal, and that machine started running. And I thought, “Oh thank God it’s not moving.” Then okay, he said, “You’re going to work, you’re going to learn. You’re going to get a training supervisor to train you.” Would you believe it, David? They trained me and trained me, and I learned how to run—you can see me here in the picture. Operation 26. I learned how to make pockets, sew pockets, and they took pictures of me there.

Then the boss calls me in the office, I’d say about nine months later. “Mary, we want to train you to train a group of young ladies.” I said, “I can’t do that.” He said, “Yes, you can.” I said, “No, they’re—what am I going to do? I eat with these girls, I go on coffee breaks with these girls, and now you’re giving me a position where I cannot mingle with them?” I said, “No, I don’t want it.” He said, “Mary, they used to pay us twenty-five cents *a bundle* of pockets, okay? They used to pay us by piecework. Mary, you’re going to be paid by the hour.” And I looked at him, “By the hour?” “Yes.” I said, “No, that still means I have to leave my girls.” He said, “No, you’re going to train them, and

you're going to eat with them. You don't have to worry about that." "Are you sure?" "Yes, we're sure. You're going to work with them; you're going to eat with them. Don't worry about it." Okay, so they made me a training supervisor.

Then they were having problems in the other Levis in San Francisco, so they said, "Mary, we're going to have to send you to San Francisco." "What am I going to do over there?" "We want you to talk to the women over there. They're going to go on strike, and we can't afford to lose the production." "And how am I going to get there?" The boss said, "You're going with me by train." So we get to San Francisco. The women saw me, and they were so happy to see me. So I said, "Oh my God, now what?" So they told me, "Well, you have to talk to them and tell them they can't go on strike, because if they go on strike what are their families going to do? How are they going to support their family?" And I look at my boss. His name was Mr. Duncan. I says, "Okay, I'll talk to them." So I convinced them, and they did not go on strike. But David, they decided to make me a shop steward, so that meant I had to take care of Levi Strauss in San Francisco, Levi Strauss in San Jose, to keep the workers from not going on strike. So I did that. So then I was not only a training supervisor, I was a shop stewardess.

Then they decided to make me personnel manager. I said, "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" The little bit of education, only the seventh grade, to be into a position where I had to talk to all these people, make sure they had their books ready to pay their union dues, be sure that they didn't lose their sick pay, be sure they put their hours in for their sick pay and for their pensions. I said, "Oh, how am I going to do it?" They said, "Don't worry, Mary." So I used to go home and I used to talk with my husband, tell him. He said, "Are they going to pay you more?" "Yes." "Take it." [laughs] "If they're going to pay you more, take it," he said. "But you're going to have to help me, advise me, because I've never worked with a group like that." He said, "Okay, we'll talk it over when you get home."

But yes, I ended up being personnel manager of Levi Strauss. I worked for the company thirty-three years. I have pictures of the president of Levi Strauss coming to give me my retirement check, kissing me on my cheek, wishing me the best, and telling me if I ever need anything Levi Strauss would always be there. But David, it wasn't so. It wasn't so. After I retired you know what happened? New managements came into Levi Strauss. They didn't know anything about us, all the service, many years we put into the company. They took my insurance away, my dental—the only thing I kept was my pension. Other than that, all my benefits were taken away from me.

And why? Like I told them, the other day that I broke my wisdom tooth, with no insurance or anything. They're always sending me a letter. It's called Red Tab, and that offers me dental, health insurance, it offers me eyes, hearing aids, everything—they're offering me all this, and then I can't have that—they

offered it to me, because at the end of the letter they're telling me we can take this away from you at *any* time without any notice. So I figure, what's the purpose? I'm paying the Blue Cross on account of my husband's union. They've got very good benefits.

So I said no. So David, I got on the phone and I called the Red Tab. I said, "Look, you're offering me all this and I need insurance." I says, "I broke my wisdom tooth, and I have to have surgery on my mouth. I have no insurance." You know what they told me? "I'm sorry, Mary. We cannot help you. You should have gotten in touch with us before you had any work done on your mouth." Her name is Amy. I'll never forget her name. I said, "Amy, I called you people five times. I gave them the dates, the names, the time. And you people were not nice enough to tell me you couldn't help me." She said, "Mary, I am sorry, but we just can't help you. And of course you say you made all those phone calls, but Mary, we're a very small company." And that did it, David. I said, "Amy, excuse me. You don't know who you're talking to. I worked for the company for thirty-three years. If you want pictures of the president of Levi's I'll send them to you. If Mr. Haas was alive he would never accept what you're treating for one of his retiree supervisors. I worked for Levi's for thirty-three years, and you can't tell me anything about the company that I don't know." She said, "Mary, wait a minute. Let me talk to my boss. Let me talk to my boss and see what I can do for you." Will you believe it, David? I got a phone call from my dental, my prime dental, and the nurse is telling me, "Oh, Mary! I'm so proud of you." I said, "What did I do?" Her name is Debbie. "I just got a phone call from Levi Strauss, and they're paying for everything."

01-01:26:58  
Dunham:

Oh, that's good. It shouldn't have been such a struggle. Well, I want to ask you, aside from that challenge of them not honoring you after the ownership changed, but you had quite an amazing career with so many accomplishments. What do you think made you so successful with Levi Strauss?

01-01:27:21  
Fierros:

With Levi and everything—

01-01:27:23  
Dunham:

And in your life, yes, overall.

01-01:27:26  
Fierros:

What I felt was that if they could do it, how many people that they're brought in from Mexico, from the Philippines, from different nationalities and they have accomplished so much that I felt I could do the same. I said maybe I cannot write that good, I cannot speak that good, but what little—David, if you only know what I've done. Time and again, that I have explained to them. You have proof right there of my headstone, that I told them that's what I want written on my headstone at the cemetery. I went in with all my credentials, and I told them—they had the most horrible looking headstone,

David, on my grave. The reason was because, bless my husband, when he went and bought everything for our funeral—he bought everything, we paid for everything—they told us, at this program, for all that money that he paid—he paid \$875 for my headstone—all the money that he paid for our graves and everything was put in a trust fund, and if anything happens to either him or I, that interest, that money it was making would be given to us. You know what Oak Hill did? They sent my husband a letter telling him that we had to pay income tax on the interest that money was making. And my husband said, “They’re out of their minds. Come on, honey.”

We went to the Better Business Bureau. We showed them the letter. “They can’t do that to you, Mary and Mike. They’re getting the interest. Why should you pay taxes on it?” So Better Business Bureau got in touch with Oak Hill. Then three days later my husband gets a phone call. “Mike, why didn’t you come to us? Why did you have to go to the Better Business Bureau?” My husband told them, “Because they get paid to do a job, and what you’re doing to us, it’s not fair.” “Well, Mike, you won’t have to pay taxes if you let us put your wife’s headstone on her grave.” My husband looks at me and said, “Honey, what do you think?” I said—I call him *Viejo*; that mean husband in Spanish—I said, “We are not about to pay Uncle Sam any more money when they’re getting the interest, so tell them to go ahead and put my headstone on.” That’s how come I got that horrible headstone, David, because we refuse to pay taxes when they were getting the money.

So then after my husband passed away I start thinking of all that I’ve gone through. I started thinking my husband gave his life for his country; he served his country. I deserve recognition. So I got all my paperwork, certificates, letters, and I said, “I want to speak to the manager, and not just an employee, because an employee can’t help me. All she does is run back and forth, back and forth, and she can’t secure me what I want to find out.” So he says, “All right.” I took one of my nieces with me. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Fierros?” I said, “Are you the manager, or are you an assistant?” He said, “The manager is on business, but I’m the assistant.” I said, “Sir, this is what I want you to go over with me, and this is what I *want*.”

David, I went through the whole thing as I’ve gone through with you. And he said, “You know what Mary, you don’t have to,” I showed him certificates from Rosie the Riveter, my letters and everything. “You don’t have to prove me anything else.” He turned around, the secretary had walked in with one of those lap things, and I look at my niece, “How are we going to write all this?” When she was taking all that down I said oh, thank God. And then he gets up and said—he shook hands—he said, “Mary, in three months you’ll get your headstone on account of the holidays that are coming in.” And he tells the secretary, “I want you to go to my office and get me an application. I want to seal it; I want Mary to tell us what she wants to be put on her grave headstone. So I sat down and I look at my niece. I said, “Okay, Gina. Get a pencil, and I want you to write, ‘Mary J. Fierros, Rosie the Riveter, my serial number from

World War II.” My niece wrote everything down, and I turned it in. And he said, “You initialed it, and I initialed it, and I’ll seal it. And it’ll be mailed out.” And David, that’s how come I got my Rosie the Riveter—and I feel so—they ask me, don’t you feel excited about all the interviews you’re getting from this young man? I said, “You know, I’m proud, but my God, when I saw my headstone I said, ‘I *got* it!’”

01-01:33:59

Dunham:

It’s testimony to what a strong, perseverant woman you are! And you’ve got your We Can Do It shirt on. I just wanted to wrap up maybe. In reflecting on the war years and the challenges and perseverances you had, of following your husband and having to navigate all those different and challenging locations, what impact do you think that period of time, the opportunities and challenges during those years, had on your life?

01-01:34:32

Fierros:

I feel it made me realize that there’s opportunities out there for you if you follow your dreams. It’s a hard—especially when you don’t have the education. And I think I have accomplished—when I told my family what I did about my headstone they couldn’t believe it! And I went all by myself. I didn’t need somebody to speak for me. I said, “No. I deserve recognition. I deserve it.” And I felt there’s people that are coming in that have the same opportunity, but they’re coming in with an education, which I don’t have. But I feel what I have accomplished, it has made my family very proud to see, especially knowing that you people are coming over here. They said, “Oh my God! I wish we could be there with you.” [laughs]

01-01:35:32

Dunham:

Well, we’ll have it to share with them, and it’s our privilege to be here. Before we close, is there anything else you’d like to share with us today about your experiences during the war or otherwise?

01-01:35:42

Fierros:

About my experience—oh, let me tell you, David, there’s so much. I have pictures that I would like to share with you for my husband, his line of work, what he went through when he went into the service, when he got out, and what he had to do without no education. He had to work so hard, but when he was discharged, he was discharged as a sergeant. So that meant he really had to—he said I made up my mind if they could do it, I could do it. In the union he was a screen man for A.J. Raisch for thirty years.

01-01:36:27

Dunham:

Can I ask, too, did he utilize the GI Bill? Were you able to utilize it for anything?

01-01:36:30

Fierros:

He never used the GI Bill. Being that he was born here in California he used the rights that they give every veteran that is born here, which he was able to use. He got it under the California Veterans Association. But he didn’t use—

they told him he had the GI Bill that he could use or he could use the Cal Vet, so he went to the Cal Vet. And we were able to buy our first home, then our second home, because it was through the veterans. I have certificates where I donate to the veterans, the disability veterans. But I had a hard time getting him into the Veterans Hospital.

01-01:37:29

Dunham:

We talked about that some. I know it was very challenging.

01-01:37:30

Fierros:

Very.

01-01:37:33

Dunham:

Things don't get much easier, do they, when they should.

01-01:37:37

Fierros:

No, but I'm telling you I'm ever so grateful for how they treated my husband in the hospital. Ever, ever so grateful for that.

01-01:37:47

Dunham:

That's very fortunate.

01-01:37:51

Fierros:

I feel very fortunate that you took the time off to come here to be with me.

01-01:37:55

Dunham:

Well, it's our pleasure. I'd like to look through some of your photos, but I'll close the interview portion if that's okay.

01-01:38:03

Fierros:

Okay, all right.

I lost my husband April 27, 2012 after 75 years of marriage. His last words to me were, "Honey, I love you very much." So that is what keeps me going. I cannot let him down.

01-01:38:03

Dunham:

Okay, thank you so much. I really appreciate it, and thank you Yvonne, as well. It was really wonderful.

DON AMBROCIO  
Y FAMILIA



1942 Cedar City, Utah

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April 10, 1992

THE LONG JOURNEY: 1892 - 1978

My father, Ambrocio Diaz Jimenez, was born in the state of Michuacan, Mexico in 1892. At the age of 16 he came to the United States looking for work. He worked in the sugar beets. A year later he returned to Mexico and married my mother Felipa Contreras. They had two children: Emiliana and Lucy.

Due to the Mexican Revolution, the family migrated to the United States. With them came my Grandmother Sustenitos, Tia Anestacia, my Tio Lucadio Zavala, his wife Tia Jesus and their two children Nemecio and Carmen.

\*\*\* Note: Tia Jesus and Tia Nestacia were my mother's sisters.

They all journeyed together and settled in Los Alamitos, California. Joe, Vera, and Rachel were born there. In Los Alamitos my dad met Don Abelino Fierros and Don Rosendo Zavala. They all worked in the sugar beets together.

About 1916, my father with his family and the Zavala family moved to Delta, Utah to work for the Delta Sugar Company. Because my father was fluent in Spanish and English he was promoted to field supervisor. The company assigned him a chauffeur and a car. He traveled to Nevada, Arizona, and California recruiting workers to work in the sugar beets. He also recruited many Indians from the Indian reservations. The Indians called my father "Pancho Villa" due to the big Stetson hat he wore.

Manuel, Mary, and Jennie were all born in Delta, Utah. When the sugar company closed their operations, my father moved to the McIntyre Ranch and farmed. A few years later my father moved to Salt Lake City where he worked for a law firm as an interpreter then moved to Preston, Idaho to farm. As a child I remember my father working in his work shop making his own farm implements.

When my oldest sister Emiliana married and moved to California, my mother and father decided to move to California, also. On the way to California, my mother contracted a severe cold in Mojave, California. We stayed three days in Mojave then continued to Sacramento.

In Sacramento the Spreckles Sugar Company hired my father to operate a labor camp in Grimes, California. My mother, Felipa, never fully recovered from her illness and died in Grimes, California at the age of 36.

Spreckles Sugar Company moved my father to Tehema, California to operate a new and larger labor camp. He employed single men and families, and during all those years my Tio Lucadio and his family (Lucadio Zavala) moved and traveled with us as one family. My Grandmother Sustenitos died in Tehema, California.

Other families that later became a great part of our lives that also worked for my father in Tehema were: The Gonzales family, the Castaneda family, Tony Vasquez, Don Rosendo Zavala family, and the Don Abelino Fierros family.  
 \*\*\*Note: Don Rosendo Zavala and Don Abelino Fierros had met my father in Los Alamitos, California, when he first came from Mexico in 1916.

In 1933, my father moved to Gonzales, California where he became a labor contractor. He married Catalina Zavala, daughter of Don Rosendo Zavala. After a few years they returned to Utah and farmed. They had ten children; my brothers and sisters are: Isabel, Concha, Pancho, Rosendo, Margarita, Simon, Emma, Monica, Refugio, and Miguel.

In 1950, my father and family returned to California and lived in the Jimenez Camp where my father died in 1978 at the age of 85.

Our father, Don Ambrocio Diaz Jimenez, was an extraordinary and remarkable man. A mere child himself at the age of 16, he had the courage to venture into the unknown.

\*\*\* That decision brought us to where we are today!

In 1974, my sisters organized the first Jimenez Family Reunion; my father called it "Un Fandango". Since 1980 we have enjoyed a family reunion every two years.

As I remember.

  
Manuel

## FELIPA CONTRERAS JIMENEZ

Lynndyl, Utah - about 1925

My mother, Felipa Contreras Jimenez, was a small woman in stature, totally devoted to her family. She was constantly working, cooking, sewing, and making all the clothes for the young ones, but she still found time to help anyone in need.

When couples fought and seperated, people would call on my father and mother to get the couples to mediate and try to get the couple back together. They had a great deal of respect for my mother and father.

When my mother went to a dance with the girls, she didn't look much older then Emma and Lucy. She was a very young lady herself.

People thought they were all sisters; they called my sisters "Las Quatro Milpas".

At the ranch my father had a chaise (one horse two-wheel carriage) for my mother to ride. She enjoyed riding it on the ranch. I always went along with her for the ride. One day a train went by while she was riding next to the railroad tracks. The horse got very excited, but my mother kept the horse in complete control.



Preston, Idaho - about 1926

Moon-light sledding and fried chicken... a Mormon tradition. The Mormons divided the county into "wards". We lived in the fifth ward. Our friends from our fifth ward would come to our ranch to pick us up to go moon-light sledding. They came on horse drawn sled wagons. The horses had bells on their harness and in the quiet of the night the sound of the bells was enchanting.

We would tie our small sleds to a long rope attached to the big sled wagon that had straw and blankets. We would crawl inside the wagon and off we'd go to the countryside where we would sled down the gentle hill in the moon-light. The moon was so bright those nights we could see our shadows reflecting on the snow.

One night Mary, my sister, went down a hill and sled into a fence! She got tangled in the wires and squealed

like an eagle until we got her untangled. She was lucky her warm clothes had protected her from the wires. By a miracle her face had missed the wire.

At about 11:00 p.m., we would go home to eat fried chicken. My mother was always happy to have fried chicken ready for us. It was a Mormon tradition and all the families in the ward had a turn to fry the chickens... innocent times...

Grames, California - 1931

I was very close to my mother. Whenever I went to town, I always bought some thing for her. Shortly before she past away, I went to a carnival in Sacramento and I had a name plate pin made for her. Although I had her name spelled wrong "Fellipa" for "Felipa", she still admired it very much.

When my mother became very ill and stayed around the house, I would climb on top of a big tree next to her cabin, and when she went by under the tree, I would call her name softly. She would go around the tree looking for me. I wanted to humor her.

My father would take my mother riding in the car every evening before they went to bed. When she died, I missed her very much. She had to go so terribly young - Colusa, CA May 1, 1893 - July 19, 1931.



My Mother  
Died in  
This House



Tio Miguel was  
my Father's Brother  
in Mexico

6-1942

## LA FAMILIA JIMENEZ

by Manuel Jimenez

After sitting down reminiscing about all the wonderful family reunions we have enjoyed together, I decided to share with you memories about my brothers and sisters.

### EMILIANA JIMENEZ

Utah - about 1926

Emiliana was my oldest sister. I do not remember much about her, but I do remember that she was pretty, and she had a pleasant disposition. She was always with my mother. Emiliana passed away at an early age.

### LUCY JIMENEZ

Lucy was a leader in everything; she worked with a passion and never stopped until the chores were done. When the girls were thinning sugar beets, Rachel and Vera were constantly making stories about how they would work so much harder than Lucy. In the field they would quit before quitting time and run home to tell my mother that Lucy would be late because she had to finish her rows, when in fact, she stayed to finish Rachel and Vera's rows. My father enjoyed telling men that Lucy could out work any man thinning or topping sugar beets.

California - about 1933

When Spreckles Sugar Company closed their operation in Tehema County, the company advised my father to move to Monterey County. It is not clear in my mind what happened. In a very short time, Lucy, Vera, and Rachel got married. My father, Joe, and I came to Gonzales, California. Mary and Jennie went to stay with Lucy or Vera. (?) Then, about a year later, Mary and Jennie came back to us in Gonzales. I was sure happy to see them come home, but I did not tell them. Lucy married Manuel Gonzales and had seven sons. No matter where they lived, they came to see us every year with all their little boys. Lucy had been like a second mother to us; we all treated her with respect and affection. (During the Jimenez Family Reunions when Lucy's sons make the barbecue, you can sense how proud she feels.)



## JOE JIMENEZ

Lynndyl, Utah - About 1926 - Growing up with Joe ...

Joe, my brother, was my father's right handman while my father worked for the Delta Sugar Company. Joe had to do most of the work at the ranch. My sisters all did their share of work, too. Joe was good with horses and farm equipment, he could do all the work required at the ranch. He never complained about working long hours, therefore, he never had the opportunity to go to school.

My father bought Joe a Model T Ford so, whenever he went to town, my mother would ask Joe to take us kids with him. He would take us to the ice-cream fountain and buy us ice-cream.

One day my father and mother were taking us to the show. My father liked to see Tom Mix cowboy movies. As we rode in the back-seat of our touring car, I accidentally fell out of the car. It was winter time and there was snow on the road. I remember I could see the red tail lights of the car disappear in the distance. I just sat in the middle of the gravel road and cried. I thought for sure the coyotes were going to kill me. When my family noticed I was missing, they came back looking for me. I was happy to see the lights of the car coming back.

I remember one day one of the cows did not return at milk time so Joe and I got a rope and went to look for her. When we found the cow,, he threw a loop around the cow's neck. The cow started to run and Joe got his foot tangled on the rope and fell. The cow dragged him all the way to the barn. I was running along the side of the cow, not realizing I was making the cow run faster. When the cow stopped at the barn, Joe looked like a porcupine all full of twigs.

Another time Joe was trying to get a harness from a hook on the side of the barn, but he could not reach it so he had to go above the hook. He slipped and fell right into the hook which lodged under his armpit. As he dangled in the air, I jumped up and down not knowing what to do. Finally, Joe told me to shut up and get some grown-ups to help him get down.

During another time, Joe had to have an operation on his left eye. When he came home, he had to stay in bed. That same day, my Tio Lucadio Savala came to see us from Sugarville to show us his new car. When nobody was looking, I got in the car and stepped on the starter. The car started to move forward. I kept my foot on the starter and the car rammed into the house right where Joe was lying in bed. All the medicine cabinets came down on his head. My mother and my Tio Lucadio



had to take Joe back to the doctor to get his eye restitched, and I lost my driving license for fifteen years.

Tehema, California - about 1931

In later years, I do not remember when my brother, Joe, started to drink. He was the only one in our family that developed a serious drinking problem. It would break my heart to see him drink. He was such a wonderful son, brother, and later father. He married a very nice girl, Ella Fierros, and raised a loveable family.

Our family all kidded ourselves that Joe was my father's favorite son. Whenever my dad saw Joe, he would say, "Que bonito se ve mi Hijo." And Joe was just that because no matter what, he was always there for us.



Joe's baseball team. 1932  
Tehema Calif.

## VERA JIMENEZ

Preston, Idaho - about 1928

Vera, my sister, was something else! Whenever I went to school with her, I felt ten feet tall. She was always feisty and ready to fight. I remember one day while my sisters were topping sugar beets along a road, some young Mormon girls asked Vera, "How do you laugh in Mexican?" Vera said, "I'll show you." She then chased them with her topping knife. After that, the Mormon girls became very friendly with Vera.

Vera was full of fun. We use to call her "China" because she had real curly hair. Vera was very humorous and at times very comical. She could mimic just about anybody. Vera and Rachel had melodious voices. They harmonized very nicely singing and playing the guitar at home parties. No other member of our family can sing and carry a tune with the exception of Mike and Mary singing happy birthday in our golden years.

Vera married a wonderful man named Tony Vasquez, and they raised a wonderful family. They have a real singer in their family, Nellie. When Vera was living in Chualar, California, she would call me on my car phone to say, "Aqui te tengo unos taquitos de frijoles chinitos con queso." They were always DELICIOSOS.



1931, GRAINS, CA. ENILIANA AND VERA JIMENEZ.

## RACHEL JIMENEZ

Rachel, my sister, has always been very quiet and reserved. As a young girl, she never got angry at anyone, and she was the prettiest of the girls. Whenever there were any discussions among the girls about where to go, Rachel would always say "Pues como ustedes quieran."

Rachel and Vera loved to annoy Lucy. They would canive in any way to give Lucy a bad time. But the harasment was all in the spirit of sisterly love; Lucy would always say, "Ustedes estan LOCAS" and ignore them.

Idaho - 1927

At winter time I would let Vera and Rachel ride my horse, Tony, to school. I knew the horse would buck them off before they got to school. The horse did not like to go away from home. On the way to school, the horse at the first opportunity he had would wiggle his ears, make a quick sway to his side, and the girls would land on the snow, and my fearless hero would come home. Tony was a smart little horse.

California - about 1933...

Rachel married a nice young man, Manuel Castaneda. They raised a wonderful family. Rachel's family reflects her gentle and reserve disposition; they are all very polite and unassuming.



## MARY JIMENEZ

Idaho - about 1928

Mary and Jennie - I could have made them famous. As a kid, I did my best to teach them how to fly. I'd tie burlap sacks to their hand and legs, give them clear instructions on how to flap their arms and legs, and then I would take them to the top of the barn and then ask them to jump. They were suppose to land gently on the straw mat below, but they never did get it. They would belly flop every time.

Jennie was very cool. If she got hurt, Jennie would just shake it off. But Mary, she would freak out. She never learned to cry with out becoming unglued. I had to give up on both of them.

As teenagers, Mary, Jennie, and I worked together picking peas in Nipomo, Casmelia, and Santa Maria. We picked prunes in San Jose and tied carrots in Gonzales. We lived in tents under trees or where ever we had to live. We made about six dollars a day between the three of us.

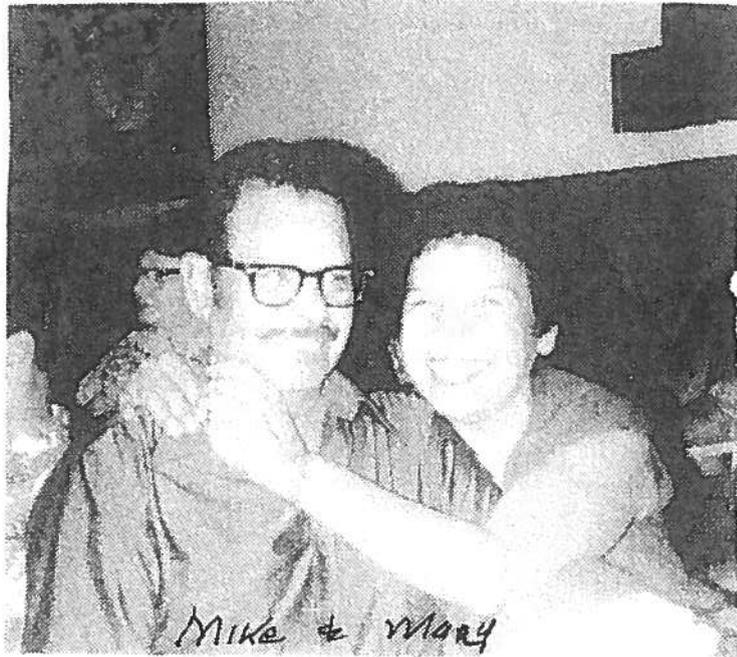
While picking prunes in San Jose, we decided we wanted to save money to buy a new car. I told Mary and Jennie we had to work hard and save money by eating only rice and beans. For six long weeks we ate beans and rice. Mary and Jennie were happy as long as I took them to the dances in our new car.

Mary married her teenage boyfriend, Mike Fierros. When Mike was inducted into the Army, Mary followed him to different army posts in the country.

After the war, Mary became a representative for the Levi Strauss Company. She traveled to Mexico City and other parts of the country on company business. When Mary retired, she remained quite active on company functions.

Mike and Mary love to dance. They are what you call teenage-seventies; they're in their seventies, but they dance like teenagers. They, also, like to travel; they have voyaged to many different places.

Mary is one of the main forces behind the Jimenez Family Reunion.



Mike & Mary

## JENNIE JIMENEZ

About 1940

Jennie went with my family to Utah. During the second World War, Jennie come to San Diego, California, to live with my sister Rachel and her family. She went to work for Consalidat Aircraft makers of war airplanes. When Jennie wrote to me telling me she was a filer for the company it made me feel proud of her because I thought she was working in the office filing documents. To my surprise, she called me and told me she was filing screws and revets on the airplanes.

Jennie loved to dress nicely. She liked to wear beautiful clothes and she always looked stylish and chic. After the war, she married Tony Bejarano, and they had two wonderful sons. When Tony and Jennie divorced, Jennie kept the children and raised them as a single mother. She was very independent and organized. Years later, she married Mike Santiago and lived in Spreckles, California. She worked for Agricultural Systems in Watsonville, California. She was very talented. The article's caption tells it better.



### Juanita Santiago, 'Harvest Innovator'



THE CURRENT HIT SONG "Nobody Does It Better" could be used to aptly describe Juanita Santiago — certainly, when it comes to raising celery! Juanita is a harvesting supervisor at Agricultural Systems' complex of 22 developmental greenhouses near Watsonville, California. Her progressive ideas led to the revamping of celery harvesting last year. Based on efficiency and quality control, Juanita's innovations have accounted for production increases, ease in handling, and higher quality celery seedlings for California growers.

## MY FATHER - AMBROCIO JIMENEZ

Soledad, California - about 1935

Several years later after my mother, Felipa, died, my father married Catalina Zavala.

Catalina was always very nice with me. We got along perfectly well and she was like a mother to me. Mary and Jennie would contradict her at every opportunity and amuse themselves by indulging in making Katie upset.

When I was a teenager, Catalina would iron all my shirts and kept me dressed neatly. Whenever she needed wood for the cooking stove, she would ask Joe to cut it and would say, "Don't let Manuel cut the wood. He cuts it too long." I would listen and say to myself, "You got that right, Katie."

My dad and Catalina had ten children. I was much older then and living away from home as they grew up so I did not have the pleasure and enjoyment of growing up with them.

My little sister, Isabel was super bright. It seems she could read as soon as she opened her eyes. She became a prosperous land developer.

Conchita was something else!!! She had a red spot on her face and when she was in a bad mood it became crimson red and seemed to glow in the dark. Conchita would walk into the kitchen and say to me, "Don't trouble me, Manuel."

My sisters Emma and Margaret loved to wear provocative dresses, large hats that looked like parasols, or mini-skirts. One day Margaret walked into a supermarket and a little eight year old boy saw her and said, "Mira la. Que sin verquenza, esa."

Monica, my youngest sister, is the "Jimenez Perpetual Motion Miracle" who is always on the go-go-go, holding two jobs, and still looking for something to do. God bless her.



I had nineteen brothers and sisters: Emiliana, Lucy, Joe, Vera, Rachel, Manuel, Mary, Jennie, Isabel, Concha, Frank, Roscendo, Margaret, Simon, Emma, Monica, Michael, Cookie, and Lydia. My father loved to tell people how many children he had. Some people would ask him, "Y todos vivos, Don Ambrocio?" "No," he would answer, "unos vivos y otros pendejos."

I shall never forget the conversation I had with my sister, Vera, two days before she passed away. She told me she could not cry, Vera said she knew she was going to die, but she knew she had lived and enjoyed a meaningful and wonderful life. Then Vera asked me, "Manuel, of all the brothers and sisters we have, who do you love the most?"

I did not hesitate and answered, "I do not know, Vera, because I love you all the same." She gave me two little thumbs UP. You see, many years ago, Vera, had told me the very same thing! "I LOVE YOU ALL THE SAME!"



Miguel Jimenez



Simon Jimenez

## MANUEL JIMENEZ

Delta, Utah - 1918

I was born in Delta, Utah, during World War I. I understand my mother had a difficult birth delivery because I had several several hook marks on my face. As a child, people would jokingly tell me I had been in the war because of the scares on my face.

El Centro, California - 1938...

In 1938, my doctor informed me I had tuberculois. His advice to me was, "No more field work." At that time, Vera and Tony were lliving in Los Angeles, California. When they heard I was sick they called my father and asked him to bring me to Los Angeles. I was interned in the Los Angeles General Hospital. A month later, I transfered to El Sausal Sanatruium in Salinas, California. It was a dramatic experience for me, but I was determined to stay in the sanatorium until I was fully recovered. I did not want to go home because I did not want another one of my family to contract the disease.

In the sanatorium I had two operations. My sister, Lucy, and my sister-in-law, Ella Jimenez donated blood for me. Lucy would come to Salinas from Sacramento. Ella and Lucy were the only family members that had my blood type. While in the sanatorium, I had my peaks and valleys, but it all came to pass.

My father and family moved to Firebaugh, California. They would come to see me every weekend. Then they had to move to Utah and I was thankful that none of my family had gotten sick. They never forgot me and they always sent me money while I was in the sanatorium.



Manuel. 1932

The sanatorium had academic and craft classes for patients that wanted to continue their education. I had dropped out of school in my sixth grade year when we moved from Tehema to Gonzales, California. In the sanatorium there were three young patients; one patient was a college students from King City and the two others were high school students from Monterey, California. I'd listen to them speak fluent English, and I admired them. The sanatorium had two teachers assigned to our wing. The students were all taking courses and keeping up with their studies.

One day while reading a National Geographic magazine, I read about how intelligent the Aztec Indians were before the Spaniards ruined their civilization in Mexico. I became

interested and the more I read about them I became aware of how ignorant I was.

The next day I called one of the teachers and told her that in order for me to avoid temporary insanity I wanted to take classes, too. She told me, "First, I have to get permission from your doctor." and she did.

I was hungry for knowledge. I became an avid reader and I devoured every book I could find from psychology to The Grapes of Wrath. In three years, I completed all my grade school and high school requirements.

Three years later, when I left the sanatorium, I was more intelligent and mature. I could converse in fluent English. I had full confidence that I could find a meaningful job.

One day my sisters came to see me in Salinas. I was staying with a friend at a Mexican theater. As my sisters were leaving, the owner of the theater drove up. After my sisters were gone, he told me I had to leave his place because he did not want me to bring prostitutes to my room. I told him they were my sisters. He made a remark I resented so, I asked him to apologize and then I beat the shit out of him. He did apologize and asked me to stay, but I left his place.



Teacher & Head Nurse  
I visit The Sanatorium

Several years later one of his nieces Bertha Arroyo ran as a queen candidate for the Sixteenth of September Fiestas. Another girl from King City named Maria Alicia Zuniga was, also, a candidate. Maria Alicia Zuniga was elected Queen of the Fiesta.

Eleven months later Maria Alicia Zuniga became Maria Alicia Jimenez. My sister, Vera, told Ella and my other sisters, "Mary Lee is sure pretty." People say that when two people grow old together they begin to look alike. I wonder when Manuel will begin to look like Mary Lee?

Alicia and I had five wonderful children. My wife, Alicia, had a significant influence in the development of their character. All our children and their children love us and treat us with affection.



Mary  
Kathy  
Manuel  
Ella  
Vera  
1946

With love,

*Manuel Jimenez*  
Manuel Jimenez

1994