

Michael Ward (editor)

*The Struggles of Segregation in Orange County:
Silvino Ramirez and Mendez v. Westminster (1946-1947)*

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Project: Grassroots Politics.

O.H. 4915.

Oral Interview with Silvino "Jimmy" Ramirez, conducted by Jesse Oswald,
November 15, 2011, Orange, California.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "Grassroots Politics." The interview with Silvino "Jimmy" Ramirez was conducted by Jesse Oswald on November 15, 2011, in Orange, California. The interview lasted 1 hour, 0 minutes, and 21 seconds, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2020 by Michael Ward.

The story revolves around the upbringing and early life of Silvino "Jimmy" Ramirez (born 1935). Unlike most Latino students, Mr. Ramirez attended a desegregated elementary school, so he was accustomed to a diverse school and confronted with segregation only at a later age. His experience of attending a segregated school entailed a prejudiced school administration rather than prejudiced teachers. He acknowledges that the school principal targeted Hispanics, and the only Hispanics attending non-segregated schools were those passing as "White." He points out that he had been raised speaking English in school, but when he switched schools many Hispanics were speaking Spanish in school. Mr. Ramirez's father, Lorenzo Ramirez, was an activist who fought against education segregation, and while his activism went far beyond education, he is best known for his desegregation efforts in Orange County, California. Mr. Ramirez dealt with prejudice and racism throughout his life, yet growing up he did not think much of it; he simply attributed it to the way the world worked.

Today, many people believe that segregation and prejudice in schools happened a long time ago, but this oral history reminds us how recent it actually was. Mr. Ramirez grew up during the 1940s and 1950s, when segregation was alive and real in Orange County, and his father helped with the push to end that. The Mendez v. Westminster case (1946-1947) was not an isolated incident, and this oral history gives credit to those who fought segregation, such as Mr. Ramirez's father. It shows how favoritism in the school system back then was bestowed upon those with fairer complexions, and that Orange County's segregation did not just impact

students: adults, too, were turned away from certain establishments based on their skin color well into the 1960s.

ABOUT THE EDITOR: *Michael Ward of Pomona, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). He is working as the social media manager for CSUF Forum. The primary-source edition published below originated in the "History and Editing" course offered by CSUF's History Department.*

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 4915)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Silvino "Jimmy" Ramirez [SR]

INTERVIEWER: Jesse Oswald [JO]

DATE: November 15, 2011

LOCATION: Orange, California

PROJECT: Grassroots Politics

TRANSCRIBER: Michael Ward

JO: I'm here today with Mr. Sil-Silvino Ramirez, and, uh, my name is Jesse Oswald. And we are here today, uh, to talk about desegregation in Orange County schools, specifically the, uh, Mendez versus Westminster case.¹ And, um – um, I'll start with my first question, and that is, ah, if, uh, what is your full name and date of birth?

SR: Silvino Ramirez. Nickname Jim.

JO: Right. (laughs)

SR: January 11, 1935.

JO: And what is – is your, uh, ethnic background?

SR: Mexican, I guess (rustling in the background), but, uh, American with, uh, Mexican descent. How's that?

JO: Sounds good. American with Mexican descent. And, uh, where, uh, were you born?

SR: El Modena,² California.

JO: Okay, and, uh, what did your parents do for a living?

¹ Federal court case (64 F.Supp. 544: S.D. Cal. 1946; aff'd, 161 F.2d 744: 9th Cir. 1947) that successfully challenged segregated schools in California, especially targeting Mexican remedial schools, which led to the integration of schools in California.

² Area in the city of Orange, California, surrounding El Modena High School.

- SR: My parents – my father passed away in 1950 – 1965, no, '66, and my mother, uh, she is, uh, bedridden, but she is still alive. She is bedridden right now.
- JO: Right, and, uh, what did your – uh, father do for work?
- SR: Uh he was a – foreman at Murphy Ranch. Then he was a straight for Bridge and Holland in Tustin,³ cutting orange trees. Worked in Irvine,⁴ and then he, uh, rode tractors, and then, uh, he got elected vice president of the labor local 652, and, uh, 10 must have been about 60s, early 60s.
- JO: Ok, and, uh, as far as – what was – how can you describe growing up with your family, with your, uh, brothers and sisters and your parents? What type of environment was it?
- SR: Oh, we had a very good time. I mean, I – I had good brothers and sisters, and we never got into fights. The only time we got into a fight was my older brother and I. My dad made me – put shit underneath his boot and made us lick it.
- JO: (laughs)
- SR: (laughs) I'll tell you what, we never got into a fight again.
- JO: Never got into another fight again?
- SR: No, we actually fight, and we, uh, we had a good bringing-up. My mother, every time we didn't come home for supper, something like that. Oh, they were mad. Next day, my mother would tie us up to the tree.
- JO: That is harsh. (laughs)
- SR: (laughs) But it was a slip up. We could have gotten out anytime we wanted.
- JO: Yeah. (laugher)
- SR: Just knew we better not, but she – they never hit us. My dad never hit us, us. I'm not talking about other brothers. He never – he would never hit us. The one whose job to keep us in reign was my mother.
- JO: And what about your, uh, neighborhood? what was it like?
- SR: Well, I lived in two neighborhoods, Whittier east, Murphy Ranch. I think those were the best days of my life. I stayed there until 1944. And, uh, we had the run of the whole ranch, I mean, we could just do anything we wanted to, running around the hills and orchards.
- JO: Lot of room to roam. (laughs)
- SR: Yes, and then when we moved to El Modena. We mainly stayed on the street we live on. And the reason was – there were so many kids right here to play with. So, we never went out.
- JO: It was more urban.
- SR: Yeah. We, uh, just stayed from, um – we lived at that time, it was the end of, uh, Earlham, a big house at the end, up to, uh, Chapman. And just on that, uh, block right there. We stayed –
- JO: You –

³ City in Orange County, California, adjacent to Irvine.

⁴ City in Orange County, California.

- SR: – we lived by – eight, uh, about nine kids there. We played marbles, tops, anything, you know, fly kites – we had a good childhood. I can't complain. I really can't complain about – about my bringing up.
- JO: Really? What about having, uh, been – I understand you went to segregated schools, then non-segregated schools, then back to segregated schools. How do you describe the, uh, effect and the, uh, transition from each?
- SR: Really, I did not feel much effect. I just thought that was where I was supposed to go.
- JO: Really?
- SR: Because I don't remember. A lot of stuff they tell me they remember. I was about nine years old when I started that. And I just really remember going with my dad to the Roosevelt school –
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: – then walking back to Lincoln. That is all I remember. He said, "That's your school," and so – but after a while, after we got through all that and stuff, and I got to be one of them, well, that is where our friends went to school.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: So, we really didn't think about school. The only reason we knew, there was a school next door, but we never – uh, Roosevelt, Roosevelt. I went to Lincoln. Roosevelt – we never saw students there. We never saw their faces. We never saw them until that picture right there.
- JO: Really?
- SR: We never knew who they – we go in at different times, take recess at different times, eat lunch at different times, and go home different times. So, we never got to see each other.
- JO: What prompted them to do the, uh, a picture with both, their class with your class? What made them want to do that?
- SR: The case.
- JO: Really?
- SR: Yeah, because we, uh, never took pictures before with both classes.
- JO: Really?
- SR: That was the first time. That had to be in 1948, I think that's when I graduated from Ramshoe.
- JO: Okay, and, um, just to reiterate. What – what was your first school in order – to start out, your first school that was segregated?
- SR: It was not segregated.
- JO: Your first one wasn't segregated?
- SR: It was an east Whittier⁵ school.
- JO: Okay.
- SR: On Whittier boulevard.

⁵ City in Los Angeles County, California, adjacent to Orange County.

- JO: And, uh—
- SR: Now it is an administration building of some sort, my school.
- JO: What years did you go there?
- SR: I started there in 1939 to 1941.
- JO: Oh, okay, and then the next school you went to?
- SR: El Modena.
- JO: Is that Modena?
- SR: 1944, I mean that is, uh, probably after summer, June, and everyone started in September.
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: So that was in 19-4—same year.
- JO: Yeah, exactly. And, uh, how long were you at the El Modena school?
- SR: Until about 1948.
- JO: '48, okay.
- SR: That is when I graduated.
- JO: And as far as English in the schools, was it—you have to, uh, only speak English or were you allowed to speak Spanish?
- SR: No, English—you could only speak English. The teacher was right there with a ruler to hit you on the head.
- JO: Really?
- SR: And, uh, Hammerstein was the principal of the school.
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: And he had a paddle with big holes in it, and if you did something he didn't like, or you started mou-mouthing back to somebody, he would go out there and give you a swat.
- JO: Yeah. He was really strict?
- SR: Oh, he, uh, didn't like Mexicans. I, well, I read this, but I can't say this, but, uh, he really didn't like Mexicans. The only ones, Mexicans that went to the White schools were the White complected, with light brown hair.
- JO: Perhaps half-White—
- SR: No.
- JO: Oh, full—
- SR: There was a family there with all Mexicans, but they had the, uh, light—light brown hair.
- JO: Really?
- SR: Their skin was really light. Lighter than yours.
- JO: (laughs)
- SR: Yeah, no lie. That is the way they were. And just, uh, they went to that school.
- JO: Really?
- SR: With, uh, I guess it was to show that Mexicans went to school there.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: They didn't let people who were dark—that went to school there.

- JO: You said, um, Hammerstein just did not like Mexican students. What about the teachers? How did you find certain teachers worked with kids?
- SR: Well with teachers. I found that they were all very good.
- JO: Good.
- SR: I mean, uh, they didn't – there was no, uh, like prejudice, not like that, but, like I said, every time you went down you better be – you better start picking names in school.
- JO: So, you would – would you say more of the racial tension came from the administration and the higher-ups than the teachers?
- SR: Yes.
- JO: Okay.
- SR: Boy, those Mexican guys were – but not the whole class hated Hammerstein. He would just walk up. And now I'm gonna cry.
- JO: Mm-hmm. Yeah.
- SR: They got a paddle of them right there.
- JO: I saw it, with the holes.
- SR: That is it
- JO: I saw that at the, uh, old courthouse.
- SR: Yes.
- JO: That exhibit, yeah, um, um – now your father was involved in the, uh, Mendez versus Westminster case, and perhaps we could you – go over his role in that case, told as straight from the, uh, family.
- SR: I didn't talk to him then.
- JO: Sure, sure. Well, now, uh, just to talk a little bit about your father now, uh, did he tell you much about it as a child growing up? Did he give you any insight?
- SR: No, because every time the adults come together in the living room –
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: They would just say, "This is adult talk," so we would have to leave, so we never were in any discussions. We never heard anything being discussed. For that reason, see – no children in that time. Grownups and children were separated.

[00:10:15]

- JO: Right, uh, a more traditional structure.
- SR: Right. It was order and tradition.
- JO: And, um, now, as far as – when you became an adult, did you start to ask your father about it? Did you inquire about the, um, case?
- SR: No.
- JO: Or was it something that you had forgotten about?
- SR: It was forgotten about – it, until my brother, he started researching.
- JO: Was that what sparked your interest? Was it your brother's research?

- SR: Yes, uh, and that LULAC.⁶ (pounds table) They were, uh, the ones that called us and gave us the paper.
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: They were the ones that told us to find out more about the case. That is when they told us to get all our pictures together.
- JO: Yeah, yeah.
- SR: And that really sparked interest and more interest, because they were taking all the credit for it, and what really disgusted us was that she⁷ would take all the credit for it, even when she got that quick medal of freedom.
- JO: Mm-hmm.
- SR: She did not once mention the other families that were involved in this.
- JO: Right.
- SR: So that is why – why I get angry, because she doesn't mention nobody. Just like she did it by herself.
- JO: Right.
- SR: Like, it was like that.
- JO: Like it was one family, versus, yeah –
- SR: And it was, like I said, each one went to one different district, so they can't say they did the whole thing, when they did the –
- JO: Right.
- SR: – when it was a class action suit. To me, afterwards, because he kept talking about, and that is the only thing that really bugged me about the date of him and the other families. Even when they wouldn't put "al" or "el," they wouldn't put nothing like that.
- JO: Right
- SR: We got papers that says everything.
- JO: It ju-just says Mendez.
- SR: Yeah, instead of saying, well, these other families were with us and all that stuff. None of that was ever said.
- JO: It is almost as if, uh, that there are four cases under the name of one case.
- SR: Yes, that is all that it is, with each one going to a different school district. And, you know, this – El Modena was a district by itself. It was a part of the city of Orange but it was the El Modena school district.
- JO: Right, so you have, uh, different rules and regulations that you have to fight against.
- SR: You got Silverado, Modjeska, they had one school back there, and we went to play scoop there, and that was the only school we played against.
- JO: Really? Um, I was reading some quotes and things, I forgot, about things that your family said. One that, uh, struck me was your father saying that

⁶ The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), established 1929.

⁷ Presumably a reference to Sylvia Mendez (born 1936) who played a key role in the Mendez vs. Westminster case and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011.

- he would rather die on your feet than live on your knees, um, live on his knees.
- SR: See, that is what I say. My father was a smart man. He would –
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: Did you ever read the one from the, uh, oh yeah, from the trial, and he was talking about day with the Black, Japanese, Mexican, that is what he was talking about. He was talking about that. It's right there. It is in the book.
- JO: Right.
- SR: I acted really surprised when he – surprised when I heard my dad said that.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: Like I said, my dad was more involved than what they say.
- JO: And, uh, that brings up a good point, when you talk about, you know, African Americans and Japanese Americans, and, uh, basically the Brown versus Board of Education⁸ case really seemed to be connected to the Westminster case.
- SR: Can I, uh, see that there?
- JO: And, uh, it was referenced, and, uh, that being said, do you kinda like – how do you compare the segregation of Hispanics in Orange County, uh, which – that African Americans and Japanese Americans sort of had to deal with in a similar way during that same time?
- SR: Yeah, well, you know what, like I say, that we had our, uh, I never thought of segregation even growing up. I never really thought about it. Even growing up, we went our way, they went their way. I never really thought too much about that.
- JO: Right.
- SR: Well, now you go in the city of Orange in the Plunge,⁹ that's what she talks about, she never said anything about the Plunge, but we did. We saw that, went through Orange city. The Plunge, do you remember the Plunge?
- JO: Yeah, the pool.
- SR: No, no, by the park down south.
- JO: Oh, okay. I'm not familiar –
- SR: You can go in the day before they change the water –
- JO: Right.
- SR: – that was the only day you can go, and, uh, we said that –
- JO: You said –
- SR: – we took everyone's context by saying, putting it there, so that's what, uh, we were the ones that went through all that stuff. And it never showed that El Modena school.

⁸ 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case (347 U.S. 483), ruling “separate but equal” unanimously unconstitutional with regard to education and thus ushering in school desegregation nationwide.

⁹ Park in Orange County, built jointly by the Works Progress Administration and city workers in 1935.

- JO: In any of these DVDs and such?
- SR: Nothing. Did you see it?
- JO: Yeah. You are referencing the Sandra Robbie DVDs.¹⁰ Yeah, I did see it, it, uh—
- SR: But, uh, at that time—
- JO: It is focused on—of the families, primarily just the Mendez Family.
- SR: Yeah, well, but this school, look at this picture with both schools at an angle. But, uh, the Mexico school was a brown, dark building, and the White school was stocked with light—light yellow, and from a distance it looked almost white, but it was light yellow.
- JO: How fitting. (laughs)
- SR: But, uh, it was real light, but they—we were only like 120 yards apart. See, that's what makes it, I think, unique, because they built that Roosevelt school. Because my dad went to that Roosevelt school. My dad said he went to school there—
- JO: How was he then—
- SR: And then there is a picture, a 1924 picture, that—I can't remember the name in El Modena—that shows a picture of a class of 1924 and shows a school picture, in the right hand corner on the top, they were building Roosevelt in 1924—
- JO: Really? And I, uh—
- SR: —and dad was in school—in 1924—in school there.
- JO: Really?
- SR: He had to start from first grade to, uh, and learned English.
- JO: Is—with your dad, I was reading that he actually went—went to school with some the administration that were now working for the school and, uh, working against him. And that, uh, that he sort of felt, you know, kinda felt betrayed. Because these are people he had grown up, you know, in an integrated school, at the Roosevelt school.
- SR: Well, people he went to school with—some were judges and some owned stores—they all talked to him. “Hey Larry,” they called him by name, “Hey Larry.” He had three names. Lorenzo in Spanish, Lawrence, or Larry. {laughs}
- JO: Oh, okay.
- SR: So, that was names. Lorenzo mainly Mexican. The White people would call him Lawrence or Laurie. He used to get in trouble—not much, but a sister of mine got a ticket one time, and he went to see a judge to talk to him, and he said, “Well, you know, Larry, I am going to have to fine your daughter \$10,” that way they wouldn't come back there again.
- JO: (laughs) That is not too bad.

¹⁰ *Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children/Para todos los niños*, 2002 documentary, directed by Sandra Robbie, covering the Mendez vs. Westminster case.

- SR: So, ah, he knew important people.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: He knew a lot of important people. He was, ah, although he wasn't an American citizen, there were some papers he had to sign because it's an American citizen, but he was not an American citizen.
- JO: Right.
- SR: And, uh – uh, he was an intelligent man compared to us. We were dummies compared to him.
- JO: (laughs)
- SR: He was a smart man. He went to school in Mexico, too, in a seminary,¹¹ but not to become a priest. He wanted – my grandmother wanted him to have a higher education. So, he got that there. So, when he came over here, he already knew all that, mathematics and all that stuff, the only thing he didn't know was English. He learned that.
- JO: He picked it up quickly?
- SR: Yes, because he had to go to school there, and, like I said, there was no segregation, so he learned it in a hurry.
- JO: Um, I was also reading about your father that he was in-involved with other movements prior to that. With, um, working with –
- SR: Mexican workers.
- JO: – working with Mexican workers rights.
- SR: He worked with the Mexican consul.
- JO: Right.
- SR: He worked at – the Mexican consul in 1942, I think, but in 1940, '41, he went to, uh, get his picture taken and – I'll show it to you, up there. It got the seal of the Mexican consul on there. (rustling) Yeah, see, right there.
- JO: Oh, okay. That is the picture that has got the seal on the picture.
- SR: Yeah, it has got a big one right there, and, uh, he worked with them for, I think, the last time, I think, was in '43, I think, or '44, something like that. They were in – the Mexican consul to San Francisco federal court to get better living conditions.

[00:20:18]

- JO: So, would you say that – because he worked towards that movement, that, that contradicts the idea that only the Mendez family wanted to prosecute, that they had to convince other families to. Because he was already an outspoken person, he was already working in other forms of, uh, activism. So, do you think that kind of contradicts that statement that he, uh –
- SR: Yeah, I do. My father, you can read it, their father's deal and my father's deal because he got more. Even right here, it says here, is no record ever the Mendez family meeting that lawyer. So, I don't know about true and what

¹¹ A college that usually prepares its students to be priests, ministers, or rabbis.

- is true, but my dad, since 1941, something like that, he started working and he went, to the – that picture there is in 1940, '41, so he was already in there. I'm not saying it was not there or nothing. But, uh, I remember when we went to San Francisco to the – just to see San Francisco, but then we found out that was what it was for. It was for the rights of the braceros.¹²
- JO: Right.
- SR: I really think my dad knew more rights than anybody else.
- JO: Really. Really?
- SR: I really do, because – because they didn't meet him until before the case. They had another lawyer.
- JO: Whereas your father knew a lot of people as it was.
- SR: He had a mouth on him. Anytime you wanted a say in, uh, the union, my dad was so sick, he was almost passing away, and it came out, they took him to the Indian homes, so they could – and they stood him up, and he talked to them, so they would vote for him. I mean, every time, he was such a good talker. That they knew, they would always call him to vote. That they would always call him, like president, and they would also call him to help with stuff that –
- JO: And that was even after this case, so that was years later.
- SR: Yeah, that was after the case. Because I don't think I voted until the 19 – early 60s, it has to be the early 60s because I went to work in a union. My dad passed away in 1966. So, it had to be before than – late 50s or early 60s.
- JO: So, you – would you classify your father as an activist, as a political activist?
- SR: He really was an activist. He was no – just show people. Do you know, he was the type of person who said, "I don't care if my name was on there as long as it was done."
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: That was him. I mean I'm not trying to make him sound better. But it was – that was the person he was.
- Jo: Right
- Sr: And there's, according to some papers I read, El Modena and Santa Ana were the first ones.
- JO: Really?
- SR: Then they got the rest. And then they got the rest. Like I said, El Modena was the only one that was unique because of the two schools that they built especially for integration. Those schools already had schools. They just separated them.
- JO: If these two schools brought the case first, um, what makes you think that ohhh – or why do you think that the Mendez case became a name? Like why, why, di –

¹² Seasonal agricultural laborers from Mexico, working in the U.S. temporarily.

- SR: Oh, they picked the name for it, I guess, I don't know. Because they said it was gonna be a meeting at a bar, oh, I don't mean bar, I mean restaurant.
- JO: Ah, okay.
- SR: And that's where they had some meetings. My dad never said anything about going there, so I don't know.
- JO: Really.
- SR: I really don't know anything about it. Don't know how it got its name or nothing Most of the time you hear his name was when you heard through the school board.
- JO: Do you now consider yourself an activist?
- SR: No, an activist for what? There's nothing to be activist about. (laughs) No, I am not that. But, do you know what, I was never prejudiced against Whites like that, I was never brought up like that. My father – you respected people the way you were supposed to be respected, and if they don't respect you, well, it's a different story, but you always respect something, respect everybody. So, we were brought up that way, we would never do it that way. We respected everybody.
- JO: Did you have close White friends growing up? Kids? Were you close with White friends – kids growing up?
- SR: No, none. Like I said, we went to school, and we knew a few there, but they would never talk to us. Except for one of the girls, it was at the movies. They were like, "Ramirez, take me to the movies." I said, "Hey, did you want me to get killed?" (laughs)
- JO: That was the time – you really feared that?
- SR: Even to this day, I do not speak to some people. (phone ringing)
- JO: We're just going to pause for one second. [audio is cut]
- SR: You want to pay a bill? (laughs) [audio is cut]
- JO: And I'm back now with Silvino Ramirez after a short break, and we were going to discuss your transition from elementary school to Jr. high to high school and – going to El Modena, can you tell me a little bit about that?
- SR: Well, in high school, at the start, we didn't have counselors. They wouldn't give us any classes to prepare for college. The only thing they gave us was FFAs,¹³ shops, PE,¹⁴ for many reasons, because we could not speak English for four years. So, I had no English, no mathematics, nothing. They said, "We need a lot of fruit pickers, and we need a lot of field workers." That was it. So, we never got an education. They would just – knocked us down, I am just talking about my school. I'm not talking about anyone else's.
- JO: Right.

¹³ Future Farmers of America.

¹⁴ Physical Education.

- SR: I went to Orange High School and Chapman College now, and, uh, that's how it was, nothing but shops, and we stick together. And the only – we all – the only thing we could do is play handball. (laughs)
- JO: (laughs) Really? Were you good?
- SR: My brother and I – nobody could beat us.
- JO: Really? Legendary? (laughs)
- SR: Our hands got really swollen from hitting tennis balls.
- JO: Oh yeah, you would get all swollen, yeah.
- SR: There was a high school that just – nothing, didn't prepare for nothing.
- JO: Would you say they were trying to make you – prepare you to be laborers rather than, uh, college students?
- SR: Yeah, that's all they wanted. When I was in school, all my class nobody went to college.
- JO: No – no Hispanic students went to college?
- SR: No, not to the school I was in. And, uh, I grew up so I just got out of high school and started picking lemons. And I could not get a job. Finally went to the Army.
- JO: Did you work when you went to school?
- SR: Yes, oh (laughs), we used to work, uh, smudge pots¹⁵ when it started freezing. Lighting smudge pots in orange groves and lemon groves. When it got to about, I think, 34 degrees for oranges, they would call us out in the middle of the night to go turn on some smudge pots. Lemon, I think, was 28 degrees.
- JO: Really?
- SR: And we stayed out there when the grass was that high, and then we run out there and to the sky, and first guy. Do you know what a smudge pot is?
- JO: No, I would love for you to explain that.
- SR: They are about twelve-foot high and would have a big bottom where the diesel would go in. And they were, like, stacked like foot high, and they had a top – we had to open the top and open the bottom. And then, uh, the first time a guy would run down and he would up both of them, then the second guy came down, he lit the bottom one, he came back and covered the bottom, and it was like putting hot water in the half, holes open, so they would, like, get air to get the frame going. Well, well. And all it was was a bunch of smudge. Your car's full of smudge.
- JO: They would get all dirty?
- SR: Yeah. And then, we had workers' permits so we could do that. We would get to school, but we would get there late. But they wouldn't get – but that's what we would do as young kids. And when I was in high school, I was picking lemons. You couldn't find a job anyplace else, or, uh, at one time

¹⁵ Oil containers with some crude oil burning in the bottom, used in fruit orchards, especially citrus groves, to provide protection against frost.

when I was, uh, in FFA, the guy wanted workers for his turkey ranch around Thanksgiving, before Thanksgiving. So, they had me butchering and hang them up and butchered them and had other guys try to clean them. So, that's how we did. Even when I came back from the Army, the only thing I could find was doing a foundry, American Sea Bells, didn't last long there. After that I said, forget it, I went to spray orange trees, get up at four o'clock in the morning and didn't get home until about six o'clock at night, and after – after that, that is when I went to the Army, I was just, just tired. And I had never knew – met a Black guy until I was in the Army, and I was nineteen years old.

JO: Really?

[00:30:36]

SR: Because Orange didn't allow no Black people in when I was a kid.

JO: Right.

SR: They just flat tell them no, they aren't allowed here, like Orange had their own segregation. They had Cypress Street, but El Modena was there. It had a community by itself, of Mexicans, and Orange was all the way around on Lemon Grove, all the way around, so there was nothing else but that.

JO: Did you, uh, did you find that all your classmates and such – did you work with them, too? Did you guys work together and then go to school together, or did they have kind of different jobs?

SR: No, no, they kind of have the same job, not with me, but most of them would pick oranges in the summer because Valencia¹⁶ was the one in Orange County in the summer. A neighbor in Orange – here it feels like winter, but up there it was summer, so they would do a lot of picking there. A lot of kids would pick up walnuts. I remember when we used to have big walnut groves.

JO: Yeah, right, right, but that was seasonal, though, wasn't that very seasonal?

SR: Yeah, you can tell when they were working because their whole hand would be black –

JO: Yeah.

SR: – from the acid. The whole hand and fingers and hand would be black.

JO: Uh, yeah, that's – it definitely seems that's – that led to part of the reason why it was segregated, it was to give – provide classes that they felt would be applicable for what they thought you would do with your life. It's just to work in the fields, so that none of the classes seem to be, uh –

SR: No, they just told you flat to your face, and what we need, uh –

JO: They didn't sugarcoat it?

SR: No, they did not.

JO: Really?

¹⁶ A type of sweet orange.

- SR: And even in sports in high school, there was, when I went there – there was one football-player Mexican at El Modena, because he was big and strong, and there was one in B and I remember on C, but I played basketball, and there was A, B, C, and D teams, and I was on the D team.
- JO: Hey, it's a team. (laughs)
- SR: And I had to walk home three miles in nothing but orange groves. From Orange to my home.
- JO: From basketball practice?
- SR: From Chapman College, I would walk home, all the way home, every night for practice, and we would come from a game at ten o'clock from another school, and I would walk home. My dad said, he – "I ain't going to pick you up." Well, he had to work, so I go home, and I walk and go, with my walk, but you had to get, well, my walk – Chapman, at that time, was only a two-lane road, and the orange trees were hanging over the road, except the big trucks, there – hardly any big trucks there, and that's the –
- JO: Funny, because I live by there, Chapman and Canon, and it is so much different now. You know, uh, I was, I was reading one of the, uh, quotes about your mom, and, um, your mom was saying that she was particularly offended by segregation, because it was built on these stereotypes that Mexican kids having ragged clothes and were being dirty and these stereotypes, and she was, like, "Well, I take very good care of my kids, and I make sure that they were clean cut, and they – you know, presentable in public." So, if they were not fitting the stereotype, then why would we – does it still apply? I was, uh, reading, uh, I think it might have been a video with her, but she seemed very upset about that and just –
- SR: I mean, she made us clean every day, because we were dirty from school. And the other schools didn't mention about this, but it – at El Modena, they would get those, uh, tongue depressors and look at our hair to see if we had lice.
- JO: Really?
- SR: and it was about once every two weeks. And it, it came up on our TV. They, uh, asked my dad – did you say all the other Mexicans were dirty, and my dad said, but that, it – what they all said, that we would all used to go dirty. But there were some people that were a little more dirty than the others, but they were really poor people, and, uh, almost ninety percent of us were clean, but they always were looking for that lice on our heads.
- JO: Really? Um, I read this a quote from the – Richard Harris, the Westminster school district superintendent, and it – he, uh, basically said that an English-speaking cultural background came from the early days in England, and that these stories of American heroes and stories of American frontier did not compare to the cultural background of Mexican families, and he said that Mexicans had no conception of these stories, no

- understanding of them. And for that reason they needed special help. How does that quote make you feel?
- SR: I don't know what he was talking about. We were not that, uh, that, uh, that, uh, well, this one, you know who also said that, too? Hammerstein.
- JO: The, uh, special help?
- SR: Those who didn't need help couldn't transfer due to lack of, uh, seating.
- JO: Yeah, that is the only excuse they used?
- SR: That is the only excuse they used, in that picture I can show you, there was only eight or ten with eighth grade.
- JO: Like that, there's only eight kids in there, uh, I mean desks in that, uh—
- SR: Yes, it was eight desks. There's more than that, that I know, there was more than that, but they just went from Green Garden to eighth, so it was that— there was all kinds of people, not that many, because the only surrounding area, there was, well, one of the guys I remember was this guy, David Irvine, and his father was a—uh, what do you call them, a ranger, in Irvine park, that's the only guy I remember, but, uh, the rest I did not know. I saw them at high school, but never talked to them.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: So, it's a—
- JO: I just thought that quote really embodied some of the, uh, mentalities of the White administration.
- SR: Yeah, but, uh, you could see, Hammerstein had a lot to do. He was the one who started the, uh, lice, and all that dirt, well, when we got there. It was already like that, so you just go with the flow, I guess. We couldn't go to another school.
- JO: Um—
- SR: And then we get, uh, at that time, we had one hour of religious retreat. They could—we could, for one hour, to any religion of your choice, and they take you from one hour of grammar school.
- JO: Really? Did you go to Catholic school?
- SR: I went to, uh, no, I was, uh, Catholic, but they had, uh, a Baptist church and, uh, close to El Modena, close to the Mexicans. And they had a Quaker church—
- JO: Right.
- SR: —remember the Quaker church?
- JO: Yeah. You don't see that anymore. (laughs)
- SR: It's a restaurant.
- JO: Is it? (laughs)
- SR: They controlled that town. There was no liquor allowed there. You could not sell liquor. In El Modena, you had to go to, uh, what they used to call it, the railroad, there used to be a halfway point between El Modena and the freeway now—
- JO: Oh, okay.

- SR: – there used to be railroad tracks across there. And on the other side, there was a store, right, like a food produce, but they sold liquor there.
- JO: You had to drive outside El Modena just a little bit.
- SR: Yeah, they did not allow liquor in El Modena.
- JO: Interesting, and what other forms of segregation, uh, outside the school did you see throughout the years in the 40s and 50s?
- SR: Well, in the theater in Orange. We'd go to the Plaza. There's two theaters, the Plaza and, uh, Orange theater. If we went to the Orange theater, we had to go sit on top, couldn't sit on the bottom, and the Plaza, it was only one level, but all the movies were Mexican like. Cabo inside. That's, that's what we all liked, so we'd go there, and, uh, Santa Ana only had one Mexican theater, the Yost, I remember that. But yet, they had a Woolworth¹⁷ right there on the corner, I guess, on, uh, Spruce and Fourth Street, and it was owned by a Jewish person. I remember him, you could go in there and order a hamburger, but you couldn't sit down and eat it there. You had to go outside to eat it. I went to a bar, and that—it was after I come from the service, I'm talking about this bar, and we went there, and everybody got served, and I sat there for an hour and just—nobody served me nothing.
- JO: Huh.
- SR: And it was right after I came back from the Army.

[00:40:03]

- JO: That must have been frustrating.
- SR: It is, and forget about that. There is other bars. I did not have to give them my money, that is how I thought about it. I did not care, I just wouldn't go back.
- JO: You used to—
- SR: When I was younger, like that, with Woolworth, the whole counter was empty. Do you remember the Woolworth—before, there was, uh, like a—how would I say it, like, uh, it was a bit of everything, okay. But it was, uh, a Woolworth, a big store, and they had them all over the place, and there they had a counter where, for the hamburgers and stuff like that, and they had seats over the counter, but we were not allowed to sit there—
- JO: Really?
- SR: –and it could have been empty, but we still wouldn't be allowed to sit there. We had to go outside and, yeah, we ran into, a lot, in there. But when I went to the Army, we went to the South, and they were worse there.
- JO: Really, in the South?
- SR: Oh yeah.
- JO: Tell me about that.
- SR: They had a drinking fountain for White and Blacks or Negros, and White.

¹⁷ Department store chain, first established in 1879, in operation in the U.S. until 1997.

JO: What did you drink out of?

SR: What, uh, the White one, that is classified. On my paper, I was Caucasian. Because there are only, what, uh, like five nationalities around the world, and, uh, Mexican isn't one.

JO: Right.

SR: No, races.

JO: Right.

SR: And, uh, Mexican was not a race or nationality. See, that's what a lot of people don't understand, that it—a nationality. So, hey, I went—go with the flow. I would not go near where the Black people were, because I got robbed too many times.

JO: (laughs) So?

SR: But they had their own, um, waiting room in the bus, everything was separated. They walked on the sidewalks—too many White people on the sidewalk, they had to let them go by, they were not allowed in no bars, and, uh—

JO: Did you find that, when you were, uh—

SR: —and they had the last four seats of the bus.

JO: Oh yeah, the last four seats, right. Did you have, uh, Black friends at the time? Did you sort of mingle with Black people at all?

SR: No.

JO: No?

SR: Mostly just, uh, when I was in the Army, there were only like fifteen, twenty Mexicans per company, but there was nothing wrong with White people. We would get along with them, too. We would get together with the Blacks, too, they were just, uh, I guess I lived so many years like that, they couldn't get over it, and not many joined the Army, and, like I said, I was nineteen years old when I met my first Black person.

JO: How would you, uh, how would you say that, uh, coming back from the service affected your views on segregation and society?

SR: It did not change. It was still segregated here.

JO: Yeah.

SR: Yes, I got out and went to apply for a—take a test at the post office—not a Mexican test, not a Mexican test. Every time I went there, it was all Whites. Oh, and, uh, El Modena school district, they had, uh, all the janitors were White, except one Mexican.

JO: All the janitors, you said?

SR: They only had one or two janitors, but one was Mexican, and afterwards that—there were tokens—they put him in Orange High School. And we had a bus to go to school. They stand at the biggest bus stop in El Modena and pick kids up for school, and if it was late or something we wouldn't go to school, because no other bus was gonna pick us up.

JO: (laughs) So, you would just be like, today we are off?

- SR: (laughs) Or late.
- JO: Or late. Yeah, we were walking –
- SR: And we had to go to the office for a tardy slip. There was a bus coming from Trabuco and Modjeska High School, and they wouldn't stop and pick anyone up.
- JO: Yeah, they did not want to mix on the bus, that is understandable. Um, one of the other ideas that was coming up from the time, as far as you know, I guess – from the prosecution in that case, supported – was the idea that –
- SR: You have to say it louder, I can't hear you.
- JO: Oh, I am sorry. I apologize. One of the witnesses for the prosecution was Ralph Deals, and he was – and in – one of his arguments was that by keeping Mexican and Spanish-speaking children together simply means that they only speak Spanish together, and therefore it makes it even harder to learn English, but if you were to mix English-speaking and Spanish-speaking – it would – makes it easier to make that transition. Do you agree with that?
- SR: Yes, look at my father. It's true. If you put any foreigner that doesn't speak English, and you put them in there, they will – going to learn in a hurry. They will not sit back and say, oh well, forget it. I really do believe that if they put them together –
- JO: – it speeds up the process.
- SR: When I see other people my age, they went to college. And, I say, from – where I come from that was a no-no, so I can't, that's why I say, I speak from where I was at, not from another school
- JO: Yeah, let's see. Is there any other stories or interesting, uh, ideas through, uh, about segregation you would like to tell me today?
- SR: You know, one time in the Army I had my uniform on –
- JO: Uh-huh.
- SR: – and that girl said, "What kind of foreign Army are you in?" (laughs)
- JO: What was your reaction? Just laughed?
- SR: I just laughed, um, "I am in the United States Army." (laughs). In the south, I did not see Latins in the South at the time I was in there.
- JO: Really?
- SR: but there were some Native Indians. They never thought of that. I don't know why they just, just said, "What foreign Army are you in?"
- JO: Was this, uh, was this a Black lady or a White lady?
- SR: Oh, it was a White lady.
- JO: Oh, it was a White lady –
- SR: – because we were not allowed to sit with the Black people. I was coming home, right I was coming home on leave, and it was a transcontinental railway, at that time, it was that or a Greyhound,¹⁸ or the transcontinental

¹⁸ U.S. long-distance bus company, established 1914 and named "Greyhound" since 1929.

- railway, so I took a transcontinental railway. And she just sat next to me and asked me.
- JO: That is a funny story.
- SR: Huh, what –
- JO: That is a good story. You know, how would, you know, compare – because, you know, you went to both schools, how much different was your experience as far as like, uh, things, what was available to you in a segregated school and an integrated school? Did you find that you had more extracurricular activities and may – perhaps equipment in your class in the integrated school than at the segregated school?
- SR: Well, in Mexican schools, we had the hand-downs, we had the hand-me-down books.
- JO: Really?
- SR: And, uh, that is about – we had second-hand tools, except in high school, I mean, but they gave us secondary teaching, I don't know, for preparatory or for college or nothing.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: That is my main thing right there. They did not allow you to go to college. The city of Orange was very prejudiced.
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: They didn't, uh, as I said, they were very prejudiced – even to this day, they are still prejudiced.
- JO: Yeah, there was –
- SR: Even prejudiced to Mexicans, that is what gets me.
- JO: You had to deal with that, didn't you?
- SR: Huh?
- JO: You had to deal with that, right?
- SR: Yeah.
- JO: Tell me about that.
- SR: Well, in school, say, all the guys that, uh, who did not want to speak to Mexicans or to anyone like that they hung out with White people. They did not want to be Mexicans. That is what I said. That got me real mad, especially in that time. They were prejudiced to their own race, that is what got me. Just give me a minute.
- JO: Is that because you only spoke English, is that because you mainly spoke English?
- SR: Well, not necessarily. Now, at that time, well, when I was going to El Modena, it wasn't bad, but that is when I told you I learned how to speak Spanish in a hurry, (laughs) so – but the, uh, most of my life, we – I spoke Spa – English in schools and everything, except in El Modena is like, uh, where I learned to Spanish, then we started to speak Spanish to my mother, but she could understand English. My mother can understand English, she just can't talk anymore. She had two strokes.

JO: Oh, yeah. I'm sorry.

SR: She was ninety-nine this month, on eleven-eleven-eleven.

JO: Really? Her ninety-ninth birthday was eleven-eleven-eleven? Oh, what a coincidence that is. (laughs).

[00:50:03]

JO: Did, uh, I actually saw her on a DVD just a few years ago, and she was, uh, she seemed very ecstatic to see that her husband, even after, uh, such a long period of time, was finally being recognized, and that really meant a lot to her. Uh, I think it was a reaction to – in the play, when they acted out –

SR: That is what she always tells us. They say, well, "Ask her if they want her library – name on it," but she says, "No," she says she wants her husband's name on it, as long as his name is on it, "I want him to be recognized," so –

JO: And, he is, uh, he is getting a library dedicated to him, correct?

SR: Yeah, I think it is a library.

JO: And where is that going to be at?

SR: El Modena. (talking to female) Hey, babe, what's the name of the school that my dad is gonna be – name of the school?

NN: El Modena?¹⁹

SR: El Modena High School or El Modena Jr.?

NN: It's gonna be the library.

SR: I know, I know, they got a library there now. They are building a library in that school. The one right there. And we have nothing to do with it. It's the people who – that knew my dad – are the ones doing it. So, it's not like we are pushing for it. We haven't done nothing for it, so –

JO: Yeah.

SR: So –

JO: Well, you can share your stories here.

SR: Huh?

JO: You get to share your stories here with me and the archives and such. I mean, you are definitely contributing.

SR: I went through a lot of that stuff. But, uh, I guess I am the only one who ever spoke about that. The other kids don't speak about how they went through school with – whenever I hear them, they never say nothing.

JO: Yeah.

SR: Uh, unless they did not go through what – the one that I did. And I am not lying, this is just facts about what I went through.

JO: Yeah, well I appreciate everything you have been able to contribute for me today, everything has been great, uh –

SR: If you have any more questions, just call me.

¹⁹ NN denotes an unidentified party briefly joining the conversation.

- JO: Yeah, don't be surprised if you hear from me, if I might call and ask you a question.
- SR: No, it's alright, it's alright, like I said, I will not tell you any lies.
- JO: (laughs) Well, I appreciate that.
- SR: Because everything I am telling you right now is something, I am telling you, is not a story – it is a life story, but it is not a story that is not real. I am trying to remember something else. Well, I will show you some prejudice. My grand – my son, my step-son, was playing in a Catholic league, and a coach with a young kid said, "Oh man," he says, "here comes the Mexicans again. They are going to play today."
- JO: About when, about your son?
- SR: Fifteen years, when he was playing – the kid, and, at that time, well, uh, churches were, well, I will tell you another – when I was in the Army, I went to, uh, a Catholic service, and I looked around and saw different nationalities and said, what the heck, am I in the wrong church? I was used to it being all Mexicans where I was at, so I went outside and read the sign there, and sure enough it was Catholic. (laughs)
- JO: Yeah.
- SR: Once you get out of our hole in the wall, like, because, uh –
- JO: Um, yeah.
- SR: – that is, uh, a church, all Mexicans, I mean there is – no other went there, and you go outside and look at the world and say, uh, uh, something is wrong here with me. (laughs)
- JO: Yeah, yeah.
- SR: So, I mean, I can get along with anybody. I don't care. I never got mad at anybody, but, uh, in fact, I did not fight with anybody in high school for nothing.
- JO: Really?
- SR: Well, I did with one other Mexican guy, (laughs) from my own town, too. My dad would say, "Don't you ever fight," but after a while you get beaten up too many times. It's just like –
- JO: Yeah, sometimes it happens –
- SR: – and, yeah, you beat at a guy, then no more, so –
- JO: Well, thank you so much for all your stories. (laughs) They're great, and, uh, you know, if need be, I would, uh, like to be able to contact you and ask you more questions. I might come bother you again and, uh – (laughs)
- SR: Well, like I said, I'm retired, just call me ahead of time in case – I am not leaving right now, because I do not know – so, so, I am not going any place, just to name my granddaughter Ana, just to let you know, or just tell her. She will let me know.
- JO: Being with family is the most important part of life.
- SR: I am going to show you a picture here – (rustling).
- JO: Sure.

- SR: –or am I? See, that is the brown building, and this was the (rustling, showing photos)–
- JO: This is the, uh, white building.
- SR: Yes, well, they both are right—now, well, this is Lincoln and Roosevelt. There is the brown building. Stucco, white, light stucco, light yellow stucco building. (background noises)
- JO: There you go. How old are you in this picture?
- SR: Twenty.
- JO: Twenty.
- SR: I get that is why people ask me if I was in the Army, because I had so much stuff on me. (laughs)
- JO: They weren't used to it.
- SR: But my older brother was in the paratroopers, too, and my—one of my younger brothers was in the Air Force.
- JO: How many people served in your family?
- SR: Eleven.
- JO: Eleven people in your family?
- SR: Eleven.
- JO: This you, too, right?
- SR: My younger brother Josue—Joe.
- JO: That, your mom?
- SR: See, this was when my dad passed away.
- JO: How old was your dad when he passed away?
- SR: About 50, uh, fifty-five, something like that.
- JO: Relatively young.
- SR: Yes, (showing pictures) that's my mom, was really young. (laughs) See, uh, I have a couple of my dad, too.
- JO: Out of the, uh—with all these different families being a part of this case, what was your—did you know the children of these other families personally?
- SR: No.
- JO: No?
- SR: No. Well, it was from different areas, so I never did meet them. And it was all done at the same time, and, like my dad always told us, it was only adult talk, so—but he never, all the other people didn't meet my dad at the house. It was just for the people of El Modena themselves. They were—see, here is a picture I was telling you, it has some cover.
- JO: Oh, this one has the seal on it.
- SR: Yeah, uh, what year is it, does it say it right there?
- JO: It does not have a year.
- SR: I think 1940, '41, something like that. I guess he needed that, back then, you didn't need a passport to cross, you just needed a nickel to cross it. And he

had to get a ID because he wanted to join the Army, but they did not take him.

JO: They didn't take him?

SR: They gave him a deferment, put him in agriculture. So, that is how that stuff ends.

JO: Do you have any contact with any of the families now?

SR: My brother, elder brother does have now.

SR: (taking to female) Hey, what's the name of the ones in Mira Loma.²⁰

NN: Her name is Beverley.

SR: Beverley Galegos. My brother talks to her a lot.

JO: Okay. Alright. I am going ahead and stop the recording while I look through this book, but again, thank you so much for everything today.

[01:00:21]

END OF INTERVIEW

²⁰ City in Riverside County, California.