

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Hortensia Garcia**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Olga Barr

Comment Betty Anhaizer was also in attendance.

13 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Hello, Hortensia. Betye Anhaizer and I will be talking to you today. Will you tell us your whole name and date of birth?

GARCIA: My full name is Hortensia Avila Garcia. My middle name is my father's name. I was born on August 20, 1947. Sweetwater Country Club is right in the middle of where my house was. At that time, it belonged to Imperial Sugar. My grandfather was a sharecropper for Sugarland Industries. I was born in my grandfather and grandmother's house by the levee, near Sweetwater Country Club. The bridge is still there I believe. Either Doctor Slaughter or Doctor Kuykendall came and delivered me at the house. They traded me off for some chickens. (laughter)

GOODSILL: How many chickens were you worth?

GARCIA: I don't know, but they gave him some chickens for me. (laughter)

GOODSILL: Was this your mother's parents?

GARCIA: No, this was my dad's family. His name was Romando Avila. He married Aurora Martinez. That is why my name is Hortensia Avila. Before I was married, it was Hortensia Martinez Avila. After I married, I dropped my mother's maiden name, and I kept my last name.

GOODSILL: What are the names of your father's parent's?

GARCIA: My grandfather's name was Panfilo Avila. My grandmother was Virginia Serna.

GOODSILL: Tell us how your grandparents got to Sugar Land.

GARCIA: It is a two-part story. It all started with my grandfather in Michoacán, Mexico. I've heard it is beautiful, lots of lakes and flowers. His mother had passed away. His father was sort of like an alcoholic. Everybody took care of him. When my father was 12 or 14 years old he fell asleep and dreamed of his mother. The dream said to go to this park and find some money there. He went and dug up some gold coins. Of course, his father found out about it and took the coins away from him, leaving him just one. With that one coin, he decided to come with his friends to Texas.

GOODSILL: Do you know the story of how they got here?

GARCIA: He told us the story. It was really hard because they had to walk all the way. He even got sick. His feet got swollen. Somehow, he got to a watermelon patch and put watermelons on them to cool them down. Somehow or other he made it to Houston. He had an older brother, but I think his brother was killed somewhere in Texas or California. Southern Pacific was laying tracks in Houston at that time.

GOODSILL: Do you know approximately what year this was?

GARCIA: March 25, 1925 was daddy's birthday. Grandma was born in 1905, I think. So maybe in 1940s? He worked at the railroad and lived in Houston. He told me that at the time he was living in Houston, he could buy lots in downtown Houston for 25 cents.

Let me tell you my story about my grandma and how she got here. I think she was born in San Louis Potosio. Grandma's first marriage had been in Mexico. It could have been the time of Poncho Villa's war. Well, she had a brother, and they wanted him to join the guerristas, which means warriors in Spanish. Her brother didn't want to join. They grabbed him and hanged him in front of her mother's house because he didn't want to join. So, her mother told grandma, "Go to Texas and take your husband so they won't do the same thing to him!"

On the way to Texas, in a chuck wagon, she lost her husband. I think he got a fever; it may have been the yellow fever because at that time they had an epidemic. So, she was widowed with three kids in a place she didn't even know. She ended up in Uvalde, Texas. She met a man, who was bringing people from Uvalde to Houston to work on the railroad. He sort of befriended her. He said, "I tell you what, I will get a guy to pretend that he is your husband so we can bring you to my house. You can stay at my house for a while with my wife and help out." So that is what they did.

After a while, she started working. Making a long story short, one of her three children died when he was hit in the head, and he died probably of a concussion. She had to work, and the children were left alone. The other one died of a fever or something, and she was only left with one child.

It was at that time that I think she met my grandfather in Houston. They got hitched not married. (chuckles) They moved to Sugar Land where they were sharecropping. They would farm for one fourth of the gains and one fourth would go to the company. It was a company town at that time run by Imperial Sugar. Having nothing, they had some very hard times. My granddaddy literally had to build a log cabin with a canvas top to live in so he could farm the area and stay there.

They lived through the hardships. Thanks to them, we never suffered any hardships. The company town was very strict. You had to buy from them. You had to gin the cotton with them. They would give you a loan, and you would have to pay it back. I remember daddy bringing me to downtown Sugar Land to go get me coupons so we could buy food.

One time he was beaten up because one of his cows went to another farmer's land. He went to get his cow, and he wouldn't fight about it. This guy got a metal rod and started hitting him. He broke his arm. He was out of work for the longest time, and he was the only one in the family. So, they had hardships. Then the gin never paid him the money that was due to him.

At other times, they would fertilize the cotton even though it didn't need it. They would fertilize it, and then charge them for it. They had to feed their children. Panfilo and Panchita. Panchita is Pancho, but with a i-t-a, Panchita. These two children died. Don't ask me how, but they died. They died very young and were buried at the San Ysirdro Cemetery. We went back and put some crosses there. They were older than daddy, so they must have been close to a hundred years ago. The crosses have fallen. So, we need to go back and put the crosses back on. They had six children. Two of them died. The others were my Aunt Josefa, then my daddy, and then Sabinas. The last one was a boy and his name was Panfilo. They called him Pancho.

They called that area the centro at that time. There was a community by Alcorn Road now near Sweetwater Country Club. We lived smack in the middle. That is where we used to sharecrop. Eventually, they took the houses off and put in this country club.



This is a reflective advertisement for the Imperial Cotton Gin Garcia's uncle placed on his cotton trailer from Imperial Sugar. Many gins gave these to their customers. They served two purposes. First, get your name out there as they were attached to cotton trailers which plied the roads constantly during the fall harvest. Second, safety! None of the trailers were lit electrically and at dusk or night they were a road hazard. These reflectors probably prevented untold numbers of accidents.

My grandfather was from Mexico. My father was born in Sugar Land. I was born in Sugar Land. My son was not born in Sugar Land, but in Houston. My grandson was also born in Houston. So, there were four generations in Texas.

GOODSILL: What was your father's life like?

GARCIA: It was okay. He helped granddad with the farm, as he was the eldest. They worked on 50 or 100 acres. They had one mule and they did the manual cultivating. Then, of course, they got a tractor. He went to the sixth or seventh grade, and then he had to stop because they had to work in the fields.

I believe my mother and father met at a dance. They had these local dances, and he met my mom at a dance. I think they married in 1945 or '46. I was born in 1947. They had a child in 1946, too.

GOODSILL: Did World War II affect your family in anyway?

GARCIA: I think it affected my grandparents on my mother's side. I think they were sent back to Mexico not once, but twice. That was a time they were having problems, and they sent people back to Mexico. They said, "We don't want the Hispanics here. We want to send them back."

GOODSILL: Tells us about your mother a little bit.

GARCIA: There is not too much to tell about my mother. She was the only child. Her mother died — probably at childbirth. Her mother's name was Anita Nimanitium Martinez. She was very pretty. Her father, Eusebio Martinez was born in Richmond or Rosenberg. He is buried at San Gabriel, the cemetery right by the Fort Bend County Sheriff's office. They buried most of the Hispanic people from Rosenberg and Richmond there.

My first sister is buried there, too. I had an 18-month old sister that died. My grandfather, Luciano, is buried at San Gabriel. He is number one at the cemetery. I think my Grandfather Luciano's middle name was Santano.

GOODSILL: What do you mean by number one? Was he the first person buried there?

GARCIA: Yeah, something like that, buried number one. His name was Luciano, and his wife was Isabel. I have a cousin whose name is Luciano, and ironically his wife is named Isabel.

GOODSILL: What kind of work did they do?

GARCIA: My grandfather was a cowboy. He worked for the Smith ranch. He rode horses and herded cows. He lost an eye putting in a wire fence. I am sort of dark complected. My grandfather was ALWAYS out, and he looked like a colored man. He was sooo sun-beaten. My grandmother was very light, very pretty.

I don't really know where my mother was born. I think she was born somewhere in Texas, but she ended up in San Antonio with this couple, who were her godparents. They raised her. Somehow or another, my grandfather met her and they moved to Rosenberg and Richmond. Then daddy met her. I don't know much about my mom. She was an only child. Her mother passed away early. I think she had up to middle school in Rosenberg or Richmond. From what I was told, my grandmother used to teach the children English.

I am sure she wasn't a certified teacher, but she used to teach the children English. I mentioned that her father was sent back to Mexico, but they came back. They were born here, but then they were sent over there.

GOODSILL: And your father went to school through six grades at the Sugar Land schools?

GARCIA: Yes, most likely.

GOODSILL: The black children were educated in different locations, but the Hispanic children went to Lakeview.

GARCIA: When I went to school, yes. We were not segregated at that point.

GOODSILL: But you don't know about your father.

GARCIA: My father, most likely, went the same way as we did with the American children or the Anglo children.

GOODSILL: These are quite dramatic stories you tell of both sides of the family. Go back to World War II. Your father's side of the family was farmers, sharecroppers. On your mother's side of the family, the men were ranchers and cowboys.

GARCIA: They were ranching for R. E. Smith. He used to own most of the land off Highway 90. They had a little house over there. Three little houses are still standing there where my grandfather used to live by the Brazos River. If you go on Highway 90, there is a row of trees. On one side, close to the river, there are three little houses.

GOODSILL: Do you remember visiting them there?

GARCIA: Oh, yeah. We would go every weekend.

GOODSILL: What was your grandfather like? What was his personality like?

GARCIA: I wasn't as close to them as I was to my father's parents. But they were interesting. They would talk a lot. Grandmother always took care of her diet. She wasn't a hugging, kissing type of grandma. The first thing they would give us was some hard candy. I don't know why. I guess that was one way of showing their affection. Then they would just start talking to us. We would just sit around.

I remember one story; it is not a tale, it is a real story. They said that next door there were three houses and a young man that lived with his parents. He liked to party on Saturdays. For some reason or another, one Saturday he came back, maybe lost his girlfriend or whatever the reason, and he committed suicide. He shot himself.

My grandparents smoked one pack or two packs a day. They loved to smoke and they would sit out on the porch and shoot the breeze. At that time, they didn't have an air conditioner, so they would just sit out on the porch. They would stay out there until ten or eleven, and then they would go to bed. Well, that one night, they saw the young man coming, whistling like he usually did, walking and whistling, and happy. They saw him go to the house. They didn't think anything of it because they were used to seeing him every weekend go out and come back that same way! This one time, he was whistling, and came walking, and went into the house. Then they remembered he was DEAD! How can that happen? They actually saw him coming down whistling after he had passed away. That is the story.

GOODSILL: Wow. On your father's side, what were his parents like?

GARCIA: My grandma was a saint. That is all I can say. Grandpa was very firm and stern. He was a Spaniard. He was over six feet tall, very light complected. He loved you, but he didn't say he loved you. Grandma was sort of like a mestiza. She was half Indian and half Spanish. Grandpa was dark because he worked on the farm. But he was very tall, and he's sitting down.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mestiza - (in Latin America) a woman of mixed race, especially one having Spanish and indigenous descent.--Dictionary.com

I have a picture where he had white hair and he was becoming bald at that point, but you couldn't see it. Grandma was the half Indian, half Spanish, you could tell right there. My grandfather was very fair, tall. My grandmother was fair, too, but she had green-eyed children. They had green-eyed children.

My Aunt Josefa, the oldest daughter, had the green eyes and their grandchildren had blue eyes. We are the brown eyed and brown children. It is funny. On both sides, we have half — we call them milk and coffee because half of them look like milk and the other half coffee. (laughs) It was probably from my grandfather's side, my aunt was very fair, green eyed, light brown hair.

Her children — well, they married Lupe Chavez. Do you remember the Chavezes from Sugar Land? Well they married one of them. They were very fair and blue eyed; at least my uncle had blue eyes. So, the kids had blue eyes and green eyes. My daddy married Aurora. My grandmother was fair, but my grandfather was very dark so we all came out this color basically.



Garcia's grandparents (seated) Panfilo and Virginia Avila.

GOODSILL: So Aurora and Romando got married and had a family. Tell us about your generation. Who was the first born?

GARCIA: First born was Maria Elena. She was born in 1946. She died tragically when she was about 18 months old. She was very sick and they needed to take her to a doctor in Houston, but they didn't have any transportation. They went to get a bus in Stafford. The child was so sick that they stopped at the drugstore to pick up something. It was freezing cold that night. The drug store threw them out with a little child. The doctor gave them a shot, but she had whooping cough, I think. She died in my mom's arms. They kept it quiet because they wanted to get out of Houston to come over here. I was born right after her. That is why I am so sentimental. I guess mom was crying all the time.

GOODSILL: Momma was still grieving over her first baby, and then you were born. Maria was born in 1946. You were born in 1947.

GARCIA: She was buried in San Gabriel. We have a real pretty little headstone with her picture on it. It is real cute. Her little cross was broken. My daddy went and put another one up. Guadalupe (Lupe) Avila Welsh was born after me. My father's name Avila. Then came Virginia, Johnny, Abel, and Ernest. Then on top of that, they adopted my cousin Lydia.

GOODSILL: What was life like for these children?

GARCIA: Even though we were poor, we never wanted. We never knew we were poor, let's put it that way. We lived exactly where Sweetwater Country Club is. That's where my house was. They moved the house and built the country club right there smack on it. Matter of fact, there is a tree supposedly with a heart shape carved into it with my initials on it. If they haven't torn it down, my initials should be there, on one of the trees. I lived there until I got married in 1969 to Raul S. Garcia.

GOODSILL: What's his story?

GARCIA: His father was born here in Texas, I don't know exactly where. He was a sharecropper. When my husband's mother got pregnant, she didn't want to be alone, so she went back to Mexico to be with her mother and have her baby, my husband, over there.

GOODSILL: Was it easy to come back and forth in those days?



Hortensia Avila and Raul Garcia at their wedding in 1969.

GARCIA: Yes, very easy because a lot of people were needed to work picking crops. That is what his dad did. They lived in San Antonio and some other places. They picked fruits and vegetables. His father's name was Pedro Garcia. They only had three children. Raul was the first one.

Like I said, his momma didn't want to be alone, so she went to Mexico and had them with her parents. They came back and had two other children. My husband has passed away 16 years ago in 2000 of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

GOODSILL: Oh, that's not good.

GARCIA: No! That's why my nerves are always very short. I took care of him. If you love somebody you do it with love.

GOODSILL: Why kind of work did he do?

EDITOR'S NOTE: ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, is a progressive neuro-degenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. A-myotrophic comes from the Greek language. "A" means no. "Myo" refers to muscle, and "Trophic" means nourishment – "No muscle nourishment."

--The ALS Association (www.alsa.org/about-als/what-is-als.html)

Henry Louis Gehrig was born in New York on June 19, 1903, at a time when very few people were aware of ALS, the progressive and neurodegenerative disease. Gehrig grew up to become a great American athlete, having played first base for 17 years with the New York Yankees. But it was his death at the age of 37 from ALS that made the man a worldwide, household name.

ALS is commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease.

GARCIA: Did you see the movie Hacksaw Ridge? Well in that time, everything was quick, quick, quick. Within a 60 day period, he graduated from school, got drafted, and married. 60 days! The man never knew what hit him. (laughs) We were sort of engaged. He said, "Are you going to marry me?" I replied to him, "Either we get married or we forget about it." I didn't want to be waiting for a man that might never come back. It was the Vietnam War.

GOODSILL: What was his experience like in Vietnam?

GARCIA: He was going to be sent to Austria. Then he was going to Germany. We prayed and prayed. Believe it or not, they sent him to Alaska. We were there a year and a half. I went right after I had my child.

GOODSILL: Tell me the names of your children.

GARCIA: Robert Christopher Garcia and Christian Matthew Garcia. I wanted their names to sound good in Spanish and in English. My oldest is Robert Christopher Garcia. So, in Spanish it is Roberto Christovo Garcia. It sounds good. I am an American even though I am Hispanic, I was born and raised here. I don't have an accent, I just spoke American. We had a TV, so I was a little bit more worldly.

GOODSILL: How is it that your family had TV?

GARCIA: They loved wrestling. Daddy could afford a TV. (laughs) He would put the TV in the window at the farm so all the farmers would come around and see wrestling. I took advantage of it.

GOODSILL: Where did you go to school, and how did you get there?

GARCIA: I went to the Sugar Land schools by bus. There were only Hispanics in that area. Some of the time, the white kids would use the same bus, like the boss's kids and all that.

GOODSILL: Was there a seating arrangement?

GARCIA: No.

GOODSILL: You didn't experience segregation.

GARCIA: We didn't experience that. The people at our age and the teachers were more worldly. Now down in the valley, you could hear stories. Ah! They were hard stories. They were very cruel to them.

I will be honest with you, the only time I noticed discrimination was when I went to the movies. The reason is because we had to go upstairs, and could sit down with the Anglos. That was the only time. But even then, maybe I'm ignorant or didn't get out much, but I didn't see any of that.

I saw more discrimination with the prisoners. I remember when I was six years old, I was at my grandparents' house. My grandfather rushes in and says, "Get the children inside the house quickly, quickly." We heard dogs and whips and everything. Grandpa didn't want us to see what was happening on the road. The prisoners came out there on the top of the levee. I can only imagine, but I heard the sounds, the whips, the dogs, and the chains, and the hollering. It was horrible! But that is the only thing I remember about mistreating people.

GOODSILL: So when you went to school, you were how old?

GARCIA: I was seven or eight. my primary language was Spanish. Even though I could understand English, I only spoke Spanish at home.

GOODSILL: So what was the process of learning English for you?

GARCIA: Phonics. We learned it in one year. Then it was smooth sailing. Ms. Brown and Ms. Rob, the one they named the school after, were my teachers. And Rita Drabek. I saw her five years ago at school because she was on a board of directors at school. We started having old memories. I was her student ages ago. (laughs) It was nice to see her. I think she was the one that taught to me sit up straight all the time, if I'm not mistaken.

GOODSILL: So Ms. Brown was the one that taught phonics, and you credit that with you being able to...

GARCIA: ...to speak English. I think Miss Rita was in the fourth or fifth grade, maybe second or first. My other friends always got in trouble for speaking Spanish. I never got hit. I was a good student. I didn't make perfect grades, but I was a good student. When we were growing up, we didn't have to be told to go to school. We knew we had to learn. Nobody had to tell us we had to do our homework. We just did it.

I remember struggling. If I wanted to get a good grade, I always had to do everything twice, maybe because of our language transition. I don't know. Anyway, I did fairly well. As a matter of fact, I wanted to be in computers. I loved computers. But then cupid came along.

GOODSILL: Cupid will derail your plans.

GARCIA: I didn't even know what college was. When it came to the Hispanics, the schools pushed you towards being a hairdresser or a mechanic. My sister, Guadalupe, wanted to go to college desperately. They said, "No, no, no it would be better if you just went to be a hairdresser." My sister said, "No I don't want to — I am going to go to college."

And she went to college. The counselors advised her not to go to college. She has been a teacher for over 40 years now. She was even teacher of the year when she was at Stafford. She teaches high school at Elsik.

I didn't want to be a teacher and ended up being a teacher. But I enjoyed it. I was very stern and firm. Matter of fact, teachers came to me and they said, "Miss Tina," they called me Miss Tina in school because I would not allow them to call me Hortense because they called me 'Whore Tense'. (laughs) They couldn't pronounce it.

I managed them because I was brought up in a firm home. You listened. One time, we had a really bad year because that is when Hurricane Katrina kids came over. We had to take them in. Those kids were so uneducated and so disrespectful. One of them could have been 21. He looked 21. He would sit in the back with his girlfriend and he would start doing things. I said, "You can't do that. You are in school. Stop it!" I told him that several times and one day he really got mad at me, and he just started to lunge at me. This little black girl got in the middle and said, "You are not going to hurt Miss Tina." Little angel! I don't know what he would have done. That's how bad those kids were. Those poor little babies. They were really distraught. Some of them would just lay there. I think some didn't even go to school.

GOODSILL: So sad. I want to thank you so much for sharing your story with us!

GARCIA: I enjoyed it!

Interview ends