

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Irineo Reyes**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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Irineo L. Reyes

Transcript

GOODSILL: I am interviewing Irineo (Neo) Reyes who is from Richmond.

REYES: All my life.

GOODSILL: Let's start with your ancestors. Who's the first one who came to Fort Bend County?

REYES: My grandfather. Mariano Reyes.

GOODSILL: Tell me his story.

REYES: He was born in Candela, Tamaulipas, Mexico. He and his brother came to Texas in 1903.

GOODSILL: What were the circumstances that led your family to come from Mexico to America in the early 1900's?

REYES: They were told that they would make a better life, and get better pay. At the time, a dollar was worth a dollar. And they could spend the peso up until 1930 in the United States. A dollar, peso, and a Canadian dollar were the same value.

GOODSILL: Was it difficult for them to get from Mexico to the United States?

REYES: Not at the time. At the time, they just went across the border. Nobody would question nothing.

GOODSILL: So they came to get a better life. They were young men?

REYES: Yes, very young.

GOODSILL: No wives, no girlfriends came with them?

REYES: No, no (laughs). My grandfather met my grandma, Trinidad Macias. She was a widow. She had four children. I only remember Anselmo. He had three brothers who used to live in Richmond.

GOODSILL: So was she older than he was?

REYES: Yes. Then they had four together. The Ramos family was nothing but boys. Trinidad already four boys Mariano came up with four boys; Ysidro, Marcos, Antonio, and Claudio. Do you understand Claudio? Clyde, they used to call him Claudio.

GOODSILL: And Marcos was your father.

REYES: Yes, he was second born.

GOODSILL: Where did your grandfather settle?

REYES: In Waelder, Texas. He was farming there. Cotton and corn. They had four mules to do it with, one plow. It takes four mules to pull a turning plow. So they took turns with the four mules. They harvested with four mules. Then along came two white dudes. They had two Clydesdales pulling a big old wagon. They took all four mules and left the two Clydesdales. The mules eat one corn a day. You feed them one corn and they go off and eat grass. A Clydesdale, it eats ten ears of corn (laughs).

GOODSILL: Not a good trade.

REYES: No, it wasn't a trade. My grandfather was helping the whites get to their elderly, ill father. They said he was in San Antonio. NOTHING written, no papers, nothing, just. "Okay I'll wait for you for a month." They harvested the land. They picked up all the cotton that they had. Then in December, they had to turn the land. When the first guys came it was in October. By the end of October they should have gotten back with the mules. The turning plow was set up for four mules. The harness from the mules were about 18 inches wide. The Clydesdales were really wide! So my grandfather had to take this over to the blacksmith to fix up the harness and change to size of the horse. Man, it turned land that they didn't know was there. It was deeper than what they were doing with the mules. Ah, they were really happy. He goes to the blacksmith again and gets himself another plow. So now they have two plows! So now all the boys had a job. They had to pull all the rocks out. In Waelder, the farmland, if you ever go there, they have rows and rows of rock.

By that time, three of my grandfather's nephews had come into Texas from Candela. Juan Duran is the only one that I remember. His other two brothers were with him. So now they had four Ramos' and three Durans' to do the work.

GOODSILL: Is Ramos the name of Trinidad's first husband.

REYES: Yes.

GOODSILL: So everybody was working. How much land was it?

REYES: 120 acres.

GOODSILL: And Mariano was foreman but he didn't own it?

REYES: No. They told me who owned it but I forgot.

GOODSILL: A white man.

REYES: A white guy, yeah. Mariano was a sharecropper. Back in those days, everybody had a big family. Everybody makes a dollar a day, sun up, sun down. This goes on until 1940. In 1942 I worked for a dollar a day. When the harvest was JUST about done...the cotton in 1912...the cotton was about that big (gestures). It had about four bales. It takes ONE HUNDRED acres to come up with at least five bales. All that acreage just to come up with five. Well this particular time, after the deep plowing, the cotton is three feet tall!



GOODSILL: Big fertile soil because they tilled it.

REYES: Yeah, they hope these guys never come back for their horses. But the one who came was the Rangers. "You got some beautiful horses here." That's a year later when they were harvesting the cotton, the Rangers showed up. "You got beautiful horses." "They don't belong to me." "Yeah, we know. They belong to so-in-so from Dallas. You had them this long?" "No, I had them since October because these two white guys came and left their horses and took my mules." "Do you have any papers?" "What papers?" "The deed for the horses. The deed for the horses!" "No." "If you haven't got any papers, you've got a stolen horse, you are going to jail." He didn't even go to court. They sent him to Harlem.

GOODSILL: Who went, just Mariano?

REYES: Mariano because he was the one that made the deal. All the kids stayed up there. When the Rangers came my grandmother was pregnant with Clyde. She harvested all the land, all the cotton was picked, all the corn was picked up and then she bought herself some mules with that big harvest that they had and they went back to Richmond.

GOODSILL: They gave up sharecropping in Waelder and moved back to Richmond?

REYES: Yes, because my grandfather was in prison. Across the bridge to the park, 359, to the south of the river, to Blasdel Road was about 5,000 acres that used to belong to the Blasdels'. The only ones I knew were John Blasdel and Jacob Blasdel. Jacob Blasdel is the one that sold us the property right underneath the bridge. At the Brazos River turnaround.

The three Durans' and the four Ramos', and the three Reyes' wind up working for Mr. Blasdel knocking down all the trees, cleaning up the land. They were clearing the land. They had to knock down all the trees. It was all overgrown with pecan trees. Nothing but pecan trees across the bridge. They had to cut them all down because Mr. Blasdel wanted land for agriculture. He had from 359 on 90A...it was 59 and 90A going up to 359...the left side going to Houston, on the right side belonged to Mr. Blasdel and the other side belongs to John Blasdel. His sister married somebody across the bridge. Mrs. Jane Whatley was a teacher at Jane Long Elementary. The other brother lived in Thompson somewhere. Anyhow, when they clear out the land they had two acres of land. While some of the brothers were clearing up the land, the other brothers were cultivating the land.

GOODSILL: Were they sharecropping those two acres?

REYES: They were sharecropping. What they were doing in Waelder, they are doing here. But they only had two acres! In Waelder, they had 100 acres! So this two acres, is all they had, and they were clearing the land. In 1916 my grandfather got out of prison because of good behavior. The cotton was just coming up. "What made y'all think that we are going to do anything with two acres when in Waelder we had a HUNDRED acres for five bales! Now you've got two acres of cotton?" When my grandfather got out of prison the cotton must have been about five or six inches tall. As the weather turned that grew to eight feet tall. (laughs)

GOODSILL: The soil down there must be so good from the river, right?

REYES: Well, no, it was new soil.

GOODSILL: Oh they'd never grown a crop on it?

REYES: They had never grown a crop there! That cotton grew 8 FEET HIGH! (laughs)

GOODSILL: How many bales did they get?

REYES: Three bales to an acre. They had six bales!

GOODSILL: Ahhh. Oh he must have been so happy!

REYES: Then he really put the kids to work. They were working on burning up all the rest of the land.

GOODSILL: To clear it all. Then were they allowed to sharecrop that land?

REYES: The whole land, there is a 175 acres. 175 acres that they used to farm, right there where that church is...near Damon Street, Edgewood and 90. My grandfather lived at the corner of Edgewood Drive where it makes a curve. I was born three-quarters of a mile from 59 to the south, right there on Riveredge Drive. I must have been there when I was one. Then my father moved to a white house by the river. My sister and I were born. Then my two brothers were born there, Macario and Valdemar were born right there at house 29. We have been there all this time. The acreage amounted and my uncle Clyde had a house on the corner. He had about 50 acres. My father harvested 100 acres; about 75 acres in cotton and about 20 on corn. Everybody needed corn at the time because we were plowing with mules. We had to feed the mules so we needed corn.

I was raised back in the 30s as a cotton picker. I started working with my grandfather. We were real close. He would wake me up at 5:00 in morning or 4:30 and say, "Mijo let's go." We went to clean his onions and his garlic. He would show me in the dark, here this is grass, this is onions. (laughs) "You don't pull this out, if you do you are going to get it! You don't pull onions out. This is garlic." Just about the same thing. You go out there and you check. Whoo we done a good job while the sun was out. Everybody works right before the sun comes out and quits right after the sun goes down. If you quit in between and you get a bellyache and you couldn't make no dollar.

Everybody worked for that amount. The kids, we were all right. But we all had to stay with my grandfather. They gave us a potato sack to put our cotton in and then we emptied it into my grandfather's bag. (chuckles) We were always with my grandfather. He wouldn't let us kids mess with or get in a grownups way. My grandfather was the children keeper.

GOODSILL: Was he strict or was he humorous?

REYES: He was both. At dinnertime, you don't want to be with my grandfather. He sits us at the table about like this. All the grandkids. "What did you do today?" "I done this." "I picked up wood." "I picked cotton." "I done, you know, nothing." "NOTHING! Get off my table!" (chuckles) He was just like that. "Get off my table."

“Go do something and then come and eat.” Have you ever heard 2 Thessalonians 3:10... my grandfather didn’t know how to read, but he knew part of the bible. 2 Thessalonians 3:10: if you do not work, you do not deserve to eat. And it was as strict as that. Like he tells us, “Okay, sit down!” and one of us stood up, POW. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Let me guess. Let me guess. None of these kids ever ended up in the pen?

REYES: No!

GOODSILL: No. He taught them how to behave the rules and how to work hard. Yeah.

REYES: Yeah. All the nephews, the stepsons, they were all in line. Every time New Year comes around, Christmas comes around, 16 of September comes around, Cinco de Mayo comes around, he had all of us together. We kill a pig and we all have a big old party, all of us together. If that pig is not going to do it, we are going to have to kill another pig.

GOODSILL: Well how did you cook the pig?

REYES: To start with we had to have boiling water so we can skin the pig. Now you skin the pig, you hang him, you clean him inside out, you dress him, all the inside the pig you clean. You don’t throw nothing away: tripes and all this, liver. The whole inside is used. The blood is used. So you cook the blood with the liver, the heart, the lungs, and the tripe. Meanwhile we are passing water into the tripe. One of them pumping on the water and the other holding the end of the water sssshhh, cleaning all the inside of the water. And then after you clean him, you put him in lime water, which had been fixed two or three days prior. And the lime settles, so now you take that water and leave the lime on the bottom to another tub. That’s where you rinse all your tripes. Then you go back and rinse them to get that lime away from them. All these tripes from the inside of the pig was used to make sausage. Most of the pig had to be in sausage if there was anything left over. If you don’t eat the pig today, you can eat it tomorrow.

GOODSILL: No refrigeration.

REYES: No refrigeration, that’s right. So it has got to be smoked. That second pig was left over, we had to cut it and the slab side would come out of the ribs, and they salt it, hang it in what we call a smokehouse. So now we climb the trees and we start pulling out moss and make a big old pile of moss. That moss must last for about a week.

My brother and I were in charge of that smoking. As soon as we get up in the morning, we'd start up a fire. We get all these coals and then we wet the moss and put it on top of the coals. I think this smokes until it dries up and it start a fire. Then we go out there get some more wet moss. (laughs) It is FUN. We've done this for fun.

GOODSILL: It was fun for you. It was work, but it was fun.

REYES: Well, you don't consider it nothing work. Like in Christmas, we are going to get one toy.

GOODSILL: Like what?

REYES: Like a little tractor.

GOODSILL: Made of what?

REYES: Iron. Yeah, cast iron. All the toys back there were made to last. Now they are made out of plastic. We've never seen plastic. Forget it. We've seen the Cracker Jacks. They used to get a little car with iron. We accumulated a bunch of toys. Then my brother in 1939 got a little bulldozer. It had a rubber deal to pull with. Man, we got all the toys together. We had a lot of fun because he could twist it and it could go around under the house. We'd sit under the house, which was set on blocks, about three feet.

In 1939 I was given a toy. I still have that toy. I am the only one that had a toy from 1939.

GOODSILL: What is it?

REYES: It's got little balls. I should have brought it. It was like a ping-pong. When you used to go to the restaurants they had this ping-pong deal where you play. You hit that ball and it would go in different pockets.

GOODSILL: Are we talking pool or we talking pinball?

REYES: Pinball. So now I have a little thing to pull and it falls into that and it pooms.

GOODSILL: FUN! Good toy.

REYES: Yeah. I still have it. Even my great-grandkids, they have a toy today and tomorrow they are looking for another one.

GOODSILL: And you've got the same one since 1939. (laughter)

REYES: Yeah, I hang it on the wall.

GOODSILL: Well tell me something about your father and your mother and how your father met your mother.

REYES: My mother's father and grandma...my grandfather's name was Abacu. My grandmother's name was Maria Flores Lopez. They come from Torillon, Mexico. I can't think of the state, but it is Mexico. My grandfather Lopez had brown hair, green eyes, was white-complected with a red beard.

GOODSILL: Spanish?

REYES: Spanish. My grandmother was Maria Flores.

GOODSILL: And what did she look like?

REYES: She looked like me, very short, dark-complected, very dark. It was day and night from my grandfather. Everything that we'd lift and show my grandfather what color is this, he would tell us green.

GOODSILL: (laughs) Why?

REYES: Because he had green eyes. Back in those days, the people were real prejudice. Like when we'd go to a grocery store, they always had young ones checking on us. Go to a restaurant, the Mexicans were not allowed, only whites. This is right here in Richmond.

GOODSILL: Did your grandfather get better treatment because he was light complected?

REYES: He established himself in La Costa in the other side of San Antonio. He found himself a job with Southern Pacific Railroad. My grandfather is no bigger than me, short, five two or five three. My grandfather was bumped from La Costa and they send him into Freeport. By that time, my mother was about six years old. He had a brother by the name of Jose. They were together and then they got bumped again. He got moved to this side of Sugar Land. It's got a name.

GOODSILL: Sartartia?

REYES: Sartartia is the name. Anyhow at Sartartia they lived in houses from the railroad. What do you call them, section house?

GOODSILL: A place for the workers to live?

REYES: For the workers to live, yeah. Across the street was a milk farm, dairy farm. My uncle Jose found himself working at the dairy. So they had cheese and butter and milk every day.

GOODSILL: You didn't tell me what your grandfather's job on the railroad was.

REYES: Labor, like crossties. They had to get all the ties together before they put the rail on top. When they had a derailment, they had to go from their job to the other side of Houston, to Galveston. They were trucked out.

GOODSILL: Wherever there was a break in the line?

REYES: Yes, and get all the boxcars that were tore up. They had to get them in line, but they were still working on the tracks.

GOODSILL: So your grandfather did a lot of physical labor? So being light-complected did not help him for that work.

REYES: It did help! The rest of the workers were Hispanic.

GOODSILL: Yeah, what were they doing?

REYES: They were doing the same thing.

GOODSILL: So why was he better off?

REYES: Because he could eat. (laughs) They had a break on 290. There is a track that goes through there. I cannot remember the name of the town. But they were close to a restaurant. It must have been half a mile from that rail that got busted to the restaurant. So they all rushed to the restaurant. "WHOA! No Mexicans are allowed in this place! HE can come in." So that's when my grandfather comes in.

He didn't know a word in English. Can you imagine that? Know nothing in English. His boss man told him, "DON'T you even SPEAK when we are not going to eat." Tell them you're dumb!!

When he is let in the restaurant he thinks, "Man, I won't have to work!" And tells the guys on the crew, "I won't have to work. All I have to do is bring your lunch."

GOODSILL: He teased them! (laughter) I bet they were mad. Oh, I bet they were mad.

REYES: Oh yeah, because segregation was going on. That's why in town you see two Catholic Churches. We had the last bench in the Catholic Church in Richmond and Rosenberg. And holidays like in Easter, we didn't even have that!

GOODSILL: Because all the white people would come.

REYES: All the white people wind up in church. Even the old Hispanic ladies were standing around because the whites had to sit down. Today you get an old lady and you make room. Not in those days because we were Mexicans. They got Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1939. Saint John Fisher was started in '51 by Father John Broussard. He was my buddy. I cut his hair until the LAST day. I started as a barber back in '54 in Korea.

GOODSILL: Wait! Let's get to it in order. How did your father and your mother meet?

REYES: My mother was in Sartartia and my father was working at the Sugar Land refinery.

GOODSILL: He was! What was his job?

REYES: He worked on a boiler.

GOODSILL: The labor was very segregated there, too.

REYES: The black and brown worked together. The whites worked in the office. They were given preference even if they didn't know a thing. Even if he didn't know how to read. They were given preference over us.

GOODSILL: Was your father a young man. He is working at the boiler in the refinery.

REYES: He started working when he was about 16. My uncle Ysidro started there first and then he brought in my father. My mother went shopping and would tell my grandmother—"mira que bonito little boy—what a beautiful little boy". I guess they met at that store in Sugar Land. "You're going to be here tomorrow?" "I'll tell momma to bring me." She was very young.

GOODSILL: What was her name?

REYES: Juanita.

REYES: He kept on working until he was 19. At 19, he decided he is going to get married to Juanita. He had to be 21. My mother was born in 1914. She was very young, so someone had to sign for both of them. At that time, everybody married young to start a family.

Then my father got sick. He couldn't make it back to the refinery. He stayed with my grandfather in Richmond. My grandfather was still farming with uncle Clyde. My father started again because he couldn't go back to the factory. Something in the atmosphere made him sick. That cane that comes from Cuba. When my grandfather was in prison, they used to farm all the cane here, right there at Harlem.

GOODSILL: Prison labor was used to work agricultural land. After a while they outlawed the convict labor program.

REYES: Yeah. And they imported the sugar from Cuba. So now they build a rail into Galveston direct.

GOODSILL: They'd ship it from Cuba to Galveston then use rail from Galveston to Sugar Land. Something about the sugar...

REYES: ... it made him sick.

GOODSILL: Was it his lungs?

REYES: He was deteriorating real bad. My mother tells us. My uncle Ysidro and Antonio they stayed there until they died.

GOODSILL: Were they working in the boiler?

REYES: No, they worked all over.

GOODSILL: Did they live in Sugar Land?

REYES: Yes, Uncle Ysidro and my Uncle Tony lived in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: Did they have company housing?

REYES: At the time yeah, in the area just behind the refinery. That's where the housing was for the Hispanics and the blacks. The housing at the time was free, but in 1950 they sold them their houses if they wanted to buy. And all the rest of the white folks...

GOODSILL: Big houses?

REYES: Yeah. The oldest store was right there in front of Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: The mercantile?

REYES: Yeah, all the trading. The trading goes right there in front. It didn't have nothing across the tracks.

GOODSILL: Do you remember when they built The Palms Theater? Did you ever go there?

REYES: Yeah. All the theatres belonged to the Coles. We all had to sit in the balcony, all the Mexicans and the blacks on the upper balcony. We were not allowed on the bottom. So we filled up a cup all the way to the top with ice and spread it out there on the bottom. "HEY," everybody started yelling. Then when we go out, they checked our cups. By that time we all had put a little ice in there. And they checked it. "Okay, who threw the ice?" "Oh, I still got mine." We had to bring all our cups to the bottom.

GOODSILL: Is that right?

REYES: We didn't leave nobody to sweep, nobody to clean.

GOODSILL: Oh no trash?

REYES: No trash.

GOODSILL: Take care of your own.

REYES: Yeah. We were not allowed upstairs anymore. It was a nickel for a king size popcorn, a nickel for a family Coke, a nickel for a foot long Baby Ruth. Not too many choices. So we had popcorn, Baby Ruth, and a Coke. No other choice.

We don't have nothing. You go to the store and you don't have any choice. You have cornflakes, cheerios. There was something else. There were three things, that's it, and only one size. That's it.

GOODSILL: When you were a kid, did you ever go to Sugar Land to visit the uncles, Ysidro and Antonio?

REYES: Oh yeah. Yes, that's why I knew where the stores were.

GOODSILL: Did you like going to Sugar Land?

REYES: Not so much. See I don't know the cousins from Uncle Ysidro. After my grandfather died, he never brings them over. They went to Houston. They are scattered all over. I don't know how many there are.

GOODSILL: So your mom and your dad met. What year did they marry?

REYES: 1930.

GOODSILL: And then they begin to have the kids. And what year were you born?

REYES: 1932.

GOODSILL: What is your birthday?

REYES: June 28, 1932. Ester is July 6.

GOODSILL: But we haven't met Ester.

REYES: Ester is my older sister, Olga (Barr's) mamma. She was the first born. Ester, Neo, Macario, and Valdemar.

GOODSILL: So tell me about your life. You were born in 1932. Then what happens in your life?

REYES: It was great! I was my grandfather's right hand. I was always with him. He had me pulling weeds. He had me right by his side picking cotton. By the time I was four years old, I was walking three-quarters of a mile just for a glass of milk. I LOVE milk. My grandfather had a jersey cow. Ahhh, that was some good milk! Oooohhh. (laughs) I never, never drank any cold milk until I was in the fifties. Before that, it was all hot milk. Ahhh, it was great! My brother didn't like it. My sister was worst. (laughs)

Anyhow, I walked all the way up to the corner of Edgewood. My grandfather would put me to work right there. I'd go under the house, get chickens that lay eggs under the house. I'd crawl out there with a little old bitty flashlight in the dark. One thing, no imagination, up 'til now, I was never scared if there is a snake or there's a frog. I'd push it away. They never hurt me. I was never scared, I'd just crawl because my grandfather tell me to. And I'd come up there with some eggs. My grandfather, he feeds me. So I walk home now with ANOTHER glass of milk. I've already drunk MY glass of milk and I walk all the way home, about three-quarters of a mile but by the time I got home, there was no more milk. I drank it all. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Couldn't help it.

REYES: No, I got older. Must have gotten about eight years old. Back in 1939, my father on one side and Mr. Blasdel on the other side, "You know this boy is strong enough to hold a mule." Okay, and they gave me a little bitty old white mule. That little old white and I worked together.

The little house at 106 Riveredge was a motel. All the housing there under the bridge were tourist. I was given that job, knock on the door, if anybody stays there. If you see that somebody had laid there, I take their sheets to momma so they can be washed. Go around the same house leave five gallons of water. The rooms had one bed and one stove, one lightbulb. So I am supposed to leave two candles, a gallon of oil for the kerosene lantern. For that kerosene lantern I had to leave a gallon. That gallon had to be sure that it was to the top. They didn't have no plastic at the time. They had this little bitty old hole and I had to go to the Sinclair filling station right above where we live. Right at the end of the bridge was a Sinclair station. I take up all the cans and take them over to John Blaisdel, Mr. Jacob's brother. So I go out there and I fill up all the cans to the top with kerosene.

GOODSILL: Every day, one a week?

REYES: Every day because we don't know if the people stay overnight or not. Sometimes three of them stay.

GOODSILL: What do you mean by tourists? Why would the tourist come and stay in a house, traveling?

REYES: Yeah. There have always been tourist that are looking for housing overnight, you know like a hotel.

GOODSILL: Hispanics?

REYES: Noooo.

GOODSILL: White people.

REYES: In 1947 my Dad bought all the white houses down there from M. Blasdel for \$15,000. Can you imagine! Back then wages were a dollar a day, sun up, sun down when he bought the places (chuckles). My dad tells my mother, "Este Viejo esta loco!"— this guy is crazy. He wants \$1,000 down and the rest we can pay monthly or we can pay yearly.

GOODSILL: He's crazy because he is asking so much money?

REYES: "Where in the world am I going to get \$1,000 to give as down payment?" Oh, my dad was an alcoholic. Every day he goes out. Everybody was getting paid a dollar a day, but he was a sharecropper. If he sells ten bales a day he gets a bunch of money. A bunch of money for him and for his friends and forget about going home. So my mother would ask Marcos—I owe so-and-so some money. He would give her a five, give her a one. My mother would stuff them in the mattress. She had been doing this since I was born or since Macario was born.

So, in 1947, when he says, "Where am I going to get \$1,000?" My mother says, "If you are going to straighten out and PROMISE me that you will not be drinking anymore, I'll get you a thousand dollars!" My dad said, "You think you are going to get it?" My mom said to him, "Yes, I'll get it. You just put your knee on the floor and tell me you are going to do better." So he knelted on the bed and he said, "Okay Juanita, I will never drink a beer from this day." Then my mom said, "Well, get your knife out of your pocket and cut the mattress." Schrusssh, money comes out (laughs). It didn't have no cotton in that mattress. It was all bald. Yeah, it was all full of bills. It was over \$3,000 that my mother had saved in that mattress. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And was your father good to his word? Did he stop drinking?

REYES: "Juanita, can I drink one beer." "No, no, no, no beer, no beer."

GOODSILL: So he never drank again?

REYES: He drank after he paid off. I went to the service in '53. When I came back in '54, he gave his last payment. THEN his party started. But he would go by himself. After this he take mamma out all over.

You were asking about my name. We are all ahead of time. My first grade teacher couldn't pronounce Irineo. She asked my dad if he could call me Pete. "Yeah, call him whatever as long as you teach him something." She didn't know that I had a hard head. Anyhow, all I hear from my teacher...I didn't understand her. I had to ask my buddies the one on the side. Like the first day of school—anybody got a knife? "Que dise?" "Do you got a navaja?" Oh, I pulled my navaja out. "Go get me a switch." "Que dise?" "Vas a tri una barra."

Okay I went to get a switch—maybe she is going to spank somebody. I cut one switch and I didn't like it. I got me a heavier one and I brought it to the teacher, and she swish, "Don't you EVER bring a knife to school." WHOOO. I went home and my dad tells me—you got whipped by your teacher. "Why?" "For nothing." "NOBODY gets spanked for nothing!" I got it again.

GOODSILL: From him?

REYES: Yeah. I used to get spanked EVERY day at home.

GOODSILL: Oh, you were a bad boy?

REYES: No, no, the bible says if you do not love your children you will not straighten them out. I was the best, most loved from our family. I was SPANKED EVERY DAY!

GOODSILL: (giggles) That's how much she loved you to straighten you out.

REYES: To straighten you out, you've got to have love. It is going to hurt me more than you.

GOODSILL: It sounds like you weren't a bad kid; you were just mischievous.

REYES: I still am!

GOODSILL: Still doing it. You can't help yourself.

REYES: I went to my second grade, third grade, I went to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The teachers called me by my right name, Irineo, San Irineo. Here I am Saint Irineo. As Saint Irineo you will find it in June 28th, that's my birthday. When my sister was born on the July 6 comes something like Sapopa. Ohh, my mother did not like Sapopa at all. Look what beautiful name it brought. What? Ester. Oh, yeah, put down Ester. So now she is Ester; she is not Sapopa.

GOODSILL: (laughs) As you grew up it was time to join the service. Tell me about that.

REYES: I was drafted. I wanted to go. I always wanted to go, but in Hispanic families—"No, don't go, that's where people get killed." They don't know that if it is not your time, you don't get killed. If it is your time, you are going to die. You don't have to go nowhere.

GOODSILL: So what year did you get drafted?

REYES: I was drafted January 1953. My training in Fort Hood was great! I had a big old fat sergeant for the first three weeks. We would get in a truck. We'd drive a block; we'd get off. He had us all spoiled. We'd get in a truck, we'd drive a mile, get off.

GOODSILL: Training wasn't too rigorous?

REYES: Dinner time comes around and he'd bring the truck. Every company has got its own chow hall. So we didn't have to do it. Fourth week, we have this slim guy, and there are two or three of them that were late. "OUR TIME STARTS AT SEVEN! BY THE WAY, I'M YOUR NEW SERGEANT! And today we are going to start soldiering. I don't want no fat kids in my yard."

GOODSILL: Were there fat kids?

REYES: Yeah, there were a bunch of fat kids. We weren't doing nothing.

GOODSILL: Driving trucks, eating.

REYES: Just eating and...

GOODSILL: Did you get fat?

REYES: No, I've always weighed the same thing, 145. You can see my records, 145. If I show you my card it would show 145.

GOODSILL: Was this a mixed group of kids, racially?

REYES: When Eisenhower was voted in, he integrated all the blacks and whites. In San Antonio when we first got there, we were drafted into Houston, and we took a ride into San Antonio. AND THAT FIRST DAY, that first day, we had this group from Corpus and all down the coast to San Antonio who didn't know a word in English. Our group was bi-lingual. Everybody from Fort Bend County, Harris County was bi-lingual. And then we had this group from Louisiana, Baton Rouge and a group from Mexico. In the middle of the night, we were just about to go to bed they started, "CALLENSE CON UNA FREGADA! "What did he say?" He said this. Well tell them this: "TU TAMBIEN." All our group. (laughs) And then the Louisiana group got into it. They're speaking a little French.

GOODSILL: Cajun. (laughter) Multi-lingual group.

REYES: So we had a triple-lingual. Everybody yelling whatever. The sergeant walks in. "LIGHTS OUT AT TEN! If y'all keep making noise, y'all are going to have a G.I. party." "Hey man, hey bato, vamos a tener un party." (laughs) Okay, we didn't know what a G.I. party was. We found out. The sergeant came back again and turned on all the lights. Can you imagine the whole floor? It was one room and everybody yelling from the same room. There had to have been at least 400 of us in one room, so it was noisy. So now the party begins. "In case y'all don't know what a G.I. party is, it is cleaning up your room. I want everything clean," the sergeant said. The lieutenant shows up in the picture. He gave us an hour. And he comes in with white gloves and he goes up on top of the... "YOU CALLED THIS CLEAN? Start all over again." We stayed up all night long with this G.I. party until the reveille comes on.

Then we had to rush to the bulletin board. If your name is there, we have to go. They had all our names alphabetically, every last name that was in the room in alphabet and all divided. They had police duty. And they had classes for eyesight, classes for typing...we all had to go. Everybody was divided. Everybody had to go to a different place. Everybody had to be dressed. Everybody had to be shaved. Some go to the chow line. Some go to cooking. Well, I wind up at the police call. I didn't know what a police call was, we'll find out. I was on K.P. myself and three other guys to peel potatoes. There was about a thousand bags of potatoes. We had to do this for an hour, and that's all the potatoes they needed. They came and showed us how to do the potatoes. You put ten pounds of potatoes, punch a button, potatoes rotate, three seconds throw them out, get another ten pound, fill up a big old thing and take it to the front. We do the same. We met up with a brand-new group that had just come in—all our buddies from Fort Bend County. Haha, I forgot about the potatoes. Potatoes came out about one inch thick. (laughter) Ah, we got chewed for that.

GOODSILL: Did you actually get sent to Korea?

REYES: Oh that sergeant, that first sergeant he was a ranger. "Now we are going to soldier." That day we had to go to the tank battalion. That tank battalion was seven miles. Then the transportation sergeant showed up and he said, "Your trucks are ready." "Trucks! Who ordered trucks? I don't need no trucks." We looked at each other, its seven miles to the tank battalion. So we started marching. "Double time whoa!" We started running. Man, it is a good thing I had a good body. We were young. Man this sergeant was crazy.

Seven miles we had to run. "Don't you y'all think I'm your enemy! I'm trying to help you out! When you confront the enemy you will be ready." Shoot, ain't got no more enemies than him. Oh God, he runs us all out there. Half of the bunch was late getting there.

Then when our classes started about the tanks, what kind of ammunition they put in there, how fast they run, all this about the tanks. Then there comes a break. HOW Company didn't get a break. HOW company was a 7th regimental team, so we can stay ready. Everybody rests but us. Fifteen minutes we had to run around come and sit down and didn't even have water don't have nothing. Okay lunch comes around and we run seven miles to our chow hall. And then he is telling us, "As soon as you get through eating get in ranks because we are fixing to run back." We got so used to this sergeant that within a month we were ahead of him. He was just on the same stride, same stride.

Then comes the end of the training. After this guy had us running, every time he gives us a paper and he said here take it to the first sergeant and go backwards make me believe you are coming back ALREADY. You would get that paper and take off and come back and give him the response right quick. At the end of the training, we all got blue ribbons. This guy treated us so bad. They picked up four short guys for an endurance race, a little bit over 24 miles. These guys were about this much taller than us. They were looking at us. "Why are y'all out here for?" "For the endurance race, it says there." They laughed at us. There comes another group. "Hey, why are you guys here for?" "For the endurance race." "Oh man, I feel for y'all." The whole division of tall guys was put against us. When they popped the gun, everybody left us. Everybody left us. We are all four together, four together. Run about five miles and it was the first group laying there. They are all sweating. They are all out. As we keep on going, there was one guy, two guys, another guy. We were still going. They give us water. The sergeant had us so used to nothing holding us down, so we just kept on going just at a slow stride. We all broke the line together. We left EVERYBODY behind.

GOODSILL: That's a good story.

REYES: Okay, so now we are ready for Korea. They sent us to San Francisco, Pittsburg, California where the other camp was. From there we had to go into San Francisco on a ferryboat. At Pittsburg, we stayed for a MONTH before that boat was set up. We went on the Marine Adder. There were 1,500 of us in the Marine Adder. Nothing but water for 17 or 18 days. Water, water, water. "If anybody decides that they want to see Hawaii, look on the starboard side!" Everybody goes to see Hawaii. It is a 150 miles due south. (laughs) All we seen was seagulls.

GOODSILL: So you went straight to Korea?

REYES: No, Sesaboo, Japan. While I was in California, I couldn't drink beer. Here in Texas you can drink beer. You are in the military you can drink beer. As soon as we got to New Mexico, on a train, they took our beers right there at El Paso at New Mexico border. "How old are you?" "Twenty-one." "Let me see your..." I needed a month to be 21. Twenty-one was June 28. This was May, no beer. Then when I got to California, no beer. I met a young lady from Galveston. She was a bartender. She tells us, "Oh, I went in there with Sam Ortega." Sam Ortega was about a foot taller than me. He was going to be 19 years old when he was drafted. I was 20. When we met this girl, she says, "How old are you?", because I asked for a Coke. Sam asked for a beer. He got his beer, no questions asked. "How come you're not drinking?" Because all the other places had already told me—you come June 28 and we have a party. Okay, no beer. So when I walked in, "How old are you?" I asked that girl. She said, "I am 25." "25, oh come on! You don't look a day over 15!" "I don't?" "No, you are just as bad as I am. I'm fixing to be 30, and they tell me I look like a kid." "You do." "Here give me that Coke," and she gave me a beer. Man, we started drinking there all the time. (laughs) Go visit her every day for that beer.

REYES: In Korea I was loved. When I got to Japan, they thought I was a JAPANESE! They thought I was Japanese and they were hiding everything. They gave me brand new clothing. Even the sergeant had patches all over, and here I am with a lieutenant's outfit. Everything new, even the rifle. I was sent like that to Korea. In Korea when they gave me a job to do, I was the most loved. Just like home. They thought I was Korean.

Now, even this past week there's a lady that comes with a bunch of boxes from Korea. And I said, "Oh are don ha de ron hare a ho meganda." "Really!" she said. (laughs) She thought I was Korean. Yeah, that's what they thought when I was in Korea. But that's what they used to sing.

GOODSILL: But you were in your American uniform.

REYES: Yeah. I was a corporal, acting sergeant. So every time they said sergeant, I would go to the office, and they would give us a job. One sergeant with ten guys would give us a paper with what we are supposed to do—make small rocks out of big ones, all different colors, so we can beautify our area so we can do whatever. We'd go out there and take a school and dig a trench to build a school. We'd do stuff like this in Korea.

When I first got there to Korea, we ended in Incheon and we could hear the bombing. It was in the middle of the night. Bombs, bombs going up and down. You could hear them from one side of the country to the other. Thum, thum, thum. Golly, these fellows don't even let me SLEEP man! And they are just making noises. The train stopped and we wind up at the foot of Popasan. Didn't even know where we were. It was raining. It was monsoon season. Our tent had more rain inside than the outside. (chuckles) Okay, we were seven G.I.s that were unloaded there, seven. There were two Hispanics, three blacks, and the rest of them were white. We were told to stay while the others...there were only seven Americans and the rest of them were ROK (Republic of Korea) Army.

We were sent there to do the cooking for the fellows on the front line. Okay, so we got up. We fed them. At noon, we had to go to the front line to take the meal. We get two Jeeps. One of them was liquid—tea, coffee, and what have you. The other one was meat, potatoes and the rest of the vegetables. One day we got hit. Turned over, no meal. Until about two hours later, we had to go back. We had to straighten up the Jeep. It's funny when you are in combat, I was never scared like I'm going to get killed. You are just angry. So here we are. We got hit. We got turned over. We got to go back and cook some more. By the time we got to the line, about three, we got cussed and everything.

GOODSILL: That's why you're angry all the time. Can't ever get it right?

REYES: Another time that we went to take the groceries, they had a barrage of mortar coming in. Little bombs all over the place. Everybody running to the foxholes, and here we are four of us with HEEE!

GOODSILL: No foxholes.

REYES: No foxholes.

GOODSILL: Out in the open with the tea and the meat.

REYES: "Hey, here is the meal. Here is the food." "Oh man you better hide, you better hide!" We were waiting for them when the barrage was off. Nobody got hurt. And we were standing there waiting for them guys to come and get their meal (chuckles). Finally they come and got their meal and we took off. When we were back, we clean our kitchen. We had time. We patched up the tents. We are climbing the tents and patching the tents from the other hand, putting gunk on it and then gluing it, glue the patch and getting needled. We had to do the trenches. We made a big hole so we can put all the ammunition that was duds, that didn't blow and to blow them up.

On April 18, they got another meeting there. They wanted four corporals, four corporals. And they go on—they need a sergeant with five men. We need a sergeant with 12 men. We need a sergeant with seven men. Is the corporal job easy? Okay, we got one, you and you and you. Go to the first sergeant. They gave us a box, a shoebox. Eeee, I never cut hair before. What's all this? The general is coming Saturday. This was Thursday. They need every last Tom, Dick, and Harry with a haircut. Oh, I never cut hair. All four of us never cut hair before. How do we do that???

GOODSILL: You learned in three days.

REYES: We had to learn in one day. They said, "Put the hat on, chase it with the scissor and then go up..." but then there are only three guys with three hand jive clippers, no electrical clippers. We had to go all the way up to the line. OKAY, and I move about that much. One just in the top of the ear. I was doing this number—errr, Man, this is heavy.

GOODSILL: Hands were hurting.

REYES: Now we understand why he said only three clippers and four men.

GOODSILL: Three guys clipping; one shaking his hand to relieve the cramp?

REYES: Yeah, three guys clipping and one shaking his hand. And here we are, nothing but cuss words because this thing pulls. So we got through with the first in one hour.

GOLLY, that's 150 guys. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Oh that sounds awful.

REYES: By the time the general came Saturday, we had 17 more guys to go. We went up on the other side of the hill to finish them. Then everybody had their haircuts, with all the hair on top (laughs) long and all bald on the sides.

GOODSILL: Oh, cut from the helmet down.

REYES: Yeah (laughter). So now, we're barbers. EVERY DAY we had to cut hair. By the time the month was over, we already had an extra clipper because now it takes an hour to do with that hand jive. It takes less than 15 minutes to do it with the clippers. In October, they sent me home. EIGHTEEN days on a boat going from Soul, Korea to Seattle, Washington. In between that we had a storm. By the time they said Hawaii, man that boat was on the swells OLD swells! , BIG That boat was carrying 3,000 people! There were 2,000 enlisted, 500 officers, and a 500 women, and the crew of the General Pope.

When we started moving with that storm, it felt BAD. We didn't know how bad it was going to get. We were on a mountain of water waaaaay above all the waters looking down. Then we are in a hole of water—man all the mountain of water on top. Then you get on top of the mountain and the boat goes like this and you can hear the propellers hitting the dry land—shu shu shu shu shu. Then like the Poseidon Adventure, you think it was going to turn over, but it just kept on going. That boat STINKED (made sound of disgust). I never got sick, going or coming. I never got sick.

GOODSILL: But everybody else did and it smelled terrible.

REYES: There were a few that didn't get sick, but it smelled TERRIBLE! I was on kitchen police all the way. They put me with the cups and saucers. I was handing them cups and saucers. I had to hold a WHOLE line of deals as it was shaking. I lost it! EVERY LAST THING WAS BROKEN! Had to get some new ones from the warehouse. All the cups, trays, everything was broken. If you don't catch...like the table was this long. You better catch something coming out or everybody spits on them.

OH! On the way to Korea, I ate nothing but oranges. That was the only one I didn't have to clean up the peel. Most of the time when they were clean, you got out there and rinse them out. I'd eat them peel and all. That peel helps to settle your stomach. I didn't know that, but I was doing it and somebody tell me. In my training, I was set for the assault team. There were about 12 of us, one out of each division, one out of each company out of the division.

We were sitting in this ravine. The officer that was in charge told us just lay low because I am going to see where the rest of the division is coming through. We have to assault. We stayed there and I run out of water. I was pinching leaves from all over the place and getting water, feeling real good. About an hour later, the officer comes in and jumps all over me. "Eeee!!!" "What are you doing! You are gonna die. You are gonna die! That is poison oak, poison ivy, poison whatever. Nothing but poisonous leaves that I was putting in my mouth. So he gets us all out of there and he says, "We meet tomorrow at the black so-and-so at 4:30." So we left and slept early to be at the place on time.

At 4:30 I was there and there was nobody else there. Five comes around and still nobody there. Finally, 5:30 a Jeep comes through there and eeee. "You know Officer Gallagher?" "Who are you?" "Private Reyes US54102013." "Get in the Jeep." "You are supposed to be dead!" So I got in the Jeep. "Where's Sergeant Gallagher?" "He is at the clinic, the hospital."

They took blood from my forearms, from my arm from my sit down, from my chest, from my waist, from my legs. (chuckles) They took a bunch of tubes. I am supposed to be poisoned. Everything normal. I went to see that officer. Eeeway! He had huge bumps all over his body, all over his face. He was bad fully swollen. He could see me through a crack of his eye, one eye. The other eye was all closed up.

GOODSILL: He was allergic; you weren't?

REYES: "You are supposed to be dead!" (laughter) "Hey, I was raised on a farm. I never drank water. I always drank weeds. Everything was raw at the farm. My dad would never give us water or nothing. He would just say there's some cabbage, there's mustard, there's turnip." So when I was in the military I had no problem.

At one time while I was there in Korea, after the war and everything was done, when I was doing the barbering, they had another incident. I was the gunner for the 105 Recoil-less Rifle. It was mounted on the Jeep. We had three Jeeps. We had to go up the hill. We carried food for three days. Went up the hill, food for three days and nothing but cans and what have you, boxes and boxes of cans for those three days. Wind up there on the third day. It says maintain radio silence for the next seven days. We were set up. We had already dug about three or four graves.

In the orient, the rich had set up on the top of the mountain, it all depends on how much you own. At the bottom of the mountain you are a nobody. You ain't got a penny to your name. At the center of the mountain, you own a cow or three. Okay, so here we are on a grave and three guys and we can put our Jeep in there. Then the fourth day, I told the guys I was in charge. (chuckles) "I need two volunteers." "Oh, you lousy so and so afraid to come outside here. Got us out here starving now you want us to do some work." "There is a hut down there. They are bound to have something to eat. You two guys and go down there tonight." So they pulled straws.

Two guys went. All the rest of us, there were 12, so there were ten left. We got some candles so we could warm up our water and have something boiling by the time they come back. They brought potatoes and eggs. I was starving! I tasted my water and it wasn't even warm yet! The potatoes were there. I got to open a potato. That milk just run into my mouth. Aw, Man, it tasted so good.

So I decided to get me a stick, chop the head off of an egg, put salt and pepper and mix it. "What you doing now??" "I'm starving man. I'm hungry." I drink my egg. "Does it taste good?" They said it better taste good because that is all you are going to get. "Get me another egg." "Man you are going to run out of eggs!" "Aye, you better start eating something."

By the time the seven days were over, and they say report back to your outfit, our group, all 12 of us, had gained from three to six pounds. All the other groups had lost. Man, here we go again jumping on us. "How did y'all gain weight when y'all supposed to have nothing to eat?" Hey, we had plenty to eat up there.

GOODSILL: Ha! I want to change the subject and ask you about the land that you have underneath the overpass. What happens when the Brazos floods?

REYES: The people that do not live there think it's dangerous, but I have been living there all my life. The first flood was in 1940 that I remember. That moved the river 150 feet to where it is now. When it floods the high bank comes down.



Brazos River flood in 1940. Irineo Reyes (r) with his father.

GOODSILL: Falls in?

REYES: Falls in. The low bank, where we are at, moves.

GOODSILL: You are at the low bank and it moves outwards, so you GROW land.

REYES: Yes. So it is in my favor!

GOODSILL: (laughs)

REYES: Okay, the pillar on the east bridge, was in the middle of the land back in those days. Now it is in water! It is about 50 feet into water.

GOODSILL: Because the high side keeps falling down?

REYES: Yes. They had put cars, every kind of rocks. The county comes and drops rocks,

drops cars, drops refrigerators to fill it up. With the next flood, surrp (sound) cleans it out.

GOODSILL: All the rocks and the refrigerators and everything run downstream.

REYES: Run down the stream.

GOODSILL: There is no way to stop nature.

REYES: No. Back in '38 at the trestle they put a bunch of iron with wire. They had ALL this put in and now it is caving in! All the people right there on Blaisdel Road are losing a lot of land. Another 50 years and the trestle falls into the water.

GOODSILL: But your land is growing?

REYES: My land is growing, yeah.

GOODSILL: If the land grows do you own it or does it belong to the county or the city?

REYES: Fifty feet from the water's edge is mine.

GOODSILL: So the homes on the west side of the Brazos don't flood too much?

REYES: No.

GOODSILL: The Brazos River underpass road gets flooded, but not the houses?

REYES: It flooded 1940. (shuffling papers as he shows pictures). In 1940, as I remember, this happened in November 24, 1940. The river rose 38.7 feet. It had to be at least 59 because in 1990, the geological survey went up ten feet on the status of the river. In 1957, it read 37 feet, but it was really 47 feet!

In '57, I had water all the way around my house. This past year (2015) the water was two feet lower. I was showing these photos to the mayor, Evalyn Moore, when she came to visit me. It doesn't go real fast. It takes forever. When it goes up to 35 feet it starts spreading. It takes more water. It is very slow moving after that.

GOODSILL: Once the level of the river gets up to 49 feet it begins spreading out? And after that it is slow to rise?

REYES: Yes. Thompson...it's a foot of water all over Thompson. Needville. I don't see how Needville get it, but Needville gets some water there. I've been doing this since 1964. And all the time people think that I should get away from there. The news media comes and makes it real bad like we should move out. Do you know when they built the bridge? When did they build that courthouse? They built it in '90. That is when they were building the bridge. In '91 we had the flood. In '91 that is when I saw the most media here. EVERYBODY from Houston was here. Everybody from Richmond was at my house.

GOODSILL: But you were fine?

REYES: "When are y'all going to move out? When are y'all going to move out?" "Hey, man, I just moved in." (laughs) I says nobody is moving out. They say, "Well the river is high." "Yeah, but that is where it stays."

Back in 1913 the river rose to 48.2. was two feet below my barbershop. What do they call that, the 100-year flood?

GOODSILL: Where is your barbershop located?

REYES: 106 Riveredge. It would never happen again. There are about eight dams in between here and Waco. All that keeps the water balanced. Right now they are letting water out of the dams so they can...

GOODSILL: Send it down to the Gulf because it is too full up north from all the rainfall?

REYES: So now when they get another rain, it holds the floods. In 1914, they built that dam around Houston because in 1913 they had a big old flood. I was listening to one guy the other day, it rained more in '57 than it did in 1914. But in 1914 they didn't have no dams at all.

GOODSILL: Right, no detention, no lakes, nothing to hold it.

REYES: Yeah, no retention.

GOODSILL: Okay thank you so much for this great interview!