

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Mary Morales Camacho**

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Mary Morales Camacho (r)

Transcript

COOK: Mary let's begin with some biological information. Tell me a little bit about when and where you were born.

CAMACHO: I was born on October 6, 1925 in Sugar Land, Texas. At that time it was a very little, small town. We called it The Quarters at that time because it was not Mayfield Park then. I didn't go to a hospital to be born that's what my mother told me. It was a mid-wife and I think it was an African-American who delivered me.

It is hard for me to remember those years but I do remember that my mother wanted to have me baptized. She was a very strong person in teaching us the faith for us to continue. At that time St. Theresa's was just a small church. There wasn't a priest, yet she brought me and had me baptized here. It was not an easy life. Some of the memories I can't say. I do remember very clearly when my mother told me that she came to the United States to Sugar Land.

COOK: And what was her name?

CAMACHO: Vicenta Duran Morales. My mother came here between the ages of fourteen and fifteen due to the fact that in Mexico her mother had passed away. The family was just lost. She told me that she just walked across the bridge. She hardly ever went back to Mexico. She was afraid they would have her deported because she never fixed any papers. An older sister of hers was already here living in Sugar Land, Texas. She came here and naturally it was a hard life for her because she had a child already, born in 1919.

The first person that they saw around was a man who was probably older than her. They married her to that man, who was my father, Jose Morales. Mother was born in 1905. My brother, George Morales, was born on September 9, 1921. So you can see she was a very young person.

COOK: Where did you live in Sugar Land?

CAMACHO: At that time the Imperial Sugar Company had little homes for the employees. You didn't even pay any rent at that time. They would just let you live because you were working there. My father was working for Imperial Sugar at that time.

COOK: How long did you live in one of these homes?

CAMACHO: Until we grew up. That was the only place we could live. In those days you couldn't live any other place. It was a separate...it was different. The Anglos lived in one place and the Hispanics in another place, segregated. But it was a beautiful life. We enjoyed it because everybody was so friendly. I can remember at seven years I felt I was already grown up. And the reason is because there was not anything else that you could do but help the family. My education was just to the seventh grade. My mother couldn't send me after that. I had to help when she had the children. My brother was between fourteen and fifteen when my father passed away. So he and I were the ones to help the rest of them. She had two more sons, Angel and Louis.

COOK: Now what type of work did your parents do?

CAMACHO: My father worked at Imperial Sugar...that was the only place you could work. He did change jobs later on as we grew, like at the canning plant. He would also go out to work in the fields picking like potatoes and green beans to bring us food home. My mother worked, believe it or not, sewing in a little shop. In those days there was no where you can go get help. The only help you could get with a loan was with the company. Then you would have to pay it back. But if you couldn't afford it you couldn't do it. Mother made clothes and ironed for people. There was a little boarding house in those days. She would go and help those people there. I remember I was seven years old because I couldn't find her one day and I walked out of the house going to look for her. My brother and I had to do what we could. He worked for a fruit stand. That was the first job that my oldest brother had. Later on my father couldn't get a job. So in 1935 he thought maybe we should relocate.

COOK: Okay now was he laid off from Imperial Sugar?

CAMACHO: I think so. At those times there were just a few jobs that that they had. He was laid off. And he was the only one that was working because my mother would work but just doing odd jobs. So in 1935 we relocated to Richmond, Texas but it didn't last very long. My oldest brother had a virus and when they brought him to the hospital mother knew he was gonna pass away. The appendix has busted inside.

COOK: Oh. So sad.

CAMACHO: So we returned back and he died in 1936. I think it was April 22. That was the child she had with her when she came to the United States. His name was Salvador. She wanted to stay with him when he was so sick. They told her she could stay but not to make any noise. About that time she had Bell's Palsy, like a paralysis. She returned back to Sugar Land after my brother passed away but she wouldn't go anywhere anymore. In 1936 my youngest sister was born and I started working. I would go help at other people's houses. My first job was cleaning homes for big people.

COOK: About how old were you?

CAMACHO: I was eleven years old when my father passed away. It must have been about sixteen years old. I worked at the homes of Mr. Kempner, who used to be with Imperial Sugar. I was scared to go there. I was a young girl. And I had to go upstairs and I felt noises, but I still worked there. I wanted to do something to help to take care of my brothers, help my mother, and help my brother. I remember our first Christmas tree. They gave it to him at the fruit stand. It was just covered with nuts. There were no toys in those days we could afford. There was nothing like that at all. You just had to be able to survive. In 1937 my father passed away. They found him in the creek.

COOK: Oh!

CAMACHO: So that was another thing that hit us very hard. My brother was not even fifteen years old. So we had to go back to Sugar Land from Richmond. We lived sometimes with my mother's sister - all seven children of us in one room. That was in Sugar Land, Texas. In the barrio. It wasn't really Mayfield Park because we were on the opposite side. And that's when the next thing happened and they fired my father. My father use to drink, we had alcohol in the family. So my brother and I we had to sometimes be without mother since we were the oldest. And that's how we came back. Sometimes we would go to stay with others and would say, "Well you have too many kids you can't stay here." My mother went through such a hard time.

COOK: Oh!

CAMACHO: She's been gone twenty-six years. And I still remember everything that she taught me to this day. She was such a strong person! She always would tell us just try to be what you can. Be satisfied. There was no place that you could go for free. The only place would be church. That's how I started coming to church. Learning and teaching the rest of the children, taking care of them.

When the second war came they drafted my brother, not realizing that he was the only one that we had to take care of us, to support us. But they said no he had to be drafted. So he left, but we all worked together. My mother went to work for Imperial Sugar and I was waiting to be eighteen so that I could get a paying job. I went to work at Imperial around '44 or '45.

COOK: What did you do there?

CAMACHO: I used to pack the little bags of sugar. I used to turn sacks. I did whatever they needed me I would do it there. In 1946 I got married and I stayed at home with my children.

COOK: Good for you.

CAMACHO: But in 1965 my oldest son was drafted. He was in the Vietnam War. I had two sons that served in the Vietnam War.

COOK: Let me go back just a minute . Your brothers and sisters went to school? Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling?

CAMACHO: I was not able to go, I had to miss school having to help my mother when she had the babies. I was the oldest. I had to be with her. I went to the seventh grade.

COOK: How about your brothers and sisters?

CAMACHO: I had another half-sister. That was the only one that graduated from high school. She still works for the city of Stafford part-time.

COOK: Is that right? What is her name?

CAMACHO: Anita Morales.

COOK: Did your brothers or sisters work in Sugar Land?

CAMACHO: You would not believe that, my mother never believed in the women working. She always thought the women were at home. The husbands were the ones that had to work. Of course, she didn't include me because there was no choice; it was just my brother and me that we had to help her support the rest of the kids. But the rest of them she says no. My youngest sister...I think she went to work probably, in her thirties.

COOK: Tell me about working there during World War II. What jobs were available to the women?

CAMACHO: My mother went to work at Imperial when my brother left for the service. Her sister worked there too. I remember my job when I went over there age eighteen; I had to go and get those empty sacks and you had to pack 'em full of sugar. Finally they gave me another better job which was in the packing department. You packed the little bags sugar. I remember when we were working at the Imperial Sugar we would get together and try to send packages to the boys.

COOK: So you'd send packages of sugar?

CAMACHO: Sugar to them and little gifts, things like that. Imperial Sugar was part of your life. The sugar house [Char House] was built when I was born 1925. You looked at it and to this day you still have memories. I would love anything to have gone back to that little town. I didn't even want to move away from there. I wanted my kids to go to school there. I told my husband when he came, he was in farming. Maybe I should have gone to the farming but I told him no. I wanted my kids to go to school. See I was fifty years old and it hurt me to see my daughter had graduated. When she graduated, I said, "How can we send you to college, you dad's a laborer?" I don't know how we did it; we worked so hard. I've worked all my life. She went to a junior college, then she winded up at Stephen F. Austin, then she went back and got her masters! One other thing that I remember very clearly is when my father passed away. He was taken from where they found him in the ditch to the cemetery in Sugar Land. [San Isidro] Now that's a historical area. Sugar Land Industries and the Imperial Sugar gave that land for the workers to be buried there and not to have to pay anything.

COOK: Where is that located?

CAMACHO: It's in Sugar Creek. It has a lot of stories. We went through a whole lot. We even went to court because they wanted us to get our loved ones out of there. Move them from there because Sugar Creek [developed]. Well you can imagine our community liked it there and how important it was for us to have a cemetery. And we were there first.

COOK: Do you remember anything about the young men joining the military during World War II?

CAMACHO: Have you ever heard about Marcario Garcia? (shares an article) This young man...I'm sorry [getting tearful]. I'm gonna be eighty-five years old this coming October. I lost my youngest son two years ago. It's been very hard. I lost my husband three years ago. It was hard but nothing was harder than losing my son.

COOK: No.

CAMACHO: But I have always been very active, especially through the church. During the WWII this young man [Garcia] came home and they denied him service in a restaurant, he was a Hispanic. That happened in Richmond. So we had to go out to my people, to my friends, walk all over, try to make fundraisers to help him get an attorney, so that we could clear his name. See he was an honorable hero.

COOK: He served in the war?

CAMACHO: Yes ma'am! Unfortunately he was killed in an automobile accident after that. I have always been very involved with my Hispanic people because I saw what my mother went through. I worked for the school district. And finally I let go of all my jobs to go work for a lady. I haven't worked for her for fifteen years, but she still sends me off and on gifts. I worked for her in a private home. She was the owner of a business. I made good money. So I let everything else go to be like a governess of a home. I did everything for her and I think if she hadn't relocated I might have still be over there. She keeps in touch with me.

COOK: What is her name?

CAMACHO: Lynn Sims

COOK: Okay. Do you remember any young men lost in the war?

CAMACHO: I remember one person that his name was Manuel Carrillo. He lost his life. He's something in the family of Susie Rodriguez.

COOK: You have said that you and your family members went to church here and that it meant a lot to you.

CAMACHO: Oh, that has meant a lot to me. I continue. I've been on the pastoral council. I've been here in 1989. I had a meeting with the Bishop Fiorenza. I said, "How can I go?" And then when I went and approached them, they said, "Yes, but you have to go also to a workshop in Los Angeles at Saint Mary, but it is not free." It cost \$700! Where was I gonna get seven hundred dollars! So I went and I said, "I'm sorry." It was in a community that was also involved with the cemetery. I approached the church. I said, "I have never asked anything from my church." I asked them if they would sponsor me. And they said, "Yes, we will sponsor you. We'll pay for you."

COOK: Wonderful.

CAMACHO: And when I found out how much the price was I came back and I said, "It will cost you \$700 to go?" "Yes, Mary, we know." Since 1989 to this day, it's been twenty years; I have still been trying to pay it back. I came back a different person. I had a lot of hurt until then seeing what some of the people went through, not only in my family. I worked as a manager for the school district. I would see children. I guess that's why my daughter is so much into education. She's in California and took bi-lingual classes. Of course, she said, "Mother that's in me." I was very fortunate. I was very lucky. I went and got my GED at fifty years old.

COOK: Wow! Good for you.

CAMACHO: My parents brought me here to Saint Theresa's Church to be baptized when I was not even a year old. I was baptized here, I did my confirmation here, I was married here, and my children have been married here too. I love my pastor here, he has been such a good person, and he did the services for my youngest son.

COOK: When you were growing up, Mary, did the rest of your family go here to Saint Theresa?

CAMACHO: Yes ma'am, all of the family. All the family this was the only church that the whole family has ever gone to. My mother didn't know how to read or write, but when my brother returned from the service after he was drafted, she saved her little money. Kept saving I don't know how but of course we didn't eat too much. When he came back that money bought a business between Sugar Land and Stafford.

COOK: And what was the name of that business?

CAMACHO: Salon Morales. First it was a café then it was a dance hall, too. It was right on Highway 90 between Sugar Land and Stafford. George wasn't just a brother. As my mother would say, he was one of a kind. He was very strict, a very strict person, and I think he was that way 'till he passed away five years ago. While he was in the service I met a young man who is the father of my oldest son. We didn't get married because the families didn't agree. And when George came back from the service I had to go to work. He would take me to work and he would pick me up. He planned it out for the whole family. What he said that had to be done.

COOK: Where did you meet your husband?

CAMACHO: I met him here in Sugar Land. He was working on the truck farms. See he was raised by his grandfather. His name was really Pena, but when his mother passed away he went to live with the grandfather, Camacho. That was his mother's parents. When he went to sign up for the military they put him under Camacho. I had to change his name from Pena; it's Jesse Pena Camacho. We were married sixty years when he passed away.

COOK: Tell me a little a little bit about the medical care in Sugar Land when you were growing up.

CAMACHO: They were wonderful to me. I even got to work at a clinic there in Sugar Land. The doctors were very good. Of course, like I was telling you when I was born I was not delivered by a doctor. My mother had all her children to be born at home with black midwives. I met Laura Eldridge, who was running the clinic there for Doctor Slaughter. I knew Doctor Kirkendahl. The clinic was fine. You had to go there they wouldn't come. You had to come to them.

COOK: How many rooms did the hospital have?

CAMACHO: Oh, they had there quite a few. They had rooms at the hospital and the doctors had their offices too. Then they moved and made the clinic in Sugar Land. They had a place there that if you got sick you could go there and they would take care of you. Someone on staff all the time. It was a nurse that they would have there always to take care in case something happened. That was one thing that I can say, our medical has always been the best.

COOK: Mary, tell me about your very favorite memory of living in Sugar Land.

CAMACHO: I will never forget as long as I live helping my mother when she was sick. I sold my home in 1980. I don't have a home now. I live in an apartment. I sold my home to help my mother. In 1980 she was seventy-five years old and it was not a very happy birthday. In 1981 she turned 76 on September 8, and my younger sister had all the family there with her to celebrate her birthday. On December the 7th my mother passed away.

COOK: If you had to state just one of your least favorite memories growing up in Sugar Land what would that be?

CAMACHO: I think the best of my memories would be my mom telling my brother when he returned from the service that he could buy land! She had saved her money.

COOK: If you had to name one of your memories that's your least favorite?

CAMACHO: Okay, I was working for this lady up there in Sugar Creek at a home and it was a special day here in our church. So I had to come to church. I went to the store and bought the supplies. And when I was leaving the store as I parked on the curb a little boy comes and knocks on my window. I thought he wanted directions. And when I pulled my window down, he put a gun to my head.

COOK: Oh!

CAMACHO: I said, "What is this?" "Get out of your car." I wasn't going to, I don't think I would have given him my car. The only thing that saved me that day is that another car parked right in back of me, so he said, "Go on." It was out here in Gerland's in Sugar Creek. Evidently they say he was visiting family and he wanted to see how it was to rob somebody. I went in the store and told the manager. And I said, "I think it was a play gun." But later I found out it was that gun was a .357 ready to shoot.

COOK: When you were a youngster in Sugar Land did you ever witness any crime?

CAMACHO: No, not really. We were living together with the African-American families. We enjoyed it. To this day, you look at them and they're like brothers and sisters to us.

COOK: Thank you for sharing your memories, Mary.

Interview Ends