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Mike de la Cruz: The Life of a Laboring Man, 1905-1977

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Abstract:

Mike de la Cruz: The Life of a Laboring Man, 1905-1977, is the story of a Mexican-American field worker, one of a dozen children, with one year of schooling, who left home in Arizona when he was about 13 years old, drifting around the country, getting work here and there, surviving as he could. In 1921 he came to Watsonville, where he worked in the fields for a labor contractor, lived in labor camps, and harvested lettuce and beets. He described himself as a drifter and hobo in the 1920s and 1930s, who could hitch, ride freights, and make do almost anywhere. In between seasons he would leave Watsonville and find work wherever he could. He described his experiences working the crops in Santa Cruz county during the Depression, when he made 12 cents an hour. His narration describes unremitting work in fields and ranches, breaking horses, planting tobacco, coal mining in West Virginia-- any work to survive and keep going. Meri Knaster, a former editor at the Project, interviewed de la Cruz, whose story illuminates a particular American life rarely documented or acknowledged in our history.

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Mike de la Cruz:
The Life of a Laboring Man, 1905-1977

Interviewed by Meri Knaster

Edited by Randall Jarrell and Irene Reti

Santa Cruz, California

2002

INTRODUCTION

Mike de la Cruz, a Mexican-American fieldworker in Watsonville, California, was interviewed in 1977 by Meri Knaster, an editor at the Regional History Project, as part of a series on local agricultural and ethnic history. De la Cruz was born in September, 1905, in Flagstaff, Arizona. He was one of a dozen children. His mother died when he was eleven years old. He left home at a very early age after perhaps a year of education, and drifted around the country, getting work here and there, surviving as he could. His story is that of a drifter, tramp (his definition is “one who walks the railroad tracks”), hobo (“one who illegally rides freight trains”). As Knaster noted, these terms are derogatory as well as descriptive.

His narration describes the life of men in the 1920s and 1930s who could hitch, ride freights, make do almost anywhere, homeless and friendless. A very lonely life, as he said. He landed in Watsonville in 1921 and began working for an agricultural labor contractor and living in a labor camp. In between seasons he would hitch out of Santa Cruz and find work wherever he could, just to eat. He describes his farm work and how backbreaking it was. During the Depression he made 12 cents an hour; he said “I was always being poor,” and could never have supported a family. Although he would have

liked to become a farmer, he said he could never save any money for the land or the necessary equipment (horse, plow, etc.).

His narration describes unremitting work, just to survive: sweeping out bars; working in restaurants, on farms and ranches; breaking horses, factory work, planting tobacco, coal mining in West Virginia—anything to keep going. He also describes his experiences over forty years working various crops in the Santa Cruz region and the changes in harvesting and technology in lettuce and beets. His attitude is one of acceptance about his life. As Knaster noted: “He accepted it was his fate to start on his life so young and to just work.” She thought his interviews significant because of the details he provides on farm work, on life during the Depression, and the attitude he had about his life. De la Cruz’s oral history illuminates a particular American life rarely documented or acknowledged in our history.

—*Randall Jarrell*

September 2002

Regional History Project

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Early Life

Knaster: First, when were you born?

De la Cruz: I was born the 9th of September, 1905.

Knaster: And where were you born?

De la Cruz: Flagstaff, Arizona.

Knaster: Do you remember when your family came from Mexico?

De la Cruz: How could I remember when I wasn't born yet when they came?

Knaster: Well, did they ever talk about it?

De la Cruz: Well, yeah, of course, but I don't know when they came in.

Knaster: Your parents were born in Mexico or in the United States?

De la Cruz: Mexico.

Knaster: Do you know what part of Mexico they came from?

De la Cruz: No, I don't.

Knaster: How many people were in your family; do you remember how many brothers and sisters?

De la Cruz: Oh, my God. (pause) There's three sisters that I know of, and six brothers.

Knaster: Were you the oldest?

De la Cruz: No. Another one older than I am.

Knaster: In your family, what did your parents speak, Spanish or English?

De la Cruz: Both.

Knaster: Did you speak Spanish at home?

De la Cruz: Oh yeah, sure. English too.

Knaster: Do you remember what kind of house you had in Flagstaff?

De la Cruz: Oh, that was a [sturdy] house. It was a small house, you know, old house. When we left Flagstaff, we [were] living in different places in Arizona; they would work in different places.

Knaster: Your family moved around a lot?

De la Cruz: Yeah, of course.

Knaster: Did your father work in the fields?

De la Cruz: No, no. He was a miner, and . . . break broncos, you know. Worked on the ranches. Cattleman, otherwise.

Knaster: So the family always had to move from one place to another?

De la Cruz: Yeah, because when my dad was doing cattle work, maybe worked one year with one man, and maybe if the other man offered a little more money, why he go with him and move right along. [When he] worked in the mines we stayed in one place for quite a while. [When I was about 12 years old] I was a road fellow. Running around, by myself. Running away from my parents. I just grew alone.

Knaster: But until then you lived with your mother and father?

De la Cruz: Not Mom. My mother died when I was nothing but a tot. I couldn't work then. I was nothing but a little boy, that's all. She died in 1916.

Knaster: 1916, and you were born in 1905.

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: Yeah, so you were pretty young.

De la Cruz: I couldn't work at all. But my older sisters did. Two of them. They worked to help my daddy. One of them worked in the boarding house, and the other one worked in the laundries, and worked there for quite a while.

My dad died in 1924. January '24. He died at the age of 52 years old.

Knaster: 52. That's pretty young.

De la Cruz: Yeah, 52 is pretty young.

Knaster: You know what he died of?

De la Cruz: No, I don't. I wasn't there. I didn't see him.

Knaster: What about your mother? Did they ever say why she died?

De la Cruz: My mother, she died in a hospital, some kind of an operation. Right around the throat somewhere. She took some kind of a cold . . . anyhow she passed away. She died at the age of 33.

Knaster: So by the age of 33 she already had ten children. Do you remember when your other brothers and sisters were born, did she give birth in the house? Did a midwife come to the house?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. She had it at home. I didn't heard she went in a hospital to birth none of them. Some kind of a lady come and see her. At that time, you know, a lot of couples like my dad and mother had children at home. As I said, I didn't stay with them very long, up until I was just about 12. I was running away from home, here and there, here and there, until I got enough, bring enough so get away from them for a long time. I stayed away from 'em for 17 years. They didn't know nothing about me, where I was living then.

Knaster: When you lived with them in Arizona, did you live in town or did you live out on a ranch?

De la Cruz: No, in town.

Knaster: Did your parents grow any food around the house, you know, like corn . . .

De la Cruz: Oh, no. They didn't raise nothing like that. As I say, when my dad, he was working for a cattleman, for another wealthy man, he was getting paid, so he brought money for my mother, and my mother went to the store and buy food, stuff like that, and bring it home.

Knaster: Do you remember whether there was enough for everybody?

De la Cruz: Enough? Yeah, there was. Of course it wasn't enough for him to buy clothing for all of us the same time. He'd buy a pair of shoes for one [of us] this week; maybe he'd work two weeks and then he'd buy another pair for another one [of us], and so on and so forth. Also for my sisters. They make their clothes at that time, but at that time everything was cheap, and the money he was giving me, it wasn't much even many years ago.

Now when I started work, I wasn't getting much, I was getting 35 cents an hour. I always take care of myself, and buying what I was needing. I didn't have no way to save no money at all. I just worked and worked, and worked and spend, because I was needing all them things, and no chance for me to save money. At that time who was saving money? Nobody opened up a bank account. Nobody. I worked 35 cents an hour. At the lowest I worked 12 cents an hour.

Knaster: When was that?

De la Cruz: That's in the 1930s, while we were in Phoenix.

Knaster: What kind of work did you do?

De la Cruz: I was working down at a farm, in the field.

Knaster: Do you remember, when you were a boy and you lived in Flagstaff, did you live in a barrio? Did you live in a neighborhood of mostly Mexican families . . .

De la Cruz: Oh, yes. Naturally, there's neighbors there, you know. Some houses together; one family live here and one family there, and one family live there, and so on and so forth. Awful.

Knaster: Were they all Mexican families?

De la Cruz: Well, some Mexican American...usually.

Knaster: Do you remember, in that house, how many rooms you had?

De la Cruz: No, I don't know.

Knaster: Did you have running water and toilets?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah, outside the house.

Knaster: Did each house have separate facilities . . .

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Like a Bird in the Air: The Life of a Migrant Laborer

Knaster: So, when you left home you were 12 years old.

De la Cruz: Yeah, something like that. Now, who will give you hard work to do at 12 years old? That's when you have to go to school. I had to work at 12 years old.

Knaster: Well, how did you leave? You just walked out of the house and walked down the road?

De la Cruz: Just walked, walked, walked, and not staying because I get towards some town or another, and look for something to do, and that's it.

Knaster: Did you do that because you weren't happy at home, or because you wanted . . .

De la Cruz: No, I don't know. It was just my future or something . . .

Knaster: That was your future. Your fate? So you started walking down the road and where'd you wind up?

De la Cruz: Wind up wherever I get. I get in town somewhere.

Knaster: What did you do for money? Place to sleep.

De la Cruz: I go up and offer myself to work so I can earn a meal or something, anything I can do. Because I always like to work. Always, all my life. Ever since I knew what work was, I always like to work. I never go up to them and [say], "Give me this." I got to do something for that. So I can have it honest.

Knaster: What kind of work did you get?

De la Cruz: Well, sometimes if I get in town, maybe it's a restaurant there, I'll go in there when I'm hungry. I say well, I can go up there and wash dishes for you, pots and everything. You give me something to eat and that's it. Isn't that fair enough?

Knaster: Sure. Where'd you sleep?

De la Cruz: Anywhere I could. Outside, inside, anywhere.

Knaster: What about when it was cold?

De la Cruz: Cold? Oh, my God, same thing. Same thing. I couldn't tell nobody about that. Same thing.

Knaster: What places did you go to?

De la Cruz: Well, I been different places in the world. Hundreds of places in the world. You'd be surprised. Near and far. Walking, riding, hoboing and all that as one who walks the tracks. And a tramp, he's the one who rides the freight. That's it, you know.

Knaster: Oh, I see. I didn't know the difference. Did you ride the freights too?

De la Cruz: Sure. A lot of times. I went from coast to coast, when Hoover was the president during the Depression. And not only me. Thousand and thousand people.

Knaster: Was that dangerous?

De la Cruz: They would ride from coast to coast, looking for work. They couldn't get no work. They had to get some food in some way or another. There was no work there.

There was nothing there, until Franklin Roosevelt got in. They started to stop this beating around up and down the roads, all these people going from coast to coast. He put a transient camp somewhere; put another transient camp somewhere . . . They give you food, give you a bed, give you clothes, give you chew, give you . . . dollar a week. If you smoked, you buy cigarettes or whatever you want, or buy food, or whatever you want to do with it.

In 1931 when I was in Baltimore I first started painting. It was a government quarters [for soldiers]; it had barracks there. We started painting that. We was getting two dollars a week. We was getting food, rich food, clothes, and two dollars a week. Finally, I left from there. I drifts on. I kept on going. I been in several towns and I didn't work at all. I made my living the best way I could, and that's the way I got to living. I helped here, helped there, and . . . sweep here, sweep there—sweep stores or bars, or a restaurant, or whatever it was. As long as I get something to eat, and maybe a quarter or two.

[Earlier] when I was in New York in 1919, during the First World War, I was bumming around the streets. I think it was on Fifth Street. This friend came. "Hey," he says, "Fred and me are going to Hamilton, New Jersey to work in a powder plant. You want to go out there?" Yeah, I'll go out. So I went there. We got to Hamilton, New Jersey and started working there. In the ammunition powder plant.

Knaster: Do you remember how much you got paid?

De la Cruz: . . . Long time now. I'll tell you the truth, I don't know how much I was getting.

Knaster: Did you work a long day? How many hours?

De la Cruz: Well, I supposed to be working . . . maybe 8, 9, 10 hours, I don't know. We had a eating place there in the same place . . . we had dormitories there.

Knaster: You mean the company gave you all the . . .

De la Cruz: The eatings and all that. We had to pay for it. Of course, they had the dormitories. We didn't pay for that. I would come from work to the dormitory there, and then I went to the bathroom and wash up. I didn't have no clothes to change in. I just wash up my face and comb my hair. I go up to the dining room, but you got to buy the ticket. It was 35 cents for a ticket. Well, I buy my ticket, see. And go and eat my supper. They give me plenty. Come out of there, go back up to the dormitory, go to sleep, next morning go to work again. From the dormitory there, they used to take you on a passenger train to the powder plant, the women and men.

Knaster: Women were working there too?

De la Cruz: Oh, sure.

Knaster: When you were on the road, walking and going on freight trains, were there women doing that too?

De la Cruz: Naturally.

Knaster: Did they ever have children with them?

De la Cruz: Girls.

Knaster: Girls?

Knaster: Young girls?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: Wasn't it dangerous for them because of all those men?

De la Cruz: They would dress up . . . like a man, you know. Cap and all that. Yeah, go from coast to coast.

Knaster: They did? The men didn't bother them?

De la Cruz: No. Not at all. I didn't see none of that.

Knaster: Was it ever difficult for you traveling that way? Did anyone ever bother you or fight with you, or the cops bother you?

De la Cruz: No, it wasn't a bother at all. It was no bother at all. At that time they didn't bother nobody. You came from New York on the freight train and nobody touch you. Even *tell* you what train to get to come over; the brakeman.

Knaster: The brakeman would tell you!

De la Cruz: Yeah, they would tell you—that there train right there going that way but I don't know how far. Then you have to transfer from that train to another, and then you go up and ask the other brakeman, does this train go that way or to California. Or anywhere you want to come back . . . coming south. And they'll tell you.

[At one point] I got me a job in Philadelphia working for the Franklin Sugar Refining Company. I was staying on Third Street. And the job was on Second Street. I was a coal roller. On the floor, you know, rolling coal to the chutes. Dumped it in the chute and then it goes down to the basement for the firemen to put it in the furnace. I worked there first in the daytime. I think I worked for a week in the daytime, then he changed me to the night. Doggone, when he changed me to night, I overslept myself. And then when I went out there to work, somebody else took my place.

Knaster: Someone took your place, just like that!

De la Cruz: Yeah they had my little money there. They had my check there.

Knaster: How long was your shift?

De la Cruz: Well, that was for two weeks. We'd shift, you know. They'd shift you every two weeks. Two weeks in the day, and two weeks at night.

Knaster: And how many hours a day did you work?

De la Cruz: Oh, no longer than eight hours a day.

Knaster: Did the company give you any benefits, or just the pay?

De la Cruz: Just the pay, that's all.

Knaster: In those days they didn't do that.

De la Cruz: No. [I've been] working all the days of my life. If we had gained the social security, I could have been a millionaire. At that time I was young, and I'm 71 now. I'd have had plenty of money, wouldn't I?

Knaster: Yeah.

De la Cruz: From Philadelphia I came to Delaware. They had a big shipyard there. From there I went to Money Point. From there I went to West Philadelphia. I got a job there, greasing tracks, for the pads and freights, they're going from Philadelphia to New York. I finally left Philadelphia, me and another boy, walking. We rode no freight trains [that time].

Knaster: How come?

De la Cruz: Well, that's the only time I got scared, you know, because the guys told us you could get fellows off the freight and chain them.

Knaster: Chain them?

De la Cruz: Put them in the working camps . . .

Knaster: Who would do that, the police or private people?

De la Cruz: Well, the policeman's the law, you know.

Knaster: Oh, it was against the law to go on freight trains?

De la Cruz: Oh, yes, naturally, of course. So we walked more than two weeks and a half to Richmond, Virginia. Doggone it, the first thing we seen going in town, but we didn't have nothing, no money to pay, was a toll bridge. We didn't have money to pay no toll bridge. We begged them men to let us go on in. He let us went on through. And the first thing I seen after we go on in town were the cops. Why, one was pretty good. He took our bag, give us some supper in a restaurant, a man took us in, give us a bed.

Knaster: They gave you a bed, the police did?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: Where did they give you a bed?

De la Cruz: In the jail.

Knaster: Why did they put you in jail?

De la Cruz: Well, we didn't have nowhere to sleep.

Knaster: Oh, but they didn't arrest you.

De la Cruz: No, no.

De la Cruz: [In Richmond, Virginia I worked in] a factory where they make these wooden tubs, ice cream freezers, boxes like that, and everything lumber. And they were paying me two dollars a day. I was living at 123 Luciana Street. That's a boarding house. My goodness I was getting two dollars a day, and I was paying two dollars a day for board. Now tell me, was I saving money?

Knaster: You didn't have a penny left over!

De la Cruz: So, when I got my first pay I gave it to the lady who was feeding me and I didn't have nothing to even buy me a pair of socks.

Knaster: Wow.

De la Cruz: [I also worked] in tobacco, not in Richmond. You go from there about 200 miles, into the field, planting tobacco. We got a little cellar. He was paying us 40 dollars a month. And you got to live on that, that he was paying you. Oh my God! Whew! After we plant tobacco, then we go to hoeing tobacco, we got to get 'em ripe, went up there and pull leaves, and then tie them, then put 'em in the barn, and cure it. Cure the leaves of the tobacco by heat, with wood. And then . . . I got so tired of that man. He even owe me for money now, yet! He never finished paying me.

Knaster: You just walked out?

De la Cruz: Just walked out . . . and he never did pay me. I went with another guy to work. He was all right about a month. Then I left him too. [From] that guy I went to another guy working on tobacco. Everything's tobacco there—tobacco, corn, potatoes, and whatever you can [grow], wheat.

[Another time] in Roanoke I worked with a marble contracting company.

Knaster: Digging marble?

De la Cruz: No, refining floors. The name was Marble Refining Company.

Knaster: Where'd you go from there?

De la Cruz: Well, I stayed there a long time. I went to West Virginia and worked in a coal mine there.

Knaster: Oh, that must have been hard.

De la Cruz: Hard and dangerous. That's where the dangerous work there is, underground. You maybe blow up, and maybe something fall out there and hit you. You better look out. If these coal mines, some of them's gas mines; there's a lot of gas in the mines, you know. Don't use no carbide, no open light. You use safety light. Safety light, it's a little light here on your cap. And you got a battery here, and it would come on here at your cap, and you got a light here.

Knaster: Like a little bulb.

De la Cruz: And then you can see everything like that, see? Where you use that for is where there's some gas. If some gas in mine you can hear a flying from outside. From inside too . . . you can hear from inside.

Knaster: You can hear the gas outside?

De la Cruz: Yeah. You can hear the gas, and boy, that thing will blow up the whole business there. Boys and everything in there, kill everybody in there. If you use carbide, open light, it would blow you all up. But if no gas, you use carbide.

I was working by contract. You got some eight cars in the cut. They cut coal deep enough, 12 feet deep. You and your partner, your buddy, two working each face. You clean eight cars. Four for you, four for me. Maybe it's four for you, and two for me, and next day I get the first one. See? But you got to buy powder, black powder, [dynamite]. And then you got to buy your cable, to buy everything because you're doing it by contract. Then you have to pull your tractor out, so not to get buried with the coals, when the explosion, like that.

Knaster: That sounds very hard.

De la Cruz: Oh boy, hard work, you're telling me. You got to hurry up to get out of there in the daytime. To clean it up so you can get another cut for next day. If you don't clean it up you don't get a new cut, well . . . you're going to miss out. In morning they cut your coal. Then you load one cut. If you don't finish it, and leave the face of your cut hard enough for the morning cut it, they won't cut it for you. You lose that day of work.

Knaster: How long did you stay in the mines?

De la Cruz: Oh, stayed (pause) maybe one year.

Knaster: Why did you leave?

De la Cruz: Oh, because that's when the Depression started. See, in 1929 they was shutting the mines down. So I had to peel out of there, you see. While I was working my company, it shut down, see?

Knaster: You went to so many places, you traveled all over the country . . .

De la Cruz: Oh. I went hundreds and hundreds of places. But see I didn't stay in one place too long. I don't like it, I just gone. I may go the same day I get there. (laughter)

Knaster: Weren't you afraid at all to travel around like that?

De la Cruz: No, I wasn't afraid at all. I was sure of myself all the time.

Knaster: You didn't find that lonely?

De la Cruz: Well, yes, of course. I went with some of the other men, because they come near where I was, but I couldn't chase them out, couldn't tell them to go . . . see, when I go and get a train I go myself, see. All the time by myself. Right here in town, here I'm by myself all the time.

Knaster: Oh yeah. You don't have any friends?

De la Cruz: Oh, I got oodles of friends here. Friends are friends, but I never walk with them. I just leave them there and I come home by myself.

Knaster: Well, it just sounds like a lonely way to live, to go from town to town where you don't know anybody, and you always have to do everything for yourself.

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: I think that takes a lot of courage.

De la Cruz: Naturally, You have to have courage to do that. Aye. No, I never was scared none. Never.

Knaster: Did you have to fight a lot.

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah, I fight a lot.

Knaster: During the time that you were traveling around, did you ever think about wanting to have a family or settle down someplace?

De la Cruz: Well . . . I didn't have that on my mind because I was always being poor. I never anticipated I could support a family, have enough to support my wife, two or three kids and have something besides. Ever since I lost my two sisters, the oldest ones, seem to me everything is going backwards. I'm getting down, you know. All the time. My sister here that I got, my younger sister . . . after a long time she come out of the hospital with a heart problem and high blood pressure and all that. She called me up and I knowed she wanted some money but where in the world am I gonna get it. I was sorry I had no money to hand to her, you know? To give to her, help her along. I had an old girl I hadn't called up for quite a while, yet, because I'm afraid she scold me, you know, she would need me for something and then . . .

Knaster: All those years that you were traveling around, and did so many different kinds of jobs, was there any kind of work that you liked better?

De la Cruz: Oh, painting. I done a lot of painting. A lot of plastering. A lot of house work, you know. A lot of cooking. Painting is better than your laundry, you know. I done a lot of painting. A lot of it.

Knaster: Which was the worst work you ever did?

De la Cruz: The worst? Field work. That spinach, bending over it all day long, why that's the hardest work there is in the world. You have to have strong back to support that kind of work. If you ain't got no strong back on you, you don't work that work.

To get in the work where you can make a good living you got to have a good education. You got to have good hearin', good mind, good listening, and go in decent, and have a decent place to stay in. Go clean, and well fed. That's the only way you can live as long as you can. Those people, some of them are living now, and some of them's all gone. See?

Knaster: These were the men who used to travel around like you did?

De la Cruz: Yeah, a lot of them, see. I know boys that I left, that I knew here in my home town. They're all gone. See?

Knaster: You think that's a pretty hard life that way?

De la Cruz: Oh, naturally, 'course it's pretty hard, it's pretty sad and alone too. And the worst part for me was when I lost my parents. I didn't see them. 'Course I've seen my brother, seen my sisters. But my parents, I didn't see them when they died. When I returned back there was long years. It was pretty hard to find somebody that knew me, to say, I know this fellow, because I was gone too long, so you forget about him. They didn't know nothing about me, see. They didn't know who was Mike, if he was that man I see who was before, or who was he. You must realize that when you leave home . . . and you spend more out by yourself and you done with your parents and you never seen them no more, when you come back, you don't see people that know, that know you when you was there.

Knaster: Did your brothers or sisters go to school?

De la Cruz: Well, yes, back then, yeah.

Knaster: Did any of your brothers and sisters get an education?

De la Cruz: What do you mean, high schooling?

Knaster: Yeah.

De la Cruz: Oh, no.

Knaster: Nobody finished high school?

De la Cruz: Nobody. I didn't finish it myself. I had my chance to graduate, see, but I didn't took it. I realized I had a chance to . . . better than that. But I didn't want to go. Like a bird in the air, see? I flounder, from town to town, and from city to city . . .

Knaster: Well, you got to see a lot and to experience a lot.

De la Cruz: My experience I took from that kind of life, I took too late.

Knaster: Did you come to Watsonville after Colorado?

De la Cruz: No, no. I went to the state of Washington, to Wyoming, and South Dakota and North Dakota, and all them places.

Knaster: What kind of work did you do in these various places?

De la Cruz: Oh, in apples and fruits, and things like that. They got all kinds of work up there. Sheep herding . . . Wyoming. Cheyenne, Landon, Hoop, and all them places. Working horses, breaking horses . . .

Knaster: Well, it sounds like you know how to do a lot of things.

De la Cruz: Yeah, well, I know I did. Of course, right now I don't do them on account of my legs, you know. I ain't working because of my legs.

Knaster: What happened to your legs?

De la Cruz: Oh, broke up both of them.

Knaster: You broke your legs?

De la Cruz: Yeah, both of them.

Knaster: How did you break them?

De la Cruz: I fell inside a hole . . . went through a hole. About a seventy-five, eighty foot hole.

Knaster: Where was this?

De la Cruz: In Gilroy.

Knaster: What kind of hole was it?

De la Cruz: You see them telephone poles? See how deep they dig them?

Knaster: Yeah.

De la Cruz: Three times deeper than that.

Knaster: Oh boy. Were you working on telephone poles then?

De la Cruz: No, no. I was walking at night.

Knaster: You were walking at night and fell into a hole.

De la Cruz: I went straight down like that, my feet down.

Knaster: When did this happen?

De la Cruz: It happened in '68. I went to a hospital in San Jose. I stayed over a year, or more.

Knaster: So when did you come to California?

De la Cruz: 1921.

Knaster: 1921. [Before that] you were in Washington?

De la Cruz: Yeah, yeah. Picking apples, do everything up there. Working for potatoes and working for everything else . . .

Knaster: And after Washington you came to California.

De la Cruz: Yeah, I came here.

Watsonville, California

Knaster: Why did you come here? What did you know about this place?

De la Cruz: Well, as I say, I was a traveling man. I leave that town to come over here and see what's here, if I like this place. Which I did, because that time here it was booming time, see, when I come here. Everything was pretty good and people were living off nothing thereabout. You work for 35 cents an hour.

Knaster: Here in Watsonville?

De la Cruz: Sure! And you can live better than you can get three or four dollars an hour.

Knaster: Why do you think that was?

De la Cruz: Well, I'll tell you the reason why. Because it wasn't so much people as it is today. See now every day we coming in because they're paying good money, and what they gonna do with good money, they can't buy no groceries. What they gonna do with it? Maybe go to Mexico, go somewhere you can spend it, see?

Knaster: Had anyone talked to you about Watsonville before you came here or you just wound up here one day?

De la Cruz: No, nobody told me about this town. Because this town on a map; you can find it on a map anywhere, see? If you is what we call a tourist, one way, I'm a tourist another way, see? You is a road tourist and I'm a track tourist.

Knaster: A road tourist and a track tourist? What do you mean by that?

De la Cruz: You go by car and I go by train, see?

Knaster: You come to Watsonville by train?

De la Cruz: Sure, the freight train, that's when I come out here. Yeah, I got off a freight train here in Pajaro and just walked that mile into Watsonville. I was looking around then, and everything was lit up. It was night. Right here used to be like Reno.

Knaster: You mean they used to have a lot of gambling here?

De la Cruz: Sure! Salinas, here, in Santa Cruz.

Knaster: Oh, I didn't know that.

De la Cruz: Oh, why sure.

Knaster: And the gambling was legal?

De la Cruz: Legal . . . It was government gambling.

Knaster: Were there prostitution houses too?

De la Cruz: Yes. At Pajaro; it was a money-making place there. And right here, same thing.

Knaster: So, what did you do? Where did you go look for work?

De la Cruz: Well, right here. Right in the field.

Knaster: Did you approach a farmer, or did a labor contractor . . .

De la Cruz: No, I went to see the foreman. I went to the camp. Well, he dead now.
Ramirez Camp.

Knaster: Was he Mexican?

De la Cruz: No, he was a Filipino. And his wife was . . . half and half . . . Filipino and Mexican.

Knaster: Where was this camp?

De la Cruz: Over here by Beach Road.

Knaster: Was it a big camp?

De la Cruz: It's about a mile from here. It was a pretty good size, hold about 200, 300. And then they had a new one here, a new camp over here by, oh the same road as Beach Road.

Knaster: So you went over to this work camp to ask if they needed workers?

De la Cruz: Yeah. Right quick I was on a job.

Knaster: I thought the Filipinos only had Filipino men in their labor camps.

De la Cruz: Naw, they got Americans, black men, everything.

Knaster: Were there also Japanese and Chinese?

De la Cruz: Well, no, not Chinese, no Japanese, nothing but Filipinos, Mexicans, Americans, Negroes. And what they call Portuguese.

Knaster: Was this a labor camp only for men, or were there women and children there too?

De la Cruz: Nothing but men. Single men.

Knaster: How was the camp set up? What kind of housing did they give you?

De la Cruz: Well, pretty good.

Knaster: Were they bunk houses?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: How many men lived in a house?

De la Cruz: Four in a big room.

Knaster: Oh, that sounds pretty good. Did the houses have toilets too?

De la Cruz: Yeah, everything, toilet, you got everything: baths too. You got great big old dining room where we eat.

Knaster: Who prepared the food?

De la Cruz: The contractor.

Knaster: What kind of food did they give you?

De la Cruz: Good food.

Knaster: Well, I was asking because I know that Filipinos like to eat Filipino food and Mexicans like to eat Mexican food.

De la Cruz: No, a lot of Mexicans eat anything that the Filipino eat now. Some of them didn't like fish. Now they eatin' it. They eat more rice than I does. They eat chicken they kill by a hundred there, and hog meat and cow meat, everything . . .

Knaster: Was there a woman cooking or a man cooking?

De la Cruz: There was a man.

Knaster: And he cooked for the whole camp?

De la Cruz: For the whole business.

Knaster: Wow, that's several hundred people, that's a lot.

De la Cruz: Oh, well they have to get up early in the morning, you know, and start dinner.

Knaster: So, it sounds like they gave you pretty good facilities there. I mean, they gave you decent food and a decent place to sleep.

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah, of course.

Knaster: Did they also give you sheets and blankets and pillows, or did you have to provide your own?

De la Cruz: Well, if you ain't got it, they'll give you. But, if you got them, why you better, well, you take them to the camp, you know, and sleep in them. They give you a bed. They give you a mattress. And maybe a couple of pillows.

Knaster: Did you have to pay for this stuff?

De la Cruz: No, that's the company.

Knaster: When you were traveling around on the trains did you carry blankets and pillows with you?

De la Cruz: I used to carry a bedroll.

Knaster: I see. So, in this camp, how was the work organized? What kind of work did you do?

De la Cruz: Well, it was organized by him. Yeah, all you had to do, just work the way he want us. Thin lettuce, thin beets. Then we would top beets here with a knife. They didn't have no machines to top beets. They didn't have no dry packing lettuce. They didn't have nobody to load no beets. The same guys that was topping beets . . . load the trucks, take them to Salinas. Now they have the dry packing, lettuce. At that time they used to cut lettuce and put them in the band. And that band you toss up like that, and dump them in the truck to bring it to the packing shed. You drop the lettuce in that band and the band carries them up, up, up . . .

Knaster: Was that like a conveyor belt?

De la Cruz: Well, it's a belt, see. Throw them up in the truck, and like that. Now they got dry packing. Now you have to go cut it, you put it in between row, and they got a packer there, throwing, packing, yelling name, just using some kind of staples in paperboard boxes.

Knaster: Could you describe for me a typical day of work during that time when you were in the camp. For example, what time did you wake up?

De la Cruz: 4 o'clock in the morning.

Knaster: In the 1920s?

De la Cruz: I was up before 4 o'clock. Because the quicker you do that work, early you stop working. You get off, and faster they pay you, see?

Knaster: So all the men would wake up and then they would go for breakfast?

De la Cruz: All the men would work in that same kind of work. He had three sets working. Now, while we doing this kind of work that we talking about . . .

Knaster: Yeah, the lettuce.

De la Cruz: The other ones, go to the beach. And the other crew goes and thin the lettuce, or go clean the lettuce, see?

Knaster: Were all three hundred men working for one company?

De la Cruz: Naturally.

Knaster: Who was that company?

De la Cruz: Sears.

Knaster: Do you remember how many acres there were?

De la Cruz: (whistle) If I can tell, you, oh my goodness, when we used to work from here, from where the camp is, oh, well see, around the camp.

Knaster: Yeah, everything around the camp.

De la Cruz: And there we go do plums in San Juan Bautista. And all the land that he got between here and San Juan, along like that.

Knaster: And you worked all that land?

De la Cruz: All that land.

Knaster: Would you say it was several thousand acres?

De la Cruz: Several thousand, more than that.

Knaster: And they mostly grew lettuce and beets? Anything else?

De la Cruz: Well, that company, of course. The other ones grew more, say, J.J. Crosetti . . .

Knaster: Crosetti? Did you ever work for Crosetti?

De la Cruz: Yes. I didn't work long. I didn't like the field boss. [He expected] too much from the guys he had there . . . awful.

Knaster: And you didn't like them? Did you ever deal with Crosetti?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: Do you remember what people said about him?

De la Cruz: No. They talk about his foreman, that's all. He got a lot of people working for him.

Knaster: So, you would get up at 4 o'clock and you would have breakfast and then you would go out to the field. Now, were you taken to the field by trucks?

De la Cruz: Bus.

Knaster: What was the bus like? Was it an old bus or was it in good condition?

De la Cruz: No, good bus, new one.

Knaster: How many men could sit on the bus?

De la Cruz: Oh, maybe 45, 50 in the bus.

Knaster: And about what time did you start working then?

De la Cruz: We usually, if we cutting lettuce, as soon as you get there.

Knaster: 6 o'clock?

De la Cruz: Yeah, as soon as you can see a head of lettuce and you know which one you want to take, the harder one, you know. You feel them with your hand.

Knaster: . . . which one is firmer, you mean?

De la Cruz: Yeah, firm. You got a spat, you know. A long thing, like that, like a little shovel on the end. Sharp here. You stick it in, you cut the root. You cut the stem off. You put it in the row. And this fellow that's packing the lettuce, he come and lifts them.

Knaster: I see.

De la Cruz: Put three dozen in a box.

Knaster: What kind of lettuce was this?

De la Cruz: It was big lettuce.

Knaster: Head lettuce?

De la Cruz: That same kind that you buy in the market.

Knaster: In April?

De la Cruz: Used to be, now it's later. Now you see, peeling leaf lettuce, oh, my goodness, they start too late, because too cold. See, right now is the time to work pretty steady. But years back, we used to work steady from April. The first season, because that lettuce, they planted in January.

Knaster: Did you ever plant lettuce?

De la Cruz: No, I seen them plant. I never planted.

Knaster: So you would really start working in April? Thinning the heads, or picking them out.

De la Cruz: Thinning.

Knaster: So you would work for a few hours in the morning. Would you get a break?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah you get a ten-minute break.

Knaster: And does somebody provide water for you?

De la Cruz: No, well you could go and get it yourself. Because there's water there.

Knaster: And did they provide toilet facilities too?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. Of course. They bring the food from the camp to you, hot.

Knaster: Oh, for lunch. How much time would you get for lunch?

De la Cruz: About an hour.

Knaster: Then you would go back to work again?

De la Cruz: Yeah, that's right.

Knaster: Until what time would you work?

De la Cruz: But the ones that are cutting lettuce, they ain't got no time to eat.

Knaster: The ones who cut lettuce don't get to eat?

De la Cruz: No, they ain't got no time. They want to make all the money they can. My goodness, the lettuce cutters, the packing shed, I mean, dry packing, some of them make 75 dollars a day, daily.

Knaster: That's a lot of money, 75 dollars a day.

De la Cruz: Well, last year they were making anywhere from 55 to 60 dollars a day.

Knaster: How much did you make in the 1920s?

De la Cruz: In the 1920s, oh my gosh. Then they was by contract, see.

Knaster: How much did the contractor give you? Did he pay you by the hour or by the number of lettuce heads?

De la Cruz: The contractor pay you when you finish the job. But you're working all week.

Knaster: So you'd get paid at the end of the week? How much would you get paid?

De la Cruz: By this contractor, see. The order they have by some market or another. Because they don't stay here, all of them don't stay here, they go back east. Places they don't have this lettuce. They go over there. East and north, they goes there. See? Now any lettuce that stays here, the company has to pay eight, sometimes twelve dollars a box.

Knaster: You mean today or then?

De la Cruz: Anybody that wants it.

Knaster: No, but what I mean is, I'm talking about the 1920s, when you first came to Watsonville.

De la Cruz: Oh, no in 1920, there was nothing but day work.

Knaster: A day's work?

De la Cruz: Yeah. Day's work, you were getting 35 cents an hour.

Knaster: 35 cents an hour then.

De la Cruz: You worked ten hours a day.

Knaster: For \$3.50.

De la Cruz: Well there you are.

Knaster: And the contractor would pay you at the end of the day or at the end of the week?

De la Cruz: At the end of the week. You work on Saturday, half a day. And then payday, they give you from noon out.

Knaster: Did you work on Sunday?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: How did the contractor keep track of how much work you were doing?

De la Cruz: He'd have what they call a field boss. He's right there with all of us. He know you were working, because he's up and down, all the time, up and down, looking up and down all the time. If you don't go to work, he'd put a zero in his time book.

Knaster: Did anybody ever cheat you of your wages?

De la Cruz: One time. One that got away from me. This was in Durham, North Carolina.

Knaster: But not here in Watsonville; you didn't have that problem?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: The contractor always paid you?

De la Cruz: Yeah, always.

Knaster: Did you ever hear about any bad labor contractors around here? I heard some stories about contractors who would run off with the payroll and the workers wouldn't get paid.

De la Cruz: So did I.

Knaster: There were some like that?

De la Cruz: Yes there were. I try to think about some of them now, but I can't think of them. They're there. They get the payroll, and goodbye with it.

Knaster: Goodbye, yeah. But you were lucky that didn't happen with you.

De la Cruz: I was lucky that didn't happen to me here in the state of California. It never did.

Knaster: Back in the fields, here in Watsonville, when you working with lettuce, until what time in the afternoon did you work?

De la Cruz: Oh, sometime, we get off at 3:30, 4:30 . . .

Knaster: And then they would take you back in the bus to the camp?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah to the camp. Take a bath and get ready for supper? They ring that wheel for you.

Knaster: What did the men do in the evening?

De la Cruz: Oh they come out, they come to town.

Knaster: What kind of things would they do?

De la Cruz: Some of them go there . . . some of those who got a car.

Knaster: Oh, the workers had cars?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. Sometimes the foreman give them a ride. Some of them come walking.

Knaster: What would they do in town at night?

De la Cruz: Oh, well, just messing around here, buying something. Drinking up beer or something.

Knaster: Do you remember problems in the camp, or any fights? Were any workers ever fired?

De la Cruz: Not as I knows of because I never seen one.

Knaster: And most of the time they got along okay?

De la Cruz: Yeah, pretty good.

Knaster: What was the hardest part of that kind of work for you?

De la Cruz: Thinning.

Knaster: Could you describe that to me?

De la Cruz: That was you all the time bending over all day long, with a little hoe, with the sun in your back all day long. To straighten up look like you're gonna die. About the hardest work out there in the field.

Knaster: Did you have to do that a lot?

De la Cruz: Oh, every day.

Knaster: Every day?

De la Cruz: I done it for forty years here.

Knaster: Forty years you've been thinning!

De la Cruz: Yeah, sure.

Knaster: How did you divide your time between thinning and picking lettuce? How many weeks would you be thinning lettuce before you would pick it?

De la Cruz: Oh, could say a month and a half.

Knaster: And then you would pick for how long?

De la Cruz: Until it's finished.

Knaster: Well, would that be a month or two months, or . . .They do the field twice.

De la Cruz: And they turn the field loose. Then the disc comes and disc it all out and plant it again, see?

Knaster: I see. So they leave a lot of it behind.

De la Cruz: Well, naturally, all the lettuce behind, see? But by the money that the company gets for the lettuce he don't care because he paid for that, see?

Knaster: I see. I know this was very hard work.

De la Cruz: You ought to go around and see the fields, how they are now. You see them guys line up like that thinning, you know, all bent over like that all day long, hot sun hit them in the back like that.

Knaster: Even though it was really hard, was there anything about the work that you liked?

De la Cruz: Well, I won't tell you the facts about myself. See, I was needing everything anyhow. I didn't have nothing. So I had to take anything that come over. Whether hard or soft. So finally, I stuck with this hard work, well I have to do it because I have to eat and sleep. I have to do it. Of course, when you finish one field of thinning you got chance to rest. Maybe you got another field coming out of there already thinned out, go up there and clean . . . and hoe it, see, and they give you a long-handled hoe, you stand up there hoeing and cleaning up, see? That's better.

Knaster: That was a little easier with the long hoe?

De la Cruz: Well, naturally, you don't have to bend over at all. And cutting, is the same thing, bending over, you see. The hardest work too is the beets.

Knaster: The beets? You worked with beets too.

De la Cruz: Oh, my goodness, topping beets is hard.

Knaster: What months would you top beets?

De la Cruz: We used to top over here in August. But in Washington, you can't lift up a beet to top it. You can't lift it up. Oh, it grewed like that, see.

Knaster: Really big.

De la Cruz: Big and heavy! And the knife, under your knife you got a hook like that. You try to lift it up like you do here, maybe you'll break your wrist. You have to roll it out and then top it. And some were small, some were big, all depends on the land, how rich it was. But over there it grows big on account of a lot of space from one another. 24 inches. And here, eight inches. And consequently, there is a lot of sugar.

Knaster: A lot of sugar and they're smaller?

De la Cruz: See, we call them carrots. See, a little and the pink tails like that. They don't grow heavy beets here. No . . . small beets. But now they got machines, you see.

Knaster: Now they have machines to top the beets. When did the machines come in?

De la Cruz: If I remember . . . they ain't got it for very long. I don't think, to my knowledge . . . they have it more than about seven years ago.

Knaster: Did you ever work any other [crops]?

De la Cruz: I used to work here in the garlic.

Knaster: Where does the garlic grow?

De la Cruz: In the field. Mostly in Gilroy.

Knaster: How long did you stay with Ramirez, that labor contractor?

De la Cruz: I stayed a long time. But I don't know exactly, long time I stayed with him. I stayed with him thirty years, something like that. I got a job in a cannery then, around 1949.

Knaster: Did the work change over the years or was it the same for thirty years?

De la Cruz: It was the same thing with me every day.

Knaster: But from the '20s to the '30s, to the '40s, was there any change in the kind of tools you used?

De la Cruz: No. Same old tools.

Knaster: Was there any change in the machinery?

De la Cruz: Same machinery, you got to have the same machinery.

Knaster: And did they use the same number of workers, or more, or less?

De la Cruz: Well, it depends on the company, on the contractor. See, it depends how much [the] man has planted.

Knaster: What about your wages? Your wages must have changed over the years.

De la Cruz: Naturally, of course.

Knaster: You started at 35 cents an hour?

De la Cruz: The biggest money I ever got from Ramirez at the length of time I worked for him was one dollar an hour.

Knaster: A dollar an hour. And you were getting 35 cents an hour during the 1920s . . .

De la Cruz: I was living better than I'm living now.

Knaster: Yes. Because everything was cheaper then.

De la Cruz: Sure. You see, you can buy a pair of shoes for, well 90 cents, I hate to say.

Knaster: 90 cents!

De la Cruz: Sure! You could buy a sack of flour, 24 pounds of flour, 60 cents.

Knaster: 60 cents! Now, how much?

De la Cruz: \$2.90

Knaster: What other kinds of things did you have to buy, because they provided you with all your food.

De la Cruz: Oh, well, your things that you need, naturally. Well, it wasn't so hard then, at that time. Now ten cents you buy nothing. Five cents you can't buy, what you can buy? At that time you could buy for pennies.

Knaster: Did you smoke cigarettes?

De la Cruz: I started smoking when I was about fifteen years old. I used to buy Prince Albert tobacco.

Knaster: You rolled tobacco?

De la Cruz: Yeah, tobacco.

Knaster: I see. So, during the 1930s, did your wages go down or up?

De la Cruz: No. They didn't go up. How could they? In 1930 was the Depression time. I was working 12 cents an hour, at that time.

Knaster: Doing what?

De la Cruz: With some Japanese in Phoenix.

Knaster: What kind of work was that?

De la Cruz: Ranch work. I used to work a day. At night, when I get off, I wash my shirt every day. Because it's so hot, maybe I lose it, tear it all to pieces.

Knaster: You didn't stay here except when you were with Ramirez because there was no work except from March and November?

De la Cruz: Well, when the work come in here with Ramirez, yes, I come to work with him, see? And when everything done here, off I go.

Knaster: You start traveling.

De la Cruz: Out again. Look for another job.

Knaster: During the Depression was there a lot of competition from the Okies?

De la Cruz: Oh, my gosh, yeah. (laughter) Yeah, it was awful, that time. Not only with them. With everybody and their brother. Lot of people . . . from all over the United States, all over other states, everywhere. Riding freight trains. Women, men, everything, yes.

Knaster: Do you remember whether the growers preferred to have certain kinds of workers over others? For example did they prefer to have Filipino workers, or Mexican workers, or to have the Okies work for them?

De la Cruz: I don't remember like that, no. I worked among everybody.

Knaster: Do you remember in 1930, they had some riots here in Watsonville?

De la Cruz: Riots?

Knaster: Riots against the Filipinos.

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah.

Knaster: Do you remember those riots?

De la Cruz: Yeah, a lot of them over here, right on Union Street.

Knaster: What was that all about?

De la Cruz: Oh, some drunks, and some for the women up there, you know, at that time was...well, is the time I tell you when Watsonville was in bloom then.

Knaster: Union Street, that's where they had the prostitution houses.

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Knaster: But do you remember the white people in town hurting the Filipinos?

De la Cruz: No, not as I know about. Some thing back there, doing them things, but I didn't know who it was and who's done it, or who died or nothing the kind as is. Nothing like that. But there might have been a riot from one side or another.

Knaster: Did people consider you Mexican, or did they consider you just straight American?

De la Cruz: Well, I don't know how to take me . . . take me any way they want to.
(laughter)

Knaster: But how did you consider yourself, did you identify with any particular group?

De la Cruz: Uh, maybe Mexican.

Knaster: You thought of yourself as Mexican.

De la Cruz: Yeah, Mexican, yeah.

Knaster: Did you ever feel discriminated against because you were Mexican, that people treated you differently?

De la Cruz: Well . . . no, I tell you, I've been treated all right. As far as I know, I've been treated all right. Only here in . . . last time [in section of the recording that was cut off] I told you about this . . . things about those welfare concerned. Well of course, you have to speak for your rights.

Knaster: Did you ever get sick on the job, or injured in any accidents?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: If that happened to a worker, who would take care of the worker?

De la Cruz: Oh well, I can't tell you nothing about that because I didn't ask Ramirez about who or whom, see? I never did see nobody that got hurt there, or got sick sometime. There's one time had an old Filipino working there with him. Well, he was old, he would go on the field and work probably three hours, see? Then he'd come in and go home. And then, one winter, let me see, I don't know what year was it, this Filipino, the old man, he come out of his room and it was awful cold that night. And he fell down right next to that door, and he couldn't get in the room again. And when they found him, he was dead.

Knaster: Did you develop any illness from working in the field? For example, from pesticides?

De la Cruz: No, I never did.

Knaster: You never had any problems with things like that?

De la Cruz: No, no problems like that.

Knaster: So, didn't they use various chemicals on the crops?

De la Cruz: Naturally, when airplanes fly here sometimes, the low ones, like that. Where they go spray this white fluff that look like white cloud.

Knaster: And that didn't affect you at all?

De la Cruz: No, because we didn't work when they were putting the stuff on. He's putting that on himself from like 3:00 in the evening, you know. When we work one more hour and we go home, and then stay home all that night, well the next morning we start working again, see?

Knaster: I see. Since you worked in the fields here for about forty years, did you see any changes in the crops that were grown? For example, when you first started, you told me that you worked in lettuce and sugar beets. The same thing all the time. What about any new varieties in the crops? For example, you said they used to grow one kind of lettuce.

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: Did they change to other kinds of lettuce?

De la Cruz: Well, there's two kinds of lettuce. One is what we call the . . . it's really crispy, you know. And firm. That's bigger than those here ones that are for now, you see. This is soft and it's kind of smooth. And the thin leaves, see? And they ate these two kinds of this plant, see? This kind I tell you, but I don't know the name of it. The beets, only one

kind; there's sugar beets, that's all, see? When they put the machines to top beets, we didn't work no more with knives at all.

Knaster: You stopped using knives.

De la Cruz: The machine did the topping. And now they load them too. But we worked in lettuce, thin them, hoe them . . . until the cutting time, see? Got to hoe. I didn't irrigate. None at all. I didn't plant, none at all. All my work was with a short hoe. Thinning. And when it come to clean them you have a long-handled hoe, boy. I worked at that.

Knaster: Did you see any changes in the fields? Like, one thing you mentioned was that they started using a machine to top the beets. Was there any other change, different tools that you would use? You said that you stopped using the knife. Was there anything else that was different, that changed?

De la Cruz: Well, that's the only change I had.

Knaster: Did you notice any differences in the way the soil was fertilized or irrigated?

De la Cruz: I didn't see no difference because I didn't do it. The fertilizer was sprayed with machines.

Knaster: During the time that you worked, did you ever notice that suddenly there would be a much larger group of workers or a much smaller group of workers at any time?

De la Cruz: Well, sometimes we had a large group, sometimes we had a small group. The largest number of workers he used to have, were when the braceros used to come over here. Sometimes they had thirty, forty, fifty, sixty and sometimes twenty-five. But he never knew himself about this help coming from Mexico here, go to work. Sears got so many. Maybe 200, maybe 300. It was according to how much land the Sears had. He had two labor camps over by Beach Road.

The last time I worked for Ramirez, I worked with him at the new camp. I was thinning the lettuce, about a mile, mile and a half out . . . away from the camp. He called me. He took me out of the field and told me to wash the pots and dishes for all the people he had eating in the camp, you see. I used to work from ten to fifteen hours.

Knaster: A day?

De la Cruz: Yeah! And my god . . . he was paying me the same wages he was paying me in the field.

Knaster: For washing dishes.

De la Cruz: And working more hours. And they didn't pay me what I used to get. Well, I quit. I was working too much, and then they didn't pay me the hours that I worked. That's the reason I quit. Of course, they liked me, and all that, and the widow, she's still living.

Knaster: Ramirez's widow?

De la Cruz: Yeah. She already married again. And she's half-Mexican, half-Filipino. Oh, she can talk Spanish just as good as me and my wife. And when I quit I started working with Baker, at the cannery, right here by Walker Street.

Knaster: The name of the cannery is Baker? What kind of canning did they do?

De la Cruz: Well, apple sauce, and dry apples and then he put up some string beans. He never did work no cauliflower, no broccoli, no celery, nothing like that. Just apples, string beans.

Knaster: But before you started working for the cannery, you said something about the bracero program. How did you feel about that program? Do you think it was good for Mexicans to come up here and work?

De la Cruz: Well, it was good for the company. I couldn't say nothing about it.

Knaster: Did it interfere with your work?

De la Cruz: No, not at all.

Knaster: Do you remember what people used to say about the bracero program?

De la Cruz: That came along in 1940, 1941.

Knaster: Before that did you notice whether the kinds of groups that were working changed at all. Like in the 1940s a lot more Mexicans came in?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: In the 1930s, what was the biggest group working around here?

De la Cruz: Who was it? They're all together. Ramirez had these braceros. He send some over there with him, send another group . . . all together, working.

Knaster: What year was it that you started working for the cannery?

De la Cruz: I worked with Baker, let me see, up until '52. I worked for him in '49, I worked for him in the '40s . Well, I worked with him up to '52. Then I went to the vinegar plant. . . Heinz.

Knaster: So, after you left Ramirez you went to the cannery. What kind of work did you do in the cannery?

De la Cruz: I was washing the machines after everybody go home. I stayed on in the evening. Of course I work in the day, too.

Knaster: What were you doing during the day?

De la Cruz: Well, I was feeding the machines. Rolling cans to the machine for the machine to press them when they was putting this applesauce. Put the tops on and everything. And then when all the people goes away, I stay there to clean the whole business. Fixing all the machinery. Wash it out, and dry everything to be ready for the next morning, floors and everything.

Knaster: How much did they pay you for that work?

De la Cruz: Oh, my god, let me see. They wasn't paying much. I never got a check at that length of time, working over there, a hundred dollar check, I never did get one.

Knaster: For a week, you mean?

De la Cruz: A week. Naturally.

Knaster: How many hours a day did you work there?

De la Cruz: I worked, after I worked the eight hours, people come out of there at four o'clock. I worked from four and five, six, three hours extra.

Knaster: To clean up. And you didn't make a hundred dollars a week.

De la Cruz: No I didn't. It was bad . . . I don't know that he was paying 90 cents an hour or 75 cents an hour, or 65 cents an hour, I don't remember.

Knaster: What kind of people were working in the cannery? Men, women . . .

De la Cruz: Americans, Mexicans, everything.

Knaster: So after working at the cannery you began to work at the vinegar place.

De la Cruz: After they moved from here they went to Santa Clara. They wanted me to go over there. But I didn't want to go.

Knaster: You liked it better here?

De la Cruz: Yeah. And I got a job at the vinegar plant. I stayed working there for quite a while.

Knaster: This was in the 1950s?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. 1950, '52, '53. After I quit from Bakers I went to J.J. Martin's.

Knaster: Who's J.J. Martin?

De la Cruz: That's a garlic field. He was paying me, I think it was \$3.35 an hour.

Knaster: For picking garlic?

De la Cruz: No. Sewing bags, sewing sacks of garlic.

Knaster: How long did you work for him?

De la Cruz: I was there for about four and a half years.

Knaster: When was that?

De la Cruz: In the fifties.

Knaster: How long did you work with the Heinz Company?

De la Cruz: I'll be doggone if I remember. I worked there quite a while. I still got some fellows that we used to work together here in the vinegar plant. One of my nieces here used to work for J.J. Martin's where I used to sew the garlic. And from there I went to

Gilroy. I work up there with Walt. They grow what you call the bell pepper...I worked for them until I got sick and I couldn't work no more.

Knaster: When you were working in Gilroy, did you live there or did you live in Watsonville?

De la Cruz: I was living in Gilroy then.

Knaster: You come back here? How many hours a day would you work in the packing shed?

De la Cruz: My goodness, we started, I think at seven o'clock and stop at five.

Knaster: How much were you paid?

De la Cruz: It was paying a dollar an hour.

Knaster: Oh, that's a little bit better than before.

De la Cruz: Naturally. It was so hot in the corn fields.

Knaster: What kind of work were you doing?

De la Cruz: Pulling corn.

Knaster: Did you work in the packing shed too?

De la Cruz: Yeah, I did.

Knaster: So you would pick and then you would work in the shed. In the packing shed what did you do?

De la Cruz: Fill up the boxes, which is a carton box. You put so many in each box and you roll them out.

Knaster: Were women working there, too, or only men?

De la Cruz: Women, too, of course. But of course that place works strawberries, corn, bell pepper. And I don't know what else they got over there.

Knaster: What year did you have your accident?

De la Cruz: 1968.

Knaster: How long were you working for that company?

De la Cruz: I didn't work for that long, for several months. Do you know Morgan Hill?

Knaster: Yes.

De la Cruz: Well, on the other side of the bridge, about a mile. That's Madrone. I went out there and picked prunes.

Knaster: Do you remember what year you did that?

De la Cruz: I think it was '67 . . . I didn't pick no more, just one run, that's all. Then I stopped.

Knaster: When you got hurt, were you in the hospital?

De la Cruz: Yes. When I was in the hospital I begin to start fixing up everything, you know.

Knaster: You know, all those years that you were working out in the fields, did you ever want to have your own land, to farm your own land?

De la Cruz: To own my own?

Knaster: Yeah.

De la Cruz: I always wanted some of my own but I never got it.

Knaster: You wanted to be a farmer?

De la Cruz: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Knaster: What would you grow?

De la Cruz: Oh, I'd grow multi-truck packing, that's what I like. If you went to sell to market, if you want to plant tomatoes, peppers of all kinds; you plant the squash, onion, green onion. Various crops to go in the market. You sell it to the market That's what's called truck patches.

Knaster: You wanted to do that?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: How large a place did you want? How many acres?

De la Cruz: Oh, let it be, well, I'd be settling for five acres.

Knaster: Five acres would have been enough?

De la Cruz: Yeah, sure. I can plant watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, chile, corn, radish, anything. Anything that would give me some money.

Knaster: What stood in your way from you becoming a farmer?

De la Cruz: A lot of things that I ain't got and they did have. For the first thing you have to have either a mule, or a horse, to plow your land, because you ain't no able to buy no machinery. Hoes and rake. Harness for your animal. Something to feed them with. Well they got put on plows, see? You need a pickup of some kind. To bring the stuff to the markets. Without which then how you gonna get it on the money? I can't walk too far either. I need a car to go here and go there, carry my wife.

Knaster: In all the years that you were in this area, did you see the farms getting bigger or getting smaller?

De la Cruz: Oh, they got bigger.

Knaster: Bigger and bigger?

De la Cruz: Oh, sure, yeah. Especially now.

Knaster: Especially now?

De la Cruz: Sure.

Knaster: Because the stuff worth more.

Knaster: Because the fruits and vegetables are worth more?

De la Cruz: Sure. Now, one artichoke. I've seen them go through 99 cents at the Lucky Market, 99 cents, one artichoke. What do you think of that?

Knaster: That's pretty high.

De la Cruz: Now, take watermelons. 22 cents a pound. That could show you something. And the men that are working, men making, as I told you, I know fellows that was making 75 dollars a day.

Knaster: Why do you think they're able to make 75 dollars a day now?

De la Cruz: Because the stuff's worth so much and the company can afford to pay the labor that much. One case of lettuce, you want to maybe put three dollars in on the case. How much do you think a case of lettuce would cost you in the field?

Knaster: I don't know.

De la Cruz: My goodness, right now it cost you twelve dollars.

Knaster: Twelve dollars to buy a case?

De la Cruz: Before you could buy it for three and a half or four dollars a case.

Knaster: What year was that that you could buy it for three dollars?

De la Cruz: Well, along in the forties. Naturally they was paying 65 cents an hour. Figure that.

Knaster: When you were getting 65 cents an hour, were the workers organized at all; were there unions?

De la Cruz: No, there was no union at all. The only time I got in the unions was when I was working in the cannery.

Knaster: In the cannery you belonged to the cannery workers union?

De la Cruz: The AF of L.

Knaster: Did someone approach you to join the union?

De la Cruz: No, nobody approached me at all. Nobody.

Knaster: So how did you join?

De la Cruz: I just joined it by myself, that's all. See, to have a right to go for a job or pay me more.

Knaster: Why was there no union for the farmworkers?

De la Cruz: Now they have it. Because this Chavez or whatever the name.

Knaster: César Chavez.

De la Cruz: Yeah, he made them come into it.

Knaster: He made them go into the union?

De la Cruz: They give them more money. But, see I was all messed up when the rest started.

Knaster: When the union started?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: When you were working in the fields, did anyone come ask if you wanted to join the union?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: There was never any talk about unions in those days?

De la Cruz: No.

Knaster: Did the workers ever talk about it?

De la Cruz: No. They didn't have sense enough.

Knaster: They didn't have enough sense?

De la Cruz: They had sense enough to go to work and kill themselves on the job they had then.

Knaster: Did you ever think of organizing the workers?

De la Cruz: Well, if they'd had a fellow like Chavez come in, he was making them join the union. If you didn't join the union you can't work nowhere. But there was nobody to harass the fellows like that.

Knaster: Were there ever any strikes?

De la Cruz: Not as I knows of.

Knaster: Because I remember that I read that in 1934 there was a really big strike in Salinas for lettuce. Do you remember hearing about that strike?

De la Cruz: I worked there all year and I ain't seen no strikes at all.

Knaster: The Filipinos went on strike.

De la Cruz: But they didn't get no more money than what they're getting.

Knaster: What do you think of strikes?

De la Cruz: Strikes? Well, that's all right if everybody joins together. So it's pretty good and all that if you can leave a track with the company or whatever you're going strike it.

Knaster: Right. How long were you in the cannery union?

De la Cruz: Here, with Baker? I worked there more three years, or more.

Knaster: Did the union do anything for you?

De la Cruz: Done anything for me? No.

Knaster: I mean, you paid union dues, didn't you?

De la Cruz: Yeah, I did.

Knaster: Did you get anything from being a member of the union?

De la Cruz: No. No, I didn't get nothing.

Knaster: Nothing?

De la Cruz: Nothing.

Knaster: So what was the purpose of the union?

De la Cruz: Well, I was there because I said, well if my job give out, I can go up there and see if I can get another job quick.

Knaster: The union would help you to get another job?

De la Cruz: Well, naturally, they're supposed to.

Knaster: They're supposed to. But did they?

De la Cruz: No, they never did look for no job for me. I always did have one. I quit one; I started working in the morning on another one.

Knaster: So you didn't really get anything out of being in the union?

De la Cruz: No, no.

Knaster: Did you see that it was useful for anyone else?

De la Cruz: I didn't see no difference. Between me and the other ones that was working, I didn't see no difference at all.

Knaster: Do you think that people should be forced to join a union?

De la Cruz: Well, if they want to join, they join. You can't force them. Because you say well I'm gonna live until I die and I always want to work anywhere I can. See? That's the way it is. They force them now on account of César Chavez, you know, because they're making good money and they can afford to be there.

Knaster: What happens if you don't join the union?

De la Cruz: They don't let you work. No siree. If you started working in a place that was working they'd chase you out of it. See, you don't belong to your union, you don't pay no rights. You don't pay no dues.

Knaster: Did you ever work in a lettuce packing shed?

De la Cruz: Yeah. I worked for the Watsonville packing shed over here in Beach Road.

Knaster: When was that?

De la Cruz: Oh, let me see. That was in the fifties, too. But I didn't like it a bit. They getting you all wet, you know.

Knaster: All wet? Why, were you using ice?

De la Cruz: No, water, all the time water.

Knaster: Oh, just washing the lettuce.

De la Cruz: Yeah, washing all the lettuce. When the lettuce come in you got to get the cases right here. It all lumber, made out of lumber you know.

Knaster: Wooden cases.

De la Cruz: Yeah, wooden cases. And naturally when the lettuce come out of the water, just put them in there along, you have got to lift them up then, it was all messed up, wet, you know. I didn't like it at all. I didn't stay very long.

Knaster: Well, it sounds like all those years that you were working you were by yourself. When did you get married?

De la Cruz: Oh, my God. February the 14th. Last year.

Knaster: Oh, only last year! So until last year you were a bachelor?

De la Cruz: Yeah. Oh, I been a bachelor all my life.

Knaster: What made you suddenly get married?

De la Cruz: Well, I said, my feeling is I was getting old now. I'm old. I was needing somebody to take care of me. And I take care of her some of the time. You know? Getting me . . . making my food and washing my clothes and keeping me decent. And same way as I do for her, see, help.

Knaster: How did you meet your wife?

De la Cruz: Where she used to work.

Knaster: In the restaurant?

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: Did you want to marry a woman who was Mexican?

De la Cruz: Well, of course, I could not find better. Because, it don't make no difference what nationality, only is treating me right, and she level with me, and all like that, see? It don't make no difference what nationality. I don't want no black woman.

Knaster: You didn't want a black woman?

De la Cruz: No, no.

Knaster: Is it difficult to be married after you were a bachelor for so long?

De la Cruz: Well, I seen a lot of changes.

Knaster: You've made a lot of changes?

De la Cruz: Yeah. I've seen many changes in myself.

Knaster: What kind of changes?

De la Cruz: Well, don't have to suffer for nothing.

Knaster: Suffer for nothing?

De la Cruz: Well, in the evening concern, my clothes clean, and I eat good and sleep good, and walk all around . . . and all like that.

Knaster: So it has worked out well for you.

De la Cruz: Yeah. It seem to me everything goes farther than it used to do.

Knaster: Farther?

De la Cruz: Yeah, sure. My groceries, what the government give me . . . going me farther, because I got a problem in the house, once I was by myself and eat, everything.

Knaster: But is it harder to live on?

De la Cruz: When I was single, everything that I was getting, I didn't see nothing I bought and I said where the heck did the money went to? So at least I got somebody to take care of that, at least I got a dime in my pocket.

Knaster: Your wife takes care of the money.

De la Cruz: Oh yeah. She buy all the groceries and all that thing. Well, buys them till all the money's gone.

Knaster: You're not getting very much money for two people, though, and \$90...

De la Cruz: No, of course we don't. It don't last long. That's on account of the groceries is too high. Too high. The groceries are higher than your money, \$97.10.

Knaster: \$97.10 and then you get welfare.

De la Cruz: Yeah and I get welfare.

Knaster: About \$187 or something like that.

De la Cruz: Something. She pay rent. Then I have to jump on my social security and buy clothes and all that, and part of the food too.

Knaster: And you're also getting Medicare.

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Knaster: So your medical bills are taken care of if anything happens.

De la Cruz: My hospital, doctor bills, and medicine. Some medicine I have to pay out of my pocket for. Now I ain't got no Medicare yet. They didn't send it to me yet this month. I got to see...

Knaster: When you look back on your life, and you remember all of your experience and what you did. . .

De la Cruz: Oh, my God, if I look back and start to thinking . . . now, I would have been a millionaire.

Knaster: What would you have done different?

De la Cruz: If you'd have seen me about three or four years ago, I was poor, you know, didn't but fooling around. She take care of me a lot. Last fall I didn't look like this, no.

Knaster: Oh, you're in much better shape now?

De la Cruz: Naturally. I weigh more, eat better, and all that.

Knaster: But if you had a choice, for example, do you think knowing what you know now, would you have left home at such an early age? You told me you left home when you were 9 or 10. Would you have done anything different if you had the choice now?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah, boy if I did change it a whole lot now. If I had thought, when I was that age or a little bit older, I would be millionaire, see?

Knaster: Do you think you would have gone to school?

De la Cruz: Oh, yes. Yes, see if I'd have went through school I don't know where I'd have gone. I'd have done more and I'd have better head to think with and all that, you know.

Knaster: When you went to school did you learn to read and write?

De la Cruz: Oh, yeah. I've been reading now. Read a letter or anything I want.

Knaster: Thank you.

De la Cruz: You're welcome.

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