

unpublished

CARA HOLT

Oral History Interview

January 15, 1980
Lamont, California

ORAL HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY PROJECT
CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD
RURAL AMERICANS IN THE DEPRESSION PROJECT

MIGRANTS, FIELD WORKERS AND LABORERS

CARA HOLT

Interviewed By
Mark Britton

on

January 15, 1980
Lamont, California

Sponsored by the Department of History, California State College, Bakersfield
and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Federal agency

INDEX

INTERVIEWEE: Cara Holt
INTERVIEWER: Mark Britton
SUBJECT: Migrants, Field Workers and Laborers
DATE: January 15, 1980
PLACE: Lamont, California
TRANSCRIBER: Marsha A. Rink
EDITOR: Mark Britton

PAGE

The move to Texas, the death of Mrs. Holt's father, and the return to Oklahoma	1
Mrs. Holt's marriage and the move to work in the Kansas smelters	3
The coming of the Depression and the education of Mrs. Holt's daughter	4
The Indian stomp dances	7
The trip to California	8
Working for DiGiorgio Farms and picking cotton in the fall	9
The DiGiorgio Strike in 1947	11
Mrs. Holt's sense of progress	14

INTERVIEW WITH
CARA HOLT

Britton: Start by telling where you were born and the year.

Holt: I was born in Porum, Oklahoma Indian Territory, in 1900 on May 1st.

Britton: Tell me about when you were a little girl.

Holt: The first I can remember I was about six years old. My daddy lived on a ranch. There were no schools in Oklahoma at that time. He decided that he'd move to Texas so we could get a chance to have an education. I don't remember just what time we moved, but it was in the fall of the year. We lived there about a year and then moved back to Oklahoma. It was different from what my mother and dad were used to. They weren't happy there so we moved back to Oklahoma in a covered wagon. We lived in Oklahoma about one more year, made a crop, and decided to go back to Texas.

Britton: Where in Oklahoma?

Holt: Porum. The same place where we had lived. It was Tom Sunday's place. He was an Indian man.

Britton: Did you rent it?

Holt: Yes. My daddy brought his stock back and we made a crop there.

Britton: Do you remember what you grew?

Holt: Cotton and corn. When we moved back to Texas, my daddy chartered a car to take his stock and my mother's furniture. He sent my mother and six children on a passenger train to Texas. He was supposed to come through with his stock. He was killed in Miscogee, Oklahoma. While he was waiting there for his train to be made up, he went to the ticket office to see when his train was going to be billed out, and a switch engine ran over him and killed him. They sent him on to Texas to us and he was buried in Texas.

Britton: How did you find out about it?

Holt: I suppose the Company. I was just a little girl. That was when I was

eight. My daddy got killed the first day of January, 1908. We lived in Texas just a part of that year and moved back to Oklahoma.

Britton: How did your family take it?

Holt: It just liked to kill my mother; and she had six children to provide for. Children weren't like they are now. They listened to their parents. My brothers were 17 and 19 years old, but they listened. My mother didn't know how to run the business very well and it was really hard on her. After eight or nine months we came right back to Porum. We moved in with a lady that was a widow--full-blooded, Indian woman.

Britton: Do you remember what her name was?

Holt: Yes, Aunt Fanny Star. She was a very noted person in that country. There was Star outlaw people at that time. Jesse James or some man that was an outlaw came to her house different times, stayed all night with her, and put money on her mantle board when he left. She wouldn't even know it until after he was gone. He was good to the poor people, but he took money from the rich. She was a nice lady, but she didn't know nothing but a rough-tough life. She was raised in the Indian Territory, and that was all she knew. Whatever came her way she did it to get by and make a living.

Britton: Where was your mother from?

Holt: My mother was born in Missouri. Mary Ann Dorran, but they called her Molly. My daddy was born in Illinois.

Britton: What brought them to Oklahoma?

Holt: I don't know what brought them to Oklahoma.

Britton: Was it after they were married?

Holt: Yes, they were married in Springfield, Missouri. They had three children when they came to Oklahoma.

Britton: What did you do while you were living with Aunt Fanny Star?

Holt: We didn't do anything. It was the winter time. Later that winter we moved to Sequoia County close to my mother's father at Vianne.

Britton: What was the place called?

Holt: There was a post office at Box and a post office at Black Gum. We lived up on Black Gum Mountain, eight miles from Vianne, where Ten Killer is today. That's where I was raised until I was fifteen.

Britton: And your mother bought land?

Holt: My mother bought land.

Britton: How much?

Holt: It was between 100 and 160 acres. She bought it with the money she got from the railroad company when my daddy was killed.

Britton: Do you remember how much money?

Holt: No. Very little by the time the railroad company got what they had. We paid for that land and built a two-room house. I was ten when my mother bought this land. We lived there three years. We kept the place longer than that. In five years I got married.

Britton: So what did your mother do?

Holt: We farmed cotton and corn. We raised a garden and sat out fruit trees. But mother never was happy after my daddy was killed. The two oldest children were boys and they got married, and my older sister married. It left three little kids and mother. She did one thing and another for a living. We usually hoed cotton for people. She didn't sell it until after I married. I married in 1915.

Britton: Who did you marry?

Holt: I married Matt Holt.

Britton: How did you meet him?

Holt: I knew him ever since I was a little girl. We'd have church at the school and we all met together. I knew the family. I went home with his sister one night, and he walked me home.

Britton: He was older than you, wasn't he?

Holt: Seven years. He and I moved to Kansas not long after we were married and he worked in the smelters. He never liked the farm. He was raised on a farm but he didn't like it.

Britton: What's a smelter?

Holt: It's where they roasted ore and made zinc.

Britton: Where is this in Kansas?

Holt: Altuna, Kansas. We made a couple of trips out there back and forth. After that we moved to Henrietta, Oklahoma, and he worked the smelters there. We moved there in 1919 and lived there off and on until 1929.

Britton: You must have been moving around a lot?

Holt: We moved around a lot.

Britton: Did you like it?

Holt: No, I didn't! He did. (laughs) We made several trips to Texas during that time. Me being the weaker vessel I had to go along with him.

Britton: You started having children. When was your first baby born?

Holt: 1917. It deceased.

Britton: It died?

Holt: It had a bowel trouble--eight months old. Mildred my oldest daughter was born August 28, 1918. Then I didn't have any more children until 1926 when I had my next child. It was a girl.

Britton: What other kinds of things did you do?

Holt: We moved to Texas during that time and farmed a little. We farmed cotton.

Britton: What were the circumstances?

Holt: Sharecropped with my uncle, Levi Fauntenberry.

Britton: Did you like that?

Holt: I liked it alright. I liked living on the ranch. I didn't like Texas, and my husband didn't like living on the farm.

Britton: Why not?

Holt: He said he liked the bright lights (chuckles) and the checks coming in

that didn't come when we lived on the farm. We picked cotton in the fall of the year, sometimes. The smelters shut down a time or two and we had to find other ways to make a living. We didn't know anything else to do but go back to the farm. Our families all lived on farms. Then the Depression time came and the smelters shut down. We went back to where we were raised and lived on my mother-in-law's ranch.

Britton: Did she own the place?

Holt: She owned the place. My brother-in-law bought us some cattle (Ed Holt.)

Britton: How many did he buy?

Holt: About 20 head of heifers.

Britton: What kind of heifers?

Holt: Some of them were Jerseys and some were mixed. We raised stock and lived there for ten years. We farmed cotton, corn, headed feed, milked cows, raised chickens, sold eggs, sold cream, separated milk, and farmed for a living.

Britton: What was the place like?

Holt: Mountain land.

Britton: Describe your life there?

Holt: During the last ten years of our lives there we had a real hard time. Everybody did. Our oldest daughter was about the right age for high school and we sent her to school. She finished high school and we sent her over to Warner Agricultural College. She worked her way through school.

Britton: What did she do to get through college?

Holt: She washed dishes the first year. She just went over there two years. Then she began teaching school and she made enough money to finish her school.

Britton: Did she finish at Warner?

Holt: No, she finished at Telequa. In the meantime we had it pretty rough. I canned wild berries. The wild onions grew down on the ranch and I fried them with eggs. We had everything we wanted to eat. We raised it. We didn't have any clothes much; but we had a good living.

Britton: Tell me more about making a living?

Holt: We farmed my mother-in-law's place. We sold eggs for sugar and flour and such things as we had to buy. We raised sweet potatoes, potatoes, peas and all kinds of vegetables. We put them up in cans and hold our turnips up in the winter.

Britton: Tell me about the cows?

Holt: They ran outside and we'd go hunt them and bring them on home, put them in the lot, and keep them up a few days. Then, we'd turn them out again on the range. They made calves. I was tickled to death when those little calves began to come. My little chickens would hatch in the spring, and sometimes it would rain. I would have to run out and gather my little chickens up, bring them in the house, and keep them from drowning. Some of them would drown. That would break my heart. That was my livelihood.

Britton: Describe the place.

Holt: My daddy-in-law built the house. He built a room and a side room. Later, he built two box rooms and big hall between them. We had plenty of room to live comfortable. We had our own smoke house in the back and we killed our own meat, raised our own hogs and put it up for the winter.

We had lots of company. Half the time we wouldn't eat by ourselves. There would be a lot of people come to our house to eat because I worked hard to put up the stuff. A lot of people didn't do that. We always had plenty to eat, but we didn't have any money. Money was scarce in those days.

Britton: Describe a day?

Holt: There would be nights I would lay awake and plan what I was going to do the next day. I was an industrious person and I loved my work. I'd say, "Well, first thing in the morning I'll get up and get breakfast." We always had to separate our milk. We would take our lanterns some mornings. Milk by the lantern. I pieced quilts. I chased around. I didn't have any covers and it was cold in that country. While I lived there I tried my best to make all the quilts I could. I pieced quilts, quilted. I picked geese and made my feather beds to be warm to sleep on.

When corn gathering time came, I helped to gather the corn. I helped to head the feed, and put it in the barn for my chickens. We put the hogs up in the fall of the year and fattened them up for meat.

Britton: How many hogs did you keep?

Holt: We usually had two nice brood sows. We had a big old red sow. She had a whole bunch of little pigs and laid on them. Killed them all. That broke our hearts so we got rid of her.

Britton: Tell us about your chickens?

Holt: I kept on until I raised 100 laying hens. I had white and buff leghorns. I had mixed chickens. In the spring of the year they really would lay. Sometimes I'd rake out 100 eggs from under the barn with a hoe.

Britton: What was the size of your family?

Holt: I had three girls. We had the other two girls when the baby was born. We sent them away. We were tickled about it because it had been seven and a half years since we had had a little baby. Everybody thought she was a regular little doll. We were keeping a school teacher at that time and we let her name her.

Britton: Tell me about the people that lived around you?

Holt: Everybody was very poor that lived around us. Our closest neighbor wasn't very thrifty. Her little old kids had it rough. Her oldest daughter went to school with my oldest daughter. Sometimes she'd go and her shoes would be nearly off her feet. She got married before she finished high school. After she got married she went to school again and made a teacher.

Britton: You lived in Sequoia County and there were a lot of Indians there. Tell me about them?

Holt: They always had what they called stomp dances. It was their chief's birthday and it lasted three days. We usually took it in because we had a lot of friends that had moved away and they would come back to go to the stomp dance. We'd stay all night and visit with our friends.

Britton: These were Indian people?

Holt: Some of them were Indian, some weren't. There was a lot of White people that went to the stomp dances. They stomped around the fire and sang in Cherokee. We'd just have a big time. My best friend would always come back and stay with us. Her husband and my husband would go fishing. We would stay at home and milk the cows and go to the dance. We had a real good time while we lived there. But, my oldest

daughter got married in 1939 and we decided to come to California.

Britton: Why did you decide to come to California?

Holt: Well, my husband had high blood pressure and wasn't able to work very much. My sister lived here in California. We decided we'd all come to California--Matt, Mildred and her husband, and the other two children.

Britton: What did you think California was like?

Holt: I'd never been here. I didn't know what it was like until I came. But, I thought it was a beautiful, beautiful country and I never wanted to go back to live (laughs). I wanted to go see the coast. When I got there I didn't know it was the coast. I couldn't tell it was water before we could see it real good. I was happy in California.

Britton: Describe the trip to California?

Holt: We came to California from Oklahoma in a 1937 Chevrolet. We brought everything we had in that Chevy.

Britton: Was it a nice trip?

Holt: We thought we had a good time. We got here in the night. My sister lived in Caliente Canyon and we had a little trouble finding her place. We stopped and made a fire and when daylight came there was a sign that read "No Fires Allowed." (laughs) We stayed there for a few days; came down to Lamont. My husband and son-in-law got jobs at DiGiorgio Farms.

END OF SIDE ONE

* * * * *

SIDE TWO

Holt: I didn't get any work until that fall. I got a job packing grapes. I worked at DiGiorgio until 1966. All during the war I worked there pruning grapes and tying vines. I lost my husband in 1949.

Britton: Let's go back now. Where did you live?

Holt: I lived right here in Lamont. I lived on Santa Rosa Street. We rented a house and my daughter and her husband lived with us.

Britton: What kind of house was it?

Holt: We lived in two rooms and another party lived in the other two. Their name was Meadows. Then, my daughter and her husband moved to San Diego and they froze him on a job during the war. He worked at an aircraft plant.

Britton: They froze him on a job? What do you mean?

Holt: He couldn't leave. He had to stay there during the war.

Britton: Why?

Holt: I can't tell you that. I don't know. Their two children were born there.

Britton: Did you and your husband go to work in the war plants in San Diego?

Holt: No.

Britton: Did you ever go down to San Diego?

Holt: Yes, we stayed there about six months, but I worked in a cafe. My husband worked in construction.

Britton: But it wasn't for the war?

Holt: No, he didn't work in the aircraft plant.

Britton: You came back to Lamont?

Holt: We came back to Lamont and lived here.

Britton: And you always worked for DiGiorgio?

Holt: Till I retired.

Britton: Did you ever plan to buy land?

Holt: No. We bought two or three homes here in Lamont. I picked cotton in the fall of the year. I could make more money than I could at DiGiorgios. My husband picked cotton too. But, the last two or three years he wasn't able to work at all.

Britton: Who did you pick cotton for?

Holt: Well, I picked cotton for Ray Shelton, Mr. Boatman, and my brother-in-law,

Kyle Choate. He was a contractor.

Britton: Tell me about picking cotton in the fall?

Holt: We'd get up early in the morning, wait for the daylight to come, and wait for the dew to dry. I'd pick like a Turk. I picked four or five hundred everyday. I've got witnesses to prove it.

Britton: How would you pick cotton? What would you have to do?

Holt: I had a twelve foot sack and I'd tie it at both ends. I'd put cotton in the end I had by my side. The bottom end of it I would tie up so I could untie it and empty it from both ends. It's hard to empty. I had to climb on a ladder on a three-bail trailer and empty my own cotton. I'd have 75 to 85 pounds of cotton in my sack.

Britton: How were you paid?

Holt: We were paid by the pound.

Britton: How much, do you remember?

Holt: Sometimes we would get real good pay. Sometimes we would get very little. When we first moved out here and I went to work for DiGiorgio, we got 22 1/2 cents an hour. As time went on wages went up a little bit all the time. I picked cotton for less than a dollar a hundred when we first came out here. I'd pick for \$2 an hour sometimes. I thought I was really making money when I could make ten dollars a day. Part of the time, my husband and I picked one thousand pounds of cotton a day. But, after he got so poorly, he couldn't work very well.

Britton: Tell me about his sickness?

Holt: He had high blood pressure and it caused hardening of the arteries. The last year he lived he was in and out of the hospital all the time. It was really hard times for us because I had to make it by myself and I had to stay with him sometimes. But my two oldest girls were married. I only had my baby girl to make a living for. She was old enough to help me. She'd help me pick cotton whenever it wasn't school days. That's one reason I picked cotton instead of working for DiGiorgio. I could take her and she could help me. She didn't like it so well.

While he was in the hospital we had it pretty rough. We hadn't been out here too long and hadn't caught up like we did later. We had a little money in the bank when he got down to where he couldn't work. But it didn't take the hospital long to get it. I was broke when he passed away.

Britton: Where did you live during this time?

Holt: We bought a home before he had to go to the hospital the first time.

Britton: Did you build a house?

Holt: We built a house. There was a little house on it / the property / and we lived in it until we could build us a house onto it. We built a two bedroom home there.

Britton: What was the name of the street?

Holt: School Street. I sold it when I retired in 1965.

Britton: You worked for the DiGiorgio Farms, did you enjoy it?

Holt: Yes, I loved it. I could make a living there.

Britton: Were they good employers?

Holt: Yes, good employers. It was just like going back to a family reunion when we'd be off a while in the winter time. In 1940, we didn't have any vacation time. We worked winter and summer all the time. We pruned grapes and packed asparagus in the spring. I worked just about all the time.

Britton: How did you get on with the DiGiorgio Farms?

Holt: They had a boss that hired the people.

Britton: Was it easy to get a job?

Holt: It was real hard to get a job when we first came here. But, after I worked a few years there, I was always one of the first they put on after we'd have a layoff.

Britton: Do you remember any union movements at the farms?

Holt: Yes. They tried to make them join the union. They wouldn't do it and they had a big tear up over it. People quit.

Britton: Did you belong to the union?

Holt: No, I never did join the union. I picked cotton that fall as usual when they had the strike in the fall.

Britton: What year was this?

Holt: 1947. But DiGiorgio never did go union.

Britton: What did you think of the strike? What was your opinion of the union?

Holt: I would have to say that I'm not against the union. I wasn't then. There's a lot of things the union has done that's been a hindrance to people, but I think it's done a lot of good too. I think it's got wages to be better. But there was a lot of people never did go back to work after the strike. There was a lot of people couldn't go back to work because they showed out and did things they shouldn't have. DiGiorgios wouldn't hire them.

Britton: You worked there until you retired?

Holt: I worked DiGiorgio until 1966.

Britton: Do you think the move to California brought your family closer together?

Holt: I don't think it made a difference as far as my family is concerned.

Britton: What was the first thing you saw in California?

Holt: The mountains.

Britton: What did you think about them?

Holt: I thought they were beautiful.

Britton: What did you think of the valley when you first saw it?

Holt: I came from Caliente. . .my brother-in-law brought us to Bakersfield from Caliente Canyon. I saw the valley from up on the hill and I thought it was beautiful. It's a lot more beautiful now than it was when I came. There's a lot more cultivation.

Britton: What did you think people living in California for a long time thought about you?

Holt: Well, I guess they didn't feel so well about us Okies.

Britton: Why not?

Holt: I don't know. They kind of wanted to tag something on us that really wasn't true.

Britton: What's that?

Holt: I don't know really how to describe it. I guess they felt a little more superior than the Okies.

Britton: Would you say your relationship with the growers was good?

Holt: Yes! I certainly would.

Britton: You always felt like you were treated fairly?

Holt: I was treated good. Sure was.

Britton: Did you ever meet any of the DiGiorgios?

Holt: Yes, I sure did. The old DiGiorgio used to be right there at the shed. And I saw his son.

Britton: And you liked them?

Holt: I didn't have anything against them. I can't say I was really acquainted with them. Their bosses were as nice a people as you would want to meet anywhere. All of them were good to their employees.

Britton: What did you think of Franklin Roosevelt?

Holt: I think he made a pretty good president in a way.

Britton: Why do you think he was a pretty good president?

Holt: A lot of people said he caused war and I'm not for war. But it seemed to me that we had better times under him.

Britton: Did you vote for him?

Holt: No, I didn't vote at that time.

Britton: When did you start voting?

Holt: I don't guess I started voting until I came to California.

Britton: After you came to California, did you vote for Roosevelt?

Holt: I doubt that I voted.

Britton: Did you vote for Truman?

Holt: No, Truman was a Republican and I'm a Democrat.

Britton: No, Truman was a Democrat.

Holt: I don't remember for sure.

Britton: Is there a difference between Okie and Dustbowler?

Holt: I don't know what you mean by a Dustbowler?

Britton: You never heard that term?

Holt: No.

Britton: Do you remember working with any Mexicans or Filipinos?

Holt: Yes, I worked with lots of Mexicans at DiGorgio. I worked with a few Filipinos in the field when I worked for Bill Messeshan.

Britton: What did you think of them?

Holt: Really, I believe they worked a crew to themselves.

Britton: How about Mexicans?

Holt: I worked a lot with Mexicans. I worked in the field with them and I worked in the shed with them.

Britton: When you look back on the move from Oklahoma and all the moving you did in the 1920's, back and forth to the smelters, do you think of your life as being a part of history?

Holt: Yes, I think so. Why sure it would be. It's in the past.

Britton: Do you feel a sense of progress in your life?

Holt: Yes. Yes, in some ways very much--in some ways not so much.

Britton: In what way do you feel progress?

Holt: I feel a great progress in spirituality.

Britton: What about in terms of your family. Are things better?

Holt: Things have always been fairly well with us. My family is doing better if that's what you mean. They aren't rich people by any means. My

My oldest girl is retired from school teaching. My baby's a teacher, and her husband has a good job. My other daughter doesn't work, but my son-in-law has always made her a good living.

Britton: How do you think your family feels about being from Oklahoma?

Holt: I think they feel alright.

Britton: Is there pride about it?

Holt: I wouldn't say there wasn't. I would say there was. There was a lot of things that happened in Oklahoma that I didn't like, but there was a lot of good things. I'm not sorry I am from Oklahoma, and I don't think none of my family is sorry they are from Oklahoma.

Britton: I am sure they're not.

END OF INTERVIEW