

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY  
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Catherine Sullivan

PLACE OF BIRTH: Los Angeles, California

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: February 27, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Bakersfield, Kern County

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## PREFACE

This interview relates the experiences of a social worker employed by the State Relief Administration in Kern County during the 1930s. It recounts some of the conditions and regulations which prevailed during that period.

Judith Gannon  
Interviewer

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- J.G.: This is an interview with Catherine Sullivan of 5808 Indian Wells Avenue, Kern City, California done by Judith Gannon for the CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project, California State College, Bakersfield, California. This interview was conducted on February 27, 1981.
- J.G.: Okay, Mrs. Sullivan, why don't you start by telling me a little bit about where you came from and your training just so we can get to know you a little bit.
- Sullivan: Thank you. I came to Bakersfield and Kern County from the Los Angeles area where I was born and lived all my life until moving up here. Of course, coming up here wasn't all that far away from home. I went from first grade through two years of college at Long Beach where I lived. From there--again not too far away from home--I went to UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles] for the remaining two years of college. After graduating from UCLA I could not find the kind of work that I wanted to do so did a variety of things--research work for other people among them.
- J.G.: What kind of work did you want to do at that point?
- Sullivan: Well, I had majored in psychology because of the lack of being able to get a degree in sociology at the time-- there was no resource to provide it. I wanted to do something in a related field--social work or whatever opportunity presented itself--but as I say I did some research for other people and then I was in business--family owned business for a while. Eventually I went to work for the County of Los Angeles in the County Welfare Department and worked there briefly until the deteriorating

Sullivan, C.

economic conditions at that time resulted in the formation of the State Relief Administration. I went to work for the State Relief Administration in Long Beach and worked--I think that was in 1934--and worked for that agency in the Long Beach area and then eventually in the San Pedro area.

J.G.: What kind of work did you do?

Sullivan: It was just regular social work. I was a field worker--field social worker--and made home calls and interviews and granted aid to those who met the qualifications that were in effect at that time. In spite of my subsequent experiences here in Kern County--which certainly revealed a great deal of deprivation on the part of people--it was just as bad in the more metropolitan area and if you're interested now or later on in the interview in some examples of that, I can provide them.

J.G.: Very much. Go ahead.

Sullivan: Well, for one thing the people with whom I came in contact there were people who did not have the agricultural background but were professional people, and some really distressing circumstances remain fixed in my memory. I remember one poor gentleman whom I'd visited who had applied for assistance. He had been a vaudeville performer with an act involving dogs. He committed suicide--just walked out into the ocean till he drowned because the small amount of assistance that was granted at that time was not sufficient to take care of his dogs too. They meant so much to him that he couldn't tolerate living without seeing that they were taken care of.

I had another applicant for assistance who lived in a miserable court--small bungalows that were rented out to people. His application for assistance had been on file and people were too busy to get out to see him right away and by the time it was assigned to me and I got there, he was so ill and so weak from hunger that I had to go out and buy a couple cans of chicken soup and literally spoon feed him until he was able to answer questions about his name and birthplace and circumstances that were necessary to begin granting assistance. I later was able with a fellow employee to get him into the hospital but he did not survive very long.

Another recollection that comes to mind was of a woman who really had been considered well off. She was living in a lovely home at Alamitos Bay in Long Beach, was married and had two children, and her husband died suddenly and here she was left with no training to do anything and was just devastated at the thought of having to apply for public assistance. When she had to come and see me at the welfare department we both went along with the idea that she was a personal friend calling on me and not coming in as an assistance recipient. That certainly was no problem for me to cope with and made her feel easier about the situation. Another man who'd been

wealthy by the standards of those days told me--and I was inclined to believe him--that he had been making in the neighborhood of \$2,000 a week and he had a son in West Point. He had to have been fairly well to do to even get recognition for the boy. Here he was applying for assistance and his greatest concern was--at least the one that he showed--that he couldn't find a napkin to give me to go with my coffee and he had to use a bath towel which he carefully tucked around my lap. He was so concerned [about his plight] that he wept during the interview. At the beginning of the interview he wanted to give me a cup of coffee. I didn't want a cup of coffee. I wanted to get in and out as quickly as I could, but he insisted so I let him give me the coffee.

And another lady who had had such a well-to-do background that she and her husband and young adult son had never thought of anything in the way of need. She had exceptionally small feet for an adult woman and had always had her shoes custom made. Her custom-made shoes wore out and she could find nothing to fit her without going into children's shoes. So here she was having to wear little Mary Jane sandals which embarrassed her very much. But of greater concern to her was the fact that they had given their son extensive training to be a concert pianist and because he was the able-bodied member of that family, it was required that he take employment. The only employment available was an assignment to what later became WPA [Works Progress Administration] but at that time was still a State Relief Administration project. It was ditch digging. They were so apprehensive that his hands would be damaged by this. I always think of things like this when I hear about people allegedly refusing to take employment. So many times they have valid reasons for refusing to work--reasons the general public cannot be aware of. It gives so many people a totally wrong impression about those who request and need assistance.

J.G.: What years would this have been that you worked in Long Beach with the State Relief Administration?

Sullivan: Let's see. I came up to Kern County in 1939 so this would have been beginning in 1934 or maybe that's when I went to work for the Los Angeles County Welfare Department and then between 1935 and 1939--somewhere along in there.

J.G.: What you're saying is that when you were working in the metropolitan Long Beach area that you saw people every bit as needy.

Sullivan: Housing conditions were every bit as deplorable as they were up here. They weren't quite so wide-spread for people who were really needing assistance. For the Arkies and Okies and others here the conditions under which they had to live were pretty

general. Very similar deplorable conditions were not as widespread in the metropolitan areas. I can remember going to one place in Long Beach which was a sort of court where there were separate little housing bungalows. It was in such an awful location that the least bit of rain made ankle-deep mud. One had to walk in mud not only to get from the street to the little house in which they lived but also to get from the little house to the little sanitary house because there was no bath in connection with it--no toilet facilities at all.

Later I was transferred to San Pedro. There had been a Relief Administration office in San Pedro and it was closed down for--I presume--money-saving purposes. It didn't really save any money. Everybody that had to work in the area that had been covered from the San Pedro office--all the beach communities along there on up to Santa Monica--had to work out of the Long Beach office so it just added to the driving expense and the time expense. It also was very inconvenient for people who were in need of assistance. It was literally impossible for them to get into the Long Beach office. So they reopened San Pedro and at my request I was assigned to the San Pedro office. I hadn't thought about this before. When I came up here it was in the middle of the cotton strike. When I went to the San Pedro office it was in the middle of the longshoreman strike--which included commercial seamen and factory or cannery workers, but that made life extremely interesting over in the San Pedro area at that time.

J.G.: What made you decide in 1939 to leave the Long Beach/San Pedro area and come to Kern County?

Sullivan: Partly it was due to my own personal circumstances at the time. I wanted to get away from the Long Beach area but I didn't want to get too far away because my mother who still lived there was in very poor health and I wanted to be easily accessible if needed. There were other reasons too. Kern County to me at that time was nothing more than a name, and Bakersfield was the last place on earth that anybody wanted to go to and live. When my friends found that I had asked to come up here, they were aghast and thought that I'd lost my "cotton-picking" mind. There was a group of people called task-force people--there was some other more definitive name given to them I think but I can't now remember what it was--sent up here to help out because the number of applications that were made for assistance as soon as the harvest seasons was over in Kern County was far greater than valley welfare departments could cope with. So they sent volunteers from the metropolitan areas to come up here to work. There was a little extra pay for their doing so.

I came because I knew some of those people. I did not come up as a task-force person at the time. I learned about conditions

up here and then I read Carey McWilliams' Factories in the Fields and [The] Grapes of Wrath and I just felt that this community needed me.

It was an area that met my personal requirements--not too far away from home and also I thought I could be of some use. I could ask for the transfer up here because the State Relief Administration wasn't just a county program. My request was granted, but the only thing was that I didn't get paid for two months. That gave me a better idea of what people had to go through when they were in as great need as most of them were. They transferred me but forgot to transfer my name on the payroll. It took me about two months before I got any money and that made life extremely interesting. My husband was with me and he was not able to work because of his health. We were at the point where we were living almost totally on credit. I've always blessed the people of Bakersfield for being as understanding as they were. Of course, they knew that I was working and I'd get paid eventually. The landlord gave us an extension on paying rent. I was able to establish credit at a grocery store and at a service station--so I got gasoline and food. Anything else I did without except a newspaper. Newspapers were five cents at the time and we'd get a bottle of milk on credit and then we would take the empty bottle back and get five cents refund on it and buy a newspaper. Of course, those conditions didn't last forever but I think long enough to give me a feeling of what it's like to be wondering when the money is going to come in.

So I continued to work for the State Relief Administration. I came up here in 1939 and the Relief Administration was terminated in 1941. I worked during that two-year period in Bakersfield. I began as supervisor so I didn't have as much field work. I was later transferred out to Wasco and worked in that office for a while and when they were on another money-saving plan, my title was reduced from supervisor to social worker again. I don't know how much money it saved because there was no cut in salary that went with it, but this did serve to put me back out in the field again. One of my greatest problems was living with this tremendously hot weather. I wasn't used to heat having lived all my life down around the waterfront. I nearly died when I was driving around. I would drive by an artesian well where all of this beautiful water was spilling out and the crops were getting irrigated but I wasn't and this was kind of hard to take.

I was assigned to go twice a week to Delano to take applications and to meet with anybody who had any problems there. There was not an office in Delano. What was used as an office was in a location that no longer exists. It was an abandoned airfield. Quite sometime before I started going up there a building had been put up right in the middle of this desolate area that was used as a WPA sewing project. All the ladies who needed assistance

had to go to work on this WPA sewing project. Well, I don't know how they survived because this building was my office when I had to go to Delano. Absolutely the only furniture in it was a desk and a chair on which I sat and benches on which people coming in to talk about their problems--whether they were applying for aid or already receiving it and had a question--would sit and wait for me to get around to being able to talk to them one at a time. I was the only social worker there. In the wintertime it was so cold that I literally had to wear mittens which didn't make writing and filling out forms any easier. In the summertime it was so hot that it was almost unbearable. I was supposed to be there from 9:00 until 12:00 or 12:30 these two days a week. I can remember on one occasion my watch was broken and I stopped on the way out and bought a thermometer and I have no idea what time it was. I know it wasn't noon yet. When the temperature in that building got to 110° I said, "This is it," because not a soul had come in. You know, mad dogs and Englishmen and social workers go out in the noonday sun but not very many other people do so I left. Those were just some of the physical-type adventures that I had. Later I was stuck in mud, sand and snow. Of course the snow wasn't in the valley. Much later I had to abandon some calls that were scheduled for me to make because the snow made it impossible for me to get from Visalia up to Springville. Instead, I went from Visalia to Tulare, but there was snow all the way.

J.G.: You as a person stationed in Kern County had to make visits all the way up to Visalia and Tulare?

Sullivan: No. As I say, that was much, much later when I was working for the State again. In 1966 I started working for the Quality Control Bureau of the State Welfare Department. Throughout the state there were people assigned to cover several counties. At that time my assignment included Kern County, Tulare County, Kings County, Inyo County and Mono County. This included assignments everywhere and was what finally led to my early retirement. The last summer that I spent working was miserable because I had to go from Bakersfield to Fresno several times a week and stay up there three or four days at a time. I didn't dislike the work or that particular assignment but it was just so very awkward to work in an unfamiliar area.

J.G.: That was a lot of traveling. So in 1941 when the State Relief Administration closed its doors did you go to work for Kern County?

Sullivan: Kern County Welfare Department. And I worked for Kern County Welfare Department from 1941 until I finally quit in 1966 when I went to work for the State again. During the time that I worked for the Welfare Department I had experience in many fields. I first started as a social worker with the adult aids which included primarily old age assistance but also included aid to the blind. The counties at that time were still giving county assistance and



so I had a county assistance case load in addition to the other.

J.G.: Did they call them GR case loads back then?

Sullivan: Yes, General Relief.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

J.G.: Okay. Go ahead. We were talking about the fact that you worked for the Kern County Welfare Department.

Sullivan: As you remind me of things and through your questioning I've come to realize one thing. I think I have a great many memories about the bygone years but when I come to verbalize them, I find that many of them that I had in the back of my mind as memories are just impressions. I'm a little unsure of the actual time or date or circumstances sometimes. It's not that they're so blurred as that I see them through the mists of many years--I guess.

In the Welfare Department I worked as a social worker in the adult aid and eventually as a supervisor. Then subsequently I was transferred to the children's division and after that I was supervising AFDC cases.

J.G.: Aid to Families with Dependent Children?

Sullivan: Right. And also a program I can't even remember the name of. Crippled Children's Services was through the hospital to some extent but the Welfare Department had to make the initial inquiry and determination and then refer people elsewhere which was extremely inconvenient for people who were in need of this assistance. I also supervised licensing of foster homes for children and adults. I also supervised the placement of children in foster homes. I was supervisor of all these programs.

J.G.: The supervisor covered the waterfront.

Sullivan: It really was more than one person should try to cope with and for instance--there was some conflict of interest when one was supervising the licensing of foster homes and then trying to find placements for children who were in need of foster care. It was always a great temptation to wink at some requirement because there never were enough foster homes to go around.

J.G.: That hasn't changed.

Sullivan: Well, I'm sure. So I was really very pleased not only to be relieved of so much work but to be relieved of this dichotomy in my feelings when they separated the two functions because they should have been separated all along.

Just recently I went to the dedication of the new shelter care facility out on Shalimar and certainly stood almost aghast and agape at the difference between that and the old shelter care home down on Madison Street that was in existence when I was in charge of the shelter care home.

J.G.: What year would that have been about?

Sullivan: Oh let's see. I left in 1966 and so it was in the late 1950s and 1960s.

J.G.: Let's backtrack for a few minutes and talk about what it was like to be a social worker here in Kern County for the State Relief Administration in 1939-1940.

Sullivan: It was difficult to even find my way around out where I worked in the Wasco area. In general we still had crank telephones where you cranked the telephone and the operators said, "Number please," and the numbers were--like--one through seventy-five or something like that. Most of the rest of the county had its own large telephone book. Wasco had a little folder that was allegedly the smallest telephone book in the world that had just about two pages of numbers.

That wasn't so odd as the fact that there was no map of the area and lanes and streets and things were just being developed as people moved in and started using them. On the wall in Wasco we had a big piece of paper which started out with the center of the town that was easily recognizable and you could find your way around. But in the outlying areas people would come in and say they lived on such and such a road and there was nothing on the map. We'd have to get explicit directions from them and it was the social worker's responsibility--after coming back from such a call and finding that it actually existed--to add this as part of the map that we were constructing as we went along. So I not only learned my way around Wasco--I made part of the way around Wasco. That area included people who were living as far away as Delano and Lost Hills and also down into Shafter and south from Shafter. It was at that time too--while I was working for the SRA [State Relief Administration]--that one of our social workers was shot and killed. I have been racking my brain to remember her last name. I should remember it. Her first name was Elizabeth. I think it was Tarbox. She came to work for the SRA and I was the supervisor who trained her. I was working out in Wasco by the time of this incident. I was working out in Wasco and was also

taking other people with me as passengers in my car and also carrying the mail. I think I was allowed to claim fifty cents a day as part of my mileage reimbursement for carrying the mail between Bakersfield and Wasco--that is, the Relief Administration mail. But in any event, I stopped briefly at the Bakersfield office to pick up my passengers and the mail and went on out to Wasco. Later the telephone call came through that Elizabeth had been shot and killed. The man who did the shooting apparently was there when I was there at the Welfare Department to pick up the mail and I thought, "Oh my goodness, it could have just as easily have been me."

J.G.: Do you know what happened?

Sullivan: He was just disgruntled because his assistance had been terminated or decreased or whatever. He was apprehended and convicted and sentenced to prison and I don't remember his name at all. I would see in the paper occasionally that he had come up for parole and it had been denied. I hadn't even thought about it for a long time so I don't know whether that man is still alive or what, but he did go to prison as a result of that. Back to the recipients of assistance--the needy themselves--there were so many things that in retrospect it doesn't seem possible that we did. I mean that the people in general did to the other people. The border patrols that were set up to keep people from coming into California--trying to keep these "deplorable Okies" and "Arkies" out of the state. I can remember belonging to the Native Daughters whose sympathies were not with this influx of people from other places. For one thing, they always turned up their noses at the very thought, and this wasn't only the Native Daughters that did this because all these people coming in were dirty and really didn't smell all that good. I made myself very unpopular one evening when I addressed the people who were at a meeting there and reminded them that I expect that our pioneer mothers and fathers whom we so revere after coming across the plains in covered wagons really weren't all that clean or probably didn't smell all that good either. I did find that as hard as it was for these poor souls to get into California--in many instances --once they got here they wished they were out again but it was equally hard for them to get out. Not for the same reasons but just because they didn't have any money and couldn't go anywhere. I remember interviewing one lady who was living in a tent and using some cardboard boxes and she was better off than some because she had a few wooden boxes to use as tables and chairs. She was trying to wash her child's hair. It wasn't because people didn't know any better than to be dirty, but it was because they didn't have the facilities with which to be clean.

This little encampment in which she and her family were a part was in an area where there was no water and the only water that they had somebody in the camp had to drive a good many miles and get

cans filled with water and bring them back. Well, this was not easy to do and so if you had a choice between having water to drink or water to wash your hair in you saved the water to drink. But this mother was trying to wash her youngster's hair and got it soaped and she ran out of water before she could get the soap out and so here was the poor child with sudsy head, but mother's intentions were honorable. That mother cried because she was living under these circumstances. She wanted to go back where she had come from in the worst way. I believe they came from Arkansas but had no way of getting there because they didn't have enough money to make the trip back again. They had been lured here by handbills that were distributed extolling the wonders of California. That's what caused a lot of people to flock here and the people that put out the handbills were the ones that were the most unpleasant in their attitude toward the people that responded after they got here.

J.G.: Did you ever have occasion to actually see a handbill? I've heard a lot of people talk about the growers advertising lots of jobs.

Sullivan: Yes, I did. I can't remember them particularly but I have this old mental picture of a bill--a little flyer printed on pink paper and that's about as far as I can go with the actual recollection but yes, I did see them. They existed.

J.G.: So you know that they actually existed.

Sullivan: This woman told me her husband was working and making more money than he had where they came from--which was Arkansas--but where they were they did not have to pay any rent and food was a lot less expensive so what little they gained in increased income was more than accounted for by their increased expenses. Plus the fact that they didn't know anybody. She missed her family. Where she lived it wasn't all that great a place but at least she had a real dining table or a real table to eat from and real chairs to sit on. Here she had wooden boxes and cardboard boxes and that was it. I can remember being in another place where they did have a table that was outside and I was there late in the afternoon and they were in the process of fixing their evening meal. They were cooking what I guess were hush puppies. They really looked delicious and they were putting platters full on a table and asked me if I'd care to stay and eat with them. I would have been pleased to partake of their food but for two reasons I didn't want to really and did refuse. One of them was that I thought what I ate would deprive them of that much and the other reason was that the bowl of hush puppies was being put on the table while the chickens were still walking around on the table.

J.G.: That kind of killed your appetite.

Sullivan: Yes, so it wasn't all that hard for me to say no in spite of the fact that they did look so good. Speaking of eating reminds me of something else. I remember this vividly because I had occasion

to comment on it so many times. A large majority of the children of the people who were here from the Dust Bowl states were just darling to look at. So many of them had blond hair and blue eyes and delicate complexions. They were beautiful children until they opened their mouths. The poor kids' teeth were just as rotten as they could be. I guess there was no dental care. There was no MediCal or anything else at that time. It was just not possible to get any assistance to get these conditions corrected for these kids. It was just very distressing. I suppose as they got older and lost these baby teeth -- maybe by that time had better diets and one thing and another that their teeth weren't in such deplorable condition. This was something that I noticed time after time.

J.G.: Would you say that for the most part their diet consisted of starchy kinds of food?

Sullivan: Yes.

J.G.: Very little meat and very little vegetables?

Sullivan: Some vegetables must surely have been available. The starchy things definitely yes. Very little protein-type things. Sweets because sweets even are used far too much by many families not necessarily for economic reasons but because sweets do have a tendency to make you feel fuller faster than other things do. Of course, part was just because they didn't know what constituted adequate diets.

J.G.: Wasn't there at that time a one-year residency requirement?

Sullivan: Yes. I had noted that here and I'm glad you reminded me of it because this again was one of the very foolish things that welfare departments have done. In my long experience--all together in the welfare field I worked for over 36 years including the two capacities and in L.A. [Los Angeles] and Kern Counties--I noticed many, many foolish requirements. I've said so many times that the people weren't to blame for getting more money than they were entitled to. This is not to say that there weren't some people who deliberately tried to exploit the program, but I didn't find in my own 36 years' experience as many people who were deliberately trying to do this as I found people who didn't know what they were doing because the rules were so asinine. Also, welfare department employees were of no help to the people in need because they couldn't understand the rules either.

But the residency requirement was one of the stupidest things. I suppose it didn't seem so stupid at the time, but it really was because people in need couldn't live there for three years before they had a decent meal. The requirement was three years

in the state and one year in the county before you were eligible for the general relief assistance. Well, that was not too bad in the metropolitan areas. There were more employment opportunities in various kinds of activities in Los Angeles than--say--up here. But for this kind of a regulation or rule or law to apply to an agricultural area was just idiocy because people had to go from county to county in order to ply their trade of following the crops, and it was hard to establish a residence of one year in a county when they were compelled to move from county to county. I can remember one comment made by Carey McWilliams in the book Factories in the Fields. He was referring to this same thing and said that the rule presupposed the fact that people who made the rules were hoping that in this shuffling of other people from place to place they'd just dry up and blow away, but people didn't. The strict enforcement of this was eased at a point and--again--it's kind of vague in my recollection. The extent to which in this agricultural area--or maybe throughout the state--the county requirement was eased I really can't remember clearly.

J.G.: Was the residency thing a county or a State Relief Administration rule? Did you have residency requirements in the State Relief Administration?

Sullivan: Yes. Well, when the State Relief Administration came along--if I'm not mistaken--the county residency didn't apply because it was state assistance. It was the general relief granted by each county out of county funds that required one year in the county and three years in the state. But this was true of every county.

J.G.: So if people were destitute during the time that the State Relief Administration was in existence, they could receive funds through that agency until they became eligible for county assistance.

Sullivan: For county assistance, yes. The problem was that you had to be able-bodied to be able to get State Relief Administration assistance because it presumed--or the prerequisite was--that you had to be able to work. It was a work-assistance program. And if you couldn't work and if you didn't meet the general relief requirements then life could be pretty tough. And there was the alternative that the counties would return people to their place of residence. Oh, this was another thing too. These things come back by bits and pieces. If people didn't have county or state residence, you had to establish where their last legal residence was. Then you entered into correspondence with that place to get them to accept them back again. And of course it wasn't necessarily deliberate but there was some heel dragging in the process because it just naturally would take time. During that period of establishing residence people were entitled to assistance until it was established that they had legal residence someplace else. Then the county bought train or bus tickets for them and sent them back where they came from.

And I can remember another little interesting episode in that regard. A young man had applied for assistance and a friend of mine who was working for the agency at the time of his case was assigned to him. She established his residence in another state. He had a grocery order to use to get him back to his home state. But because they wouldn't cash grocery orders on the train, it meant that things had to be purchased here before people left and they had to buy things that they could eat like bread and things to make sandwiches with or something of that sort. And this young man spent his entire grocery order on bananas. He loved bananas and he'd never been able to afford his fill so he had this order that would grant him enough money to presumably feed him sandwiches on the way back, but he chose bananas.

J.G.: I hope his bananas didn't overripen in the process.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

J.G.: Okay. I wonder if you could think back for me a little bit and tell me if you recall any difference between the attitude and the personalities of the Dust Bowl migrants to those of the people you worked with in Los Angeles County?

Sullivan: I really can't remember too much about people's attitudes when I was working down in Los Angeles County. For one thing, the State Relief Administration which I worked for in Los Angeles County was--both for the people that worked for the agency as well as for the people who were receiving assistance--deemed a cut above the county welfare departments. The people who were working for the agency I believe were somewhat better educated. The education requirements were higher at that time for those employees than they had been for welfare department employees. People were becoming a little bit more aware of the causes of needs, and the people that were in need of assistance were--as I indicated before in this interview--people who had been professional people and they weren't going to be as easily pushed around as some prior county assistance recipients had been because they just were better equipped in their own concepts of themselves to resist this sort of thing. Up here in the agricultural counties we were back--even with the SRA--to people who didn't have that good an opinion of themselves and were more easily pushed around. So many of them had little if any schooling when they got out here where they thought things were going to be rosier--certainly if not for themselves, then for their children. They found that their children were just ostracized in schools and the schools didn't want them. The established residents of the community--the children already in school--didn't want to play

with them or anything else. I remember one young man who worked in the Wasco unit that I was supervising. I discovered that he had an abhorrence of contact with all of these "dirty people" and I learned that when he went to their homes to interview them he wouldn't even sit down. This of course established great rapport between him and the people he was supposed to be helping. If they didn't come to the door to let him in he would push the door open with a pencil. He wouldn't touch it. He was just so afraid of having a germ light on him that he was impossible. He didn't last long as a social worker--believe me. I also found a considerable amount of prejudice on the part of certain people in the Welfare Department toward the Mexicans and Negros. I can remember talking to a Mexican father who lived in Lamont or Arvin who tried to go to night school to learn to speak English. He was so shunned by other adults in night school that he just gave it up. He couldn't tolerate it. I also learned that the Mexican children were learning to speak English in school, but with the father figure being the "macho" one in the family unit, he felt it was beneath his dignity to accept instruction from his children. So he just went on not learning English. Most of the time they were very pleasant people to deal with if you could speak Spanish. I didn't.

J.G.: Yes, it's hard to work with people who don't speak English even with an interpreter.

Sullivan: Especially when I had to use the children in the family and many times it was hard to find an interpreter because if a family was living off apart by themselves somewhere by a ditch bank or something and there was no interpreter living within five or six miles, I wasted quite a bit of the taxpayers' time and money running around looking for somebody who could help me out in that kind of situation.

J.G.: One of the things I've been reading about is that the growers attempted strenuously during this time to make receiving welfare contingent upon accepting work at whatever prices the growers wanted to pay when the crops needed to be harvested. Do you have any memory of those kinds of requirements or rules that one must accept work at whatever wage?

Sullivan: At any price? I sort of think this was true. I would hate to be asked to take an oath about my recollection. I do remember that when I came up here--either at the time that I came or very shortly thereafter--a strike was called in the cotton fields. The strike was for--and here again is where my memory fails me because it just seems impossible to me that it would have been this low--but I kind of think that the pickers were being paid twenty-five cents a hundred weight and they were striking for fifty cents. Now, I may be wrong. It may have been that they



were being paid fifty cents and they were striking for seventy-five. But I think a quarter is what the wage was. If they could work and work was available and they refused to work they were denied assistance.

Another thing that really wasn't the individual grower's fault or even the growers all getting together and coming to some conclusion in restraint of welfare rather than restraint of trade was the personal property limitation set, and this was on a state-wide basis. Maybe the individual counties could set their own requirement but I don't think so. I think all counties had the same requirement but the personal property limitations here where farmworkers were dependent on a car to get from farm to farm what they were allowed to have in the way of personal property was so little they couldn't own an adequate automobile to enable them to get work. So all the way through it was a Catch 22 situation.

J.G.: Yes, it sounds like it. Did you ever have anything to do with the distribution of commodities? Many families that I've talked with talk about waiting in line.

Sullivan: Ah yes. I'd sort of forgotten. Yes they did. You were assigned to the commodity distribution thing. I don't believe that I ever worked--yes, I did. I can remember being in Delano and helping out with that program on commodity distribution day. The people would come and there were boxes of things--powdered milk, powdered eggs, fruit, potatoes or whatever was available--and you came there and you got what you were entitled to for your size family. Isn't that funny that I'd forgotten all about commodity distribution and the phrase now trips as lightly from my tongue as it did when I had to know about it. I don't remember the requirements, but I think it was up to the individual social worker to certify a family for commodities and they had to have their commodity card that they presented to the distributor showing how many there were in the family and how much they were entitled to. Another thing that was just heartbreaking was the commodity destruction program. Rather than let people go out and pick up potatoes that couldn't be harvested they'd put gasoline on them and destroy them. Oranges the same way and other crops also--they just destroyed them.

J.G.: Did you ever have families complain about the quality of the commodities? A couple of the families that I've interviewed said that stuff was barely edible because the flour was filled with weevils and the meat was practically spoiled by the time they got it and I wondered if you'd ever had any recollection or heard about that.

Sullivan: That I can't respond to too adequately either. There were a lot of complaints about commodities but the actual inedibility of them because of the intrusion of foreign substance like bugs I couldn't swear to. I can understand that powdered eggs aren't

as delectable as fresh eggs, but it was just because people didn't really try or else didn't know how to use the commodities with which they were provided. They didn't know how to use them correctly. Now I can remember the Health Department--I think it was the Health Department--that made up recipes and gave lessons in how to use these things, and certainly they were better than nothing at all because they did provide nourishment. But, they weren't as good to start off with as fresh things would have been and by the time they went through the incompetent cooking that they did on the part of the recipients they were probably even less attractive. I really can't say I personally remember the other kinds of complaints.

J.G.: Did you ever have occasion to work in any of the government camps like Arvin? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Sullivan: Yes. As a matter of fact the woman who owned the property was Bertha Rankin. Has anybody mentioned her to you?

J.G.: The name is familiar.

Sullivan: Well, she owned large holdings out in Weed Patch and the Arvin area, and Bertha Rankin herself was quite a character. I knew her quite well. I became well acquainted with her over the years. She has long since gone to her reward. She owned the property on which the camp was that was the center of activity in The Grapes of Wrath story. She owned that property. She either sold it to the government very inexpensively or gave it to them or something. But I didn't have as much involvement there as I did with the camp out at Shafter. I was in and out of that on a daily continuing basis. It was far better than the private camps that were furnished by the growers themselves or people who were just landlords in the Shafter-Wasco area and all over the valley area. I can remember one camp--not the government camp but a privately owned camp just outside of Shafter--that I really disliked having to go into because it was so dirty. Nobody coming in had time or inclination to try to clean it up because they had come into it when it was dirty. They were only going to be there very briefly and what was the use of their spending all their slight energy that was left after a day's work in the field trying to clean up a place that was the accumulated dirt of hundreds of other people when hundreds of others who wouldn't take care of it if it was cleaned up were coming along afterwards. Two things that I remember about that kind of dirty living quarters. This particular camp that I speak of was just outside of Shafter. I was interviewing a family who had just come here from the Imperial Valley. Also, I can remember people telling me that they came up here to Kern County because the doctor told them to go to a cooler climate and I couldn't believe this--Kern County wasn't cooler than anything --but I guess it really was.

J.G.: Apparently the Imperial Valley heat is really something.

Sullivan: Yes, and of course there was no air conditioning in any of these miserable places or in the miserable automobiles at the time including the miserable county cars--no heaters and no coolers. But this one family had come in and she and her husband and their five or six kids were living in one room that was about ten by fifteen feet with no inside sanitary facilities and they had to use a community one outdoors. She showed me with the greatest pride a plaque or certificate or whatever that had been given her twelve-year-old son by the American Legion down in Imperial Valley because he had won a public speaking contest which they sponsored on the subject which was "Why I am Proud to be an American." And I thought that if any youngster could be proud to be an American under those circumstances he certainly deserved all the plaques he could get.

The government camps were inspected and there were washroom facilities provided where they could take showers and wash their clothes. The floors on those camps were cement with wood part way up and then canvas the rest of the way. They must have been miserable to live in in hot weather and miserable to live in in cold weather but they weren't as miserable as these private things. They could be scrubbed out easily because of their cement floors and it was necessary to maintain them. As I said, they were inspected and this was a far better arrangement for people than the private camps were. I had seen so many people living in these private camps where the conditions were just filthy.

J.G.: Were the private camps usually tent camps?

Sullivan: No they weren't. They were just little wooden structures. The tent houses were a result of the Department of Immigration and Housing to start off with and that department was more concerned about immigration than housing I think. If I'm remembering correctly, when the State eventually set up housing as a separate department to keep tabs on what was going on and the conditions under which people were living, they made a little bit more valid inspection and conditions began to improve. Some of the places were torn out all together.

J.G.: That was the private camps?

Sullivan: The private camps, yes.

J.G.: As I'm listening to you I have this feeling that when people first came to the valley they settled anywhere that they could find a place with a tent.

Sullivan: Right.

J.G.: And maybe they went from there to the private camps and from there to the government camps and even from there for those who managed to get a small place of their own. Would you say that that's an accurate portrayal?

Sullivan: It's exactly what happened. When they first came many of them just had to sleep in their cars and I have seen many, many families just camped along the roadside or wherever they would be permitted to light and stay overnight or for a week or whatever. Then clusters of them would find an area where they were permitted to remain undisturbed for a while and then go into private camps if they couldn't get into a government camp. I remember particularly out along the area south of Shafter people started to collect along there. I can't even remember the name of that road. They began just like squatters and put up houses that were constructed totally of cardboard and scrap lumber and odds and ends of corrugated tin that they could find or any scrap metal. Because so many people from Oklahoma settled there it became known--I may be confusing this with the actual Cherokee Strip back in Oklahoma--but I think they called that Cherokee Strip for a while. And then "Little Oklahoma" and then bit by bit because these people were no different given the opportunity from anybody else they added to and improved and took down the corrugated tin thing and when they could buy a bit of lumber they put that up and eventually that whole area became a very decent-looking residential area. If you look closely you could see that it was a house that was built one room at a time but that didn't preclude its being a decent living space. By the time they got roses growing up over the outside and paper on the walls inside and trees planted around it was very fine. I can remember calling on people after it began to show this improvement and having this one family and I felt as equally elated I'm sure as they did because after these many, many, many years of the Okies being ostracized in school, this young girl had been elected as the homecoming queen of the school she attended. I thought at last a real breakthrough had occurred. That incident was symptomatic of the changes that were occurring and people becoming more accepting of other people. It eventually got to the point where some of the people that came in under those extremely sorry circumstances and the sorry treatment that they got from those who were already here meted out the same sorry treatment to others coming in after them.

J.G.: I think that pretty well covers the questions that I had. If you'd like to take a minute to go over your notes and make sure that you've mentioned everything that you wanted to talk about I'll turn over the tape.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

Sullivan: Something that I heard a great deal about was the actual book burning of The Grapes of Wrath here.

J.G.: I've read about it. No one has told me about it.

Sullivan: Well, it actually happened. I came just after that had happened and I saw pictures of it. They were newspaper pictures of the bonfire that occurred when the book was burned and it was banned from the public library by the Supervisors for years. Sierra Bookstore stocked The Grapes of Wrath and my goodness were they doing a land office business.

J.G.: Everybody was trying to get a hold of one.

Sullivan: They couldn't get it out of the public library because the Supervisors wouldn't permit it to be in the public library at that time. I think you can get it now. But they couldn't keep it in stock in the bookstore.

J.G.: Those notorious things are much more widely read. That brings up an interesting thought. You mentioned that before coming to Kern County that you had read The Grapes of Wrath. What was your feeling about the way that Steinbeck depicted the life of the migrant?

Sullivan: Well, I was geared to being sympathetic toward it not only because of my own observations as a social worker but because of the associations that I had with other people and knowing people that had been up here and so on. But I really didn't have any personal concept of or couldn't validate by my own knowledge Steinbeck's statements in the book or his story telling. I came to realize after I got here that everything that he said in the book was true except it didn't all happen to one family. Everybody had problems. They didn't all have as many problems as the Joads but I was very moved by the picture--I mean by the book--and subsequently by the picture because I just knew that it was so. Now I suspect that many, many of the things that I have said others are not going to feel the same reaction to as I have indicated but I do feel that certainly from my standpoint anything that I said has been my valid reaction and my valid recollection except where I've indicated that I couldn't recall too many details.

J.G.: One of the things that is very difficult to get families to talk about because it's extremely painful is--and Steinbeck alludes to it in the very last chapter in his book--the actual starvation of people during this time. The situation was so desperate that there were people that were actually starving. From your own knowledge or just from your general sense of what was happening at that time, do you think that the situation was that desperate?

Sullivan: That desperate? Yes, I think it was. I didn't have very much actual personal contact with people who were close to real starvation. They were hungry, and I have a confession to make. I discovered that I could not cope with the people who were hungry and I knew they were hungry because they were living on one meal a day and would have told me so or they maybe had had a meager breakfast in the morning and it was the afternoon that I was interviewing them. They had not had any lunch and so I knew they were hungry because I myself had been hungry by lunch time after having had a breakfast and had eaten lunch. I regret to say that I was not anywhere near as sympathetic with people who were hungry when I myself was hungry. I could be a lot kinder when I wasn't myself suffering hunger pangs and my hunger pangs were only from one meal to the next and not from one day to the next. I do remember one woman who was being very belligerent and I was trying to get her calmed down. It was during the strike situation and she wasn't about to do what she was supposed to be doing and I don't remember what she was supposed to be doing. I finally was sitting there getting madder and madder because she was cutting into my lunch hour and I finally resolved the whole problem by taking her home to lunch with me. And it did resolve the problem because after that we had a meeting of the minds. We got the problem solved with no great difficulty and as I say, I don't even remember what the problem was let alone what the resolution was, but when people are hungry no matter which side of the coin they're on, they're a lot more volatile than they might be otherwise. I mentioned the man that I had to feed before he could respond to any of my questions which was not here in Kern County--it was in Long Beach--and that his application was on file but nobody had gone out to see him to see how he was subsisting. I had another woman for whom I did the same thing in Long Beach. The circumstances were slightly different. She was living in a hotel and her condition was known to people and she would not have been permitted to just lie there and die. I did have to go out and buy something for her to eat too.

I can remember something else connected with food and I think this is what I was going to mention quite a while back when you asked me about the living in the deplorable conditions of the private camps. I remember getting into a discussion with a woman one day who was talking about the filthy, dirty people. Her husband was a farmer and one of the growers. She said the people working for them were so dirty and there was no use giving them good furniture or putting anything proper in the cabins for them because they didn't know how to take care of it. They'd just break up the chairs and burn them for firewood. They were dirty and my goodness you just didn't want to have anything to do with them. And I said, "Well, if you had a family and you'd be pretty tired after working all day out in that hot sun and you got home after that hot day in the hot sun and you had just enough money to buy a box of corn flakes or a box of soap flakes, which would

you buy?" Well, she didn't answer me and as far as I can recall we didn't have any further conversation about anything ever after that.

J.G.: You mentioned earlier when people are hungry they're volatile. I wonder to what extent the social problems of that day--the family problems, the alcoholism and gambling and what have you--were exaggerated and exacerbated by this kind of stress that they were living under.

Sullivan: It is quite possible. The hunger and the total lack of security undoubtedly had something to do with it. I saw battered children in later days when welfare had improved to the point where people could more definitely depend on it and people weren't in the discredited position that they were then. When I was supervising in the Child Placement we uncovered two cases of which I think one man is still in jail. The child had been kidnapped. Isn't it funny how names escape me after I thought they were just indelibly in my mind. The man and woman with children of their own had abducted a child and he had raped this youngster with his wife's awareness and then they had killed her and eventually the body was found and oh my the papers were full of it. I was the supervisor of the placement department at the time and the parents were both put in jail and the children were put in shelter care and then in foster homes. But the mother was pregnant and I know that I had been asked to have one of my workers ready so when that child was born we would pick it up immediately and place it in the foster home. We had the foster home all lined up for this newborn infant. The mother was taken out of jail long enough to have the baby and then we took the baby back for the foster placement.

Another incident was when a couple came in and applied for assistance and my social worker in getting the necessary background information and trying to verify the ages of the children through records at Kern General Hospital as it was called then--Kern Medical Center now--because budgets were computed on the basis of the ages of the children realized that a child had been born and that the family hadn't said anything about it. So she came to me and said she wondered why. So we started checking back on it and finally referred the matter to the sheriff's department and they looked into it. The child had been born and killed by the parents and buried out in an orchard somewhere in Delano.

J.G.: These are later?

Sullivan: Later, yes.

J.G.: What I'm hearing you say is that at least from your experience you don't think that the family disorganization and the family upheaval during that period was particularly worse than it has become.

Sullivan: Not on the basis of my experience, no. On a much lighter note I was trying to verify one man's age--of course we used all kinds of documentation because very few people had birth certificates like lodge records and also we always had to ask if people belonged to organizations through which they might have been entitled to any benefits. This man was black and fairly well along in years, and when I asked him if he belonged to any of a list of organizations that I read off, he said, "No'm, I don't belong to nothing now." He said, "I used to belong to the Elks but then I got unfinancial and I had to drop out and I've never been able to renew myself since." I thought that so many of us were in that same predicament of being "unfinancial."

J.G.: Did you have anything more?

Sullivan: I think that as far as I can see here anything that I thought up on my own I had mentioned and then anything that I hadn't thought of you did.

J.G.: Well, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW



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