

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Joe Zaragoza

PLACE OF BIRTH: Bakersfield, Kern County

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: February 5, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Bakersfield, California

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PREFACE

Joe Zaragoza volunteered to be interviewed and stated that he had personal information about Okies to contribute to the Project. Mr. Zaragoza was very friendly and cooperative, but unfortunately he did not have much information. The interview has been severely edited because there were numerous repetitions, contradictions and digressions from the subject at hand.

The interview took place at Bakersfield College in the Physics Lab where Mr. Zaragoza is employed. This was the only arrangement that could be made. There were numerous interruptions for phone calls and other duties which Mr. Zaragoza performs at the College. In short, this was not an ideal interview.

One interesting fact to note is that Mr. Zaragoza is married to a woman whose family came from Oklahoma.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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INTERVIEWEE: Joe Zaragoza (Age: 47)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: January 5, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Joe Zaragoza for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at the Science and Engineering Building at Bakersfield College on February 5, 1981 at 10:00 a.m.

S.J.: First, I'll ask you about your own background--where you were born, your family, and how you came to live near Arvin.

Zaragoza: My parents came out from Mexico as migrants and they first settled in Whittier for a while and then they came out to the San Joaquin Valley. This was 1924 or 1928--around there. I was born in 1934 in Bakersfield at what is now Kern Medical Center. It was Kern General Hospital at the time. We lived on a ranch in Arvin between Arvin and Sunset Camp and my father was a sort of foreman or the ranch hand. We had a house there. It was a 48 acre ranch and he was the foreman and caretaker of the place. I was raised with some older sisters.

We had to go to the Vineland School and Sunset School. Mostly children of the migrants went to these schools and lived in the camps or out in the streets or under trees. They picked cotton and stuff like that. Few were from the ranch people that owned the ranches. I don't know if some were there from Oklahoma or not. There were very few of the store owners' children. The majority of the people were the field workers. That's what I was raised with out there.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about your family? How many brothers and sisters you had and how well off your family was and whether you were very poor or you thought you were pretty well off?

Zaragoza: At the time there at the ranch I had five sisters and I was the youngest. My parents never had been on welfare or anything like that--even until now. They always had a job. My older three sisters were sent for better opportunity and jobs to San Francisco to an uncle so they could find work because they didn't want field work. They were raised up there kind of on their own after they were fourteen to eighteen and that left my two other sisters and myself at the house. My father got the very minimum wage which was \$4.50 to \$8.00 a day. We were comfortable. The ranch furnished my father a house. We didn't have to pay rent or utilities.

He ran the ranch for the people that were living there. We seemed to always have good food. We drove to Arvin every Saturday and got a sack of beans or flour or staples. We raised mostly our own crops and beef and chickens at the ranch. Mother made our own cheese and butter and when it came to eating, we always had food on the table. Jackrabbits and cactus [were part of it] and to this day we still eat cactus. We went to Vineland School--my sister and I. We seemed to get along pretty well with everybody.

S.J.: Because your parents were from Mexico did they have any problem with the language that made them isolated in the community?

Zaragoza: My father spoke better English than my mother. Even now my mother still doesn't speak good English. My father speaks English pretty well and he got along. We visited some of the migrant families. Sometimes people that worked on the ranch came by. We would go have a barbecue or picnic or something. Socially we went to other Mexican people's houses in Arvin--one or two families--only not often. My sister and I played with the boss's kids and the kids who lived around there who were ranch hand people or people like us that lived on another ranch. My parents really weren't too social. They didn't go around too much. Very little. Very little. A trip to town twice a year, maybe to Bakersfield.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about growing up in Arvin? You said you were just about the only Mexican family that went to Sunset School.

Zaragoza: Arvin had a few Mexicans and Lamont did too at that time. We were kind of in between Lamont and Arvin. Lamont had very few families--maybe 24 Mexican families and the rest were all Caucasian. Arvin had very few Mexicans at the time scattered through the ranches. Vineland and Sunset were so close that my sister and myself were the only two Mexicans at that time going to school. There was one black family at that time. Most were migrant Caucasians.

S.J.: So as a child you played with a lot of the migrant workers?

Zaragoza: Yes.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about their situation or about their homes? Were they a lot worse off than your family was or about the same?

Zaragoza: Most of the people that lived at different ranches had outhouses. I can remember even though the boss had a beautiful home and he had indoor plumbing, we didn't. We had a nice home though. Some of the other people that lived on the ranches like we did had similar things to the white people. But at these other homes like the government camp they didn't have that much. They were furnished by the government. They had their place to stay and a store to go to and their central laundry and central bathroom system. That didn't seem to really be in my mind at the time.

S.J.: Do you remember going to the government camp--Sunset Labor Camp?

Zaragoza: We visited friends there once in a while. My parents went every once in a while. Not often but we would go there. We played with people there. Parents would visit somebody that they knew or they'd have us over. We played mostly at the ranch. The boss had two children and the people at the surrounding ranches would come around and a few of the migrants would come around and we would play. But not too often.

S.J.: How about the ditch camps? Do you remember ever seeing those?

Zaragoza: I can remember them living out of cars under trees. I can remember them doing their laundry and bathing in the canals. I can definitely remember along the roads toward Arvin there were people always camped out all over out in the desert. Some would come to the ranch looking for work. I can remember they had overloaded cars with junk all over them. They would go out and work in the fields and go back and cook and sleep. Eventually they got moved into the government camp or into places like Weed Patch or the surrounding areas. I can remember the cotton pickers 'cause I picked cotton with them and with our boss's kids also.

S.J.: Did you know very many other Mexican families that lived that way?

Zaragoza: No, mostly Okies. I didn't know too many Mexican families at that time. Most of them were out in places like DiGiorgio that had a camp furnished with houses and they worked there. I think they were hired as permanent employees for the ranches at the time.

S.J.: When you went to school with the Okies do you have any recollections

of any special experiences or things that happened in school?

Zaragoza: I never did feel like a Mexican really even though I was. I felt always a little below the migrants in education. I couldn't learn as fast as they could because some were a little sharper. The ranch hand kids seemed to have a little more on the ball. We got along well. I made good grades with them. As far as attendance there was quite a few that didn't go to school because they had to pick cotton. And discipline was pretty good. We had very few troublemakers at the time--very few. And they all seemed to want to learn also. But I can remember some of my shoes or pants had holes in them. I've always felt that I was about like some of the migrants because a lot of them came that way. As a rule they were pretty well dressed.

In school they taught that you were equal to everybody whether they were migrants or the ranch hand kids. But I kind of run around with the upper class as you would call them--the ranch hand people and some of the higher class migrant families and some that had more discipline and weren't the troublemakers.

There was a little bit of a problem with people with more money. I can remember a couple toughies. I don't think there was any problem because of where they were from or anything. It was just their attitude. I can't remember any prejudice or any kind of gangs against other people. I just stay away from the bad people--the bullies.

S.J.: How about when you heard adults talking? Do you remember hearing anything about adults that didn't like Okies?

Zaragoza: No.

S.J.: Can you remember any particular characteristics about the Okie kids that made you know they were migrants or Okies--perhaps the way they dressed or the way they talked?

Zaragoza: Not really. You could tell and you just accepted that they were people going to school and that they didn't have a ranch to live on. You could tell the difference I suppose in the clothes compared to the people that had a little more money like the ranch people's kids or the better-to-do people around. As a rule there wasn't that much difference in the clothes and their discipline. They were all one big family.

S.J.: Did you ever hear any of the children or the adults talk about why they came from Oklahoma to California?

Zaragoza: Yes. They came out because of the work--the wages. There was always work for them if they wanted to follow the crops. A lot of them traveled and followed the fields but there was work at

least six months out of the year. Some of the families would migrate from Texas out to Arizona to Imperial Valley to San Joaquin Valley and then they would go up north. We would get some of those coming through. They would come out and stay about six or seven months and go back--then come back here again. The majority would stay. They came out because of the work--there was a lot of field work picking cotton, chopping cotton, picking grapes and working around the sheds.

S.J.: Was it difficult for the kids that stayed out of school to pick cotton to get back into school and catch up on their work?

Zaragoza: No, it didn't seem to be difficult. They kind of accepted it and realized these students would do that and the kids would get by. A few of the sharper ones would do okay but some of the ones that were kept out awhile kind of got behind. They seemed to catch up. They seemed to do okay--not too bad. There wasn't too much of that although it was scattered. I can remember at the Vineland School during the World War they would bring to the classes things like peas and we had two hours where we shelled them. To help the farmers we all worked together.

S.J.: Did you ever hear much about the nature of the farm work? Did you ever hear about how long they worked in the fields? What was their average workday like or how much were they paid for what they did?

Zaragoza: It's hard for me to ring a bell but the pay was very little at the time. I can remember picking cotton. You'd get seventy-five cents for a hundred or something like that. Eventually it went up a bit. You'd have to work your tail off to make five or six dollars a day. Some of the better people that really worked hard would make maybe fifteen to twenty bucks. The whole family would go out there. I can remember picking potatoes. They didn't have machines at the time and the whole family would go out there. I only did it two days because I couldn't handle it and I was quite young. You'd see poor kids out there working their tails off and they would get something like three cents to nine cents a stub. They'd pick so many stubs a day and they were lucky to make six dollars at the top a day by working their tails off twelve hours. That was some of the better workers.

Chopping cotton you'd get maybe so much a row but it would take you maybe half an hour to an hour to do and maybe get thirteen cents or something like that. The salary was real bad--very minimal.

S.J.: And you say sometimes the whole family would be out there working. The women and the children too?

Zaragoza: That would be chopping cotton and picking cotton and picking potatoes. I never did go during school time but I know some of the kids would go out there with their parents during the school

time and work. The children worked every Saturday and Sunday helping the folks.

S.J.: During the off-season in the rainy winters when there was no work for the Okies to do, do you remember what they did?

Zaragoza: They were hanging around the government camp. I can remember that. They would hang around and very few people would be running around through town. They really couldn't afford it. Saturday night was a big night at Arvin though. That was when everybody would go shopping. When there was no work to do I think they were getting supplemented from the government if I remember right--some kind of welfare or something like that.

S.J.: Did very many take government aid?

Zaragoza: I think quite a few did that stayed around during the winter. A lot of them were getting aid.

S.J.: Did you ever hear much about that from either them or other people? Some people accused the Okies of coming out here just to go on welfare.

Zaragoza: I didn't hear about this.

S.J.: A lot of people also think that many Okies are very proud and they would do anything not to go on welfare. Did you find that they were mostly very proud people that didn't want to do this?

Zaragoza: I think most of them wanted to that I remember. They had to 'cause you know otherwise they'd starve. They were pretty good workers.

S.J.: How about health problems? I've been told that the Okies seemed to have a lot more disease and health problems than other groups.

Zaragoza: Not really. Colds, chicken pox and runny noses.

S.J.: Do you remember much about what they did in their spare time for entertainment on Saturday night or something like that?

Zaragoza: There was a movie that most of them would attend at Arvin and that was the going thing at the time 'cause there was no T.V. The kids would go out and play ball usually in the evening. Most of them would just sit around in the government camp. I can't remember too much drinking but I can remember some played guitars and listened to the radio. It was so hot as a rule they would sit outside. They had no desert coolers.

S.J.: You said they moved around quite a lot following the crops.

Zaragoza: School would be started and there would always be someone coming in and someone leaving. A lot of them did follow the crops at the time and they still did up till not too long ago. They would come in and stay at the government camp or at a ranch and stay for a couple months and then go on. Those kids might have attended four or five different schools a year. They did try to keep them in school--try to better them.

S.J.: Do you remember hearing much about the way the growers or the ranchers treated the Okies they hired? Whether they treated them fairly or perhaps tried to cheat them?

Zaragoza: I don't think they tried to cheat them because these people were kind of stubborn. The harder you worked the more you would get and sometimes you'd get a little bit of bonus. As far as I know I think they treated them pretty fair. When they went out and picked cotton there was this scale so they wouldn't cheat them. They paid them cash and there wasn't really too much of a hassle.

S.J.: How about with the Mexican farm workers? Did they ever have any problems with the way they were treated by their employers?

Zaragoza: Yes, some would go out there, but mostly the whites would be out there.

S.J.: How about black workers?

Zaragoza: There were very few. They came from Bakersfield and picked cotton. They were very good at this.

S.J.: At that time in the late thirties and early forties do you remember hearing anything about attempts to unionize the workers?

Zaragoza: No. No, but I can remember people striking a for a little higher wages.

S.J.: Do you remember any specific incidents?

Zaragoza: They had a few clashes at the time. There would be people trying to get through and the others didn't want them going through. I can remember them carrying signs and people that really needed the money were trying to work. Sometimes a few workers and strikers clashed.

S.J.: That was right there in Arvin?

Zaragoza: Arvin and all the areas between Sunset and Arvin--all that farming area out there.

S.J.: Was your father ever involved in any of that?

Zaragoza: No, because he was at the ranch all the time. He was kind of the manager at the ranch. We had people come in and work there and he was kind of the foreman. No, he never was involved.

S.J.: Was it very violent? Do you remember hearing of fights or anyone being hurt?

Zaragoza: Somebody would get hurt once in a while. But the worst stories would probably be about what they called pachucos at the time. They were low rider types but they were different at that time. You stayed away from them and they carried the knives and wore the zoot suits. Those gangs and the whites once in a while would get into it. The whites--Okies--would kind of stay away from them. Every once in a while there would be a little clash like gang-type fights. We were always scared and we stayed away from them. But that was mostly Saturday night type of thing.

S.J.: In the places in town such as churches or stores and the places where Okies would have to go in to get supplies do you remember any hostility towards them? Did they have any problems when they tried to go into the stores?

Zaragoza: No, not in the Arvin area. A lot of them had credit or tried to get credit. If they knew the ranch they worked for or something, they'd give them credit. They were able to go in and buy pretty easily.

S.J.: How about Bakersfield? Did you get to Bakersfield very often so you would know how they were treated?

Zaragoza: Not too often. I got to Bakersfield at that time maybe once or twice a year. Arvin was the main place for us. Later on in life we would take the bus in to Bakersfield for clothes.

S.J.: How about the number of field workers that were Okies? Did that change after the war? I heard that a lot of the Okies worked in the defense industry in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Zaragoza: Yes, a lot of them started leaving as soon as the jobs opened up. They left for better paying jobs. A lot of women also worked.

S.J.: Were there very many left that still worked in the fields throughout the war?

Zaragoza: There was enough.

S.J.: Did more Mexicans come in then?

Zaragoza: Mexicans started to come in right about the war or a little after.

S.J.: Did the economic situation get any better for your family when

the war started?

Zaragoza: I can remember coupon rationing. They would give rations for so much gas, so much sugar. And what used to make us mad was the German prisoners they would bring in to pick cotton. Now that you mention it, the Okies did leave and farmers couldn't get their cotton picked so they brought in the Germans to a German Camp which was at the Rebre Camp out on Rebre Road. They would take two or three trucks of these Germans out there with one armed guard. We have a man at the college that was one of the armed guards. I can remember they would have to pick cotton. But what really was griping was they'd have a truck of food, cigarettes, chocolate and abundance for those guys. The other people couldn't get them in the stores at the time but the prisoners were well-supplied with them. I don't know how many hundreds they had there but it was pretty big. They would take these Germans because there were less people working in the fields. They needed help 'cause a lot of the Okies did go to industry and the farmers couldn't get the cotton picked. They were just war prisoners. They used to work for the ranch that my father had or was foreman of.

S.J.: Was this publicized very much or did you just happen to know that they were German prisoners?

Zaragoza: Well, it was obvious that they were in prison uniforms. There was one guard in a helmet with a rifle. You'd see them all over the fields at different places. They'd move them around.

S.J.: Do you know what happened to them after the war?

Zaragoza: Well, most of them went back to Germany. I think most of them were shipped back right after the war. They were pretty well guarded at the prison. They were nice and they were friendly and a couple spoke English. They looked just like regular people except they were in uniform.

Most were officers. They would take them to different fields and work them. They were well-fed. I can remember that. I can remember everybody saying we can't buy chocolate and we can't buy cigarettes. We were rationed and they could have all they wanted. People complained about that.

S.J.: To get back to the Okies, I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about your impressions both when you were a child and then now as an adult. A lot of people think of Okies as very ignorant inferior people without morals. Do you remember people thinking that way when you were a child?

Zaragoza: Vaguely. At the time I felt a little below them. I didn't realize I was actually better off than those kids 'cause I was a Mexican. You can still find a few of the ignorant ones that were kind of prejudiced. They were very prejudiced but I didn't

realize this at the time. I've never known prejudice until I actually married an Okie and found out her parents were so prejudiced that they didn't want us to get married. They thought I was low class but they found out that I'm not a low-class Mexican. That really bothered me. You'll find this still in Oildale where a lot of the Okies have settled down. I didn't realize this until later in life. At that time I didn't notice.

S.J.: At the time perhaps you didn't realize it then but looking back do you think the Okies had a rougher time of it than the Mexicans?

Zaragoza: It depended. If they got on a ranch they did well. I think they did a little better than Mexicans. The Mexicans who lived at the DiGiorgio Camp were a little better off than the people that lived at the migrant camp, and the white people that lived on ranches had it a little better than the Mexican people.

S.J.: Did you and your family encounter much prejudice when you came here?

Zaragoza: I can't remember that. My sister and I were taken up with the white ranch kids and the better class of Okies and had no problem at all. That didn't start until later in high school.

S.J.: How about the term Okie? That has a very negative connotation. Did it then? Did you call them Okies then?

Zaragoza: No, you were kind of afraid to call them that at the time. I think that wasn't brought up to them. You could hear about the Okies and the lower class that some were scum because they came out here and didn't have nothing. But they were trying. A lot of them broadened their minds and settled down and worked hard and seemed to have pulled themselves up from that. To better themselves is why they come out actually.

S.J.: And do you think very many of them did eventually do that?

Zaragoza: Yes, quite a few. Thanks to good schooling and the jobs they pulled themselves up. At that time there wasn't that many programs specially to help people. You came up on your own. To get a scholarship you earned it. You weren't given one like they do now. So these people who did try had it made. They were equal like anybody else and they did fine--the ones that I know.

S.J.: Did you know very many that really did well and became very successful?

Zaragoza: Yes. I can't name them all. A lot of them become ranchers and have made it.

S.J.: And do you know some that are still very poor and really haven't

done much for themselves?

Zaragoza: Yes, in Weed Patch. There's still a few of the older people left that are still on welfare and didn't bring themselves up, but the kids seem to have done better.

S.J.: You mentioned when we were talking about government aid that a lot of them took welfare and you said they wanted to.

Zaragoza: They had to. They were kind of openhanded. They needed the help because the wages were so bad. They were furnished the houses. They had a special store there and were given food stamps. They were helped if they needed help. But as a rule they wanted to work and they worked. There were a few lazy ones once in a while of course. They all seemed to want to better themselves and they were trying 'cause they knew the schools were free out here.

S.J.: Do you think that very many of them have suffered or perhaps have scars because of the experience they went through?

Zaragoza: I think they have outgrown that. I think they look back and they take it as war scars. I talked to some of these people that have made it. They remember it and they're thankful that they have pulled themselves to what they have now. I really feel that. And they seem to be doing pretty well. Bill Johnson came from a religious place. They lived in Weed Patch where they probably rented. He started as a box boy in one of the supermarkets and he was fair in school. Now he's a big shot and doing beautiful. I've talked to him before. He now owns Foodtown Markets. They look back and it's part of life. They seem not to be hurt by it. They think about it but they appreciate what they have now. I do the same thing.

I look back now and realize that I was better off than the majority of those kids and didn't realize it because I was Mexican and I thought they were always a little above me. And now I look back and I was as good if not better than the majority and I feel that that was good in a way because I appreciate it. I was a Mexican migrant that settled down on a ranch and brought myself up. I feel like I did pretty good--pretty fair. And I look back and kind of liked that life at the time.

S.J.: Did it ever upset you or cause you to stop and think when you heard people talking badly about the Okies? Did that make you angry because you knew that these were basically very hard-working and good people?

Zaragoza: No, that didn't bother me. And there wasn't that much bad talk. There was some bad talk here and there but as a rule--no, that didn't bother me at all.

END OF INTERVIEW

INDEX

- California
 - Arvin, 1
 - Lamont, 2
 - Bakersfield, 8
- Crime, 8
- Discrimination
 - In schools, 4
 - In community, 4, 8, 11
- Education
 - In Arvin, 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
 - Discrimination, 4
- Family Life
 - Entertainment, 6
 - Cars, 3
 - Cooking/Food, 2
- Health
 - Diseases, 6
- Housing
 - Home in California, 1, 2
 - Ditch camps, 3
 - Grower-provided, 3
 - Government-provided, 3
- Impact of Experience, 11
- "Okie"
 - Definition, 10
 - Reactions to term, 10
- Relief
 - Welfare, 6, 11
 - Attitudes toward, 6, 11
- Violence, 8
- Work
 - Migrant labor, 4, 5
 - Employers, 7
 - Unions, 7
 - Strikes, 7
 - Wages, 2, 5
 - Conditions, 5, 7
 - During WW II, 8
- Workers
 - Blacks, 7
 - Mexicans, 7, 8, 10
 - German prisoners of war, 9

He proves avocados will survive in Kern



Staff Photos by Earl Day

Joe Zaragoza examines avocado blossoms on varieties of avocados at his home. Three of his 100 fruit trees. He grows 13 varieties are his own development.

By DONNA REYES
Staff Writer

Joe Zaragoza is an avocado connoisseur.

He is a back-yard grower who for years has been successful in producing the tropical fruit that normally doesn't grow well in Kern County. He also said he's the only back-yard grower in the county to develop new avocado varieties.

Zaragoza, a 46-year-old physics lab technician at Bakersfield College, has been growing a variety of fruit trees — from deciduous to citrus to avocados — as a hobby for 24 years. He boasts 100 trees on his two acres east of Bakersfield.

The hobby turns professional when Zaragoza occasionally buds and grafts trees for homeowners, ranchers and nurserymen.

Of the 13 avocado varieties Zaragoza grows, three are his own developments. Two he has named "Jojo" and "Ugly Green Giant." The third is unnamed to date.

"They're good for the valley. They can take this climate," Zaragoza said.

Avocados don't grow well in Kern because they are sensitive to frost, said Joe Maranto, a county farm adviser at the University of California Cooperative Extension. He said the fruit grows best in tropical climates near the equator.

"It's a risk to grow avocados in Kern County because they can be killed in temperatures below 27 degrees," Maranto said.

The three varieties which are more resistant to frost, and which subsequently grow best in Kern, are Zutano, Bacon and Susan, he said.

Harvest of the 200 to 300 acres in Kern will be from September

through November, Maranto said. Zaragoza's Jojo variety can survive in temperatures as low as 22 or 23 degrees, and his Ugly Green Giant can take cold to 19 degrees. He said Mexicola is another variety of avocado that "has the best flavor and is hardier for Bakersfield. It will take temperatures down to 18 degrees and still won't be hurt."

Zaragoza is experimenting with two more new varieties but won't be able to gauge their production for at least 13 years.

He also is trying to develop new pomegranate, nectarine and plum varieties. Besides fruit, he developed a fresh-cut flower three years ago which is used as a filler in bouquets of Queen Anne's lace.

Called Spanish lace, he said his flower — which is white, lavender or pink — is the only one of its kind in the world.

Zaragoza takes special pride in his dwarf citrus trees, which he makes into "salad trees."

"I put three to four varieties of fruit on each salad tree," Zaragoza said. He said this method is especially advantageous to the home gardener, since each variety will mature for harvesting at separate times and the homeowner is not left with an overabundance of fruit at one time, like he would be with one variety.

"Some varieties come off one month, some the next. It makes your (harvest) season longer."

Salad trees also save space, which is precious to most homeowners, he said. "You can grow more varieties on less land."

Deciduous trees also can be
see He produces — page 2