

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Bobby Glen Russell
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Arkansas
INTERVIEWER:	Judith Gannon
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	February 3 and 10, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Orange Cove, Fresno County
NUMBER OF TAPES:	4
TRANSCRIBER:	Marsha Rink

## PREFACE

This interview tells the story of a family from Arkansas whose experience in the 1930s was difficult but whose problems were just beginning. Mr. Russell appears to remain on the fringes of adjustment to the larger society. He feels that most of his difficulties can be traced back to the experience of migrating to California.

Judith Gannon  
Interviewer

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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Oral History Program

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Bobby Glen Russell (Age: 52)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: February 3, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Mr. Bobby G. Russell for the California State College, Bakersfield, CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Judith Gannon at 900 4th Street, Orange Cove, California on February 3, 1981 at 9:30 a.m.

J.G.: Okay, Mr. Russell, tell me again about your childhood in Arkansas.

Russell: My earliest memories probably start about the time my youngest brother was born. I was almost four years old at the time.<sup>1</sup> We did a lot of traveling trying to find jobs, trying to survive. Dad did an awful lot of work for the WPA for the Recovery Era-- I guess they called it. Lots of families lived together in order to survive. If somebody had a house and food the whole family-- sometimes three or four families--would get together and live. It was a hard time. Not so much for me because I didn't realize how hard it was but I remember Dad having to get up at two o'clock in the morning to walk to work. He would catch a truck that would drive right back in front of the house but they couldn't pick him up there. It just seemed like it was rough on him.

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<sup>1</sup>My Uncles William (Bill) McFadden and Willie Warren died from the flu in the winter of 1931-32. I cannot remember Uncle Bill's funeral but I do remember Uncle Willie's.

Mom, dad and I had lived with Uncle Willie and Aunt Jennie that fall while picking cotton. We moved up in the mountains to Uncle Bill's only a short time before he died. After his death we moved just north of Alma, Arkansas to a place--a grocery store--called Hobo. We had only lived there for two or three weeks when Uncle Willie died.

We'd go to the woods a lot of time. Mom and Dad cut firewood to sell. I remember dad making crossties for railroads and carrying them on his back into town. He got two bits a piece or something like that for them.

One particular Thanksgiving we didn't have anything for Thanksgiving and somebody had made a rabbit trap and set it out in the woods and it had a rabbit in it. Dad went to take the rabbit out of the trap to bring it home so we'd have something to eat. My cousin and I had followed him and turned the rabbit loose but he caught us and gave us a paddling. Anyway, it's sort of funny to look back on it.

J.G.: About how old were you then?

Russell: I must have been about five maybe six years old.

J.G.: And that would have been when?

Russell: Oh, 1934 or 1935.

J.G.: Did your parents live on a farm in Arkansas?

Russell: They were farm-oriented people. My grandfather died shortly after I was born and the bank took the farm. We owed \$600 or something against it, but it was his farm and the kids all had to come up with money to pay it off and it was just something that couldn't be done. After--it must have been 1936--I guess things started getting a little bit better. Dad managed to lease a farm and he farmed a couple of years before we came to California.<sup>2</sup> We were a victim of progress I guess. A lumber outfit wanted the farm because of it's location. They wanted to put a sawmill on it so we lost the farm and the house--that's when dad decided to come to California.

J.G.: How many kids were there in your family?

Russell: There's five kids in the family--four were born in Arkansas and one was born in California--just barely. On our second trip to California we left in December 1940 and got into Indio in January 1941--my sister was born the next day.

J.G.: When you were in Arkansas, what was life like there? You say that times were really hard but you lived out in the country. What did you do for social activities?

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<sup>2</sup>Dad also worked out a lot when he was not working his own place. He had a team of horses.

A man was worth 35 to 50 cents a day. A man with a good team was worth \$1.50 a day. (You had to feed your own horses.) A day was from sunup to sundown.

- Russell: Played in the woods, played in the barns--when we had a barn. There really wasn't a whole lot of social activity. We went to church a lot. I remember one of our excursions into Oklahoma to visit Aunt Nora and Uncle Chuck Gentry--there were some dances in the houses. People would bring all their kids and throw them into one bedroom and then they'd dance in the living room. People played a lot of checkers. There was a lot of social activity because there was nothing else to do but socialize but nothing like they have today. People just got together and visited. When there were jobs they worked. Just wasn't that much really to do in those days.
- J.G.: Were you and your brothers and sisters going to school in Arkansas?
- Russell: I went to three schools in Arkansas and one in Oklahoma before we came to California.
- J.G.: So what kind of work did your father do after you lost the farm in Arkansas? You said you moved around a lot looking for work. What kinds of work would he have been looking for?
- Russell: Anything. One time he worked as a rock mason. Drove mules. A lot of times he would sell vegetables. Sometimes they would go into Oklahoma and Texas and mom and dad looked for cotton picking jobs or trading in livestock.
- J.G.: Did you go with them?
- Russell: I suppose I did after I was born but I really don't remember too much of that.
- J.G.: About how old were you when the timber company took over the farm and made a sawmill out of it?
- Russell: That was in 1937 and we came to California in December 1937 and in January 1938. I was eight years old.
- J.G.: Did they sell their possessions to come to California?
- Russell: Oh yes. They had a big auction sale and sold everything off and dad bought a car--an old 1930 Model A Ford Victoria. We came to California in that pulling a trailer naturally--rich Okies with two mattresses.
- J.G.: How many kids were there who came to California?
- Russell: Four of us. Actually, there were seven of us that came through--mom, dad, the four kids and then one of mother's brothers, my Uncle Layton McFadden--came through with us. I think it took us almost three weeks to make it. It was a long trip.

J.G.: How did you live along the way?

Russell: Oh, I think we rented a motel room every night that first trip out because when we got here we didn't have money to go back or we probably would have. We got into California in January. I remember coming down the old Grapevine. It was a grapevine in those days. My Uncle Layton had been to California before and kept telling my dad, "We go down here to where this giant lemon is at and we turn off." Dad kept telling him, "It's been so long ago that the lemon's dried up and blowed away by now you know." When we got down there sure enough somebody had picked the stupid lemon up and moved it way back out in the field and dad said, "See I told you."

We went into a cotton camp south of Arvin for about the first couple of months or maybe a month.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't very long. But that first seven days, if we had had the money, I am sure Mom and Dad would have gone back because the wind blew. Boy did it blow! Tents were blowing away and we didn't have one so dad pulled the car down behind a big old Caterpillar and parked it to keep the wind from rocking it so bad. When the wind died down some of the people got up and left so then we got a tent.

Mom and Dad worked there and I started school. I don't remember the school but it was way down south of Arvin. All the grades were in one room. All of us were refugees of the dust bowl even though it was past the dust bowl days. We left Arvin and moved up to Pond just north of Wasco.<sup>4</sup> Stayed there and it rained and rained and rained. No work--couldn't work. A lot of people got flooded in. At that time someone told dad and my Uncle Levi, who we met in Arvin, that there were jobs to be had over the coast starting in June picking berries so they went over and lined up a job at Watsonville picking loganberries. They came back and we all moved down to the Sunset Camp. I think it's called Weed Patch Camp now but in those days it was the Sunset Labor Camp--a government camp.

We stayed there until the end of May and that's when I really began to get an idea how tough it was to find jobs other than picking cotton in California. Dad was trying to get a job picking potatoes and he went out every day. I heard him and mom talking one night and he said that this guy had told him, "If there's a job, I've got relatives. I've got to keep them working or I've got to feed them." And he said, "The only way you can get a job in this crew is if somebody passes out--don't stop to see what's

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<sup>3</sup> Aunt Versi, mom's sister, and Uncle Levi Martin lived in the camp which is the reason, I guess, that we went there.

<sup>4</sup> Uncle Levi's brother Homer Martin lived near Pond [California]. Note: A singer that became fairly well known was Kay Martin but that was not her first name when I knew her.

I also attended the Pond School.

wrong with them. You step over them and go start working and let somebody that's slower take care of the person that's passed out." And that's how he got his job. He said he actually had to walk over a man that had passed out from heat stroke to get the job.

J.G.: Was that picking potatoes?

Russell: Yes. He'd come home and hit the floor and mom would rub him down with alcohol and he'd lay there all night. I don't even remember him eating when he'd come home from work. Anyway, he'd get up the next morning and go back to work and he did that until the end of May or first of June and then we moved to Watsonville and started picking Loganberries.

J.G.: This was all in 1938?

Russell: Yes.

J.G.: So roughly from January to June you lived in the two camps--one at Arvin and one at Weed Patch. Tell me about what it was like?

Russell: In Pond, we shared a house with Uncle Levi and Aunt Versi and their three children--Garry, Carmalita Garret and Freda Lois Martin--a total of twelve people.

For me the government camp was pretty nice. There was always something to do. I was going to school. I guess I was the weirdo--I liked to go to school. A lot of kids didn't but I did.

Our tent was right near the dance platform. A family by the name of King played for the dances. It's the dance platform that was in the movie The Grapes of Wrath. We lived right across from it. Practically every Saturday night there would be a dance. I also discovered movies so when I could hustle the nickel or dime it took to go I would go to the movies. There was always the store--in fact, it's called the Sunset Store. The kids would get out of school and we'd run a foot race and the first one to the store would get to empty the trash basket which was worth a nickel. I wasn't fast but I was a stayer so I could run the mile a little faster than most of the kids. I got to empty the basket my share of the time. There was always a chunk of baloney in the trash basket. Sometimes other kids would get it and sometimes I'd get it and take it home--most of the time I just ate it.

Dad, I think, got involved with the union people when we were living in the camp there but I didn't become aware of that until the next year when we moved back to the camp.

J.G.: What did you think of the people that ran the camp?

Russell: Most of them thought they were God's right hand! They were going

to tell us how to live--what was good for us--manage our lives for us because, "Okies and Arkies just weren't that smart--all they knew how to find as the Welfare Office." Same way with the schools--all the migrant kids were stuck in the back of the room, regardless. They weren't going to be here that long, therefore, you can't teach them anything. They can't learn anything anyway. It was a little rough. I can understand now why some of the kids developed a real dislike for school. If they had problems the teachers couldn't take time. They would work with the ones that were going to be there. It's real interesting to note that a lot of the so-called slow learners in those days are successful businessmen around Bakersfield. They survived. They made it anyway--the drive that motivated them was survival.

J.G.: You say that the camp managers tried to tell you how to live you lives. Can you think of any examples of the way they did that?

Russell: Oh boy, can I! They would tell you who could come and visit you and who couldn't. You know whether they were welcomed in camp or not.

J.G.: What kinds of people weren't welcomed in camp? How did they make a decision about that?

Russell: At the time I didn't know. I know now that they didn't want trouble makers in there. The government camps were to control people. It sounded like it was a great idea to take care of people and to help people. It wasn't. It was to control them and make sure they were available to do the farm labor. As soon as the labor was done you should leave. I know that now--I didn't know that then.

In the winter of 1939 there was one particular incident where a man and woman were sick and couldn't get out of their tent. There was a lot of flu that year. Anyway, this kid stayed home from school one day to take care of his parents and the camp manager went down and got all over the kid. The kid said, "I'm not going to school, my parents need me." So this guy took down a handsaw and whacked him with it--that really created some problems. Took almost four months until they got the guy fired--that was one of the incidents in which my dad was a leader. It split the camp with a lot of bickering and fighting but unfortunately those people who were backing the manager sort of got left out on a limb. I know there was a fist fight one time and the guy that was defending the manager wound up having to get his own attorney and he didn't have the money. When it came time to go to court he didn't have a ride so so the guy he fought with picked him up and took him to court. He said, "Never again--from now on I will let people fight their own fights."

But my father and his friends got signatures on a petition that



said the manager should be fired. They sent it to Sacramento but it didn't do any good. So dad and three or four others went in and talked to some attorneys in Bakersfield and they said for him to go ahead and send that petition in again and to let them know when he mailed it and they would be there when the mail arrived to see that it was opened and read. Anyway, it was just a couple days after this particular incident that the camp manager went on vacation and never did come back.

J.G.: What camp manager was that? Do you remember his name?

Russell: No, I don't.

J.G.: Which camp was that?

Russell: That was Sunset Camp--that happened right after the incident where a bunch of the guys got together and emptied a cotton field. There was a cotton strike. The Sheriff's Department arrested 138 men and took them to jail. Two guys pleaded guilty. The rest pleaded not guilty. The two guys who pleaded guilty got two years with probation and the guys who pleaded not guilty got a year of probation.

J.G.: Were those people that lived in the camps? Did the sheriff come in and do a sweep of the camp?

Russell: What happened was a group of men got together one night and set it up. They went to this one particular cotton field and emptied it. They just went in and said, "That's it boys, you're leaving." Anyway, as they were headed back to camp the Sheriff's Department pulled them over and said, "Okay, you're all under arrest--just follow us into jail."

J.G.: I don't understand. Are you saying that a bunch of strikers got together and cleared the field of non-striking workers? How did they plan to get the non-striking workers out of the fields?

Russell: They went prepared to do whatever was necessary to empty the field. The sheriff got them for trespassing. There was a guy named Johnson who wasn't exactly sympathetic of the strikers but he let them use his truck. When they picked up the strikers they impounded his truck. When he went to get his truck they threw him in jail too.

J.G.: Was Johnson a grower?

Russell: No, he was one of the guys who lived there in the labor camp. He moved and I think he built him a home in Lamont. The government had a project in those days that would help you pay for a lot. It was real cheap--\$25 or \$50 something like that. A lot of people would take advantage of that and then they would go to the oil fields and pick up lumber they were throwing away and build their houses out of that. Some of the best houses in Lamont are still

made out of it.

J.G.: Oil field throw aways?

Russell: Yes--sturdy.

J.G.: We'll come back and talk more about the labor organizing. I want to first get an idea of what happened to you as you moved through California. I would like to backtrack a little to ask you why your parents picked California as a destination.

Russell: I guess dad had always wanted to come to California and when things got out of kilter in Arkansas he thought he would come to California. We just came.

There were also the wild stories about all the jobs that were available. They would plaster posters all over Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri--in fact, all over the midwest--about all these great jobs that were out here. The land of milk and honey. The sun shined all the time. It was the Garden of Eden type of thing. There were lots of labor recruiters back there. I guess they got paid so much a head for all the people they could send out.

Mostly, dad just wanted to come to California. I think that's where it was with him. He wasn't a dummy. He'd been around--he wasn't a kid. I don't really think he thought it would be as rough as it was. He was a small man--weighed about 122 pounds. When they'd go to those compounds for hiring--five jobs and a thousand people would show up--he got overlooked a lot till he worked. He was particularly fast with his hands so he did pretty good after he got acquainted.

We learned early that there were fruit tramps, cotton tramps and pea tramps. Each group had their own trail. There were gathering points for slack seasons. The pea tramps would hit Edison then go into Oregon, Washington and over into Wilder, Idaho then back down through Santa Maria and winter in Brawley and Calipatria. It was just a run they made. They'd fill in picking strawberries.

The fruit tramps were usually the people that picked tree fruit and they had their run--cherries at Beaumont and Banning and at Linden then up into Salem and Yakima and those areas. Some would go into Utah and pick cherries. They had their run and they would fill in usually with picking cotton. The other group of people were either row crops or grapes or things like that. We did a little of everything. We finally wound up as legitimate fruit tramps doing ladder work most of the time.

J.G.: So you went to Watsonville and picked berries there. What kind of living arrangements did you have there?

Russell: We had a tent and we were camped on a hill above the field and above the ocean too. People would pay a fortune to do that kind of living today. It was a little rough in those days having to live in a tent. It would be foggy and damp. It was a good job. Mr. Hagen was a good boss.

J.G.: Why was he a good boss?

Russell: He seemed to be concerned about the welfare of his people and he made sure that if we got there broke we had groceries. He was pretty liberal with his bonuses at the end of the season. As a result, he had most of this people come back year after year until the war started. Mom and dad went back for three years, I guess, after the war.

J.G.: How long did you live in Watsonville?

Russell: Oh, we would usually leave there about the middle of July. The berries would start approximately the first of June--give or take a week. We'd leave there usually about the middle of July or the first of August and come back to Dinuba and cut grapes. We lived in the old Dinuba Auto Court for three years. That first year, though, we saw California! My dad and two of my uncles were with us then. They'd heard that there were some good lumber jobs up in northern California so we made that tour up through the Redwoods and some of those mountains. We had a Model A and you had to down shift--the gas tank was up front. My uncle had an old 1932 or 1933 Chevy and the gas tank was in back and in order to get up some of those hills and to get the gas to the carburetor you'd have to turn around and back up the hill. He said that he wasn't going to do much travelling in these or he was going to change cars. He didn't like backing up the hills.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

Russell: We wound up at Oswald near Marysville. We were picking peaches there. Us kids would go to the meat market and get dog bones. We didn't have a dog but we'd take them home and mom would make soup out of them. It was also where I got whacked in the back with a club by a wino. Dad filed a complaint with the Sheriff's Department. We left because it could have gotten out of hand.

J.G.: What happened?

Russell: Oh, I really don't know what happened. We were living near this old barn that had a bunch of cats under it and me and one of my cousins crawled under there one day to chase a cat. I guess it made the guy mad. When we came out why he started chasing us and we took off running and he threw this club and hit me in the back with it.

J.G.: When your father tried to establish a complaint how was he treated?

Russell: I don't know. Probably with indifference. Just another case--we were living in basically a hobo jungle with the winos and the whole bit. It was just one of those things that happened. They really didn't get too concerned as long as it was within the family so to speak. If it was out of bounds, if we went into town and frequented places that we weren't suppose to that got people into trouble. At my age though I didn't pay too much attention. I didn't learn until later that the migrant camps--whether it was government or private or just along side the road--was where all the town boys went to get their girls because they were easy. I learned later that the boys in the hobo jungles and the labor camps went into town to get their girls because they were easy.

J.G.: Describe living conditions at the hobo camp.

Russell: It was a railroad switching area right along side the road. There was a small gas station, grocery store with a meat market in it. There were loading pens. I don't remember if it was cattle or sheep but I know we played in the loading pens. We lived under a tree right next to the loading pens. In fact, I think our tent was tied to the fence of the loading pen. Dad and my uncles went out and got jobs picking peaches. No baths. You'd go out behind the loading pen somewhere when you had to go to the toilet. I don't even remember how mom done the washing in those days. Strange, I should remember that because she was always busy doing something.

J.G.: Your mom didn't work in the peaches?

Russell: She couldn't get a job. In those days they wouldn't hardly hire women. For a woman to get a job there had to be an exceptional employer. Mom could work when we worked for Mr. Hagen. In fact, us kids could work too. Picking strawberries and picking cotton was one of the few jobs in the early years that she could do. She also had four kids and I was the oldest so unless I could stay home and take care of the kids she didn't work.

J.G.: Now did you go to school during the peaches?

Russell: No, this was during the summer. Occasionally when we'd go to Watsonville school would still be in session. I'd go to school there. Let's see--that first year I went to school at Arkansas to begin with and then went to school south of Arvin and then I went to school at Pond and then went to school at the labor camp. I went to three schools that first year.

J.G.: So after the peaches finished where did you go from there?

Russell: We started back south and got as far as the Merced River where the bridge on Interstate 99 crosses the Merced River. There was a camp down under the bridge there and we pulled in there one night

and ran into some shirttail relatives from Oklahoma. It was my aunt's husband's brother. We ran into him and he was looking for work too but he said there were grapes to cut in this area. The next day he and my dad and my uncles went over to Caruthers and got a job. They came back and moved us over there and cut grapes till the job was done. After we came to old Dinuba Auto Court we cut grapes until it was finished. Then we went back to the labor camp in Arvin and stayed there that winter.

That winter mom got pneumonia and almost died. I got sick. I was sick a lot for the next three years. I wonder now if maybe I had Valley Fever. I didn't get to go to school much. I was laying around staying in bed a lot. That was also when I learned to read. I got tired of looking at pictures and I'd look at all the pictures in all the comic books so I started reading the print figuring out what words. Actually, that's the way I learned to read. About that time I also discovered classic comic books. I liked those and read a lot of them.

J.G.: So that must have been the winter of 1938 or 1939?

Russell: Yes.

J.G.: You lived that winter around the Arvin area in the camp. You said your mother had pneumonia--what kind of medical help did she get?

Russell: When it looked like she was going to die they let her into the hospital at Arvin. She was there for a couple of weeks. When she started to recover they sent her back home. You just toughed it out. In Arkansas we had a lot of pneumonia. I remember I was four when two of my uncles died of pneumonia within three weeks of each other. They just got sick and died. People took a lot of quinine--remedy-type stuff--that's what we tried in California but it wasn't working with mom. She was unconscious when they admitted her to the hospital in Arvin--medical attention just wasn't available.

I understand there was a lot of birth control people coming around telling our parents they shouldn't have any more kids but there just wasn't that much medical attention. What was available was fairly cheap but people just didn't have the money--most people I should say--some had money but not many.

J.G.: What did your father do that winter when you were so sick?

Russell: He picked cotton--that was when labor strikes were going on. In those days the Socialist Party wanted to organize farm workers. The Communist Party wanted to organize the farmers and the AFL-CIO both wanted to organize the farm workers--there were a lot of cotton strikes--plus there were various other groups which tried to

organize the farm laborers. Looking back most of them could have cared less about people but they saw a chance to be leaders and saw some people they could lead. It didn't work. They were very tough to organize. Most of them were very independent and didn't want to be organized. Actually, they didn't want to give up any of their freedom I think. To belong to a group you have to be disciplined to follow whatever the group dictates and people just wouldn't do it. I really don't know why.

The farm laborers are probably the best organized group in California today but they have no leaders. They're a voting block that's powerful and they swing most elections in this state but still there's no one that you can go to and say, "Hey, how are the people going to vote this year?" You can go out and do all the surveys you want but you don't know until they walk into that voting booth how as a block they're going to vote. They do seem to vote basically the same way in every election. They call themselves Democrats, most of them, but they really don't vote the straight Democratic ticket. The ones I know anyway tend to think that honest people don't run for public office and recent history seems to bear them out. It really doesn't matter.

J.G.: That winter you stayed in the Arvin area until the cotton was finished --was that about October?

Russell: We stayed there all spring. When we went back there we stayed there until we left there the next year and went back to Watsonville. It was the winter of 1939 and 1940 that we moved into Arvin itself and lived in the Bysbinder Camp.

J.G.: Was that a private grower camp?

Russell: No, it was just a private camp. The guy had his own little grocery store and he had some land so he rented tent space and had three or four houses that you could live in. In the spring of 1940 or maybe early winter was the first time we'd lived in a house in California in all the time we'd been here. The rest of the time was in tents or under a shade tree or something like that. The winter of 1939, I guess, was when I started shining shoes. I was ten years old. There was one kid in town who was pretty tough. He wouldn't let any other kids come in and shine shoes. It was his territory. One kid I knew wanted to shine shoes but he was afraid of the boy. So he talked me into building a shoe shine box. Somehow I managed to get me a can of shoe polish and a rag and I went to town to shine shoes. First thing that happened was that kid jumped me. Whoo! Anyway, I was sort of small in those days but I just cold-cocked him with my shoe shine box and went on shining shoes. After that a lot of other kids came in and we all shined shoes and made pretty good money--exceptionally good money for ten year old kids. In fact, I would make more money shining shoes than dad could working--three cents a shine.

J.G.: You'd have to shine a lot of shoes at three cents a shine to make money.

Russell: Yes. I'd make anywhere from \$3. to \$5 on a weekend shining shoes.

J.G.: Did you think The Grapes of Wrath depicted migrant life accurately?

Russell: Old Henry Fonda and John Carradine don't know it but they sure had an influence on my life! Well, actually the movie was made at the old Sunset Camp. They called it Weed Patch Camp. A lot of the characters in there looked like people I knew. The old truck that the Joads drove around looked like the truck that belonged to the Blakes who lived in the tent next to ours. Mrs. Joad looked like a lady by the name of Hedge. The characters were real.

Anyway, by this time I had all this exposure of listening to the men talking about labor unions and had seen some of the things that would happen in the labor camp. It was pretty real. I think maybe they played down some of the stuff because there was an awful lot of people dying of starvation--malnutrition would be a better word--that weakened their system and they died from other causes. A lot of it happened but they didn't play it up very much in the movie. I know my first wife lost a brother and sister--one strictly from starvation and the other from malnutrition that weakened the little boy so much that he died from pneumonia.

J.G.: Do you think that is what happened to your mother during the time she was sick?

Russell: It could have been.

J.G.: What were you eating at that point? What was your menu like?

Russell: A lot of baloney and a lot of beans and light bread. Actually, I thought we were living good because in Arkansas when you had baloney and pork and beans and bread that was right downtown living. I know it sure seemed like a waste. Supposedly the government was going to take care of you yet they'd go out and buy up all these potatoes and put fuel oil on them so people couldn't eat them--grind them into the ground. People would be going hungry all around. Some of the people picking up the stupid potatoes were going hungry. They wanted to pick them up but they couldn't get a job. The government would buy all this stuff and take it and waste it.

J.G.: That was happening during that winter you were living there?

Russell: Oh, yes. Particularly up around the Shafter area I think they called it Minterfield. They'd take truck upon truck loads of

potatoes out there and wipe them out. A lot of citrus was wiped out. In the spring of 1939, though, there was a load of grapefruit that came into the government camp. There were 500 families and a ton and a half truck of grapefruit--probably two grapefruit per family or something like that. It was quite an experience. I wouldn't take a million dollars for it but I wouldn't give you a nickel to do it again. It's okay since I survived.

J.G.: So you spent the winter of 1938 in the camp and went back to Watsonville to pick berries in the spring. What happened after that?

Russell: Then we came back over to old Dinuba Auto Court and cut grapes--that's where we met a guy called "Arkie". We went to Marysville and picked peaches and then we came down here. I know we pulled into the camp on tires so thin that when we pulled in two of them went flat from goad heads. One night this car pulled in and parked and pitched a tent way in the back of the camp. For two or three days nobody saw anything but no one went to check either. People were entitled to their privacy and you didn't mess around with tents. Anyway, Arkie had fallen out of a cherry tree and busted his neck and couldn't work and he had nothing to do all day so one day he went down to this tent to introduce himself. He opened the tent up and there were five people so weak from starvation they couldn't get out of the tent. He went back to his house and started digging out some canned goods and when people came in from work he told them, "We've got a family that's starving back there." People dug out food and gave it to them. Arkie took them down and showed them where the Welfare Office was, got them a job and they were on their own. They said they'd left Missouri with \$6. They landed in Dinuba. They said they'd saved the \$6 by frying hickory nuts to get the oil then they would fry dough in the hickory nut oil and save money on food. When they started through they cooked up a bunch of this dough in this hickory nut oil and that's what they ate coming through. Man, \$6 even in those days--I don't know how they did it. They got here though.

A lot of people hoarded food in those days. They wouldn't let you know they had it. Scared. I mean they were survivors! When all is said and done that's what they were doing was surviving--trying to get all the edge they could on surviving. When that family was laying there starving those people went into their tents and from wherever they stored it they brought out food and put that family back on its feet. It was quite an experience. It's things like that that sort of shaped me the way I am today. I have no great ambitions anymore--if I ever did. I sort of enjoy my life and believe people are much better than they think they are. They are! When push comes to shove people are better than they think they are. I don't know why they're down on themselves so much.

J.G.: What happened with your family? Did you keep following the crops



each season?

Russell: In the winter of 1939 was the year they had the welfare strike.

J.G.: What was the welfare strike?

Russell: The government had a commodity day. Every Tuesday you went in and stood in this big, long line and they gave you dried meat or canned meat or tomatoes or something like that--lots of canned goods. This one particular time people had been standing in line and about two o'clock in the afternoon this guy comes out and says, "I just got word from Sacramento that everybody just gets half rations." At the cutoff point in the line for full rations this old boy says, "You know that doesn't seem right to me. We've been standing here waiting and most of us really need the food. I don't think I'm going to take any and I don't think I'll give up my place in line." It just sort of grew and everybody said, "That's right. We're going to stay in line until you give us full rations." The guy said, "Well, I'm not going to give you full rations." He went ahead and gave all the other people up to that point full rations. They wouldn't give the others full rations and they wouldn't accept half rations. The net result was somebody broke out a guitar and started playing and singing and somebody said, "I feel like dancing." So they pushed back the desks and cleared the place and had a dance. They danced all evening and stayed there all night. The next morning they guy got new word from Sacramento to give full rations. It was one of the few times I guess the Okies and Arkies all really stuck together in one strike. It was a lot more interesting to hear dad tell about it because he was in it. After we moved into Bysbinder Camp in the winter of 1939 and 1940 that's where I started shining shoes and went to school in Arvin. I didn't finish school--that was the year we went back to Watsonville. I spent a couple weeks going to a little school that hadn't closed yet--that was when they started talking about the draft for World War II which wasn't going to come but they were going to draft anyway. So we worked that summer and stayed around Watsonville and over around Gilroy. We didn't come back to Dinuba that year. We picked up prunes, fruit, apples.

Along in September my uncle wanted to go back to Oklahoma to register for the draft so they traded off our old Model A and bought a big old Buick. We took my uncle back to Oklahoma and stayed until December and came back to California. That time mom, dad and us four kids--mom was pregnant--my cousin Bonnie and her husband and two or three kids and Uncle Eb's brother came back in the Buick.

J.G.: That was a full house.

Russell: Yes. We were broke and got over into Arizona somewhere or was it New Mexico and had a flat tire. Dad stole a tire. I wasn't suppose to know it but I did. He stole a tire so we could come on. We got over somewhere near the Arizona-New Mexico border and ran out of money--that's when mom pulled \$20 out of her purse that

my aunt had given her to use when we absolutely had to. My dad got on her because he stole that tire when he didn't have to. I don't know--it was probably for us kids' benefit--he might not have objected that much. We got into Arizona and it was raining.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

Russell: We pulled into Eely, Arizona and dad decided we were broke again so he said that we'd stay there and pick cotton for a few days--that's where we lost the trailer in the storm. We'd headed out to this government camp and water was running across the road and dad drove into it and the water had washed the road away--just left a big four foot pipe laying in the middle of the road. Dad hit the pipe and the car and trailer got straddled over the pipe. We got out and stood along the bank while dad went into the labor camp and brought back a guy and a truck to pull us out. They hooked a chain onto the car and jerked the car and trailer across this big pipe. We all got back into the car and took off but when we got to the labor camp we noticed that our trailer was missing. Apparently after they jerked the car off the pipe the pin had come loose on the trailer so when we took off the trailer was left sitting behind. So we went back and got the trailer and got set up in this camp.

It was so wet that some of the guys there said that they wouldn't pick any cotton for weeks. Dad said we had enough money so we just loaded up again and went onto California down near Brawley and Calipatria. We were going to try to get a job picking peas or working in the lettuce but it was raining and flooding.

Dad figured that we had enough money to get us as far as Indio. We got there and hit the labor camp and were broke--dead broke! Because of some of dad's former activities we were blackballed from the government camp and not permitted to live in them. Dad said he was moving in anyway and the guy said he wasn't. The manager said there were no spots available. Dad said, "I think there are." He just went down and found a platform and moved us in. We pitched our tent and dad said, "We're here. Let them move us out." They never did. I understand they tried but they never did get us out. We were broke. We didn't know until later that dad had 50 cents in his billfold that he didn't know he had. He went out and got a job picking tangerines--that's the way we lived. In fact, we spent the next seventeen years in that area.

In the spring of 1941 I was awful sick again and didn't get to go to school much. When I did I went to Indio.

J.G.: So you came in 1941 and stayed in Indio for seventeen years?

Russell: My parents sort of liked the area so they would stay there from September until school was out most of the time so I could go to school. Every summer we'd make the run north again. In 1941, things

began to pick up. Jobs were a little easier to come by and dad was a pretty good worker when it came to working with his hands so we did pretty well. I got back into the shoe shine business. I started selling newspapers at the army camps--Camp Young--which was out in the desert.

Anyway, we got in trouble again in a labor camp. Dad seemed to always have trouble. He was one of those guys that didn't like dogs. We lived in a tent and dogs are a filthy animal when it comes to tents. Anyway, this stupid dog took up with dad. Wherever he went that dog followed him. I mean even to the toilet that dog would follow him. It wasn't dad's dog but the camp manager came down and got on dad. He told dad to get rid of that dog or pay to have it disposed of. Dad said it wasn't his dog. The manager said, "Well, it's following you, therefore, you're responsible." Dad said that he would tie the dog up. The dog disliked the camp manager--I mean with a passion. One day when the manager came down to tell dad to get rid of the dog the dog bit him. So the manager said he was going to have dad arrested. Dad said, "No, you're not going to have me arrested." The manager had kicked the dog and that's why the dog bit him. Anyway, that was a hassle. We stayed there a little longer than usual that year while they went through all that mess. After I got out of school we took off and left the dog. When we came back the next year that stupid dog found dad and took up with him again.

They tried to get us kicked out of the camp and tried to blackball us. Dad fought it through the courts and won. We had a right to live in the camp after all. As soon as we won we moved out of the camp. Dad said, "To hell with it. It just isn't worth the hassle." So we moved over to Shope's Camp which was a mile and a half from the government camp and we lived there all during the war--probably from spring 1942 until I graduated from grammar school in 1945. I was quite old then. We bought a place at Coachilla--Little Coachilla. Dad built a garage first--we were going to live in it until he got the house built. He never did build that house. I graduated from high school in 1949. After I graduated I heard mom and dad talking one night and they were going to sell the place so I could get a year of college. I told them, "No thanks!" Strange.

J.G.: Strange how?

Russell: Things your folks will do for you.

J.G.: So after you graduated from high school what did you do?

Russell: Went to work. I worked in packing sheds. Picked fruit. Got married a year later. Married in September 1951 and got my draft notice in October. The Korean War had broken out. No, I got married in September 1950 and had my draft notice for my physical in October.

Anyway, I went in and took my physical and they said, "Why'd you get married?" I said, "Because I wanted to." And they said, "Not trying to beat the draft?" I said, "No, I'm ready to go if you want me." They gave me a deferment. Anyway, my wife and I split up temporarily and I went up and told them to go ahead and draft me anyway. So I spent the next 21 months in the Army in Korea. Got out and we went back as fruit tramps--my wife and I. Then I got hurt. I fell out of a cherry tree up in Lodi. I fell 35 feet and it didn't hurt. Then I got up and walked around and thought I was in pretty good shape. I bent over to pick up a box and I went to my knees. I couldn't get up. I finally managed to get back on my feet and went to a doctor--nothing. When I started to leave the building I sneezed and I fell again. The next year and a half they worked on me. They still couldn't find anything and they finally determined I had a ruptured disc and they had to operate--that was when I got involved with the State Compensation Insurance Fund--the farmworker's friend! The growers and the contractors paid through the nose for the insurance but it wasn't worth a damn. Unless it's improved it isn't any good now. I finally got enough to pay off my bills. They determined that I was entitled to a \$1.15, I think it was, every two weeks based on my earnings. The Administrative Law Judge, and I quote said, "It's been my experience that farmworkers all have back problems until you give them a few bucks and then their backs get better!" I told him, "To hell with it." I think it was \$1,700 that they offered to pay my bills.

J.G.: You fell out of a tree in Lodi in what year?

Russell: Let's see I got out in December of 1952. I think it was 1953 when I fell out of the tree. We wound up trying to get on welfare. But by that time we had two kids and the Kings County Welfare Department sent a worker out and said my wife should go to work--this was winter in Corcoran and there just wasn't that much cotton to pick during the rainy season. They used the example of the gal next door that was working and making a living picking cotton. Actually, she was working as a prostitute to feed her family. If anyone's that stupid--I'm talking now about the welfare worker using that as an example. We never did say anything about it but my wife didn't go to work. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't take care of small kids then. It was another eighteen months or so before I got the operation that helped.

J.G.: How did you live during that time?

Russell: We'd saved some money and during the summer my wife could work. We left Corcoran and went down to Indio and she worked with my mom and dad and picked dates and tied vines. I tried to work but I just couldn't do it. I'd get up in a date tree and my back would lock on me and I couldn't move--I couldn't get down--it was dangerous.

You can get hurt if you're not in pretty good health and pretty good shape working in dates. Anyway, I didn't do anything. We just lived as best we could. One morning--dad didn't have a job either--we took his pickup and went out and picked up copper wire --just picked up junk and hauled it to the trash or the salvage yards. Then I got a job cleaning swimming pools and that was pretty easy work. I could set my own pace and do what I could. We were in pretty good shape.

Dad had been planting date trees and grapevines and orange trees for a couple of years so we were talking one night and he said, "Why don't you just try to get some labor contractors license and we'll work together on this thing." That's just what we did--I got the license and I'd keep the books and line up the jobs and run errands and he'd run the crew.

J.G.: What year was that?

Russell: That was in 1957. I worked at it until 1970. Dad quit in 1960 or 1962. We came in one night and he said, "I'm retiring." I said, "That's great. When?" He said, "I have retired." He went in to sign up for social security and he had had two employers in his total work experience who had paid social security on him. Several had held it out but only two had paid it--one was a government contractor and one was a place where he ran a packing shed for a couple or three months out of the year. He had to go back to work again and work three more years to qualify for social security. That's probably what hurt him because he was one of those guys that either worked hard or not at all. I mean there didn't seem to be a middle ground for him. He worked pretty hard I guess those last three years--brought on a heart attack.

J.G.: You were a labor contractor in Indio for a number of years?

Russell: Only a couple of years--in fact, only for a year. I moved to Orange Cove because we were planting a lot of orange trees--some budding and balling. Mostly we were planting trees and this seemed to be the center of the area at the time so we moved here. We worked --well except for one three-year period--I've been here ever since. During that three-year period I went into Idaho to run a poverty program.

J.G.: What was that?

Russell: OEO.\* I think they call it Community Services Administration now. I ran a three-county program up there for three years and that's when my first wife and I split up. I also discovered that I had hypoglycemia--a lot of health problems. Boy, this is a sad story. Anyway, it was February 11 that my wife and I split up. On the 13th I got a telephone call that my dad was dying and two days later is when the results of all the examinations came back.

\*[Office of Economic Opportunity]

I had hypoglycemia and hypertension, possibly epileptic and a whole bunch of stuff and several skin cancers that had to be removed. Just like everything hit at one time--that sort of hurt. Dad died and I went to the funeral fully intending to quit my job when I got back--you know, just too much. While I was gone I discovered that some of my friends had decided they would fire me while I was gone and the secretary was typing up the letter dismissing me when I went into the office. I told her to hold off on it. I managed to hang onto the job another six months and then I quit--it was actually over four months.

J.G.: In what year was that?

Russell: 1972.

J.G.: Then you moved back here?

Russell: No. I spent a year running all over the country with a brief pause to remarry. I married a girl half my age but it didn't work out. She was a nice person but the age difference was too much --I like kids and she didn't particularly like kids. She had ambitions of her own and the marriage just didn't work. We split up while we were still friends. I'm still married to her. We haven't managed to get a divorce yet. It's a good insurance policy so I don't get stupid. At least I've got a waiting period there. I do have a tendency to get stupid sometimes.

J.G.: So after your year of running around, you came back to Orange Cove?

Russell: That's when I learned that my grandchildren were about to be put into a foster home and I said, "I'd like to have them." They said, "A man? A grandfather wanting grandchildren? Don't think so." They offered them to my ex-wife, I understand, to the father, to a lot of people before they finally said, "Okay you can have them." I had some friends that were in state government in Idaho and I got them to help me out. I don't know what all happened. All I know is I got the kids and I've been raising them ever since. I got them when they were three and five and they've just turned seven and nine. Pretty good kids.

J.G.: That's quite a task!

Russell: It's fun. I've tried and tried to get a job. There are lots of people with all kinds of degrees who can't get a job. They're over qualified I'm told. I've got all the experience in the world as an administrator and manager but I don't have any degrees. The credentials are on one end of the extreme and I'm on the other extreme. That's okay--I'm surviving. I'm enjoying life now a whole lot more I think than I did. The good memories--going to have some more.

## END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

J.G.: This is the second session of an interview with Bobby Glen Russell on February 10, 1981.

J.G.: When we stopped last time we hadn't really talked at all about your union organizing activities so I thought you might recall when your father and you were involved in the organizing and tell me a little bit about what that was like.

Russell: My earliest memories are about the 1930s walking picket lines and carrying signs. I really can't remember too many of the names of the people from those days there were so many of them. You had representatives from IWW [Industrial Workers of the World], Wobblies [slang for a member of the Industrial Workers of the World], you had Communist Worker Party people, AFL-CIO and the Socialist Workers. Every fringe group in the country was trying to organize the farm workers. I remember sitting at night and listening to the men talk--some of it made sense, some of it didn't. It was just people wanting a little better way of life--trying to survive. Most of them couldn't afford the products they were picking--if they had a job at all. They were just wanting to live mostly. One young man I remember later was a guy by the name of McLean. He later became involved in organizing senior citizens in California and ran for governor two or three times. No hope of winning but at least he showed he had enough support from seniors to get some social legislation and things for the people. With the coming of the poverty programs that sort of killed off that movement. Because of his efforts the government stepped in and started doing things for the older people in this state--the names were Galarza and Green. They started trying to organize farm workers in the late 1940's almost immediately after World War II.

I got involved to some extent with that. My dad was running a crew in those days and I know they would come and ask him if he was going to take his crew across the picket line and he told them, "No way. If the crews walked out he was going with them." He was the boss and, therefore, couldn't do too much. In those days they had a lot of Filipino crews that traveled and had their own union. They were well organized and usually got anywhere from 15 to 25 percent more per hour than the other crews. They just had their own union and they worked as a unit. Sometimes they'd get housing furnished--it wasn't the best housing in the world but it was still better than some of the rest of us had. It sort of died out though with the coming of the Korean War. Seems like there was always a war about the time farm workers thought they were going to make it. And in the late 1950s I was very active with AWOC--Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee under Norm Smith. We had people all over this state but we never could quite swing it. We just couldn't get them together and in 1960 or 1961

somewhere along in there the AFL-CIO decided that it was an impossible task and they were going to drop the effort. Some of us said, "Well, you know that's fine if that's what you want."

We approached the Teamsters and the Longshoremen and got some interest and the AFL-CIO decided not to drop their effort. Norm Smith quit and a guy by the name of Larry Itliano, a Filipino, took over the reins. A guy named Green took it after Norm Smith but he didn't have too much success either. Then Larry Itliano took it. He moved the headquarters from Stockton to Delano where there was a young man by the name of Cesar Chavez trying to organize credit unions. He wasn't having any luck either. Several of us talked to him and tried to get him to come in and help but he just wouldn't do it. Anyway, after Larry moved down to Delano, Cesar and his credit union group were having a meeting that night to decide if they were going to cross the picket lines and with a lot of effort some of us packed his meeting and not only decided not to cross the picket line but to become an active part of the striking force--that sort of got Cesar into it whether he wanted to be or not. He's done a good job most of the way I think. Again, the Vietnam War sort of stopped him and right now it's sort of a social movement rather than a labor movement.

J.G.: What do you mean when you say a social movement rather than a labor movement?

Russell: It's limited primarily to one race which is Chicano. The problems they're having with bilingual education and all of this stuff. He may be on the right track. It just seems like it's the old time labor movement. Of course, that's one of the reasons I got out. I became disenchanted with the labor movement because there really wasn't too much imagination there. You know, what they did 50 years ago or 100 years ago well, that's the way it was still done. All they ever had to offer was more money. Never any improvement in living standard unless it could be bought with the money you got. I don't know. I think there's a lot the labor movement could do if they could just change the way they think about some things. Unfortunately, they are the first to say you have to have an early retirement age but some of those guys are in those jobs till the day they die and therefore the thinking doesn't change that much. I think they've adopted a lot of the principles of management like retirement systems. If 40 or 60 percent of the people don't lose their benefits the rest don't get anything. I don't think it's right that that many people pay into something that they get nothing out of.

J.G.: How long ago did you decide to get out of the labor movement?

Russell: I don't know if I really totally dropped out of it. I still support it. After Chavez and those people got pretty well established I



sort of drifted away. I still watch it as a spectator but I don't participate too much anymore.

J.G.: Could you go back for me to the time in early or late 1930s when your father was trying to organize. Do you have any memories of what that was like or what kinds of problems he ran into?

Russell: In those days blacklists were legal. If you were on a picket line or if you attended a meeting your name went on the list. Jobs were not to be had--you just tucked it. Occasionally they would send people around to intimidate you.

J.G.: Who's they?

Russell: The growers--it wasn't necessarily growers. I mean they had an organization which absolved them of all responsibility but they footed the bill.

J.G.: What organization was that?

Russell: I don't know what they called themselves but there were all kinds of grower organizations that would charge dues and then someone would make a decision--you know, we've got to cool this operation down or this is a trouble maker and he needs to be gone. There was all kinds of intimidation. When the war came along my father was about 44 or 45 with five kids and every time he'd attend a meeting he got a draft notice. Five times they called him in for the draft. Each time he'd go and report and each time the doctor would send him home saying that he was too old. I think he hoped that he would get drafted because he said that if he ever got in there they'd never get him out again.

Before World War II a group called Migrant Ministry had church meetings and discussed a lot of things besides religion--that was the group I seemed to work most with. I was always knocking on doors and inviting people to meetings.

J.G.: Who was the head of Migrant Ministry?

Russell: I don't know. There were representatives from all religious groups. The Brotherhood of Railroad Engineers footed the bill for some ministers. They were railroad engineers but they would take a leave of absence and spend a month with us in the various labor camps working with people.

Something I didn't know until recently was that the government also had a lot of birth control clinics in the labor camps. Of course in those days that was something only adults talked about. Children weren't too informed--probably none of the boys and some of the girls might have known. They want all those people to come here to work and then they want to tell them not to have kids so

they won't have to support them--that's the history of California--particularly in agriculture.

J.G.: That's what?

Russell: Getting people to migrate to the state and then using them for a few years and then as soon as they start wanting a better life they bring in another group of people. You know they've had the Armenians, Japanese, Filipinos, Okies, Arkies and Mexicans. We'll probably get a group from Vietnam--maybe that's the way the world goes I don't know. It seems there should be a better way.

J.G.: Why do you think there was such a hard time in organizing the farm laborers? Chavez seems to have made some strides in that direction but prior to that time it seems as if that most of the attempts were not very successful. What do you think caused that?

Russell: I think probably there's something about so-called dust bowl refugees or red-necks. They're independent. They will belong to a group but the group does not necessarily tell them what to think or how to think. I think the climate for organizing is a little better now. I think the public is a little better educated. Many, many of those people that we tried to organize in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s went to the cities and joined labor unions but not to work for peanuts. They joined carpenters and engineers unions. Those are the people--at least second generation people--who are saying, "Hey, farm work is the hardest work there is." You can't be an idiot and be a good farm worker--this is something they have preached for years. It isn't true that anybody can do it. You have to have some skills. You have to know more about soils, water, fruit. I don't think there's any labor union that requires a good worker to know as much as a good farm worker has to know.

In the 1950s when we were trying to organize it was interesting to note that Germany, France, Israel, India and Russia had time and motion people following the migrants to find out why they could do so much more in such a short time than their people could. They found that there was a lot of skill involved in being a good fruit picker. As an example, how you set the ladder--the good ones would go to the top and work their way to the bottom. If the bag or bucket whatever they were working with wasn't full, they'd fill it up from the bottom of the tree and go dump it. They never went with a half bag of fruit and dumped it because that was losing time. They'd set the ladder so they could reach the fruit easily--so they didn't have to stretch out and take unnecessary chances and then they'd work down. There's a lot of skill involved. A good tractor driver has no problem going and taking a job with the operating engineers and operating equipment because of the skills they learned on the farm.

Farm workers are skilled people. It showed up in some of the salaries

that some of them made. Unfortunately, once a year my wife and I would try to make \$100 a day--that's damn good money in those days--that was once a year. I didn't say anything about the three weeks we spent where we might make \$1.50, \$2 or \$3 a day waiting for that one time in the year where we could get out there and hit it. Afterwards, we'd make only \$30 a day the two of us. Toward the end of the season we'd just barely make it. Over the season we didn't make that much money. We were our own worst enemy. We'd brag like hell about that \$100 day. We never said much about the \$2 or \$3 days. People would say, "Ah, you're making \$100 a day!" It's still true. People will brag about those good days and fortunately, they're also beginning to complain about the bad days so it balances itself out.

J.G.: That's still today that you're talking about?

Russell: Yes. It hasn't changed that much. Like picking oranges--people go out early and sit there waiting for the fruit to dry. They might work two or three hours. They're pretty lucky if they make enough to pay for gas. Then there will be some days coming up shortly when they'll go early and stay late and make it pretty good. Except when they start producing too much the prorate shuts them. You know you won't get to work today or you can only pick so many boxes today because the orange prorate will stop them.

J.G.: In other words there are just so many oranges that can be picked in a day's time?

Russell: Yes.

J.G.: How long ago did that start?

Russell: That's been around a long time but it got really strong in 1964 or 1965 when more and more fruit was coming into production and just had to stop it.

J.G.: Do you remember having prorate back in the 1930s and 1940s?

Russell: No prorates--you got what you could until the fruit got too ripe or something like this and you had to quit.

J.G.: Were you involved in trying to organize all different kinds of farm laborers--the pea pickers, the fruit pickers and the cotton pickers?

Russell: Yes.

J.G.: So the unions were trying in all the different areas?

Russell: Right. Now, rednecks are supposedly racist.

J.G.: What do you mean when you say "redneck"?

Russell: People from the south--it's a slang term that was attached to them--supposedly derogatory--still is I guess. Actually, in my experience everybody was welcome to the union. I don't remember anyone saying, "Hey, you can't join because you're black or Indian or female." We're all in the same boat. We are all hungry and need jobs. We were all being pitted against each other. A real popular practice in the Imperial Valley was to have a Mexican crew, a Filipino crew, a black and a white crew. You worked one day and the the next day a different crew would show up and you were out of a job. That lead to some bloody battles down there between people. It wasn't the workers themselves doing it it was the way they were being manipulated by some of the special interest groups to keep wages down. I guess the best description I ever heard of was when I attended a hearing conducted by the State of California. This guy got up and said, "In California there has to be a list so we know who the trouble makers are. We keep them out. We do not let them work. If they cause trouble for one year or if they cause any kind of trouble they cannot work for one year. We need to have the camps so that we can keep our good workers in and get rid of the bad ones." He summed up by saying, "Those people have got to be wet and hungry before they work."

J.G.: What year was that?

Russell: 1960 or 1962, I believe, in that period.

J.G.: As late as that.

Russell: Oh, yes. As I said, nothing has changed. At the same time over on the west side of the Valley they had cotton camps for winos. The camp boss carried a battery cable and people had to behave themselves or they got worked over with the battery cables. You rented bed space, a bed, a blanket and you bought your wine from the company store at the camp. You never ever earned enough money to get out of debt. You were not permitted to leave until the debt was paid.

J.G.: What happened when the cotton ran out and you still owed?

Russell: Your name went in a book and you were permitted to come back the next year and work it out--not many did. Who cared? The people were getting their cotton picked. The labor bosses and contractors were making it. The growers didn't know what was going on. They preferred not to know what was going on. A lot of them were victimized by so-called unscrupulous labor contractors. There was one labor contractor I know who had a job chopping cotton. He would take his busses down to skid row load up with winos and take them to the field and give them a hoe. One day he picked up too many winos

and he had too many cotton choppers and not enough hoes. So he took hoe handles of which he had a supply and gave them just a hoe handle and told them to walk along the rows. He turned them in as cotton choppers that day and collected on them and they didn't do anything except walk around with a hoe handle in their hand.

J.G.: What year was that?

Russell: Same period--1962, 1963, 1964--along in there.

J.G.: The nationality of the workers changed a lot during that time didn't it?

Russell: Not really. You still had a lot of Okies and Arkies. Mostly they were second generation.

J.G.: I thought in the 1960s it became primarily Chicano.

Russell: It did in the 1960s but in the early days of the 1960s it was still primarily Okies and Arkies and Filipinos. You had some Mexican crews. In those days you still had the Bracero Law--that's where most of the crews were at. They'd bring them in and as soon as the job was over they'd ship them back to Mexico. Unfortunately, there was a lot of trouble at those camps too. They weren't too much better than the wino camps.

J.G.: Were wino camps used during the 1930s and 1940s or was that a 1960s innovation?

Russell: The labor camps of the 1930s became the wino camps of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Most of the Okies and Arkies had places like Traver--little shacks that they lived in. They'd acquired property. They still did a lot of farm work. Orange Cove was still primarily a tent city up until early 1950s.

J.G.: Did you ever live in Orange Cove in a tent city?

Russell: No, we lived over at Dinuba in the Dinuba Auto Court in a tent. Dad came over here and looked at Orange Cove years before I moved here and it was a tent city. You know, the Zananovitch's had their brick houses over there. There just wasn't that many houses around. Even into the late 1950s there were still an awful lot of outhouses in back of the houses.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

Russell: About the only major change would be the complexion of the farm workers--that's about all really.

J.G.: That's all that's changed since the 1930s--they now have primarily Mexican farm workers but conditions?

- Russell: I expect they're just as bad considering inflation--conditions may be worse. A few years ago poverty was considered \$1,500 but with inflation people are making \$5,000 or \$6,000 and it's still poverty.
- J.G.: Go back again to the 1930s--can you think of any incidents or things that happened when you attempted to organize--any specific kinds of intimidations or anything like that you recall? Either your dad talking about it or that you remember first hand?
- Russell: Most of the things I heard about were later. Kids were pretty well protected from things of violence in those days. There was a lot of fighting among the men. There was a lot of one on one fist fighting--some of them got pretty bloody. The blackballing from the labor camps--the government camps--was probably the major thing that I was aware of because it seemed like every time we'd try to get into one it was a big hassle.
- J.G.: What did your father do exactly that got him blackballed from so many of the camps?
- Russell: I suppose for one thing he wouldn't take any crap from the camp managers. He wouldn't let them dominate his life. If they did something wrong he was always around somewhere. It wasn't just him it was a lot of people that felt that a camp manager should manage the camp and not the people. As long as they obeyed the rules that's as far as the camp manager's authority extended. They had no right to tell people how to treat their kids or how to raise them or what kind of work they should do. Also, he was involved in taking some people to a field and clearing it of strike breakers at which time 138 of them got arrested. He was involved in a commodity strike in Bakersfield. The time they went to court to get rid of the camp manager and wound up going to the state legislature--things like that got you in trouble.
- J.G.: He always managed to get into the camps didn't he? Or did you have to pitch a tent wherever you could?
- Russell: Sometimes we had to pitch a tent where we could. Most of the time he was stubborn and said it wasn't right to blackball people from the government camps and he would hassle it through. A couple of times we got in. If we were travelling with someone dad couldn't rent the cabin but whoever we were with could. So they would rent two cabins and we would take one--got in that way. The time in January 1941 he just flat moved in because we were broke. We stayed there three years before we finally moved out. By that time they had done away with the blacklist or at least dad's name was dropped from it so we could legally live in the camps--that's when we moved out. As far as I know dad never did move back into one. I did a few times but I never had any problems.

It was real easy to get on the blacklist in those days. If the straw boss didn't like you he could turn your name in. A lot of people could get you on the black list--they still can today. Black lists do exist but most of them are carried by insurance companies and things like that. If a guy is suspected of being epileptic the insurance companies have his name on the rolls and he can't work unless his employer wishes to pay one hell of a big premium. If someone gets arrested for drunk driving the state carries that list and you are assigned to a high risk insurance and the premiums never go down. It's just a new floor under it that from now on you're going to pay that or more.

J.G.: Earlier you talked about the labor contractor versus the grower. When you or your father were working in the fields did you most generally work for contractors or growers?

Russell: We worked mostly for growers--usually small farmers, family farmers who had to have help at a particular time during the season. Most of those guys were struggling to live also. Generally, they treated you better than the big corporate farms. Corporate farms are very impersonal and they will hire--if you'll excuse my French--a horse's ass to run their crews most of the time. People who are impressed with the title of crew leader or straw boss will do the dirty work and corporate farmers can sit back in their offices and deny any knowledge or responsibility for what goes on in their operation. If they get called on the carpet they get rid of that straw boss and get another. They avoid their responsibilities that way. Of course, I'm one of the few people who thinks that corporations do have responsibilities--individually and as a group. The family farmers were easier and better to work for. They treated you better.

You couldn't always get a job with that type of farmer but most of the time we did. I know one time over in Brentwood and the only place to live was under a tree along side the road. No one said a word for about three weeks. There was no place to wash, to use the bathroom--nothing. We got done with our job about ten o'clock and we were paid by noon. We'd been back in camp maybe fifteen minutes when the Sheriff's Department showed up and gave us thirty minutes to leave the area. It was planned. They made allowances as long as the crops were in danger. As soon as the crops were no longer in danger we didn't even have time to rest or clean up before we had to leave the area. We were going to leave anyway but probably not as quickly as we did--that was in 1953.

You can make the rounds today to the old labor camps and there are still people there. I mean, there's still people going in. In Lake County the Argonaut Camp is still there--also in Kelseyville, Marysville, Indio, Weed Patch and Lamont. Most of those camps are still there--Porterville and Pixley too. Over in Corcoran I'm

sure they haven't done away with all the old dirt floor cabins yet. I'm sure they're still there.

J.G.: I know the one in Arvin is still there. When you think back over the whole experience of having been a migrant to this area do you think it had any lasting effect on you?

Russell: Oh, yes. I think healthwise. I know my health is not as good as it should be and I think it was because of the way we had to live. I think I'm bitter.

J.G.: Talk a little bit about that.

Russell: I'm a good worker--I was a good worker and yet I was never able to satisfy anyone. When I was needed they'd come look for me but as soon as I wasn't needed I was out on my own. I think one of the reasons my father went blind early was because of having to work in grapes so heavily sulfured that it burned his eyes. My mother has heart trouble maybe for the same reasons. I made deals fair and square with people to do a job but when I started making money they objected. They wanted to renegotiate the deal.

J.G.: Tell me a little bit about that.

Russell: The best example is when we were picking dates in Indio--this guy had about 30 acres of dates--five acres of those trees were over 60 feet tall and so rotten that he couldn't get anyone to pick them. So I went and made the deal with him to pick the whole thing at a penny a pound which was half of what it had been a couple of years before. We picked the 60 feet tall trees first and we made nothing. I mean nothing because we had to be so careful and so cautious to keep from hurting ourselves. We got it done and then we moved over into the low trees which were only about fifteen or twenty feet tall and were making money. He came along and said, "Well, you've got to carry the dates out to the end of the row." We didn't like it but we said, "Okay, we'll do it." We knew we would make some money if we worked hard. Then he turned the water on and started irrigating. We had to work in the water. We weren't going to make any money if he was running water and we were having to carry the fruit to the end of the row. So we said, "Hey, we'll come back when it's done." He said, "No, you do it now while I'm irrigating or you'll break the contract and you've got to leave."

In those days we had a man by the name of Mr. White. He was an old man, retired and in his seventies. He didn't make much money but he wanted to work and he was out there and had been up in the trees. He came down and started fumbling for his pocket knife. I knew what he was going to do so I said, "Okay, we'll quit." I took Mr. White and left--the old man was getting ready to kill him. His word was his law and he lived by it. When someone lied to him or tried to break his word he paid the price.



I got out of there--this was immediately after getting out of the service. I tried to draw my \$26 for 26 weeks and the state checked with him--he said I quit voluntarily. I said, "Yeah, that's true, I quite voluntarily but these are the reasons why." It didn't matter. The man had the right to do anything he wanted to do and if you didn't like it and quit you weren't eligible. I fought that all the way to Sacramento. I must have spent \$200 trying to collect \$26. I did collect it.

If you're a boss you never lie. If you're a migrant you're a liar and a cheat and a thief. You're immoral, lazy and no good. It made me bitter. I don't deny it. I am very bitter. I don't like what's happening in agriculture. I don't think big is better. I think it's more impersonal. Whether people who control things can remove themselves from some of the things that they are ultimately responsible for--you know, they can hide--like DiGiorgio. Some of the things they did in the 1930s--they should have been horsewhipped.

J.G.: Like what?

Russell: The way they treated labor or the way they hired people who treated their labor.

J.G.: Give me a couple of for instances.

Russell: If you got sick you weren't permitted to come back to work. A lot of those people were good workers but they were sick. They'd lose their jobs! It got to the point where some of the people would actually vomit into their fruit rather than quit because they'd lose their job. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff.

Another example was over here in Dinuba at the cannery. I was about sixteen or seventeen. I'd cut this finger one day so bad and it was bleeding and the blood was running into the cans of fruit. I went down and bandaged it up but the blood was still running out. They told me to get back there and continue cutting fruit. I said, "With this? I'm getting blood all over that fruit and its going into the cans you're canning!" They said, "You either do it or get out of here." I got out. They didn't want to pay me. The guy said, "You didn't work all day. I'm not going to pay you." I said, "Oh, but you are going to pay me." About that time three or four of my friends who were there said, "Yeah, you're going to pay him and us too." We did get paid but it took some doing to get the guy to pay us. If I'd gone home and told my dad and uncles that that guy wasn't going to pay me it would have been a lot worse. A lot of things happened like that.

J.G.: What you're saying is that if the contractors or the growers had half a chance they would take advantage of the people.

Russell: Oh, yes. Lots of contractors took advantage of the growers and

labor. First choice was labor because they had no muscle.

J.G.: Clout?

Russell: Right. Growers if they got too smug would be taken to the cleaners by the contractors. Like the guy who had fifteen or twenty people out there a day drawing salaries doing nothing--just walking around with a stick. The grower checked him from an airplane--from an airplane you can't tell whether a stick's got a hoe at the end of it or not but he paid off.

J.G.: Earlier you were talking about all the different names that the migrant laborers were called. I think you said they were ignorant and lazy and a half dozen things you named. Was that the general feeling that you got from the local people when you were coming through to pick the crops?

Russell: Oh, yes, that's still true today. I'm not a kid anymore but I go down here to the coffee shops and I listen to some of the guys talking and the Okies were pretty good workers--the current crop is lazier, irresponsible, winos, drunks. Unfortunately, the same people who call them lazy were very, very hard to get a day's work out of but today they're the boss--their memory serves them a little better.

J.G.: As a young man in the 1930s and 1940s did you associate very much with the locals? Or were most of your social associations with other families of migrants?

Russell: After I got into high school I associated with locals. Even in grammar school after my parents would stay in one place for nine months while school was in session I associated with a lot of locals. Of course, we were considered local even though we were living under a shade tree on a platform with a tent over it.

J.G.: What made you a local?

Russell: I was never able to figure that out. I suppose just staying in one spot for nine months made us locals. I don't know. We still followed the fruit every summer. Our run was down pat--we knew where we were going to work and knew within a few days when the crop would start. Sometimes it got us in trouble. It got me in trouble when I was in the fifth or sixth grade. In order to get there and help the guy start the crop I had to leave school one day before school was out and they flunked me. I went to a different school the next year. After having a run in with the teacher because I knew the work they put me up [a grade] so it didn't really hurt too much.

J.G.: As you look back over the whole experience do you think there was ever a time when you lost hope?

Russell: No. I've had some experiences since then that were worse and I've seen other people who have. I've seen them just give up and start drinking. They just give up. I've always known that I'm going to survive--that's really what it's all about--surviving. I'd like to survive a little better sometimes but I really can't complain. I've done okay. My house is paid for--such as it is. I've got some pretty nice grandkids. I get a little disturbed sometimes when I see what's going on but I think I've paid my dues. I've tried to make some changes. Unfortunately, I've succeeded sometimes and the changes are probably worse than what we were trying to change.

J.G.: I don't know if I understand that.

Russell: Oh, there's a good example right here in town. For years if you were a Mexican you were out of it. You had no say. So a group got together and we worked and fought and opened up the community. Mexicans got a say. Now they have total say and they're shutting everybody else out. I mean they aren't that much different than other people. The people we placed were replaced with people who were just like the ones they replaced--everything's the same. It's the thing about power--once you acquire it you really don't want to share it. You want to acquire more.

J.G.: A lot of the migrant people went into defense industries during World War II when that became really big. Why do you think your family remained in the farm labor rather than going onto another area?

Russell: Dad worked building Camp Young and the one at Riverside. One of the jobs he got was farm work putting in the guayule farms.

J.G.: Putting in what?

Russell: Guayule--don't ask me how to spell it. It was a plant from which they made artificial rubber and that kept him busy for a year or so. He stayed in farm labor most of the time. He even had a job in 1938 for a small contractor called Del Webb.

J.G.: He didn't stay small long did he?

Russell: No. He got several government contracts building labor camps. He built a lot of labor camps and put in new sewer systems and built new bathrooms and platforms. Dad said that that was the only job he'd wished he'd stayed with--construction. He was a ditch digger in those days when he was working for them and the guy liked him--a guy named Red. I don't know what his real name was. He wanted dad to go with him. They had a big job in Arizona building another labor camp and he said he thought that before too long they'd probably be building some military camps--and they did--that was in the winter of 1938 or 1939.

J.G.: You dad went out occasionally into contracting but stayed pretty much in farm labor--so did you after you got out of the military.

Russell: That was my dream--I wanted to own a farm. I think a lot of people who stayed in agriculture wanted to be farmers. They were farmers at heart. They were always a day late and a dollar short when it came to buying land. Their credit rating wasn't too good. I thought the G.I. Bill would help me after I got out of the service. If I had had enough money to buy a farm they would have been happy to loan me money but being willing to work was just not the answer even though I was sort of specialized in those days in citrus and nursery work and it didn't take a great deal of land. I found 20 acres for \$16,000 with a house on it which was a lot of money but the G.I. Bill wouldn't spring for it.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 2

J.G.: Earlier you said that there had been times in your life that were more difficult than the late 1930s and early 1940s. Would you like to tell me a little bit about when that was?

Russell: One instance was in 1954--I fell out of a cherry tree and hurt my back. We were very near starvation in those days.

J.G.: Who was with you?

Russell: My wife, my children and myself.

J.G.: You had three children?

Russell: I had one when I hurt my back. My wife was pregnant at the time and one was born then she got pregnant again so I had three children. I wasn't able to work. I tried but I just flat could not do farm labor--that was all I knew. I tried going through rehab. They wanted to make a jeweler out of me and I just couldn't take the work. I didn't know it then but I had eye trouble--that was the reason it kept making me sick. My wife would work when she could but with me and the kids there wasn't much she could do. She did work. One time over at Corcoran I know we were flat busted. We tried to get on welfare and couldn't make it. My wife was physically able to work, therefore, she should be in the field. Wound up a friend of mine literally gave me a second-hand store with a bunch of old clothes in it. I ran that. A lot of days we would sit there hoping to make a sale in order to get something to eat. We always did--maybe 50 cents or so. I guess I was a soft touch but people would come along selling household items--if I had a little money I'd buy their stuff so they could have something to eat--they were hungry too. This was in the 1950s.

That's the main time it was rough. One of the periods in there

was when dad had a pickup and we'd go out and find junk and scrap metal and haul it in.

J.G.: When was this?

Russell: 1956 or somewhere along in there.

J.G.: Do you think it was also true for your parents that the 1950s were every bit as difficult for them as it was for you?

Russell: No, my parents really had it pretty good in those days comparatively speaking. They were doing okay. Dad and mom were well known and they could get jobs. I would have done okay if I'd been able to work.

Right after the winter we picked up the scrap metal and I moved up to Bakersfield in the hopes of getting a job. I couldn't and we were out of everything to eat--I mean absolutely nothing. No money, no food and the kids were crying. I managed to get downtown to the Welfare Department but they couldn't help me. They sent me to Catholic Charities but they couldn't help me because I wasn't Catholic. They sent me back to the Welfare Department. I just gave up and started walking back toward where we lived and happened to pass in front of a Salvation Army. I went in and told them my problem and they gave me a \$5 grocery order. I bought groceries and took them home. When I got home my wife told me that she'd been offered two jobs--one in a packing shed and the other as a salad girl at the Bakersfield Country Club. She held both jobs for about three months. A friend of mine in Palm Springs said he thought I could clean swimming pools and that this company was willing to give me a job if I wanted to come down and try it. I went down and took the cleaning job. It was a good job because I could work and earn as much as I could do. It was a piece rate pay so I could work at my own pace. It was a good job for me. That's when I got some money and got my farm labor contractor's license and my dad and I worked together.

J.G.: It sounds like during that time you were raising your children it was a really rough time. How do you think that affected your kids?

Russell: Right now I have two daughters who are alcoholics--one's on drugs. I have another daughter who has very serious emotional problems. My wife and I have separated. I think it affected her also. To some extent it probably affected me. Even though I never really gave up I began to lose confidence in myself that I could survive. Something always happens--something always happens to take care of me. I don't know why. I can't explain the things that have happened to me in my life. Why a guy next to me got shot in the war and I didn't. Why a log I'd been sitting on for two months--nothing happened and one day I sat somewhere else and a guy sits down on it

and it blows up. Why a mortar shell can blow the logs over the top of your head and you not get a scratch. I don't understand this. I know after my divorce from my first wife things have been pretty rough here too. I know now that I have faith that I'm going to survive whatever my time is--it doesn't bother me too much. I've picked up beer cans to buy food. On one occasion I had no money or food in the house--the kids were crying--my grandkids--so I put them in the van and we started driving. As looked out the window I saw something laying in the road. I stopped and went back and picked up \$7 that was laying in the road. I went and bought food. Something always seems to happen to take care of me. A lot of people say I'm nuts--I probably am.

J.G.: Why do they say that?

Russell: Because I sort of march to a different drummer, I guess. I don't conform too easily. I don't buy other people's discipline. If I don't have it within me there's not much use anyone trying to do it for me. Maybe it's because of my dad and the way he lived. I don't know. I sort of tend to speak my mind. I say things and do things that make people think and they don't like to do that. Unless they have to they prefer to go with easy things. Therefore, I'm nuts. If you don't conform you're different, therefore, you're crazy. There are times when it really gets rough. I think maybe that's what makes the good times so good. A lot of people say they tend to forget the bad times but I don't. I remember them and then I can compare them to the good times and the good times seem even better.

Another time when I was first married one of my cousins and his wife and baby and me and my wife were broke--seems like I've been broke a lot. We went out and picked up beer bottles and we'd buy gas and go to the top of this hill, turn the car around and let it coast back down the hill. We'd stop it and get off to pick up bottles along each side of the road to get something to eat. Sometimes if we didn't have enough to get something to eat we'd all sneak into the trunk of the car and we'd go to a drive-in movie. We wound up working for a feed yard that winter and did pretty well. After that I went into the service--it was March 1951.

J.G.: I know that a lot of people who were having a difficult time making it would opt to make the service a career because at least you had meals and shelter. What made you opt against that?

Russell: I did consider it. A lot of times when reflecting I wish maybe I had but I cannot kill people. I mean I am just not cut out for it. It bothered me no end when I was in Korea.

I love my country. I'm not a Communist as some people think. I don't think there's that much difference between Communism and Capitalism. Eventually, if each one is carried to its end conclusion

you have the company-owned store.

J.G.: Ones owned by the government and ones owned privately?

Russell: Well, you have a government-owned store or you have a store-owned government. What's the difference?

J.G.: How has it been for you since you've started rearing your grandkids?

Russell: I've had the kids for four years. It's been a little rough at times. I've had to do some things with them I didn't like to do. Evidently they're survivors too. I'm trying to break them of some of the things they learned to do the year before I got them because of my daughter's involvement with drugs, booze and men. They seem to revert real easy though to whatever it takes to survive. I don't want them to lose that particular thing but I want them to think about how they're surviving.

As bad as it was during the 1930s living in camps with strangers there was very little stealing. Everybody lived in tents so you don't break in. You don't molest. Today, it isn't that way. This what I want to get through to the kids. You don't lie and steal. There are better ways to get by--it is possible. You may have to break some laws but those laws are mostly designed to control people.

J.G.: Do you get any kind of disability insurance from your fall from the tree?

Russell: I did for three years and then they decided that I had recovered to go back to work so we are going through the appeal process again for the second time. The kids are on welfare and I'm on their case which gives me about \$43 a month. The kids get \$400 a month and then whatever I get added onto that. We make it real good.

J.G.: When you were living with your parents back in the 1930s and 1940s was there ever a time when they were on welfare?

Russell: Oh, yes. Dad always signed up for welfare. He didn't always get it but he always signed up for it--that commodity strike in the 1930s was one time.

J.G.: Was that for the off season? Was that generally when he signed up for it or all year round? How did that work?

Russell: Mostly he just went in and signed up to let them know he was in the area. At least you established the fact that, "I'm here." you had to live in the area so long anyway to be eligible in those days. You established residency the quickest way you could and that was to go in and sign up for welfare. They would turn you down but at least you had a record on file with them that you were in the area. We never did get that much help from welfare. I guess

after dad could work we really didn't need it. We worked for small farmers mostly and they didn't object at all if you canned some fruit and made jelly. The big farmers didn't want anyone taking anything away from the farm. Sometimes they'd even put guards out to search and make sure that no one carried any fruit away. Small growers would allow you to live on their place and instead of throwing fruit away they'd give it to you. It was the best fruit. It was ripe and ripe fruit doesn't go to market. They just throw them away so they'd let mom have it and she'd can it.

J.G.: It must have been a difficult time for a woman in that time when you think of all the conveniences we have nowadays. Living in a tent with no running water or toilet--women must have had to work very, very hard.

Russell: They did. Mom had worked in Arkansas. On wash day she did all the washing and carried the water until I got old enough to help. After we came to California all of mom's stuff that she'd acquired got broken or destroyed in the move. We wound up with a lot of tin plates and tubs and cots. She not only had to take care of the family but she worked in the fields. I did practically all the babysitting until the kids got old enough to take care of themselves. I was responsible for them.

J.G.: You were the oldest?

Russell: Oh, yes. There were five of us. I'm four years older than my next brother then it's two years right down to the last one and there's about three or four years between the fourth and fifth one.

J.G.: Did a doctor come out to the camp to deliver your brothers and sisters?

Russell: This was in Arkansas and the doctors came to the home.

J.G.: All the kids were born in Arkansas.

Russell: Except my youngest sister--she was born in Indio, California in a hospital. The first and last children were born in a hospital--all others were born at home.

J.G.: As a last question I'd like you to talk about what you think is meant by the term "Okie" or "Arkie". How did it feel when somebody called you one of these names?

Russell: "Okie" and "Arkie" were derogatory terms which came out during the 1930s to put people down--put them in their place. It all depends on the tone of voice. A lot of people called me Arkie and Okie and it didn't bother me. But some people really have a knack of using the term and the context in which they use it--they're fighting words. They're looking for someone to fight. It all depends on



how the term is used and the tone of voice and the situation. It never bothered me unless someone was looking for a fight. It was a derogatory term to label people. They're easier to keep track of if they're Okies or Arkies or Mexicans or niggers. It's all the same thing--just a label people like to pin on other people to keep track of them.

END OF INTERVIEW

[NO QUESTIONNAIRE SUBMITTED]

Russell

McFadden

Bobby Glen Russell  
b. 1929, Arkansas  
Education: high school

m. 1950 →

m. 1972 →

Three daughters

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