

# **UC Santa Cruz**

## **Agricultural History**

### **Title**

Jose Galvan Amaro: Mexican-American Laborer, Watsonville, California, 1902-1977

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## **Introduction**

José Galvan Amaro, a Mexican-American fieldworker in Watsonville, California, was interviewed in June 1977 by Meri Knaster, an editor at the Regional History Project, as part of a series on local agricultural and ethnic history. This oral history, conducted in Spanish on June 2 and June 6, 1977 at Amaro's home in Watsonville, California, focuses on Amaro's extensive experience as a laborer in California from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Amaro was born in Durango, Mexico on May 28, 1902, the son of gold and silver miners who had been working in the mines for five generations. He completed four years of school (all that was offered in the area) and some additional home study organized informally at the homes of several teachers in Durango. In 1917 Amaro went into the army to fight in the Mexican Revolution with Pancho Villa. He deserted the army after his commanding officer, who was the president of the republic was killed, and went to work as an electrician's assistant for an American company some distance from Durango.

In 1918 Amaro fell in love, and decided to follow his girlfriend and her family to the United States. Part of his motivation was also to escape the army, which was arresting deserters like him. This decision propelled him on a lifelong trajectory as a migrant laborer in the southwestern United States. His girlfriend's family planned to come to the U.S. to work in the copper mines in Arizona. Since he lacked money for a passport, Amaro arranged to cross the border at El Paso with help from a man who promised

him employment at a cattle ranch in New Mexico. Once in El Paso, Amaro worked laying tracks for the railroad, picking cotton near Phoenix, Arizona and in 1923 ended up in Los Angeles, California laboring in construction building the Los Angeles City Hall. There he also attended night school and studied English. He was unable to save enough to support his girlfriend and pay for a traditional Mexican wedding and eventually she broke his heart by marrying someone else. Amaro remained single and never rejoined his family, who remained in Durango. And this, he says at the end of his interview, is "how time just passed."

Amaro describes the Great Depression in Los Angeles as a time in which "the bread lines were orderly and everything moved along smoothly like nothing was happening." He found work constructing fire breaks in Malibu. In 1931 he moved north to Guadalupe, California where he worked in the fields making fifteen cents an hour cutting lettuce and harvesting sugar beets. At this point in his life Amaro became a labor activist and organizer, helping to organize strikes in the fields between 1931 and 1935. One strike in Guadalupe involved one thousand Filipino workers and eight hundred Mexican workers. Amaro talks about how these ethnic groups worked together with the "Americans" to push for a higher wage in the fields. Some of the organizers were Communists, but not all of them were.

In 1935 Amaro moved to Salinas to work in the fields thinning lettuce. The 1934 lettuce strike in Salinas had improved working conditions there, and wages were at a more attractive thirty-five cents an hour. He discusses some

of the problems with unethical labor contractors there, conditions in the labor camps, and the health hazards to workers created from pesticide spraying. He also details the processes used to thin and harvest lettuce at the time.

In the 1940s Amaro moved to Watsonville, California, where living facilities in the labor camps were better than they were in Salinas. Except for a brief stint working in the shipyard in Richmond, California during World War II, he worked in Watsonville for the rest of his life, either in the lettuce fields or for the Martinelli Cider Company in Watsonville, California, where he began working in 1944. At Martinelli's he worked pasteurizing apple juice, and also packing and loading.

Amaro describes Watsonville during the 1940s, and paints a vivid and critical picture of the organized prostitution that spread up and down the coast during World War II.

Due to funding and staffing limitations, this interview was tucked away in a locked safe at the Regional History Project's office, and is only now being released for publication. Special funding was provided by the Library, which enabled the interview to be published in Spanish and translated into English. Transcription and translation was done by the Ubiquis Reporting Company. Copies of the manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; in Special Collections at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz; and the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by

Christine Bunting, the head of Special Collections and Archives, and Acting University Librarian, Robert White.

—Irene Reti

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Regional History Project

McHenry Library

University of California, Santa Cruz

## **Early Life**

**Knaster:** When were you born?

**Amaro:** I was born the 28th of May, 1902.

**Knaster:** In what country? What location?

**Amaro:** In Durango, Mexico.

**Knaster:** What did your parents do? Did they work there or did they cultivate the land? What did they do in Mexico?

**Amaro:** For generations we were miners in Durango. My parents were miners for five generations.

**Knaster:** What did they mine?

**Amaro:** Gold. Gold and silver. In those years there was much work because there was gold. Very rich metal. There were American companies working there. It was good during that time. And there were other companies from other countries working there too. English companies. [Gold] was a very common mineral at that time. Now it's declined. But at that time there was much money and work.

**Knaster:** And your father worked for a company?

**Amaro:** Yes. Since he'd been a miner for so long he had a contract with the company, and we were all right.

**Knaster:** How many children were there in the family?

**Amaro:** There were about three, I think.

**Knaster:** Only three children?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** And did your mother work too, or did she take care of the family?

**Amaro:** No, she took care of the family. At that time women didn't work in Mexico like they do here.

**Knaster:** Was it prohibited or what?

**Amaro:** It's just that it wasn't the custom. There wasn't work for them. Women couldn't work in the mines. Young people used to work like here. After school they'd go to work in offices, stores, and other things.

**Knaster:** Women too?

**Amaro:** Yes, women too. But other than that there weren't many factories. The jobs that were available were for men. The mines and the things that the mining companies had there to grind metal and all those things. Nothing but men at that time.

**Knaster:** Do you remember where you lived at that time? The house and the neighborhood?

**Amaro:** Well, we lived in a place called Trigueros, which was between the village and the mining companies that were there. Trigueros—I think that's where I was born.

**Knaster:** Did you live in a small house?

**Amaro:** In a house, yes. It was good for us because my father made good money. Later on things got very bad for us, very bad. Very bad when the revolution came.

**Knaster:** Did the house have water, or did your mother have to go get water?

**Amaro:** At that time convenience was scarce. She had to go get the water.

**Knaster:** And do you remember what she did around the house? Did she grind corn? What kind of foods did she prepare?

**Amaro:** The usual Mexican food. The main ingredients were corn, beans, the basics of Mexican food. But when there was work there was always meat, food. You could buy things at that time. And one thing that arrived early in my village, and I think in all of Mexico were grinders to grind the [women's corn]. In our village, like I said, there was work and money. That way it was better for the poor women. People used to suffer a lot.

**Knaster:** I'm sure. Getting up at whatever hour of the morning and start by doing that.



**Amaro:** People in Mexico at that time suffered a lot. We were a bit better off because there were minerals, and the companies employed a lot of people and paid better salaries. But there weren't many conveniences. There wasn't electric light yet. No one knew about it. The companies did have electric light inside their companies, but it hadn't been extended to here. Water was brought by boat and on donkeys, too. And it was delivered to the homes. That's how it was.

**Knaster:** And did the children go to school?

**Amaro:** Yes. In our village we always had school. That was a good thing.

**Knaster:** How was the school?

**Amaro:** The school was in the center of the village in a building called the Municipal Palace. The building wasn't that tall, two floors. There was school for boys and a school for girls. They were separated: Boys and girls. Since it was a government school, we had seats and very good teachers that had been sent from the capital, from Durango. The teachers were paid by the state, and the school was free. The only thing was that the school only went to the fourth grade. It was an amazing thing. I don't know how people learned in four years. The boys and girls left the fourth grade to work in stores and all over. They learned arithmetic. They had to know how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. They had to know how to do these things because the teachers taught them these things. And they left school ready to work in offices and stores with what they'd learned there.

**Knaster:** After the fourth grade there wasn't any more?

**Amaro:** There wasn't any more. The teachers organized schooling in their homes for those who finished regular school, like me. I went to those home schools. There weren't any secondary schools, but they taught what they hadn't had time to teach in the regular school, and we studied in the teachers' homes.

**Knaster:** So that came after the four years?

**Amaro:** Yes, after the four years.

**Knaster:** Were there always female teachers and not male teachers?

**Amaro:** There were many female teachers and assistants, but mainly female teachers. But the principal was a man. He was very well educated and came from very far, from the capital.

**Knaster:** So one teacher taught every year, or were there separate teachers for first grade, second grade, third grade, and fourth grade. Or were all the children together in one classroom?

**Amaro:** No, no. We had enough room, and each grade had its own classroom. The teachers split the work among themselves. Some would take fourth grade, third grade, second grade, first grade, wherever. They arranged the work well among themselves.

**Knaster:** Was it possible to cultivate crops around your house, like corn, or did your parents have to buy everything?

**Amaro:** The soil was scarce because everything was minerals. There was a very small space, even though there were orchards and places where [crops] were planted, like lettuce and all kinds of vegetables, and people would come sell them.

**Knaster:** So at your home you didn't cultivate?

**Amaro:** No, there wasn't anywhere to do it.

**Knaster:** Were the neighborhoods crowded, or were the homes far from one another?

**Amaro:** The neighborhoods were crowded and very poor. The companies brought a lot of people to the village to have a lot of people. They needed a lot of people for the agriculture. So the neighborhoods were poor, and new people came all the time, strangers, and people that fought and drank on Sundays. There was a lot of music and singing in the canteens. A lot of happiness, but a lot of deaths.

**Knaster:** Deaths?

**Amaro:** Yes because there were people who fought. And we used to blame all the new people that came for the fighting. They came from very far away. A lot of people arrived there constantly because there was a lot of work. Jobs help to move people to wherever they can get them.

**Knaster:** When did you start working? Did you start in Mexico, or here?

**Amaro:** I began working in Mexico because I had to go into the army when the revolution began.

**Knaster:** That was about 1910?

**Amaro:** Yes, but in 1910 I was very young and I couldn't...

**Knaster:** Only eight years old.

**Amaro:** I went into the army in 1917. The revolution had already ended, but there was still a lot of fighting going on. We had to fight with [Pancho] Villa. Villa was the only one who... Blowing up trains and roads. He wasn't in agreement with the government then. He was the only one who had risen up, and then I had to fight with those people. When I left the army it was because the situation was very serious. They killed our [inaudible]. He was the president of the republic back then and they killed him. We then didn't want to stay and that's when I left the army and went to work. I went to work for an American company which was pretty far from my village. It was between Durango and [inaudible] and the American company had a large foundation and that's where I went to start working.

**Knaster:** At that time you were about...

**Amaro:** Eighteen years old.

**Knaster:** You started working there? And was that in the mines as well?

**Amaro:** No. No, this was a metal [inaudible]. An American company and they sent us to look.

**Knaster:** And what were your duties? What did you do there?

**Amaro:** They made me an electrician's assistant, but it was very strict. [I] had to work everyday, and if we didn't do the job well and failed, they'd change us to somewhere else and much worse [inaudible] where the ovens were and we had to step on them the whole time so they'd stay hot. It was really bad. But I stayed and worked there.

**Knaster:** Do you remember how many hours per day you worked?

**Amaro:** At that time we only worked eight hours.

**Knaster:** Eight hours. Five or six days a week?

**Amaro:** Until Saturday. We worked everyday. From Monday to Saturday.

**Knaster:** From Monday to Saturday.

**Amaro:** And we had Sundays off.

**Knaster:** And do you remember how much you were paid?

**Amaro:** They paid very little, but at that time it was good money. Money was worth something then. I used to make 1.75 [pesos] and if I did everything right, I'd make 2.00 pesos.

**Knaster:** Per day?

**Amaro:** Per day, yes. And if I did everything right they'd give me two pesos. At that time two pesos was very good money.

**Knaster:** You could buy much?

**Amaro:** You could buy everything you needed. You paid for food and everything, and you had money left over for later. Everything was very cheap, very cheap.

**Knaster:** And where did you live, in housing provided by the company?

**Amaro:** Yes, the company had houses. They were decent to live in while we lived there.

**Knaster:** How long were you there?

### **Immigrating to the United States**

**Amaro:** Well, not long because, a family . . . well, here's where some romance comes in.

**Knaster:** Okay.

**Amaro:** Because of the revolution, at that time many families moved. [There was] was a railroad station and a lot of people were coming over here because they couldn't live there because there were robberies all the time and people being killed. Families began to leave for [inaudible] which was a railroad station and there were businesses there and they lived any way they could. There wasn't work in mines; it was mainly agriculture. That's when I

met a girl, and then this American company went looking for people there to work. They had mines and melting here. Everything was minerals. So my girlfriend's family got a contract to work here and I stayed. They came to work in when I left the army, which was many months later, almost a year later. I went there to work and we were reunited. They had a brother here in the U.S. who worked in a mine, and he'd been here for a long time and sent them money and helped them, and they were getting ready to come here. I wanted to get married.

**Knaster:** With that girlfriend?

**Amaro:** Yes, with her. I told that to the family and the father, they knew me well and loved me, called me and said, "But José, you can't take our daughter away from us. We're getting ready to go to the U.S."

**Knaster:** They were ready to leave?

**Amaro:** Yes, they were ready to come here.

**Knaster:** And you didn't think of leaving?

**Amaro:** No I didn't. I never thought of leaving. I was thinking of going where my father was, and starting a small business like my father had. That's what I was thinking about, going there and starting work somewhere. I wasn't thinking of coming here. But they were getting ready to come and they said, "Come with us. What are you going to do here? Let's go" And she told me the same thing and her father told me, "Let's go. Once we get there

you work and you get married there. What are you going to do here?" So I came.

**Knaster:** They convinced you?

**Amaro:** Yes, they convinced me, and I came with them to the U.S.

**Knaster:** Where were they going?

**Amaro:** They were on their way to Arizona, where there were mines too

**Knaster:** Gold too?

**Amaro:** No, copper. They were getting copper during the war, because at that time the war of 1914, 1918, remember, the first war, number one [World War I] was going on.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** I came with them here.

**Knaster:** How did you get here? Did you come by train? How did you know where to go and did you need to get papers? How did you do it?

**Amaro:** They had a son here and he was the one who helped them. He'd already sent them money so they could get their papers, passports ready. The passports were eighteen dollars.

**Knaster:** Was that a lot of money?



**Amaro:** Yes, it was a lot of money. And I didn't have a lot of money. We came and I had money for the ticket, but I was spending money on my girlfriend and a sister, and we went out to places. When we got to the border, I had little money and they had to wait to fix their passports. I couldn't wait that long and I didn't have money.

One day I was on the street, when I saw a man with a cart who sold meat, and I heard him say he needed a young man to go work on the other side. He didn't tell me; he just shouted it, but he was looking at me: "I need a young man to go work on the other side." I went over to him, and he said, "Yes, I need a young man, forty-five dollars per month including food. They want to send him to work on a ranch in New Mexico to help out there with things they have." They had a business where they sold meat. So I told him I wanted to go, and he said, "Good." I told him, "I don't have a passport," and he said "You don't have a passport? Don't worry, come on and I'll get you across on the meat cart. I'll get you there."

**Knaster:** In the trunk? How?

**Amaro:** In his meat cart. A closed cart. I was ready at about 11:30 and he said, "Are you coming?" I said yes, and then he said "Look, I'm not taking you on the cart, but there are some guys who take people across every day and I already told them and they're going to get you across." They're two brothers and one of them would go via a bridge, because they had passports. One of them would go via a bridge and the other one would go by the edge of the river and would get them in through a place there.

So I was ready to go across. I didn't have money. I could also have been arrested because I left the army just like that. I deserted, and they didn't know where I was. They could've arrested me at any time. I had to be careful and I wanted to cross the border quickly before I was arrested.

**Knaster:** Were you afraid?

**Amaro:** Yes, I was afraid, because they'd arrest you.

**Knaster:** Did many people leave the army?

**Amaro:** Yes, because they'd killed our commanding officer, and our party was failing, and we didn't want to go on.

**Knaster:** Oh, I understand.

**Amaro:** But when a soldier left like that he was considered a deserter. And if you did anything to offend them, you were shot. It was very delicate at that time, because a lot of them killed people without even thinking about it and without making out any paperwork, or transactions, or war councils or anything.

**Knaster:** It seems like it was a very dangerous time.

**Amaro:** It was very dangerous, because if someone didn't like you, you were sent to be killed. I was afraid, and that's why that morning I was ready with that butcher. I told him, "I'm ready." These guys will get you across. At about 12:00 by the bridge, and the other one had a cart that said "Express"

with a small horse, and then he said, "Let's go. I'm going to get you across." We went by the riverside, and we got to a spot where the river wasn't that rough, and where we were able to cross on the cart. At this time is when the officer goes to eat, so we're going to go now. We got across fine, and after we crossed he said, "Look, there's the officer coming back." But we had already passed and we were in the U.S.

Later, the other brother came in a car, an automobile. Cars were charged ten cents at that time, and he was in one of them. I went with him and the other brother took me to the American of the meat company who was going to give me work. He took me over there, and the American told him to tell me, because I didn't understand anything, "Tell him that we won't be able to send him tomorrow or the day after, because we need to see when we'll be able to send him. He's going to New Mexico to work where there's a lot of cattle and a lot of things where they could work." [The pay was] \$45 a month including food. That's good but tell him that I don't have any money. Then the American said, "Tell him to come every morning. We'll give him \$1.50 every morning." Then every day I went and got my \$1.50.

**Knaster:** Without working?

**Amaro:** Yes, without working, because I was waiting to be sent to New Mexico. That's why they were giving me \$1.50. With \$1.50 in El Paso I could buy clothes and things. Very cheap and the food too. Everything was cheap. With \$1.50 I could eat, go out, buy clothes and everything. It was very good back then, very cheap. Very little money but everything was cheap. One day

they told me to show up on Monday. On Monday I was ready and there was no one there who could speak English. A lady, maybe the owner's wife, was going to take me to the station. When I went [on] the streets of El Paso, she gave me a letter. I didn't understand her. She went in [to the train depot] and bought my ticket and stayed with me. When it was time to board, she gave the man the ticket and spoke to him and he let me through. Then I went to the train, and I was looking at the lady, and she was standing there, and she didn't move until the train left. That's how they sent me here.

The train got there, and the conductor told me it's here. When I got off the train there was no one waiting for me and I didn't know anything. There was no one there. So I took off and I came across a small American child and I showed him the letter. He said, "Oh, bank." He took me to the bank. The letter was for the bank. The banker was talking to someone who was Mexican, and when he was free the Mexican told me that the banker said this letter was sent from the meat company, and that you have to wait here until someone's sent over to get you. They're going to help you here so you can wait for them to come get you. Well, it's going to take them five days, but it doesn't matter. You're going to have everything. Those guys had a hotel with rooms and a small Mexican restaurant. He said the banker told me to take you there and wait until they come. He also said you'll have a box of candy to give to the family who's coming to get you. A box of candy they'd given me. I didn't know anything and I'd already opened the box and eaten some. Then the Mexican told me he says you have a box of candy for the people who are going to give you work. Yes, but I didn't tell him I'd eaten them. So

I went and I bought another box of candy. But they weren't coming for me because the ranchers didn't have time. A few days passed and they didn't come.

**Knaster:** And what were you doing without money, a home, nothing?

**Amaro:**No, he was giving me...

**Knaster:** The Mexican was helping you?

**Amaro:** He gave me everything and the bank was going to pay him. That was in the letter I had. To insure that I had everything I needed until they came to get me. He was giving me everything, but I was uneasy because they weren't coming. They were sending people to work on the railroad, and one morning I went over and put my name on the list and they sent me to work. I didn't wait, and I went to work on the railroad. I made some money and from there I went to where we were originally coming, in Arizona. And so I came.

**Knaster:** How long did you work for the railroad?

**Amaro:** Very little, maybe fifteen days.

**Knaster:** And what did you do?

**Amaro:** On the railroad tracks. That's where I worked. Many people worked there. But people didn't want to stay there. They just wanted to work a little.

They wanted to come here, where they were paid more and were better off. Just like me. I was coming to work in the mines and make more money.

**Knaster:** So you went back to your girlfriend in Arizona.

**Amaro:** They weren't here yet. I got here first.

**Knaster:** They weren't here yet?

**Amaro:** No, not yet because it took them a while to get their passports in order. Later, we were reunited.

**Knaster:** My goodness. Without speaking a word of English you traveled and found the people you were looking for and everything.

**Amaro:** Yes, because there's always been a lot of Spanish [speaking] people. I'd find someone and speak. Many Americans spoke, too. I found a friend of mine and stayed there, and then I started to look for work. The war had ended and the mining companies were no longer in need of people because they no longer needed copper. The war was over. They were letting people go. I couldn't get work. There wasn't any. I had to leave there and come to California.

**Knaster:** With the family, or you left them?

**Amaro:** No, by myself. They settled in Arizona because they had their son there and they did fine with the son's help. But I couldn't get work; there wasn't any. They were letting people go, and then I came to Los Angeles.

**Knaster:** By yourself?

**Amaro:** Yes, by myself. To Los Angeles to look for work.

**Knaster:** How did you get here, by train or on foot?

**Amaro:** They had gotten a guy from Phoenix, Arizona to get people to pick cotton. In Phoenix, they needed people to pick cotton and they were looking for people and I went with them to pick cotton. But I didn't like it. I worked there for a week. I didn't like it. I went to look for other work like picking corn and that paid more. Cotton didn't pay much. You could only get some seventy-five pounds, and they paid a cent and a half per pound.

**Knaster:** One and a half cents for a pound of cotton?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** Unbelievable.

**Amaro:** I couldn't pick much and I left to go pick corn because they paid two dollars a day.

**Knaster:** Was that in Arizona too?

## **Los Angeles**

**Amaro:** I was there for a while, and then I came to California. I came to Los Angeles. In Los Angeles I met some guys who had been soldiers too, and they were real smart and were working in Los Angeles, and they were very

well dressed. So I started to imitate them. Everything I made I spent on clothes and didn't save anything for when I was going to get married. My girlfriend was waiting for me and I couldn't save anything. I just was barely able to pay for the room, clothes and that's it.

**Knaster:** And what kind of work did you do in Los Angeles?

**Amaro:** The most amount of work in Los Angeles was in construction. It was very hard work, very hard and sometimes it wasn't that bad. But it was hard.

**Knaster:** And how much did they pay at that time?

**Amaro:** They paid well. They paid fifty cents an hour.

**Knaster:** Per hour.

**Amaro:** You could make four dollars a day, and everything was cheap too, very cheap.

**Knaster:** I'm sure that at that time it was a very beautiful city.

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** Very different from today.

**Amaro:** Oh yes, yes. There was a lot of construction going on. I worked on the construction of the Los Angeles City Hall. It took many years. That's was the only problem in Los Angeles. You always had to look for work, because the work didn't last. We'd work on a building, to thirteen floors, but then it



would end and before we finished, we'd have to go out and look for more work. But we had enough to dress and go out, and I was busy there. My girlfriend got married—like she lost all hope. I couldn't go because I didn't have with what. The situation was really bad.

**Knaster:** Did you miss her?

**Amaro:** Yes, but I couldn't do anything. As Mexican custom goes, she didn't want to leave her home unless she was married and all the rules as they go—church wedding and everything. But I didn't have enough money to do all those things. I tried but I couldn't. I could barely live and dress.

**Knaster:** During those years, where did you live?

**Amaro:** In Los Angeles?

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** We lived well in hotels.

**Knaster:** Downtown?

**Amaro:** No, on North Main. There were small hotels there. Very good and clean. They cost fifty cents a day.

**Knaster:** And in the meantime, were you in touch with your family in Durango?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** And they didn't want to come?

**Amaro:** Well, no.

**Knaster:** And you stayed in Los Angeles?

**Amaro:** I stayed in Los Angeles.

**Knaster:** But they stayed in Mexico?

**Amaro:** Yes, they never came here. They worked over there and were better off. My father had a business, and his children helped him, my other siblings. No, they never came here. And I wouldn't have come either at that time because I didn't think about it. Maybe I would've come later, I don't know. But at that time I was thinking of working for my father and that's how they worked. My father died later.

**Knaster:** And how long did you stay in Los Angeles?

## **The Great Depression**

**Amaro:** I stayed in Los Angeles until 1929. I arrived in Los Angeles in 1923 and I stayed seven years. In 1929 the big crisis started here, a very big economic crisis, because the stock market fell and closed in New York. The wealthy lost a lot of money and the banks closed and poor people lost all the money they had because there weren't any laws to protect them. And the worst was that people were very afraid of what was to come, because from one day to the next everything fell apart. No one wanted to spend money or

invest money in anything. Everything was paralyzed. It was very hard and sad. There was no work, for years. Whether I wanted it to or not I was affected by it. I was in the middle. There was no work. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do, but stay there. Bread lines started showing up throughout the city. We went from one to the next every day, sleep, and then the same thing. That's how the time passed. But Los Angeles didn't change at all. We knew there was a crisis and that there wasn't any work, but the city was very calm. Everything moved along smoothly like nothing was happening. The bread lines, everything was very orderly, you couldn't see the poverty. But there was. There was no work until they sent us to Malibu to [construct firebreaks] in the countryside, for when there are brushfires. They have to have. That's what we did and we had everything there, clothes, and everything.

**Knaster:** And was that sponsored by the government?

**Amaro:** That was sponsored by the county. They'd send us there. Then I came back here to northern California. I came to Santa Maria and Guadalupe.

### **Moving to Northern California**

**Knaster:** Had someone mentioned those cities to you?

**Amaro:** Yes, yes.

**Knaster:** What did they tell you?

**Amaro:** That there was work here in agriculture. There was and there wasn't. Many times the orchards were destroyed, full of apples and all, because they couldn't sell them after they were picked. That's the way it was.

**Knaster:** So they didn't crop because they knew they couldn't sell?

**Amaro:** Yes, many times. It was better to leave everything there than spend money picking it and lose it anyway. There was no market. I arrived in Guadalupe and stayed there. When there was work they paid fifteen cents an hour.

**Knaster:** Fifteen cents. And what did you pick?

**Amaro:** There was work cutting lettuce. [And] sugar beets.

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

**Amaro:** When we worked it was eight hours a day, but for very little, two or three weeks. And that's how it was. Just to live.

**Knaster:** Did women work there too, or just men?

**Amaro:** Yes, women worked here in California in the fields. Not many, but they worked.

**Knaster:** Were all those workers Mexican, or from here? Filipinos or Japanese?

**Amaro:** Filipinos and Mexicans were the majority. They were the ones who did the work and were paid fifteen cents an hour.

**Knaster:** During those years, you said until 1923, were you able to have papers or not?

**Amaro:** I didn't have papers.

**Knaster:** And no one had done anything to you regarding that?

**Amaro:** No never. I always thought I had to fix that, but after some time, I think it was in 1924, the Mexican consulate announced that there was a law here in the U.S. that all those persons who'd come into this country before a specific date were not going to be deported. They could stay in the U.S. and get their papers here in San Diego. So I was calm. When immigration found me I told them when I'd come here and they left me alone.

## **Labor Organizing**

At that time when we were in Guadalupe a new thing started that had a lot to do with how people thought in the U.S. and it had a social and political effect as well. At that time, there was much Communist activity in the fields. A lot of young people, but they weren't real Communists, they just got involved for fun, as something new. They were very enthused [about] helping the poor people of the countryside, and they were poor too. They were there among us trying to organize us to rise up. We didn't need them, but when we had strikes, then they went to try to organize everything.

**Knaster:** Did you have a strike in Guadalupe?

**Amaro:** A big one.

**Knaster:** And what year was that?

**Amaro:** After 1930. Between 1931 and 1933. There were two or three big strikes. At one there weren't any Communists. They later arrived.

**Knaster:** Who organized all those workers?

**Amaro:** We did it ourselves.

**Knaster:** You did.

**Amaro:** And why did we organize? Because the situation was unbearable. We didn't know what to do. There wasn't any work, and when there was it paid very little. So we had no choice but to organize ourselves. What we did was more like a protest and we always got a five cent raise. One time we were like one thousand Filipinos and eight hundred Mexicans that took part in a strike. And that was just us. We always managed to get some improvements, a raise per acre and lettuce and everything. But they realized that people were rebelling, and then the Americans came in with us. The Americans worked in the canneries at that time, inside work. There was always a lot of work, and women worked there too. They decided that something had to be done and they helped us. When they wanted to lower our wages then we'd all get together and everything would stop completely. Then we did get some things, and they realized that something had to be

done because people were very upset. People were suffering. They brought us clothes because people really needed them.

**Knaster:** And the government didn't help at that time?

**Amaro:** No, it couldn't. Then President Hoover left and President Roosevelt came in. Things got much better. President Roosevelt immediately closed all the banks because he wanted to start from scratch. And that's what happened, everything started from scratch. Wages started going up and President Roosevelt started helping people more. Before that there was very little help. But President Roosevelt established the necessary help so people could live.

**Knaster:** In those years, people in Guadalupe lived in houses and tents.

**Amaro:** Yes. There were fields where there were tents. Very poor, but were mainly for workers only. Their families lived in the town in small houses.

**Knaster:** Did you stay there all year, or did you move from place to place looking for work? Did you stay in Guadalupe all year?

**Amaro:** Until 1935. I was there about four years and I was part of all those things I told you.

**Knaster:** Did you help organize the workers?

**Amaro:** Yes, yes. And one time we were arrested. We were arrested, the leaders, and we were taken to Santa Barbara, the capital of Santa Barbara

county. Then our people went to Los Angeles to see the Mexican consul. There was a very young and active vice consul, and he was in charge of the department of protection and he found two attorneys, who he didn't pay, but they wanted to get as much work from the consulate as possible. Then they'd help. They came and got us out because we hadn't committed any crime. The only crime we'd committed was to organize a strike and that's why we got out right away. But they couldn't stop the strike. It went on.

**Knaster:** Were you looking to form a union, or just try to organize people when there was a need to?

**Amaro:** No, not something permanent, but to try and solve the problems we had. They were very tough. We needed improvements and we got them, but it was very little. A five cent raise, or twenty-five or fifty cents an acre, a dollar an acre, and that was very good for us. It was help and that's what we got. We're the ones who paved the way for the organizations that are out there today, because now they're very solid.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** At that time we didn't have anything like that. Everything was very backward. Not now; things have changed.

**Knaster:** I'm trying to understand how the capacity to organize came about. Did someone come in and instigate you, or did it come up among people, or was there a leader among the people?



**Amaro:** When there's need, a leader always comes of it. For example, in Guadalupe I saw how the situation was and I already knew what our rights were in the U.S., what the rights of the working class were, or how the American people thought. I knew that, and I wasn't mistaken, and I told everyone: this is what we have to do. It's a protest and that's how it was. We wouldn't get much, but we got something. And we made people see how critical our situation was. People didn't even have pants, and people would come and give us clothes.

**Knaster:** How did you learn about the rights of citizens?

**Amaro:** I read. When I lived in Los Angeles I went to night school to learn English. I went to night school and I learned how to read and they taught us how to write. That's why I read—and how Americans think and how much they love freedom for people and human rights, like they are in other parts of the world. But there's more power here to put all these things to use, because people understand. That's why people understood what we were going through, what we did was because we were desperate. Our situation was very sad.

**Knaster:** Do you think something like that could've been done in Mexico, for example, when your father worked in the mine? If people wanted higher wages, would they organize or not?

**Amaro:** No. At that time there was no organizing. If there would've been, the foreign companies would've left more money than what they did. They only

left people's wages, and the authorities didn't take taxes from them or anything. Everything was very backward. They paid very little and took money for the schools and the companies helped the schools. But there weren't any unions or anything.

**Knaster:** And people were satisfied with not asking for more? For example, your father.

**Amaro:** Well, they weren't very satisfied because the revolution started. In a very big mine which is over here on this border, around Baja California, a very well-known mine, very big, one of the American companies there . . . The revolution was coming and it was being organized. The people were very dissatisfied because many of the workers the company took over there from here were being paid in dollars and the Mexican worker was paid the same salary in Mexican pesos, and of course that was a great disadvantage. The exchange rate was two for one, and the Mexican worker made half of what the workers that came from here were making. They did that to protect the companies that went from here, and the Mexican workers were very unhappy. When the revolution came it was due to a large strike. That's where the generals came from, a general named Manuel M. Diega, he came from [that] mine. Later on he became a great general. There was discontent, but there weren't unions. Not like now that there are unions established in the entire country and they're big, strong and recognized. But at that time there weren't any. Everything was done in a temporary fashion to resolve problems, and that's where the revolution started.

**Knaster:** When did you leave Guadalupe?

**Amaro:** I stayed until 1935. In 1935 I was in Salinas.

**Knaster:** Why did you come to Salinas?

**Amaro:** For work, because in Salinas the pay was better. When we arrived they were paying thirty-five cents an hour.

**Knaster:** And how much did you make in Guadalupe?

**Amaro:** Fifteen cents.

**Knaster:** Only fifteen cents?

**Amaro:** Fifteen cents. The Filipinos had a strike here in Salinas.

**Knaster:** That was in 1933 or 1934?

**Amaro:** Around there.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** Then after that they were paying thirty-five cents an hour. Everything happened when we came here to get work.

**Knaster:** Did you come alone?

**Amaro:** Yes. By myself. I stayed in Watsonville, and by 1937 I was well-established here in Watsonville.

**Knaster:** And did you work here too, or only in the fields of Salinas?

**Amaro:** I worked here too.

## **Labor Contractors**

**Knaster:** And how did you work, with a labor contractor, or...

**Amaro:** Yes, that was the bad part. We worked very hard against labor contractors in Salinas, Guadalupe. They did a lot of harm.

**Knaster:** They did?

**Amaro:** Yes. The bosses paid them and the contractor worked very little and took from everywhere and would charge them for food and stole from them. The companies didn't pay directly. They paid him and he paid the people, so he had the opportunity to steal.

**Knaster:** And did it ever happen that the contractor went away with all the wages?

**Amaro:** There were many times.

**Knaster:** Did that happen to you?

**Amaro:** No. But it happened in other places.

**Knaster:** But it was known around.

**Amaro:** Yes, they ran off with the money.

**Knaster:** Were those contractors Mexicans, Filipinos, or Americans?

**Amaro:** Among us it was always Mexicans. The Filipinos also had contractors, but I think they weren't that bad.

**Knaster:** The Filipinos?

**Amaro:** The Filipino contractors weren't that bad.

**Knaster:** Like the Mexicans?

**Amaro:** They were bad.

**Knaster:** Why?

**Amaro:** Because they enjoyed stealing from people.

**Knaster:** How do you feel about immigrants who steal from other immigrants, all from other countries and all suffering and struggling just the same? Where does that come from? Why don't they work together for the boss who's stealing from them?

**Amaro:** That's true, but it's not like that. You can only take care of men like that by force or through the law. But back then you couldn't do that here. In Mexico it couldn't be done, but it could be done here because workers here didn't have a voice. But the contractor was better off, because all he'd do was look at the boss and give him a beer. Many would go to Mexico and bring the bosses back and they could do whatever they wanted. The worker was very disorganized and weak. The worker wasn't heard, and the contractors

could do many things as long as they were in good with the bosses. That's how it was then. Workers couldn't do much. And that still happens now. Who brings all the illegals? It's all the same people. Americans who exploit them and make money off of them. Not only that but they rob them openly at the border, even the Mexican police in Tijuana.

**Knaster:** How can that situation be alleviated, made better?

**Amaro:** It's getting better now because the authorities in San Diego have become very strict because they see the injustice and they have plainclothes policemen around to see what's going on and they've even caught some people who steal from the illegals. One time they caught a Mexican policeman from Tijuana who was coming to steal. They brought him to San Diego and since he was a policeman they said, "Well, since he's a Tijuana policeman we'll send him back." And they did. I think he was punished over there, but not here. He was stealing and was coming to steal. It's a terrible thing.

**Knaster:** It really is.

**Amaro:** And this was now, so imagine what it was like back then. The contractors were people who studied how to steal from others, and get rich with other people's money and find ways to do it. There were those that weren't bad, but there were many who were very bad. They had power and could do that.

**Knaster:** Taking advantage of their own people.

**Amaro:** That's right. It couldn't be fixed. There used to be many offices here that used to rob us, all us workers, with the immigration issue. Mexican companies that were open to fix immigration problems and they know perfectly well that what they're doing is not what they promise. "I'll fix everything for you, and good, sign here," and they know very well they can't fix anything. The immigration offices would tell us that we didn't need to go to those companies, just go directly to immigration to get the proper information. You can't bring more than your wife, children, but not siblings or nieces or nephews, only your wife and children. Why do you go to those companies to fix everything for you, they can't. But you'd pay a lot of money and they wouldn't fix anything. The poor worker is constantly robbed, because they knew they were stealing from people and that nothing could be fixed. We could only bring wife and children, it was written clearly. No one else. This is now. Imagine what it was like back then. But back then in Guadalupe we got together and protested against the contractors and later on we'd get paid directly, because we told the boss about what happened when the money was in the hands of the contractor

**Knaster:** Did you work with a contractor in Guadalupe?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** And did he give you a place to live and tools to work with?

**Amaro:** Yes. They gave us everything.

**Knaster:** Food too?

**Amaro:** Yes, food too.

**Knaster:** And how much did they make?

**Amaro:** Well, one dollar.

**Knaster:** Did you all live in camps all together?

**Amaro:** Yes. In the camps we didn't have to pay rent or anything. They put up the camps. [Inaudible] the food, but they stole other things. For instance in the measurements of the [land], you worked per acre at ten dollars an acre, and the workers didn't know how to measure the land at first. Later on we all knew. So the contractor measured, and said you have so much and you have so much, and that's where he was able to rob them, pay them less, because they didn't know. And that's what they did. At other times, they'd take people to work for other ranchers and they'd pay the contractor one amount and the contractor would pay the workers another amount. That's where he robbed them. It was easy for them to cheat and steal. That's how they did it.

**Knaster:** What would you suggest as a replacement for the contractors? How can that situation be fixed? What arrangements can be made with the workers? Pay them directly from the owner to the worker, or have an intermediary, or what?

**Amaro:** Well, that seems to be fixed now.

**Knaster:** How?



**Amaro:** Now it's fixed, thanks to the unions. Cesar Chavez's people didn't have to deal with contractors because [they] have to follow the rules of the union and they can't rob the workers. In my day, this didn't exist and that's why contractors were free to rob on the jobs.

**Knaster:** So you think that there shouldn't be contractors? There's no need to have this kind of occupation or job.

**Amaro:** There still are many contractors, although there don't seem to be that many, but for the farmer it's sometimes necessary to have someone to supervise people and relate well to them, speak their language. It's sometimes necessary. That's why they use that man, but the boss doesn't believe or think that he's being robbed unless someone complains, like we did. When we complained the bosses would do something about it and pay the workers directly.

**Knaster:** Are the contractors members of the union? Are they independent?

**Amaro:** They once tried to organize, but I don't know what happened. There was one, as a matter of fact right here, they were members of the contractors union. They didn't organize to rob from the worker but to protect their interests.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** But it was terrible back then.

**Knaster:** What services did the contractors provide to the workers?

**Amaro:** Practically everything. The boss told them what they had to do and they had to get people, take them to the job and pay them. Whatever was necessary back then they did. The boss didn't pay, and many times the boss didn't pay the contractor a salary, just commission. For each worker he got paid so much.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** So his job was to supervise and report to the boss. All the boss cared about was that the job was done. Anything else was of no importance to the boss. But people complained and then the boss had to do something.

**Knaster:** But what exactly did the contractor provide for the workers? Transportation, food, where to live, tools to work with?

**Amaro:** The boss was the one who provided the tools to work with. The contractor brought the workers to the boss's house for the day's work and then picked them up at the end of day. He supervised them too and took care of their needs. That's what the contractor had to do.

**Knaster:** And did he charge the workers for those things?

**Amaro:** No, no. He didn't charge anything. The boss paid him. He used to make a lot of money with the food because the food was very bad, very bad.

**Knaster:** Really?

**Amaro:** And they charged.

**Knaster:** What did they give you?

**Amaro:** They used to buy the worst available. The cheapest and worst beef, and many times they didn't even buy beef. They bought something that was nothing but fat, no beef. Not fit for feeding people—bones, and stuff like that. Very bad food. Since their wages weren't good, the contractors used to buy the cheapest food. Other contractors were more conscientious and gave us something a little better.

**Knaster:** Was the food Mexican or Filipino? Or was it a mix?

**Amaro:** It was a mix of everything. If it was Filipinos, it was Filipino food.

**Knaster:** Who prepared the food?

**Amaro:** They had a cook.

**Knaster:** Was he one of the workers, or another person?

**Amaro:** He was another person that was hired by the contractor and paid by him. The cook was paid the minimum just like the other workers.

**Knaster:** And that was just in the labor camps?

**Amaro:** Yes, in the camps.

**Knaster:** Yes. Did you live in any camp?

**Amaro:** Yes, sometimes.

**Knaster:** Was that in Guadalupe, or here in Watsonville?

**Amaro:** I lived in a camp in Guadalupe, and in Salinas, too. And in a Mexican camp in Guadalupe. The treatment was terrible. Well really, the treatment wasn't bad because there were young people, but the food . . . We were treated well, they were good, but they did try to steal everything they could. They didn't mistreat us, but they stole a lot.

**Knaster:** Were there problems between the workers in those camps? Were there fights, or did people get drunk and steal from each other? Or weren't there any problems?

**Amaro:** People used to get drunk. They'd go to the town and the canteen and drink. They'd fight over there but almost never in the camp. Everyone was used to working.

**Knaster:** What were the sleeping conditions like? Did you get beds or, how do you call them, cots? What are they called? They're like beds.

**Amaro:** Yes, they're called bunks.

**Knaster:** How do you say bunk in Spanish, or is there a word in Spanish?

**Amaro:** We called them *bonques*. They were two, one on top of the other, sometimes even three.

**Knaster:** Three?

**Amaro:** Yes, with steps going up.

**Knaster:** How many to a room?

**Amaro:** As many as could fit. There wasn't a number.

**Knaster:** Fifty, one hundred? How many people per room?

**Amaro:** No, not that many because the room wasn't very big. Probably two or three bunks per room. There were sometimes six or nine people.

**Knaster:** Six or nine people per room. And how many rooms in a house?

**Amaro:** There were many, because they were in a row.

**Knaster:** In a row?

**Amaro:** Yes, because they were low houses, not high. One story. And the rooms were there, a lot of them.

**Knaster:** Were there bathrooms?

**Amaro:** No. In Salinas there were.

**Knaster:** But there weren't over there?

**Amaro:** No, there weren't any. Back then everything was very backward. There weren't bathrooms here, or in the hotels of Watsonville. There was no hot water anywhere, or in any hotel like there is now. Now in all the hotels, no matter what class, there's hot water and bathrooms and everything because it's necessary and the rules are already established. But not back then. Not even in Los Angeles. Everything was cold water.

**Knaster:** Did you see any differences between the Mexican camps in Guadalupe and the Filipino camps here in Salinas?

**Amaro:** Not much. But the Filipinos liked to bathe every afternoon. They used to send them tubs and water if there weren't any. They had to have hot water, in order to bathe. So when workers used to arrive there things would be better. Whoever was there would get a good bath. The food wasn't good, but they'd get good tubs to bathe in because they couldn't go to work the next day otherwise, they'd be very tired. They were better off in that sense. Better here than in Guadalupe.

**Knaster:** Yes. In what year did you arrive in Salinas?

**Amaro:** In 1935.

**Knaster:** 1935. And what kind of work did you do here in Salinas?

### **Lettuce Thinning**

**Amaro:** In Salinas we worked lettuce. In those days there was a lot of lettuce in Salinas. I think there still is. That's what brought a lot of wealth to Salinas: lettuce. It prospered because it was sold well.

**Knaster:** Can you describe for me a typical day of work with lettuce? What time you got up and ate and then when you left for the camp? Can you describe that for me?

**Amaro:** Yes, since I was there. We used to get up with enough time to start 8:00 or 7:30. Almost always 8:00.

**Knaster:** So you'd get up at 8:00?

**Amaro:** No, we were ready to start by 8:00.

**Knaster:** Oh, so what time would you get up?

**Amaro:** Not very early, like two hours before.

**Knaster:** Like at 6:00?

**Amaro:** Yes 6:00.

**Knaster:** And you were fed?

**Amaro:** Yes, lunch and all those things. They used to bring food to the camp.

**Knaster:** For lunch?

**Amaro:** To eat. For mid-day. We used to have lunch; actually we used to call breakfast lunch because at lunch we ate a lot—whatever there was, eggs. At mid-day we'd eat the other meal. They'd bring beef, soup, and things like that. Then in the evening we'd have the last meal. That was dinner. One thing that I noticed at the camp in Salinas that I hadn't seen in others was the enthusiasm there was to do the work.

**Knaster:** There was enthusiasm?

**Amaro:** The workers were very enthusiastic. It was such that we'd rush to get up, not because we were rushed, but because we wanted to hurry. We started the morning with much enthusiasm in order for each group to find the better spot and work as long as they had strength. The ones who lagged behind were called the apostles.

**Knaster:** The apostles?

**Amaro:** Yes, because they were old and [inaudible]. No one wanted to be with the apostles because they were always behind because they couldn't do more. That was their spot. All day long all the groups were like that. The good ones were always ahead and then they were followed by the ones in the middle and in the back. But the boss didn't say anything. He knew that was the way we wanted to work. In the morning we'd hurry to get that spot and we'd keep it all day, all day. In the back, in the front or in the middle. That's how we worked. There was a lot of enthusiasm to work. People were happy.

**Knaster:** Really?

**Amaro:** Happy.

**Knaster:** No one complained?

**Amaro:** No, no. That was amazing.

**Knaster:** Yes. Why?



**Amaro:** It seemed like the workers were happy to be here in the United States, and making good wages. They weren't very high wages, just thirty-five cents, but since everything was so cheap, those who knew how to manage their money were well off and could spend it on clothes and going out. That's why everybody was happy. Like I said, we'd run to get our spot and work that way, we liked it.

**Knaster:** How did you get to the camps by eight, by bus or truck?

**Amaro:** There were some companies that had very good buses.

**Knaster:** In good condition?

**Amaro:** In very good condition.

**Knaster:** Really?

**Amaro:** They had very good buses, like the modern ones there are now. There were some that were worse, but that's where we all went.

**Knaster:** Who'd take you? Was the bus property of the company or the contractor?

**Amaro:** The good ones were company buses. We were taken by whoever was hired by the contractor.

**Knaster:** Do you remember the name of the company?

**Amaro:** I can't remember the name of the company. But it was very well known.

**Knaster:** How long did you work there?

**Amaro:** Not long. Since I'd taken part in strikes in Guadalupe there were a lot of guys that knew me. When we got here from all the towns we'd been to we came here because they were paying higher wages. They were already paying thirty-five cents and over there it didn't get to twenty cents. It had gone up from fifteen cents to twenty cents. These guys sent me to a Mexican contractor. They'd told him a lot of good things about me, and since he was a good man—he didn't steal from anyone—that was my condition for going to work for him. I told him, "I can work for you but I don't want you to steal from people." He said, "No, I don't do that. You're going to work as the one who keeps the accounts of the workers."

**Knaster:** Oh, like an accountant?

**Amaro:** Yes, like an accountant. Keep their names and how much they worked per day. Keep accounts of wages earned and pay the workers on pay day. He also gave me land, because at that time we worked per acre—so much per acre. So we had to measure the land, and I already knew how to do this, and know how many acres you did—half an acre, quarter of an acre, two acres—and then pay.

**Knaster:** So you stopped working in the camps with your hands?

**Amaro:** Yes, I left and then I went to work and I was paid well and the food was included. It was very good.

**Knaster:** Did they pay you by the hour, or the entire job?

**Amaro:** No he paid. He gave me the food.

**Knaster:** And sleeping quarters?

**Amaro:** Yes, very good. A very nice bed for me. He didn't pay me much, but didn't charge me for the food.

**Knaster:** But you earned more than the workers?

**Amaro:** Yes, much more. And when I had free time I'd go work and make some more on the side.

**Knaster:** When you worked in the lettuce camps what did you do? What were your duties?

**Amaro:** In English it's called thinning. And at that time there was a lot of work in that. People liked to do it by contract, or by the acre.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** That way they could work independently and do more if they could.

**Knaster:** And you did that job?

**Amaro:** Yes, I'd learned it there and in Guadalupe too. The distance there should be between each plant, from the lettuce plant that will produce.

**Knaster:** So if there's three heads of lettuce, you'd take one away or just the leaves?

**Amaro:** No, all of them. I'd have to take them all.

**Knaster:** From the root?

**Amaro:** Yes, from the root. We'd have to calculate how far apart they'd be.

**Knaster:** How many inches apart did they have to be?

**Amaro:** Like this.

**Knaster:** Like twelve or fifteen inches?

**Amaro:** Yes, there had to be enough room for the lettuce to grow. That was the work we did.

**Knaster:** Did you also plant seeds?

**Amaro:** No.

**Knaster:** No, never. Did you work on the crop?

**Amaro:** Yes, I did.

**Knaster:** Picking the lettuce?

**Amaro:** That was the work we did afterward.

**Knaster:** Which months?

**Amaro:** A lot of companies started working in May. The lettuce companies, and there were others that worked all year.

**Knaster:** All year?

**Amaro:** Well, not in winter because it was very cold, but there's lettuce early in the year. By May, and even before in some places. Then you have a good lettuce crop and it's picked with a spatula [spade]. And it's like this. [demonstrates with hands]

**Knaster:** Oh, thrust or plunge.

**Amaro:** Yes, thrust or plunge.

**Knaster:** Thrust and pull it out.

**Amaro:** Back then the lettuce was loaded in trucks that they used to bring.

**Knaster:** And take it where?

**Amaro:** No, do like this and pick it up.

**Knaster:** How big was the, how do you say, *torque*? You mean truck?

**Amaro:** Yes, that's how we called it.

**Knaster:** Isn't it called a *camioneta*?

**Amaro:** The same thing. It was only for loading and it was open on top so you could see the lettuce.

**Knaster:** And just throw it on?

**Amaro:** Yes, sometimes. Other times we'd cut them and leave them there and there were others who'd come to pick them up. That's how we worked.

**Knaster:** How many hours a day did you do this?

**Amaro:** Eight, nine, sometimes ten hours.

**Knaster:** Ten hours?

**Amaro:** When there was a lot of work, but mainly eight or nine hours.

**Knaster:** Six days a week, or more?

**Amaro:** We worked Saturdays too.

**Knaster:** Saturdays too.

**Amaro:** Six days, all day on Saturdays.

**Knaster:** Did they give you some free time during the day, or did you work eight hours and stop to eat?

**Amaro:** Yes, we were given an hour to eat. But here in Salinas there was a rule made for what was called smoke time.

**Knaster:** Smoke time.

**Amaro:** That was some ten or fifteen minutes, twice a day. That was great because you could rest a little. And if you smoked you did, or if not you rested. You'd rest and go back to work. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Twice a day. But that was because it was in place here already. Everyone did it. In Guadalupe it didn't exist, but here yes.

**Knaster:** Did you suffer from any physical problems brought on by your work?

**Amaro:** No, no.

**Knaster:** It didn't affect your health?

**Amaro:** No, I was very healthy. No, it didn't affect me at all. When you're young it doesn't affect you.

**Knaster:** Didn't you have to bend down a lot?

**Amaro:** Yes, a lot. When I was doing some other kind of work and I'd go [thin] lettuce, I couldn't sleep for three days from the exhaustion. But the body needed to get used to the exercise and then it was easy. It was real hard work. When you're young you don't feel anything.

**Knaster:** When someone got sick what would happen? Did they give them medicine or treatment, or did they just lose their jobs?

**Amaro:** In Guadalupe and here in Salinas, no one ever got sick or died from working with the lettuce.

**Knaster:** No one?

**Amaro:** Never. In Watsonville yes, they used to drop dead, but that was different—the class of people was different. Those people were already sick and not young. They were sick and would get worse there and would drop dead right there. Others would get sick and wouldn't be able to do the work; they didn't want to even start the work. They'd rather do something else than thinning.

**Knaster:** But it's hard, isn't it?

**Amaro:** No, it's easy. The only thing is the position.

**Knaster:** Yes, that's what I mean.

**Amaro:** But it's not hard. It's easy. It's not very difficult work if you're strong and physically young. We used to work with a lot of enthusiasm because we knew we were going to have money and be able to go out and all that. We weren't in bad shape. The wages were low, but everyone worked well and with much enthusiasm.

**Knaster:** Yes. If someone's not under contract with a contractor, how could this person get work?

**Amaro:** All you had to do was go to the camps. That's all.

**Knaster:** And see the owner?

**Amaro:** No, the contractor.



**Knaster:** So you always had to go to the contractor?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** There wasn't any other way to get work?

**Amaro:** No, because he controlled everything. You had to go see the contractor at the camp, and he'd give you work if he wanted to or if he needed help, and if he thought the person wasn't good enough he wouldn't give the person the work. That's how it was.

**Knaster:** So the workers were organized by a contractor and he controlled everything.

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** And he supervised you all in the camp?

**Amaro:** Yes. He supervised the camp day and night.

**Knaster:** And were the workers in Salinas only Mexican, or from other races as well?

**Amaro:** No, at that time when I got here in 1936, and when we were in Guadalupe and Santa Maria there were many more Filipinos than Mexicans. In a strike there were more than 1,000 Filipinos and we were about 800, but there were more Filipinos. And here, too.

**Knaster:** In Salinas, too?

**Amaro:** The Filipinos controlled the lettuce work in Salinas. We were always the minority. They gave us work.

**Knaster:** Were there also white people called Okies working?

**Amaro:** Yes, but very little.

**Knaster:** Not many?

**Amaro:** They'd arrive and work, but they wouldn't last. They'd work two or three weeks and that's it. The Okies worked more with peas. In those days there was a lot of work in that. Everyone worked, men, women and children. They all helped each other and did a lot. With peas people helped each other out a lot.

**Knaster:** Did only men work the lettuce, or women too?

**Amaro:** Only men, because it was very difficult work and the men had gotten used to it, since that was all we did. If a woman started, she usually couldn't do it. But if she did get used to it, it was good work.

**Knaster:** So women did work?

**Amaro:** Yes, but very few.

**Knaster:** Were they Mexican?

**Amaro:** Yes, they were Mexican mostly.

**Knaster:** Did women live in the camps too, or just men?

**Amaro:** No, just men, but sometimes women came from the town

### **Prostitution in Watsonville**

**Amaro:** The bridge that's there... [the Pajaro River Bridge]

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** All day long there were beautiful women coming and going, very young coming over the bridge, because everything was completely open. The people here are very good, very good people, but the situation was like that back then. Everything was free and open.

**Knaster:** Everything was free and open in Watsonville?

**Amaro:** Yes, completely.

**Knaster:** When you say free and open and many women, are you talking about prostitution?

**Amaro:** Yes and a lot of it. Here and everywhere. The depression was the cause of all this, the depression. During the depression everything reached such a boiling point that it exploded and then everything had to start all over again from the bottom with wages and prices, because that's what the depression brought. And so at that time all poor people, men and women, the women found a way to make a living. Everyone lost their money, and what were they going to do? These contractors were the ones who found these women to exploit them too.

**Knaster:** But if no one had money during those times, who could pay for the women?

**Amaro:** They charged very cheap, according to what we made. They charged one dollar. Nowadays no man would look at women like that because things are different, but in those days...

**Knaster:** Someone told me that there were houses on Union Street on the other side of the bridge.

**Amaro:** Many, and in Salinas too. Everything was open there too. The women worked for very little money because the worker barely made anything. He could spend one dollar.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** I'm referring to that because the depression is what brought it on. Now there aren't any more Communists around here, and in those days they were very active here because of poverty and the depression. Those young people when they got out of school they had nothing else to do so they went to help the workers and organize them and take food to them. They helped them with food; they'd show up with loads of food for the poor. That was all due to the depression, the low wages, everything because of the depression and nothing else. Now we're in the same situation.

**Knaster:** You think so?

**Amaro:** Yes. What happened back then could never happen now. You know why?

**Knaster:** Why?

**Amaro:** Because the government has given and distributed a lot of money, a lot of money. A crisis like that one could never occur today. There's capital: they're losing and gaining. The government has distributed a lot of money, one way or another. People are getting money. Now there's this thing called revenue sharing. That, and the fact that people have a lot of work, and social security and everything else, like welfare. What happened back then couldn't happen now. Now if a crisis comes, people always have with what to buy things and stores can stay open and apples can be picked because people always eat. At that time there wasn't anything with which to buy food. What President Roosevelt started was good, social security, and all that.

**Knaster:** It's a form of socialism. You'll never hear that from capitalists in the United States. Never. But it's a form of socialism.

**Amaro:** Yes, it is.

**Knaster:** Yes, because the government is helping people.

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** They give people with what to live on and eat and medicine. In Europe those countries are called socialists.

## Health Hazards from Pesticides

You said you weren't affected by working with lettuce that had been sprayed. But it did affect other workers?

**Amaro:** Yes, but they weren't from the [fields]. They were from the orchard. Those people worked in the orchard all the time and they got stains on their faces. "What's wrong?" And they'd say, "No it's the spray." And they died.

**Knaster:** They died from that?

**Amaro:** Yes, they'd get progressively worse, and from other diseases too. It affected me for one day, while I was in the orchards, in the stomach.

**Knaster:** Really?

**Amaro:** [Inaudible] and the boss said "Yes, I know, I know. "It's the spray."

**Knaster:** And what did he do about it?

**Amaro:** Nothing. I went back to work, but at another orchard. But on that one it affected me and I couldn't work. I had a bad stomach ache. I didn't know what it was and the boss knew. "I know, I know. It's the spray." I went back to work but they'd put a lot of spray in that place.

**Knaster:** Do you belong to Mexican community organizations?

**Amaro:** Right now I'm with the coalition.

**Knaster:** The coalition.

**Amaro:** The coalition. I belong to it.

## Citizenship Issues

**Knaster:** When did you become naturalized?

**Amaro:** No.

**Knaster:** No? You never did it?

**Amaro:** No, I never did it.

**Knaster:** Why not?

**Amaro:** When I was young I wanted to, because it was good for me and it was necessary. I had my future in front of me but I didn't have a passport. If I didn't have a passport I couldn't apply for citizenship. For many years...

**Knaster:** Yes, because you came in illegally.

**Amaro:** I came in illegally, like I told you. During all that time no one said anything to me and I worked. I got my passport in 1955. I came in 1920 and I was without a passport for more than thirty years.

**Knaster:** Did you get a Mexican passport, or one from here?

**Amaro:** From here. They gave me an extension on my green card, the *mica* so I could go to Mexico.

**Knaster:** The *mica*?

**Amaro:** Yes, that's what they call the green card. Before that, I could go to Mexico but couldn't come back. Many people did it, even though they didn't have transportation. They'd go to Mexico and come back and sneak back in.

**Knaster:** So since you obtained a passport you've been here legally?

**Amaro:** Yes, legal. So then I could apply for citizenship. From 1955 to now.

**Knaster:** Do you have family here in the U.S. or are you by yourself?

**Amaro:** I'm by myself. The family I have is in Juarez. They're all in Juarez on the other side and they work. I don't have anyone here. No one's come here. They're all busy over there. They won't come here. If they come, it's to El Paso and they leave. I've got a niece in El Paso.

**Knaster:** Did you also work in packing?

**Amaro:** Later on.

**Knaster:** When was that?

### **Martinelli Company**

**Amaro:** In the last twenty-three years of my life before I retired I worked here in Watsonville in a company called Martinelli making cider, apple cider. I went to work there and stopped the other work.

**Knaster:** You said you worked as a bookkeeper?

**Amaro:** Yes, that was before.



**Knaster:** Until when did you work as a bookkeeper?

**Amaro:** I probably worked as a bookkeeper for two years.

**Knaster:** So until 1937 or 1938?

**Amaro:** Probably a year and a half as a bookkeeper, because in the winter the contractor would go to the Imperial Valley.

**Knaster:** And you stayed here?

**Amaro:** Yes, I didn't want to go there. They'd go work there.

**Knaster:** What did you do during the winter months?

**Amaro:** Nothing. In the winter there wasn't any work there. That's why they went to Imperial Valley, because there wasn't any work here.

**Knaster:** After that job, after working for that contractor what did you do?

**Amaro:** I worked here in Watsonville in the same thing.

**Knaster:** Lettuce?

**Amaro:** Yes, lettuce. Things were so backward in Watsonville back then that we had to cut the lettuce and put them in wood boxes. We didn't pack them; we just put them in just like that in order to take them to the packing plants. See how backward it all was that we filled the boxes and then at the packing plants empty them out and [inaudible].

**Knaster:** It seems like it was more work.

**Amaro:** Yes. Now they don't do that.

**Knaster:** So you cut the lettuce?

**Amaro:** Yes, I cut it and packed it. Later on in the packing plant they had a lot of men and women working.

**Knaster:** Did you work in the packing plant too?

**Amaro:** No. I never worked there, but there were a lot of men and women working there. One day they organized themselves and were able to make more on the packing. But it was very backward because we put them in boxes and then they'd empty the boxes and bring them back to we could fill them up again. Until they changed everything.

**Knaster:** That was in 1940?

**Amaro:** A little before. By 1940 there were no more boxes. They had new ones— what were they called? Some carts that were smaller than the ones people used to ride in. People used to call them trailers but they weren't trailers, they were little carts that they filled up with lettuce, and then they were full of lettuce when they were sent to the packing plants. There were no more boxes and that was a very big change.

**Knaster:** And that was around 1940?

**Amaro:** A little before. Things changed very fast from one thing to the other, but there were no more boxes and they had those carts that we filled with lettuce and that's it.

**Knaster:** And were those carts pulled by tractors?

**Amaro:** No, no. They had their own motor.

**Knaster:** Did you work with Martinelli before working with the lettuce, or afterwards?

**Amaro:** Afterwards. I started working at Martinelli in 1944.

**Knaster:** So from 1939 to 1944 did you work at the camps, or not?

**Amaro:** No. What I was trying to say was that when I worked at Martinelli I didn't get paid for the whole year. We only worked for about six months. The rest of the year we didn't have work there and so I worked here too.

**Knaster:** With the lettuce?

**Amaro:** With the lettuce. And those are the companies I'd like to find here. Let's see if I can find one. This one's 1959.

**Knaster:** That says Martinelli.

**Amaro:** Yes. Watsonville Canning Company, but here's another one. These are apple orchards that I used to work at too.

**Knaster:** Why did you go to Watsonville? Why didn't you stay in Salinas? What attracted you there?

**Amaro:** The living facilities. They were much better here. There was a camp that later on declined. In the downtown that was a camp where people lived. Here under the bridge was a camp. Now it's gone. There were living facilities there and at that time they were good, but later on they declined. But for a while they were very good. And they were very cheap, cheap.

**Knaster:** Was that a camp or a boarding house?

**Amaro:** No, they were living facilities.

**Knaster:** When you say living facilities, do you mean a house or a room?

**Amaro:** A small house.

**Knaster:** A detached small house, or all together?

**Amaro:** They had only one room, big, and there was a bed and an oil heater. There was no gas yet at that time so it was oil, and you could cook and sleep there.

**Knaster:** So one little house per person?

**Amaro:** Per person.

**Knaster:** How much did you pay for rent?

**Amaro:** Four dollars a month.

**Knaster:** Ah, that's why you came.

**Amaro:** Yes. That's right. They were cheap and very comfortable. And we ate there in the dining room, but I liked this because I could live independently. You paid for your own home and get up and go look for work wherever you wanted. That was a benefit of Watsonville. Like I said, four dollars a month.

**Knaster:** They didn't charge much.

**Amaro:** And you could pay.

**Knaster:** Do you remember working for [J. J.] Crosetti? I've been told it's a very big lettuce company.

**Amaro:** Yes, but I worked very little. I remember when he started. I was working for someone else at the camp. And I worked a lot in the apple orchards.

## Strikes

**Knaster:** Can we estimate when you worked with the lettuce? Which months?

**Amaro:** During the months when lettuce season begins: April, May. Martinelli started when the apple season began. They always started in August or September, and it went on until after Christmas and New Year's. And before that I worked in the orchards.

**Knaster:** Oh, you've got papers that go back until 1944!

**Amaro:** Yes, because we already paid income taxes.

**Knaster:** In what year did you start paying income taxes?

**Amaro:** In the agriculture we started late. Here I've got some dates. In Salinas, California. In 1944 I started at Martinelli. And I worked at the shipyards in Richmond during the war [World War II]. [Then] I came back I started working at Martinelli. I only worked at the shipyard about a year.

**Knaster:** How did you find out about this job? Did someone tell you about it?

**Amaro:** People were going there to work because they paid very well. Here the wages were forty or fifty cents.

**Knaster:** And how much did they pay?

**Amaro:** They started paying one dollar and up. And more.

**Knaster:** Much better.

**Amaro:** Yes. And they also paid overtime, like they called it, and we made much more.

**Knaster:** Were the tools that you used to harvest or thin changed?

**Amaro:** Thin? No.

**Knaster:** That remained the same all those years?

**Amaro:** Now Cesar Chavez changed everything.

**Knaster:** In what year was that changed?

**Amaro:** Now thanks to Cesar Chavez, not long ago. Maybe four or five years. It was changed by law. Because now they can't use [short hoes].

**Knaster:** Were there strikes when you worked in Salinas at that time, or were there unions? Did anything happen during those years?

**Amaro:** No, there was a big strike organized by the Filipinos.

**Knaster:** That was in 1934, right?

**Amaro:** In 1934, yes. But the Filipinos lost it because everyone was against them. They were well organized. Since they're all brothers, the contractors as well as the workers, they were all Filipinos and they helped the workers organize because they knew everyone would win if the strike won.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** They invested a lot of money in the strike, and maybe that's why everyone was against them. They were all very unified to win the strike, but they lost it. They were all very disheartened when I arrived, because they'd lost it. But they always made thirty-five cents. They'd lost that big strike and there weren't unions. The important unions didn't appear until Cesar Chavez. There weren't any.

**Knaster:** How did you start working at Martinelli?

**Amaro:** I returned from the shipyards and there were other guys working there who were war veterans and they took me over there to work. They didn't pay much.

**Knaster:** How much did they pay?

**Amaro:** Very little compared to what was being earned at that time everywhere else. Martinelli paid barely ninety cents an hour. And I was making more working temporarily. I was making \$1.25, but that was temporary because during the war they needed [workers] and they paid us more. The boss gave us coffee and donuts every morning, so that we'd work. He wanted us to be there and he paid us well. So then, Martinelli needed people to work when the apple season began and they were looking for a lot of workers, fifteen or twenty, and...

**Knaster:** To pick the apples?

**Amaro:** No, no.

**Knaster:** Or to work at the plant?

**Amaro:** To work at the plant. They wanted to have everything ready for when it was time to start. And that's how I got in.

**Knaster:** And what did you do there?

**Amaro:** The work was different with Martinelli. There were some hand trucks... That's how I began, and later on you had to load some tanks and



bottles and then to pasteurize. That's what we did and why we filled the tanks with boxes and later. . . . open the vapor [inaudible]. That was very backward too, but later on it got better. Everything was done by hand and now it's done with machines.

**Knaster:** When did it change?

**Amaro:** We used to put labels on manually.

**Knaster:** Really? Did you do that too?

**Amaro:** Yes, sometimes. We had to do one by one.

**Knaster:** That takes a lot of time.

**Amaro:** Yes it takes a lot of time, but everybody did it very fast. But it did take a lot of time. Later on they got some machines that did it. Machines are a great advantage, aren't they?

**Knaster:** Yes. But you said you were there for twenty-three years.

**Amaro:** Yes, I was there a long time.

**Knaster:** Did you then change your occupation, or did you stay in the same thing?

**Amaro:** No, no, because at that time those tanks weren't used anymore.

**Knaster:** When did you stop using hand trucks?

**Amaro:** I did it a few years, and I don't remember when it started to change. I began to understand how to operate the machines that make the boxes. They put together the boxes and you put them in and they come out on the other side. You need to understand how those machines work. I learned those things, and when they put on the labels we helped to change the machines. There were machines just for bottles, half gallon and gallon. There were all kinds of bottles and we had to change from one to the other, and that's what I learned there.

**Knaster:** And did things keep going that way for many years?

**Amaro:** Yes, up until the latest machine. The machines did everything, everything. It's amazing all the things that the machines did.

**Knaster:** Did you notice that the camps started out needing a lot of people and then much less?

**Amaro:** Yes. [Inaudible]

**Knaster:** Yes? Were many people let go because of the arrival of machines?

**Amaro:** Yes, even though they weren't let go just like that.

**Knaster:** No?

**Amaro:** They just simply didn't look for more people like they used to when they needed to. They never fired anyone. At that time people were needed

because hands were needed, and later on many weren't called any more because they weren't needed.

**Knaster:** Did the Martinelli employees organize into a union?

**Amaro:** Yes, later on. First, Martinelli was a very good family and he wanted everything to run as if everyone were...

**Knaster:** Like the boss.

**Amaro:** And he wanted the workers to see what he was trying to do. He paid us all our un-worked holidays, time and a half, and I don't remember what else. He paid us time and a half, holidays and overtime. He paid like that for many years, and every year he'd raise our wages a little. He wanted everyone to have work for a long time. They were very good to their workers, didn't mistreat them. That was a great advantage for poor people, very good treatment. They were a very good family. Then it got very ugly, as we say, because the women made a little less than the men.

**Knaster:** Doing the same job?

**Amaro:** No, they'd take out any part of the apple that was rotted with a little knife, and they were there all day. They'd put bottles in the machines so they could be filled, but the machines weren't able yet to pick up the bottles. That's what women did—taking out whatever was rotted in the apple. It was very easy, but they wanted better wages too and the unions were already here, the Teamsters, and the women called a representative from the

Teamsters to see what he could do for them. He came and spoke to them and asked about their situation, and he told them what the union could do and to organize. Not only the women, but everyone. So Martinelli spoke to all the women one by one and told them the union wasn't good for the company. It was going to ruin everything. The thing was that he fired all the women.

**Knaster:** All of them? How many?

**Amaro:** Well, it wasn't a great number.

**Knaster:** Twenty or fifty?

**Amaro:** No, no. About twelve or fifteen women. That's the most. When there were sixty workers, then that was a big amount. It was a small plant; now the machines produce millions of agricultural products, so it always produced a lot because they had a market. So he fired all the women because of that, but the Teamsters kept coming because people wanted it to.

**Knaster:** In the meantime, were other women employed?

**Amaro:** No, not anymore.

**Knaster:** Did he get men then?

**Amaro:** He replaced the women with men.

**Knaster:** And did he pay them the same as the women?

**Amaro:** Yes, the same wages. The men's.

**Knaster:** The same as the other men's wages, but not the women's?

**Amaro:** No because the men made some more, like five cents

**Knaster:** So if they paid women a little less than the men, and later on the women were replaced by men who were paid the same as the other men I don't think that was fair.

**Amaro:** No, but he avoided a union coming in, which is what he didn't want. He wanted the women there, but he didn't want a union. The union, in effect, changed everything.

**Knaster:** So the union did come in?

**Amaro:** It did. After 1950. I retired in 1967. In 1967 I turned sixty-five years old. When I retired, the union was barely three or four years old.

**Knaster:** So it was probably in the 1960s.

**Amaro:** Yes, probably.

**Amaro:** The Teamsters came in and the wages immediately rose. I get an annual pension of \$1000, \$1008 per year from Martinelli, and that's thanks to the Teamsters. If not, we never would've had any of that. He didn't offer a pension; he had a small one for those workers who'd been with him the longest but nothing else. There was nothing for everyone else, but the Teamsters made them implement it for everybody, and that's how I got it. It was very good what the Teamsters did.

**Knaster:** So you were a member of that union?

**Amaro:** Yes, for many years. When I left I'd been in the union for about four years.

**Knaster:** Out of all the jobs that you've done, which would you prefer? Which was the best and which was the worse, or the most difficult?

**Amaro:** Well, this is a hard question to answer. Every job had its advantages and disadvantages.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** Right there at Martinelli there was very hard work. The loading of the heavy tanks and then the unloading when they were ready—that was very hard work

**Knaster:** When you worked at the plant, yes. After a few years, did you stop going to the camps? You told me that you picked apples and lettuce a few months out of the year.

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** And the rest of the time you worked over at the plant.

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** So, did you keep that up for many years or did you stop going to work at the camps?

**Amaro:** I stopped going to the camps because there was more work at Martinelli. I worked more months.

**Knaster:** When did you stop going to the camps?

**Amaro:** About 1963

**Knaster:** When you worked in the camps, did you prefer to work with one vegetable in particular, or did it matter to you at all, lettuce or sugar beets or tomatoes?

**Amaro:** Well, the orchards were better.

**Knaster:** The apple orchards?

**Amaro:** Yes, because we worked standing up. The disadvantage of the lettuce was that I had to be [stooping],

**Knaster:** During all the years you worked, were you interested in owning your own piece of land to cultivate? Did you want to be a farmer?

**Amaro:** No. I never aspired to that. No. There were many people that did and bought houses with a yard and such. No, I thought of having a better job, studying and having a better job, but time passed by and that was it.

**Knaster:** But did you ever aspire to be...

**Amaro:** Independent?

**Knaster:** Yes, independent.

**Amaro:** Yes, it would've been nice, but I had to work. I read a lot about the union and those things. [Inaudible] is an organization that helped me a lot, a lot. While on those jobs they helped me a lot.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** Because the organization helped people. People don't know and don't believe it. They think they're not for real, but it was. From the time I started working they helped me.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** And I'm satisfied because it's served me well.

### **Watsonville, California**

**Knaster:** Good, good. After having worked in many different counties, how would you compare the county of Santa Cruz, Watsonville with the county of Salinas and Guadalupe? Have you noticed any differences between those counties?

**Amaro:** Yes, there are much better organizations here.

**Knaster:** Here in Watsonville?

**Amaro:** Yes. Santa Maria was better for other people, but for those of us who worked in the camps it was better where there was work in camps, and Guadalupe was such a mess.



**Knaster:** A mess?

**Amaro:** Yes, people drank and fought a lot and there was only one policeman and he was also the town barber. He had his own barbershop and he was always nervous that people would come to him with complaints. But they couldn't have anymore. It was a big mess. You were free to fight there anytime. People literally did kill each other there.

**Knaster:** What do you like about Watsonville?

**Amaro:** I like the people. They're all very good, including the police.

**Knaster:** Really?

**Amaro:** I've never been bothered here and in other places I have been bothered, and in Salinas too. People used to arrive who knew us and . . . this one—where does he work and what's he doing here, and all those things. In Watsonville that never happened.

**Knaster:** Have you ever been discriminated against here or in any other place because you're Mexican?

**Amaro:** No, because I never went anywhere that I didn't belong. I went where everyone could go.

**Knaster:** For example, what places?

**Amaro:** [Inaudible]. There was a chief of police here that was rumored to be of Mexican descent and he spoke very good Spanish. One time some young guys, workers, went to a canteen over there...

**Knaster:** Downtown?

**Amaro:** Yes downtown. And there weren't many Mexicans there and they were told they had to leave the canteen.

**Knaster:** Why not? Because they were Mexican?

**Amaro:** They couldn't be there drinking; they couldn't be there at all. They were there already, but the owner threw them out. Then they went to complain to the chief of police because he spoke Spanish, and the guy said where, and he went with them to the canteen. He asked him, did you throw these men out of here? So he took out his license and . . . But that never happened to me because I really didn't go to canteens.

**Knaster:** Do you think that the people of Watsonville feel the presence of Mexicans here?

**Amaro:** Well now, yes. But...

**Knaster:** And why?

**Amaro:** They say here that Mexicans come here and take away the jobs of the Americans, but now the Mexicans are against Mexicans.

**Knaster:** You mean the ones that are established here?

**Amaro:** Yes, the ones who are established here and in Los Angeles. Because they're the ones who are affected by this. Americans aren't affected by them because they do other kinds of jobs. But the Mexicans—there are many women working, and men too, but more women...

**Knaster:** In the canneries?

**Amaro:** Yes, in the canneries. These women are here illegally and make them work more and all those things, and they fear for their future because now there are very young people arriving who take their jobs too soon. And that's what Mexicans are upset about. The Americans only see these things in the papers. It's true that illegals have invaded all kinds of jobs, because there are many who are educated. But it's not that much. The ones that are unhappy are the Mexicans. They are the ones most affected.

**Knaster:** Do you remember when the Bracero program was introduced? How did that affect you? That was probably in 1942.

**Amaro:** It didn't affect us much because we didn't have much power in order to complain. Most of the workers were braceros. It affected us because the braceros were granted things that we were never able to get, because they had people who defended them. We never got anything, and they always did because inspectors would come and ask them: "How's everything going? Are they treating you well?" And they'd say good. "And how's the job?" "We're working well." "How's the nutrition?" and when they complained about it they'd change it.

**Knaster:** But when the braceros arrived, didn't they take away work from you?

**Amaro:** No, no because they were needed. A lot of our young people had gone off to war, and we needed them. So they were brought because they were a necessity. There were a lot of young people, and they spent money and there were dances and everything. They were all very happy because there were a lot of young people. They danced, and everything. I don't remember anything that affected us and besides I was already working with Martinelli and I wasn't there much.

**Knaster:** After your experience organizing workers in Guadalupe, did you organize workers on another occasion somewhere else, or did you participate with the UFW with Chavez?

**Amaro:** No, never. I was retired by then.

**Knaster:** It was only one time?

**Amaro:** Yes. In Guadalupe I organized the Mexican workers myself, with no help. All by myself in order to strike. Remember that big strike I told you about with some 1000 Filipinos and 800 Mexicans?

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** I organized that one all by myself—without money or anything.

**Knaster:** During your years here, have you noticed any difference in the size of the land [plots]? Have they gotten bigger or gotten smaller?

**Amaro:** They've gotten much smaller. Here in Watsonville you can see it. Houses have been built where there were once orchards. Right here by the bridge there were orchards, and all that's gone—all houses now. Right here on Salinas Road too. If you go by Salinas Road you won't see one orchard—there are so many houses there. So many "for rent" signs because of all the construction. There's been a lot of construction and a lot of land in San José has been constructed on. They've constructed many houses. For you, you probably can't notice it that much, but I do because I knew what everything looked like before, when there were orchards.

**Knaster:** Have you noticed a change in the fruits and vegetables that were once cultivated here? Or are the same things being cultivated?

**Amaro:** Yes, because people still eat the same things, like peas, and stuff. The sugar beets are still being cultivated. Lettuce too. If it's a good price it sells well. Sometimes they lose a lot, but the worker [inaudible].

**Knaster:** I remember that last week you told me that when you arrived in Watsonville everything was open and available and you told me about women who became prostitutes. Did these women work in the camps?

**Amaro:** No.

**Knaster:** No? Who were they?

**Amaro:** Prostitution was very well organized. The women were brought.

**Knaster:** From other cities?

**Amaro:** From other cities and they were sent everywhere along the coast  
That's how they did it, in an organized fashion.

**Knaster:** And were there women of all races?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** Young?

**Amaro:** More white than anything else, and very young. The world's oldest profession. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you about this, not because the people of Watsonville are at fault because they're very good and so are the authorities, but the social conditions that came about because of the depression—that's why these things happened. Everything was upside down. People used to go and play, and no one could do anything. The people of Watsonville couldn't do anything. It was awful. Everything was bad. Wages were low. The persons who organized all that vice did well for themselves and were free to do what they wanted. Later on they had to stop.

**Knaster:** So those houses no longer exist?

**Amaro:** Yes they do.

**Knaster:** They're still there?

**Amaro:** I know very well that those houses should not be inhabited because of what they were once used for. They were terrible things. People don't know what happened and the effect on those that come later.

**Knaster:** So those are the same houses? Over there on Union Street?

**Amaro:** Yes.

**Knaster:** The same ones?

**Amaro:** Yes, they're all there. Some are gone, but yes, those are the ones.

**Knaster:** Those houses are very old.

**Amaro:** Yes, very old.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** Now they're all rented. People live there.

**Knaster:** Oh, so they're no longer brothels?

**Amaro:** No, that's over.

**Knaster:** When did that end?

**Amaro:** It ended slowly, but I don't remember how many years. They were chased out of there a few years ago.

**Knaster:** So, not long ago?

**Amaro:** Not long ago. There still was, but more hidden.

**Knaster:** Yes.

**Amaro:** In those years everything was out in the open and in Salinas too. No one said anything.

**Knaster:** But now there's probably some houses left. I'm sure there are some houses left.

**Amaro:** Yes, because prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. It won't ever end, but certain things are no longer permitted so openly. When the police get them they arrest them. That's why they go and raid houses once they find them. But I remember all that. And what caused it? The depression.

**Knaster:** After the depression, when Roosevelt came in, were you able to get help from the government?

**Amaro:** No, I never needed it, because a man alone never really needed help.

**Knaster:** So you never got married?

**Amaro:** No, I never got married. I didn't get married because I never could, even though I wanted to because there wasn't enough money. And that's how time just passed.



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