



**Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey -  
Chicano Oral Histories  
1983/146**

Oral interview of  
Ruben Reyes

December 5, 1983

**Conducted by Rosana Madrid**

**Transcribed by Lee Ann McMeans**

Center for Sacramento History  
551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd  
Sacramento, CA 95811-0229  
(916) 264-7072

[cs@cityofsacramento.org](mailto:cs@cityofsacramento.org)  
[www.centerforsacramentohistory.org](http://www.centerforsacramentohistory.org)

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This is Rosana Madrid, the interviewer for the Sacramento History Center's Ethnic Community Survey. The interviewee is Ruben Reyes of Santa Barbara Court in Sacramento. It was done on December 5, 1983. In English, it is tape one of two and the major topics are: Mr. Reyes' personal background, the history of the cannery work and organizing. [Tape one and two are included in this document.]

**Rosana:** And since it is hard to repeat it to the same person, but I wanted to first ask you as I said before, about, some of your personal data, if you want to call it that. First of all, what are your origins, in terms of where were you born and when? And we can start with that.

**Mr. Reyes:** All right, I was born in Superior, Arizona, on November 13, 1930. My father was a miner in Arizona, a copper miner and my grandparents and my aunts and my uncles and my mother came to the United States in 1912. They came from the state of Sonora. Conanaya, a mining town. And they were copper miners there, all my relatives, my uncles, and my grandfather and my ancestors were copper miners so consequently when they came to this part of the world they moved right into the copper mining areas of Arizona from Busby to Superior to Jerome, and I was born in Superior in 1930. We moved to a place called Alhambra, which is a couple miles west of Phoenix, which we lived in little shacks next to a canal there, up until about 1933, when we moved into Phoenix. I grew up in Phoenix for the first 19 years of my life, in a very violent environment. Gang wars and killings and you know, probably the most violent place, it has been documented the most violent place in America. I didn't, I knew at a very young age that I wanted to leave. There was no employment there. I still talk to people today who don't believe me that I grew up at a time when they wouldn't serve us in restaurants there.

In my teen years when they had all the big bands, Glenn Miller, Harry James, you name it you know, we used to try to go to the dances, which were held at the Riverside Ballroom, which is the south side of Phoenix, they wouldn't admit us. The only thing that we could see was the all the Black bands, and whatever Latin bands that they had at the time. We were not permitted to go into the buildings just because we were Mexicanos. Even in the south side of Phoenix they had restaurants that refused all Mexicans. All Mexicans lived in the south side of Phoenix and they were restaurants there that wouldn't serve Mexican people. We were not permitted to swim in the north side of town in the City owned swimming pools. We were not permitted to do a lot of things as human beings, you know, in Phoenix in the years that I grew up. When I left Phoenix in 1949, I left it for the sole reason that I could never find employment there. Aside from working in the fields that's all that was open to us, and of course there were the sheds, of which is one step up from farm labor. They paid better and it was all White people's work. A few Mexicans used to get hired and eventually we just worked our way into the sheds.

**Rosana:** Were these the drying sheds?

**Mr. Reyes:** They were melon sheds, carrots, they processed lettuce, carrots, you know, different commodities, uh melons and the sheds were only a few blocks from our house, but I could never get employed there until they started having labor problems in 1948 and 1949. I started working in the sheds the last two years I lived there. And, uh, because of those reasons, all I ever wanted out of life was you know, a place to work and to support a family. Because of that, the unemployment situation, because of the violence, I knew I never wanted to raise a family in Phoenix, because it wasn't the right environment.

**Rosana:** Now were, how did you make the transition, how did your family make the transition from being a mining family in the small mining towns of Arizona to going to agriculture outside of Phoenix in Alhambra?

**Mr. Reyes:** Well actually, my Grandmother moved us all out from Superior. Eventually, we started moving into other areas. My Grandmother brought us to Alhambra and eventually we moved right into Phoenix which you know it isn't a mining area and, and my mother was a laundry worker most of her life and she supported my sister and myself by working in a laundry. And I grew up in Phoenix.

**Rosana:** Now, how many children were there in your family?

**Mr. Reyes:** In my family it is just my sister and myself. I have a sister that's one year older than I am.

**Rosana:** And was your father also, did he move with you to Phoenix?

**Mr. Reyes:** No, actually, my mom and my dad were never married, they just, after we were born, my Dad married another lady and we just moved away from Superior and we used to go visit him once in a while, but I never really knew him that well.

**Rosana:** So then it was a matriarchal household? In a way?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yes.

**Rosana:** By default?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yes. And it was just my mother and my sister and myself, and of course aunts and uncles and my grandmother, who, my grandmother raised me most of the time, because my mother was always working. She, my grandmother raised me for the first eight years of my life actually. And then it was back and forth. I used to live in both places, with my mother and with my grandmother, so. But I think it was my grandmother who had the biggest influence on my life.

**Rosana:** Was your grandmother at all involved in unions or [hard to hear] or anything else that?

**Mr. Reyes:** Not that I know of. My grandmother wasn't very educated, but I still look back and see her as a very strong person of, very intelligent person, who never had an education. She didn't learn to write her name until she was in her sixties. She didn't learn to write. And that was just to sign for letters that were coming from my uncle who was in the service at that time. But I can't think of anybody in my family who was ever involved in any kind of movement, other than the general thing that happens to mine workers the problems that they have experienced in America which is similar all the way back to the Appalachia's. Company owned mining town and the problems that miners experience in dealing with, you know, with a company owned mining town. Where they have to, they are always in debt and the strikes that

they have to go through every few years to try to get the wages they feel they deserve. Only in the general way. I know of no one in my family who ever really got involved specifically in any movement.

**Rosana:** So once you were in, on the outskirts of Phoenix and then later on living in Phoenix. How old were you? What were you doing there?

**Mr. Reyes:** Well from the time I was five, and I started school in Phoenix, I went to the eighth grade. I never went to high school. I never learned much actually. From the time I was in the third grade to the eighth grade this five year period, I spent a lot of time out of school. I never knew what was going on in the classroom actually, because, the whole school was 100% Chicanitos, you know? And the teachers were a resentful lot. Not the kind of teachers that you see in modern times. Who have some kind of concern for the Mexican kids or any kid, you know. They see us all in a different way than the teachers that I grew up with. The teachers that I grew up with, I somehow sensed in looking back, that they were very resentful of having to teach on that side of town. Because they had no sympathy or, any kind of compassion for the problems that we have as Mexicans. There was always, kind of, I think there was a deep anger somewhere in the teachers that taught in our schools, the resentment, I think was like I said, though I don't think that they feel that they should be in that part of town. And maybe they were assigned there according to, against their own wishes, but, it was totally different. I tell my kids how lucky they are to have some of the teachers they have here, that you know, I'm talking about some of my kids' teachers for instance, such wonderful people and you know, it's so unlike the teachers that I knew. So from the third to the eighth grade I just never really learned anything. I

was a complete truant. I was out of school more than I was in school. So I never really knew what was going on.

**Rosana:** Was there any kind of problem with the language?

**Mr. Reyes:** Definitely. Definitely. We never spoke English. I hardly ever spoke any English until I came to California. It was all Pocho, Pocho and of course, the south side of Phoenix is Black and Brown and all of my friends were Black or Chicanos. And so when we did speak English, it was Black English, you know. Up until I moved to California I didn't really know what the English language was all about. And I think I learned in all the years that I have been here, and I have read a lot. I think I learned in that respect. But actually, in the school, in the playground, in the parks, everywhere you went, we never spoke English, except when we were with our Black friends. It was all Pocho. So I couldn't relate to the English language until after I was 20 or 21.

**Rosana:** Getting back to the school setting. What was the name of the school and, or the schools that you went to and do you remember specifically like any differential treatment between on the part of the teacher towards you or an Anglo? Or a Black student?

**Mr. Reyes:** There were no Anglos. And the Blacks had their own schools. See the Blacks were still segregated when I left Arizona. I, in 1949, I came to California to work in the canneries. Because at that time I had turned 18 and I was old enough to seek employment elsewhere, and I came to California when I was 18. At that time the Blacks in Phoenix had their own schools,

grammar schools and high schools. They had one high school, what was it? Dunbar, I think was the name of the school. A high school in Phoenix that was for Blacks and it was like a block and a half away from my grandmother's house. Everyday at 3:00 p.m. you would see this long string of Black kids coming from their high school going home in the south side of Phoenix. They went right by my grandmother's house. It was just a long string of you know, just Black kids. The schools, although they were I guess open to anybody, nobody but Mexicans lived in the south side of Phoenix so, consequently they had 99.9% of students in the Phoenix grammar schools, there was Grant School, there were Lowell School, there was a primary school that went up to third grade the Lincoln school, which is one of the old, old types with the bell up on top. That went up to the third grade, I went to that school and then I went to Grant School from the third grade to the sixth grade, and then I went to Lowell School sixth, seventh and eighth, something like that. I mentioned it was like 99.9% Mexicano, of course we had a few Okies that used to move into the, they had a little Okie colony in the back of a big Safeway market there on Central Avenue in Phoenix. It was a great big lot that eventually grew into somewhat of a tent city for the Okies, you know. So we would have many one or two Okie kids in the school with us, but other than that it was all Mexicanitos, Chicanitos. And as far as comparing the teachers' attitudes, we were all Mexicans. They were all resentful it seemed like, towards us. And there was no way to compare with a, because there were no White kids. There was nothing to compare with. It's just that I felt you know, this strong resentment. We had a, one guy that stands out in my mind was the school coach, who was this great big strapping 230 pound White guy who was a complete redneck who used to love to take the kids in the room when they did something wrong, take them down in the basement and beat them with a rubber hose. You know, I'll never forget that.

**Rosana:** Did you ever have that?

**Mr. Reyes:** Oh, yes. Definitely, he beat up on me two or three times.

**Rosana:** Do you remember for what?

**Mr. Reyes:** Once I was accused of, and I still to this day remember what happened, some kid, a friend of mine had an argument with a girl, and used foul language, but when she, I was his friend, but when she accused him and ran to the teacher, she implicated me although I had nothing to do with it. And I remember that one incident and he took us into the office and made us bend over and pull our pants down and just beat us with his rubber hose. Another time, another kid and I had an argument. We got into a fist fight on the playground. And, he took us, now this was at Grant School, when he first gave me my first beating. Later on he moved up to Lowell when I did and I was going to Lowell Grammar School, and there were a couple of incidents there. I think we had shoving matches on the playground and he took us down into the boiler room and that's where he would, where he had his rubber hose and he would beat the hell out of the kids, and everybody had experiences. His name was Clavenger, I [hard to hear]Mr. Clavenger, Couch Clavenger. Those are the things that I remember. I know that the only goal I had at the time from I guess, the time I was 12 to the time I was 18, I used to tell all of my friends, I'm leaving, I don't want to grow up here and I don't want to raise kids here. I'll never, never, as soon as I'm big enough to go out on my own, I am going to leave this place. And I did. I did, and it happened by accident. I had an older friend who used to come to California to work

the canneries, and we were working in this melon shed at the time and he told me that this summer, this summer, he was coming to California. This was the summer of 49. He told me he was coming to California to work the canneries and was I interested in coming. I jumped at the chance. And I was 18 at the time. I came with him and found employment at Libby's cannery.

**Rosana:** Here in Sacramento?

**Mr. Reyes:** Here in Sacramento.

**Rosana:** So, what did you and your friend do once you got into Sacramento and –

**Mr. Reyes:** Well, he knew a family here in Sacramento that was very close to his mother, some people that had very close ties to his family. When we got here, it turned out to be people that I had lived right across the street from in Phoenix. The Chavez family. And they put us up until we got employment. And we lived on 12<sup>th</sup> and E Street. That was in 49. And I stayed with that family for a couple of years and then my mother, my sister, and some of my other relatives started moving up here. And my mother and I got a place. My sister got married here. And, spent the first two or three years around 12<sup>th</sup> and E. I was drafted into the service in 1951, which was only a couple of years after I had moved to California, but the memories and the experiences that I had had in Arizona were very strong and I was very angry with the system. And I was very, very anti-White. I think I still am. And so when I was drafted, during the Korean War, I definitely told them, from day one, that there was no way in the world that I was ever going to fight for this country. Some people used to say tell them that you are a Conscientious Objector,

and that's the reason you won't fight. But I, I didn't want to do that, I wanted to tell the truth. I, they took me from, they started out with a sergeant, I ended up talking to a Lieutenant and then to a company commander and so on, and I kept telling the same story, hey look, I grew up in a place where they wouldn't serve me food, they wouldn't allow me in any restaurants, we couldn't swim in your swimming pools, you know, what are you talking about? Freedom in American? Baloney. You know, that's, America doesn't belong to me and I've never been part of the melting pot. And basically, I just don't recognize myself as a, as someone that wants to defend a country that is as racist as this country is. And, I refused to fight. They threw me in the stockade, I ran away and I just kept running away, and they finally gave me an Undesirable Discharge. I was in the service for eighteen months and I had something like thirty-some days. I don't know if you want to put all of this down. I don't particularly care, but, that's the experiences I had. I was, people call it bitter, but I just call it angry.

**Rosana:** Were there any other Mexican-Americans or Chicanos, drafted at the same time? And serving at the same place with you?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah, but most of the people that I met in the service were, a lot of them from L.A., Southern California, and I don't know that they all had the same thoughts that I did. I was the only one that I remember that was definitely saying that I would not fight. And those were my reasons. I didn't believe this was a free country or that there was equal opportunity. I just, from the core, to this very day, I believe this is about one of the most racist countries in the world. I believe that and I, you know, live with that. My kids think that I am awfully hard nose, but hey, it's been with me too long and I still see it. What you say is a subtle, I call sophisticated racism,

you know. It's just a different way of doing it. The anger and the racism and the hatred for people that are the non-Whites in this country, is just as strong as it was when I grew up. It's just that they hide it and they are just bigger hypocrites than they were. I have more respect for the redneck racist that lived in those days, cause they called you a, you know, I never heard the word Spic until I came to California. We were Greasers. Greasers and uh, what else, a couple of other names. Greaseballs, cause they used to call that out on the street. I used to walk down Main Street in Phoenix and you see a gang of White kids, you know, and they just turn around and they stop and call you "hey Greaser" or the Blacks they would call "Niggers" just right out in the open. I mean, people didn't hide it then. At least you knew where you stood. Now, you develop friends and slowly, it takes a while to realize that they don't like you. But they hide it from you. Go on, but maybe I'm going on and on about racism and that's the whole thing with me. It still is a movement today to throw us down, but I'll be right up there, because that is how I feel.

**Rosana:** Tell me what happened after you, you were discharged from the service. Did you come back to Sacramento?

**Mr. Reyes:** I got married, actually, my hopes, when I got drafted was that I had no intention of serving, I had no intention of fighting, and I had met my wife, in 1950, in late 50, and I was drafted in late 51. And I had, I was at the time, my mother was working part-time and she was getting old and I was helping to support her. And I was applying for a dependency discharge at the time and that's one of the reasons I got married was that I figured that if I had a wife also and a mother and a little brother, that that would help me get a dependency discharge, because I didn't want to serve. And I had already been working in a cannery, I had established my first

year there, and when I went into the service and I got my discharge, I came back and I went right back to work for Libby's. It is the only job I ever had.

**Rosana:** So I take it that your mother had another child who –

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah. She adopted a little boy when I was 18 years old, right, a couple of months before I came to California, my mother adopted a little boy that this lady had who lived across the street from us. She was going to give him away and my mother just brought him home in a little cardboard box in the middle of the night. She woke me up and said, “look what I got.” And, then I had this little brother, and he is 35 years old now.

**Rosana:** So at this time, when you were drafted into the service, and then you came back to Sacramento, did you live in the same place? With the same house?

**Mr. Reyes:** Same neighborhood, yeah, I only had –

**Rosana:** Where was that?

**Mr. Reyes:** 12<sup>th</sup> and E, right around 12<sup>th</sup> and E. My, we lived at 12<sup>th</sup> and E for the first two or three years and then we, my sister moved on to 8<sup>th</sup> and E and I think my mother had an apartment next to her, and then I was in the service, I got married, when I was in the service and then I came, when I got out of the service, I just moved into the first apartment we had was at, 27<sup>th</sup> and F Street. We rented an apartment there. And my second child was born there. And then we

found an apartment in a low, what is now South Side Park, there used to be an old housing project there. Across the street from the Helvetia Housing Project. Which was the brick buildings across the street from South Side Park. The soccer field that is now, and what is it, the X and Broadway, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, or, yeah 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, Broadway and X, is where the housing project was before they tore it down to make a soccer field out of it.

**Rosana:** And that was a federally funded housing project or?

**Mr. Reyes:** Probably. Because it was low income housing. I think we were paying \$35 a month for a two bedroom apartment. And then I had an opportunity, my goal was, here is the only thing, the move that I wanted to make was I knew what quality education was. I didn't want my kids being taught in a neighborhood where I knew the teachers had this attitude that I had experienced, the resentment towards minorities. And I figured, if my kids were going to go to school, Washington School, which was all Mexican, almost at the time, they were going to get the same kind of treatment that I had received in growing up in Phoenix. And, my goal was, the first chance I get I want to put my kids in a neighborhood where there are these White people who get the best quality education in this country and whether they like it or not, they are going to have to teach my kids in the same way. And that is my reason for moving into this neighborhood.

**Rosana:** Which is, what is the name of this neighborhood now?

**Mr. Reyes:** East Sacramento, I guess they call this from Alhambra on up, I guess they call it East Sacramento.

**Rosana:** And you are how many blocks off of Alhambra?

**Mr. Reyes:** We're like three or four blocks east of Alhambra. And, we, my kids, all my eight kids have attended the David Luben School which is probably one of the best schools not only in the city, but probably in the United States of America. They've got quality of education here, and it's where all the rich kids go. [gleefully] The Warren family, you know Earl Warren, Earl Warren, Jr., [son of former Governor of California and the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1950s and 60s] used to live down the street. My oldest daughter, all of his kids, paired off with all of my kids. His oldest is the same age as my oldest, and his oldest kid was in the same room, and same class with my oldest daughter and the second oldest had one of the Warren kids, the third oldest had one of the Warren kids, and so, I'm only making this comparison because this is what I was looking for. I was looking for an education for my kids in a place where they were going to pay attention to them the same as they would either a Warren or a doctor's kid or a lawyer's kid. The key as far as I was concerned, was quality education. And basically I figured that the problem that I had and the only way to resolve it is to teach my kids the written language. By that, I meant that they should learn to read and understand the English language because that is the only way they are going to conquer the biggest obstacle they have in America today, is to learn, the same way as the, what we the Blacks are, the Anglos. First of all, I had one or two or three goals. Get in the right neighborhood; secondly, make sure that you put them in the right school, where they're going to get a quality education; and most

important, make sure that they are on good reading programs, so that they can relate to the language so that when they go to school they won't have the problem that I had. I didn't understand what I was reading half of the time when I was a kid. So everyone of my kids, I got them interested in reading without forcing it on them, interested enough so that it was fun to them and so they would continue it on their own, and they did. And, everyone of my kids was a good student. Darn good students, they didn't have any problems in school.

**Rosana:** How do you feel about Bilingual Education? Was that an alternate for your children?

**Mr. Reyes:** My kids didn't need it. One of the mistakes I made in life was I didn't teach them any Spanish. I was so involved in making sure that they had the right tools for this society, and the right tool to me was understanding the language first of all, and I figured that if they had to learn Spanish, they could always learn it later. It was a stupid way of looking at things, I think, on looking back now you know, but basically it, that was my philosophy, that they conquered the language and that would be their primary tool in bettering themselves.

**Rosana:** Tell me about some of the differences between the 12<sup>th</sup> and E and 8<sup>th</sup> and E area and the South Side area.

**Mr. Reyes:** The differences that I see and what I have learned in talking to some of the people that I have hung around with, that lived in the south area, here in Sacramento, say South Side Park. Over in the 12<sup>th</sup> and E it is primarily just Mexican people. A lot, most of them are people that came from Mexico. That was an experience to me too. You see, I grew up in a totally, I

won't call it Mexicano, I consider myself a Chicano, a Chicano, a lot of people have a problem with that. Basically, where I grew up we were Chicanos. I never knew people from Mexico, except our parents. Once in a while, there would be people visiting in Phoenix that came from the other side, that didn't speak English and we knew that they had just come from Mexico, that they were really visiting. Those were the only people that I knew from Mexico. Up until the time that I came to Sacramento and there is an abundance here of people that come from Mexico. They've got groups from Jalisco, they've got groups from you name it, different parts of Mexico. And they all seem to congregate together. They all attract one another. The Jalisco group is, mostly Jalisco is around 12<sup>th</sup> and E, and there are other people from Mexico, from other parts of Mexico that, I think they seek each other out. And then, when you, that's how I see the 12<sup>th</sup> and E area, as mostly people from Mexico with their children now growing up as Chicanos.

**Rosana:** Today, the same as back in '49.

**Mr. Reyes:** Exactly. Exactly. It's just a new generation, they're coming here, I don't know they just come in groups. They are always coming here. You see people that are just arrived. People that have been here two years. People that have been here 15 years. Some of the kids were born in Mexico, and are being raised here. That's how I see the 12<sup>th</sup> and E area. Now, the way I see it, what I have learned about the South Side Park area, it was probably the most international area in Sacramento. Some of the kids that I grew, that I later got to hang around with, in my later years. For instance the Senna family. These five brothers and a couple of sisters, who were Portuguese, who grew up in the South Side area. I learned most of the history of the South Side area from them. Uh, but from other people as well, that were raised there and

from what I understand it had groups of Japanese, groups of Chinese, groups of Italians, groups of Portuguese, Mexicans, and it was just an international mixture there in the South Side area. And they all hung around together, and they played together.

**[Tape 1, Side 1 ends]**

**[Tape 1, Side 2 begins]**

**Mr. Reyes:** You have maybe not the mixture you had then, the freeway was responsible for a lot of the housing being torn down and I guess the times have changed.

**Rosana:** When did the change start happening?

**Mr. Reyes:** I'd say the changes started happening like in the 50s. I think people started moving out of their neighborhoods a lot in the 50s. Not only in Sacramento, but I think all over the country. People started migrating from one place to the other more. What it is, where compared to say the 40s or before, people were pretty stable, I mean. They pretty much stayed in their own, in their own part of the country. Except that there was people always migrating to California, but, I think the Second World War changed all that a lot. In that people started moving all over the country to different places, maybe because of employment, maybe because of being in the service. The service had a lot to do with people moving from one part of the country to the other. And I think the real changes in our society were in the 50s. Although I think the real, real change came in the mid 40s, or right after the Second World War when I think

that the mother left the home. And I think that changed the whole structure of America. It became what it is today. You know, I think that we are a totally different race of people now because the mother isn't in the home, or one of the parents isn't in the home. It doesn't have to be the mother, but before then, there was always one parent at home. And I think that maybe that is why we have lost that stability within the families that we had before. The unity, the family thing as they call it.

**Rosana:** Did you feel that that was the case in your family where your mother worked, as well as your grandmother and therefore there was not necessarily a parent home?

**Mr. Reyes:** Well in my case, my mother worked out of necessity, and there was no father in the home ever. I grew, I pretty much grew up, when I wasn't being raised by my grandmother, and that was like I said, moving from one house to the other, that, when I lived with my mother, I pretty much did what I wanted. There was nobody around. My mother was always working. When she wasn't working she was always going somewhere, so I pretty much, I was a very, very much a loner all of my life. I grew up pretty much by myself, and, I was home alone a lot. Me and my sister. Then she had her friends. My sister was very developed for her age, so she always hung around with older kids, and it was like, instead of being just a year older, she was like four or five years ahead of me. You know, in attitude and behavior. I always looked up to her, she was my first hero.

**Rosana:** So when you did return to Sacramento, after your military discharge, you were married and so who lived in your household?

**Mr. Reyes:** Just my wife, and at that point we had our, in 1952, my first child was born, my oldest, and I got out of the service in May of 1953. So, I set up my own little family and my own household and later on, had the rest of the kids.

**Rosana:** How did your mother make her livelihood?

**Mr. Reyes:** She mostly, up until the late 40s she worked in a laundry. And then when she moved to Sacramento, and we had our own place right before I got married, my mother was working in the canneries. It was like a cannery, food processing. She worked at the, what they called the Sacramento Food, Frozen Foods which was over on 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and C Street, D Street, in that area, they had a big frozen food plant there, and my mother used to work there until she retired. I don't even remember when, sometime in the mid 50s.

**Rosana:** Did you arrange that job for her? When she came from Arizona to Sacramento?

**Mr. Reyes:** No, no, she got it on her own. I think my sister might have had something to do with it. My sister was working at the Del Monte Cannery and at Sacramento Frozen Foods. I think by word of mouth people learned where they could get employed here at the time. It wasn't like it is today, people could go work in the canneries. There was a multitude of food processing places. Not to mention, the railroad, not to mention the empty can plants that they used to have in this area. Which employed a lot of Mexican people.

**Rosana:** The empty what?

**Mr. Reyes:** Empty can plants. Can manufacturing plants. That's what they were. They used to make cans for the canneries. And there is a history there about what happened to Mexicanos too, that worked in these can plants. After the can plants were closed, then the Mexicanos were put out, all the new can plants that opened hired 99% White people. So the Mexicans were left out in the cold again.

**Rosana:** Before we get even further into the canneries, the issue about the canneries. Let me just ask you, who lives in your household now?

**Mr. Reyes:** Ok, right now in my household there's the lady I have been married to, although we separated ten years ago. Maybe I should explain. Part of what has happened because I got to organizing this and that, I spent all those years in organizing. I never got paid, ok? I never made any money in organizing. I did it because I wanted to and I don't think anybody owes me anything for it. I did it because I wanted to do it. And, but I paid a price. The price was that I lost my job in 1972. They kicked me out. And the only money I have earned in organizing was, when I went out and looked for funding. The only kind of funding you get for radical people like myself, or radical organizations, really radicals as they call us, come from radical foundations. Radical foundations see you as a person that is involved in social change, right. And they say if you are so interested in, it's basically what they are saying when they want to fund you, is if you are so interested in social change, when you submit your proposal what we want to see is people involved wanting social change and willing to sacrifice. What we don't want to see in your proposals is big salaries for the director, or big salaries for the secretary, or

monies for people. What we want to see is monies for a movement, and so basically every time we submitted a proposal to any of the radical foundations, that's what we would have to live with. Out of all the funding that we received, and we got a hell of a lot of money over the years, I received a salary for a period of about maybe fifteen months. And the salary was very low, I think the proposal stated that nobody would be paid more than \$700 a month, plus maybe \$50 for dependents. Ok. At the time, I remember that at the time for a while I received \$1000 a month for a period of about 12 years, 12 months, because I had \$700 coming and at the time, I think I had six dependents which gave me \$50 for each, another \$300 which gave me a top salary of \$1000 a month for a period of about 12 months, and then I had like three months that I received \$700 a month. But let me tell you this, we had some of best labor lawyers in the country working for us. A guy by the name of Tony Ganson who gave Cesar three years of his life. The guy could have been earning probably a quarter of a million dollars a year, working as a labor attorney, with his talent. He was probably one of the most beautiful people I have ever met, who was a socially conscious individual who worked for us for \$700 a month. None of our lawyers ever got more than \$700 a month, and that included me.

**Rosana:** So how did that impact your, your family life?

**Mr. Reyes:** If I took you through this house and you saw it, you would understand half of my story. This house is just falling apart. I mean we had the Housing Authority come over here, they said and I had those people tell me, have Rub, if they ever came in here they would condemn it. Perhaps you noticed our roof was opened for a period of maybe 18 months where the water was just coming in through the walls. All the walls are stained, we haven't had any

money to do any repairs. So well, what basically, what it did was destroyed me economically. I mean, finally the Housing Authority, after dealing with them for about 15 months, had, really putting a lot of pressure on them, they finally came up with \$1,500 to put a new roof on my house so it wouldn't leak anymore. But I have been on their case about getting a low interest loan for the last three or four years. Trying to get some money, the end result of my work is that I have been blacklisted. What can I say?

**Rosana:** During the time that you first started your organizing, you still had a full household? Your children were still living here?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah, all of them were here.

**Rosana:** And is that when you and your wife separated?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah.

**Rosana:** But, but now the fact of the matter is that there is some kind of reconciliation.

**Mr. Reyes:** No. What has happened is that economically I can't go anywhere else. So that's my, my little house. We, we never got together again, you know. It was something that changed our whole lives. She never could understand why I was in it.

**Rosana:** Well tell me about what you were doing. What –

**Mr. Reyes:** Organizing.

**Rosana:** What led you to the canneries and then what happened in your special case that, that mushroomed?

**Mr. Reyes:** Actually what happened in my case was that in working in the cannery from day one I realized one thing that was different. There was a Portuguese, the Portuguese people, there was the old Germans, there was the Italians, there was the Espanoles, and the Yugoslavians, ok? They were the predominate groups in the canneries. Let me preface this, I have to preface all of this now in going back. See the canneries in the 30s, during the Depression, everybody was having a hard time in America employment wise and feeding their families. The canneries were operating and there were people earning damn good money in the canneries, and I'm talking about the Italianos, the Germans, the Espanoles, the Portuguese, Yugoslavians, those five groups were hey, they were having a ball in the canneries. They were making good money. There were stories circulated, that, they were told to me by the old cannery workers, where some of these people were making \$100 a week during the Depression. They had a lot of piece work, and these people were running around like it was a rat race. These guys used to work 12 to 15 hour days of course, that's how they made their \$100 a week, which was like maybe a \$1000 a week today, or maybe more. These people were making gobs of money. The whole system, the whole cannery system was so heavy here in Sacramento and other cannery areas, is that they had deals with the state, where the state had a special, had the cannery workers in special categories were they, the cannery workers were never referred out to other jobs so that the canneries would have an

available workforce, whenever they wanted one. Workers were scarce. The kind of workers that they were looking for. Their, their experienced workers were so scared, scarce, that canneries had cabins for their workers. Libby's used to have a row of cabins there, in order to entice the workers to stay with that particular company, Del Monte's did the same thing. All the canneries in the area. But again, this was before the Mexicanos moved into the canneries. Ok, all of this was happening in the 30s. They made good money, they worked hard, and a lot of the old guys tell me about how they ended up as cripples because they used to jump off the can stacks. They use to, it was a rat race, they used to work awfully hard and awfully fast. And there was always, this one individual always there to just push them to go faster and faster. It was, I call it a rat race because that's the best description that I can think of. Ok. Consequently what happened, this is a group of cannery workers that were the old people ready to retire when I came onto the scene in the canneries. These were people that made a lot of money, most of the old cannery workers, that particular group, that I'm talking about, that made a lot of money, most of those people that I worked with for the last ten years that they were employed in the cannery and retiring at that point when I was earning my seniority in the cannery. Everyone of them, you know, when they talked about how many houses they owned, all of them were well off. Cannery workers, the group ahead of me, were people who made damn good money in this town. They were the people that were apartment house owners, property owners, multiple house owners. You know, they made off really well. Ok. The reason I'm prefacing all of this is because it is very important to remember that these are the groups, the White groups, that were the group before the Mexicans moved into the cannery. Ok, some time, in it must of happened right after 1941, right after the Second World War, ok? It's very important that people understand that all of a sudden, these same cannery workers that were doing so well in the canneries, the Second

World War started and all these defense plants started opening up. Airplane factories, ship factories, in San Francisco, San Diego and then there was what was it, there was all of these jobs that had opened up in what they called the Defense Plants, that was the description that they gave the ship factories and the, all the factories that were producing for the war effort. Now the wage scale in these factories, in these defense plants as they were called, was much better than the pay in the canneries at this point. So what happened, the reaction was that the White people started leaving the canneries. All of these Italians, all these Portuguese, all of these Germans, and all these Espanoles started leaving the canneries to go into Defense Plant work. So what happened? At that point there was all of these Mexicans. The Bracero program had been started, or maybe right before the Bracero program, but they were bringing in the Mexican workers into California at that point, and a lot of the agricultural workers, say some of the jobs are opening in the canneries, let's go. So consequently, sometime in the early 40s the Mexicans started moving into the canneries. Where they weren't employed before. And, I like to relate this to the mentality of the White man, you know. The mentality of the White man was that hey, all of a sudden we don't have White people in the canneries anymore. All of these Mexicans are taking over. It's time for a change, a radical change. So, it just shows you what White people think of other people, you know, and, and basically what they see the Brown people as in this country, the White people I'm referring to. See the Brown people as hey something lesser. That's definitely very obvious. It has been to me all of my life. That they didn't feel that we as Mexicans, or Chicanos, were worth as much as the Whites that were working there before. And that's when they made their big radical move. They went out, the canneries went out, at that point, I might say, that all of these White workers that I have mentioned, the Alemanez, the Italianos, and the Espanoles, and so on were very well represented in the canneries. I heard stories where

whenever a grievance wasn't resolved in the cannery. In those days, there was always a what they called a plant agent, who was in charge on behalf of the union of seeing that the workers were treated right and that the bargaining agreement was lived up to by the canneries. If there was ever a grievance, you and if it wasn't resolved soon enough to suit him, he'd just go call the workers and say everybody sit down, or everybody walk out. And, hey they would resolve the problem right away. Canneries couldn't take that kind of pressure. Because the unions were strong, they were heavy, and they were heavily supported by the employees. Now, this radical change, all the Mexicans come in and now all of the Mexicans are there, and now all of a sudden the cannery owners say hey you know, we can't pay these people as much, it's time for a change, and so what happened was that the cannery owners went out, get this, they went out and solicited the Teamsters Union. By the way, I have a history of that here, and I'll let you read it later.

**Rosana:** Thanks.

**Mr. Reyes:** And that will give you specific and more information about what I am talking about. Then they decided that hey, we're going to get a union, do we have a union for you people, ok? [Sarcastically] So they call in the Teamsters and the Teamsters in violation of the laws of this country, see, these people already had a bargaining agent, the unions, the ILWU, the old Tobacco and Arms union and probably the one that you mentioned, were representing these workers. Cannery people didn't want them anymore, because hey, now we've got Mexicans here, now we can make the kind of moves, and I think the government, itself, being the racist government that it is, allowed the canneries to bring in the Teamsters in violation of the laws of the land. So they went out the back door, brought in a union and said we're not going to deal with the ILWU

anymore, or any of these other unions and the people themselves, said “hey you know, we’ve got laws to protect us.” So the canneries used their political power, instead of having some kind of a court order, that said, “hey, that’s in violation of the labor laws of America, you can’t come in and try to represent people that already have a bargaining agent. You have no business here, get out.” This is what the courts should have said. But instead, what they said was “ok, let’s have an election. Let’s have an election, we will have the people chose whoever they want to represent them.” That’s when the bloodshed started. The Teamsters went out in the street with their goons, beat up people. There was violence all over the place. And the election was won by the cannery workers to permit them to continue with the representation they had. And you know what the canneries did? They closed the doors on the workers and they said, basically what they were saying is, “we are going deal with the Teamsters whether you like it or not.” And they did. There was a hearing by the Labor –

**Rosana:** National Labor Relations Board?

**Mr. Reyes:** Exactly. They had hearings and they had investigations and hey, the Teamsters won. In violation of the law, in violation of ethics, morals, what have you, they were permitted to stay and the canneries basically said, “hey, we deal with them, and if you don’t like it go find work somewhere else.” A racist act on behalf of the canneries and the government itself, for allowing them to do that. So now the Teamsters come in and ever since the Teamsters have came. I mean there have been nothing but sweetheart contracts, violations of everything you could think of in the bargaining agreement. Essentially, what the canneries did was they could do anything they wanted and the tradeoff was that the Teamsters would be allowed to run the

retirement plan, the retirement money, the pension plans were given to the Teamsters, in a tradeoff. And in return, the Teamsters would allow the canneries to do whatever they wanted to do, in violation of the agreement. And that is basically what happened when I came in, by the time I came in by 1949, the Teamsters were all ready in. It didn't take me long to find out that we didn't have a union when I came to work there. And basically what it was is that when I came to the can— to work in the canneries in 1949, the attitude of the foreman and the people that were in charge of the canneries was one of a Simon Legree personality, you know, the guy with the whip, pushing people, pressing people to work harder, and if you went to the union you just, just got a deaf ear. Nothing was ever done. So consequently, the attitude of people in the canneries was one of a slave driver, with no respect. Everything was done through yelling and shoving and pushing. When I formed a committee in 1969, they were still grabbing people by the back of the neck. You know, and running them hey, just like a little school kid. Hey you get over there and grabbing them by the arm, physically handling people. They were doing that still in 1969, when I came into the scene and I, my experiences were, I had an aggressive nature, growing up in the environment that I did, so nobody pushed me around. And I didn't get much flack from many of the people, because they only did it to me once. And, I was pretty much left alone, although I never got promoted, I never got the opportunity that the White kids did, I was never given anything that I didn't fight for in the cannery. But basically, the attitude of the White guy, that was in charge, since, you know, very few Mexican foreman, if any, very few Mexican mechanics, very few minorities, and Blacks were the last to be hired and first to be fired. And at the tail end of all the machines where all the hard stacking is done, it was always a Black guy. When the season started, there was always this saying, hey, we're getting, starting line number 9, get us a couple of "niggers" or "buckers." So at the tail end of the machines were

the Black guys doing the stacking, doing the dirtiest work. Ok. That's basically the scene that I came upon in 1949, when I came to work in the canneries.

**Rosana:** So what did you do, exactly? Can you tell me?

**Mr. Reyes:** Basically, what started me on it, there was a lot of Mexicanos like I said. There were Chicanos in the canneries, but it was the Mexicanos that didn't speak English that had the biggest problems. You know. What happened, the way that they would beat the Mexicans and deny them the opportunities, was that they would tongue lash them. And most Mexicans, not being able to deal with the language, this was basically the biggest weapon that the canneries had against the Mexicans. Was that they would tongue lash them and embarrass them. So the next time you had a complaint, you know, it was very embarrassing to stand there and have a White guy tongue lash you. They would lower their heads and go back. So, little by little, people started coming to me, "would you go up and interpret." It was actually that they were afraid to deal with, with the particular problem. And I, out of nowhere all of a sudden, I find myself representing this guy and that guy on particular problems so, hey consequently, I became an obvious troublemaker. Uh, "what are you doing representing, it's none of your business, you know, Lopez can resolve his own problems, you know, we don't need you." "Hey I'm just here as an interpreter, he asked me to come in you know." But basically I was fighting his fight for him.

**Rosana:** But, what was your job? Hold on, let me.

**Mr. Reyes:** Well one of the first things that I did was, when I came to work in the canneries, I was willing to work 24 hours a day, I wanted to make as much money as I could. And I was an awfully hard working person, and I started to take it upon myself to learn the things that you have to learn in order to make more money. And I started, on my spare time, I really would take it upon myself to learn everything I could about the machines, about everything. So I became the youngest guy in the warehouse to have a crew working for me. Because there was a lot of people who didn't want the responsibility, because of the pressures involved. People yelling at you all the time. And you know, the line stopped hey heaven help me boy, because you have not only your boss, but the plant manager there, wondering why the line has stopped. So people, a lot of people couldn't take that kind of pressure, so there was a lot of old timers that were there, 10, 15 years working there, that never got to operate machines because of the pressure. And that's what I took on. I immediately jumped into every position I could get, and I became very good at it, because I was the youngest guy to run the most important lines in that particular warehouse and different lines, different size cans, different machineries. I learned it all there, the year after I was there. I had guys that had been there 10, 15 years working on my crew, I was a 20 year old kid.

**Rosana:** Describe to me your first job.

**Mr. Reyes:** The first job I ever had in the cannery was running a casing machine. That's the machine that pushes the cans, you fold a piece of cardboard, put it over a particular metal box and the machine itself would push the cans out into the case and it would fall down and run right into to the line into a sealing machine that would seal the case. The first job I ever had was what

they call a caser, running a casing machine. From there I went to what they call a higher pay, label machine operator. I learned to do that the first year I was there, and I became a label, and then you have a crew. See, you are the head of the crew as the label machine operator. Then you have a caser, and various other people that, that work on your crew, so you are the head of the crew at that point, being a label machine operator. It means you have three or four people working as your crew. And it pays better. And then there were,

**Rosana:** But what is the pay difference? Excuse me.

**Mr. Reyes:** It went, that was what they called, brackets went from one to five or six. Most of the general labor done in the cannery is like a bracket four. Then there is a bracket five, which paid less. I can't remember what the pay scale was in those days, but maybe there was 30 or 40 cents difference between each bracket.

**Rosana:** Do you remember at all what you first started getting paid at?

**Mr. Reyes:** A little over a \$1 an hour, maybe a \$1.30 or something an hour. In the 40s which was pretty good pay in those days.

**Rosana:** And this was all at Libby's?

**Mr. Reyes:** All at Libby's, that's the only cannery I ever worked for. Then there is more complicated machinery where you have some bigger crews.

**[Tape 1, side 2 ends]**

**[Tape 2, side 1 begins]**

The interviewer is Rosana Madrid, of the Sacramento History Centers Ethnic Community Survey. Ruben Reyes is the interviewee. He's lives on Santa Barbara Court in Sacramento. The interview was done on December 5, 1983. It is in English, and it is tape two of two. It covers work discrimination and organizing the United Cannery Workers Committee, and also the legal ramifications.

**Rosana:** There's more complicated machinery?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yes, for instance, there's maybe 20 to 30 label machines in the label room, they all pay the same what they call, bracket three. And, then there's maybe one big machine that labels bottles, it was a ketchup line they called it. It was a little more complicated than running a label machine. I got to work on that about the third year, I was working there. Usually it took a 15 to 20 year man, you know, running that machine and nobody wanted to deal with those things. I was always willing to learn, so I was running the ketchup line about the fourth year that I was working there, that had a crew of maybe 10 or 12 people. That paid a little bit more than bracket three. Consequently, it was in that period of time I was an advocate for a lot of people, you know, with their problems and I became known as a troublemaker. So in the winter time, part of the problem, and I don't call it a problem because it was an ideal situation for me, it was that

they usually used to segregate me from the working people, from the rest of the people. They would always find a little job for me somewhere in the warehouse where I'd be away from people. So, from about the fifth year on, until the time that I formed the committee, I was always being assigned these little jobs way out of the way. Back in the warehouse by myself, out in the yard somewhere, doing work, by myself, most of the time, because they always wanted to separate me from the rest of the workers. Because I guess I was an advocate, but they didn't like it.

**Rosana:** What was the ethnic breakdown of the people who worked at Libby's?

**Mr. Reyes:** At least 35% of the workers at Libby's at that point was Mexicans and Chicanos. Some people always claimed that we were 50% of the workforce. Statewide we might have been and at times at Libby's it was maybe 50%. It fluctuated.

**Rosana:** This was in the early 50s?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yes in the 50s.

**Rosana:** Until about when?

**Mr. Reyes:** It was in 19, in the mean time I had a lot of squabbles with the company on behalf of myself and on the behalf of other people because of a lack of representation, in violation of the bargaining agreement. I mean, it was like not having a union, you know. I don't care what

the problem, how you could point it out in the contract. Like with dealing with the laws in this country, you can basically go to the law and say hey, the law says this, go to court and have it resolved. It wasn't that way in the cannery, you had your bargaining agreement, it was spelled out exactly, what your rights were in a particular grievance and enforcing it was something else. You see, there was no enforcement. You got the run around, both from the union and the company. So, I was in the middle of a lot of squabbles on behalf of a lot of people. Somehow, sometime in 1968, I had already had, I don't know, a number of problems with the cannery dealing with my own personal problems. Because from a warehouseman, by having the problems that I did in the warehouse, the warehouse foreman didn't want me in there anymore so they wanted to kick me out of the warehouse, consequently, instead of kicking me out, they kicked me up to a better job. The only way they could deal with me at this point was to say "hey look, we have this little position open as a weighmaster." There is only one weighmaster to a plant, the head weighmaster. You are the guy that weighs the trucks that come in, you're the guy that takes the reports, makes out the reports, dealing with the commodity, the grading of the product, the shipping out of some of the, see you may receive tomatoes, but maybe they want to ship some of them over to Sunnyvale to another Libby plant. So it's basically very much like a bank clerk, except that instead of dealing with dollars, I dealt with pounds. I dealt with grading of the product. I dealt with shipping of the product, receiving of the product, the weighing of the product, the reports dealing with how many cases per ton were canned, those kind of things that you do as a weighmaster. There was only one problem, I didn't know any math. I didn't know anything about being a clerk, and I knew very little about writing. I only had an eighth grade education. Really, at that point I considered myself to have had maybe a third grade education. They asked me, "you are having problems in the warehouse, Ruben, why don't you take this

little job. Do you know how to run a calculator?" And I said yes. "Do you know how to do this?" Yes, I figured I could, there would be somebody there to teach me. I didn't know what percentages were. I didn't know what fractions were. I didn't know any of that stuff. So they gave me this job as weighmaster. Believe me the people that were supposed to help me, these [counter 050-051] [undecipherable] people that were around me, that were the people that were supposed to tutor me and help me and show me how things were done, were probably the biggest rats I ever met in my life. They resented me having that job. Nobody ever helped me. I learned percentages by reading the sports pages that dealt with major league teams. That's how I found out what percentages were, just by looking at it and figuring it out by myself. I learned how to run a calculator by watching people. Nobody ever wanted to teach me anything. The people who were supposed to teach me really gave me a hard time. And so, slowly by making mistakes, and trial and error, I learned. I was the head weighmaster for about ten years. Then other things started to happen. I became really good at it, and they started taking away the help that I had. I used to have two helpers. Pretty soon they took one of my helpers away. The next thing you know, the second helper was only there part-time. They were running me ragged. So I got into another hassle with the company. A prolonged fight, I took them to arbitration, three different times. Resolving the problem was a victory for the cannery every time. Even though you win, through arbitration, you lose. To give you an example, the contract said I was to get so much help, right? And I had this help. When they removed the help, they violated the contract. I took them to arbitration and the arbitrator says "you can't do this to this man, the contract says, he is supposed to have these helpers, he is supposed to get this pay, and you are supposed to do that. So" they said, "consequently, we're awarding Mr. Reyes a victory in this decision. He's right and we want things the way they were." But in the mean time, I had to work by myself, before,

up to the date of the arbitration, which is like a court hearing. They violate the contract, take away your help, and there is nothing you can do. You can walk out and quit and lose your job, or you can continue as best you can and work and hope that the arbitrator will compensate you for their having violated the agreement, right? Well I got the victory. He said I was right and that it was not right, and that the company had no right to remove my help and so, what does he do? They remove the guy that was earning \$3 something an hour, as my assistant and they removed another guy who was only there part-time who was earning \$3 something an hour, so here they remove two people that they were paying \$6 or \$7 bucks an hour to those two people, and the arbitrator awarded me an extra ten cents an hour, for doing the work of three people. So ok, so the next year, they did the same thing. Here, we had precedent, like the courts. The arbitrator had already ruled on the problem and said that “hey they weren’t supposed, they did it anyway.” I had to do the work by myself again the following year and the arbitrator came back and said “hey we just resolved that, don’t do that again. Ok, we’ll give you another ten cents an hour.” These are the victories that I won.

**Rosana:** But Libby’s never hired helpers for you?

**Mr. Reyes:** No. They went ahead and violated the contract and the union allowed them to. Instead of the union coming in and saying “hey we have precedent, it’s already been ruled on, you can’t, give him his helpers back right now.” The union never did that. “They said we’ll take it to arbitration for you.” I said “why go to arbitration when it has already been resolved.” “No, we got to take it to arbitration.” But in the mean time I have to bust my behind and do all of this work and it’s too hard. It takes a toll on you. So, I went to arbitration three different times on

the same issue, and each time I was given ten cents an hour. But the work that I had to do, the stress, the tension and, and the pressures, that I had to go through for three or four months in the mean time were tremendous. And they took a toll on me and finally, I said hey, you can take your weighmaster's job and shove it. So I finally ended up as a forklift driver. Instead of going up, I went down. As a forklift driver, I got moved up to the warehouse on Florin-Perkins Road and we started having troubles over there. They were eliminating helpers, and they were eliminating people, and they were forcing people to do, in violation of the contract, to do more work that the contract specified. Sometime in 1968, we had our fill. In the mean time they were hiring new White people to come in and giving them some of the higher paying jobs, and not allowing the Mexican workers to fill these positions. To upgrade themselves to get better pay, to get a better position. They didn't allow us to do that. Sometime in late 1968, I started organizing the workers in the warehouse, and it started out by having meetings with the company. Bringing in the union, and putting the pressure on, "how come you guys aren't representing us." We are allowing the company to bring in new workers to get some of the better jobs when we have Mexican people here that can fill those positions, put those White workers in their jobs and move the Mexicans up because they have been here 10 to 15 to 20 years. You are denying them that opportunity. So that 's how it all got started. My organizing in the cannery was when I started in the warehouse over at Florin-Perkins. I started calling meetings with the workers, calling meetings with the company, and the union and not getting any response. I didn't know anything about the EEOC, the Fair Employment Practice Commission, I had no knowledge about the structure of our society and the agencies that are supposedly available to us. But I started learning. Pretty soon, I started getting in contact with the government and state agencies and the Labor Department, and then saying "hey, we need help

here.” I didn’t know about Title VII, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If I would have known I could have saved myself a lot of work and gone directly to them, but I learned step by step. And eventually, what happened was, that I started getting in contact with some of the people that were in the agencies and started calling meetings, and then one day, they said “let’s call a major meeting, let’s call all the cannery workers from Del Monte, let’s call all the workers from Libby’s, let’s go down there and have a meeting.” At the time they were, the Concilio had opened up. They were over on 8<sup>th</sup> and F. I went to Concilio in search of a place to meet more than anything else, not because I needed their help, because I didn’t know what Concilio was all about at the time. I went down there and I said, “look, we need a hall because we are going to call a bunch of cannery workers together, Mexican cannery workers. Because we are having problems with the canneries.” So he decided to give us some space and some of the people there. Instead of just calling the people in Sacramento, we started saying “hey, let’s get the people in Woodland too. Let’s get the people up in Vacaville. Let’s get them all.” So we went out and we started inviting all of the cannery workers. The first meeting we had there were 60 people there. Which was at the time, it didn’t have any meaning to me, and there was 60 people and I didn’t even know what I was going to say. What the hell am I going to talk about? Here I call this meeting and I didn’t know what the hell I was going to do, except to talk about the problems and what can we do about them. So the people at Concilio were very impressed because nobody ever has 60 people at a meeting. They were impressed. It was the first meeting that there was 60 people, the second meeting was a 100 and some people. And we had to move into another auditorium. Concilio people were very impressed and they said “hey man, you’ve got something going.” At that point, things started falling into place. I had written to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and I had written to the Fair Employment Practices

Commission. So, at the very first meeting we had, some people from the FEPC show up, and the second or third meeting we got people from the government and at this point, everybody's impressed, you know, all the cannery workers are impressed. Hey we got people from the U. S. Government here. It was kind of funny now in thinking back and saying, Jesus it was so impressive to us, we didn't know what phony, how phony these agencies really were. We were just impressed because hey, the state government's involved, the federal government is involved. Hey we are going to go somewhere now. You know? By next year we'll have everything that we want. But we didn't know about the inadequacy or the phony, the pseudo agencies that exist in America. They are there for showcasing, and nothing else. So that's how we got started. The thing just got bigger.

**Rosana:** Tell me about who attended the meetings. Was there pretty much an even split of men and women?

**Mr. Reyes:** Mostly men.

**Rosana:** Mostly men.

**Mr. Reyes:** Originally, but we started this campaign, for every fifteen or twenty men, there might have been one women. And she was there, not because she was interested in the meeting, but you know how we Mexicanos are? We are probably more sexist than anybody else, you know, the husband, hey, they don't want their wives involved in any meetings, or, you know, they don't mind them working and bringing home the paycheck, but they don't want their wives

at these meetings where all these men were. Consequently, we said “hey, women have as many problems as we do, in fact the women might have more of a problem because at that time, women in the canneries, get this, were paid, they did the hardest work, they were relegated to only one area in the cannery. That was working on the belts, which is probably the hardest work that you can do in the cannery. Women were not allowed to work in the warehouses. Women were not allowed to run machinery. Women were not allowed to do any of the driving jobs. Which were easier and higher paying. You had a scattering of a handful of White women that had these little choice jobs. They were the cutest ones too, by coincidence. One hell of a coincidence that the only women that had these men’s paying jobs were these cute little women running around looking cute. The foremen would be patting them on the behind. Just a handful. At that time, at Libby’s they might have been two or three. Out of all the workers, maybe that had any kind of pay comparable to a man’s pay, women at the time that the committee was formed, get this, were three slots for pay. Three slots lower than the lowest paid man. Tell me about it. They were doing the hardest work. When you work on the belt, it is awfully hard work to stand in one place, the steam, the heat, or the cold, and this belt moving in front of your eyes for eight hours. Women used to faint up there. Plus the handling of the product itself was such that, women, the nurses, office, everyday before each shift was full of women, they couldn’t tend to all of them because they would come in and get bandaged up. What was happening was that they were handling the product coming in off the fields full of insecticides. Ok? They developed sores, what have you. Rashes. They thought peach fuzz, or the acid from the tomatoes. This is the explanations that the canneries gave. It took us years to find out what was really going on. It was all an educational process. But at the time we were so naïve and so stupid and so dumb about this, what was happening to these poor women. Why

they were bandaged up all the time, we would see these women with bandages all the way up to their arms. Because of the sores and the rashes, and what have you that they were developing and they were told nothing. It was actually the insecticides and all of the stuff that was coming in from the fields was infecting them.

**Rosana:** There were mostly women on the belt. Were there any men working ?

**Mr. Reyes:** Never.

**Rosana:** Never.

**Mr. Reyes:** Until after the Committee was formed.

**Rosana:** But before the Committee, then what was the breakdown between men and women in the plant overall in Libby's?

**Mr. Reyes:** Probably women made up 50% of the worker force.

**Rosana:** Were there any such things as Libby's hiring women who had taken time, who had resigned for maternity leave or who had taken time off to have a baby? Did Libby's hire these women back, or was it --?

**Mr. Reyes:** That's a whole story in history in itself. That's an acute question, ok. Part of the process in the canneries in the pension situation, was one where the biggest rip-off going on in the canneries was the rip-off of women's pensions. One of the biggest rip-offs going in the canneries that ideal situation for the Teamsters was, unlike the men worker, although to some degree it happened to the men, the rip-off of the pensions I am referring to, was for instance, men got to work year round. Women didn't. Men were usually called back. Women, they couldn't care less. And they didn't tell the women what their priorities were, or what rights they had in regards to the pension so that they could protect themselves. What would happen is that a woman would in a cannery, 20, 30, 40 years ok? What she didn't know that was that somewhere 20 years ago, or 25 years ago, she took time off to have a baby right? She took time off, so consequently when she did come back to work, she was never told, but at that point she had what they call a break in service. A break in service, specifically, under the bargaining agreement under the pension plan meant, one thing, the pension was now wiped out. You have no pension anymore because you have what they called a break in service. So you worked ten or fifteen years, before you had that baby and you had built up a pension. Now because you had a baby, and you had to stay out for a year or more, when you came back, you were like a new worker, you start all over again. You had a break in service, I'm sorry, now that money belongs to the Teamsters. The other contributing factor and the same respect is one where women, unlike men right, I know that it happened with my sister and I know it happened to a lot of my friends. A guy would say "honey, don't work this year, I'm doing all right, why don't you stay home this year, take care of the kids, or maybe she had a project." Ok fine, she didn't know that she was going to have another break in service and again she is going to lose everything. So consequently, there are a multitude of women in the canning industry who have worked 10 or 15,

whatever it was, or maybe a series of breaks in services. The first one or the second and third to have babies, or maybe one year she decided to go on vacation. She wasn't going to work that year, but never being told about the break in service stipulation in the bargaining agreement. She never protected herself. So consequently, you have thousands, and I'm talking about thousands of women in the cannery who worked for years, who periodically had a break in service and ended up relinquishing their pensions to the Teamsters, only because they weren't informed of their rights or educated in the break in service clause. That thought, Tony Ganston and I were sitting here one day right on that couch, one day when I was telling Tony what a rotten thing it was that only women had to experience that, some guys did, you know, some guys maybe went to another cannery or maybe they went to work in the fields for a couple of years. They experienced the same thing, a break in service. But basically the whole thing was structured 50% of the workers were women, so 50% of the workers at the cannery were relinquishing their pensions every so often. Consequently, the Teamsters were building up this tremendous pension fund which was theirs to keep forever. When I was explaining this whole thing to Tony Ganston, Tony says "I got a friend in San Francisco who works for the Senior Citizens Law Program who would be interested in this. Let's get together with him." So we sat down and we started talking about it. I started explaining the whole thing and he says. "Ruben, do you think that you could get in touch with some of those retired women?" And I said "Sure, hey man, as many as you want." So I started, it was a project with the cannery workers, but he gave me the assignments and I went out and I interviewed hundreds of cannery workers. A lot of White ladies, mostly White ladies. Who had worked and didn't know themselves, why they had worked for the cannery for 20 and 30 and 40 years, Rosana, and why they were only getting \$27.50 a month. Well, some got \$50 some dollars a month. A few. It depended on the amount

they had salvaged in other words at the tail end of their careers in the cannery. So basically we came to figure it out all the women we interviewed, I forget what the average pay, it turned out to be something like \$30 a month. The average pension for women that had put 40 and 45 years in the cannery.

**Rosana:** Why was it that you were interviewing mostly Anglo women? What happened to the Mexican women who worked for the cannery?

**Mr. Reyes:** I'm saying a lot of them were Anglo women.

**Rosana:** Oh.

**Mr. Reyes:** Because that's originally. Since they were the ones that were retiring. You see, we are talking about the ones that were retiring. This was done sometime in the early 70s. At that point you see, these were the women that retired from the cannery who had been there for all those years. The Mexicans hadn't moved in until a little later. So the bulk of the women that we interviewed were Germans, Yugoslavians, Russians, Espanolas, so on. There were some Mexican women involved.

**Rosana:** Let me ask you something, did the canneries make a definite distinction in their attitude and their treatment toward Mexicans and Espanoles? Although we speak the same language?

**Mr. Reyes:** Exactly, not only the canneries, but the Espanoles themselves. See these were, hey, one of the first things that I learned when I came to the cannery was a hell of an experience to me. Some guy was asking en espanol by the name of Lopez, because they have Lopez' too, and they have Sanchez and they have, you know.

**Rosana:** Reyes and Madrid.

**Mr. Reyes:** Yes. If you went up to a Spaniard and said "are you Mexican?" Hey man, that's like calling him a mother something or a – Hey, you better understand that an Espanole is not Mexican. They let you know because they have Spanish foremen. They had Espanoles that were foreman, foreladies, they had the better jobs you know. A lot of them were blond, blue eyed. Let's face it, they are Europeans. Don't you ever, ever call an Espanole a Mexican at the cannery. He will let you know right away. Some of the biggest rednecks I met in my life, some of the cruelest people I met in my life were these same Espanoles, who spoke Spanish. You see? So eventually, I've got some stuff here in regards to that suit. If you ever want to do some follow-up on that.

**Rosana:** Sure.

**Mr. Reyes:** Eventually we filed a suit –

**Rosana:** We?

**Mr. Reyes:** Well, it was done through the Senior Citizens Law Program out of San Francisco. I can't say the cannery workers. It was our work that brought it about, and it was our research that did it, but it was a law firm that had gotten grant monies from the government to do legal work for the elderly. It was through that program which Tony Ganslan (check out name) put us in touch with, that we did file a suit. They took it over, I did the research. I did the interviewing. I got the name plaintiffs and so on. But it was our work that got it in there. It was their legal work that brought it to its final thing and that was that there was some compensation involved. If you know how the law works then in class actions, I don't know how familiar you are with that. It is so prejudiced and so crooked and so rotten, you become a member of a class right? You might receive in the mail something that says you are a member of a class Alaneise versus California Canneries, Inc. What the hell does that mean to the average cannery worker? Now if you want to know what this is all about, you can come to the San Francisco District Court and read the consent decree or the Court decree. Ok? Tell me how many people do you think are going to jump on a bus and go down there and start reading and educating themselves on what they have coming. So, because of that stipulation, member of the class thing that they have, hey people never get compensated. It's all geared to benefit powerful people. The powers that be. The multi-nationals, the canneries, the Teamsters. That's what happened with our libel suits, I mean our court suits, that we became members of a class. Consequently, people never were informed what that class was. We spent a lot of time trying to tell them by holding meetings, but it was a monumental task.

**[Tape 2, Side 1 ends]**

**[Tape 2, Side 2 begins]**

**Rosana:** Testing, testing, one, two, three. Perfect. Before the tape ended, I wanted to ask you about the, how the Cannery Workers Committee got started, and the story behind that.

**Mr. Reyes:** Ok, I started to say that when I was working in the warehouse on Fruitridge and 68<sup>th</sup> they escalated their hiring practices to hire mostly White people into these higher paying jobs that I had mentioned, while denying the 10, 15, 20 year employee, the Chicano and Black the same opportunities to these higher paying jobs. I think I mentioned all the things that contributed to the pressures and the problems that we were experiencing. At that point it started out by my calling meetings between the workers that I worked with, the Chicanos and bringing up the problems that we were having and calling in the Union to some of these meetings and saying “why is it that Chicanos are being denied? And you are supposed to be protecting us.” The Union giving us the run around. Eventually the meetings getting bigger among the employees and eventually calling the meetings over at the Concilio, and I went on to say how I started getting education about the regulatory agencies that supposedly exist to resolved these problems, the FEPC, the EEOC, and the Labor Department and so on. Utilizing the auditorium over at the Concilio and the thing just got bigger and bigger and just snowballed. The next thing you know we were electing officers, calling these meetings between, among all the cannery workers, not only in the Sacramento area, but it included the Woodland workers, the Vacaville workers, Yuba City workers and so on. Everybody getting turned on by the presence, somehow being in the presence of other people with a similar problem, seems to instill courage in people. In other words, when people have a problem, and they’re alone, they tend to ignore it, but when

you sit in a meeting full of people and people are voicing their experiences and their rejections in the canneries, it seemed to give courage to other people to stand up and talk about their problem. Eventually we got to thinking, what are we going to do about it and who are we going to call? My getting in contact like I said with the regulatory agencies and all of a sudden, the state FEPC was showing up and the U.S. Government EEOC people were showing up. All of a sudden we were told that we could file charges against the companies for racial discrimination. That we were told by the Equal Employment Opportunity representatives that eventually we could take them to court and not only could we resolve these problems, but we could also get compensated for discrimination acts in the past and so on. Which gave a lot of people a lot of courage. The word started spreading. One of the problems that I, the first problem that I experienced that was a real turn-off to me was that I didn't know the tactics that the companies and the system uses. Once you start getting organized. The very first step they seem to take all the time is to co-op the people, the leaders. Right? The first thing they do is, if you can, if you want to kill any movement at all, is go out and deal with the leaders and give them favors. Because the first thing the company did was, we had an elected board. We were elected by, let me tell you, the membership and it was a very loose-knit membership. It wasn't anything that you had to sign a card or anything, if you came to the meeting, you were a member. So people that were coming to the meetings at this point, we were having meetings like every week almost. There were a lot of people coming from all over, because word was spreading that we were moving. You know how rumors tend to change as they go from mouth to mouth, and all of a sudden people were talking about compensation. If you were denied in the past you could get money for it. If you were a Mexican, now all of a sudden all you hear was, if you are a Mexican you can get money from working in the Cannery. Rumors changed. But anyway, some of those things turned

people on. Aside from just the fact that they were being discriminated and they felt they wanted to do something. We had an election night. After we had so many meetings, we really had no leaders. I was the guy getting up there and making the speeches and learning to relate to the people and explaining what we were trying to do. Also we had a loose-knit board and it was mostly Libby workers. They were at the head of the table, explaining because we were the most experienced at the time. We had taken, we had meetings with the cannery heads, they met with us and told us that they were sorry about what had happened, but they would try to see that it didn't happen again. That is the most we were getting out of them. But, at least we were the experienced people, the Libby workers. So we were the ones doing all of the explaining. When election time, somewhere along the way, somebody said "hey, look, you just can't go on representing the people. Nobody elected you, nobody made you leaders, nobody made you anything. What you ought to do is have an election." We said "hey, that's right." Because not only do we want an election, it seemed like nobody wanted to get up here and help. We need help. So we were for it. It wasn't a matter that we wanted to lead or that we wanted to be the ones representing the people. It was a matter of we were seeking representatives from every cannery. So eventually we had an election night. Nominations and so on, we were nominated as the board. There was no chairman or anything else, just representatives, and as it turned out the people that had been up front were the people nominated. And mostly Libby workers right? So on the whole, there was maybe six or seven of us that were nominated and we were all Libby workers. Because, and we didn't think it was right, we urged people to, like, you know, not only it isn't right that its just Libby workers up here. We have to have people from Del Monte. Nobody wanted to deal with it. They all wanted to participate but they didn't want to be up at the front. A lot of them because the word was getting out already. The threats were coming.

You are going to be fired. You get involved with that committee, the Union was already telling workers that “hey those guys are no good, you stay away from them.” “They are going to lose their jobs.” Fear was one tactic that they were using. Instilling fear in the workers. So people were reluctant to be part of the head of the committee. We had already earned our badge at that point. We weren’t afraid, we had already formed a committee. We knew what we were facing and at that point, we were ready to take them on, but we couldn’t find people from the other canneries to be members of the elected six or seven. But we left the door open. We said, it isn’t fair we feel that, we’ll fight, we’ll fight for everybody, but now that we’ve been elected, there’s another step we’re going to take that we want anybody that’s present that wants to participate and be members of this board, to come forward now, you don’t have to be nominated and you don’t have to be elected. We’re asking for volunteers to be members of this board. That was it, you know. So eventually, we ended up with a board of about seven people. They were all Libby workers. So, the first move that the company made, we had, at that point we had gone out and made a, done a recruitment thing with the women, so now women were coming, you see? So we said, we have to have women on this board, there was like two or three women elected. Ok?

The first move that was made by the company was, in fact I could show you. I dug this out, I dug this out to, it might help. But originally, these are the people that were elected and some of the pictures that were taken. A lady put this together one day, and she all of a sudden showed up one day and just gave it to me and said “look this is what I have been doing.” [Mr. Reyes is looking through papers and pictures.] There is pictures here of the original committee as it started. Ok, these were the original, very first meetings that we had. In the auditorium at the Concilio. These are all just cannery workers from all over. Ok. Then this guy is a Libby worker, so is

everyone, this guy just sat in. That's Luis Contreras, who used to work at the Concilio at the time. Ok. This guy got into some trouble. He became a troublemaker.

**Rosana:** Who's that?

**Mr. Reyes:** He's a guy named Leon, who came out of left field all the time. We didn't, we never understood what his story was, but he was always against everything that we were trying to set up. I mean he was –

**Rosana:** When did you first have your board elected?

**Mr. Reyes:** Let's see, our first board was probably elected in March or April of 1969. The very first meeting. The very first cannery workers committee that was ever held was held on February 6, 1969. That's the first major meeting that we ever had. Ok. I pointed out all of these people, there's a reason for my doing that. One of the first things they did was Frank Gonzales was given, he'd been wanting to be a clerk for a long time, ok? He worked in different jobs in the cannery warehouse. He'd been wanting to be a clerk for one of the better jobs in the cannery. He'd always been denied. The committee was formed, and all of a sudden Frank's a clerk. Victor was given an assistant position of the Department A, which was part of the warehouse. Doliteo, see we had no Mexican mechanics and those are the jobs that we were talking about that should go to everyone, you know. Mechanics is the highest paid in the cannery along with the foreman and so on. Doliteo was made a mechanic. Who else is there?

**Rosana:** Luis Colmanares?

**Mr. Reyes:** Luis Colmanares, oh, Luis Colmanares was made a foreman. Ruth Garcia was given a job in the personnel office. Molly Jimenez was, quit the cannery not too long after that so, I don't know that she was ever given any opportunity to be anything.

**Rosana:** How about Leon? The first guy.

**Mr. Reyes:** Leon is the guy that left. The guy that started problems within the committee. We never knew what, this guy was from left field, he didn't have any education, and he was very crude, you know, he we never knew what he was going to come up with. Or what his ideas were, but, he just didn't like us, you know. He took a dislike to all of us and came to the meeting and disrupted the meeting, we never knew what his goals were. We would always try to sit down and say "well what do you want, which way do you want us to go?" He didn't seem to know what he wanted, he just, I think he was just a confused guy, you know. Like I said, it was a blessing when we fought out that the guy had gotten into some kind of police trouble and he ended up fleeing Sacramento. Ok. This is what happened. Everybody – oh, I had applied for a foreman's job, I had applied, you know what I did? I came home three different times and I put on a suit and a tie, and I went back to talk to the plant manager, to apply for a better job. Because, all the twenty years that I was there, hey I'd go up there and I'd plead, "hey man you are bringing in all kinds of new guys, White guys, all the time than before, and we'd have to break them in, we'd have to break these new guys in to be our Foreman. I kept going up there and saying "hey, you know." They kept promising, "hey, you are a good worker, oh you are

wonderful, we have our eye on you, you'll do well, well there's an opening." This went on for a long time and I went, like I said, one step further, I came home and put on a suit, and a tie and went back and that's for an audience with the plant manager, and I said "look, I am here to apply for a foreman's job." And I was working there. And I did that three different times. They never would give it to me. But when the committee was formed, hey, all of a sudden I was good enough to be a foreman. They made me the foreman of the warehouse.

**Rosana:** So had did that effect the committee?

**Mr. Reyes:** What happened was that everybody that was given the job, hey they didn't want anything to do with the committee anymore.

**Rosana:** So, were there new elections?

**Mr. Reyes:** No, what happened was that, hey look, at that point it was dying out. They didn't want to hold meetings. These guys weren't interested anymore. Hey everything is going alright now. And all of this. I said "bullshit, nothing is going right now." You guys got better jobs, how about all of the other thousands of Mexicans out there? What about them? "Well they are going to change now because they know that the government is here and they know this, and they know, just phony excuses. See what happened was, was that they were co-opted by the system. That is exactly what I was leading to awhile ago when I said "that is the first step that the system takes, is to buy the leaders off." And that's what happened. So we had a Union election and I ran for secretary/treasurer.

**Rosana:** Union through the Teamsters?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah. We ran, this is what we did, we ran a slate of officers for the Union leadership offices. I ran for secretary/treasurer. I was not, I told them from the beginning, I didn't want to. Because the people are going to think, that hey that is all we were looking for. But hey, everybody urged me, everybody got on my case, that I didn't want to take it on. I said "hey, I'll take it on, but I just didn't want people." So I was nominated as a candidate for the secretary/treasurer, the highest position in the Union. I found out five years later from the government that they stole that election from us. The guy won by a very narrow vote. But they never told us what it was, and there was a lot of manipulating, votes being counted twice. By, the guy, the same government guy that was sent in to oversee the election was the guy who stole the Union, the election from us. Five years later I found out that I won, except that it was rigged. And I found it out from the government. I said, "if you guys knew all that why didn't you do something about it?" They said "well there wasn't, we're EEOC we have nothing to do with that, that is the Labor Dept." At any rate, what happened was that everybody was happy now they had positions and they didn't want anything to do with that committee anymore. You know what? I was angrier after they made me foreman, than I had ever been in my life. The gall, you know, that these people think that they can buy me. It made me very angry. I went back to the committee and I talked to everyone individually. I said "I want it from you direct, I said if you don't want to have anything more to do with the committee give it to me in writing." I got everyone of those people to give me a letter that they were resigning. That they didn't want, they were satisfied now. And that's when I really started working full-time. I started going to, after

they had given all of those people, everybody thought it was going to die down. Hey, I started calling meetings by myself. I went, and I made appointments to go, I was already a foreman, and I made appointments to go before the Human Rights Commission here in town, in front of the City. I went and I told them, I said “hey, you know, these people think that they bought us off and the government isn’t doing anything, the Human Rights Commission isn’t doing anything, we feel you know that there should be an investigation, there should be hearings.” I was asking for the whole ball of wax. I was representing myself as a, I had been elected chairman at that point.

**Rosana:** Of the?

**Mr. Reyes:** I was the Chairman of the Cannery Workers Committee at that point. So I was there as the Chairman of the Cannery Workers Committee soliciting help from the Human Rights Commission and still writing letters to the government and still writing to the FEPC. The next thing I know, I was getting a lot of write-ups in the paper. I was getting interviewed on T.V. People in Stockton heard about me. People in Modesto heard about me. People all the way to King City heard about me. Since the problem was so prevalent and something that was happening everywhere, I started getting letters and phone calls. “Hey come to King City, hey come to Stockton, come to Modesto.” While I was working there, I started traveling. I was using my own money. We didn’t have any money. We didn’t have anything. So I was driving my own car, using my own money and I went to Stockton and formed a committee there. Modesto, I went to Vacaville, formed a committee in Vacaville. Then I got this strong letter from people in King City, which is next to Salinas, 50 miles on the other side of Salinas. About

200 miles from here. Drove to King City, formed a committee in King City. All of a sudden I, but you know where I found out our power was? Because these people felt we were setting up a network. What they didn't realize was that these were small committees, 20-30 people when we first started out. But I was representing the committee as a big organization. Oh we have 1500 members in King City. We have 2000 members in Stockton. I kept [running?] my head off, because that was power, you know, and they were great. If I'd say "we only got five guys in Stockton," they wouldn't have paid any attention to me. So I was exaggerating the figures of the membership and saying that we had large representation of workers everywhere. Believe it or not, they swallowed the whole thing. They thought that we had a network of 2000 members in Stockton and you know, all these figures that I was handing out, they were accepting. The next thing I knew we did have a membership in those places that just grew. I was having, I couldn't keep up any more. We were having a meeting. I had to schedule the meetings so that I could be at each place on different days. So all of a sudden I was working an 18 to 20 hour day, full of energy. I never got tired. The next thing you know we had a network all over the state. Then we were calling statewide meetings. Were we had representation from each, hey boy, we got all kinds of publicity at that point. Things really grew. It really snowballed awfully fast. I moved to San Francisco and set up a committee in Hayward, in Oakland, you know, they were loose-knit in these places, you know, because they weren't growing yet.

**Rosana:** Now what did you do for income?

**Mr. Reyes:** Used my own money.

**Rosana:** You were still working as a foreman?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah.

**Rosana:** At Libby's?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah. And sometime in October of 1972, they rigged up a, some phony charge that I didn't show up for work on a Saturday.

**Rosana:** Libby's rigged it?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah. I showed up for work on October 2, 1972, and, but a lot of funny things were happening. They called two, they called two major, what they called task force investigations. What it is, is the EEOC sends in, this was in early 1969. They send in like a whole gob of agents into the Sacramento area. EEOC, to interview Mexican workers, to talk with the plant, to investigate the charges that we were making. It was a real task force thing. It scared the hell out of the canneries. Because that is when they really started making concessions. All of a sudden, they called me and said "Hey Ruben, things have been pretty bad for you people." He says "we feel that we should have some Mexican foreman, we feel that we should upgrade, having training programs for mechanics," All of a sudden, they started giving women opportunities. They had a training program where they put in like seven or eight Chicanos to learn to be mechanics. Opportunities, they started posting the jobs, which they had never done, to people that wanted to work in the lab. Recruiting Mexicans, actually to fill these positions. They wanted me to go out

and choose people that should be foreman. I said “hey, that isn’t what we are fighting for. What we are fighting for is very simple. Let me put it this way: to put it in a nutshell, if you would resolve one problem in the canning industry it would resolve 95% of our problems. The seniority rule. That’s all we are asking for.”

**Rosana:** What –

**Mr. Reyes:** According to senior, whoever has been here the longest is the person who should have the first crack at any position that is open. That’s all we are saying, nothing else. So, hey next thing you know we have five Mexican foreman in the warehouse. We had Ruth, was given you know, the job in the personnel office. Victor, there were, I don’t know, there were ten or so many Chicanos training as mechanics. All of these jobs, mostly at Libby’s see. But it also started happening at the other plants. Slowly.

**Rosana:** This is early 70s?

**Mr. Reyes:** Yeah, early 70s. By 1972, I showed up for work on October 2. That’s the first time that we went after money was we, contacted an agency called the Pacific Change. Which later, which originally was the Eldridge Foundation. That later changed to the Pacific Change. They had heard about us. They were very interested and they wanted to give us some money. They said, “hey, Ruben, we are going to give you \$10,000, to be used for, no salaries, just to be used for expenses, whatever you need.” And I said “fine.” So on November 30, on September 30, 1972, we had this meeting in San Francisco, with the Pacific Change people. They were going to

give us money. I got permission to go, I got permission to leave early the day before, which was a Friday, to meet with some of the people here. I had made all of these arrangements long before. So we went on Saturday, had the meeting, they gave us \$10,000. I showed up for work on Monday. All of this got in the paper because one of the people that attended was George Williams from the Sacramento Bee, who is now a very good friend of mine. We became very close friends because, George always says that the, he got kicked upstairs because of all the stories he wrote about the cannery workers. So George was at the meeting of the Eldridge Foundation People, and they gave us \$10,000. I showed up for work Monday, and they told me "hey, before you report for work they want to see you in the personnel office." I went to the personnel office, and they had hired a Mexican guy as the personnel man now. They brought him in from Chicago. He was half White. His last name was Perry. Well, when he came here, he changed his name to Jesus. So they claim, you know, so they could claim another minority. The guy was just a taco, a complete sell out. He handed me a piece of paper, and said that I was sign, that said that I had left without permission and hadn't shown up for work on Saturday. You know, I said, "hey that isn't true." So he said "Just sign it." So I tore it up and threw it on the counter. And he said "you're suspended." I said "all right." So I walked out, and I said, "so what's the next step?" He said "well, you'll here from us." So I was suspended. I came home and I never heard from, I don't know what happened, but all of a sudden I wasn't working anymore. That's when I formed the King City committee, and went to Oakland and Hayward. That's when I had a lot of time. That's when I really made a strong effort, to build up a strong committee in Modesto. At this point, that's when the committee really grew, when I had all of this time off. I went back. Then never called me to work, they kept telling me that, they weren't going to give me my job back. But, that they wanted to talk about it. My attorney didn't deem it

a necessary for him to be there, he kept putting me off, and I didn't want to go by myself, so eventually they sent me a letter that I had been fired.

**Rosana:** Huh.

**Mr. Reyes:** That was in October of 72.

**Rosana:** So, between October of 72 and say 76, what happened with the committee?

**Mr. Reyes:** It grew, it just slowly grew. Between 72 and 76 we grew by leaps and bounds. I mean, I couldn't even keep up anymore. I was doing it all by myself. What happened was that we went after real funding and we got \$50,000 from most of it Sears Robuck money from the Sears Robuck people that have, that were the owners or what have you. The whole clan, it's a family. We made presentations, at the St. Francis Hotel, in San Francisco, they had this big suite and this big table with, you know, we went and made this presentation, they gave us \$50, or \$55,000. We got money, we got like \$40, from them and then we got \$5, \$5 from different foundations all around the country. So now, but the stipulation was that there'd be no big salaries. So, out of that money, none of it came to me as a salary.

**Rosana:** Right.

**Mr. Reyes:** What happened was that I was paid for my gas, all I had to do was save the receipts and since I wasn't eating at home, one of the things was that I ate very well. I could eat

anywhere I wanted to, you know, which was always a Mexican restaurant. All I had to do was save the receipt. They paid for my travel, which was the gas, my food, and my lodging. Wherever I went. That's the money that they paid me. So now I had a free hand and the money to be able to stay wherever I want to organize. It was a really comfortable thing, even though I wasn't making any money. What little savings I had was supporting my family. So now we just really got big. I ended up by testifying at Senate Hearings in Washington, D.C. Uh, I ended up talking to the people at the Labor Dept., at the Justice Dept., you know, making trips to Washington. But the, it wasn't so much that they were helping, the publicity was what was doing it to us.

**Rosana:** What happened to the idea of having a board?

**Mr. Reyes:** Well the board, after the committee was form, after 1970, we had a statewide board.

**Rosana:** Ok.

**Mr. Reyes:** We had statewide meetings that we held in San Francisco. We held them in Sacramento. We held them in different places. Every city was represented. We had a board, board members coming. They had, every city where we had a committee had their own board. Ok? And then we had a statewide board with representatives from each city.

**Rosana:** So what was the high point, and what happened after that that caused the dissolution of the Cannery Workers Committee.

**Mr. Reyes:** What happened was that there were investigations made. I told you about the task force investigation made in 1969. Well in 1972, they called a major task force into Sacramento, that's when they fired. Right before they fired me. You see, the heat was on completely. They couldn't take it. They sent in a task force of 25 agents to the Libby plant and I don't know how many were doing interviews throughout the whole city, plus all of the areas where we had committees, they were doing these investigations. What the company did, was they took me out of the plant and sent me over to this warehouse, an empty warehouse over in north Sacramento. And I sat there for, I don't know, four or five weeks. I just sat there, eight hours a day. Nothing to do. While the investigation was going on. Ok. In the meantime, what happened was that, when I escalated all of my organizing and I had set up committees and we had a statewide board and the whole thing, the government came in after their investigations and they came up with what they called a Consent Decree. They rammed it through the Federal Courts in San Francisco. We were double-crossed by some of the attorneys that we had hired to represent us. At one point, we were trying to kick them out now, because they were

**[tape 2, side 2 ended]**

[no other tape found in box, no other tape mentioned in the beginning of this tape.]