

Tape 21a: Interview with Ramon (Raymond) Romero

Interviewer: Helen Krische

Date of Interview: 2006

Length of Interview: 48:08

Location of Interview: St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church

Transcription Completion Date: December 13, 2020

Transcriptionist: Emily Raymond

Interviewee's daughter Lupe states on March 1, 2021: "He let people call him Raymond and other Mexican Americans who knew him called him by his real name Ramon. So his full name is Ramon Enrique Romero Sr."

NOTE: Garbled sounds and static until about 16:00. Some words intelligible from 16:00-20:00. Tape clears up slightly after 20:00 but does not become mostly intelligible until about 21:50. I began transcribing what words I could manage to decipher at 15:48. I have left blanks (____) where the speech is distorted or otherwise unintelligible.

Raymond Romero (Interviewee): We'd get chicken and strawberries, corn...I remember, about twice...Next.

Helen Krische (Interviewer): Next? Just run down the question list, huh? Um, so you spoke Spanish.

RR: Well, yes. Oh, you want to know about that?

HK: Oh, yeah.

RR: Back in 1945 when I started kindergarten, the worst ____ that I ever got was Susan ____, the assistant ____ superintendent here. ____ E. Birch was the ____, and he'd go over to schools ____, show us what penmanship was. Write your name ____. Well, ____ he must have gotten out of the wrong side of the bed that day ____ there was about four or five of us. ____ I was the closest one _____. Grabbed me. "____ you little devil!" What can I do ____? I was scared. What you gonna do? ____ little kid. That was about the worst treatment I've gotten. ____ I'll let it go at that.

HK: So you just learned English?

RR: ____ Starting in the kindergarten, first grade I knew a little more. Second grade, a couple ____ finally graduated.

HK: Did you graduate from, um, Lawrence?

RR: From Liberty ____ Most of – most of these kids, uh _____. What was the other ____? Some of those – some of those kids ____ got to, uh, third grade. One or two families moved out of here. They moved to _____. Might as well stay here during the Depression.

HK: Yeah.

RR: Then, let's see. The only ones who – me and Marty were the only ones that were left ___ who came through junior high. I don't know what happened ___ in junior high. I couldn't quit because I wanted to get moving. I kept on going, got out of Liberty. But as far as I know, I was the first Mexican that graduated. What tickled me, you know, there was a library, had a picture of different people there. Who are these people? I seen their picture there ___. "Who's that guy?" Said: "We want to know." "Well, you're talking to him." [Laughter] ___ she put it down or what she done. That was the last time ___.

HK: ___.

RR: ___ question, where did you get those pictures? I said: "Well at that time if I remember ___ they were charging us 25 cents a picture. And that was in '41. '40 or '41. Times were hard, and, then, see, the war didn't start until December the 7th, 1941. Then everything started going up ___ Roosevelt, yeah, Roosevelt ___ everybody, not just the ___. Now, what's next?"

HK: Yeah. Well, when did you – where did you meet your wife?

RR: My wife –

HK: Was she from around here?

RR: Oh, you shouldn't have asked me [HK laughs]. I was getting off – I was getting off the train after my first discharge. Ah...my old girlfriend, she had, uh, moved to California. I didn't know it 'til I got home that, uh, she had moved to California. ___ Oh, well, God be with you. This, when I got off the train there in the Union Pacific ___, I got down and had my little seat back. And there she was with her mother and, uh, her brother, they were getting on the train. ___ I winked at her and she, well...that's how the relationship started. Every time I'd get a chance to see her, ___ they moved, they lived at, uh, little town by the name of Williamstown. You know where that's at?

HK: Billtown?

RR: Billtown.

HK: Yeah.

RR: Well, how come you call it Billtown?

HK: I just had heard it called Billtown. There's a Billtown, Billtown Café there, yeah.

RR: Yeah, on the highway now.

HK: Uh-huh.

RR: Sharon's Café.

HK: Uh-huh.

RR: Before that, there was, uh, I remember there was a store, a post office...and the superintendent of schools for Jefferson County lived there in Billtown.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: And the – the foreman of the railroad, he lived there. And, let's see, who else? There was only one black family that I can remember there. Wait a minute, I take it back; there was another __ the older black folks there, and the other one was the Lewises. Maybe you might have heard of them. The old man Lewis, the one that had, he had, uh, __ big old horse thing __ and he'd give it some milk: "Come on, honey! Come on, honey!" [laughs] __ Come on! Drinking milk.

HK: I'll be darned.

RR: So there you are.

HK: So, she was from Billtown?

RR: Yeah __ that time. Now I guess all the kids that can save a little money they bought a ticket and got out of there which I don't blame 'em. Used to go to the grocery store, they go to the grocery store. __ I've got a daughter who used to teach there, in fact, she was a librarian, well, she *is* a librarian, she told me, uh, yesterday? Yesterday was Sunday.

HK: Yeah.

RR: She said they were gonna move all the books out of the library there and build and move to Perry.

HK: Really.

RR: She's a – a librarian down in Perry. Yeah. By the way, my wife is a graduate of that little dinky school. __ I think she said there was four kids in her grade.

HK: Four? [Laughs] That is small.

RR: And there were just three families that lived there, Mexican families that lived there. The Chavez, the Jiminez...no, I guess there was just two. [Eudora?], I think he was in Topeka. I don't know why he got there to work, or when he worked.

HK: So the Chavez family moved from Billtown to Lawrence?

RR: Oh, do you know them?

HK: Mm-hmm. I think I went to school with, uh, I think Victoria was in my grade.

RR: Which Victoria?

HK: Victoria Chavez. Vicky.

RR: When I went to ___ it was just Trini, Lupe...Trini, Lupe... When I got back, we had to line 'em up. [HK laughs, murmuring] children. Chavez and the Jimenez. Jimenez was, uh, ___ Luis ___ Chavez. Salvador. He was there, but he – he moved, I think he was by himself. [Murmuring] Well, what's next?

HK: Well, I want to know a little bit about what kind of jobs did you work at?

RR: When?

HK: I – well, you probably worked a lot of jobs when you were young, growing up, I can imagine.

RR: I worked for [tree?], I worked for Alfred Heck, and Charlie Shockey...then joined the Navy and forgot about the world.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: I visited the world. And then when I got back, getting off the train I was offered a job.

HK: Really?

RR: See, I had worked in the summertime, I had worked there, um...during the flood ___ John Kennedy. He said: "Hey," he said, "you want a job? I could use you in the morning."

I said: "Listen, I'm just getting here."

He said: "I'm gonna put you down."

So I worked one day and I asked the clerk there, I said: "Hey, John Kennedy put me down."

He said: "Oh, yes," he said, "you're the sailor."

I said "Yeah."

He said: "Yeah, he told me about you." [murmurs] I went to work for him...and I quit in 19...80. July of 1980.

HK: So that – that was Kennedy Glass? Or...?

RR: Kennedy Glass Children. The older are John Kennedy's children.

HK: Okay.

RR: There was a bunch of...well, one just died here not too long ago. I think it's [Name] but I'm not sure. It was John, let's see, that was John. That was by old John Kennedy's first wife and by his second wife, he had Max, Bernard, [murmurs].

HK: Uh... [long pause] Never even heard of...

RR: Well anyways, he had four or five boys. Two wives. He retired, can't even remember when he retired. [Long pause] In between __ various moments __. Until I got transferred, I got transferred to Topeka once, I worked there for seven years and I worked on the east, uh, side of Lawrence. Oh, about five years. All the way, all the time, I was given credit for 36 years. [Murmurs]

HK: What kind of work was it?

RR: General. Anything, really. Anything they [begins laughing]

HK: Anything they wanted you to do, huh? [HK laughs]

RR: Yeah.

HK: Well, what were some of your experiences when you were growing up in Lawrence? Did you, um, were there – was there a lot of prejudice in Lawrence?

RR: Oh, yes. I'll never forget the – the other, the other Mexican kids, say: "You going into the __?"

Said: "Oh, I might, I might not."

Said: "You know what? They made us go up there on top and – and sit with the black ones."

I said: "They did? Well," [laughs] "I'm not going to no __." I used to go to the [Pattee?] theater. Maybe you heard about that.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: It was just an alleyway and, uh, I'll never forget, on Saturdays they'd have a matinee there. All of the kids would come in and __ your tickets will be, uh, five bottles. And, uh, I needed to get Cokes now and then, I finally, uh, somebody had discarded an old whiskey bottle. I threw that in the collection. [Murmurs, laughs] That were rough times.

HK: Yeah.

RR: But the whiskey was here. [HK laughs] Yeah. Yeah...

HK: What – what about the restaurants and, um, other places in town? Did they discriminate against Mexican men?

RR: Oh, yeah, and the ones that discriminated were mostly the ones in North Lawrence.

HK: Hm.

RR: There was, uh, kind of a drive-in, in there. And we went in the old jalopy, and we sat there and we sat there and we sat there and we sat there. Finally I went to the kitchen window, said:

“Hey, you gonna wait on us?”

“Hell no. Get out of here.”

And we got out of there before they beat us up. We – we didn’t have no ball bats, or else we’d have probably had a little showdown.

HK: Yeah [laughs].

RR: And [murmurs] the varsity ___ Mexicans ___.

HK: Mm.

RR: What? The film?

Interview Assistant: I’m checking the tape.

HK: Checking the tape. What did, um, what are your earliest memories of your mother?

RR: My earliest memories?

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Well, hard-working. Tried to keep us clean with what...uh, she had to work with.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Cause at that time I think they were just paying...two dollars a day, five cents a week on the railroad. And that’s what we had to subsist on. Eat and everything. Of course I remember, she went to the, uh, store and she’d buy a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread...uh, wieners or lunch meat. You can’t do that now.

HK: No.

RR: If you get any lunch meat, well, that will be over a dollar. Wieners, that’s gonna be, I see where Checkers got ‘em for 89 cents. And then, uh, bacon, that’s going out of sight.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: I think it costs close to three dollars for bacon. You couldn’t do that in those days. Get two dollars and 80 cen – 85 cents, 89 cents for a week’s work and ___. You had to live high on the hog ___ on his feet.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Yeah.

HK: Did she have a lot of, um, special recipes that she would cook?

RR: Soup

HK: Chicken soup? [Laughs]

RR: Yeah, you know, folks raised, oh, about 15, 20 chickens.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Then when the hens had the chicks, we'd...raise 'em up and butcher 'em. That's what we had to eat. And now and then, uh, there was a stockyard there that, uh, they'd...gave us, gave my dad a pig for 50 cents. And that's why he raised pigs, on table scraps, weeds, water and everything. Get good size and then butcher 'em. It was good old hard days.

HK: Yeah. What about a garden?

RR: Oh, yeah, they put out a garden. One thing he always, my dad always ___ corn.

HK: Hmm.

RR: And then tomatoes, tomatoes... specially what do you call them, string beans, string beans –

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: String beans, tomatoes, hot peppers. He'd give somebody a ___ or two down the road, he'd plant. I know he'd keep the seeds ___, that's how he got ___. And they'd pickle, pickled the peppers ___. They'd have to cut 'em open [laughs]. ___ I'll never forget, my mother's, uh, the peppers, she'd slice 'em up, then take a ___ out of them. They'd pick 'em, take a piece out at a time. ___ Tortillas. They made their own tortillas. They made their own corn tortillas and flour tortillas. You don't see the young ones doing anything like that.

HK: No...I'll bet those peppers – those peppers were probably – the seeds were originally brought up from Mexico, huh?

RR: I'll bet they were. 'Course [murmurs].

HK: Just kept the seeds every year and replanted them.

RR: Yeah. Only thing was, is I remember my dad – he'd plant peppers right here, right, this year, next year he'd plant a little ways from there. The same thing with tomatoes...corn, same thing. There's something in there that he couldn't explain, it would, uh [murmurs], farming, you know, they get their seeds from the seedhouse. That's it.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Wheat, the same way. Corn, the same way. Uh, soy beans, same way. Uh, what else? Milo the same way. Here we are, the greatest nation in the world.

HK: Yeah.

RR: By knowing what to do –

HK: How did things change when the Depression came? Did that, um...did you eat a lot less, then?

RR: When the Depression came?

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Back in, uh, 1927, '28, '29, there was less food and less work, and a lot of things less. And, uh, people made [murmurs], did, the, uh, lamb's quarters [an annual plant, also known as white goosefoot], think you ought to know what they are. Lamb's quarters?

HK: The plants, or the –

RR: The – the plants.

HK: Yeah.

RR: Well, they'd take the leaves and cook them greens, and, uh...those old folks would spice 'em up, would make a nice little dish. And I remember some black folks that had, uh, nettles for greens. Hot. I draw the line right there. [HK laughs] Stinkin' things.

HK: Didn't want any of those. How did they, um, manage to clothe all of you kids and keep you in shoes and...?

RR: Lot of 'em was hand-me-downs, and, uh, I remember the, uh, the JC Penney. Montgomery Ward is another term. They'd have sales, folks would buy what clothes they could afford to.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: [Murmurs] And then there wasn't no, like here, at that time, like all these places where they have, uh...secondhand clothing. There wasn't –

HK: Mm-hmm. Did your mother sew at all?

RR: Oh, yeah. I remember my dad was – think he said he was 70 or 71 when he wore his first piece of – first glasses, to be able to see a little better.

HK: Oh.

RR: I know I was 60 when I first started wearing glasses.

HK: Uh-huh.

RR: And, uh, I'm 86 now. [Murmurs]

HK: Yeah.

RR: 1980s-something. [Murmurs]

HK: What happened if – if one of you kids got sick or something? How –

RR: Our kids, now?

HK: No, when you were growing up. You as a child, what happened?

RR: If we went to school, they'd send 'em to – to the school, what do you call it? At that time there was a nurse, Etta Kettlesburger, Kettlesburger. She was from Salina. And that's one woman I'll always give credit. She'd try to help the Mexicans and the blacks. And, uh, she would, uh...more or less try to take care of us.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: 'Course, she said, those are the people that didn't have the opportunity for a lot of things [murmurs]. She just died not too long ago. She was a little over 100 years old.

HK: Wow.

RR: She was in a rest home there in Salina, she was from Salina.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: I remember when she was young and started being the nurse here in Lawrence.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: Who else...

HK: Well, did you, um, did you ever get to go to the dentist, or...?

RR: At that time, you know what? We didn't know what a dentist was. All we knew was in school, they'd take the whole class. They'd have a little box, uh, about that. They put, um, instruments in. And: "Okay, you can come in and sit down. Open your mouth." There was a dentist...and whoever was taking care of [murmurs].

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: That's how they knew, we knew that. That, you know, you had bad teeth. When you get the chance, see if your parents can afford to take you to the dentist.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: I remember the first time I went to the dentist, Dr. Kennedy. This Dr. Kennedy who is living now, it was his father. [Murmurs].

HK: Wow.

RR: I don't remember [murmurs] upstairs, in, uh, 900 block of New Jersey – uh, Massachusetts. On the east – the west side of the street.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: And he was, uh, he was a pretty good dentist. I think he charged us 50 cents for fixing our teeth. They don't charge no 50 cents now.

HK: Nope, nope.

RR: And then this – his son, well, he took over the dental practice. He just retired here about...wanna say fifteen years ago, maybe a little longer [murmurs]. He's still living. I seen him at the store, we speak to each other. He – he's no kid, I'm 86 and he's a lot older than I am.

HK: Really? Hmm.

RR: But you – you can't tell his age.

HK: What do you think are some of the biggest differences between, um...when you were growing up and how things are now?

RR: Just like day and night. [HK laughs] Now, well, [murmurs] money is more plentiful and the wages are a lot higher. And, um...I remember back in the old days, when the canning factory was open. We were in high school, and we went sometime to work over there and we would get 15 cents an hour. And by the end of the week, we thought we had a lot of money, oh yeah. At least I remember buying my first pair of white shoes [murmurs]. And, uh, clothing that I'd needed 'em for school. Socks. And of course our parents got the rest of it, at JC Penney's and Montgomery Ward. Then there was [Name?], a clothing store there. They had – they were fancier, we couldn't afford those. We'd just bypass it.

HK: Yeah. So, did your dad, um...or did your family, where did they move to after – I know when the '51 flood happened, um, did that wipe out pretty much the living area?

RR: We were living in town then.

HK: Were you?

RR: Yeah. Uh, [murmurs], my present wife she was there. And we would see the water. See, we lived on the 900 block of Pennsylvania. Kind of on a hill there.

HK: Mm-hmm.

RR: You could see the water, down where there was an old junkyard and the, uh, Santa Fe freight house. Freight house. And the offices down there, and [unintelligible] house. And, uh, the, uh, tracks. But since then, they have raised the tracks and they, uh, and they built the new, uh, the freight house [murmurs] freight. They put in a McDonald's, put, uh, what do you call it, beer establishment?

HK: Mm. Um...Abe and Jake's? Abe and Jake's?

RR: Oh, no. Abe and Jake's –

HK: No?

RR: Was up here.

HK: Yeah.

RR: That's some [murmurs].

HK: This was, this was...where was it located at?

RR: Eight – no, ninth – Eighth and ninth [tape cuts off at 47:25]

END OF TAPE 21A