

VINCENTE VARGAS INTERVIEW

VINCENTS VARGAS LAURIE BRETZ

Bretz: Today is Wednesday, April 23rd. I'm Laurie Bretz here with Vincente Vargas. Say something Vincente.

Vargas: What do you want me to say?

B: What's your name?

V: Vincente Vargas.

B: Where do you live?

V: I live at 422 Ruby Drive. And I work on Kansas City Star.

B: Okay, stop.

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B: Where were you born, Vincente?

V: In Kansas City, Wyandott County.

B: What barrio were you born in?

V: Rosedale.

B: When were you born?

V: 1925, July.

B: How old are you now?

V: Fifty-five.

B: Did your parents come from Mexico?

V: Yeah.

B: When did they come?

V: I'm not too sure. My mother came in 1920. My dad I don't know, he came long before that. They met over here.

B: What kind of work did your father do?

V: My dad used to work for grade school(?) and he knew my mother and got married over here in Rosedale. WORDS UNCLEAR And they lived on the Railroad. They had passenger cars over there free and they used to let the workers live in those cars. Until they bought a piece of land and built a house.

Brtz: What was it like living in those passenger cars?

V: I was born when we were living in the house already.

B: Did your parents ever talk about it?

V: Well, I know what it is because i lived in those cars when I worked for the Texas Pacific.

B: What was it like living in those cars?

V: It's hot. You got your bunk over here, up there, there's another bunk over there. So you get this bunk down here and the window down here. Somebody's here already, you got to get up on top. For single, not for family. Guys, that's all. Working on the railroad is hard.

B: Did families ever live in the box cars?

V: My family? They lived in those cars before I was born. That's why my family on my mother's side came this far away from the border. Because all these companies they had offices around the border. El Paso, Laredo, and as soon as you come across, they offered you a job.

B: Renganches?

V: Yeah, if you a Mexican, they ask you, you want to work? What kind of work? Railroad. That's what you were looking for, that's what you get. And they get you, the renganche, where you want to go. My mother and my grand mother and my aunt and my uncle, an old woman with two daughters and one son. So the son, he is the one that get the job. Because of him, they take who is with you. So he got a job with Sante Fe and they came over here to Lamar, Colorado. Because they lived in Pueblo and Lamar. My mother being the oldest of the two girls, she got to work the cafeterias. Where the train changed engines, they had enough time to get off. They didn't have no diners those days. You had to get off and eat at the depot there they had a cafeteria. That's the way it used to be.

Bretz: I'd like to go back and talk a little bit more about living in the box cars, you know? What did it look like on the inside those box cars?

V: It's just a box car. Once you're in there and you figure on staying longer, you fix it the way you want it. You can put up wall paper if you want. There's no privacy there. You sleep on this bunk and the other man sleep on the other bunk and that's all.

B: How many people lived in the box cars?

V: About eight. There's one here, there's two on the other side, and there's another four on the other end of the box car. And you had the stove in the center. Cause in the winter time it was cold and you had to put wood or coal in the stove.

Bretz: Could you cook?

V: Yeah, but it's too much trouble. You don't have no privacy. You can't say leave my things alone. There's a wait to get out. There's no room there, and if you going to cook, you have, to get out.

B: How many worker lived like that? Lots of them?

V: All of them. When you say, I live in the camp, you living like that. And the camp don't stop in town. I see some cars that the Sante Fe got here but there's no people living here, when they used these things that's because they got work to do outside, on the mainline, way up there. So you have stay over there where the camp is. You live there and they bring a big tank of water. And you put a switch so you can get the camp on the switch. The company tries to get a family women who will cook for the single guys working for the railroad. And they deducted from your check, they give to the lady. You got to pay for the food that you eat. They always stopped three or four miles, far away from the town.

B: Why? They didn't want you in the town?

V: Well, they company didn't know what kind of people they got working there and some times they get in trouble. I remember one time out there pretty close to Louisiana, out there in the woods. We went to the little town on pay day. There was a guy with a pick-up truck and he gave us a ride to town. We tried to stay together because we was strangers in town. And a man there asked us, what kind of people are you? Oh, yeah, I think it's been about ten or fifteen years, I see one go by here. He was a tramp, he was walking along the railroad — the people in town were looking at us, we thought maybe they didn't like us, but they were looking at us because they didn't know what kind of people we were. That's the only way my people would go that far? the railroad.

Bretz: Were they mostly Mexicans that were working on they mainline like that?

V: Mostly Mexicans and colored.

B: Any white folks?

V: No, the white folks, they mostly roadmasters. He don't live there, he used to come from way up there. He rides the little thing that runs on the railroad, that's got the little moter. No, they got the white shirts and ties. The roadmaster, he's like the superintendent. He's the only white.

B: When were you working on the railroad and living out there?

V: 1945.

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Bretz (cont): How long were people working like that?

Vargas: At that time I worked close to a year. I got a little part of the winter when I was working there, then I worked all summer, then the next winter, I didn't like it, so I quit.

B: What was it like working on the railroads? What did you do?

V: Run the jack and (WORD UNCLEAR). It was a big job. They called it six camps in one. We was changeing everything. We was putting a bigger rail, new ties, when you work in a yard the foremen, they go and mark which ties he want you to change and over there we was changing every one of them, cause they were building a bigger engine. And they need bigger rail.

B: How did you change the ties?

V: You just get on one side and lifted it enough to pull it out.

B: Did you hav3 to take out the rail?

V: No, you just pick it up a little bit. With a jack. Then you dig, by that time you are ready to take the spike off. You just pull the tie out and put the other one in. And here in the yard. 3ut out there in the mainline we was putting a bunch of... maybe about a mile and a half a day changing everything. We had two men, they was called watchmen, about a mile and a half each way down the track. They wouldn't stop the train, but they would slow down the train if it was a passenger train. If it was a freight train, they had to stop, and then start again from there and go real slow because everything was loose there, just turning the wheel. And we had to tamp the ties, you had to get the rock and put it underneath so you could tamp the ties.

Bretz: How many workers worked there?

Vargas: About thirty.

Bretz: How long did you all used to work?

V; Eight hours.

B: (WORDS UNCLEAR)

V: Well, there was sometimes when we worked Saturdays and Sundays, but you don't have to do that. The foreman had a schedule to make, so many miles in so much time. Maybe raining or maybe a lot of guys got sick, heat how do you call it? Too much heat. there were a lot of guys like that. You was sweating, working, you could take your shirt off and squeeze out the water. The push cars would have ice water on them, you'd be sweating and then you'd drink ice water, and you couldn't see anything but pines.

B: What about (UNCLEAR) ?

V: In the winter? In the winter it gets pretty cold. In the winter you better on the push cart. They get warm.

B: Did you like working for the railroad?

Vargas: Er...The job was pretty hard...I don't say the foreman was bad. That's what was required of him to push the guys. You can't say I gonna slow down over here. When that man behind you finish, you ought to be about ready to finish. If the man in front of you finish and you not ready to finish, then the foreman going to come and say, what happen?

Bretz: What would happen if you slowed down?

V: They fire you. You lose you job.

B: How many ties did you have to put in in a day?

V: In a day about twenty. You don't put them by yourself. You always got another with you. For example, they put the jack over there and raise the rail, When they do that, they raise the ties with the rail because the ties they go to the spikes. You get the crowbar and take the spikes off. 'cause a spike is what keeps the tie there.

B: So after you got the tie off, what would you do with it.?

V: Just throw it to one side.

B: And what would happen to the tie then?

V: Well, if there's time they're going to rick them up. Get the push cart. We picked them up, but most of the time we just left them there. People they come and take it in those days to burn and put them in the stove. But now I don't know what they do with them.

B: Your dad worked on the railroad, didn't he?

Vargas: Yeah.

Bretz: Were they pretty much the same working conditions?

V: No, like I say, He worked in the yards, I worked in the main line.

B: What was it like for him to work in the yards?

V: In those days, dad had no union and he had to be available 24 hours. See, the broom they use in the railroad, it's not straw, it's pretty stiff. On the other end they got a piece of metal.

B: What was it used for?

V: To sweep the snow off the switch. In those days, so much snow accumulates in the switch, the swichman comes over here and wants to open or close the switch, won't be...

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V: The switch, it moves and under, there's a rod and this thing moves both rails and if that thing is n not clear, you won't do nothing. The laborers got to keep it working if it is snowing. If it is ice already, then they turn the broom around and hit it with the thing like a ice pick, so it is ready when the switcher comes to open the switch. So you see?

B: How much did he work? When did he work?

V: Day and night. You sleep when you can. After you got five, six switches, they get pretty bad. You don't need all the switches all the time. The Road master knows which switches supposed to be cleaned cause when the going to put one train here and the other train there. After you clean those, they got a little shack over there, you can go and lie down. If a switch gets pretty bad later at night, they just wake you up and send you over there. You work off and on. Depends on how bad the weather is. You can't compare the yard to the mainline. On the mainline you got to go doing what you're doing and you mot to get to the other end. In the yard you just go back and forth, back and forth. The foreman, he goes in the morning, marks the rotten ties, then you come along and change them. It's easy. Over in the yards they change the ties with ashes. In the old days, they used to burn coal. When they clean the boiler, there was ashes coming out of there. They used to throw them on the rails and when you was going to change the tie, you start with those ashes. Yeah you at dirty, when you put in those ties it get in your clothes. I don't know what it is. It's something they cure the wood so it can last longer down there in the ground. To me it smells like turpintine but I know it's not.

B: So when you were a small boy, do you remember your dad being gone for days to work on

the RR?

V: Well, you see, the men who worked on the RR, they lived as close as they could to the work. My dad always walked to work. My dad never learned how to drive a car.

Bretz: How would he go when he had to go to work?

Vargas: They told him. And they'd see the weather. Those men like my Dad, they was used to hard work. If they were not working hard, they were not satisfied. They thought that they was doing some good. They work with a pick and shovel, it was nothing to them. They could work for about tenn hours like that.

B: Did they work for ten hours like that? What did they do with a pick and shovel?

V: You got to use the oick because that thing is hard, that tie has been there for a long time. At least from six to eight months, maybe longer. If the rail got too much traffic, then they replace it. You got to dig around there. If the rail isn't UNCLEAR then it's a sandwhich. That's what makes it harder in the yards, cause you're working where it's flat. You got to make a ditch as thick as the tie, the length of the tie. If you take a rail tie, they're shorter, but if you take a switch tie, then they're big. Some ties they carry two switches, when you pull one of those, you're going to have to clear good. Like I said, in the yard you got more time that what you got in the main line, in the main line you got to work with the trains. There's a guy that gets on the pole and signals on the telegraph when there is a train coming. Then we got to do what we got to do in 15 or 20 minutes. The passenger trains and the trains that haul vegetables and fruit, you can't hold them too long. If he got different things, furniture or something, you can stop it. some of them they stop for twenty minutes to give us a chance. And if while the train is stopped there waiting for you, another train comes from the other way, you can't afford that. What you going to do? You got to work. It's a different kind of people for these reasons. I was reading in the paper the other day that they wanted the junk food. People eat too much of it. They like it and maybe it is good but it's not too good because they get calories, but not enough. It was directed more to the teenagers, the growing generation. The people years ago that worked on the railroad and the farm didn't use that. You didn't have no time for that, you can't leave your pick over there and the motor on the tracks and say "I'll be back, I'm going to find a machine to give me a cup of c coffee and some potato chips. You can't do that. There was no place to go. You wanted to eat breakfast to last you for five hours, until noon, then you sit down and eat, to keep you all the way til six...four...four thirty in the evening. So those people they didn't eat much junk food. When they get to eat, they get to eat solid food! And now...a dag of portato chips ...Fritos...No, they couldn't use the pick and shovel with that.

Bretz: How long did you live in Rosedale?

Vargas: Seven years. I want to kindergarten.

B: At what school?

V: I don't remember the name of the school, it was a little bit ty one.

B: And then what happened to you?

V: I had two older brothers and my dad used to take us out of school in the spring to go chop beets in Nebraska. And the family had to go over there. I was not big enough to help, but I had to be over there. So we spent the summers over in Nebraska and the winters over here. I don't know how my dad used to do it, when he used to come back from Nebraska and go to the railroad, he used to get his job back. He used to work all winter there.

B: Did you tell me once that one time you were in Nebraska and some people came and put you

on a train back to Mexico?

V: Yeah! I don't know what happened but they was asking people they they wanted to go back to their countries because there was a bunch of people in Nebraska. Even Russians, Japanese. They was asking. I don't know if my dad understood what they was asking, but my dad signed the papers.

B: What did the papers say?

Vargas (cont): I don't know, I don't think my dad knew either. Cause my Dad used to speak a little bit of English, but I don't think my dad ever knew how to read English,

Bretz: When was this?

V: 1932.

B: What happened after your father signed the papers?

V: First they took us to the depot and put us in the train, All the way to the Old Country. They fed all the way, they used to give us tin cups, plenty of food, ham sandwiches. According to what my mother used to say, they allowed you to take anything you wanted to take with you.

B: Why did your family return to Mexico?

V: I don't know. It was my dad's idea. My guess is that my dad he was going to make good over there. You see my family on my father's side, they weren't no workers, they owned their own land. They had orchards. It in way, way south Mexico. The state of Guanajuato. But when he got over there, things was not the way he figured. My grandfather, he was not there no more. My dad didn't communicate too well, that's one thing I know. He didn't write home, so he didn't know how it was over there. According to the letter my dad had in his pouch with him — he used to keep his mail with him, he didn't like nobody to go through his personal things. And one time there was a flood and it killed all the fruit trees. And then my grandfather wrote to him, according to the the letter, and then my dad started sending some money over there. And they replaced the old trees with the new trees. And I guess when the government men came around, he figured things are getting "better, I can go back to my country. Something to live for. I guess he figured that way.

Bretz: Were things bad during the depression here?

Vargas: They were bad.

B: How was it?

V: We couldn't even find corn. Mexican people, if they don't have meat, they don't starve. We eat the chilis and beans and tortillas. American people have to have the neat and the gravy and the bread and the butter. In the farm there was something to eat, the only thing, there was no money. If your shoes were not too good, that's when you start worrying 'cause you're going to need some money to buy new shoes. As far as I remember the farmer over there, he used to give us the milk after he pass it through the machine. He took the cream out of the milk. Said, "If you want to, take it, because I'm going to feed it to the hogs. So we would take what we need, and the other we put there for the hogs.

Bretz: Do you remember being hungry?

Vargas: No, I don't remember being hungry, but I hear my folks argue about different things that they need and they couldn't get it. Come to the eating, it was no different, cause was lots of potatoes. We used to plant them and we used to eat them. They was not ours they were the farmers, but we didn't have to ask him for nothing. In the evening, those big potatoes, they didn't want them, they was just laying out there in the field. The only thing you had to do was

go get a big gunney sack. And just throw 'em out there next to your house and leave them there two or three days. They were good.

B: So how was it different during the depression than before the depression?

V: We had to put more patches on the clothes, my mother did. We used to go to the store every week, after that we didn't. And the farm, you look forward to Saturday night cause that's the day you go, parents go and buy the groceries and while they do all this shopping, you go to the show. Sometimes they go too. And when you come back, it's late at night. You get ready for the Sunday. Sometimes, Sunday, if they farmer was behind on his schedule, you have to pick the corn or cut the alfalfa, you have to work on Sundays. There was a difference, because the farmer didn't plant the same amount he used to plant every year. So we run out of work long before the time to come back here to Kansas City. So my Dad didn't want to come back.

Bretz: What did you do?

Vargas: The government was asking the people, the different races that was here in this country, if they wanted to go back to their country, he pay the ticket all the way to where you want to go. It no matter where, if you want to go all the way to the border or any part...

TAPE ENDS

VICENTE VARGAS INTERVIEW VINCENTE VARGAS

PART TWO LAURIE BRETZ

Bretz: ...April the 22nd interview with

Vicente Vargas. Say something Vincente.. Vargas: 23rd. Yeah, the 23rd.

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B: So...your father decided to go hack to Mexico, right?

V: Well, there was another man over there, he was an agent for my people and he told my Dad, It's better if you sign the papers so you can go back to your country. My dad figured, I go over there, I got a place to go.

B: Who was this agent?

V: I don't remember, there was not only one...

B: What did your family do when you got back to Mexico?

V: Have problems. It was not the same. My dad had been in this country by then for about 30 years. He came to this country when he was 14. He figured his country was the same as when he left. The revolution came and my grandfather didn't like it. Didn't figure on his son going to the revolution. When I said they didn't have to work for nobody, that's what I mean. They had to work their own. And make their money.

Bretz: So did your father go to fight Pancho Villa?

Vargas: No, my grandfather send him off to the United States. And he didn't send to the United States, he sent him to the north. My people are in the south of Mexico. In those days, the Mexican revolution, those people, they didn't come and say "We got a draft, if you're 18, you got to go and register." No they pass by your village and they keep an eye out, and at night they come and pick you up. And who is going to stop them? Nobody. Nobody like to die. So my grandfather didn't want to take no chances. He saw some revolutionaries come around there and they got too close. Better you pack somethings, in the night I take you out there. And catch the train in a different town. Where there was no soldiers or rebel. My grandfather didn't think

that his son had to go up there and get killed for somebody. He had no need for that. We making our living good here and we don't bather nobody, so we don't have to go out there. They might take me but my son, I am going to send him to the north.

Bretz: So when your family got down to Mexico and started to have problems, what kind of problems did you have?

Vargas: No house, no place to stay. The place that my father thought he was going to go, it was there, but it wasn't his no more, In my father's family there was 2 boys and one girl and my uncle died when he was young. So that left my father and my Aunt, my father came to the United States and my aunt stayed over there. And stayed in the house until my grandmother and grandfather died. She was single, a guy came and they got married. He was one of those guys, but...because she had three kids from this man. Off and on, off and on he would stay at home. Finally he went and pawned the whole property and he went to the service. Before my grandfather died, the fence they used over there was a rock wall. He made a wall in the middle of the orchard and said from here on belongs to my daughter and from here on belongs to my son. He made papers for that. With a lawyer. He said in case I die, my son is up in the north, when he come, you give him his property. My daughter is over h here, she's going to take over her Property. And that's what happened. But that guy that married my aunt, I should have called him uncle but I never knew him, he figured he was going to come in and take over. There was other aunts, my grandfather, brothers and sisters. They was watching the girl and he found out it was not that easy. So he got my aunt pregnant, went away, and come back when the baby was born. Thats the way he did it two, three times, and the last time, he found the papers.

Bretz: So you didn't have a place to stay, no land, so it was hard to live down in Mexico. What kind of work did your father do to support you?

V: In Mexico, if you go up in the mountains you can plant up in the mountains. If you got a way to support yourself while your waiting for the crop to come up... but we didn't have that either. My dad tried to do that, but then he had to go work to find a job. And the only job he could do, he was a farmer and they didn't pay farmers very much. I remember that... I was around eight. I just couldn't eat those corn tortillas, they was pretty bad. I was used to the flour tortillas. And the bread. Over here across the border the people used a lot of bread and flour tortillas. You get farther and farther from the border, down in southern Mexico and all they got is corn tortillas.

Bretz: How long did your family stay in Mexico?

V: They're still over there.

B: How did you get back to Kansas City?

V: My brother, he's the oldest of the family. He brung me the first time 1941. I was 17 then. I don't remember too good, but I knew over here was better than over there. We came to the border, my folks was trying to come back to the United States. All along the border, a bunch of families like us, they wanted to return to the United States and they couldn't do it. That's why I say those papers might say something about you not coning back no more. And my father, not knowing how to read, he couldn't read that, he didn't understand. He had some body read it for him. Those agents, they were Mexican people, too. They were not too smart, I don't think so. If they read those papers for my dad, maybe they skip that part there or maybe my dad didn't under stand, that once you sign that paper you couldn't come back to the United States, no

more. I know now what is to come into this country. The American consul told me that in Juarez, 'cause I was there fixing papers for my wife. The way I fix papers for my wife, there was a girl from the American side married to Mexicans, born in Mexico and they was trying to fix papers for them. It was different for me, they was fixing for a girl and I was fixing for a woman. And this girl in front of me with the American Consul, he talks loud, he don't care who hears. "You bring me these and that and that's all." Not for me. Once I heard what he told the girl, I said that's bad...So he asked me "What you want?" After that woman, I was ready to get out of there, I didn't want nothing. But I had to tell him That I married to a girl here in Mexico and I want to take her with me to the United States. Because I'm working in El Paso and I wanted to fix papers in Juarez. Well I said to myself, I know what he's going to tell me, the same thing he told the girl. But it was all the way different. He said, you going to support this woman? I said yeah, she's my wife I want her over here on the American side. He said you go and get me a police letter from the American side, then you come over here in Juarez and get a letter on the woman, and when you got those two, go to a notary public and make me an affidavit, where you promise to support this woman. She won't go over there without that.

Bretz: What kind of work did you do when you came back to the United States?

V: Working in an oilmill, cotton seed oil. they get the cottonseed and they crack it and the meat of the seed they cook it and they get the vegetable oil out of it. It's a vegetable oil.

Bretz: When you came to Kansas City, what kind of work did you do here?

V: I worked in a packing house.

B: Which packing house did you work for?

V: Swift.

B: How long did you work there?

V: Seven months. And they laid me off. Then I work for a grain elevator at 18th and Kansas.

B: What kind of work did you do there?

V: Unloading grain from the boxcars.

B: Did you work again at the packing plant?

V: Well, from there I did. They just let me work there 82 days because at 90 days I had to join the union. The supervisor there told me, it's not worth it because I'm going to let you off in the the next month. You're the new guy and I ain't going to have no work for you. So I went out and got me another job because it's just a seasonal job there. Just while the grain lasts, that's all. So I went to the other packing house, Wilson. And they gave me a job over there.

B: When did you start working at Wilson?

V: 1957.

B: What did you do at Wilson?

V: I was a butcher there.

Bretz: A butcher! Tell me about it.

Vargas: I went in there not as an apprentice. In the personel office when I make the application I put there "Butcher Apprentice". Then they go over the application before they give you the OK to say if you're hired or not. And then the guy over there said "What do you mean butcher apprentice?" Yeah, I'm just learning the trade. "Can you skin the cow?" Well, yeah. Maybe I can't keep up with the other ones but I can skin the cow. "Well, then we'll just put butcher here." That's the way I went in, and that makes a difference, because you can stay an apprentice for a long time.

B: What did you do as a butcher?

V: Breaking legs on the cows.

B: When they're alive?

V: No, when they're dead. I had to skin it and break it.

B: How do you skin a cow?

V: Just skin it.

B: How?

V: First you got to have a sharp knife, then you got to hold the skin tight then you take the whole hide off. Not too easy, but after you do it every day you get used to it.

B: Was it very bloody?

V: For me it was because I had to break the front feet and after I do that I had to the weasel, one is the gully (?) the other is the weasel. The weasel is the (UNCLEAR) that comes over the gully and come straight to the nose of the cow. He breathes through there. And the gully's where he rushes the hay to the gut.

Bretz: So you had to put that stuff on the cow's head and on its feet?

V: No. When I get to the gut to do my work, he didn't have no head no more. But I had to go in there and tie those things.

B: Inside the body?

V: Yeah, it's almost Inside the body and it used to get a lot of blood. On my hands, my arms. It's bad, the blood. (UNCLEAR) time it burns your skin, if it gets in your eyes it's bad.

B: What happens?

V: You can't see for a while. You got to out there with the nurse and she gives you something for you eye. According to the nurse, it's too much acid in the cow's blood and it burns your eye. You can't see like that for 5 minutes, maybe 10 minutes. So you try not to get blood in your eyes. And, then, it was hard for one reason: you had to bend down. You had to work the cow in the floor. So you got to be bending down most of the day. Later on, in the 60's, they put in the chain. Before you used to go to the cow to do your work, then after they put in the chain, the cow come to you. You had to wait there for the cow. You didn't have to wait too long.

We was making an average of about 54 an hour. That was not too much because, it was a small slaughter department. That's where there used to kill the cows.

Bretz: How did they kill the cows?

V: They got a sledge hammer, about four pounds, enough for you to handle it good, and hit 'em in the head and knock 'em down. And then you open the door and the cow rolls out, then you get on one side and you shackle, with a chain you put around the hind legs and you put it on the hoist on the rail. The rail leans a little so it rolls to the man, the one that steaks (?) the cow. That man he (UNCLEAR)

B: He found the jugular vein?

V: Yeah...

B: Tell me again, what did the stick man do?

V: I can't say it too good. It's a jugular vein? Something like that. Anyway...he had to do one cut just once. You can't cut your knife in a steak and turn it around and around. There's one little bitty thing, they call it sweet bread. I don't know if you ever eat that or not, but it looks almost like the brain but it's not. (UNCLEAR) they're the only man that can cut that because they're the

only men that stick a knife in there. Or the one that bleeds the cow, 'cause the cows already hanging, it's still alive, but what he does is stick the cow and the cow bleeds to death.

Bretz: And then what happens to the cow?

V: Well, he skins the head and he cuts 'em off...

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V: ...they cut the leg that's not on the chain.

They skin it and they cut it. And then the other man puts another chain on the other leg. They sink a roller with a hook into the shank. Then they take the chain off the other leg and peels the leg and breaks it. Then it comes down and the other man, he's on a hydrolic platform, peels the belly of the cow. Then it comes to me where I skin the front feet and break them and tie the weasel. And then the other one next to me skins the neck.

Then they put chains on the hide and then a hook pulls the chain until it pulls all the hide off the cow. By the time it gets over there the hide is just hanging on the back of the cow.

B: Then what happens?

V: Then it goes up where the guy saws the breast. And then it moves on the table with the gutter, the one who gets the guts out of the cows. And the liver and the lungs and the heart. The table is moving. While he's working he's moving with the cow on the chain.

Bretz: And then what happens?

V: The it goes to another man with a big saw that splits the backbone. He makes two halves, from there it goes to the scales; from there it goes to where they're washing the cows. When it gets to the washer it ain't no cow no more, it's just a carcass. It's just a piece of meat. Then they put the canvas over it and they put it in the cooler.

B: Was there a union when you worked at Wilson? Were you involved in any strikes?

V: One.

B: Tell me about it.

V: In 1959. The officers of the union, they had disagreements because they didn't like the president we had in the local. He was there for too many years. He was there since 1948 and when we went out, on the strike it was 1959. It's too long for one president of a local to be. They didn't want it.

B: what were your demands during the strike?

V: We needed more money. Cost of living. We didn't demand too much on the company. What we wanted was new officers in the local. Mostly it was arguing in the union. The workers were not satisfied with the officers because they was not doing nothing for you. There was some men there that were leading too much in the union. They didn't want to work but they wanted to get paid for it.

Bretz: What happened during the strike?

V: During the strike it was a little bit hot for me. I'm talking from experience the President took care of his boys and there were too many of them. He used to call them "his boys". The one who knew of this were leading the whole thing. If you was a worker there and the foreman did some thing you didn't like you was within your rights to make a greivence. In writing. So you get the greivence form and you fill out what was your complaint. Then you get your buddy next to you and say you want to be a witness? Sign here, you know what the foreman did to me. And then you give that to the president of the local so he can go to the management and talk about this. But you never get results. And if you report it and the foreman keep on doing the same

thing to you and you didn't see the union do nothing. We didn't know what was happening until after the strike. The strike was over when they put that man out, then everybody was ready to go back to work. They didn't want to work under that man.

Bretz: Did you like working in the packing plant?

V: You made pretty good money.

B: When did you quit working at Wilson's?

V: I didn't quit they put men out, They closed the doors.

B: What happened to the plant?

V: They moved the HQ to Oklahoma.

B: Why?

V: They said they were not making money over here. But I said to myself, I don't think so because there was other packing houses that were still working. It was the people that was working there. Like I said, they was leaning too much on the union.

B: What did you do after the packing plant closed up?

V: Look for another job. I couldn't go and get a job in a processing plant because I'm no meat cutter. In the processing plant, you got to be a meat cutter. They wanted me to join the meat cutter's union, but I wasn't going to pay union dues with no work.

B: So, what kind of job did you get?

V: I didn't work in '77.

B: Why not?

V: It's a little bit hard. Not hard for me to say, but hard to describe how I felt. I spent too many years in that one place The whole thing changed so much those years I was working in the packing house that when I was out of work, I didn't know what to do.

Bretz: How long had you worked in the packing house?

V: Many years.

B: So what did you do?

V: Look for a job. Not right away because I claimed my compensation. They give me about six months when I claimed compensation. They said I couldn't make another claim, but I could make another extension, so I made another extension. Until October

B: What kind of job did you finally find?

V: Janitor at Western Electric. But they they didn't pay me anything.

B: How much did you get paid at western Electric?

V: \$2.90.

B: ' How much were you getting paid when you got laid off at the packing house?

V: \$7.50.

B: How long did you work as a janitor.

V: About 4 months. I quit because my car broke down. I couldn't go no more. It was too far away, It was 25 miles. One way.

B: Then what did you do?

Vargas: I just stayed out of work for a while. Then I case with you. I came to see you. You didn't have nothing, then you sent me up there with Joe Ranga (sp?) after that you sent men here with Mark. Then after Hark I went to apply for work over here where I'm working right now.

Bretz: How is it working over there now?

V: There's no weekends over there. And working night is hard. That's way... If you're working

nights you stay away from every body and nobody sees you.

B: What kind of work are you doing?

V: Maintenance. They don't call it janitor because you do that and more. You change the lights and everything. You got to keep the place clean. If a window needs cleaning, you got to get over there.

B: Is it hard work?

V: No, to me it is not hard work, let me tell you why. 'Cause I've been working hard. In the packing house it was hard. Work. You had to work in the packing house. They pay you' good, but you had to work. These jobs over here, you have to work, yeah, but just to keep the place clean.

B: Do they pay you pretty good there?

V: Not too good, but... like I say, I still can't get by too good with what they pay me, that's why I was trying to get me another job.

Bretz: So you found it pretty hard to find a good job since you left the packing house.

V: Oh, yeah, very hard. For me as an individual, I don't say for the rest of them, because a lot of them, they took the pension A lot of them they went and got good jobs. Maybe a little harder than the packing house, but at good pay. And for me...I was too young for retirement and too young to go get another job According to the agreement the government had in 1967 you don't go no chance any more.

B: Were ther many Mexican workers at Wilson?

V: Mot too many.

B: And the Mexican workers that were there, what kind of jobs did they have? Did they have good jobs?

V: In the packing house it was according to the seniority. You couldn't just go from here to there. Because we had department seniority, we didn't have plant seniority. At Swift it was plant seniority. In all the plant, any where you wanted to go, your seniority counted. But not over there.

B: What do you think most of the the people did when they got laid off?

V: They just had to do the best they can. I took me four years to get over that. I was like jealous or something, I don't know... If I wasn't going to work as a butcher, I just couldn't work at all! I spent too many years over there. I was a great butcher, I just couldn't degrade myself. It took me four year to get rid of that. Now, if they pay me my job as a janitor, I do it. Real happy, but they got to pay me. Not like Western Electric. I was not working for Western Electric, I was working for the man who had the contract with western electric. For me to lay wax, I used to do it eight hours every night at Western Electric, and when I came over here to (UNCLEAR)

Bretz: You're living in Rosedale now. You were born in Rosedale and now you've moved back there. What's it like living there? Tell me how it was when you were growing up.

V: I didn't grow over here. I was born here then I grew up in Mexico.

B: Okay, pero cuando volvio usted, como era la colonia alli?

V: Oh, it was a little Mexico. Too much excitement. All the people moving, all the people happy.

B: What did it look like?

V: Dead.

B: What?

V: All the people are gone. The ones who didn't move out over the neighborhood, they're dead.

Bretz: Why didn't people stay there?

Vargas: Because if you're living there, you got to cone all the way up to the street to get you mail. When you are in your 60s and 70s you can't do that every day. So you ove to another neighborhood.

B: Did many people used to live down there in the hole?

V: A lot of them.

B: But now you don't see very many houses. What happened?

V: An avalanche! (LAUGHTER) No, no, no. It rained too hard. It was filling. It was not hard soil there. Do you remember WPA? During the depression, the government had the WPA. It was like in the service, they give you a uniform, take you to the camp. They throw dirt over there. And then people build their houses in soft soil there. "Hey, it's really soft over here, it's good to build a house!" Well, they built the houses, then they had a year when it kept on raining for maybe 20 some days and the hill it started moving and throw all those houses down the hill.

B: What did they people do?

V: They moved out of there.

B: What kind of houses were they?

V: Just a house.

Bretz: Big houses? Brick houses? Little shacks?

Vargas: Little shacks. Yeah. Those lots over here where I live, they was 25 front for a hundred deep.

B: So, how many houses were on one lot?

V: One.

B: How big were the houses?

V: They covered the lot. 25 feet so they can make division over there. In Missouri they have some houses too close. This man, he had enough money to buy a big piece of land so he buy one lot. And he wanted to built a big. house. So how big can you build is? Just 24 feet. Between one house and another house, you cannot pass a wheel barrow!

B: So La colonia alli was full of houses like that?

V: Just like that.

B: Where did the people that lived there work?

V: For the Santa Fe. Ice plant. Wilson was over here before the flood. And celldahy and Swift.

B: Did many people have cars to drive in and out of the hole?

V: No, not too many. A bunch of people they used to walk. We had one of them.

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