

California State College, Bakersfield
San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

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F.A.: Today is December 14, 1974. My name is Frank Armijo. I'm here in Bakersfield, California at 1207 Meredith Drive and I'm going to be interviewing Mrs. Ray Armijo on how it was here in Kern County during World War Two.

Mrs. Armijo, where did you live when the war started?

R.A.: I lived down in Shafter.

F.A.: Did you live there throughout the whole war?

R.A.: No, we were there just for a while, and then in 1944 we moved here to Bakersfield.

F.A.: How many people were there in your family?

R.A.: There was just my mother and my dad and myself.

F.A.: Who did your dad work for during the war?

R.A.: He worked for the railroad company, Santa Fe.

F.A.: What were you doing when the war broke out?

R.A.: I was a freshman in high school.

F. A.: What high school did you attend?

R.A.: Shafter High School.

F.A.: Were there any members of your family or close relatives that participated in the war?

R.A.: Yes, I had two uncles. One was actually in the war. He was over in the Philippines and the Aleutian Islands, and he did quite a bit of fighting. The other one went into the service towards the end of the war and he didn't get to do too much fighting.

F.A.: What were their names?

R.A.: Henry Pineda was the one that was over in the Philippines and the Aleutian Islands. And his brother Charley Pineda was here in the states. He didn't get to go overseas.

F.A.: Alright. Did many of the students drop out of high school and go into the service, and/or were many of them drafted?

R.A.: Well, some did leave school, and the majority were drafted after they were out of school, and the ones that were old enough would try and complete their schooling in three years so that they could graduate and go on into the service.

F.A.: What was the attitude of these people? I mean, were they all for going over into the service, or what?

R.A.: I would say they were. They all wanted to go out and do their part.

F.A.: Did many businesses close down on account of the war here in the county?

R.A.: No not that I can remember. There was a lot of new businesses opening. Your government had a quite a few things starting here in the county.

F.A.: I guess you wouldn't say jobs were hard to come by then.

R.A.: No, unh-uh, there was plenty of jobs.

F.A.: Did the war have any effect on the agricultural production here in the county?

R.A.: No, there was quite a bit of agricultural work as there was a lot of food that had to be produced. And besides just the raising of vegetables and cottons and what not, they had experiments starting at that time in guayule.¹ That was the substitute for rubber because they didn't have enough for tars and what not. And so there was a lot of people working in the guayule at the time.

F.A.: Did they have a hard time, or should I say was there a shortage of the help that they used to pick and harvest the crops?

R.A.: No, I don't-there wasn't a shortage in people. They would have a lot of the students go out there and help too at the time. Like at the time of cotton I remember going from school. They would have us go half a day and pick cotton so that it would get picked.

F.A.: Did they pay you for it?

R.A.: Yes.

F.A.: Were there any plants or industries that were developed in the area which manufactured goods, especially for military use?

¹ A shrub found in the southwest U.S. and northern Mexico that was used as a rubber substitute during World War Two.

R.A.: Yes, here in Bakersfield there was a plant, Lockheed², and they used to manufacture parts for airplanes. That was kept going day and night.

F.A.: Where was that located at?

R.A.: It's located there on California Avenue.

F.A.: Were most of the employees from here in the city and county, or was a lot of it outside help that worked at the plant?

R.A.: They did bring some from other cities, but then they used the majority of people from Kern County. They were trained to do the work. But being there was a shortage of men--being they were going into the service, they started using quite a bit of women to do the work.

R.A.: Do you recall what they actually manufactured there?

R.A.: They were just parts for airplanes. That's all I know.

F.A.: I know there was a ration on the gas throughout the United States. Did it affect the people much here in Kern County?

R.A.: Yes it did. They had gasoline stamps. And I remember at the time we used to sell gas and people would line up to get their quota of gas for the week to go to work.

F.A.: During this ration on the gas did they raise the tax on it, or did the price go up any more than it usually was before the war started?

R.A.: It went up some. Not too much.

F.A.: Did the prices on the food go up during the war?

R.A.: Yes they went up some.

F.A.: Were there any food shortages or scarcities during the war?

R.A.: Yes, there was a shortage of butter and sugar, and some of your meats and oils.

F.A.: Did the price on clothing and other necessities go up?

R.A.: Yes, the price on clothing did go up. There was shortages in some of the materials, especially your nylons, your silks. And when you'd buy things you really didn't need like jewelry or cosmetics, luggage or anything like that, you'd have pay an extra excise tax, they used to call it. It would be a luxury tax. And I remember especially the nylons. On certain days you'd know they have some downtown in the stores, and boy you'd have to go out there and get in line to buy just one pair of nylons.

² U.S aircraft manufacturer.

F.A.: What was the general atmosphere during the war here in Bakersfield? What I mean by that is, was it actually different than any other time around here?

R.A.: Yes, you could notice there was more sadness among people because all you would here would be someone in someone's family leaving for the service, and the sadness that went along with that. And others that would be getting word of somebody getting injured or getting killed over there. So you couldn't help it, I mean you'd always know that there was a war on.

F.A.: I know they practiced civil defense drills throughout the United States during the war. Did they practice any of those drills right here in Kern County?

R.A.: Yes, they did. I remember having the black outs. About every month they would have a black out at night. They would have everybody turn their lights off and keep them off, and your radios would be on, but your lights would have to be off. And they would stay off for a matter of minutes, and then after that you'd hear a siren, or the whistle, and then you could use your lights again.

F.A.: During the war they had many slogans about saying to be careful about things that you said about the war in case there'd be any enemy spies or anything over here. Did you people have to worry about anything like that during the war over here? I mean, being careful what you said to one another or something?

R.A.: No, not really, because there wasn't very much that we could say that was private information.

F.A.: Was there very many Japanese people that lived in this area?

R.A.: There were at the time when the war broke out. They had to leave their homes. They sold whatever they could and tried to get as much money as they could for their property and private things, and then they were taken and put in camps for the duration of the war.

F.A.: What was the purpose of putting the Japanese into these camps?

R.A.: Well, they said we were at war with Japan. I believe they were afraid that they would be spies--that they would try and get information to send back over there.

F.A.: I know that they had camps here in the United States, and some of them were in Arkansas, Colorado, and Utah. Do you know if they had any camps right here in Kern County?

R.A.: No, I don't remember any camps being here in Kern County. There might've been some.

F.A.: Did many, if any at all, of the Japanese citizens here the United States put up resistance when they were being taken from their homes and placed into the camps?

R.A.: No they weren't because they were given time to sell their homes and belongings, and try and make arrangements before they had to go away. So all I know while I was here they didn't put up any--as much as they hated to go, they didn't put [up any resistance].

F.A.: I know also in other various parts of the United States they did take and put away some Italian and German citizens for the same reason. Are you familiar, or do you know if they put any of them away here in Kern County during this period of time?

R.A.: No, I didn't hear them taking any Germans or Italians. The only ones I knew of were Japanese.

F.A.: All right then, continuing on here. Was there ever any threats of attack here in the states, and Kern County in particular since we had a major air force base, which required the National Guard to be detached here in the area?

R.A.: No, we never did have to call the National Guard, although we were a prime target over here, being there was a naval base in East Kern and an air force base where there were planes, and they were always testing for new weapons. And also we had a training field here out at Shafter called Minter Field that they used to train in the Air Force. So if there was to be any kind of an attack that we would have [in] East Kern, which we had the air force down there plus Minter Field, which would prevent the airplanes from going out any further and attacking other places.

F.A.: So, mother as far as you recall they never had any need, or never did station any guards here in Kern County. Is that right?

R.A.: Well not from the National Guard, but they did have regular guards on oil runs who were relieved to--for the oil wells here. You couldn't go in. They would have a guard at the entrance, and then they would have, well like guards around Lockheed and places where they did aircraft work for the government, to keep anyone from going in there. You had to have identification which used to be—you'd wear a card on you with your picture and your information of who you were and where you lived and all that.

F.A.: Did they patrol the area here quite frequently? Or did they actually patrol the streets at any times?

R.A.: No, they didn't do much patrolling. Sometimes they would have [a] curfew. You couldn't be out too late at night.

F.A.: All right, moving on here to another subject. I know that women played a more important role in World War Two with such forces as the Women's Army Auxiliary Core, the Women Employment for Voluntary Emergency Service in the Navy, the Women's Auxiliary Fairy Command, the Women's Reserve, or the Coast Guard Reserves in the Marine Corp, the Marine Corps Women's Reserves here in the United States, and in Canada they had the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division, and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service in Canada. These are just a few of many programs and services that they provided during World War Two as compared to just being, more or less, clerical clerks during World War One. Now, my question is, did many women here in Kern County join in any of these services? Any that you can—well, any that you can recall to particularly?

R.A.: Yes, a few of my friends joined the service. There was Sophie Logans. She was a WAVE. She did clerical work in the WAVES³. And then there was Bonnie Smith. She went into the WACS⁴, which was the army. And she was doing clerical work in that too. And then there was others that went into the hospital programs [as] medical students to help in the hospitals that they had.

F.A.: Mrs. Armijo, here's another question for you. Did they have big recruiting drives during World War Two, or was it not necessary?

R.A.: Yes, they did bring in something new. They would try to get everybody interested in it. They would go to the schools and would describe what their program was and try and get you interested in. And they also came and showed us movies in which they would show you the training you had to go through, especially for women. And the training you would get into all these different fields even after you came out of the service you would be able to use your knowledge someplace else. And they luckily interested a lot of girls into joining the service. Because like I say, everybody wanted to do their part.

F.A.: Did the war affect the schooling that you received in high school as opposed to the schooling that you received prior to the war in any way?

R.A.: No, everything went along as normal as it could be. We had all our classes; there was enough teachers for all the classes. And we had our sports and normal activities like we always did before. And also, they added along with the fire drills, we had civil defense drills in which they would tell us what to do in case we were attacked, like getting to the opposite wall in the room, and [lay] on the floor with our heads down. And that was about it in the school.

F.A.: I know that women took the places of men during the war in the war plants—worked in the war plants as the men went into the armed forces, and then by the year 1943 there was more than two million women working in these war industries here in the United States. My question for you here is, did this situation affect the employment situation here in Kern County—not necessarily am I talking about working in these war plants, as we already talked about that, but just in general, regular working jobs that would exist under normal conditions here in the county.

R.A.: Well, yes, any jobs that required manpower. There was a shortage of like, for instance, in gas stations. They started hiring women to sell the gas. And where they had deliveries—like deliveries from stores. And in the hospitals for any job they had that the men would do, women would start taking over and kind of filling all these positions. Oh just by the way, I just remembered—before you were asking me if they were short on agricultural help—and I just remembered that along with the high school help, they did start bringing some Mexican workers from across the border to work out in the fields and [work] all the vegetables that were all going to be picked. And they worked out there for about, oh, a good four or five years. Way past since after the war stopped they still kept working out there.

³ Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service

⁴ Women's Army Air Corps

F.A.: Another question for you Mrs. Armijo. Concerning mail and packages and stuff that was sent back and forth across seas and here in the states that came to Kern County in particular, were there any special procedures that they had to use in the handling of this mail? And approximately how long did it take to get a package or a letter from across the sea? Was it any longer than it takes nowadays?

R.A.: Well, yes they did have regular procedures on that. As far as their mail was concerned, any mail coming out of the war zone had to be inspected. They would censor anything that they felt they didn't want to be known like locations or anything they would write about the location of what they were doing. And our packages that we would send over there—cookies, or candies, or clothing, or anything like that—they would be inspected before they would be sent over there and given to them. And as far as the length of time, your packages would take longer than your mail. I would say at least a week, a week and a half, for the mail, and possibly your packages would take up to two weeks.

F.A.: When the war was over could you notice any big difference here in the county, or might I say, was there any big celebrations or anything? And how long did it take before things finally got back to normal here after it was all over?

R.A.: Well, as soon as the news broke out about the war being over I remember that the stores closed down right away and everyone got to go home, and everybody was happy. Cars would be honking, and people were actually dancing out in the streets and they all started getting together and having parties and celebrating, and especially the ones that still had someone in the service and they knew that now they'd be able to come on home safe. So, well, all over the United States it was just a holiday. They closed down and celebrated the end of the war.

F.A.: Approximately how long did it take before almost all of the soldiers returned back home here in the county?

R.A.: I'm not quite sure, but it took quite a while because they couldn't come back right away. They still had to stay down there until papers were signed and things got back to normal. And they had to come few at a time. So I would say it took at least a good six months before they started coming back.

F.A.: Was there any difficulties when the people that participated in the war returned back here home in getting jobs? And did it affect any jobs that women already held that [would] usually be a former position that a man would handle?

R.A.: I would say that it took them a while to get back to normal. There was jobs that for a while—like I said, there was a lot of these government business here in town and they didn't close down right away. They kept in operation for a while after that. So, they were able to come back and start finding work again.

F.A.: Well Mrs. Armijo, I think we've covered just about everything that I can think of that had anything to do with the involvement of Kern County in the war and how it affected it. And I can see that our time is running short here on the tape. At this time I would just like to thank you for

letting me interview you on how it was here in Kern County because there's a lot of us that weren't around to see what happened, and hope not to be around to see what it would be like in a world war.

R.A.: Well, I really hope that—I really wish that I was able to remember more. But I think that about covers everything. And it was kind of nice to get interviewed.

F.A.: Thanks again. Thanks again, Mrs. Armijo.

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