

1691 Villa, Luis M.mp3

Yolanda Leyva [00:00:00] This is Yolanda Leyva interviewing Mr. Louis Villa at Jefferson High School on July 28th, 2016, in El Paso, Texas. So first, I want to thank you for coming down to your old school to share your stories with us.

Luis Villa [00:00:18] Thank you very much.

Y.L. [00:00:20] So you were born here in El Paso?

L.V. [00:00:22] I was born right across the canal, right there.

Y.L. [00:00:25] Right across the canal?

L.V. [00:00:27] That was where I was born in the French Addition. Because the owner, he used to own that part, and he sold that lot to my grandfather. And when my mother got married, my dad moved to live in their house. We lived there for a long time. My grandfather used to have a big yard, big lots in the back. He used to grow corn, he used to grow flowers, sweet peas, and we had fruit trees in the back. We had sweet peas, we had apricots, and he used to grow corn. Well, that was where I grew up until I was about 14 years old. And then, my grandmother's brother, he was going out with this girl, and they had a little girl, a baby girl. But the girlfriend and my grandmother's brother split up. So, actually, my grandmother raised her, and she was about two or three years older than I was. We grew up together in the same house and everything. And then my mother used to play the piano when she was younger. She decided she wanted me to learn piano. So, she hired this man who used to come to the house to teach her how to play the piano. And my aunt, which was my aunt, she was about two, three years older than I was, she wanted to play the piano. So, she taught both of us. She told both of us, "Do you want to play the piano?" After that, sometimes, we used to fight a lot, me and her, because she was only two, three years older.

[00:03:07] One day, we were fighting. My mom came in, scolded her, and my grandmother didn't like it. So, she came over there and started fighting with my mom, and she started hitting her, slapping her. We were just looking at her, we were scared. So, in that same house, we split up. After that, my dad said, "Well, we better move." My mother had a comadre who used to live down the road, and then we were going to California. She said, "Why don't you come here and live in my house so you can get a job in California?" [with her husband.] So, we went over there. It was a nice house with three rooms: a living room, a little kitchen, and a porch on the side. The porch was pretty big, and it didn't have any windows. It was just a regular porch. So, my dad, when we were there, it was just my two brothers and me. My two sisters weren't born yet, but my dad fixed the porch, put screens in the windows, and put a backwash. And in the little kitchen, it was the first time I tasted water from the tap.

[00:04:43] We didn't use to have water out here in the French Addition. We didn't have any water.

Y.L. [00:04:50] Where did you get the water?

L.V. [00:04:52] My grandfather used to go across the bridge in the alley. On the other side from the street corner all the way to the park, there were Anglos. There were Anglos here. There were people who used to live right next to the canal, on the side of the canal. My grandfather used to go to their house to take water with cans. It was 25 cents for the water. He used to carry two pails, and my grandmother had a barrel, a wooden barrel

[where] she would carry the water. She had a can with her; we would pour the water into a glass and drink it. And she would get the water for cooking. We had no water, we had no gas, we didn't have anything. So eventually, me and my supposedly aunt, we used to fight a lot when we were younger.

[00:06:21] My mom scolded who I called my cousin. My grandmother got mad at my mom and started slapping her and everything. She got mad, and we separated. Eventually, she had a comadre who lived right down the street, and they were going to California. So, my dad and my mom decided to go over there to her house. We lived there for about two, three weeks and they came back. So, they came back. We all lived in the same house. Eventually, my dad said, well, you know, this isn't going to work. So, up the street, on Francis Street, there was nothing over there. The only one out there was an Anglo, and he had cotton in the back. He had a big house, he had a basement, he had horses. So, when we moved to Francis Street, I started going to school with the son, and we became good friends. He used to hire us to pick the cotton. We used to go out there and pick cotton.

[00:08:00] He would pay us I think two cents a pound. Every time we would pick cotton with his son, I would stay with his son, we would go to the cotton plants and get the bolls that were not open. And put them on the bottom of the bag so that we can fit more. We picked the bolls before they opened on the bottom.

[00:08:38] We went to his dad, and he would pay us, I think, two cents a pound. He would pay us that, each one. Five or six dollars a week, and for us, that was a lot of money at the time. Candy was a penny a piece.

Y.L. [00:08:52] That's a lot of candy.

L.V. [00:08:55] So that's where I grew up. And that's when my dad bought the lot over here on Francis Street and built the house. Two little rooms where we used to sleep all together. That was before my sisters were born. There were three boys, my mom, my dad. So, we grew up there. Eventually, my dad fixed the house, and he made another room. And he made two rooms to the side. Then, he got another lot next door, so we had three lots. Eventually, he used to grow flowers, and fruit trees, too. I used to go into the cemetery and sell my little basket of flowers. And that was where I grew up.

Y.L. [00:09:57] And what did your dad do for a living?

L.V. [00:09:59] He worked at Phelps Dodge. My dad went to school, the school that's out on Piedras Street.

Y.L. [00:10:09] Beall School?

L.V. [00:10:10] Beall School. He didn't go to high school. And eventually, he started working at the refinery when it was small. Then, it became a big refinery. He used to pull the copper, and make the bars of copper. That's where he used to work. One time, he took me out there when they had dinner for all the employees in the back. He took me back there, and there was food and everything. We went inside, and he showed me where he used to work and everything. When I was growing up, I used to take him. When I learned to drive, I used to take him to work, so I could bring the car back, and take my mother downtown. Everything was downtown.

[00:11:20] There was nothing out here. There was only one movie theater down here. There was – what was the name of that theater? Mission Theater on Alameda. That was the only theater on this side of town. We used to go there a lot. We used to go there every

Saturday to the movies. My parents would stop at the Barrel House on Copia Street, and they would stop to have a beer. He and my mom would send us behind the Barrel House to the Hamburger Inn. I think it's still there. He used to send us over there to eat hamburgers and chili beans. And my grandfather used to live on – I don't remember the street. It was right behind Zavala School. That's where my grandfather used to live.

[00:12:22] And my aunts used to live right next door to him. When my grandfather passed away, my aunts moved over here to – what was the name of the street? The one going up to Montana. The first street that goes up to Montana. There's a bridge, the Paisano Bridge.

Y.L. [00:12:59] Trowbridge?

L.V. [00:13:00] Trowbridge.

Y.L. [00:13:01] Trowbridge?

L.V. [00:13:02] That was the one the bridge is after. But there was another street on the side that goes under the bridge. It goes all the way up to Montana. It's where the Walgreens is on Montana.

Y.L. [00:13:21] Chelsea.

L.V. [00:13:22] Chelsea. Yeah. That was where my aunts eventually started to live. And there was a drive-in. I remember there was an empty lot in the back, and we used to sit out there and watch the movies. At that time, there was no sound. There were a lot of cars parked on the outside. So, it was a lot of fun growing up. I had a lot of fun growing up.

Y.L. [00:13:57] Tell me a little bit about your father.

L.V. [00:13:59] My dad? My dad went to a vocational school. He grew up over there -- he grew up on Piedras Street. That was where he used to live. Eventually, he started working for Phelps Dodge. All the employees were Mexicans; they weren't English-speaking people. He worked there for 41 years.

Y.L. [00:14:49] Where was your dad born?

L.V. [00:14:51] He was born here in El Paso. He was born -- you know where Piedras ends, over there at a car lot? Do you remember it used to end at a car lot? That's where Piedras used to end. And my dad used to live in one of those little houses where Paisano Dr. is now, in one of those little houses. My grandfather used to live there before they moved over here to Valverde. And that's where he grew up on his street. And then, when he got married, he started working at Phelps Dodge.

Y.L. [00:15:39] You told me before we started recording that your dad had lost his mother when he was really little.

L.V. [00:15:45] When he was real little, yeah. So, he doesn't remember much. My father and his two sisters, my two aunts – that's about it from what I remember from. And he started working in a refinery. I don't know how he got the job. I don't know how. When he started working in a refinery, it was a labor. Like I said, at that time, these people were poor men and worked extra hours as laborers.

[00:16:21] I asked my uncle, he was my padrino later, he was a foreigner. My mother's sister was married to him, and they used to live in a house over there next to the train

tracks behind a smelter on the other side of the mountain. That's where they used to live. They used to rent the house through the employees. I remember going over there with my grandmother, all the way over to where they used to live. That was the first time I ever took the bus. Where the bus was coming, there were fruit carts there. That was the first time I ever rode the bus. Yeah, like I said, everything was downtown. We used to go downtown to buy shoes, to buy clothes, and everything was downtown. I remember at San Jacinto Park, they used to have alligators, live alligators. I remember watching the alligators crawl around the pool. I remember all of that. Eventually, I grew up and started coming to Burleson. And when they started building Jefferson, I went to El Paso High for one year.

Y.L. [00:18:22] So Burleson was right here where Jefferson is now? So, when you graduated from Burleson, you had to go to El Paso High School?

L.V. [00:18:28] I went for a year, and I liked El Paso High. I didn't want to come back.

Y.L. [00:18:40] So, there was no high school in this area?

L.V. [00:18:42] No, there wasn't. I started riding the trolley car to high school from Burleson, over where Jefferson is now.

Y.L. [00:18:58] Both of your parents were part of getting Jefferson High School to be built, right? Can you tell us about that?

L.V. [00:19:04] They were involved in PTA and everything. I remember my dad speaking at the meetings. My mom would stand up and help him, too. So, that's a bit of my life.

Y.L. [00:19:23] So, what do you remember about your father speaking in the PTA meetings?

L.V. [00:19:29] Well, I guess I don't remember very much. I know he was giving a teacher hell and everything about the way they were learning in school. Like I said, most of the teachers were mean. Eventually, they started coming around to his way of thinking.

Y.L. [00:19:52] So, he was telling the teachers to treat the students better?

L.V. [00:19:57] Yeah, and my wife, she went to Lincoln School. When they started making Jefferson High School, and I came back here, I went to El Paso High for a year, and then I came back to finish. It was my favorite year. Over there in the corner, there was a horseshoe of a street. Over where they were building the school, there was the canal. It was a lot of fun growing up here. Like I said, it was part of my barrio here. It was great. My friends lived across the street.

Y.L. [00:21:17] When you came back, and it was already the Jefferson High School, what was it like for you here?

L.V. [00:21:23] It was great. It was great. Like I said, I was used to my school. Before they took it. There used to be the dining room and then the gym. Before the gym, right here, I remember, there used to be the trains, and they would tell us to ride it to school. There was a neighborhood right there across the street, a neighborhood, and right in front there were the hospitals.

Y.L. [00:22:35] You were telling me earlier that your father was in the union.

L.V. [00:22:39] He used to be. He was in the union. Back in the day, he had a big personality. I remember going, well, actually, I didn't go because I wanted to. My mother was very jealous. She would tell me, through my dad at the meetings, that she was very jealous. She would talk, and I knew they had a room in the back with a typewriter, and when I got tired, he knew I was too bored to speak. He would talk to me, and say, why did you go to the backroom, and play with the typewriter? By that time, we would go home. So, that's the way I grew up with my dad and everything.

Y.L. [00:23:40] So your dad was very active.

L.V. [00:23:42] He was very active. He was the president and everything.

Y.L. [00:23:47] So, when you were -- that year that you went to El Paso High School, how did you get to the high school?

L.V. [00:23:52] I would take the tranvía that would pass through here, and go all the way to the front of the courthouse. It was where there used to be a little park, and it would turn around and come back. It would pass back over here.

[00:24:16] And then the only time I got on the bus was when my grandmother used to take me to my aunt. She used to live out there where the smelter was. That's when I took the bus. I liked to ride the bus. When they put the streetcars off, they would say how are you? I'm actually driving the bus, how are you?

Y.L. [00:24:47] And now, they're building them again. The streetcars. Yeah. So you graduated from Jefferson?

L.V. [00:24:55] I did.

Y.L. [00:24:56] In what year did you graduate?

L.V. [00:24:57] Let me see if I remember. In 1948. Yeah.

Y.L. [00:25:03] 1948. What did you do after you graduated from high school?

L.V. [00:25:10] After I graduated from high school, I met -- we used to play in the band. We used to play in the band and after that, we used to practice after school. We used to play in the gym for the school dances. And then the teacher got tired of staying after school, so he told everyone, "you know what?" I had to work. I have to call my wife. One of the guys that used to live in Lincoln Park would practice in his house. So we moved everything to his house, and used to practice at night over there. There were two trumpets, and the girl that used to play the trumpet in the band. There were saxophones, two saxophones, and the drums. And we started practicing with a piano. That's where I met my wife when she used to live by Lincoln. Because her brother, her youngest brother, her mother used to live next door to this nice house, and her brother used to come over here to hear us play. That's where we became friends. Eventually, he introduced me to my wife.

Y.L. [00:27:10] How long have you been married now?

L.V. [00:27:13] Let's see. It'll be 80 years next month.

YL. [00:27:26] A long time. So before they built the freeway, you could just walk to Lincoln from here, before they built the freeway? You could just walk to Lincoln from here?

L.V. [00:27:37] Yeah, I used to walk across the street right here, there used to be a neighborhood behind the hospital. All that was a neighborhood. And then I used to walk across to there and go through the tracks to Lincoln.

Y.L. [00:27:54] What instrument did you play?

L.V. [00:27:56] The trumpet.

Y.L. [00:27:57] The trumpet.

L.V. [00:27:59] We had a piano when I was young, and I started playing the trumpet in high school.

Y.L. [00:28:07] After you graduated, what did you do?

L.V. [00:28:10] We made a band. We got together some other guys, and we started a band. You know, every Friday we went to Bowie High School. We started, and we used to play in there and everything. Eventually, our teacher got tired of staying after school, practicing after school. One of the guys said, "I've got a piano at home, and we can go to my house in Lincoln, Lincoln Place." That's where we went and mostly before that, the guy used to live in Lincoln. And I used to live over here, so I had to go all the way over there. So, we practiced in his house, and one of the girls that used to play the trumpet with us, she used to live up by, up in the – what was the name of the street that goes all the way down? The one that goes – Yandell? Yandell. She lived close to Yandell. We started practicing at her house, and then we moved. Eventually, she started going with this guy. I started playing the piano, I used to play the piano. I learned the piano and everything. That's when I started playing the piano. We started playing at little houses, and somebody heard us and said, "We've got a salon next to Bowie High School." When it was over there. That's what I remember. He said, "Do you want to play over there?" We said yeah, we can play over there. We started playing every week, and some of the people from Jefferson started going over there.

[00:30:26] A lot of people from Jeff started mixing with the people from Bowie at that time. There were no fights or anything over there. We had a good time going out.

Y.L. [00:30:40] Did your band have a name?

L.V. [00:30:43] The Teen Timers. We started out as The Jeffersonians.

Y.L. [00:30:49] The Jeffersonians?

L.V. [00:30:50] And then we changed to The Teen Timers because we were an alternation. Like I said, eventually, the girl that used to play the piano got a boyfriend, and stopped playing the piano.

Y.L. [00:31:13] It sounds like a lot of fun.

L.V. [00:31:14] Yeah, a lot of fun. And then, like I said, I started going where my dad wanted me to go, to UTEP. But eventually – the teachers didn't like me very much there. One day, a lady said, "You Mexicans don't learn anything here. What are you doing in here in college?" So, I went to the dean, and they came and pulled her out. I remember, I said I quit. I told my dad I'm going to quit. I could not handle college.

Y.L. [00:32:16] So you had a bad experience with the university? Do you think that was common, that the teachers at UTEP had that attitude toward Mexicans?

L.V. [00:32:28] They were all Anglos. When my girls started going to college, it was different. In fact, one of my girls had an exhibition of the pictures she drew, and we went. There was a building that we had to go through the back. We had to go to that building. We went there and saw the pictures she made and everything. I'm real proud of them.

Y.L. [00:33:16] How many children do you have?

L.V. [00:33:18] I have two boys, the oldest one and the youngest one, and three girls.

Y.L. [00:33:29] And what did you do for a living when you grew up?

L.V. [00:33:33] When I grew up, let's see. When I was growing up, I used to work in different places. Eventually, when I met my wife -- when the teacher said we couldn't practice here, we went to Lincoln to practice. And that's where I met my wife, because her brother used to go where we practiced. Eventually, he introduced me to my wife in that room. So, she lived over there and we got married. I told my band we're going to get married. When we got married, I kept on playing for a while, until eventually, I said no. I've got too much. We're having kids, and we went to Mexico City for our honeymoon.

Y.L. [00:34:51] Oh, how nice!

L.V. [00:34:52] We saved enough for Mexico City, paid for everything. Eventually, when I started working for Pepsi, we moved over here to Valverde. We moved over here, and won a trip to Hawaii. So, they sent me to Hawaii, me and my wife.

Y.L. [00:35:25] You won that trip through your job?

L.V. [00:35:27] My job? Yeah. I was working for Pepsi.

Y.L. [00:35:30] How long did you work for Pepsi?

L.V. [00:35:32] I had worked for -- say, 44 years.

Y.L. [00:35:34] Forty-four years. What did you do for Pepsi?

L.V. [00:35:39] I was a truck driver, I used to drive a truck and would deliver to all the stores. At that time, there was no, like I said, all the stores had sodas. I had to take little boxes with ice. There were no -- like today, they have freeways, but they didn't have big stores like today. They've got Walmart and all that. Mostly convenience stores. They had little pitchers of ice to fill and everything. That's what I did for 44 years, driving a truck and selling Pepsi. So, I didn't sell some Coke. At Fort Bliss, when I got over to Fort Bliss, I had to go over there. One day, I don't know what happened. At Fort Bliss, they had racks. So, we took the sodas, and pulled them inside for the soldiers. When the door opened, we filled the shelves, and took them back again before night. We used to go at night, too. And one day, one of the guys used to put stuff on the racks, shelves with Coke. He said, you know, we're going to pick them up, and I said, fine, come on. We started backing up, slowly into the store, and there was a supervisor, it was a lady supervisor standing right there in front of the door.

[00:37:38] I went in there, they came up to me and I stood right next to her. I said, come on, and she said, "What's the matter with you guys? What are you doing? You are going to

beat nobody up! If you want to beat somebody up, you go outside, and beat him up. But he's not going out. He wants to stay in here." I said, "Oh, he took my racks, because he's mad." I put all of my stuff on the floor and took my racks. He said, "You took your racks? You bring them to the back. If I see you here again, get out of here. I don't want to see you here anymore. You tell your boss how I don't want you here anymore." So, he took them back. From then on, I would go back all the time, and we used to fight a lot. You know, eventually, I took control, but eventually, I couldn't. So, I started taking Coke, and that's what made him mad. So, I had a lot of fun working for the fights and all.

Y.L. [00:38:50] You probably met a lot of people.

L.V. [00:38:52] All the time. Like I said, I spent a lot of time working for them. I started out pretty early, because a lot of the other guys at the stores didn't want it. Eventually, I took all the of the stores out here from everybody. I was number one.

Y.L. [00:39:20] You were number one in Pepsi?

L.V. [00:39:23] I was.

Y.L. [00:39:30] How did you learn to be such a good salesman? How did you learn to be such a good salesman?

L.V. [00:39:36] Because I really could surprise. When I got my job, my boss was real nice. He taught me everything to go and drive the truck, and do business. There were always people. He told me to keep your customers. Be nice, and everything. Treat them nice. He said take priority, something like that. He told me treat them nice, don't yell a lot. So, hold them up here. Eventually, a truck driver that used to drive the other route, one of the best routes, became a supervisor, too, when we moved to – over here on Valverde. When we lived over here. After that, we moved all the way down to the Lower Valley. That's where we have our ties from the Lower Valley. I used to, like I said, drive a truck. I would pick up, take it home, and go in the morning. Pick up my stuff and go to all the stores. Make preorders for the next day.

Y.L. [00:41:32] So you really enjoyed your job?

L.V. [00:41:33] I did enjoy my job to retire. I can agree on that.

Y.L. [00:41:44] Is there anything that you would like to tell us of your memories that I haven't asked you about?

L.V. [00:41:50] Like what?

Y.L. [00:41:52] Like what's your favorite memory of coming here to high school?

L.V. [00:41:58] My favorite memory actually was band. Like I said, when I started playing piano to become a musician. It was great, it was great in high school. That's what I remember about high school. I asked for it to play in a ball game. Since the gym was busy, we had to play in the gym. We had a ball game. Eventually, we got out.

Y.L. [00:42:47] Are you part of the Jefferson Alumni Group?

L.V. [00:42:50] Yes, but I don't really go to meetings.

Y.L. [00:42:55] What does it feel like to be here in your own school from first grade through high school?

L.V. [00:43:00] First grade. Now that you mention -- like I said, I went here from first grade, then to college. All of my kids graduated from here.

Y.L. [00:43:12] So it's three generations of your family coming to this high school? If there was one thing that you would want to tell young people today, like your grandson, what advice would you give them about education?

L.V. [00:43:30] Study as hard as you can. Learn for college, learn a good trade to get a good job. And get married and have kids. Teach your kids the same thing that I told you. Bring your kids up. The way I brought them up, is the way they should bring their kids up, so they wouldn't be hoodlums. They can think about what I told them. That's about it.

Y.L. [00:44:04] That's good advice. Well, I want to thank you for giving us this interview and sharing your memories with us. Thank you.

L.V. [00:44:12] I'm just pleased to be here.