

AKERS: This is John Akers with the Tempe Historical Museum Oral History Project. It is August 29, 2002. I am with Mr. Gilbert Duran Orrantia in his house in Mesa. We are here to talk about Tempe Beach Swimming Pool and when he went to what is Arizona State University today.

How did you become involved with efforts to desegregate Tempe Beach Swimming Pool?

ORRANTIA: I think probably way back in 1937 when I was a freshman at Arizona State Teachers College. I was enrolled in a P.E. class. The instructor, he was one of the coaches, informed us that we were going down to Tempe Beach to swim. Well, I was the only Mexican American at that time. We used to call ourselves Mexican Americans simply because that is what we thought we were. Nowadays we have a lot of other cultures who come in, like the Salvadorans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so forth. But at that time we were just Mexican Americans and that's what people called us and what we called ourselves.

So I was the only one involved in the class, and I don't know whether the instructor knew that this policy existed there, but he must not have or he wouldn't have excused me in some way. Anyway, we went down to Tempe Beach, and of course everybody got to swim except myself because I was a Mexican American and they didn't allow Mexican Americans to swim in the

swimming pool. From that time on I thought, "What's going on here?" Although I was just a freshman I was concerned about these things because they were not peculiar at all to Tempe Beach. It was all over the state. Where I came from in Clarkdale, at that time they used to drain the pools because they didn't have the chemicals to purify the water. So they would go for a week or so and then they would drain it and refill it. Well, they would let you go the last day.

My dad would say, "You're not going to that filthy pool." So we would swim in the river. I knew that was going on, but then to come down to a town which was supposedly more "enlightened" because it was a college town, and when I saw it happening here - and of course I had always been opposed to segregation. It existed everywhere. In the mines and smelters where I worked, when I got out of high school I went to work right away as a smelter, and of course we took some meanest, the worst jobs there were. I was always against that and trying to fight the company and being kind of a pain in the rear.

I was always trying to better the situation if I could. I had actually done some of that stuff in Clarkdale because I stayed off one year and worked in the smelters, and I was a bit of a rebel there.

AKERS: What did you do in Clarkdale? Did you challenge the policies or did you encourage other people not to...?

ORRANTIA: I sure did. All of us young kids were the ones that were working at the worst jobs—on the railroad changing ties, moving tracks, heavy work, something that was really difficult, and all the other guys were having office jobs and nice jobs. We had meetings with the big wheels who would come occasionally and they would accuse us of doing things, and I would stand up and say, "Hey, you're at fault, not us, because you have been informed of these positions, especially safety positions." And I had been elected a safety committeeman for our track gang, and I was given half a day on Fridays every month to go and inspect the things that were dangerous and that they should take care of.

Well, they didn't pay any attention to my reports, and then an accident happened because of their lack of interest in improving the conditions and a big wheel came and accused us. As the representative I got up and said, "Well, I'm sorry but it's your fault, not our fault." My friends said, "Sit down. You're going to get fired." I kept going, and of course it got to really harsh words. He was so angry, he left. His secretary who was a big guy said, "You know, Gil, you shouldn't do that to Mr. So and So. And you too. You are sticking up for someone who obviously is in the wrong." So he took off too. I thought I was going to get fired, but I didn't. I continued in that role that year. The following year I went to school, and I returned after that. For two years I worked, and then

returned to school in '40 and '41.

There was a space of time when I had left Tempe and gone home to work, and I came back just in time to complete two years of college before the war started.

I went in before Pearl Harbor as an aviation cadet. It's interesting that even in that situation people didn't consider you intelligent enough to be a pilot.

Kind of like the Tuskegee Institute people. They thought you were incapable. Even when I was interviewed before I was inducted after my physical they gave me a psychological examination.

AKERS: Did they do that for all the cadets?

ORRANTIA: Oh yeah, they did it for all the cadets, but I'm sure they didn't ask others the questions they asked me. The final one was more of a statement than anything else. The medical officer said to me, "Well, you are a Mexican American, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you're going to have a hard time of it." I wasn't a youngster anymore I was already 22 or 23. "I said, I'm not in the service yet. I don't have to put up with that kind of stuff. If I have passed the physical and everything else and you sign that paper, I'll take my chances with the best you have. And if I can't cut the mustard, I don't deserve to be a pilot. I don't want any favors from you or from anybody else." He looked at me, a little surprised that I would be that belligerent. But belligerency was in

order at that time because you didn't get anywhere by just sitting on your behind and doing nothing about it.

The first year I was in school we organized Los Conquistadores.

AKERS: 1937?

ORRANTIA: '37-'38 school year.

AKERS: What was Los Conquistadores?

ORRANTIA: We had no place to go as a group. There were other groups, like, and before that, but you see that was a combination of the other people, and mostly other people. We were overwhelmed and we didn't have a chance to do much of anything. So in order to have some kind of a power base and some kind of a way to put out our message—and all we wanted to do was to have a better relationship between the students and to have them understand that we are as capable as you are, we deserve all the chances you get, that's all—yet people didn't understand that. They assumed that because of what they were that they might be superior to somebody else, and of course, that's a false premise.

So we organized for that reason. We were lucky that we had a sponsor. From then on we did a bunch of

things that were beneficial, not only to ourselves but I think to the college itself, because people got to know us and show a little respect to us who were a little different from them because of our color tint, but we were just as human as they were. This was not in vogue at the time.

AKERS: How large would you say was the Mexican American population at the college when you first went there?

ORRANTIA: The first year we were there we only had between 1,500 and 1,600 students, which was less than a high school, and there were probably at the top about 40 of us, which was not a great number. I don't think there was one who wasn't on work-study program. We had to work our way through. Our folks were poor working people. I had six brothers, and of those six brothers three of us went through the university. At that time, not even the "Anglos" had that many attending a university. It's a psychological phenomenon in the sense that even your own people would say to Dad, "Why are you sending those guys to college? Why don't you have them help you raise your family?" Well, Dad was a very outspoken person. He'd say, "Do you pay for my children to go to college?"

I remember my first check, which was a lousy \$38.00 or \$40.00 for two weeks of work. I took the check to Dad and said, "This is yours, and I owe you a lot more." He looked me in the eye and said, "You don't owe me

anything. Your Mom and I owe you." My oldest brother had already graduated from what was then Northern Arizona State Teachers College, and he taught me in high school and was my junior high basketball and track coach. I think our family did pretty well in education simply because our dad's forward-thinking attitude.

When somebody would get hurt the company wouldn't pay him. He would write letters to the council and the council would send people up there and get it straightened out. I remember coming home from school, and he would be in the living room with somebody. He was always helping somebody.

Of course, kids couldn't belong to the Boy Scouts because they wouldn't allow them in the troop. It wasn't because the Boy Scouts didn't allow them. It was because the troops wouldn't allow them. My brother decided he would just form a Boy Scout troop, which was sponsored by the parents and the Catholic Church.

AKERS: Going back to Los Conquistadores, where did the name for that organization come from?

ORRANTIA: Well, the [original] Los Conquistadores were a bunch of murderers, but Los Conquistadores to us meant that we were kind of Don Quixotes, going out to conquer the ills of the world. We were out to try to overcome the

obstacles that were constantly thrown in our way just because we were a certain type of person. I know that even some of our own people have criticized the name.

I had some experiences even after I had my degree and had come back from overseas with [the field of] agriculture. I had a double major and a minor in French. I taught French and Spanish in high school for a long time at Mesa Community [College] when it started up. All that time I was advocating to have them hire some Mexican American teachers. Education always talked about role models, and yet they were reluctant to supply the role models. When I started here in Mesa I was the only Mexican American teacher in the whole school district. Now that doesn't mean they hadn't had some before, and it was notorious for not hiring. But in my field they never had an opening because there was one teacher who taught Spanish and French. It was a little high school, the old high school that burned down. But after I graduated, for six years I tried to get a job and Phoenix wouldn't hire me, nobody would hire me. Some of them even told me to my face, "I won't hire a Mexican." I'd ask why.

This one particular guy from a mining town said, "Well, we had one once. And he was always talking about being discriminated against." Then my Irish temper flared up and I said I wouldn't work for an S.O.B. like him. That happened not once but a whole bunch of times.

[Tells of an unsuccessful job-searching experience in Chandler.] I finally got a job here in Mesa. I was a communicable disease investigator, but what it really boiled down to was venereal disease although we did investigate some tuberculosis. I worked there for three years, then in 1952 I applied for a teaching job. When I started talking to this gentleman who was the superintendent of schools, I immediately felt that maybe there was something here.

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BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE B

AKERS: You were talking about the man you met with the *Tribune*.

ORRANTIA: Yeah, it was Chubby Minton. So [the superintendent] said, "Mr. Orrantia, would you like to visit the school?" So he picked up the phone and called the principal, who asked if I wanted to visit the classroom. They had a lady who was substituting. She didn't know much about French or Spanish, and the kids were doing the teaching. After that I went down to meet the principal. [He asked me if I wanted a job.] I resigned from my job over there [as a health official] and came to work for them at the same salary, which was \$3,200 a year. I wasn't losing any money, but I was getting into what I had trained for and what I wanted to do. I thought I could better the lot of not

only the Mexican American but every youngster that came into my classroom from what I had to offer. I think I had a very successful teaching career here. As a matter of fact, when I started working at MCC, I started right away teaching with them in the evening [and continued working with the Mesa Schools during the day.]

The old school didn't have any cooling or refrigeration, just heating. It was a terrible situation. They built the first air conditioned school, which was Westwood High School, the principal asked me if I'd go with him. I was the head of the language department. Of course, at first I was the only one, but when I left we had about six people in the department. Then when I went to Westwood we had about four and then it grew. I stayed there until 1967 when they needed somebody over there [at MCC]. The job came open sooner than that but I had been teaching for them, and they seemed to be happy with me. The head of the language department at Phoenix College (we were under Phoenix College then) had come to evaluate us. He was going to retire, and [he recommended me for his position]. But the guy who was doing the hiring didn't think much of Mexicans. He didn't hire me. This was 1965 or '66. They hired a young lady in her '30s. I blamed the president and I told him so. I had to help the lady.

[Reminiscences about being turned down at Phoenix

College and MCC and the people who were hired instead of him.]

Anyway, I finally got into MCC and I did become the department chair. I did do some things there to help the Mexican Americans with the Fiesta de Oportunidad which we organized and which got national recognition in the National Junior College Bulletin. I was the one who was the head of the evening division. We were trying to get the Mexican American people to realize that this was their college too, and that they should be sending their kids there. So we had information booths and served food. We had people from Valley National Bank, people from the proving grounds helping us. I contacted the Mexican Consul of Phoenix, and he came and talked to the people.

AKERS: Was this in the late '60s?

ORRANTIA: This was in the '70s. Somebody had to do something, and I was the only minority at the time. Then we got a Social Studies teacher. Then I talked to the president and asked, "Hey, how come we don't have any other people?" I think I was instrumental in bringing key people to MCC. Now they're retired. Then I was always involved with the faculty senate in trying to get things operating properly. If you're not accepted it means you are not accepted socially, in the work environment, the political environment or whatever it may be. You're not accepted.

AKERS: When did you retire from Mesa Community College?

ORRANTIA: I retired in 1983.

AKERS: It sounds like your programs had quite an effect. Did your Fiestas have the desired effect of bringing people into the school?

ORRANTIA: You know, I had to resign. I got colon cancer. Unfortunately, [by the end of the '70s] it sort of faded away. Then I had only three more years. I retired at 65. You were supposed to then.

I'm going to give you something that you might be interested in. In 1992 some people got together and they decided they were going to do an appreciation dinner for me at Mesa Community. This is actually a program. [Discussion about his involvement in the 50th anniversary of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Mesa.] We helped the MLK people. [Discussion on the Martin Luther King holiday celebration in Mesa one year.]

AKERS: I want to go back to the swimming pool. You mentioned the Los Conquistadores group that you were working with. What did your group do to challenge that policy at the pool?

ORRANTIA: The problem was that when I left in 1941, and I served

almost four years so I didn't get back until 1945. I don't think there was too much done at that time. When I came back somebody else was doing some work with the pool. You mentioned Danny Rodriguez. There was a little beer joint in Tempe [that did not allow Mexican Americans], and we were instrumental in getting the ban lifted.

I never went back. They complained that there were too many fights.

The pool by that time was almost a given that they had to desegregate it.

AKERS: When you came back from the war?

ORRANTIA: Oh yeah.

AKERS: In what way? Because there were so many people who were vocal against it?

ORRANTIA: Not only that. I think society by that time was coming to realize, especially with the war effort, that something was going to have to be done. To the credit of Mesa Schools, I think that they were the first to completely desegregate, which was in 1952. We still had a colored elementary school, Washington School. And they still had a black high school, Carver. I remember going there and doing some nosing around. I think Mesa saw the writing on the wall before others did. And they took that faculty and

spread it around to the different schools when they closed Carver and Washington. The principal there was made a principal at one of the other schools.

AKERS: With the pool, were you involved in conversations with the Chamber of Commerce?

ORRANTIA: No, I wasn't because I wasn't here. Then when I came back I wasn't on campus anymore. I was home here in Mesa and I was doing things here rather than in Tempe.

AKERS: You just would go to campus and then go back?

ORRANTIA: Yeah, I had to because I had to work.

AKERS: Were you still a member of Los Conquistadores at that time?

ORRANTIA: No, once I left I suppose I could have gone back but it was a campus organization and I hated to go back and butt into what they were trying to do, although I did go back when I was invited.

AKERS: Did you ever hear the story about what happened, what was the event that changed the policy?

ORRANTIA: I can't recall how that came about exactly.

AKERS: I'd like to ask you some names of people and groups and see if you have heard of them. Dr. Samuel

Burkhard?

ORRANTIA: Oh, yes. Dr. Samuel and I were good buddies.

AKERS: He was an education teacher at the college.

ORRANTIA: And he taught philosophy. I took some philosophy classes from him. He was very interested. He would come to our events for Los Conquistadores. Him and Dr. Grimes, the dean of men, I think. Another one that was very interested in us was an art teacher. [Could not think of the name.]

AKERS: Who was the adviser when you started?

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BEGIN TAPE TWO SIDE A

ORRANTIA: Miss Wilson. She was the sponsor of La Liga Americana. So we went to her with our plan and we asked if she would be the sponsor, and of course she agreed. She was our first one and our last one, I believe, because the club dissipated by the time she died.

AKERS: I believe by the time the group worked on Tempe Beach she was still the adviser.

ORRANTIA: Yes, I know she was.

AKERS: Some other names. Did you know Danny Rodriguez?

ORRANTIA: No, I didn't.

AKERS: He had a brother named Benny Rodriguez.

ORRANTIA: Benny sounds familiar but I couldn't say.

AKERS: Do you know a man by the name of Edward Mickey Garcia?

ORRANTIA: No, no. Like I say, I didn't live in Tempe.

AKERS: These are all veterans. Did you get a chance to meet other veterans? Did you have classes over at the college?

ORRANTIA: Yes. There were some. There was Frank Amado. Val Cordova, he was a lawyer and a Superior Court Judge later on. [Discussion on various lawyers and politicians.]

AKERS: Did you know any of the men from the American Legion Post 41 in Phoenix (Tony Soza Post)?

ORRANTIA: I knew Tony Soza. There were some Perraltas there. Pete Moraga. The Moragas. The Parras.

AKERS: Is he Juana Perralta's son? Juana Perralta kind of fired up her sons to help challenge the policies.

Have you heard that?

ORRANTIA: Yes, they were very involved. I knew a bunch of them.

AKERS: From the Thunderbird Club, did you meet a man named Ray Martinez?

ORRANTIA: I used to go over there. I know who he is but I don't know him well. I was adjutant for the Mesa Post 26.

AKERS: Was that post every segregated before you came on?

ORRANTIA: I don't know if it ever was, I never heard. Right away in '45 when I got back I joined. I'm a lifetime member right now.

AKERS: When you went to the college did you ever go over to the Mexican-American neighborhood north of A.S.U.?

ORRANTIA: Oh, yeah. Sometime they would invite us over for Mexican food. The interesting thing is that Mexican food was not considered edible by the others. It wasn't mainstream. We lived at the dorms, so we had to eat at the dining hall and they never served Mexican food. We used to go to a little place called Ramona's on Mill, way up there by the railroad tracks. The owner's name was Ayala. He had a son and some daughters. They went to the college there too.

AKERS: Did you like the food at Ramona's?

ORRANTIA: Yeah, that was Mexican food. That was real food. There weren't hardly any Mexican restaurants anywhere. Ramona's in Tempe was the only one. Later on they moved.

[Discussion of living in Alpha Hall near McAllister Dr.] We lived two or three to a room but we slept on the porch that connected both rooms. It was a sleeping porch. They had these roll up canvases. Boy, it was cold in the winter and then it was hot in the summer. You spent most of your time in your room, and then at night you'd run out there and dive into the bed. Dr. Gammage lived across the way and his first wife Dixie Lee. Dr. Gammage was at Northern Arizona State Teachers College when my brother was over there. And my brother used to drive him around. So when we came down he introduced us to Dr. Gammage. My brother and I worked at the cafeteria. So he had us take dinner to him and take some for us and eat dinner with them, with Dixie Lee and him. So I told my brother, "This is dumb. Sunday is the only day we have to go and do things, and we're here with Dr. Gammage. Why don't you take them one Sunday and I'll take them the next?" So we became real good friends with Dr. Gammage.

When I came back from the service (in 1943) I stopped by and talked with him. Mary Bunty was his secretary. They were over at the old library, the Matthews

Library, and he had his office upstairs. Dr. Gammage asked me how I had done and so forth. There was a little auditorium catty-corner facing north (Arizona West) east of College, and we used to use it. He said, "You know, Gilbert, I am going to call a special assembly so you can talk to the students." I said I'd rather not. Then he told me to talk to the major of the cadet detachment--there must have been a thousand cadets there--so I talked to the major. I was a first lieutenant. He told me I had to review his troops and talk to them. It was all grass around Old Main. So we had them sit down (they were aviation cadets) and I talked to them about the things that had happened. In retrospect, maybe I should have talked to them. It would have shown them that here's a Mexican and he has done these things.

AKERS: A few other Tempe names for you to see what your memories are. Dwight "Red" Harkins?

ORRANTIA: Dwight Red Harkins was a great guy. He had that little old theater there in Tempe, and we used to go there. He would take the time to talk to us and encourage us. He was a good person.

[Tells of an occasion where he couldn't sit down at a Mesa theater.] It was in the summertime. So we (he and his nephew) went to this theater and paid. It was not much money--15 cents for him and I think it was 35 for me. We're walking down and wanting to sit in the

middle. The usherette said, "No you can't do that. You have to sit back here to the left." I said, "No, we're not going to do that." We walked out and when I went to the cashier I said, "Look, if I can't sit where I want to sit and I've paid as much money as everybody else, then just give me my money back." She couldn't do that so I asked her to call the manager. He gave me my money back after I threatened to call the police.

AKERS: Did you know of a Dr. R.J. Stroud?

ORRANTIA: Yes. I think he was the head of graduate division, if I'm not mistaken.

AKERS: He was involved in athletics, and he later on ran the pool. I know he was involved in amateur sports, like a sports league in Arizona.

ORRANTIA: [Discusses the problem he had getting the credits for his Masters Degree. He went to Dr. Stroud of the graduate division.] He asked me, "Why did you wait so long (to get your M.A.)?" I went into a sociological dissertation about how I had been prevented from teaching because I was of Mexican descent. He said, "You go home and write that up for me. We're having a meeting with whatever committee on Friday." So I went home and typed it up and brought it back. On Monday they called me and said, "Mr. Orrantia, go through all the process. You're going to graduate."

AKERS: Just a couple other questions wrapping up. One was at the pool, and you told me about the first time you tried to go into it. Do you remember if they had any signs with the No Mexican Allowed policy written on it?

ORRANTIA: No, I don't.

AKERS: They told you when you tried to get in?

ORRANTIA: Yes, because I was unaware. They hit me cold.

AKERS: So later on when it was open and desegregated did you ever go swimming then?

ORRANTIA: No, I'm too proud. I don't go where I'm not wanted.

END TAPE 2 SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2 SIDE B

ORRANTIA: At that time we had to go through Prescott, Yarnell, Wickenburg, Congress Junction, to Phoenix. It was a round about way. So he (my brother) brought us down in his car and introduced us to Dr. Gammage. This was just a little school. At that time the president of the college was accessible to almost any student if you wanted to go talk to him.

AKERS: You went to school for two years and then you went back to the mines. Why did you go back?

ORRANTIA: To earn some more money to come back. It was taking too much of my time to do so much of the work at the college and not have time to study. So I felt if I had a few more resources I would have a little more time. They were really good about the work study.

I remember College Avenue used to be tree-lined from University all the way down to Orange with Chinese elm. It was almost like a tunnel. Chinese elms are very brittle and they would just break up. Mrs. Krause, who was the chairperson of the student employment, used to run the dining hall with her husband. He was the chief cook. She would ask us if we would like to clean up the mess (of the Chinese elms) that the storm made. They'd pay you 50 cents an hour, and that was money. They were pretty good about offering us jobs like that.

There was a trolley that used to run from 24th to the Capitol, then north on Central and south on Central, and it ended at 24th. So we would sometimes walk to 24th to go to a movie at the Fox and take the trolley. It would be dark, but there were no cars.

AKERS: You would walk along what is called the Tempe-Phoenix road?

ORRANTIA: Yeah, it went up Washington. You had to catch it at

Washington.

AKERS: So, why the Fox Theater in Phoenix?

ORRANTIA: Because it was different. There it was segregated. You had to go up in the balcony. You couldn't be on the main floor at the Fox. Then I remember when the Orpheum came in. I thought it was so beautiful.

AKERS: Were you allowed to sit where you wanted to there?

ORRANTIA: I don't remember that they segregated us at all there. But the Fox, yes.

AKERS: The last question I have for you is, Can you tell me how you ended up in the military because you were a student when you enlisted?

ORRANTIA: Yes, but that didn't make any difference. When they initiated the draft people from Mesa had to go to the college to enroll because they didn't have a draft board in Tempe. Tempe was too small. They had the Mesa draft board go there. We were in college so we had to sign up. Then they pulled the lottery, and my number was so close to the number they pulled that I knew I'd be called. I thought that I didn't relish the idea of having to lug a rifle all over Europe. Despite the fact that I suffer from acrophobia (fear of heights), but I thought I wanted to give it a try. I'm going to enroll in the Army Air Corps. This was

the second semester of 1941. They came from the Army, Navy, and the Marines because that is all we had. So I tried the Army Air Corps. So I volunteered. Before they called, the Draft Board sent me a "Greetings from the President." [Wrote two notes saying he was already signed up with the AAC.] Then they called me again in October and I went in. We were inducted in the Luhrs Towers Building, which was THE building at the time. On November 11, 1941, on Armistice Day, we were sworn in. There were 21 of us from ASTC, NASTC (Northern Arizona State Teachers College), and University of Arizona. We were put on a train and off we went to Texas.

This was before Pearl Harbor. We were getting indoctrinated. We were marching. We were cleaning rifles. They were shooting us with shots. That was a preflight thing. Then we went to a town in Texas called Stanford. We did our primary flying there. It was winter time.

[Discusses the perils of flying in winter in Texas.]
These were PT 17s and PT 19s. The PT 17 was a Steerman, the double wing, and then the 19 was a Fairchild, a low wing motor plane. I flew the Steerman first. Then I went to Randolph Field, which at that time was considered the West Point of the air. Then I went to Ellington Field in Houston and did the multi-engine training. They put me in bombers.

AKERS: Where did you serve? What was your combat position?

ORRANTIA: I served in North Africa. We went there in late '42, early '43. A whole group flew from Homestead Air Force Base in Florida to Puerto Rico and then to what is now Guyana, to Brazil, etc.

[Discusses some experiences in the Army Air Corps including meeting Jimmy Doolittle.]

AKERS: This is the end of my set questions. Is there anything else you would like to say?

ORRANTIA: It sounds incredible. Some of the things I have to say sound incredible. Nowadays people can't imagine what was happened way back then. When I grew up we didn't have any running water, any electricity, anything. You went and got your water in a wood barrel. Our dining room table was just boards that Dad had made into a table with benches around it.

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