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Interview with Guillermo Olea

Guillermo Olea

California State University, Monterey Bay

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Guillermo “Bill” Olea
Interviewer: David Reay & Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena
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Duration of Interview: 00:54:09

David Reay 00:07
Hi, my name is David Reay. We are—today is October 19, 2009. We are here with Mr. Olea. My partner already went over the release form with you. Do we have permission to record?

Guillermo Olea 00:24
Yeah, no problem.

David Reay 00:28
Okay. So, my first question for you is where are you from?

Guillermo Olea 00:36
Originally, I was born in Benson, Arizona. And my dad used to work for the railroad. And he got transferred to Salinas, so we came to Salinas since I was eight years old, and so I was actually raised here.

David Reay 00:55
Do you have any siblings?

Guillermo Olea 00:57
Yeah, I have, well, one brother, and then I had two brothers and four sisters, and we were all born in Arizona. And we all came here to Salinas and all were raised here. I'm the only one left in Salinas in the family. My brothers and sisters have all scattered throughout California.

David Reay 01:21
What was it like growing up with your brothers and sisters?

Guillermo Olea 01:25
Oh, it was great. Both my older brothers were just that. They were older brothers and they took care of me. And we all—all the three boys took care of the girls, so we—our big thing was going to the beach here, because coming from Arizona, we had a lot of beach in Arizona, a lot of sand but no water. So, here we got to see the water. So, we really enjoyed the beaches. We used to go about every other week and just do cookouts at the beach and really enjoy it.

David Reay 01:30
Were there any family—any stories told within your family when you were growing up?

Guillermo Olea 02:13
Within the family, not really. Just we were all close family, and we still are a close family. With everything we did, we did together. Even now that we've all gone our different ways, we still get together every August, the entire [unclear], all the kids and what not. We—most of the time we get a lot together now in Santa Maria, because it's in between everybody else. So, we have our barbecue and family gathering there for a weekend. We do that now [unclear] being raised here was great because we could go anywhere and not have any problems whatsoever. We used to live in East Salinas, and we'd come into town and have no problems with anybody. I remember that we used to go on vacation in New Mexico where my parents are from, and we'd leave our house unlocked, never had to worry about it. Nobody ever went in. And, of course, the neighbors watched for each other, but we never had any problems with that. But that was our vacation time. Every year was a train ride into Mexico—Sonora, Mexico, at that—and spend a couple of weeks down there every year, and then the whole family would be down there.

David Reay 03:40
When you get—when you and your brothers and sisters would go to the beach here in California, what were some of the things that you would do there?

Guillermo Olea 03:51
Throw sand all over each other for one thing, but we used to like to go also clam at the beach while we were playing around there. Dad would take a pitchfork, and he bent the pitchforks down so we could dig, and dig clams out, and we'd eat them right there. Dad would open them up and we'd eat them raw. Boy, that was the best thing we could have, and this was the [unclear] of the [unclear], because we could get all kinds of stuff. [laughs] But we did most of the—we'd dig holes, make castles, and played war, and played Cowboys and Indians and everything out there, but most of the time we were in the water, but the water was cold. But it was, like, you're young at that time. You didn't feel it until after you got out of it. [laughs]

David Reay 04:47
Tell me a little bit more about your father. Like, where did your father come from, and what line of work did he do?

Guillermo Olea 04:55
My father was born in Sonora, Mexico, and when he was eighteen, he decided that he was going to come to the United States, because it was the land of plenty. At that time, to emigrate to the United States is you cross the border—you go to the border station and sign your name, and that was your immigration. You came in—he came into Los Angeles, and he worked for Goodyear Rubber there for a couple of years, then decided to go back look for a wife, because he wanted to get married, and he met my mom. They saw each other for quite some time, then finally they got married. And he brought her back with her. That's when the Rubber Company was having a lot of union problems, so he decided not to be fighting the unions that fight each other. So, he went to work for the railroad. He started with the railroad—he ended up working thirty-eight years with the railroad. And that's when he was working in Douglas, Arizona, at the time. They transferred him here to Salinas, and that was when I was eight

years old. So, once they transferred him, he decided he's not going out of here. Once he got a taste of this climate here, that was it. We were all staying here.

David Reay 06:16
How did your father meet your mother?

Guillermo Olea 06:20
Let's see. One of my mother's brothers was a friend of my dad's, and he introduced my mother to my father, and they—and actually my dad picked it up from there. He said, nice looking little chick, so he stayed with her. [laughs]

David Reay 06:47
What kind of memories or, like, stories did your father tell you, like, about growing up when he was growing up in Sonora?

Guillermo Olea 07:08
In Mexico? At that time, it was all—travel was strictly by horse. It was horseback and buggy and that type. Very few cars at that time, and he says that he loved to go horseback [unclear]. He said one thing that really sticks—that he'd be riding on one hill, somebody would be at another hill, and they'd wave at him. So, he'd wave back in, and say, "Same to you." So, if he's saying hello, well, hello to you. But if he's giving me an epithet, he says it's same to you. He's getting it back. [laughs] And that I firmly recall from my dad. He always says, "Same to you," just in case. But he really enjoyed it. Growing up in Mexico, it was the [unclear] cowboy era at the time, and he started working on some mines, some gold mines that are in Mexico. And then he finally decided being down in the cave was not for him. So, that's when he decided to come to the United States.

David Reay 07:32
When you guys—when you go back to Mexico every year, what are some of the things that you do?

Guillermo Olea 08:31
Oh, do a lot of stuff. Get together, because I still have a lot of family in Mexico, cousins down there. We all get together, and we'd always take horses out, and we'd go work cattle, and ride the different mountain sides, and go fishing. And just enjoy the whole time. But to me, the two weeks wasn't enough. But that was more than enough for dad—mom and dad—and they had to come back, go to work. But all the kids, they just wanted to stay longer, because we really enjoyed the family. Every night was dinner at a different house. And never—seemed to be never out of food. I was—every time we went to a house, we'd walk in, first thing they'd say is sit down and eat. So, we'd sit down to eat. But all the kids got along great, so we always look forward to going back to Mexico. From Agua Prieta, Sonora, which is just across the border from Douglas, Arizona. The train inland is only eighty-six miles, but it took the train six hours to go those eighty-six miles, because it was the slowest train in the world, and it stopped at every village, stopped at every little hut that was on the side of the road, either bringing mail or food for the people and so forth. But it was a slow train ride. Sometimes when the train would have to negotiate a long curve, and we knew that long curve, we'd get off the train, walk across up a mountain

and the little hill down the other side, and wait for the train to come. And then we'd just get on it as it come back by.

David Reay 08:44
Tell me a little bit more about your mother. Where was your mother from?

Guillermo Olea 10:37
My mother was from Nacozari, Sonora, Mexico. It was a little mining town. It was mostly copper zinc. They had a huge copper zinc mine there at the time. And her mother was a midwife, which was my grandmother was a midwife. I think she delivered ninety percent of the babies in that town. And it was a little—it was a village, pretty good size village. And she was raised—raised my mom, and when mom first met my dad, the first thing my grandmother says is [unclear], because she—my dad was nine years older than my mother. And he says, "Yeah, here comes his old rooster for the young chick." [laughs] But they got along pretty good, and it turned out that my dad was the best son-in-law she ever had, because he's supported us here and supported the family in Mexico.

David Reay 11:42
What memories do you have of your grandparents growing up?

Guillermo Olea 11:47
Well, my grandfather on my mother's side was a pretty good-sized man. And he was very authoritative. He was the authority of the family. And with all his—he'd go around to all his kids when he'd go hunting, and he says, "Who needs meat?" So, they're the ones that tell him, says, oh, we don't have any meat, or we're getting down low on meat. So, he says, "I'm going to bring deer. I'll bring one for each one of us." So, I said, "Okay." So, he'd take [unclear] if he needed to—if you're going around the families, needed three deer, so he'd take three bullets. Take his rifle, he'd be gone a day, and he'd come back with three deer. And he was a hunter that wouldn't quit. He knew exactly where to go and how to hunt and everything else. And I asked him at one time, how come you only take one bullet for each deer. He says, "That's all I need." He says, "If I need more, I'll quit hunting." [laughs] But he supplied the meat for the family for many years that I can recall. And like I said, my grandmother was a midwife, and for that matter, my dad got sick here in Salinas at one time with real bad ulcers, bleeding ulcers. And the doctor put him on Pablum, and my dad was a meat and potato eater. He wouldn't—he didn't like Pablum. So, my grandmother told him to come to Mexico. He went to Mexico and stayed with her for two weeks. He came back, no problems, went to the doctor, and they couldn't find any evidence of a ulcer or even scars of ulcer. The doctor asks, says, "What did you do?" Says I went to see my mother-in-law. She's a—what they call a comadre, which is a midwife. And she knows every herb there is out there in the countryside. She can tell you what herbs do, which is our medicines nowadays. It's patented after herbs. And he fixed her up—fixed him up come back, and then the doctor told him, says, "I want you to take me to your mother-in-law. I want to talk to her about the herbs." And dad said sure, but you'll have to take my son too, which was me, at the house at the time. And he'll have to interpret for you, because she doesn't speak English. Doctor says fine. Well, we're just getting ready to leave, but two days before we left, my grandmother fell and broke her hip, and within three days she was—she died. So, the only herbs that was remembered in the family was what she had taught my mother.

David Reay 14:42
When you first moved from Arizona to California, was it hard making that adjustment?

Guillermo Olea 14:51
Well, the family liked the desert motif. We like being out in the desert, and be able to go out and go hunting any time for rabbits and what not, turkey, dove, and to feed the families. When we moved here, we moved into town, because most of the time we lived in railroad-supplied housing, which was not in town. It's usually out on the outskirts and so forth. But when we moved here, the railroad-supplied housing was right smack in the middle of town, which is on Market Street. And there was an adjustment there, but we got used to it. We—the main thing we liked was the weather. So, that kind of helped us get used to it real quick. And then going into schools, different schools, we just made a lot of new friends. So, it was actually, for me, it was an easy adjustment. I think my older sister had the harder adjustment, because she was already old enough to be seeing a boy, so she left the boy in Douglas. [laughs] And that was a hard adjustment for her.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 16:10
So, tell us a little bit about your name. I know your name is Bill Olea.

Guillermo Olea 16:14
My name is Guillermo Olea. Guillermo means William, so most of my life my family has called me Bill. So, I've gone by Bill almost all my life. I really didn't know my name was Guillermo until I was seventeen years old, and I enlisted in the Air Force. When I went to the Air Force, they asked for a birth certificate. So, I got my birth certificate from my mother. I looked at it, I says, "This isn't my birth certificate." My mom says, "Yes, it is." "No, this is for Guillermo." And she says, "You are Guillermo. That's what it really means." [laughs] So I said, "What?" So, until then, my name was Billy for as far as I could remember, and at that age and finding out my real name is Guillermo, so—

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 17:03
How did that make you feel at that moment?

Guillermo Olea 17:06
Pretty good. I like the name Guillermo. First thing was that I could pronounce it, so it was worth it to me. And I liked the— like, my older brother's name is Fernando, and he likes it. My other brother was Renee, and we never had any problems with our names. But I enjoyed that all going through the service as Guillermo, and then everybody just started calling me Memo, which, short for Bill, so it just transpired, when I got out of the service, I continued through as Bill.

David Reay 17:47
Tell us a little bit more about—what exactly did you do when you were in the Air Force?

Guillermo Olea 17:53
I was an Air Force—I was an airborne radio and radar operator. I was on a flight crew for three out of my six years, and then I transferred into the air police. I was an air police for the last part of my enlistment, and that got me interested in police work. So, I figured when I got discharged, I'd be going

into police work. I was stationed in Germany, my whole enlistment up to the last couple of years, when I was transferred here to Castle Air Force Base in Merced. And there's where I got my main taste of police work, with the air police. And that gave me a chance to come home on weekends and look for a job before I got discharged, and which I did, and I was interested in police work. I looked up the different police agencies here at Salinas [unclear]. And at that time, the chief of police here was McIntyre, and his assistant chief was Herb Roberson, and I talked to Roberson. And after I talked to him [unclear], he says, "Apply." He says, "We need people like you, since you're a veteran. You're still young." I was twenty-two, and I was already a veteran coming out of the service. So, he says, "You're at the right age and you—" Says, "We need people like you. You're from hometown." So, I applied and got hired. I worked with the Salinas Police Department for twenty-five years.

David Reay 19:36
And are you still working with them or—

Guillermo Olea 19:38
No, I've retired from the police department. Matter of fact, I retired twenty-one years ago.

David Reay 19:45
When you worked for the Salinas Police Department, what exactly did you do?

Guillermo Olea 19:50
I started just patrolling like everybody else. And you work the streets, answer calls, and you look out and watch out for the people that are out there, try to protect them. I went through, started as a patrolman, and went to instructor, corporal, sergeant, detective, right on up the line. When I retired with twenty-five years of experience, I retired as a lieutenant with the Salinas Police Department. I was one of the first Hispanic middle managers for the police department, and I enjoyed the work with the police department, because each day is different from the other. Really, it's never becomes mundane. You're—I looked forward to going to work. I was there an hour early, get everything ready, and then after my shift was over, I'd still be an hour putting everything straight, making sure there's no mistakes made and so forth. And I really enjoyed it. That was—I was the second Spanish speaking police officer hired by Salinas, and then when they put me on the night shift, which was from 8pm to 4am, they assigned me the beat of Chinatown. That was my beat, and I walked it. I'd walk everything. Walk the alleys, walk through the bars, walk through the stores, hotels, and everything, just to keep as a beat man there.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 21:28
How did that make you feel—

Guillermo Olea 21:31
I enjoyed it, because this was during the time of the Bracero program, and that was the big location for the braceros that come in for—because there were pool halls, and they had the beer halls. There was some Mexican restaurants at the same time, and it was a big area for prostitution at the time too. So, that's mainly what I worked, and make sure that the—my main thing was, according to my boss, was at the—watch out that the bracero wasn't getting ripped off.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 22:03
What was the Bracero program?

Guillermo Olea 22:05
Bracero program was where they brought people from Mexico to work the agricultural fields here in Salinas. It was—we didn't have enough people here to work the fields, so they had to import their laborers, and for the most part, ninety-nine percent of the laborers were brought in. That's what they—they were hard workers. They'd come into work, make their money, and take it home. They would keep so much, send the rest. And it worked out pretty good. Sometimes we'd have troubles with them, depends from different parts of Mexico. One group didn't get along too good with the other group, so they'd end up fighting, so we'd have to split them up and make peace. But for the most part, very well-behaved people. Very humble, and honest. You'd ask them a question, and even if it hurt them, they'd answer it correctly. That's one of my big memories of them.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 23:12
What do you know about the Republic Cafe?

Guillermo Olea 23:14
Oh, they had some very good food at the time. Since that was on my beat, I used to try to eat there as much as possible, because I preferred that food, the Oriental food, and there was—it was very classy, especially for the area. You'd go in there, and you—they had tablecloths. You have linens, and you have proper glass and knives and forks, and so forth. And if you prefer to eat with chopsticks, you also had chopsticks. And for Salinas, as far as I was concerned at that time, it was one of the classiest places in town for a meal. It outshone most of the other restaurants in town that people would go to. Now Monterey was a different story, because they—most of the restaurants went to Monterey. But for Salinas, Republic Cafe was very—and it was not pricey. Not for the time anyway. It was pretty good.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 24:16
Do you have any stories or special moments or memories of Chinatown that you'd like to share with us?

Guillermo Olea 24:21
The one thing I do remember was when I was assigned to Chinatown—since I was the first officer that actually was assigned Chinatown, that was my eight-hour beat. I'd be walking the area, and I'd hear little shuffling footsteps behind me. I turned around and I wouldn't see anybody. I'd keep on walking, and I hear this—and after a couple of days, this is somebody that's gotta be following me, and I gotta find out why. So, one day I went from Soledad Street over to Lake Street, back behind the alley there from the Golden Dragon, and put up against the fence and waited, and here comes the shuffling feet. Person comes around the corner and I grab ahold of him and said, "What are you following me around?" It was a little Chinese gentleman, couldn't speak English. All he could say is, "Chinatown. Officer need help." So, I said, "What?" "Chinatown. Officer need help." I says, "You gotta say something more than that." He said, "Chinatown. Officer need help. Bing Kong Tong. Bing Kong Tong." So, that was an association there, a Chinese association on Soledad Street. So, I walked him over there and asked the people at Bing Kong Tong, say, "What's with this guy? He's been following me and

everything else." He says, "Oh, no." He's says, "We hired him. He's to follow you everywhere you go. Anytime a fight starts or anything else, he's supposed to run to the call box," which we had one call box in Chinatown, "run to the call box and call the police department and tell them that it's Chinatown, your officer needs help." [Gerardo laughs] And so, a couple of times that I had gotten into a tussle with some gentleman, all of a sudden, the police cars were there to back me up, and I had no idea how they got there, because in those days we didn't have walkie talkies. It was all strictly call box. And so, the police officers—then finally after he told me that, I asked our dispatcher, "How'd you know I was having troubles?" He says, "Oh, somebody on the phone said, 'Chinatown. Officer needs help.' So, we sent you some officers." [Gerardo laughs] And the president of the association there, Bing Kong Tong, says, "You're the first one to be assigned to us. We don't want to lose you." So, I felt good. I felt real good. From then on, I heard the little shuffling steps behind me, and it didn't bother me. [laughs]

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 26:48
What do you think made them decide to assign someone to look—

Guillermo Olea 26:52
Because there used to be—there used to be quite a bit of problem there with the prostitution and so forth, and even some drugs at the time. And once the officer was assigned to Chinatown, everything kind of quelled, went down a little bit. So, they saw this, and they says, this is going to be—this can only be good, so we want to continue. We don't want to—they figured if the officer got hurt, they won't assign another officer there. But it was—we, at that time, we were working six days on, two days off. So, I'd work six days, and I'd have two days off. Meanwhile, they assigned another officer to cover the beat while I was gone. So, then after I come back from my two days off, everybody would start telling me, says, yeah, such and such that happened, and who did what, and they'd give me all the information. But they wouldn't give it to the other officer. [unclear], "Why didn't you talk to the officer that was here?" Well, he says, "This is your beat. We talk to you." And that was it. I'd spend the first day clearing up the last two days actions.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 27:43
From your experience working as a police officer in Chinatown, what were some of the different community groups you saw that lived in Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 28:11
Well, the first was Chinese through there. There was quite a few Chinese. Then they moved out of the area, but they still owned most of the property. And a lot of Filipinos started coming in. And Filipino setting up pool halls, and one hotel that I remember there on the corner, just by the—next to the Republic. I don't remember what the name of that one is. But it became Filipino, and that's when the, more or less, the Bracero program started going on, and they catered to the to the braceros. But they were also very honest people. You could talk to—you could really work with them. And that was the main thing there at the time, so I enjoyed it. I worked from eight o'clock at night to four in the morning there, and never have something to—I didn't have to look for something. Something was always going on, so—

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 29:18
Do you ever see any problems between the different groups?

Guillermo Olea 29:20
No, not really. Filipino at the time were owners. There were some Mexican owners, bar owners there too. And they all got along. Their main thing was the prostitution. They didn't care for it. And we worked it as much as we possibly could, like, what the laws allowed us to do. And they supported us with that, and that's—seeing if we would support what they were looking for—they wanted to get rid of—was the prostitution. But prostitution got so bad there at one time—Lewis Hotel. That's what it was. The Lewis Hotel—that we in ended up doing a red light abatement program on the Lewis Hotel, because that's where all the prostitution was going on. And once that happened, then we cleared that out through the red light abatement program. We had other places that we were, you know, looking at too, so they also got [unclear], so they got out of the area, and then at that time is when the girls, prostitutes, started using motel rooms. Instead of setting up a room right there at the Chinatown, they go to different rooms.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 30:38
Do you remember any of the fires that happened in Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 30:41
Any of the who?

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 30:42
Of the fires.

Guillermo Olea 30:44
There's only one I recall, and it was right next door to the Republic Hotel. And the fire department did a good job in keeping the fire from going onto the Republic, but that's the only one that I can recall, because other fires that happened even prior to me being assigned there, but I do know that when all that was cleared out, the fire debris and everything was cleared out, the people started going through the debris in the empty lot, finding old bottles from way back, [unclear] medical bottles from way back in the days of the 1800s, and then they started finding a lot of opium bottles too. But that's about the only thing—the only fire I recall is that one right next door to the Republic.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 31:45
What are some of the changes you have seen over time in Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 31:49
Oh, big change. Big change in the—prostitution has moved out of there. Ownership of the different places now is— people have bought the buildings more or less for—see if they can turn some type of profit on it or whatever. But the people—now it's mostly homeless that are going there. And the Victory Mission is doing a great deal to feed them and to house as many as they can. So, that's changed a lot. Now the—also the CSUMB people are going in there and they're cleaning up, cleaning up lots, cleaning up buildings. They're doing a good job. I do remember one time there was a film crew from Hollywood

that came in. They wanted to do a film in Chinatown. And so, we had to go with them and they got all the permission from all the property owners, and the [unclear] says we're going to paint it, because it's going to be in color and everything else. We're going to paint your buildings. If you paint the front, you paint all the way around. You don't just paint the front. So, okay, they agreed, and they did. They painted all the buildings to shoot the movie. And so that—I remember that brought Chinatown's esteem up a little bit, because they had brand new paint on the buildings.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 33:20
[laughs] What can you tell us about the Fort Ord soldiers that were placed there? They come off into Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 33:31
Actually, the military—they're young kids. They were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. They left the 100 Block of Main Street mostly, but they would go to the Chinatown for the [unclear], for the prostitution. They didn't go there for the drinking in the bars or anything else. But they did go looking for the prostitution, and usually that was about it, because they stuck mainly to 100 Block Main Street, where there was Rex Pool Hall, Tiny's Cafe, and they kind of catered to the GIs. And they felt more at home there than it did in Chinatown. Chinatown, they'd go in groups of three or four. And once they saw that the police officers observed and followed them around, checked where they were at and everything else, they became uncomfortable, because they knew that prostitution was legal, and that's what they were going down there for, so they may go back to 100 Block of Main Street.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 34:30
What were some of the businesses, markets, or places that existed?

Guillermo Olea 34:36
Well, mostly at the time that I was assigned there were a couple of restaurants and mostly beer halls. Then one Filipino gentleman built the Leon's Club, Leon Deasis did. And he—it was a new type of club for the area, which was not just beer. There were—he had mixed drinks and dancing, so that made a difference. And that club alone made a big draw of people, of all kinds of people, to Chinatown, was to have a nightclub and have dancing. And his music was mostly Mexican style music. And depends on who the customers were at the time, if they were from the ranches and so forth. They'd have Ranchera music. Otherwise, I'd have—I know they used to do a lot of mix of [unclear] type music, and they—which was real good, because then he had a doorman, so it was pretty nice. It was kept clean inside, no problems there.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 35:51
How would you describe a typical day of work at Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 35:56
Constantly going. [laughs] From the time you get on the beat, you're always going to—you're answering questions, you're stopping small fights, making sure that people aren't getting ripped off. From the prostitution, we had to also handle their pimps, and that was a full-time job, just keeping that area straight for anything, so—

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 36:31
Do you remember any major incidents you had to handle, or something that was really—

Guillermo Olea 36:34
No, the only thing major we've had there was—we had there at the times were—there were stabbings, cuttings. The one that I do remember the most was one guy got straight stabbed in the chest. And when I got there, I was up the street when I got there. Everybody was calling for the fight. I ran in there, and he says, "Here's the guy. He's laying on the ground." And you can see the air coming out of his chest from his lung, and had to do everything you can to try to save the guy's life. And between myself and the ambulance people, we were able to keep it pretty straight, so—

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 37:17
Tell us a little bit more—let's go back a little bit and tell us a little bit more—why did you decide to become a police officer?

Guillermo Olea 37:23
Well, I had some experience with it in the military as an air police officer. And so, when I got out, I was looking for work. I was twenty-two at the time, looking for work. And there was a notice in the paper where they were looking for police officers. Well, that's when I went to talk to, at the time, was Deputy Chief Roberson. He told me to apply. He says if I pass a test and everything else, I'd get hired. And I did. And training, at that time, you had to buy your own uniform. The only thing they issued you was the gun, handcuffs, and a set of keys. You had to go to San Francisco and buy your uniforms. So, first time I came to work, I came in there and the chief assigned me to a senior officer for training along with a senior officer for six days, and then I was on my own. That was the academy: six days in those days. It was 1961. [laughs]

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 38:28
What made you decide to join the military, or the Air Force?

Guillermo Olea 38:33
Oh, the Air Force? Well, when I was going through high school, I was hanging—you know, the kids I used to hang around with were—several of them were dope addicts and burglars and what not. And I told my dad, I says, "I want nothing to do with these people, and if I go—" We were the only two high schools in town. It was Salinas High School and Palma.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 38:54
Which one did you go to?

Guillermo Olea 38:55
I went to Salinas High. My parents couldn't afford Palma, so dad says, "You're just gonna have to bite the bullet." I says, "No." I was a junior then. I says, I can finish my school in the Air Force. Well, I'll just go in the Air Force. So, we went home. I asked my mother's permission, my mother says, "I will not sign for you." So, my dad says, "Well, if they'll make a man out of you, let's give it a chance. I'll sign for you." That's when I found out my name was Guillermo. So, he did. He signed, and I think that's the best thing

my dad could have done for me. He signed for me. I went into service and I enjoyed every day of it, from basic training all the way through until I was discharged.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 39:38
How was your experience in high school?

Guillermo Olea 39:40
It was good. At that time, we only had I think two black families in Salinas. That was the Bouttes, and Kellys, I think the other family was. Quite a few Mexicans, but mostly white. Never any problem. We got along, everybody got along, and to me, I didn't experience anything prejudiced until I went to Biloxi, Mississippi, where I was stationed for tech school. There's the first place I ever come across prejudice. But here in Salinas, all the time from eight years old up until when I turned seventeen and went in the service, I never had any problem with anybody. My brothers never did. My sister didn't. Never saw it out in the [unclear], nothing in the—with the kids in the schools—but when I came back afterwards, then you could see it.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 40:43
How did that make you feel—when you came back, I mean?

Guillermo Olea 40:46
Kind of sorry to see that happening, since most of it was, like, people were feeling threatened, because here's these Mexican families coming in. They're working the fields, and some of them would say they're taking our jobs. Well, you're not working the field. Why are you saying they're taking your jobs? And then they'd shut up. But when we first came to Salinas, we did the field work too. Matter of fact, my dad liked the produce work so much that he—besides working full time with the railroad, we had a strawberry ranch out on Espinosa Road. And we farmed strawberries, and that's where we learned to work the fields, and then after dad got rid of the strawberry fields, we still followed some of the crops, picking pears, tomatoes, and prunes, in Hollister down in San Joaquin Valley, up to Moraga for pears. And maybe the kids, some of the kids—actually it was two of my sisters, my older brother, and myself and my mom. The rest would stay at home. They were going to school and what not, so—but we did that for quite a few years, and then Mom and Dad decided that's not your kind of work. So, then one thing I do remember though is that both my mom and dad says is, "Spanish you speak at home. We will teach you Spanish at home. At school, you will speak English. They will teach you English. I don't want you being taught English in Spanish, so it's full immersion English so you can learn it, full immersion Spanish at home so you can learn it." And so, we did, my sisters, my brothers, and I. Once in a great while you can detect an accent in one of us, but not always. So, after we learned Spanish and learned English going through school and what not, we just told my mom and dad, said, "Okay, full immersion English in the home. You're gonna learn English." [laughs] "You talk to us in English or we don't talk to you."

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 43:05
So, you still speak Spanish, right?

Guillermo Olea 43:07
Oh yes.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 43:08
Do you go often—do you go oftentimes back to Mexico, to your family? You say you have family in Mexico?

Guillermo Olea 43:12
Oh, yeah. And we have—we still have family reunions in Mexico. I used to go to different places in Mexico with the Flying Doctors as an interpreter. We used to take dentists and eye doctors to little villages in Mexico.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 43:36
Did you ever get a chance to go to school in Mexico when you were a child?

Guillermo Olea 43:39
No. No, never did.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 43:40
You just went for vacations, two weeks? [laughs]

Guillermo Olea 43:44
Yeah, just for vacation, but not—and I liked it so much that when my son was—one summer decided he wanted to go to Mexico and visit. He was about six, so Mom was going to Mexico, but she was going to be there a month or so. So, I told my son, said, "You can go with grandma. I says, "She's gonna be there a month." "Okay." And he went to stay with her a month, and when—he didn't want to come back. He says, "I like this too much. I'm learning how to speak Mexicans." [laughs]

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 44:19
[laughs] Well, you said you didn't face any discrimination, but you—I mean, you did face some discrimination, right?

Guillermo Olea 44:35
Not here.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 44:35
Not here, but somewhere else.

Guillermo Olea 44:37
In—first time I did was in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 44:42
Did any of your family members face any discrimination?

Guillermo Olea 44:44
No, not—they never have said anything if they had. But at that time, I don't think they knew what discrimination was. You know, at least we did. Most of the kids I ran around with were Anglo. My sisters, same way. We—but we still had Mexican friends, and I ran around with Bouttes also, which were a black family. And, of course, when we first moved here, East Salinas was Okie flats. That's not what—redneck Okies out there. And we were one of the first Mexican families to move in, and we still didn't have any problem.

David Reay 45:41
I want to go back to the Bracero program. When your father immigrated from Mexico to the US, did he immigrate as part of the Bracero program?

Guillermo Olea 45:50
Well, no. No, he was—when he first came across, he was eighteen years old. And he just knew that United States was a place that if he was going to make it, he's going to make it in the United States. And at that time, when you immigrated, you just came—as you pass the guard check at the border, you signed your name, and that was your immigration. You were then an American citizen. However, my dad still took it further because he loved this country to the point that he became a naturalized citizen. He went through the schooling and everything else, and he became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 46:30
What was that process like?

Guillermo Olea 46:32
A lot of studying for him, because at that time, too, we were just teaching them how to speak English, proper English. He could speak broken English and so forth, but all the kids were taking it on to ourselves that teaching the proper English—just the way they were teaching us in school. And he picked it up pretty good. And he just says, "I want to be a citizen of the United States." And that's what he did.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 46:58
Can you tell us a little about your own family? Are you married? Did you marry?

Guillermo Olea 47:03
Oh, I'm married, yeah. And my wife, Barbara, she works at the hospital, and that's where I work too now, part time as security. She worked in agriculture, in the offices, all her young life. And she was in agriculture then. She knew a lot of the field workers, and in the early days, she didn't work in the fields, but then later on she went to work for a seed company. And there she had to go out and work on the fields, even though she was a secretary. She was also the document keeper. She kept all the documents in regards to the advancements and the improvements of the different seed varieties and so forth. So, there was a joke in our family was here I used to be a field worker and became professional, became a police officer. And I says, "You were a professional secretary." Says, "You're a field worker now." [Gerardo laughs] Says, "You're going the other way around."

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 48:14
So, do you have any children?

Guillermo Olea 48:17
We have two adopted children, a boy and a girl, adopted with my first wife, and then adopted a boy out of Los Angeles and a girl out of Salida, Colorado. And he's got his own business in Danville. He has a furniture store. And my daughter is a stay at home mom with her two kids, so—

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 48:43
You said your father decided to migrate, right? He made a decision. Did anyone help him come to the US?

Guillermo Olea 48:49
No, at that time, there was no such thing as help. If you want to do it, you did it. And, of course, it was the days where very few cars. Like I says, it was mostly—they just saddled up his horse and went to Arizona, as they went through Douglas and Agua Prieta, Sonora. He signed the books, and they says, "Okay. You're a registered alien in United States."

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 49:14
You said he worked in the railroad, right?

Guillermo Olea 49:16
Yeah.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 49:16
At first? Why did he decide to not continue working on a railroad? Well, I guess that was something temporary, but then the fields, right? He worked in the fields?

Guillermo Olea 49:27
Well, no, Dad never worked in the fields, but he worked for Goodyear Rubber for quite a while in Los Angeles. But when they started going through all their union problems and fights, and there were so many deaths in regards to the union involvement, that he said he wasn't going to put his family in jeopardy by getting himself killed. So, he went to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad and really liked the work there. So, he—from there, from day one, he just stayed with the railroad. And the railroad is what offered him the transfer here to Salinas, and they told him to take two weeks, bring the family up here to Salinas, look over the place, the town, see how they like it. And then he can go back in two weeks and decide if he wants to transfer or not. So, we were no more here than a week, Dad says, "Let's go back." I says, "You don't like it, Dad?" He says, "No, let's go back so I can get transferred. Sooner is better." So, we went back to Douglas and he says, "I want to—I'll take the transfer." And they transferred us over here.

David Reay 50:41
You said that you adopted two kids. Did they get along while they were growing up, or were they constantly fighting?

Guillermo Olea 50:50
No, no, they get along. There's regular sibling rivalry between them and so forth, but nothing out of the ordinary really. It's more of a brother and sister type thing. But they both knew that they were adopted from day one, from the day they could understand it. Matter of fact, for that reason, I had told my ex-wife, I says, "I want the kid—" At that time, we just had one—the boy, Eric. I says, "I want him to know he's been adopted, that we aren't his natural parents, that we are his adoptive parents, and we'll raise him." At first, she didn't want to. She said, "No, no, no." Says, "Then he'll have it against us for [unclear]." I says, "No, I want him to know." I says, "I've got too many nieces and nephews. They can get into a squabble sometimes, and it could come out that he's adopted, and it could be worse." So, finally she agreed. So, then we started telling him what adoption was and that we had adopted him and so forth. And we were at a Thanksgiving dinner over at my mother's one day, and he was beating a couple of his nephews, or his cousins, in baseball outside. So, one of them got mad and came up to him and says, "Well, we'll have to accept you just because you're adopted anyway." So, my brother looked at him, says, "That's fine. They wanted me. They had to take you." [laughs]

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 52:20
What's your opinion of the renewal project of Chinatown—going back to Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 52:24
Yeah, I think it's great. If they continue through and go forth with the plans that they have figured out, I think it's a good thing. There's a lot of history there. But it's been let go so long that it's going to be hard. It's a tough [unclear] to get it back up again. But for that area, I think that's one of the best things that could happen. And I see that they're going to—I think they're going to be successful in bringing it up.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 52:56
Is there anything else you'd like to share with us in regards to your life story or your memories of Chinatown?

Guillermo Olea 53:02
No, not of what I've already said. That's all pretty much so. Even to this day, I still go through Chinatown every so often and just kind of reminisce. It's changed a lot from the original, traffic patterns and everything else, and they've done that for the—mainly for the prostitution, but it's slowly, slowly changing back up again, and I think it's going to be—it's gone through Chinese, Filipino, Filipino-Mexican, and it's going back to the Anglo now. [Gerardo laughs] Most of the—your whites are owning the property and getting more involved now, so it's kind of gone the whole gamut. [laughs]

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 53:53
So, I'd like to thank you for sharing with us your life story, your memories of Chinatown.

Guillermo Olea 53:58
I thank you for bothering to come and interview me.

Gerardo G. Zenteno Mena 54:01
No, thank you for your time and sharing with us your life story and your memories of Chinatown.