GILBERT ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW OF

CARLOS SAGASTA

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Museum

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Edited by Pat Castaneda

Interview by George Ruiz
December 2, 1992

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Gilbert Oral History Project

INTERVIEW: Carlos Sagasta
DATE: December 2, 1992
PLACE: Mr. Sagasta's home at 117 W. Cullumber Ave. Gilbert
INTERVIEWER: George Ruiz
TRANSLATION, transcription and notes by Carlotta Heward, Mr. Sagasta's daughter.

Interviewer: Mr. Sagasta, tell us how you came to Gilbert? What year, and how old were you?

Mr. Sagasta: I came to Gilbert in 1923. I was eighteen years old.

Interviewer: Where were you coming from?

Mr. Sagasta: I came from Phoenix, Arizona.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Mr. Sagasta: I was born in Cannea, Sonora, Mexico.

Interviewer: You were twelve years of age when you came to this country?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes. I entered near Nogales, Arizona in 1917.

Interviewer: What year did you come to Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: I came to Gilbert in 1923.

Interviewer: What were your parent's names?

Mr. Sagasta: My father's name was Nabor Sagasta, and my mother's name was Alvina Molina Sagasta.

Interviewer: Where were they born?

Mr. Sagasta: San Xavier, Sonora, Mexico.

Interviewer: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Sagasta: I have a sister younger than myself. Her name is Conception Vega. She is living in Gilbert. I had three other sisters who are all dead.

Interviewer: What was Gilbert like when you came in 1923?

Mr. Sagasta: It was a poor, dusty town. Nothing like what it is now.

Interviewer: Were you looking for work?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes, I was.

Interviewer: How many stores were in Gilbert at that time?

Mr. Sagasta: There were four grocery stores belonging to owners Reed, David, Navo and Sam Lee. One clothing store owned by Lewis Serrano. A drugstore and a hardware store. We also had a movie theater, and Charles Blakely's second hand store.

Interviewer: What were the roads like, and do you remember the names?

Mr. Sagasta: They were narrow and dusty. If two cars passed each other, it was a tight squeeze. Gilbert Road ran north and south as it is today.

Interviewer: Have you been living here all these years?

Mr. Sagasta: Ever since 1923.

Interviewer: Were you married in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: No. I was married in Florence, Arizona in 1935 to Patrocinia Ybarra. She, too, was from Gilbert. We married in Florence because she was underage. My wife was born in Juarez, Mexico, and came to this country when she was nine months old.

Interviewer: At that time what kind of work were you doing?

Mr. Sagasta: I was baling hay, weeding cotton and some grain.

Interviewer: Were there potatoes and watermelon also here?

Mr. Sagasta: Some watermelon. Mostly it was grown in Queen Creek, Arizona. The potatoes too.

Interviewer: How did you bale hay?

Mr. Sagasta: The baling machine was stationary. There were nine men to a crew. We used pitchforks. At one end the hay

was pitched, and wire was fed through some sort of needle. On the other side the bale came through and was hand tied with the wire. The bales were then stacked to be later loaded on the horse-drawn wagon. They would take them off to be loaded on the boxcars at the railroad station. There they went to the various places. Gilbert at that time was the hay capitol worldwide.

Interviewer: What hours did you work and what were your wages?

Mr. Sagasta: Sometimes from sunup to sundown, seven days a week. We were paid ten to fifteen cents a ton, earning $2 or $3 a day.

Interviewer: That wasn't very much money.

Mr. Sagasta: No. Food was cheap. With $5 you could feed a family. $10 bought food for the entire week.

Interviewer: In those days how did you keep cool at night?

Mr. Sagasta: We slept outside and would burn dry cow manure. It wouldn't really burn. Rather it would smoke and keep away the mosquitoes.

Interviewer: At that time how was food cooled?

Mr. Sagasta: Food was wrapped in wet gunnysacks. We had no iceboxes or cooling.

Interviewer: Did you attend school in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: No. I went for one year at this mining camp called Washington near Patagonia, Arizona.

Interviewer: What did you do for intertainment?

Mr. Sagasta: We would go to the movies. Also, we would play cards. At one time we saw free movies shown in the back of the post office.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the Town's population?

Mr. Sagasta: Not in actual numbers, but there were quite a few people.

Interviewer: How many children were born to you and your wife?

Mr. Sagasta: We had four girls and one boy. His name was Grabil, and he died in 1981. Daughters are Nellie Tristan, Rose Bustos living here in Gilbert, Carlotta Buckhannon from Mesa, and Cruz Pena of Rosemead, California.

Interviewer: When you first came here who were the first families you met?

Mr. Sagasta: Ramon Bernal, Theodore Ruiz, Fernando Ruiz, and Fernando Avalos.

Interviewer: What kind of work was your father doing?

Mr. Sagasta: He and I would bale hay. We worked at the ranches irrigating. We were always together.

Interviewer: What is the reason you came to be here?

Mr. Sagasta: We came from Cannea, Mexico in 1917. The copper mines where my father was employed shut down. Mine officials were giving free passage to their workers so they could relocate themselves and find jobs elsewhere. We arrived in Nogales, Arizona, and later went to the mining camp known as Washington, near Patagonia, Arizona. From there we went to Phoenix.

Interviewer: When you came to Gilbert from Phoenix, what was the reason?

Mr. Sagasta: I had an uncle living here, Leonardo Sagasta, my father's brother.

Interviewer: What can you tell me about the school and segregation at that time?

Mr. Sagasta: Both white and Mexican students attended school in the same area. The rooms were segregated.

Interviewer: At that time were there many Mexican people?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes, there were. One was really aware of this when you came to town on Saturdays.

Interviewer: What was your first job in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: Picking cotton.

Interviewer: Did you see many cars in town?

Mr. Sagasta: Not too many. They were Model T's.

Interviewer: Did the Mexican people own any?

Mr. Sagasta: I owned two myself which I bought used. I remember this one man, Chico Maldonado, having a new one and I don't know how he managed this. Brand new sold for five hundred dollars. In those days it was a lot of money. We had no credit except for groceries, which were charged during the week, and paid off on Saturdays.

Interviewer: In your horse and buggy days did you go many places?

Mr. Sagasta: Some. To Phoenix it was around a three hour trip.

Interviewer: How did the Mexican people get along with the white people, the ranchers specifically?

Mr. Sagasta: We had no problems. All the help at the ranches were mostly Mexican people.

Interviewer: Did you celebrate the holidays?

Mr. Sagasta: Just Christmas. We would stay up late, the womenfolk making tamales and such.

Interviewer: What of the churches?

Mr. Sagasta: The one I remember was St. Anne's, the Catholic church.

Interviewer: Back in the early days did you rent or buy the homes?

Mr. Sagasta: In the early years we lived in tents. [From 1935 till 1942 my father and has family, along with a few other families, lived on some land owned by Ed Peterson. It was located between the canal and railroad tracks where the sewage plant is. This small settlement was called Los Alcomphors. Eucalyptus trees growing there was the origin of the Spanish name for it. During the Forties people living there would see the German prisoners go by in the

trains. The prisoners sometimes cleaned out the canals. C.H.]

Interviewer: You must have had hardships with the weather.

Mr. Sagasta: During the winter my grandfather would have a fire in a tub outside. At night he would bring it inside the tent for warmth.

Interviewer: So you had no heaters?

Mr. Sagasta: They were unheard of.

Interviewer: How was your water acquired?

Mr. Sagasta: From the canals. It was used for all purposes. Cooking, drinking, laundry and bathing. In 1935 I left there and rented a house in town from Lou Allen. I also got married.

Interviewer: What did you do on Saturday nights?

Mr. Sagasta: We would go to the Spanish dances in Gilbert, Mesa and Chandler.

Interviewer: Have you family in Mexico, and have you gone back?

Mr. Sagasta: I have nieces and nephews in Mexicali, Baja California. I have not gone back.

Interviewer: In those days was English necessary in your work?

Mr. Sagasta: No, not in those days.

Interviewer: Can you tell me anything unusual happening to you in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: One day about three in the morning I was on my way to work, walking along the canal bank. I heard this terrible cry, so full of anguish. I looked toward this house where I knew the people living there. Everything was in darkness. I heard the cry twice more, and I felt this awful fear. I started walking fast, then I gave gas to my feet and was running as fast as I could go. I arrived at my brother-in-law's house out of breath.

Interviewer: Where does this story originate?

Mr. Sagasta: This woman had three small children. She went to the river to wash clothes. Her children wandered into the river and were swept away by the current and drowned. It is said her spirit walks along the rivers looking for her children, crying this awful cry. [My father's grandfather also heard this a time or two and would try and follow the sound, but never discovered the source. C.H.]

Tape #2

Interviewer: Carlos, do you remember a truck delivering groceries to the homes?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes, I do. That was in 1925.

Interviewer: Was that the first time you'd seen a truck?

Mr. Sagasta: There abouts. It was a Model T Ford truck. Some time after I bought a used Model T car for $35.

Interviewer: Do you remember when the Roosevelt Dam was built?

Mr. Sagasta: No, I don't. [My father helped build the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix around 1928 or '29. He worked for two or three months. One of his cousins helped with the construction of the Coolidge Dam. C.H.]

Interviewer: Do you remember Carrillo's Camp in Gilbert, and what kind of people were they?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes, I do. People came from Texas mostly, and other places. They came to work in the fields.

Interviewer: When was this?

Mr. Sagasta: Around 1940. They came from all over to pick cotton. It was one of Gilbert's main crops.

Interviewer: After the cotton season was over, where did the people go?

Mr. Sagasta: Some stayed. Others went back home, and still others went to California.

Interviewer: Do you remember a community of Yaqui Indians in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes. That was in 1924 or '25. They lived in Gilbert and Sonora Town.

Interviewer: What happened to them?

Mr. Sagasta: They settled down in Guadalupe, Arizona. The majority went to Scottsdale where they worked for the water users, cleaning the canals.

Interviewer: Do you know other languages?

Mr. Sagasta: Spanish only.

Interviewer: How many grandchildren do you have?

Mr. Sagasta: I have eighteen grandchildren, twenty-seven great grandchildren, and one great great grandchild.

Interviewer: What one thing has changed in Gilbert that stands out in your mind?

Mr. Sagasta: More modern trucks and tractors, especially the tractors.

Interviewer: What did you like best of the old days?

Mr. Sagasta: The people seemed happier. There was more work in the fields and ranches. Now days it's all construction work. You have to speak and write English. People helped each other, were more neighborly. We didn't earn much, everything was cheaper. Clothes and food. Come Saturday we went dancing. The older people played cards.

Interviewer: Was there alot of prejudice in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: Among the black people as always. They were not allowed in the bars and restaurants.

Interviewer: Was this also for the Mexican people?

Mr. Sagasta: You didn't see it among the older people. We respected one another. Among the younger generation you did see it. This was in the Thirties. Nowadays we're supposed to be equal, like brothers and sisters.

Interviewer: Do you think that all the modern things, machines and such, that do away with manual labor, are good for people?

Mr. Sagasta: Times and things have changed a lot. Who knows?

Interviewer: When was the first time you saw an airplane?

Mr. Sagasta: When we were living near Nogales, around 1918. Now you see them day and night.

Interviewer: What do you think the future holds for us in your eyes?

Mr. Sagasta: Everything is so modern and advanced, who can tell?

Interviewer: How do you feel about this?

Mr. Sagasta: Everyone has to live in their time period with the good and bad.

Interviewer: How old are you, and how many more years do you want to live?

Mr. Sagasta: I'm eighty-seven years old, and I'd like to live a hundred, and a hundred more, so I can see all the changes.

Interviewer: Carlos, how long have you lived in this house?

Mr. Sagasta: Since 1940. I bought it from Walter Page for the sum of $350, paying $10 monthly. Page lived on Park Street, directly across from the library. At that time I was baling hay and picking cotton.

Interviewer: Carlos, what has your life been like in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: Good, thanks to God. Never had problems with anybody, never been in fights or in jail.

Interviewer: Have you had the need, or felt that you have been pressured to apply for citizenship?

Mr. Sagasta: No, I did not, and now I am too old and feel there is no need to do so.

Interviewer: How old was your wife when she died?

Mr. Sagasta: She was sixty-seven. She died six years ago in 1986.

Interviewer: Give me the names of some ranchers you have worked for.

Mr. Sagasta: The ones I remember are Kempton, Twitty, Erramuzpe, Dobson, Fisher Mieles, Bernal, Clyde Ramsey, Ray Ramey and his son , Lacy, Scott. I worked seventeen years for Clyde and Ray Ramsey.

Interviewer: If you had your life to live over, what thing or things would you change?

Mr. Sagasta: Not a thing. If I could go back in time, I would want to be with all of my family again.

Interviewer: How has your health been?

Mr. Sagasta: Good. I have no complaints. I still smoke and drink a few beers.

Interviewer: What do you attribute your health to?

Mr. Sagasta: I've worked hard all my life. Do my yard and still walk a lot. I've had no serious illness. I don't feel as strong now. I'm slowing down a bit.

Interviewer: Is there anything you wish to comment on?

Mr. Sagasta: At night I try to remember about things past, how Gilbert used to be, how much it has changed.

Interviewer: Was there an ice house in town?

Mr. Sagasta: No there wasn't. It was delivered from Mesa to Blakely's second hand store, which was located where the Norwood Furniture store is today. The ice was delivered to the houses. I remember our first icebox. My dad bought it at the hardware store. We thought we were the cat's meow.

Interviewer: How long would the ice last?

Mr. Sagasta: It depended on the size of the ice. Fifty pounds would last all week. We would drape wet gunnysacks over the iceboxes.

Interviewer: Back in the early days what did you use for light?

Mr. Sagasta: We used candles and petroleum lamps.

Interviewer: Were there gas stations in Gilbert?

Mr. Sagasta: In 1923 when I came here, Charles Blakely had a pump, and as I recall there was another north of town.

Interviewer: Did you shop in Mesa?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes. Quite often. My father and I would see the world series where the Valley National Bank is on Main Street and MacDonald. There was a screen of sorts. Numbers and small bulbs representing the various plays and players.

Interviewer: Do you remember your first TV?

Mr. Sagasta: Yes. I bought one second hand in the Fifties. I recall people having them in the Forties.

Interviewer: You must have listened to the radio a lot.

Mr. Sagasta: Yes, we did. I remember this particaular one I had that ran on batteries.

Interviewer: Carlos, thank you for letting me come to your home and talk to you.

Mr. Sagasta: Thank you for your time.