

Jean: For the record I Jean Hanfelt am going to interview John Aragon who resides at 309 East 2nd Street as part of the oral history project. The date is Monday, September 19, 2005. Mr. Aragon, where were you born and what brought you to Salida?

[00:01:00]

John: Well I was born in November the 18th, 1915, in Española New Mexico. My parents moved in about 1922 to Salida where Daddy had a job on the railroad and he was working at the Salida Transfer and so Daddy brought his whole family to Salida to live.

Jean: How old were you Mr. Aragon?

John: I would say about 8 or something like that.

Jean: Did you have older brothers and sisters?

John: Yeah. My sister Anita was the oldest. She's a girl, Anita. And then I was born in 1915. Then my brother Lydle, we called him Lydle, but his name is Adelydle, was born in 1920. Let's see he was born two years after me so in 1920. In 1920, he's two years older. I mean I'm two years older than he is.

[00:03:00] Next I think was a girl. She was named Esther. I don't know, I can't ... unless I ... not from memory when she was born.

Jean: Okay.

John: The next was Mildred.

Jean: Mr. Aragon these were children that were born in Española New Mexico that came?

John: No.

Jean: They were born here?

John: They were born here.

Jean: How many of you came to Salida from Española?

John: Evidently it was only Anita, John, and Adyldle, and I think Esther was born here.

Jean: Okay so your family, all four moved to Salida.

John: Right.

Jean: Your dad worked for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad?

John: Right, yeah.

[00:04:00]

Jean: Do you remember what was the population, the size of Salida in 1922 when you arrived in Salida?

John: I would say maybe it was 3,000.

Jean: Were the streets paved?

John: No.

Jean: You had dirt streets?

John: Yeah I remember it was still wagons going in the streets to make deliveries or stuff like that.

Jean: What are some of your earliest memories of Salida?

John: I guess going to school.

Jean: Where did you go to school?

[00:05:00]

John: Longfellow School located on ... about 5th and G I think. Two story, three story building at that time, yeah.

Jean: Do you remember the size of your class?

John: Well we was in the, for first we was in, Lydle my brother, and I, and Anita I guess, it was just me and Lydle, or me and Anita, who went to Longfellow. I'm not really know if Anita did go but I know I did.

[00:06:00]

Jean: Mr. Aragon what language was spoken at home?

John: Spanish.

Jean: Did you have difficulties in school or was English spoken in the home along with Spanish?

John: Well it was all strict Spanish when we was born in Española, and we didn't go like I'd say right across from the road, it wasn't a highway it was a road, they had a school to which we attended to. I mean I don't remember learning any English but I would say maybe I picked up a few words. We

[00:07:00] had a teacher that was Spanish and he was teaching us probably some words in English too, but I don't remember it being any professional English or Spanish, just a conversation between a person of that Spanish, and I

would understand him very good, but English I think it was limited.

Jean: Did you have any problem in school learning the English language?

John: No. We started at the Longfellow School like I say, and I think that we went strictly into English, yeah.

[00:08:00]

Jean: So you learned to speak and write ...

John: That's it. That was what we learned in I would say our first two years of schooling in Longfellow, it was English.

Jean: Were there other families that moved from New Mexico to Salida to work on the railroad or was your family unique to that?

John: No, there was a good friend of my dad named Ignacio Vigil, and he moved his wife too at approximately the same time that Daddy moved. He brought his wagon and everything and whatever, furniture I think, that Mr. Vigil had because I know that he brought his wife in the wagon, or maybe he brought her in the narrow gauge train at that time. There was an narrow gauge train running from Salida to Alamosa and then from Alamosa to Santa Fe. She might have or maybe Mama had come too on the train. I know that's the way we used to go back when we went to see our grandmother and Dad would get passes for us too, and then Mama would take us. We'd stop in Alamosa overnight and then in the morning and would leave to go to Española which was our destination.

[00:10:00]

Jean: Did you enjoy riding the train?

John: Oh yeah.

Jean: Or was it just a way of life?

John: Yeah it was, that's the only way that we went.

Jean: When did your father buy his first vehicle, do you remember?

John: Oh yeah I remember that. He bought a Star, that's the make of the car, was a Star, and that was sold by the Young Brothers. They had a garage right there where, let's see what is it now, it's that, that makes sweatshirts and stuff. Catty corner from ...

Jean: Oh yes.

John: Right across the street from the senior citizen's. There was a big garage there from the front of F Street there clear down to the alley.

Jean: Okay. I have never heard of the Star automobile. Who manufactured the Star? Was it General Motors, or ...

John: I think it was General Motors.

Jean: Was it the equivalent of a Chevy or a Ford?

[00:12:00]

John: Yeah I think it was like to, Chevy. No. It was a Star anyway. It was like a coupe.

Jean: A coupe. What color? Do you remember the color?

John: I think it was blue.

Jean: How many could ride in it?

John: Four could ride in it.

Jean: So you didn't ... This was not a family ...

John: They had a rumble seat.

Jean: A rumble seat, oh how fun.

John: Yeah, it had a rumble seat. It was like two passenger car, four if you got in the rumble seat.

Jean: After school and on weekends what did you and your friends or your siblings do for fun?

[00:13:00]

John: Well, fight with the Italians I guess. Once we crossed F Street down here to this east side, was looking for trouble.

Jean: Oh really?

John: Well we used to, you know they had, well I wanted to go later on. We used to get around playing hide and go seek there, in the neighborhood there, playing hide and go seek, and then play they used to call shinny. Playing like with a milk can or something, and have a little like a, like they use in hockey you know. Same set like that only we'd get a willow. A willow had a crank in it and play with a milk can down the street.

[00:14:00]

Jean: So you created your own games. Your own entertainment?

John: Yeah that's right, yeah.

Jean: What about music? Did you have radio? Did you have ...

John: We had a phonograph.

Jean: Phonograph.

John: Yeah.

Jean: What kind of music did you like to listen to?

John: Well it was mostly discs you know. I don't remember any particular music
[00:15:00] that I guess we wanted something that people making up poems or something and making their own music. Guitar and stuff.

Jean: Did you attend St. Joseph's Catholic Church?

John: Yeah, St. Joseph's, yeah. It was located right there in the area that they use now for parking. They had like you went into the first grade, second grade, then you went to the third and fourth grade, then fifth and sixth grade was like in a row, then the L like was seven and eighth grade.

[00:16:00]

Jean: St. Joseph's School was not the school that we know today.

John: Well that's true.

Jean: It was in a separate building, not ... See when was this school, Preston School, when was that built, do you remember?

John: No I don't remember. It was there when we went first.

Jean: When you went first?

John: Yeah.

Jean: You went to public school first?

John: Yeah.

Jean: Then when did you start attending St. Joseph's?

John: Second grade.

Jean: In the second grade?

John: Yeah.

Jean: Was it being taught by nuns?

John: Nuns, yeah. All nuns. They had one nun for each class and in the morning's
[00:17:00] she'd go to teach the number first class, maybe the second class would be in the afternoon. One teacher to each room.

Jean: Was the school, the kids that attended school, were they all Catholics or did you have to be Catholic to attend St. Joseph's?

John: No.

Jean: It was just anyone could send their children?

John: Yeah anyone. Of course they had a tuition. What they called a tuition. You paid so much for each pupil and it wasn't strict Catholic. I know some of the Protestants that were going there.

[00:18:00]

Jean: What other ethnic groups lived in Salida? You had mentioned briefly the Italians. Were there a number of Greeks?

John: Oh yeah, there was some Greeks. Most of them were employed by the railroad.

Jean: Were the Italians employed by the railroad as well?

John: Yes.

Jean: And the Spanish were employed by the railroad?

John: Yeah.

Jean: So that was ...

John: That was the main ...

Jean: The main industry?

John: Industry at the time yeah.

Jean: What do you remember about the ranches?

John: Oh the ranches, well ...

Jean: Did you get acquainted with the ranch owners?

John: Oh yeah.

Jean: Do you remember some of them?

[00:19:00]

John: Oh sure. I remember the one that we used to work for. His name was, last name was Grenada.

Jean: Grenada. That was Italian?

John: Grenada, yeah. He was Italian and then we worked for Martellaro.

Jean: Martellaro.

John: My brother and I.

Jean: On the ranch?

John: Yeah we worked during the summertime. Was the only time that we done that. What they were doing, they were doing garden stuff, not big ranches. They didn't have any cattle. Maybe they had. We didn't work with cattle or anything. What we'd do, cleaning lettuce, carrots and stuff like that and have that kind of vegetables, cabbage.

[00:20:00]

Jean: So it was truck farming that was done?

John: Yeah.

Jean: Did I think when I moved to Salida in 1966 I heard that Salida, was Salida or Buena Vista that had been known as the capital of lettuce, lettuce capital of the world?

John: Uh huh.

Jean: Was that Salida?

John: It was Salida yeah.

Jean: So they grew a lot of lettuce in Salida?

John: Yeah that was their main crop really. You're bringing up the subject of lettuce. They had like one, two, three sheds where they packed and where they employed the guys selecting, making sure that they were getting crated for shipment, lettuce that would stand the trip, and they'd have, well I know for sure three and I could say four, lettuce sheds.

[00:21:00]

Jean: Oh really?

John: Each one was separate.

Jean: What type of refrigeration?

John: They'd have railroad cars, refrigerated cars, into ... Of course they'd have to build the track into the sheds to get the cars in there, and there were all refrigerator cars and they'd all be full of ice and between each of the refrigerator cars there'd be ice. At the time, that's going to another ...
[00:22:00] There was a pond right around. There weren't all them houses you see now around Walmart there, in that area there.

Jean: Highway 50 West?

John: Highway 50 to the left it was all covered in ice there, then there'd be people. It was farmers all right but they was raising ice in the wintertime.

Jean: Okay so if I was going to ask if I guess did, was there any ice produced from the Arkansas River?

John: No. Too much ...

Jean: It never frozen solid.

[00:23:00]

John: They'd run water from Little River coming down from Poncha, that little river that flood all them ...

Female Speaker: Ponds?

John: All them ponds there and there'd be ice in there as big as this tray here and that's what they'd harvest. I think I have one of them saws that they used to use to cut the ice.

Jean: High school. What do you remember about your high school days? Anything that stands out in your memory?

John: Well I dropped out of school in the 11th grade.

Jean: What did you do after you dropped out?

[00:24:00]

John: I went to the CC (civilian conservation) camp.

Jean: CC camp, and where was that located?

John: Located in Buena Vista up Trout Creek Pass.

Jean: How long did you spend on the CCC?

John: Oh approximately three years.

Jean: This was a program I think that was developed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

John: Right.

Jean: To help with jobs for the Depression?

John: Mostly it was for juveniles.

Jean: For young men that had ...

John: After there was, I think there was taking them in up to 16.

Jean: To give them some training?

[00:25:00]

John: No there was no training. How to use the ax, you know.

Jean: Just plain old hard work huh?

John: Yeah that's what it was. Building dams you know, erosion dams, and chopping down trees for ropes and wilderness, and to clean up the area. Clean up the area too. I wish they had something like that they wouldn't have so many fires, forest fires like they have now.

Jean: Did you commute? Did you live at home while you were working for the CCC or did they have their own camp?

John: They had their own camp.

Jean: Did you get to come home very often, living in Buena Vista?

[00:26:00]

John: No you could come home anytime. They didn't have no restrictions. They was just to show up in the morning to work, that was it.

Jean: May I ask you why you dropped out of school?

John: Well ... it wasn't a necessity. My daddy was working and everything. It was more or less that I started school a little too late, and I didn't feel like I would go back to pick up whatever I had forfeited.

Jean: After the CCC what did you do?

[00:27:00]

John: I went to, up to a place called McPhee, up around Durango, in that area, and went there to work in the sawmill that was cutting down timber and making lumber out of it and they were hiring. They had, I went to work in

that outfit that was named Montezuma Lumber Company.

Jean: How long did you work there?

John: Till oh let's see I would say like three years.

Jean: When did you return to Salida?

John: I returned back here in well ... I had worked during summertime, stuff like that, for the railroad. Daddy got me a job down where he was working. He was working at the freight house. They had a big freight house there where they would unload merchandise that were in the various cars, and they'd make deliveries to the grocery stores and so that was a pretty good job you had. When I went in the service they asked me what I was working in I said, "I was working with two wheeler truck and freight."

Jean: When did you go into the service?

John: In 1942.

Jean: This would have been World War II?

John: Yeah.

Jean: How old were you?

[00:29:00]

John: Well let's see I would say I was ... That was in '42. Subtract ... Let's see I was born in '15. 20, 25, 26. How do we go ... 25.

Jean: You were about 25?

John: No it wasn't that big. I think I went in was like about oh when I was drafted you mean?

Jean: You were, were you 17 years old?

John: I think so.

Jean: 17 years old when you went into the service? 27.

John: Yeah.

Jean: 27 when you went into the service. Were you single or married?

[00:30:00]

John: I was single.

Jean: You were single. And what made you decide to ... Did you get drafted or did you volunteer?

John: I got drafted.

Jean: You got drafted.

John: I got drafted yeah.

Jean: How many years did you serve? What branch of the military?

John: The infantry.

Jean: Infantry, Army or?

John: We went to, I was drafted after we went through the process and took my training in Fort Knox in heavy tanks.

Jean: Fort Knox Tennessee?

John: No let's see. Kentucky.

[00:31:00]

Jean: Kentucky. Fort Knox Kentucky. Was that your first real trip away from home?

John: No CC was.

Jean: CC was your first.

John: Was the first away from home, yeah, and also I went to McPhee and I stayed up there with an aunt. In McPhee.

Jean: When did you return after the service? Did you return to Salida? What brought you back to Salida?

John: What brought me back to Salida, I was still working for the railroad.

Jean: You were working for the railroad.

John: At the time yeah.

Jean: Did you continue to make a career of the railroad?

John: Yeah I did.

Jean: When did you retire from the railroad?

[00:32:00]

John: I retired, it was like, it was in '85.

Jean: 1985?

John: I think so. Let's see if that's right. I think it is right yeah.

Jean: Okay so ...

John: 1985 I think. Let's see ...

Female Speaker: No, you were at the post office when Jim and I started dating.

John: Oh yeah that's right.

Female Speaker: In '79.

John: Yeah they abolished all the jobs down here on the railroad.

Jean: Okay.

John: I went to work in the postal service.

Jean: Oh did you?

John: Yeah.

Jean: What did you do in the postal service?

John: Well, I was ... about three years or so.

Jean: Were you a mail carrier or did you ...

[00:33:00]

John: I worked ... Yeah I done both. We were doing anything you know. Sorting mail. Picking up mail. Delivering mail. It was what we called, they could use you. They didn't have any particular rules. Of course I applied for a job over in Poncha and I was selected as Post Master for Poncha Springs, so I served there five years.

Jean: Oh.

John: In Poncha Springs, so I wasn't retired then. I think from retired in '85 though I believe. Maybe.

Female Speaker: Probably.

John: Let's see ...

Jean: Mr. Aragon when did you get married?

[00:34:00]

John: I got married in February the 22nd, 1943.

Jean: 19 ... While you were still in the service?

John: Yeah.

Jean: Did you marry a local girl?

John: Yeah. No it was a local girl in Kentucky.

Jean: Oh you married a girl from Kentucky. What was her name?

John: Her name was Aline Virginia Lee Chapel was her name.

Jean: Okay. You met her while you were stationed in Kentucky?

John: Right. Yeah.

Jean: Did she stay in Kentucky while you were in the service?

John: Yeah.

Jean: Then when you were discharged you brought her to Salida?

John: Yeah. She had a son.

Jean: She had a son.

[00:35:00]

John: She was pregnant before I was in the service. Yeah. She had Johnny.

Jean: Okay.

John: Yeah.

Jean: What did she think of Salida?

John: Oh she loved it.

Jean: Did she?

John: Yeah. Yeah. She didn't want to leave Salida.

Jean: Oh that's nice. You were married how long?

John: 59 years.

Jean: 59 years. When did your wife pass away?

John: She passed away in '80, '83 I guess. Does that make 59 years?

Female Speaker: It's been two years.

John: Huh?

Female Speaker: Two years ago.

Jean: Two years ago? She passed away two years ago?

Female Speaker: In March.

John: Two years ago, maybe it was 44 it might have been.

Jean: How many children did you have?

John: Seven.

Jean: Seven children.

John: Seven children.

Jean: What are their names?

[00:36:00]

John: Johnny's the oldest. Then there's Annie.

Female Speaker: Janet?

John: Janet. Then Sheila. Then ...

Female Speaker: Rita.

John: Brenda.

Female Speaker: Rita.

John: Oh Rita. Rita yeah. She passed away here in ... no she was in Tennessee is where she died. It was Rita and then Brenda, and then Martin.

Female Speaker: And Jim.

John: And Jim. Jim and Leonard.

Female Speaker: Tom.

John: Tom yeah. That's three cooks, four cooks and three laborers.

[00:37:00]

Jean: Well that's wonderful Mr. Aragon. Did you ... getting back to early Salida, did you encounter any prejudice?

John: Oh yeah, yeah, it was.

Jean: What kind of prejudice?

John: Oh ... I'll just mention one that ... Some of the barbers had their notice on the window, "Mexican Trade Not Solicited." That was like a board this way on their window. And of course everybody knows about the swimming pool.

Jean: No I don't know about the swimming pool.

John: Yeah the swimming pool, that was ... What we found out at the time we come back from the service that of course the swimming pool was all

[00:38:00]

construction by people on the WPA which was one of the works that Roosevelt had for people, and so that pool was made possible by labor from you might say the Mexicans. Everybody, regardless, as long as you had a Spanish name or something like that, had a Spanish name well you was considered Mexican. They never heard of Spanish Americans or Spanish people, and what I used to say was this. I'd say well Columbus come down to Mexico before he discovered America to get a bunch of Mexicans for a crew. He landed in America with a bunch of Mexicans there as his crew. I used to just make that answer.

[00:39:00]

Jean: Did you feel the ...

John: The pressure?

Jean: The pressure, did you feel the discrimination, or was ... did you just sort of overlook it?

John: Yeah. We did feel that. In fact there was a few, for adults even, some of them that approached by what you might say the guy was white, French or German or whatever, Polish or whatever, he was, would be approached, and called a Mexican. May result in a fist engagement.

[00:40:00]

Jean: Were the Italians discriminated against? They were another large ethnic group.

John: Oh yeah they were. Well, the west side of town was, and even the

[00:41:00] Austrians were. You might say that there was put aside. Of course they were all in Smelter Town. There was the majority of them. There was very few of them in Salida, but there was also been employed there at the smelter. You see that big flue up there. That used to be the smelter there. They were all employed there until they run out of gold I guess or ore or whatever they was doing there, but you can see the whole side of the river on that side of the chimney there. All full of lava like what it was melded in the mill and just poured over the dump of the river there. It's all full of lava.

[00:42:00] They call it, well the tracks are, they use that, had good use for it. The tracks for that, they call it another name, and they start using that waste that they had created from the mill, from the smelter, and that's about it for the ... Well when we come back from the service well then is when they tightened up the swimming pool.

[00:43:00] I don't know whether it was on account of some of the guys that had served in the Army or Navy or Marines or whatever they served in had come into contact with the Negroes in the south see, and they come back with that thought in their minds that the Negroes had their own areas to wait at the station, bus stations or street cars or in depots that had only white would be the ... and I think that's what got a lot of this guys here that inherited some of that from the south, in their service that they were in, and they seen how they treated them, and I imagine that's what they brought back. It was brought back by some of these soldiers, I mean in the service, by the way they treated the colored people there.

[00:44:00]

Female Speaker: Who was allowed in the pool? Sorry.

Jean: Yes. Who was allowed in the pool?

John: Just the whites.

Jean: Whites meaning Anglos?

John: Everybody as long as it was white.

Jean: As long as you did not have a Spanish name? Were the Italians allowed?

John: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Jean: So it was definitely ...

John: Yeah they didn't have any distinguished.

Jean: It was just Spanish. When was that restriction lifted?

John: Well it was when we took it up with the various organizations and say we was paying taxes and everything and they didn't give us ... Then what they done, they said the city council at the time, what they said, they would

[00:45:00]

clean the pool, the swimming pool on a Thursday and fill it up on Fridays. So on Thursdays they would let the Mexicans in.

Jean: How long did this go on?

John: We had a lot of discussion in the American Legion and that kind of loosened up the people here on that. Brought up in the council you know and discussed and they just kind of easy like I said, on Thursdays let the Mexicans in because they're going to clean the pool out Friday. That was in steps like that. So finally I mean my brother Lydle was one of the ones that was heading that. Most of the boys in the Legion were Spanish and Lydle my brother and of course I did some of it too. We put pressure on the city council to allow whatever, whoever bought a ticket or whatever, paid.

[00:46:00]

Jean: Well you served for the United States Army.

John: We started it, through the various organizations.

[00:47:00]

Jean: What other memories come to your mind about early Salida?

John: Salida? Well just ... it's a lovely town now. I'd accept living here for the rest of my life.

Jean: And you will be 90 years old November the 18th.

John: Right, yeah.

Female Speaker: They have a hamburger stand on top of S Mountain?

John: Oh the S Mountain?

Jean: Yeah what do you remember about the S Mountain?

John: Well that was put up there by the high school. The high school was the one that, I mean the students.

Jean: Students?

[00:48:00]

John: Yeah the students. I think they probably derived it from probably other colleges and schools or something like that, so they decided to have an S put up there, and what they done, they just put a frame up there and filled it up with rocks and then took some white chalk or something. What did they used to call it?

Female Speaker: Whitewash.

John: Huh?

Female Speaker: Whitewash?

John: Yeah whitewash, whatever it was. Just paint on the rocks in the area around full of rocks there, down, and they whitewashed it and so then some of the other teams here that would come to fight Salida or something, they'd go up and tear it up. Just during the, after the game or something, whatever.

[00:49:00]

Jean: Who was the biggest rival?

John: Oh biggest rival was Canon City.

Jean: Canon City. Why was that?

John: Well they beat them a few times, I guess yeah, and then Canon City and of course Canon City it's a big town too. It's a big city and they had a lot of good teams. Football teams that is.

Jean: Did any of your children remain in Salida?

John: Yeah they did. They all attended high school.

Jean: All graduated from Salida High School?

[00:50:00]

John: Not all of them. Johnny my oldest boy he joined the Navy and he didn't graduate. I tried to get him to graduate and tell him we got at that time, I says we got, who was that president after Roosevelt, the one that was, the Catholic president?

Jean: John F. Kennedy?

John: Yeah. I used to tell my son that ... I'd say he's going to be president. I told him this country's going to be real good and you'll go to school and go to college. I says I'll pay the college and everything, and you'll be getting a good job here. You don't have to go to the Navy.

[00:51:00]

Jean: President John F. Kennedy brought a lot of hope didn't he ...

John: Oh yeah.

Jean: ... to some of the older ...

John: To all the veterans I think he did yeah. Yeah he was a good president.

Jean: I remember going into homes and everyone had a picture of John F.

Kennedy next to their family photos.

John: Oh yeah.

Jean: He and the Pope.

John: Yeah.

Jean: Well thank you so much Mr. Aragon ...

John: You're welcome.

Jean: ... for this interview.

John: Yeah.

[00:52:00]

Jean: If we think of anything else we need to ask you I will be back.

John: Okay. You'll be welcome.

Jean: Thank you.