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## Oral History Interview with Josephine Festa and Gloria Tejada
## Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.018
## Interview conducted by Monte Rivera on June 23, 1974 in Brooklyn, New York

TEJADA: I'm the eldest of five children. Born in Brooklyn. My father; a carpenter who was self-employed. My mother came to this country in 1925 from Caetano, Puerto Rico, my father from Arecibo. We lived in Brooklyn on 209 Adams Street. We went to school in P.S. 5. There were a few Puerto Rican families there. We attended the Pentecostal Church because it was about the only Latin groups you could get together with but once we became familiar with the Americans or English-speaking kids we started attending Catholic school where—there was Sister Carmelita, who many Puerto Ricans knew, who had worked with Puerto Rican children. She used to pick us all up and take us to this settlement were they taught us to sew and make little art and crafts--and what little bit of Puerto Rican culture that I knew at the time, we learned. Although at home we were brought up in true Puerto Rican fashion; the rice and the beans, chicken on Sundays, pastilles on the holidays, fresh pork, sweet potatoes and all the things that we usually eat. We spoke Spanish at home but my parents weren't educated people; not in the Spanish language or the English. We didn't become well educated as far as Puerto Rican cultural background but we speak the language. We attended schools as I said before, in Brooklyn. I went to P.S. 5, from which I graduated, and during that time we moved to different sections which were Adams Street near the Navy Brooklyn Yard. We had a little candy store where my father had started with about $40 that he had saved up in nickels.

RIVERA: What year was that?

TEJADA: This was about 1935, 1936.

RIVERA: What year was Sister Carmelita active with Puerto Ricans?

TEJADA: It was about that same time. I must have been about 10 or 11 years old at that time. So that would make it in the early '30s.

RIVERA: Do you recall the parish?

TEJADA: It was from St. Patrick's in Brooklyn; but I'm not sure of that, it was about Henry Street and the mission church was right opposite the Manhattan Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, right at the plaza there. All the kids used to meet there. This is where we received our first holy communion. As I was saying, we grew up there and gradually we start seeing Puerto Ricans in that area, moving into the neighborhood. There was more—new Spanish grocery stores opening up. It was a very mixed neighborhood though; Chinese, Japanese, there was all nationalities. But Puerto Ricans started moving in at that time. We lived in Washington Street at the time and then that's when we moved to Sands Street; where we had the candy store. From there I graduated from P.S. 5 and I went to Central High School Needle Trades, in Manhattan and for four years I studied dress making. At the time my father started working--that was prior to the war-- he started working for--it was like the WPA. He used to go and do carpentry work, Remember? That was part of our activities in the summertime; we used to get up in the mornings and my father would go to work and we would follow him into Manhattan where he was working in Central Park--it's like a wading pool that they had and that was our outing for the day. We stayed with him for the day, eat, and then come home in the evening with him. There was like, on Myrtle Avenue—You familiar with Myrtle Avenue?—there used to be stores on the outside; they would display all the wares that they had at that time; like hot-dogs and root beer for a nickel. All this block, all this used to be very Irish and Polish, but gradually we started seeing Puerto Ricans moving in to that area.

RIVERA: About what time was this?

TEJADA: About 1934 or '36, '38, around that time. When I graduated from P.S. 5 and like I said I went to high school.

RIVERA: Tell us about your experience in P.S. 5? This was an elementary school?

TEJADA: It was an elementary school--Well, I don't recall it to visibly except that there was--there were a lot of Blacks and the few Puerto Ricans were always being picked on by the Blacks. As I said before, my mother had brought us up very sheltered. She

would walk us to school in the morning. Pick us up at noontime, we'd go home for lunch, she would walk us back again and pick us up in the evening. We were not allowed to play outside in the streets. The home was our domain and that was it. We weren't allowed to play outside. The boys when they were about 12 they were allowed to go outside, but until then we were kept definitely indoors. In PS 5, like I said, there weren't too much, too many Puerto Ricans. I remember one girl; Gloria Negron, who now is Gloria Davis she lives out here, and a few other families, but like I said, we didn't mix too much. My mother was always a homebody and that is the way she brought us up. In high school I could never say I found any discrimination because there were a lot of people there who didn't know what a Puerto Rican was. And to tell you the truth I knew very little myself. It was only in high school that I became aware, that we were Puerto Ricans and that we were American citizens; that we didn't require passports and things like that. [Interview interrupted.] I recall going to Goodwill Industries for underprivileged children which we didn't realize that that was what we were at the time. Where they would teach us to do hand sewing--ten cents to go in and they would keep you there until around 5 o'clock. We would do hand sewing; other children would be playing games or doing papier-mâché things, like art and crafts or the other. When I mentioned before that we had gone to the mission church and I said St. Patrick's church, it wasn't. It was St. Peter's Church on Henry Street where Sister Carmelita used to pick us up to take us for religious instructions. [Interview interrupted.] Oh, here is my sister Josephine; maybe she wants to say a few words.

FESTA: In speaking about Sister Carmelita and the help she gave in the areas of trying to help the Puerto Rican children, or should I say Spanish-speaking children, in the neighborhood, it encompassed other areas than religion--she had arranged--I remember to have the children who had not had their tonsils removed with ah, Cumberland Hospital, which was a city hospital, and I remember in a group of 15 or 16; first, we met in the sister's rectory, the home where they lived on Gold Street and from there I think we went by bus to Cumberland Hospital—where we were all deposited; boys in the boys section and girls in the girls and we had our tonsils

operated on, group tonsillectomy. So her interests in helping were not only religious but physical, spiritually, and she arranged trips. I remember one trip that she took most of the children to Manhattan Beach, which at that time that beach was strictly for Jewish people. And she arranged to have us go in to enjoy the facilities at Manhattan Beach. The reason I remember this vividly is because my brother was not allowed to enter and use the swimming facilities because he had had a skin disease which left marks in his body and they thought that perhaps this was something that was contagious. I was thoroughly incensed over it. I refused to enter and bathe in the pool and I went in with my other brother to watch over him. Whereas the one with the skin disease had to stay outside, but we were treated--I mean we were able to go in, but we were treated as if we were all had the pox, more or less. We were patronized so to speak. So it wasn't a trip that was entirely enjoyable. Another time through the auspices of this mission at that time, PAL started; getting a stranglehold on the neighborhood. And they would collect the children in the morning, but the parents had to sign permission and [Interview interrupted.] they would take the children to a gym. I believe it was a private gym on Willoughby Street where they had made arrangements so that the children could use the facilities; an indoor basketball court and I believe handball. I am not too sure about that. I remember the basketball court because it was the first one we had seen at the time; with the polished wood floors. And the boys were allowed to play basketball as long as they could. This was all under the auspices of the PAL. At that time, Puerto Rican children were being grouped together--rather they tried, under the auspices of the mission where the lay teachers were, were young men who were studying for the priesthood. They were the ones that would teach you the catechism in the storefront that served as a church on Sundays. They taught us catechism in English and this storefront in the evenings tried to have little social gatherings; mostly folk singing at that time. Something to keep your mind occupied. We didn't go too often but I remember one evening when I went with my brothers. At the time, they were getting religious instruction. So the church was actually the full point more or less; they were more involved with trying to see to the

youth of those days. I think they succeeded. They didn't seem to get such a high incidence of children getting into trouble. It was all in that neighborhood that encompassed Sands Street, Adams Street, Pearl Street, Jay Street; that the Puerto Ricans seemed to settle in because the stores were there. And it seemed that as the people came from Puerto Rico--they went to places where they knew that their friends lived, or families. So if you lived in a neighborhood that was sheltered because you dealt with Spanish stores, or if the owners were not Spanish they somehow endeavored to learn to speak the few words that were necessary to deal with Spanish-speaking customers. So what else did you need? You stayed there. You were aware that people around you were the same as you were; it wasn't until you left the shelter of the neighborhood, per se, like when you went to high school you could realize the vast difference. Even though Public School #5 was a representation of a lot of the neighborhood ethnic groups, but it was still a small percentage and you still stayed with your own. Whereas when you went to high school you had to move out of your own group and that's when it became crystal clear to you that you were different. As for treatment, you just stayed by yourself or made friends with girls of other ethnic groups but there were still enough Puerto Ricans that if you wanted to stay with them, you had the choice and the opportunity to do so. But on the whole I think it was a very integrated happy neighborhood. When the Italians had their St. Aloysius Feast everybody went and participated or enjoyed their food. It was a very happy sort of carefree existence, even though we were poor; although we weren't aware of it at the time because everybody was under the same circumstances. Even the storekeepers; they would just sell their wares, and just had enough money to keep the roof over their heads, so to speak. Like I said, it was a happy carefree existence.

RIVERA: How were your school experiences? Elementary school.

FESTA: School experiences? I loved school. Public School number 5, which is still there by the way.

RIVERA: Where was it located?

FESTA: On Tillary Street. It started, or it encompassed the whole city block because one half was supposed to be an annex for the high school although we never ran into the high school students. It was separated by the assembly hall and it had its entrances in Bridge Street. And there was a park, a city park which almost everybody went through to go to their own homes. And on the other side there was a parochial school. There was always—which you would call it now—a rumble between—There was always a fight between the parochial school students and the public school number five students as to whom the park really belonged to. When fights of that kind ensued, I would always skirt the outer perimeter and go home and keep my nose out of all that business. It didn't particularly interest me one way or the other. But school, I loved school. First of all; the teachers were fair they didn't seem to discriminate against any of us that I remember. I mostly kept my nose in the books so I wasn't aware. If there were any incidents of discrimination I wasn't aware of them. Let me put it that way. I loved school. I did well in school; enjoyed the teachers, the subjects. I had visions of becoming a teacher because I loved school so much. Like I said, the school is still standing even though it was built a long time ago.

RIVERA: Do you remember any friends that lived in the area with you at that time? Do you recall their names?

FESTA: Yes, of course. One of whom I was particularly fond of was Jenny Garcia, because she had a lot of older brothers. We became very chummy and the few times that I was allowed to go to somebody else's house was to study and there was a very good library on Montague Street and Court Street and the school would give you special cards if you were really interested. You could take more than one book out at a time and I was able to take out five books a week, which I greedily devoured and returned to get five more. The neighborhood outside of Sands Street was right around City Hall, Brooklyn--Borough Hall—well, that's what the city hall of Brooklyn is. In this neighborhood we would have to go get dental work or to pay your gas bill on Remsen Street or to pay your electric bill--Con Edison, that was Pearl Street I believe--and the library which was on Montague Street, so you did leave the--How would you say?—the

closeness of your little particular world to venture out to have to deal with your—How could you say?—utilities and things like that. Once we grew older and grew out of the neighborhood theater, we would venture out into Fulton Street which was the hub of the commercial world; as far as your large department stores, and then we would go into the higher priced movie houses like the Metropolitan and the Paramount. It was still a safe neighborhood. If there was an opportunity that you were out to late at night, the streets were safe to walk in and since we lived on Sands Street when the fleet came in and the sailors all came out to take the subway to get to 42nd Street. You could still walk amongst them. You were not worried about being molested by them. They didn't bother anybody in the neighborhood. At the time when we had the store, they would stop in to buy to buy a few things before going up to the bar because Sands Street was notorious for its bars, but it was only when the fleet was in. Outside of that they never bothered anybody, that I remember.

RIVERA: These were merchant seaman?

FESTA: No, this was the United States Navy. When the fleet came in it meant extra business for the merchants that were lining Sands Street. Like I said, there is one bar. I think that they call it John's Bar and it was notorious because supposedly it had the longest bar of its size for Brooklyn, for all of Brooklyn. That's because it could accommodate when the fleet came in. And I have vivid recallings of going to the chicken market, live chickens; you would stand there and pick out the one you wanted. My mother showed me how to tweak them so you could see whether they were juicy or not. And then they would follow through and pluck them and wring their necks or slice their necks.

RIVERA: Did many Puerto Ricans go there?

FESTA: Oh yes.

RIVERA: Where was this located?

FESTA: This was located in the Italian neighborhood. I remember going--this was York Street down--you could go through. I preferred going down the little alleys that intersected the neighborhood, they bisected the neighborhood and you could stand

there and watch the chickens. The smells were at first offensive, but you became used to it. And watched the chicken from its plump state to its demise; dunked into hot water. Then it was all plucked and you'd take your hot package and run home with it. I found that interesting. You had everything you needed there. From clothing; you had what are called now specialty shops until we outgrew it and then went into the larger department stores as our finances increased. There were a lot of sales people; these house to house salespeople that would come with their big boxes and you could buy on time, 50 cents down and 50 cents a week. And my mother did buy because she wasn't aware of the larger commercial world outside of our own little enclave there. As we grew older and our—Since we spoke English—We were taught English in school and once we learned to speak English we would speak it amongst ourselves at home. We became aware of the fact that all the world wasn't Puerto Rican and we enjoyed it.

TEJADA: Remember the public baths on--?

FESTA: Oh yes--on Willoughby. They had--well that institution was just torn down about five or six years ago, we saw it. We read about it on the paper. We would all take our towels and our paper bags and our soap because if you didn't bring your soap you had to buy it. In summertime you'd see the people coming back; you knew they were at the public baths, because they'd have their towels thrown over their shoulders and their hair soaking wet.

RIVERA: Did many Puerto Ricans go?

FESTA: Lot of Puerto Ricans. I think because we didn't have bath tubs in our flats and we were young and so we didn't mind the walk at all. We didn't go there in the wintertime because you would catch pneumonia on the way back. But in the summertime it was a common sight; you knew people had gone there. In fact, we used to make plans and meet; six or seven of us get together and take the [unintelligible] down there, then come back and [unintelligible] walk back. It was a common outing, so to speak. We mourned its passing when we saw it in the paper; it was part of our youth being wrenched away from us. It's too bad. They should have made it a monument, because

it kept a lot of Puerto Ricans and other people clean. I guess it wasn't too bad a walk when you went with a group.

TEJADA: The Public Health Center [unintelligible]

FESTA: Oh yes that was on Sands Street. They had a survey to see, to find out, who was the healthiest child around and they picked Helen. She was a very fat, bouncing baby and when they came around the store and asked my mother what she fed her--

RIVERA: Who was Helen? Younger sister?

FESTA: My youngest sister. She told them that they were on a diet of rice and beans, they were appalled. They didn't think that was too, you know, too nourishing a diet, but she was healthy so the proof was right there. Rice and beans can keep you healthy with assorted vegetables thrown in.

RIVERA: You remember the name of this health center? Where was it located?

FESTA: Heavens no. It was in Sands Street. The woman used to bring the children there. They would get weighed and examined and checked. It was like your health care centers of today. It was for the, you know, public health--vaccinated there. Things that you wouldn't ordinarily, well--Before this center you would go to Cumberland Hospital, put it this way. So this center was for newborn babies and small children, just to make sure you had inoculations and they were weighed regularly and checked to see that everything was alright. This was established later on, not when we were smaller. I have very fond memories of the neighborhood, fond memories of the people that lived there. It's too bad that we had to move away from them, because it's a shame that you lose track of the people you grew up with.

RIVERA: When did your family move to Long Island?

FESTA: Oh, that was after the '40s. That was after the '40s. We moved out because after my brother died we owned our little brownstone house and my mother didn't feel right staying in that house by herself. So in order to divert her, we would take a ride out here and on Sunday and visit a cousin who just had a little shack.

RIVERA: In Brentwood?

FESTA: Right here, right, North Bayshore. So, we started coming out regularly every Sunday in the summertime and then my father saw property for sale and he purchased it and he built the basement here with thoughts of the future; sometime building. They decided to move out here completely. It seemed like we moved out in time. I remember thinking that we moved out just when the fares—the subways and the bus fares—went up from a nickel to a dime. Beautiful, beautiful timing. But getting back to the old neighborhood—

RIVERA: Did you have any relatives in the area? Or in Brooklyn as a whole?

FESTA: We had an aunt, paternal; my father's sister, and my father's brother and assorted second and third cousins.

RIVERA: Where did they live?

FESTA: They lived in--not in the Sands Street area--they lived further out, near Bushwick; Bushwick area on the—between Greenpoint and Williamsburg, more or less, where Varick Street runs, Graham Avenue and Broadway where there was a concentration of Latins also.

RIVERA: What kind of job did her husband have?

FESTA: My aunt's husband?

RIVERA: Yes.

FESTA: He was a merchant seaman.

RIVERA: How were they making out at the time?

FESTA: Not too well. Not too well, but then he died at an early age and she remarried. My uncle; he always had a good job because he sold, and installed, and repaired pool tables, which there were quite an abundance of at that time.

RIVERA: His business was in Brooklyn at that time?

FESTA: Yes along Atlantic Avenue. He worked for this company and I guess he still does work for them today. And ah, my aunt's worked as a seamstress. She made a good living at that. The other cousins; they worked at different jobs. Like my cousin Roberto, he always worked with a fuel company, that either installed boilers and maintained them and also sold fuel, more or less, as a driver. And also when he came

out the Navy he went to Farmingdale for 2 years of agriculture. But his mainstay was always working. He learned a lot of plumbing, [inaudible]. So—