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 - Flores, Alice Oral history interview conducted by Patricia Carino Pasick, June 14, 2014, Patricia Carino Pasick collection of Johnson Street Filipino-American oral histories, 2013.001.05; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Oral History Interview with Alice Flores,
Patricia Carino Pasick collection of Johnson Street Filipino-American oral
histories, 2013.001.05
Interview conducted by Patricia Carino Pasick at Flores's home on June 14, 2014
in Manalapan, New Jersey

PASICK: Okay, we'll do a test. Can you say your name?

FLORES: Yes, my name is Alice Lorraine Flores

PASICK: Yes.

FLORES: Alice Lorraine Flores. And I live on [address redacted for privacy], in Manalapan, New Jersey. Jersey's a really very large state, it's really huge.

PASICK: It is. I'm talking with Alice Astorga Flores. Alice, can you tell me when you were born.

FLORES: I was born on [date redacted for privacy], 1919.

PASICK: And where were you born?

FLORES: I was born in Brooklyn, and not in a hospital, with a midwife.

PASICK: With a midwife, wow.

FLORES: Can I tell you about the cowl? [laughter]

PASICK: That's a wonderful story. And Vic knows about that too.

FLORES: I was born, as my mother told me, with a cowl over my face. And a cowl was probably ...a very thin skin maybe...but it was called a cowl. It was broken, it was not a full, but broken some way or another. And then she explained to me, my mother, that the seamen who went to sea thought this was a good luck charm, and they carried it in their pockets. And it was called the cowl. C-O-W-L.

PASICK: Do you think you benefited from this good luck charm?

FLORES: Well, I'm lasting this long. I feel something happened that that was worthwhile.

PASICK: Alice, tell us, tell me about your parents, and how they got married? Your mother was Caucasian, and your father was Filipino.

FLORES: Can I say she was Lithuanian-born? Of Lithuanian descent I should say. She met him through her girlfriend who was already married to a Filipino, and they used to go up—he was in the Navy at that time, my father, and this girlfriend of hers who was already married to one—one of the Filipinos who was married-- and they used to go up and see. He used to bring some of his friends up, and my mother would go up there, they would go up, her and a few girls would go visit too, and that's how she met him.

PASICK: Great. And they had, uh, you're one of five? Four. One of four? Children? They had four children, or five children? Your parents.

ALICE FLORES: My parents...

PASICK: ...had Stanley, okay, and you're the second born?

FLORES: Yes.

PASICK: Okay

ALICE FLORES: Um-hmm.

PASICK: And then you have two sisters.

FLORES: So we were four. My father and mother had four children: three girls and one boy.

PASICK: Okay, all right. Um, you told me a story earlier about how your grandmother and her sisters, many of them married Filipinos.

FLORES: Exactly, yes. Four of them did.

PASICK: Four out of five daughters.

PASICK: Married Filipinos.

ALICE: Exactly.

PASICK: Yeah. Do you know how that happened?

FLORES: Well, my mother was the first one to marry, really. And the others followed suit, afterwards, and perhaps they married, met, I'm saying I don't know if this is true or not but they went in the circles of all those other people, other girls who were married. I assume that they met their husbands after I was married.

PASICK: Okay, okay. Alright. So, uh, what, um, so what do you think were some of the advantages of being in a family that was, had, Filipinos?

FLORES: I never thought about it. I never thought about it as an advantage. We were just, I don't know, we were all happy. We never thought we were poor. But we probably were. They never had to go on welfare. My mother lived within my father's Navy money which became an issue, you know, when they started having children, because it was very difficult then to maintain. If you were just a couple, maybe you could live on something like that, but when you have children, you need more. So that's the reason why he resigned from the Navy.

PASICK: I see.

FLORES: To pursue more work, in others words. That's why he went to Philadelphia.

PASICK: Hmmm. That's what you were telling me.

FLORES: Yep. We lived there for two years. Rita was born there. And he had two jobs. That was the thing. He could do that. But then we came back from Philadelphia. I don't know what happened there.

PASICK: Was that when you were living on Johnson Street? You were telling me you were living on Johnson Street, near Pearl Avenue.

FLORES: Yeah,

PASICK: And there were three houses in a row.

FLORES: Yup.

PASICK: And it was your family, and there were several other families, and they were all Filipino families.

FLORES: Yes! And in fact in one apartment there were just bachelors. Filipinos! Not married, but they had about three or four of them gathered together and had an apartment.

PASICK: I see, and so these Filipinos in this part of Brooklyn all lived in the same area.

FLORES: Yep, yeah. We did anyway, and they had an apartment there. Very nice young men. They were fairly young at that time. The other family you know of.

PASICK: Yes, I do. Can you tell us how your dad started the Filipino Community Center?

FLORES: Oh, he didn't do the Community Center, he did the VFW.

PASICK: Also the Filipino Community Center?

FLORES: No, he didn't do that. My brother was the secretary. I told you. A lot of young people were going there. We were all going there. He said, let's get a Youth Club. They decided to call it a Youth Club.

PASICK: Okay....

FLORES: ...and that's how that happened. Even Freddie was involved with us.

PASICK: And it was on Fulton Street?

FLORES: Yeah!

PASICK: Okay, above a tavern as I understand?

FLORES: A bar. There was a bar on the first floor, and we always used to go down there, but, eeeh, you know, I was under age. I was sixteen.

PASICK: So what did you do in the Center? Were there dances?

FLORES: We had a dance every Saturday, we had dances. I don't know if we collected money for that. I really don't know. But they used to have meetings too that we used to go to. But this was—

PASICK: Were these cultural meetings? Did people talk about Filipino culture?

FLORES: No, we didn't. We were too young to get into that. We just talked about things we wanted to do, where, where we wanted to go. Like a social, a social club.

PASICK: A social club.

FLORES: No important items did we talk about; what happened in the day, the politics, none of that.

PASICK: So what difference did it make in your teenage life to have that club there?

FLORES: Oh, it made a lot of...I was able to go there. I mean, because my brother, he was always there and I was only 16. My mother wouldn't let me go if he wasn't there.

PASICK: Okay.

FLORES: So that was heaven. To be able to go and dance, and, oh it was great.

PASICK: Did your parents encourage you to date Filipinos, or date Caucasians, or did they not care, one way or another?

FLORES: They didn't. In fact, uh, I hardly introduced my parents to the boys I went out with. 'Cause I didn't bother with them too long, you know. I didn't bother with them. But I met somebody else I wanted to go out with, maybe.

PASICK: Okay

FLORES: But I was telling Pat about the socks, when my mother came to... he was one of the ones who came to the house when he picked me up. And she noticed. I didn't even notice. He didn't have any socks.

PASICK: Okay. Tell us about your Dad. Your Dad started this very special VFW—

FLORES: Exactly.

PASICK: Go ahead.

FLORES: Well, let me see. What can I say about 'em?

PASICK: It was called the Jose Rizal...

FLORES: Dr. Jose Rizal...post...and number 867. I never forgot that number. It was a congregation of Filipinos. It wasn't my father directly that decided 'lemme get these guys all together.'

PASICK: Okay.

FLORES: It was the Filipinos themselves that wanted to do this. So they all got together and of course they nominated my father [laughter], nobody wanted it maybe, to be the commander, but he did. He took it.

PASICK: This was between World War I and World War II.

FLORES: Exactly. Yeah...yeah.

PASICK: And uh so, how important was this to his life.

FLORES: It was important, because it was something that he was doing. Oh, another thing that I wanted to tell you about my dad. Before he married, he had a very bad handwriting, well he had no education to speak of. So what did he do? He took a correspondence course. The Parker method it was called. And you know they sent him stuff. He didn't have a man telling him what to do, or a teacher. I got—I want to show you his handwriting.

PASICK: Why don't we wait and show me right before I go?

FLORES: Alright. Because it's beautiful. And I kept one of his slips, you know, for his banking? And the writing was gorgeous. It's right before he met my mother, actually.

PASICK: Was he working for the Brooklyn Post Office?

FLORES: No, when we came back, and they bought the house, the two-family house I told you about, he applied to the Postal Service. There were calling men, you know. He was a mail handler.

PASICK: What was his work when he lived in Brooklyn?

FLORES: In Brooklyn...

PASICK: So this would have been about the time you were born. Was he working in the Merchant Marine?

FLORES: No, he was still in the Navy when I was born.

PASICK: I see. Did you see him a lot?

FLORES: He was on the big battle ships. I even have a list of all the ships he was on.

PASICK: Oh, that's great.

FLORES: Yeah.

PASICK: What's the first time you remember seeing him?

FLORES: Seeing him? He seemed to be always there, really, for us. He would never say a harsh word to us. Never. Never raised a hand to us. And my mother didn't either, but she had that look. Tell her, Vic. She always said I had that Lithuanian look when I'm gonna mad at you. I don't remember having it; my mother had it I think. 'Cause she'd give you one look, and you know you did something wrong. [laughter] You better watch out!

PASICK: Do you think Brooklyn was a good place to me, as a Filipino-American person—

FLORES: Exactly! You know where we lived, at the corner of the block we were on, were Greek people. We were ethnic groups, and all around the corner were Greek. And then in the next

block up, were Puerto Rican. But the red-headed Puerto Ricans. I don't know what area they were from, in Puerto Rico, but they had red hair, some of them. And one of the girls was a very good friend of Rita, my sister.

PASICK: I see.

FLORES: They were very good friends.

PASICK: Did you encounter any difficulties being someone of mixed race, when you were living in Brooklyn?

FLORES: Only in school, in grammar school. The kids didn't know what I was. I had the bangs! So I really looked brgggg, like I don't know what, but anyway. They kinda made a little fun of that. But that was all. I never had it when I was grown up.

PASICK: Great.

FLORES: [laughter] I guess I looked better, somehow. So they didn't question. And that was the school—not St. James where I went to—the second time. The first time, it was the Immaculate Conception School.

PASICK: Was there other prejudice around you in Brooklyn when you were growing up?

FLORES: Not really, not when I was growing up. No. I never felt it then, badly. Except when we were in Chapel Street, Brooklyn, there were Irish immigrants too. They were immigrants. And they were very prejudiced. You know, when my mother would hang out clothes they would throw water on her head, things like that. That was not very good. And there was only one bathroom on each floor, you know there was like three floors to the building, and there was only one bathroom for like three families, would use it. So after these people would use it, they would leave it dirty.

PASICK: I see.

FLORES: And my mother would clean it up.

PASICK: I see.

FLORES: She would, before she would let us use it.

PASICK: Let me ask you this, as a kind of wrap-up question. What do you want the future generations to remember about the Filipinos living in Brooklyn?

FLORES: What do I want them to remember? Well, I would say that, uh, that we, oh, well, what can I tell you? I can only talk about my father. Who was the best ever, right? I think, he was. Very gentle man, and he loves his family. And sometimes you can't say that about a Caucasian

man. Because a lot of them leave, you know, but none of those Filipinos, even if they did get prejudiced, you know, that I didn't hear about, that wouldn't bother them.

PASICK: Wow.

FLORES: They just wouldn't. They just wouldn't think that people would be like that. But they would let it go. They would not hate these people.

PASICK: I see.

FLORES: That's what my father. Even if anybody was prejudiced against him, he still wouldn't hate them.

PASICK: Wow. That's a great ending. I want to thank you, thank you for talking with me today.

FLORES: Okay, we're finished.

PASICK: We are.