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Oral History Interview with George Gomez

Patricia Carino Pasick collection of Johnson Street Filipino-American oral histories,
2013.001

Interview conducted by Patricia Carino Pasick on September 4, 2004 in Middle
Village, Queens, New York

PASICK: Okay, so George thanks for doing this. This is for some writing I'm going to do, about being Filipino-American. And I do want you to understand that this is confidential, okay, so that what you tell me I will never share with anyone, unless you give me permission to, okay?

GOMEZ: Uh, uh, I mean, I'm not that worried about it.

PASICK: Okay, alright. Okay. So we're going to start. And if you get tired, just tell me, and we can pick it up after lunch, okay? Okay, George, can you tell me your full name, and where you were born?

GOMEZ: Where I was born, and all that?

PASICK: Yes, and your whole name.

GOMEZ: Well, my name is George Gomez, and actually I don't know where I was born, the address there, but I think it was Hudson Avenue, 170 Hudson Avenue.

PASICK: And do you know where you parents were born?

GOMEZ: Well, I know that my father was born in the Philippines, and my mother there, I don't know where she was born. She was an American, but I don't actually know where, her past. As I said, we never really went into that, those things. We never had anyone who asked us things like that.

PASICK: Uh, huh. Do know any stories about why your father emigrated from the Philippines, why he left the Philippines?

GOMEZ: Well, I guess when they came here, and they seen the ways things were run in America, they figured they wanna come here. And live here, that's right. But when he came I don't know whedder it was 1910 or 1900, around that. And there wasn't that many Filipinos here.

PASICK: Right. Not on the East Coast, no.

GOMEZ: And like years later on, you'd mostly see Filipinos at dances, there; they had this Rizal or something. That's where you'd see a lot of Filipinos that were married. And they were mostly married to American girls there. But they were mostly at these dances. And like years ago, when I used to go to Philadelphia, they had a place they used to go, a park, and have picnics.

PASICK: Had picnics.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: Can you tell me what your dad's occupation was?

GOMEZ: My father, when he first came here, was a cook. Then he worked in railroads as a deck hand. New York -Central Railroad. That's where my father worked.

PASICK: Was that on the tow ships?

GOMEZ: What do you mean?

PASICK: The tow ships.

GOMEZ: No, New York Central Railroad was a big railroad.

PASICK: I see.

GOMEZ: He worked for them as a deck hand.

PASICK: What did a deck hand do?

GOMEZ: Like a crew, on a tugboat. You have a captain, and there's three deck hands. You have the first deck hand, and then you have the second deck hand, was for the stern of the ship, and then you have the float man. When they picked up a barge, he used go on there, and handle the lines there.

PASICK: What did the third deck hand do?

GOMEZ: That was the float man there.

PASICK: Oh, that was the float man. Were there other Filipinos that did that work?

GOMEZ: The only ones I knew was mostly my father. I never heard of any Filipino who used to work as a deck hand on the tugboats. My father was the only one.

PASICK: Tell me, George, about the neighborhood you grew up in. What kinds of people lived in the neighborhood?

GOMEZ: The neighborhood we grew up in, Hudson Avenue, was all Italians. Mainly Italian there. Mostly all Italians.

PASICK: Okay.

GOMEZ: That's what was mostly there.

PASICK: Where there other Filipinos where you were living?

GOMEZ: Yeah. There was other Filipinos living there, living around there, like in different places, Sand Street. There was never a group all living together, a group, just living together

PASICK: Tell me what you mean by that.

GOMEZ: Well, they was just scattered all over. Not just in a certain section. Not like around here. In certain blocks in Brooklyn we had all Puerto Ricans, and everything.

PASICK: And that wasn't true for Filipinos.

GOMEZ: No. They were scattered, scattered all over, one family here, another family there. There was never a group. Except when the Filipinos used to come together at a dance, maybe there was a dance.

PASICK: Or a picnic.

GOMEZ: A picnic, or something. But it was never a organized group, with someone saying what was going on. We never had none of that.

PASICK: How well off were the people in your neighborhood? When you grew up?

GOMEZ: Well, mostly it was people like it wasn't never that rich. They were just working people.

PASICK: Um, hmm.

GOMEZ: There was never anybody that was rich, or was outstanding, like that. There was never any money, never any money.

PASICK: How did the neighbors treat the Filipinos?

GOMEZ: Well, like I say, mostly they thought the Filipinos was Chinese. If you went to a place, an apartment, they didn't think we were--they never knew we were Filipinos. They used to think that everybody--cause they were light-skinned, and-and-and had slanted eyes--they were Chinese.

PASICK: Was there teasing in the neighborhood about that, teasing about that, remarks?

GOMEZ: No, they-they didn't tease you, but, uh, if you went in the neighborhood, I don't know if they even discriminate. They wouldn't not rent an apartment. If you went there and an apartment was empty, and you found out about it, they wouldn't say, "No, we can't let you have it because you're a Filipino."

PASICK: So your family was never discriminated against, in housing.

GOMEZ: No.

PASICK: When people mistook you—or any of the family—

GOMEZ: Mostly in the schools. When you went to the schools, right away other students would call you—they would pass a remark.

PASICK: They would pass a remark.

GOMEZ: Call you Chinaman, and all that.

PASICK: Okay.

GOMEZ: If you wanted to explain you're not a Chinaman, you're a Filipino, they didn't know anything like that.

PASICK: Were you able to explain in the neighborhood, to boys, or kids, that you were a Filipino, and not Chinese, or did you just let that go?

GOMEZ: Well, it wasn't that bad, around, uh, that they always figured, you know, that if you, you got slanted eyes, you were Chinese. They weren't thinking like the Japanese, they got slanted eyes, and the Chinese—they never figured that.

PASICK: Um, hmm...

GOMEZ: Yea...

PASICK: What other kinds of kids were at your school?

GOMEZ: All kinds. Irish. Italian.

PASICK: Mainly White?

GOMEZ: Huh?

PASICK: Mainly White?

GOMEZ: Yeah, mainly White. Years ago, there was never Blacks. There was a few Blacks, but wasn't that many.

PASICK: Okay.

GOMEZ: Like I say, when they would see a Filipino, they would mainly think he's Chinese.

PASICK: Chinese.

GOMEZ: They never figured.

PASICK: Did your parents ever talk with you kids about that, I mean--

GOMEZ: No.

PASICK: Did you ever tell your parents that kids were passing remarks at school?

GOMEZ: No, we never said nothing.

PASICK: How did the teachers do with Filipino kids, do you think?

GOMEZ: Well, they never questioned anybody or anything. When they teach, they were looking for if you--if they ask you a question, they want--they were looking for the right answer. They didn't question it; they never passed a remark, nothing. Teachers never passed, never passed any kind of remark.

PASICK: That's good.

GOMEZ: No matter what a person was.

PASICK: Were you ever aware of a person passing remarks about your father, who looked more Filipino than you did?

GOMEZ: Well, like I say, uh, they--they probably would say Chinese.

PASICK: Alright.

GOMEZ: The only time they would pass a remark, like if you were to cross in front of somebody, or maybe go ahead of them, they would pass a remark.

PASICK: I see.

GOMEZ: Outside of that, they never say nothing, you walking-- Okay on the street, they don't say, "here come a Chinaman," you know. They never say anything like that.

PASICK: Okay, it's only when they felt threatened someway.

GOMEZ: Only if you passed somebody, and you done something like maybe didn't let them go first, you went ahead of them, they might say "that lousy Chinaman" and they would pass that remark. Like that, but outside of that--they didn't discriminate or anything.

PASICK: Do you—can you—um, speak a little, George, about since in school, there were some of these kids who would pass remarks—how do you think that affected you?

GOMEZ: Ne-ne-never bothered me. I would never answer them back; never have an argument with them, or anything.

PASICK: Okay.

GOMEZ: If they said anything, ju-just- didn't say nothin.' If you would answer them back, and try to explain it, there'd be a big argument, and there'd be trouble.

PASICK: Did Zachy handle it in the same way?

GOMEZ: I guess go. I never asked him, or anything. Probably all, all of them who were Filipino, they went to school; they passed some remarks

PASICK: How did you think of yourself—when you were a kid, how did you think of yourself racially, I mean, did you think of yourself as Filipino, or White, or mixed, or –

GOMEZ: I didn't think of anything. They don't bother me; I ain't goin' to bother them.

PASICK: Right. But how did you think of yourself? Did you think of yourself as growing up in a Filipino family, or as growing up in a mixed family, because your mother wasn't Filipino?

GOMEZ: No. Like I say, I never heard anybody say anything--passed anything--the only time I know about Filipinos, that there were that many of us, is when you go to the dances, and you see all these people come to the dances, all these Filipinos married to White women, and nobody passed a remark or anything.

PASICK: Did that—when you went to the dances and saw that there lots of other people like you, and lots of other families like you, uh, did that help you feel like, well, other people are doing that, and it's not that unusual? I mean, did you feel pretty normal in that sense?

GOMEZ: Well, uh, that never really bothered me.

PASICK: What did you used to check, George, when you had to check race on a form.

GOMEZ: Heh?

PASICK: Like when you used to have check race on a form?

GOMEZ: You had to put White. You had to put White. If you were Black, you had to put Black. If you were White, you had to check White. If you were any other thing, like the Spanish who were Brown, you had to put White because that's what they told you. You might want to change it and put other things, like Brown or Filipino they would tell you no. White. You had to put White there.

PASICK: Do you remember wanting to put Brown or Filipino?

GOMEZ: You might want to put something else, like Brown or Filipino or mixed race but, no. They didn't want to know that. You're either Black or White; that's what it was. You're a Black person, you had to put Black. If you was anything else, it's White.

PASICK: That's interesting.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: Um, if you can think back a bit, George, when was the first time, as a child, that you aware of the idea of race? When is the first time it occurred to you that people come in different races?

GOMEZ: I don't know, like I say, them things [laughter] never bothered me, never ask anything, never figure...you're either one of the other. But like I say, in school if you wasn't a Black person, you hadda put down White. If you was Brown or Filipino they didn't want to know that, no.

PASICK: If they had had a box for Brown or Filipino would you have checked that?

GOMEZ: Yeah, but they never had that. I remember I might a had a test, where you could put that down, but no. You were White or Black. If you weren't really a White person, you had to put down White. But the school where I hadda go, they was mostly Italians, Public School 14. In an all Italian neighborhood. Italians owned all the homes around there. They used to rent out apartments.

PASICK: George, can you say a little about what it was like to be a Filipino during World War II?

GOMEZ: Well, the guys never say anything. They might tell you, "don't step out of line" because the guys might think you're a Jap and shoot you, especially at night. But same for White guys; if you were step out of line, like my friend, he stepped out of

line, and didn't know the password to get back, and they shot him. They thought he was a Jap.

PASICK: Wow.

GOMEZ: And, like I say, you don't move around. You stay put.

PASICK: Did you have any, um, difficulty with any of the guys you served with because you were Filipino?

GOMEZ: No.

PASICK: So, they treated you like one of them.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: That's good. How about when you got home from the war, were you aware of anyone mistaking you for Japanese, or –

GOMEZ: No. As soon as I come home, I didn't wear the uniform.

PASICK: Right. Do you believe that people believe that Filipinos have certain characteristics?

GOMEZ: Well, when people see Filipinos they figure they work in restaurants or different things. As I say, there was no other Filipino that was put to work as a deck hand. No.

PASICK: Your father was one of the first.

GOMEZ: He was the only one and like I say, working in the railroad. And when I started to work there, you had to have a relative who worked there. Either your parents worked there, or somebody recommended. When they were hiring, that's how you got into that job. The railroad used to say, well, we're hiring some men there. You have a son there, you fill out an application, and that's how you get into the railroad. You couldn't go over there yourself

PASICK: Sounds like it was hard to get there.

GOMEZ: Yeah, because a lot of friends of my sister wanted to know how my brudder and I got into the railroad. They tried to get that job and they said they wasn't hiring. And then my brother got it there because my father worked there.

PASICK: Was that a civil service job?

GOMEZ: No. It wasn't. It wasn't. Heck the pay there, you had to work 8 hours--they paid you \$5.30 for eight hours, eight hours of work. And then if you worked, maybe they had another job later on, work like overtime, you got paid time and a half. You got \$8.00 for eight hours work.

PASICK: Wow. Was that a lot of money then?

GOMEZ: Yeah, it was a lot of money! Because like I say, when I first came home, I wanted to buy a new car, and I had to save up until I had \$2,400 dollars. To buy a new car. I bought a new Ford, 8 cylinder, 4-door sedan, and I had to give 'em \$2,400 dollars.

PASICK: Wow, that's huge amount of money.

GOMEZ: And then the guy said--because he had that car, and a couple of people wanted it--you goin' to get insurance, car insurance? I said, "No, I ain't got no more money. You got all my money." He said, "You mean, you're going to take that car and run it without insurance?" I said, "Yeah." Them days, you didn't have to have insurance.

PASICK: I see.

GOMEZ: So I said, "Let me have the car; I don't have any more money." That was a lot of money in 'dem days.

PASICK: What parts of your Filipino background are you most, uh, proud about? You're very proud that your dad got to work on the railroad. Things like that. Are there some things you're very glad about, in terms of your Filipino background?

GOMEZ: Well, I never heard anything outstanding about the Filipinos. Never heard anything that somebody was so great, was in the war, especially with Spain. I never heard anything. Never anything.

PASICK: Uh, huh. There were heroes of course Filipino heroes.

GOMEZ: I don't know. Like I say, the only one like I know, and I didn't hear too much to know about it. That's the time they shot that guy, Rizal. I don't know what he done; he faced that firing squad, and they killed him.

PASICK: Uh, huh. Did you know, George, that in World War II, there was a special branch of the government that had all Filipinos in it?

GOMEZ: That was the outfit called [unintelligible].

PASICK: Uh, huh. It was an all-Filipino unit, and they fought against the Japanese in the Philippines.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: And they were—they all these medals.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: I think the unit got started out in California, where there were a lot more Filipinos.

GOMEZ: Oh, yeah.

PASICK: And they were a highly decorated unit. They were, uh, a very successful unit, against the Japanese, after the Japanese occupied the Philippines.

GOMEZ: The only thing, like I say, all the medals I got. In order for me to get that medal, the Bronze Star Medal, the only reason I got that is because I read in the newspaper years back, that anyone who served on Guadalcanal, and fought against the enemy, the Japanese, is entitled to the Bronze Star Medal.

PASICK: Because it was such a terrible battle.

GOMEZ: Nobody ever said I was entitled to it, so when I read in the paper, I got the address, and I even worked with some politician, and I got the address, and I wrote to them about the war, and the declarations, and I gave them the dates, and the outfit that I belonged to, and the time we spent on Guadalcanal. And then they answered me back, and they answered me back, and that's how I got the Bronze Star Medal. By President Roosevelt signing this here bill, a certain bill, anybody that fought the Japs on Guadalcanal, and it was such a battle that they lost, was entitled to the Bronze Star Medal, and that's how I got mine.

PASICK: Do you feel you deserve it? That your unit deserved it?

GOMEZ: No, no. I never figured--there were other people there doing the same thing.

PASICK: But do you think as a group you deserved, uh, special commendation--

GOMEZ: No, no.

PASICK: For fighting?

GOMEZ: No, there were times you went out on patrol, and you had a sergeant in charge, and then you used to come to these huts. He would name two guys. One would go in the head of the hut; the other guy would go in the back. And then they would sneak up to the hut, and throw a grenade in. And you step back. If there were any Japs in there, they would come out.

PASICK: That sounds, that sounds very brave to me.

GOMEZ: Well, everybody had to--you didn't do it all the time. They would pick somebody else; come to another hut, and pick somebody else. The two guys would go up there, and the rest wait outside, in case the Japs come out.

PASICK: So if you don't think you deserved the Bronze Star, why did you write for it?

GOMEZ: Because, because I-I was entitled to it. I mean, actually, when I was getting out, they knew what outfit you were in, and where you were. They really shoulda gave it to me, and they didn't.

PASICK: That's right. You were entitled to it.

GOMEZ: It's not that it gave me anything because when you got that medal, it didn't entitle you to nothing. Because if you got killed overseas, the only time you be buried in Arlington Cemetery was if you had the Purple Heart, or you had the Silver Star Medal. If you had that medal. And a lot of times, what I read, a lot of times guys that got killed while they were fighting, their parents never knew they weren't entitled. They used to bury them, even though they had the Bronze Star Medal. But you had to get killed to be buried there. But now, if you're retired, say you got the Silver Star or the Purple Heart, you'll still be entitled. If you wanna be buried in Arlington, you can be buried there.

PASICK: I see, I see, it's another kind of entitlement. Can I ask you, George, was your father proud about being a Filipino, proud about it?

GOMEZ: Well, I don't know. He never mentioned anything about it. Never said, I'm glad I'm a Filipino. He never made it with the Filipinos; he never mentioned it.

PASICK: Can you tell me that story about how he never really totally embraced being an American because he always had a little thing about the Americans?

GOMEZ: No, he said that once you come to this country, you never want to go back. If you go back to the Philippines, you have to have money to take people out and treat them to things, and he never had that kind of money.

PASICK: He never went back.

GOMEZ: He never had second thoughts about going back to the Philippines.

PASICK: Do you know where he was from in the Philippines, his province? Was it Mindanao, or Mindoro, something like that?

GOMEZ: I don't know, some small place. I never looked into anything. The way he came in, he must have been a cook, who came in a ship, to come to America to see how it was here. He probably wanted to stay there.

PASICK: How did your parents meet?

GOMEZ: I don't really know. My mother probably met my father when they went to some kind of dance. 'Cause he used to get dress up, in them days, the Filipinos when they got dressed up, got a homburg and different things. I guess that's how she met him.

PASICK: She was the first sister in the family in the family to marry a Filipino.

GOMEZ: Like I say, back then, they used to say Chinaman, not Filipino.

PASICK: You know, back in the early part of the 20th century, racial intermarriage was frowned on, and there were even laws against it? I mean, how do you think, how do you think your mother, how was she able to marry a Filipino? I mean knowing her personality, knowing something about her. I mean, it was a very brave thing to do.

GOMEZ: Like I say, she probably met him when they went to one of these dances. She never met him in somebody's home, or something like that. At one of these Rizal balls, maybe around New Year's Eve.

PASICK: Right, right. I wanted to ask you about them. Do you think they got married for convenience, for love? Why did your parents get married, do you think?

GOMEZ: I think it was love, I guess.

PASICK: Yeah?

GOMEZ: Yeah, I think so. Heck, when you looked at them. I don't think my mother ever worked. I never heard that she ever had any kind of job. So it must have been that they loved one another. That's why she got married.

PASICK: I have to look it up, but I think it's possible that your mother worked in a silk factory, way back.

GOMEZ: I never heard of my mother having any kind of job. I only remember that my Aunt Cath worked in a thread company. But outside of that, I never heard of anybody else working.

PASICK: Now, when you and all the kids got to be young adults, did your parents encourage you to marry Filipinos?

GOMEZ: No. Never said anything about who I should go with, or what.

PASICK: Okay.

GOMEZ: Like I say, when I was growing up, it was all you could to take care of yourself. Trying to get married and living with somebody? You didn't have that kind of money.

PASICK: Now, your sisters married Filipinos.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: And how did your parents feel about that?

GOMEZ: They never said nothing. Never said who I should go with, and what I should do. They never said you shouldn't go with a Filipino. They only went with Filipinos.

PASICK: Um, now when you married, you did not marry a Filipino. How did her family react to her marrying a Filipino?

GOMEZ: My wife had already been married to somebody else. Then when she met me, she got a divorce.

PASICK: Was she married to a White person?

GOMEZ: No. A Black man.

PASICK: A Black man. Okay.

GOMEZ: And she got a divorce from this guy. And that's when she married me.

PASICK: So she had already married somebody outside of her race.

GOMEZ: When she was going with me, and this guy knew I had a car, son of a gun, one day when I had my car parked out there, he gave me a couple of flat tires!

PASICK: Oh, my gosh! Really? Oh, no. Where did you meet Louise?

GOMEZ: At work, when I worked in the parks.

PASICK: What was she doing?

GOMEZ: She was a woman's attendant; taking care of the woman's side, you know, in the park.

PASICK: This was in Manhattan, wasn't it?

GOMEZ: Yeah, they used to transfer you around to the different parks. It was Manhattan.

PASICK: Yeah, I remember you telling me that once. So are you saying that in your family, there was never any consideration about race, when it came to who you would marry?

GOMEZ: No. Nobody ever said anything. My sisters never went with any American guys, only Filipinos.

PASICK: Do you know why?

GOMEZ: I don't know why.

PASICK: I guess they preferred to be with Filipinos?

GOMEZ: My sister, Marion, went with one who worked in the post office for a long time, but he didn't marry her.

PASICK: He was Filipino, too.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: Do you think, do you think racial intermarriage is a good idea?

GOMEZ: Well, like I say years ago, they never said anything. I don't know if it's a good idea. In my time, Filipinos went with their own kind.

PASICK: Well, you broke out of that mold. You did something different.

GOMEZ: Well, like I say, I didn't have any money. In the back of my head back then, I didn't have enough money to take care of somebody. I didn't make that kind of money and I could only take care of myself.

PASICK: Yes. Yeah.

GOMEZ: That's why I never looked to get married. Most of the 18 or 20 year-old guys that I know, they got married. I don't know if they all lasted, but they got married. I don't know how they done it, what kind of jobs they had. One guy I know, I was going out with this girl, and then he went out with her, and they got married, and now he has 4 or 5 kids. I don't how he did it.

PASICK: Um, hmm. Let's see how we're doing here, other questions I might have. At the different jobs you had, was being a Filipino ever an issue?

GOMEZ: No, nobody ever passed a remark. When I worked at the railroad, there was not that many Filipinos. We were the only ones. Most of the ones who worked in the railroad, their fathers were Austrian.

PASICK: Oh, is that so?

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: Really! You know the Pacanza family, the women there come from Austrian-Bohemian families. And I wonder if that's the link, because they worked in the railroads there.

GOMEZ: No, I never heard of anybody. Most who worked there were Austrians, quite a few of them. The Captains of the tugboats were licensed; they were mainly Austrians, or sons of Austrians.

PASICK: You know that Filipinos in the Navy, almost all of them were stewards or mess attendants or cooks, or ward attendants, occasionally petty officers.

GOMEZ: Right.

PASICK: And until 1967, they could never achieve a higher ranking. No matter what. Had you heard of that? Does that make sense to you? Did you know about that?

GOMEZ: No, most what I seen, they were petty officers, or cooks.

PASICK: Or cooks. Now they are captains or admirals--

GOMEZ: I never seen any. On the ships, I never seen any on the decks. Most were in the kitchen.

PASICK: You mean, on the ships you were on, going overseas.

GOMEZ: On the ships, all that I seen, the officers were all White.

PASICK: Right.

GOMEZ: Like I say, I never seen—they never mixed the Blacks and the Whites together. Blacks was always separate.

PASICK: Does it make sense to you, does it seem fair to you, that the Filipinos were kept at the level of steward or petty officer.

GOMEZ: That's the way the Navy was. If you wanted a job at all, you couldn't become a higher officer or anything. You wanted to be a petty officer you had to be in the cooking department.

PASICK: And then work your way up.

GOMEZ: Yeah.

PASICK: But that's the highest that you could be until 1967, and then they passed a law saying that was illegal. It wasn't, it was uh, discriminatory.

GOMEZ: Like I say, all the officers during the war were White officers. I never even seen a Black officer. If there was any Black officers, that was in the outfits that was by themselves. All Blacks, not mixed.

PASICK: Just two more questions. What you do imagine the Philippines is like? If you were to go back to your father's town, what do you think it would look like? What have you imagined?

GOMEZ: We never got to the Philippines when I was in the Army. I heard about it, but we never got there.

PASICK: What do you picture that it looks like?

GOMEZ: Well, I picture that it don't look like America. People over there don't got nothing. Why would I want to go back there? I would rather stay here in America!

PASICK: Sure.

GOMEZ: You have a chance here. No matter who you are, if you're smart enough, no matter who you are, you can pass a test and everything, you go up.