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Oral History Interview with Richard Pineda
Patricia Carino Pasick collection of Johnson Street Filipino-American oral
histories, 2013.001.08
Interview conducted by Patricia Carino Pasick on March 21, 2014 in Lakewood
Ranch, Florida

PASICK: Hi Richie

PINEDA: Hi Pat

PASICK: Thanks for agreeing to do this...

PINEDA: You're welcome.

PASICK: I'm Patricia Pasick, Patricia Carino Pasick. Today's date is March 21, 2014. And I'm in Sarasota, Florida, and I'm interviewing a cousin of mine in the home of his sister. So we'll just start! Can you tell us your full name?

PINEDA: Yes, my name is Richard Pineda and I was born on [date redacted for privacy] 1941.

PASICK: Great. Where were you born?

PINEDA: In Bronx, New York, Westchester Square Hospital.

PASICK: Westchester Square Hospital! Do you remember your street address?

PINEDA: Yes. In the Bronx?

PASICK: In the Bronx.

PINEDA: In the Bronx. 2507 Tratman Avenue.

PASICK: Troutman Avenue.

PINEDA: Tratman.

PASICK: Trattman. How do you spell that?

PINEDA: T-R-A-T-M-A-N

PASICK: T-R-A-T-M-A-N. Okay, can you tell me about it, was it an apartment building, or...

PINEDA: Yes, it was an apartment building, we lived on the third floor.

PASICK: Okay, how many floors were there in the apartment building?

PINEDA: I think there were five.

PASICK: Really.

PINEDA: I think so.

PASICK: So you were on the third, there were a lot of families there.

PINEDA: Oh, yeah.

PASICK: Cool. Okay, alright. And...um... can you tell me your street address in Florida?

PINEDA: 6268 Tupelo Trail, Lakewood Ranch, Florida.

PASICK: Okay, great. Great. So, um, um, I told you quite a bit about the project, um, and again thank you so much for agreeing to be part of it, and to contributing your stories to the history of Brooklyn at a very interesting time, when there were many ethnic groups living around Brooklyn. So, um, first tell me about your family, tell me about your parents, their names, and um...

PINEDA: My mother's name was Ella

PASICK: Ella...

PINEDA: And my father's name was Luciano.

PASICK: Luciano.

PINEDA: Right.

PASICK: Pineda. Can you spell Pineda?

PINEDA: P-I-N-E-D-A.

PASICK: Okay, um, tell me how did they meet? Do you know anything about how they met?

PINEDA: Well, I mean, that was before my time.

PASICK: Obviously [laughter]

PINEDA: So I have no idea...since they passed away before we really got old enough to understand all of that.

PASICK: Yah, yah. What were they like as a couple? Do you have any memories of that?

PINEDA: Well, they were a happy couple...I mean they were a good mother and father, they were very loving...

PASICK: Yeah...

PINEDA: ... and, uh, that's all I can think of saying about them as a couple.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: Because when you're young you don't really think of what kind of couple are they. You just know they love you and take good care of you.

PASICK: Yeah...so clearly you were loved, and taken good care of.

PINEDA: Oh, yes.

PASICK: Terrific...what did you do as a family? What was your earliest memory?

PINEDA: Well, we did what all families do, when the carnival came into the Bronx we went to the carnival.

PASICK: Wow!

PINEDA: In the summers we went on summer vacation, we went out to our bungalow in Connecticut, Milford, Connecticut.

PASICK: Okay

PINEDA: And we spent all of our time in Milford, for the whole summer.

PASICK: Wow

PINEDA: In the sun and in the beach and when we came back we were brown, as brown as you can be... and, uh...compared to the other kids on the block, we were the brownest ones there. [laughter]

PASICK: Tell me about the kids on the block. Did you describe yourselves as a Filipino family? Did any even use the word Filipino among your friends growing up?

PINEDA: No, growing up, we were just another kid on the block.

PASICK: Okay

PINEDA: We were just another American, another Bronx-ite.

PASICK: Yeah.

PINEDA: Just another New Yorker.

PASICK: Who was your best friend?

PINEDA: Well, I don't really think I had a best friend. We were all friends. I don't think I had a real best friend, except the one when we moved away. He sent me a condolence card with a dollar in it. I think he was my best friend, because he said that he missed us.

PASICK: Oh my gosh, what a touching story.

PINEDA: That was Benny.

PASICK: Benny...do you remember his last name?

PINEDA: Viscella.

PASICK: Oh my God you do remember his last name.

PINEDA: Viscella.

PASICK: Viscella. What was his background?

PINEDA: It sounds like an Italian name to me.

PASICK: Yah, to me too, yah, yah. Right, right, cool.

PINEDA: But we didn't really identify people by their ethnic background.

PASICK: Say, say something more about that.

PINEDA: Well, everybody was just friends.

PASICK: Yes.

PINEDA: And, you know, we didn't say well this one was Italian, this one was -everyone was just, you know, equal.

PASICK: Yeah, yeah.

PINEDA: Just equal, right.

PASICK: But you knew what each one's background was, right?

PINEDA: Yeah, we knew what each family's ethnic background was, but it was meaningless to us. I mean it didn't have uh....we didn't feel that, uh, anyone was better or worse because of where they came from. We were all good friends.

PASICK: Sure....Can you tell me a little bit your parents and their ethnic background?

PINEDA: Well, my father, uh, was Filipino...

PASICK: Okay.

PINEDA: ...and my mother was part Filipino and part Hungarian

PASICK: Okay.

PINEDA: She was born in Hungary.

PASICK: Alright...umm

PINEDA: That's what we knew about it.

PASICK: Okay, when you think of your mother when you were a kid, did you think of her as Caucasian or White, or as part Filipino?

PINEDA: You know, we didn't even, uh....that didn't even come to mind. She was just Mother. And it was Dad, and you know the only times ethnic things came about, came to mind, was when the family, relatives, would come to visit, or friends would

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come over, or we would visit the Filipinos down at the Merchant Marine Academy down in Fort Schuyler.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: And, uh, all the cooks down there were Filipino, and they welcomed us like one of them, and fed us all the goodies they had down there, baked potatoes, and roast pork, everything they put together down at the Fort for the cadets.

PASICK: I see.

PINEDA: So that was the only time we met Filipinos in our life.

PASICK: So when you got among Filipinos, it was clear you belonged to that group but in the neighborhood, or the apartment building, or in the school, or the streets, there was no sense of 'I'm Filipino and you're not' or 'You're Italian, I'm Filipino...'

PINEDA: No, no. We were all Americans, and New Yorkers.

PASICK: Yeah, yeah...right...right. Did your parents ever talk about being Filipino? Do you ever remember them telling you about your background? Or, uh, making any mention of it?

PINEDA: Not really. I, uh, never ...all I know is that once in a while my father would speak Tagalog, the native language of the Filipinos speaking to other Filipinos, but we spoke English at home. They never discussed anything ethnic.

PASICK: Sure... right... right. And your food? Did you have Filipino food at home?

PINEDA: Oh yeah Dad used to make Filipino food and Mom used to make Filipino food.

PASICK: Oh, really, okay. Were they both from the same background, of the same ethnic group in the Philippines...to your knowledge? Both from Tagalog background? Or some Ilocano?

PINEDA: I really don't know much about the Philippines. At our age, they really didn't discuss that with us. Now, if we had known them when we were older, we might have asked them those questions.

PASICK: Sure, sure...

PINEDA: But at that young age, that wasn't important to us.

PASICK: Now, your mother: did she speak Tagalog?

PINEDA: No.

PASICK: Okay, okay.

PINEDA: No. She always spoke English.

PASICK: Where was your father born?

PINEDA: Now, I don't know the town in the Philippines, but he was born in the Philippines.

PASICK: He was born in the Philippines.

PINEDA: Yeah.

PASICK: And you knew that at an early age, that he was born in the Philippines?

PINEDA: Well, he told us that's where he came from there.

PASICK: Do you know how he immigrated? How that happened?

PINEDA: No, no.

PASICK: Did he ever tell you what life was like in the Philippines?

PINEDA: No. No, we never discussed that.

PASICK: How about when you were among his family? Were you ever among his family, other Pinedas?

PINEDA: We didn't meet too many of his relatives, know any other Pinedas. His brother came after he passed away. Well, actually his brother came to live with us in the Bronx. His brother Abelardo came to live with us in the Bronx. Because he had been in the Merchant Marines he wanted to see how it was here in the United States.

PASICK: I see.

PINEDA: He was here for a brief time.

PASICK: Okay.

PINEDA: But that was the only other Pineda I ever met, uh, while they were alive.

PASICK: And while your uncle was here, did you hear him and your father speak Tagalog, or hear some stories about what it was like in the Philippines?

PINEDA: No, not really, they didn't speak about that.

PASICK: Yeah, I think that was...uh....that was very....typical experience for that generation.

PINEDA: Well, you know for a young child like that, I don't think they would have brought it up, and said what it was like, back there. Except we would have known that they left there, because they were not satisfied with the conditions back there.

PASICK: Okay, so you had a sense---

PINEDA: --though they didn't mention what the conditions were---that they left.

PASICK: So what about your grandfather, your mother's father who was Filipino. Do you know anything?

PINEDA: No, we never met him...we didn't even know his name! He left the family while his children were young. They didn't ever talk about him.

PASICK: How about your grandmother Fannie? Did you know her?

PINEDA: Oh, she passed away before we were born.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: ...and we never met her either.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: ...unfortunately.

PASICK: Can you say, uh, something about what it was like in the school, particularly around issues of race and ethnicity, particularly about how you felt in school?

PINEDA: Well, we just felt like another American. There wasn't any discrimination in any of the schools that I went to.

PASICK: That's great.

PINEDA: We were just another student.

PASICK: That continued up into high school in Brooklyn?

PINEDA: Yes! Yes.

PASICK: Can you say something about the difference between Brooklyn and the Bronx in terms of being Filipino-American? Any differences?

PINEDA: Not really...we were treated the same in both areas.

PASICK: Wow, that's great. What was the name of your high school?

PINEDA: New Utrecht, in, uh, Brooklyn.

PASICK: Tell me a little about the student body. How mixed was it?

PINEDA: Well, the student body was like how New York was. There were Italians, Irish, Jewish—I didn't meet another Filipino in our high school....but, uh, it just a mixed situation in high school.

PASICK: Okay. What does this mean about how you identified yourself to friends, especially as you graduated from high school? You identified yourself as an American. You said that a couple times...you identified as White? Asian? Filipino? How did you think of yourself racially and ethnically?

PINEDA: Honestly, we never even thought about race. Race never came up as applied to us. We were just one of the crowd.

PASICK: How about now, how do you identify yourself now in terms of your origins?

PINEDA: Well, it depends on, uh, like if you're filling out a form...that has different things....I might put in Pacific-Islander..or-- but since we're mixed I might put Caucasian or White. It depends on the situation.

PASICK: Right... What do you think you feel you are, at heart? Do you feel mixed, or do you feel Filipino, or do you feel White?

PINEDA: Uh.....I really don't think about it....but if I were to....I just feel mixed.

PASICK: Okay. Mixed. Yeah. Okay...so down here in Florida my father would talk about, before he died, that since he was mixed, he felt a little different when he was in an all-White crowd. Do you have that same experience?

PINEDA: No, no.

PASICK: You're not tracking that...

PINEDA: No. Unless someone...I've never had a case where anyone discriminated against me because I was different. Because I never felt different, and I was never treated differently. Which was one of the wonderful parts of New York, and America.

PASICK: Absolutely. A totally good thing about that. We were talking a few minutes ago with your sister about Brooklyn, what it meant to live in Brooklyn, particularly as a teenager. You spent your teenage years living in Brooklyn. And what it meant to be in an area that had so many different nationalities and so many ethnicities, so many races. Do you think it was a good thing for you, a neutral thing for you, or a bad thing?

PINEDA: I think it was a good thing because you got to understand everyone even though their families, their parents may have come from different backgrounds or countries. Everyone got together and treated each one, everyone, equally. Just as another person, you know. We had good relationships. And you know it's a wonderful thing to remember that so many people from different backgrounds got along so well together.

PASICK: Yeah, I'm sure that's been a big part of your experience. For example, can you imagine having been raised from your background here in Florida?

PINDEA: Yeah ... you mean...

PASICK: Or Indiana?

PINEDA: Well, I'm down here now, and I don't think I'm being treated any differently...but I guess that depends on who you're dealing with. There might be certain people who might have prejudices.

PASICK: True.

PINEDA: But, uh, on the whole I haven't seen that.

PASICK: Right. Right, right. Uh, in your experience growing up in Brooklyn, did the idea of skin color ever come up in your experience?

PINEDA: No, not applied to us. Except when we came back from Milford, Connecticut, and we were brown!

PASICK: How was that?

PINEDA: Well, we were welcomed back; everyone was happy to see us. Because we were away for a couple of months, and all our friends were glad to see us. It was good for us to see them too...

PASICK: I know just for the record that you had two sets of parents. Can you explain how it is that you have two sets of parents?

PINEDA: Well, our parents passed away when my sister Linda and I were young. My sister was nine, and I was eleven. And then my godmother took us to live with her, in Brooklyn, and it was different because, uh, well, you had your birth parents raising you until they passed away, and then you had godparents who never had children, raising someone else's children at an age when they're starting to become more

independent than children who were younger and maybe we weren't as affectionate to each other. Because of the age we were at that time. We were becoming more independent. So it wasn't as close a relationship as we had with our parents.

PASICK: Right... You said something, or maybe Linda said something the other day that, that the woman who you called Aunt Marion, who's my father's first cousin, uh, something about her and being Filipino. Now she herself was a mixed person.

PINEDA: Right.

PASICK: Yah, do you think that was important to your upbringing, that she also had a Filipino background?

PINEDA: No because we came from the same background as she did. We had the same mixed parentage as she did. That made it more familiar to us, more natural.

PASICK: More natural, right, right. And how was your Aunt Marion, in terms of her own sense of herself? Do you think she identified more White, or mixed, or Filipino? How did she bring Filipino-ness into the house?

PINEDA: Well, we didn't live as Filipinos. We just lived as New Yorkers.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: We never mentioned anything about the Philippines when we were growing up, because she was born here also, and, uh, I don't think she knew much about the Philippines, and she didn't really discuss anything about how she was brought up.

PASICK: Um-hmm. You knew her husband was from the Philippines.

PINEDA: Yes.

PASICK: Okay, and you knew her parents, Gomez and Mamie.

PINEDA: Well, I knew her mother was from a Caucasian background.

PASICK: Right, right...like your grandmother.

PINEDA: And her father was Filipino.

PASICK: Yeah, right, right, right...did you have Filipino food in Marion and Herman's house?

PINEDA: Once in a while she would make something, but mostly it was American food.

PASICK: Okay...tell me a bit about Herman. What was he like?

PINEDA: Well, Herman worked for the post office, he worked at night...he was older than Marion...there was a difference in age, I don't remember the exact difference ...but, we saw him ... he worked at night at the post office, so when he came home we would see him going to bed, and sleeping all day and then we would see him before he got up and went to work, and we didn't get to know him too well because we didn't see him during the day.

PASICK: Did he speak Tagalog, or....Ilocano, or Vasayan?

PINEDA: Well not to us, because we wouldn't have understand it if he did.

PASICK: Sure! Did he have Filipino friends? Did he bring other Filipinos into the house?

PINEDA: No...

PASICK: He sounds like a quiet guy...I only knew him very briefly.

PINEDA: Yes, he was quiet... The only time we ever saw Filipinos was when we went to see your relatives: the Gomezs and the Carinos. That's the only time we got to see other Filipinos.

PASICK: Interesting...

PINEDA: And when we went to the Bronx, to see the cooks at the Fort where my father worked.

PASICK: He had a concession stand, your Dad.

PINEDA: Yes, at the Fort. And there were a lot of Filipinos there, because they were cooks or— Yes, that's where we met a lot of Filipinos, at the Fort.

PASICK: Was that a positive experience for you, to see all these other Filipinos.

PINEDA: Yeah, we were just kids, and they were so happy to see you, ah, Filipino kids and down there, they treated us very nice when we got there.

PASICK: I mean, I'm just thinking to myself that-you know, your mother was half-Filipino, your father was full Filipino—among the kids they saw at the Fort, you may have looked more Filipino than other mixed kids. And whether for them, seeing you evoked memories of the kids back in the Islands.

PINEDA: Yeah, that's why they were so happy to see us. They were probably thinking of their own children, or their relatives back in the Islands.

PASICK: Now you have met other Pinedas now, other relatives, and been out to San Diego.

PINEDA: Yes, we flew out there, and we did visit the Philippines once.

PASICK: Right. What was that experience like for you? Here you are among your, uh, so-called, people, right?

PINEDA: Yeah, so we flew out there, first going to San Diego to see some of our relatives there, and then we flew out to the Philippines, and met all of our relatives there who were still living, and they really treated us like royalty. Every home we went to had a banquet of Filipino food and we got to sample every dish there was...

PASICK: Amazing...sure....that's terrific. I wanna just take you back to a story you told before we made this recording, about what it was like to grow up in this compound, in this four-walled area outside the apartment building—was that in Bronx?

PINEDA: Yeah, that was in the Bronx.

PASICK: Give me a couple of stories of what it was like to play, in the Bronx.

PINEDA: Well, we used to play all kinds of games, like, uh, Johnny-ride-the-pony, and, uh, After-the-flag, and uh, you didn't want to hear about choosing up sides, did you...

PASICK: Sure!

PINEDA: Well, there was no discrimination there but when we went to choose sides, we used to say eeny-meany-miny-mo... Oh, and I guess we don't want to hear that one... You don't want to hear that one. [laughter]

PASICK: In Brooklyn, what was it like to play in Brooklyn as a teenager? Were there gangs of kids, where you part of a gang, part of a group?

PINEDA: No, the gangs were, there were minority kids that would form gangs because they needed some kind of identity with their own groups.

PASICK: I see...

PINEDA: But we just fit in naturally with the others, so we didn't have to join particular groups, to have friendship.

PASICK: Okay...were their other Asian kids in your high school?

PINEDA: No, there weren't any other Filipinos, but there may have been some Chinese.

PASICK: Okay...

PINEDA: Not many but there were probably a few Chinese.

PASICK: You were telling me a story about a Chinese launderer. Was that in Brooklyn?

PINEDA: That was in Brooklyn.

PASICK: What area were you raised in, in Brooklyn?

PINEDA: In Brooklyn, we lived in Borough Park.

PASICK: So wanna tell that story? About the Chinese laundry?

PINEDA: Oh, that was in the Bronx. We were little kids, maybe four or five or six, something like that. And there was a Chinese laundryman, and sometimes the kids would make fun at the Chinese laundryman, and call him names, and he would come out and he would come out with a pot of cold water and throw it at us. And because it got him so excited, the kids used to like to provoke him, and whenever they had nothing else to do, they would go back and call names at this guy, and he would throw this pot of water, and this was exciting for them....

PASICK: Yeah, yeah...

PINEDA: Unfortunately, I participated in that, and when I look back at it, I'm ashamed that I did that.

PASICK: Um, yeah.....in Brooklyn, there were also Chinese laundries, so were the Asians picked on in any way?

PINEDA: Well, we were older then, in Brooklyn and what happened in the Bronx was for younger kids, they had those feelings, and when you get older, you become a little more mature, and you don't think of people that way, and you know how that might hurt their feelings, and you don't think that when you're younger sometimes.

PASICK: Right, that's right... We're kind of almost to the end, um...if there had been a place on the census form that asked you to identify yourself, you know, ethnically or racially, and there had been a Filipino check-box, would you have checked 'Filipino?'

PINEDA: Yes!

PASICK: How come?

PINEDA: Because I am. That's part of my heritage. If it said 'Filipino.'

PASICK: Um-hmmm.

PINEDA: But if there had been other boxes, I would have checked more than one box, because of the mixed parentage.

PASICK: Because of mixed parentage. Sure, sure.... What are you most proud of, of being a Filipino? A Filipino-American...

PINEDA: ...hmm. I have to think about that one....because I never thought of myself as being a Filipino even though I come from a Filipino background....I'm proud that I come from a country that is friendly with the United States, from people that are well-liked, and friendly to the United States, and I really.. I'm just proud to be an American that has a Filipino background.

PASICK: Let me ask you one more question: You know, in this country, there are many inter-marriages, as we call them. Do you think inter-racial marriage is a good thing, that children derive some benefits from that?

PINEDA: Inter-racial marriage...it depends on the people. If they are compatible, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. As long as they get along well, and bring the children up properly, I don't see anything wrong with that.

PASICK: Anything else you want to add, another story....? Or anything you would to be sure gets recorded for posterity, about growing up Filipino-American in Brooklyn?

PINEDA: I can't think of one now, but if I do, maybe we'll have another session.

PASICK: Yeah! Well, thanks a lot Richie, I really appreciate it.

PINEDA: You're welcome.

[Interview interrupted]

PASICK: Hi Rich...you wanted to say a couple more things about why you're proud to be a Filipino. Go ahead...

PINEDA: Well, when I think of people I've met: hard-working, even though they might not get....they were willing to take any job, they didn't care if it was a low wage, they wanted to do their best.