CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Oral History Program
Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Edgar Combs
PLACE OF BIRTH: Virginia
INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon
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Preface

Mr. Combs is a grower in the Arvin area. His interview discusses the 1930s migration to the southern San Joaquin Valley from the point of view of the grower. The interview has a good description of the labor strike in 1933.

Judith Gannon
Interviewer
J.G.: This is an interview with Edgar Combs for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project at 308 Campus Drive, Arvin, California by Judith Gannon on April 2, 1981.

J.G.: I noticed on the form that you sent back to us that you came to California from Morton, Washington. Why don't you start by telling me a little bit about what it was like in Washington and what your childhood there was like.

Combs: Well, I was born in Virginia and left there on March 30, 1907 and the next day was Easter Sunday and I've noticed there have been two more Easter Sundays on the 31st day of March since then. I remember that one.

J.G.: What did your family do in Virginia?

Combs: They were small farmers. They just had a little farm and we grew what we ate. In that country you couldn't buy much and you could grow almost everything we wanted, planted gardens and raised corn, the Indian corn for grain that's for stock and we made meal out of some of it. We had corn bread twice a day and had to buy our flour. People lived on what they raised on the farm and always had plenty. I never did see the time we didn't have plenty to eat.

J.G.: How old were you when you left Virginia?

Combs: I was 13 years old.

J.G.: What made your family decide to go from Virginia to Washington?

Combs: Well, I heard my dad say when I was smaller that his father told him that he left the country to go to a new country, so they
were going to the state of Washington because other people from Virginia my mother had two brothers and some cousins in the state. They were wanting to better themselves, but we got to the state of Washington and we couldn't grow as much stuff to live on as we did in Virginia so it was kind of hard to make enough money to buy the things that we had to buy, but we got along okay.

J.G.: Did you make the trip from Virginia to Washington by car?

Combs: No, by train. We were on the train five days and nights from Virginia.

J.G.: That means you didn't take a whole lot of household goods and stuff like that along.

Combs: No, they didn't take any of that. My dad did take his meat. He butchered so many hogs every fall and we had meat to last us till the next fall. My mother cooked up enough food to take along to do us some five days and nights and I wasn't the only child. There were eight of us children but I was the oldest one. I lived in the state of Washington for ten and a half years and I didn't like the climate. It rained too much there and I had to work outside all the time so I came to California, but my father didn't want me [to go] to [California] until 1917. My doctor told me I had a little touch of TB. He said, "You go down to Los Angeles and work in the oranges this winter and you'll be all right."

So I started down here and on my way down I stopped and worked some in the apples in Hood River, Oregon and I was boarding at a place. One of the fellows and me was there one evening by ourselves. I told him I was going to Los Angeles and he said, "Oh, don't go to Los Angeles. Everybody goes there in the winter and there isn't any work for anyone. Go to Bakersfield. It's a lot better." So I just changed my mind to come to Bakersfield. I didn't have anyone's address that I ever knew before in California. There were people here that I had known there in the state of Washington but I didn't have their address or anything. So I came to Bakersfield and, of course, I had very little money and I wanted to get a job right away. I hired out to a hay baler. The hay was to be baled out here at Arvin about two miles from here so that's how I came to Arvin. Well, I met up with some very good Kentucky people and we got to be great friends and so they talked me into staying and that six months hasn't run out yet.

J.G.: What year was that?

Combs: 1917. About eight months after I came here I was married. The wife and me had a good life for nearly 57 years, lacked 34 days of being 57 years. We raised six children, three boys and three girls, which I'm very proud of. We had it pretty hard here but I never thought of going back to Washington. I don't know, something seemed to keep
me here and we weren't making anything just barely a living when I got started farming up about 1926 before we really got to making money farming. I got hold of about half dozen cows and got to selling milk in Arvin so we began to make a little money from then on.

J.G.: So when you first came here you worked as a hay baler?

Combs: Yeah, I didn't work at that too long and this friend of mine told me he'd get me a better job. He got me a job with his brother-in-law and I lived in the house with them, his wife and a little girl and the husband.

J.G.: What kind of job was that?

Combs: Just working on the farm. Plowing wheat. I was driving six mules. Plowing wheat.

J.G.: Putting in wheat—that was here around Arvin too?

Combs: Yeah.

J.G.: I didn't know they grew wheat.

Combs: Well, they did, the dry farmers didn't get very much of a crop, but it helped out you know. They'd make a little money. They used horses and mules so they would get a little money out of that wheat. Sometimes they wouldn't get much more than a sack to the acre or maybe a sack and three quarters or two sacks. In good seasons they'd do better but the good seasons were far apart.

J.G.: So you worked for this fellow as a hired hand?

Combs: Until spring came and then they were starting to plant cotton that year. 1918 was the first year they planted cotton here so he and I went in [as] partners farming. He furnished the stock and implements and I did the work and we put in a crop of cotton that year. That's the year the cotton started to be planted commercially in Arvin.

J.G.: Was that dry farming also?

Combs: No, we had to irrigate the cotton. They were doing quite a little irrigating here but there wasn't enough water for all the land and the farmers would get out and put in some wheat to bring them in a little money the next summer.

J.G.: I see, so on the irrigated land you raised cotton?

Combs: Alfalfa and milo maize corn but alfalfa was a very good crop. Hay was cheap but then you could always get something out of it you know. It grew very prolific.
J.G.: So you worked in 1918 in partnership with this fellow. How many acres did you work together?

Combs: Well, I've just forgotten. We only had about 40 acres of cotton that year and the next year I sold out in the cotton business and had a little store and post office in Edison for a year. I burned out there after I'd been there about fourteen months. We came back and went to farming again at Arvin. So we planted cotton again and that year it wasn't worth anything. We lost everything we had.

J.G.: What year was that?

Combs: That was 1920 right after World War I. In 1919 they got $1.10 a pound for their cotton so we all put lots of cotton. The next year you couldn't even hardly sell it. Some of them shipped it to foreign countries to get them to work it up in the mills on a share basis. Anyhow, we thought we were bad off when we got burned out, but we found out the cotton crop left us worse than the burn out but we still didn't have any thought of leaving the country. I've never thought about it since. I got pretty good wages in the state of Washington logging in the woods, but I never did consider going back. I liked the country and we stayed with it and finally made some money.

J.G.: That year when your cotton crop was not any good at all, how did you manage to survive that year?

Combs: Well, we had a cow, and we grew some things and, of course, we borrowed some money to live on. That's the worst of it. We owed money after the cotton was settled up. My brother and me was doing the work and the owner of the land furnished the land and horsepower and water and seed and then we divided the cotton even. We had to pick both bales though and our bale we couldn't sell for enough to pay for picking the two bales. So we had a pretty tough time that year. In 1920 and in 1922 why things picked up a little bit here. I got a job planting some grapevines for a man and at that time we had a couple of children and we began to get along better from then on.

J.G.: Prices just started to go up or what happened?

Combs: Well, yes, I think so, and they got in a different kind of cotton. By 1923 I had in some cotton that was different variety of what we'd ever had before and we got a pretty good price for that 35¢ a pound. We made pretty good on it that year. I didn't have too much in but I grossed in a few dollars.

J.G.: In 1923 and early 1920s did you and your brother do all the picking yourself?

Combs: No, we had to hire pickers. That's the worst of it. We could
borrow the money to pick it but the bank thought that we would be able to sell it and pay them back, but then we couldn't sell the cotton.

J.G.: What kind of workers did you hire to pick it in the 1920s? Where did the cotton pickers come from then?

Combs: Well, I remember one family was here from Alabama, I believe, and there's one or two families from Missouri. We didn't have any of the Oklahoma people till, oh, later on, maybe around 1924 or 1925 they began to come in here.

J.G.: So in the early 1920s you still had whole families coming in from the east but not particularly Oklahoma.

Combs: Well, yes, there wasn't too many. I remember, another family came from Texas—one of the children is now our county recorder here. His mother came here with her father and mother and the other children when she was just a young lady. Now her son is a county recorder here in the county.

J.G.: Did you ever feel in your years of farming on a share basis that you were having trouble competing with some of the really big farms.

Combs: No, there wasn't too much of the big farms then. There wasn't too many of the big farms at that time. My brother and me had a hundred acres in that year and that was about as large a farm as there were around here.

J.G.: Who were the people that owned the land?

Combs: Well, Mr. Derby owned that land and Mr. Jewett had land there along side it that different fellows farmed. He later went to farming himself, of course it's paid off good then and the last 40 or 50 years.

J.G.: Was that pretty much the way that your friends worked too or the other farmers that you knew that somebody else owned the land and they worked for a share of the crop?

Combs: Yeah, there was an awful lot of that. There's some small owners here that farmed their own land, but not too many of them, most of it was renters.

J.G.: Like DiGiorgio Farms is very close. Isn't that a huge farm?

Combs: Oh yeah. I saw them start. I saw them plant their first grapevines in 1920 and they've gone on until [now]. I think they own maybe as much as 12,000 acres in here and had it all producing good.

J.G.: They didn't do sharecropping. Was that a big company?

Combs: DiGiorgio had been a fruit peddler. They said he started out in
New York with a small hand truck pushing it around selling fruit and by the time he came here I believe he owned a boat that was bringing bananas from the southern part of the country.

J.G.: Did DiGiorgio start small or did he have money from the beginning?

Combs: Well, when he came here he had lots of money because he bought lots of acreage and began to hire a lot of people and was a great boost to this part of the country.

J.G.: Because he brought in lots of laborers?

Combs: Well, he didn't bring them in. They got most of them from around here like they'd come in from back east and they'd live here in a little section of Arvin. He had lots of places for them to live on his farm too.

J.G.: He created jobs here in town?

Combs: He brought in a lot of Mexicans and he had a Mexican camp there. I don't know whether they went down and hired them in Mexico and brought them back or if they just came here themselves, but I remember he had a Mexican camp.

J.G.: Was that early in the 1920s?

Combs: Yeah, that was in 1922 and 1923.

J.G.: Did you ever hire minority workers or were most of your workers eastern transplants out here?

Combs: Well, first I hired Mexican fellows but most of them was Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas fellows.

J.G.: In the late 1920s things started to get much better for you as a farmer.

Combs: Well, yes, of course the late 1920s--1929 was the time of the crash and we didn't do much good then until 1933, maybe a crop would make a little money on it, but we went through hard times. We had five children but we always had plenty to eat. I don't know just where we got it and all, but we never went without. My wife would can as much as 800 quarts of fruit and stuff each year so we had plenty.

J.G.: When you hired the workers to pick your cotton did you have to provide housing on your land or how did that work?

Combs: We provided all we could, but I remember one family in 1920 sleeping on a big flat bed wagon about eight feet by sixteen. They had beds and things up on that wagon and we had some odd rain in June. So we had to scurry around and get them inside of the house to get them out of the rain. Some of them had tents and, of course, in
those days the farmers weren't providing because they couldn't
hardly provide for themselves. The laborers would live under trees
or anything.

J.G.: That was in the late 1920s that when you started planting cotton
and that extended right up until when?

Combs: Well, you mean the way they lived?

J.G.: Yes, their living in tents.

Combs: Well, people began to build houses then in the 1930s. About 1935
and 1936 somewhere along there, the farmers began to provide
cabins for them to live in.

J.G.: The small farmers too?

Combs: Well, no, the small farmers usually hired people that lived in
Arvin. There were a lot of people that lived there and had their
own place or was renting a little place you know. You could
rent houses some of them for $5 a month and I used to rent one for
a man that worked for me for $5, I remember.

J.G.: A little different from the rents nowadays.

Combs: Oh yeah, yeah. And we got to help them a little in the winter
you know, when we didn't have work for them.

J.G.: You'd have one part of the year when the cotton needed to be picked,
then you would need a lot of workers, where did they go after they
finished picking your field?

Combs: Well, they usually went back to Oklahoma and Arkansas. Yeah, they'd
come out here and work through the cotton season. The town would
be full of Oklahoma and Arkansas cars. You don't see them now
they don't do that anymore.

J.G.: They were migrating here and then they would go back to Oklahoma?

Combs: Come out and make them a stake, money, and go back and stay in
their home state until they got another harvest on and then come
out again.

J.G.: What did you think of the Oklahomans as workers?

Combs: Oh, they were good workers. I had lots of good workers from Oklahoma
and all of us worked hard, I'd work right with them. I had good
workers.

J.G.: So as far as you ever saw they wanted to work and were willing to
work hard.

Combs: Yeah, you'd find very few that wouldn't work. Once and a while you'd
run into one that wouldn't work.

J.G.: That's true of almost anybody.

Combs: Yeah, but most of them were good workers, they came out and did a day's work. They worked a lot harder than men do nowadays. These farm workers don't have to work too hard nowadays. They've got irrigating so much easier. We used to have open ditches and that's pretty hard work when you run that water in an open ditch, but if you've got it in a pipeline then it's not so much work.

J.G.: Did you keep a hired man all year-round?

Combs: After I got to farming in 1937 I had several men that I kept the year-round. I exchanged farms here in 1937 and got a farm that had a camp on it. Well, it filled up right away and I used them all I could, sometimes we didn't have work for them but they didn't have to pay rent or lights or anything.

J.G.: So you let them stay in your facility until you needed them again. They could stay when they didn't have cotton to pick?

Combs: Yeah, we'd be starting in on another crop and then we'd start making hay in the spring and need quite a few men. At that time I had a hay baler and a full crew. I got the hay for the farmers, baled it and stacked it up by the road where the truck could get it.

J.G.: When you say you exchanged farms in 1937, I'm not sure I understand that.

Combs: I owned a farm of 120 acres and some of it I had in vineyard. It was under community wells, different farmers got water from the wells. That would get you into little arguments. I always wanted to farm where I had my own well. I had a chance to trade with a grape man and take a farm that had a good well on it and also had ditch water from the river so I traded for that. I built a house on it and put in pipeline.

J.G.: What was the advantage for him to trade with you?

Combs: Well, he was a grape man and I had some 25 acres of grapes already planted on my 120 [acres] and this was better grape land than what I got. I was interested more in alfalfa and cotton and there was cheaper water for me there. I made good on that and at one time owned 240 acres there. I didn't owe a dime on it.

J.G.: Very good. What year did you buy your land and stop sharecropping?

Combs: Well, I guess that was about 1936 I started buying land over here. I just owned ten acres in 1920. I don't know what year it was but a neighbor said to me, "Why don't you buy more of this land here?"
So I started buying it and I wound up with 120 acres.

J.G.: So on your share of the land you were able to save enough money to pay down on land?

Combs: Yeah, I rented in 1933 and 1934 and made some money so I could pay them a small payment down on the land and then pay for it every year. When I traded I paid all of them off. When I traded farms I got money difference in the two farms because mine had some of it in grapes. I got more land, I got 160 from him and I let him have 120, but he paid me quite a bit of difference because I had the house and things on it that he didn't have on his.

J.G.: You must have been pretty careful with your money to be able to save enough to buy land.

Combs: You had to save and we didn't live like a lot of people did. By that time in 1937 we still had five children or six children, we lost one when it was eleven months old in 1936, then in 1940 our youngest one was born—a daughter who lives in Bakersfield. Her husband works for Occidental Oil Company as a petroleum engineer.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

J.G.: Tell me a little bit about the house that you built for yourself.

Combs: Let's see, that was four bedrooms, I made a basement in it and made two bedrooms in the basement and had two upstairs so it was the first good house we'd owned. We'd lived in very poor houses up till that time. Well, we had a fair house on this other land that we lived on.

J.G.: That would have been about 1937.

Combs: Yeah, 1937.

J.G.: Did you have electricity and running water in that home?

Combs: Oh yeah, I fixed that. I had the electricity in our house since 1926.

I wanted to tell you about a family that I'd seen come in here to tell you how poor they were. One evening at the dinner table the phone rang and a man in Arvin told me that he wanted me to send his brother-in-law over--his brother-in-law was working for me and lived about a mile away. So I ran over to tell the brother-in-law about it and when I got home why this man that had called me was sitting in front of my house. His car was an old Dodge just full of little children. It didn't look like they could have gone many more miles. Today one of them little boys that was in that car is superintendent of a big packing shed up here. If they came here and would work they got along fine, you know.
J.G.: In that time when there were so many people coming in from Oklahoma and Arkansas and other states, were there a lot of people that were living in tents out under a tree?

Combs: Oh yeah, they would live anywhere they could live.

J.G.: What did the townspeople think about so many people coming in?

Combs: Well, they didn't like it. The whole state didn't like it. I remember when Los Angeles had officers on the road back there that turned them around and sent them back and I told my wife they can't do that. A person is allowed to go anywhere in the United States, but they did it for awhile and finally they got stopped. I told my wife those people are coming here for a purpose and they'll be needed and it wasn't long till World War II broke out and they put them all to work. They needed them.

J.G.: That's right. Can you think of any examples or anything that happened between the local people and the migrants that indicated that there was hostility between the two groups?

Combs: Oh yeah, in 1933 we had a cotton strike. It happened a couple of miles west of here. An older, Mexican man was killed and a young fellow got his arm shot off so there was a little hostility then.

J.G.: Do you remember what happened? How it all started?

Combs: Well, they were only paying 50¢ a hundred for picking cotton in 1932. Why you could get all the pickers you wanted at 50¢ a hundred because any money at all went a long ways toward living. Then in 1933 the cotton pickers wanted $1 per hundred and the farmers didn't feel like they could pay it so the pickers went on strike. After they'd had this trouble here the governor set the price at 75¢. The farmers grabbed that right away. They paid the pickers 75¢ and the strikers went to work for the 75¢, they didn't much want to but they did. Everything was okay till 1938, we had another strike and I wasn't connected with that very much and I've forgotten the details.

J.G.: Were you raising cotton in 1933?

Combs: Yeah, I had cotton then but I forgot now but I think my pickers had already picked my cotton out pretty well. I know I wasn't having any trouble with them, but some of the fellows got together and went around and burned some hay stacks on the farm, but they picked them up. They were talking about arresting them and I said all they had to do is put up about $1,000 bond and we'd have them overnight so they did and it wasn't overnight but they had them in two, three days or a week.

J.G.: Oh, I see, a reward.
Combs, E.

Combs: Yeah, a reward and any of these people knew them and knew they done it and they came to tell to get that $1,000. That was quite a lot of money.

J.G.: It sure was.

Combs: So those boys were sent to the penitentiary. I knew one very well but the other one I wasn't acquainted with him.

J.G.: And they were part of the migrant farm workers or organizers.

Combs: You might call them one boy's father I'd known him very well for a long time and he was a very hard worker and when the boy grew up, he wasn't too much into working so he got into the striking part of it.

J.G.: In 1933 who was organizing the strike that you were involved in?

Combs: Well, a man and his wife, I don't believe I can recall their name. I know them very well, but it's been so long and they both passed away and I can't hardly think of their name now.

J.G.: Were they people from Arvin? They lived here in Arvin?

Combs: Yeah, they were people around here that organized it.

J.G.: As a farmer, what did you think of the striker's demands in 1933? Did you think that they were out of line?

Combs: We hadn't gotten any more for the cotton yet, but it looked like we would get more. The year before they picked it for 50¢, of course, the 75¢ was a fair deal I think. As soon as the governor suggested that they pay 75¢, the farmers grabbed it and went right out and offered the pickers 75¢ and they decided to go to work for it.

J.G.: Do you remember how the actual hostilities got started? What happened that somebody got shot and another person lost his arm?

Combs: Well, the farmers left here one morning and went in a car caravan up in Tulare County around Pixley. They just drove around and thought they'd help. They were having a strike up there. We came back home that evening and my wife told me my pickers didn't pick because they wouldn't pick unless I was there on the ranch with them. It had rained a little bit that night and it was a little damp the next morning. I told them,"I'm going over to Arvin, but I'll be back here in an hour or two and we'll go to picking." Well, I went over to Arvin and found that they were going to call a strike on a neighbor that day so I went out there with them to the fields. We kind of stayed between the strikers and the pickers. The pickers were close to the road and we stayed between them and the strikers. It was October 10. It was awful hot and we needed water. Some of us ran to get water at noon. I remember I had promised to be there
with my pickers this morning, I forgot about it. I ran up and told them to be there at one o'clock and I'd be back and stay there while they were picking. I went back and told some of the farmers about it and they said, "Oh sure, go and get those pickers in the field." So I went back to my field. After I left they had this fight and they beat up some of the farmers. Some of the farmers got it pretty bad, some of the pickers too.

The police officers were cooperating with the farmers and they stayed off about a mile, sitting in their car in case of any trouble. I went and told them to come, so they'd come down there and ordered the strikers off and they didn't want to disband so they threw some tear gas in among them. They started to leave then they ran down across the man's field and there were two farmers who were drinking. I could tell they were drinking. They weren't really the best characters in the country, but the strikers were running across the field and one of them started shooting and he killed this old Mexican fellow.

I'd seen the young Mexican that morning. One man with me in the field had a 22 Winchester rifle and the Mexican said, "Oh, he's got a target gun. Try me. I'd make a target." When the shooting was over I wondered what happened to him but I never did hear anything. When the trial came up I saw him with his one arm in his pocket, you know, where he'd lost that arm, so here was that same Mexican boy that was talking that morning.

J.G.: Did the guy who shot and killed the Mexican come to trial?

Combs: No, these farmers didn't see it happen. I learned afterwards who it was. Nobody told me exactly who it was but they told me enough till I knew. Even the officers talked to them. They didn't know nothing about it either, you know. So the farmer took it up for him all right but he had to leave the country. He was kind of run out of here. He died up in Tulare County.

J.G.: I guess there were incidents on both sides.

Combs: Yeah, the farmers always get two or three in there that's bad, you know, kind of rascals and the other farmers didn't want to have any shooting at all but these fellows when they saw these guys running why, they shot them. The other farmers took their guns from them then, so the majority of the farmers didn't want no trouble, I mean, like that to go out and kill somebody.

J.G.: Did the strike in 1938 get as violent as that one in 1933?

Combs: No, I don't think it ever came to a fight or anything like that.

J.G.: It sounds like you got your field picked okay in 1933, that it wasn't unanimous that some of the pickers were not wanting to strike.
Combs: Yeah, I had two camps then on my place and the one camp was picking and the other camp was striking. Them that wanted to pick why, they wouldn't pick unless I was on the place because they were threatened by the strikers. I wasn't getting too much out that way. There were very few picking.

J.G.: Were the two camps pretty much the same kind of people?

Combs: Yes, there were Oklahomans and Arkansas people about a half a mile apart but then they were neighboring states anyway.

J.G.: But one of them somehow got organized and decided to go out on strike and the other one really didn't want to. They wanted to stay and pick.

Combs: I think those that would pick were in sympathy with the strikers all right, but I don't know why they would pick cotton. They didn't exactly want to be classed in with the other strikers I don't think. They all were about the same people but it just happened that one camp there would pick and the other one wouldn't.

J.G.: How did it go when you provided housing for the people? Did you find that they took pretty good care of your property?

Combs: They took fair enough care. I had some very good people lived on my place year-round and some of them wouldn't go out on the strike, you know, they worked. This other camp was more or less for the overflow of the pickers and so they were more on the strike.

J.G.: So you kept a number of people all year-round, but then at peak times you'd have to bring in crews to help with the work.

Combs: Yeah, picking and like that. I had this hay work going and I used several men at that and then they'd pick cotton when the hay work would kind of let up in the fall and by that time they could take their wives and the kids and go out and make pretty good picking cotton.

J.G.: What did you think about the government camps that they build here around Arvin?

Combs: Well, the farmers weren't too satisfied with them really. I didn't know much about them. I didn't hire anyone from there. I might have hired some of them that had come to my place, but I never did go there after any men. They helped out having workers there all right, but a lot of the farmers didn't care for the camp too much.

J.G.: Why was that?

Combs: I don't know. It seemed a lot of fellows that didn't want to work
was in them camps. They really weren't the best of workers in there and they'd more or less make trouble. I was in the camp once or twice, I don't know just why I was there, but I don't remember ever going there to try to hire any men.

J.G.: That brings up an interesting question. Where did you find the people who worked for you?

Combs: Well, they'd generally come to me and want jobs. At first, they called them Arkies and Okies. They started that themselves. Some of the women who were chopping cotton for me one day were talking amongst themselves, they said, "Now these Arkies..." and "this one is Okies," so they got that started themselves. A lot of people thought that the farmers got that name started, but it started from these workers. They called themselves Arkies and Okies. Most of them are good people, most of them were good workers.

J.G.: One of the things that many of the people that I've talked with have talked about is there was so little medical care for the migrants during those years.

Combs: I wouldn't say that, they had this county hospital there a long time and they could go there. They've always had medical aid you know and some of us poor farmers couldn't get it.

J.G.: That's what I was going to ask you what did you do for medical care?

Combs: Well, we usually had doctors who would wait on us for the money and we had doctors all the time private doctors who were county doctors.

J.G.: You said earlier that you lost a child at eleven months. What was the problem?

Combs: Pneumonia. [We] had a bad rainy day and we thought it was too bad to take him town. [We] didn't think the sickness would amount to anything, but it did. We finally took him to town, but he didn't live too long after that.

J.G.: Pneumonia was a real killer in those days.

Combs: Yeah.

J.G.: Did you think that the farmers lived much better than the migrant laborers?

Combs: Well, they did in a way, but then a lot of them lived just about like they did. I know my wife told me one time, "I feel sorry for those people working for such little wages." I said, "Well, they can go home and lay down and go to sleep for the night. I can't. I've
got to think about how I'm going to pay them at the end of the week."

J.G.: Got different kinds of responsibilities?

Combs: Yeah. I always worked right with them and that way they were more loyal to you than if you've got a big bunch and the farmer's the fellow that just rides around in a car and don't do any work himself. He didn't get quite as good cooperation as you do if you work with them.

J.G.: I'm sure that's true. Were there quite a few of the farmers that didn't work along with their workers?

Combs: Well, some of the bigger farmers couldn't because they had so much to look after that they couldn't work with them like I did.

J.G.: Did you ever have any trouble or find that it was difficult to compete with the big farmers?

Combs: No, no they never bothered us. Now DiGiorgio did pay a little more but I remember the farmers all having the meeting down here at Arvin one evening in a gin office. They had the DiGiorgio superintendent there and they were kind of giving him a hard time because they paid better wages than other farmers. He said that he figured they had a pretty hard time making a living and they needed that much so the farmers began to raise their prices then.

J.G.: When was that?

Combs: That would be about 1935 or 1936 somewhere along there.

J.G.: Was there ever a time when you weren't able to find enough people to work for you?

Combs: Well, we might be short there sometimes, but most of the time why, there was plenty of help. We always had plenty of help.

J.G.: Even during the war years when people could go and find work in defense and the like?

Combs: Yeah, we were paying 35¢ an hour on the farm and I had families that left to go up to the shipyards and came back to work for me and said, "I'd rather work here for 35¢ an hour than up there." Then, of course, wages began to go up here on the farm some after that.

J.G.: How long did you continue to farm?

Combs: I quit in 1943, I guess 1943 was the last year I farmed.
J.G.: What made you decide leave farming?

Combs: Well, I was having trouble with my back. I still have trouble. I worked too hard. I had brothers that were foremen or something in the oil fields where they could stand around and get fellows to work, but I had to do more work than any other guy. I was beginning to have trouble with my back and lifting bales of hay and things like that. We had twin boys who were just going into high school. They were interested in the high school farm so we thought we'd move in there close to the farm and they did well in that.

J.G.: What farm is that?

Combs: The high school owned a farm there close to Bakersfield and they had dairy cattle, in fact, they had a whole dairy with pure bred cattle and the boys could have their steers there.

J.G.: What high school was that?

Combs: This was Bakersfield High School.

J.G.: You lived near Arvin but your kids went to high school in Bakersfield?

Combs: Well, yeah, this school wasn't here until 1950. My youngest graduated here and that's the only one, the rest of them all graduated from Bakersfield High School.

J.G.: Did the migrant kids go right to school with your children?

Combs: Oh yeah.

J.G.: Did your kids go to school here locally?

Combs: Oh yeah, we had good local schools, one here at Arvin and one at DiGiorgio. It's been the best school in the country because they had it over there out of town. This one at Arvin was in town and the kids you know could run out and get away pretty easy.

J.G.: Was there ever any trouble having the migrant kids and the local kids in the same school?

Combs: No, I don't think so. Some of the best friends they had were some little Japanese kids, they just got along fine with them.

J.G.: Were they people who worked the fields or were they owners or growers?

Combs: Lots of the kids were from the people that worked in the fields you know and some of them were grower's children.
J.G.: Were there many minorities?

Combs: Well, yeah.

J.G.: There were quite a few minority kids among the workers.

Combs: Yeah, now there's a few Japanese over there in the DiGiorgio School and a few colored and a few Mexicans. I know our oldest son who's in there painting the room, he's sixty years old now and I remember when he came home one day and said, "Daddy, one of them boys told that colored boy he had the black plague." I said, "Don't never let me hear that you'd said that." So they never did have no trouble with the kids or anything.

J.G.: You know sometimes the times were so hard at that point everybody was having a hard time making ends meet that you kind of wonder if the kids heard their parents saying things about the farmers and the growers and there being problems with the kids because the two sides were having their troubles.

Combs: Well, I don't believe they had much trouble the children in the schools on that account. I don't think I ever heard of any of it. I know our kids were good friends with all of them. I had fine colored fellows working in the fire department out of Meadows Field there. He found out my name was Combs and said, "Do you know Hulet Combs?" I said, "That's my son." They thought a lot of Hulet, treated him nice in school.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

J.G.: Did you, during the time that you were farming, find that most of the people that you hired were Oklahomans and from Arkansas or were there other minorities, Japanese, etc.?

Combs: Well, not too many Japanese. There were a few Japanese. I think they worked for DiGiorgio and maybe a few families and the kids I know went to school there at DiGiorgio.

J.G.: What about Mexicans and blacks?

Combs: Well, there were a few of them. Now there's more Mexicans in Arvin now that there are whites. I know the schools are heavily populated with Mexicans.

J.G.: But when you were farming it was predominantly white farm hands?

Combs: Oh yes, there were just a few minorities then.

J.G.: You mentioned that you raised six children. Did any of them go into farming?
Combs: Not a one of them. Just the oldest one. He did farm some but he's been working the oil fields most the time.

J.G.: What about your other children?

Combs: Well, we raised twin boys. They were born in 1929. Wesley went on to school, I think he went to school about 22 years. He's in the export cattle business in the Philippine Islands now working for the Philippine bank there for four months on their loans to cattle. They wanted him eight months but he had four months and then he goes to Africa for two months. He was in Africa last fall on this same deal. He lives in Canada. I think the Canadian government sends him and sometimes he's with contractors who have deals there. I don't know just how it works.

J.G.: What about your other children? Are they around?

Combs: Well, the other twin is in Arkansas. He owns the Serge Milking Machine Agency in Conway, Arkansas. He's bought another little business, an underground water system like they use plastic pipe but put holes in it.

J.G.: Oh, drip irrigation.

Combs: You put your water under the ground instead of on top of the ground.

J.G.: Yes.

Combs: So he did that. I have a girl that lives in Oklahoma. She and her husband have Angus cattle and they've done quite well. Another daughter who lives a mile this side of the Oregon line, her husband has been with the Farm Adviser's office for a good many years. The youngest daughter's husband works for Occidental Oil Company.

J.G.: It sounds like a couple of your children did the reverse, instead of migrating to California, they migrated to Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Combs: Yeah, went back there, yeah. The daughter married an Oklahoma boy when he was out here in the Army and he went to St. Louis, Missouri with the Continental Phone Company. He was in the IBM machines then so he bought out a business there and has his own business now.

J.G.: After you quit farming in 1943, what did you do?

Combs: I've been in the real estate business in a small way but retired about five years ago. I opened up two or three subdivisions here.

J.G.: That you built or that you were involved with?

Combs: I laid it out and had it subdivided and sold lots and helped some of them build houses on it and laid it out in large lots, to have
one lot for a cow and the other they could live on, by the time I got it laid out cows were not in style anymore.

J.G.: What year was that?

Combs: 1947. Used to be everybody had a cow up to about that time and soon they didn't have any. Now there are two houses on them lots where I only had it laid out for one.

J.G.: You worked in real estate and lived here in town?

Combs: Yeah, sold some places and bought and sold and started another subdivision and sold it out and my brother-in-law and me have opened up another little subdivision here.

J.G.: Right about the time that you were involved in the farming Steinbeck wrote The Grapes of Wrath.

Combs: I remember when that happened. He didn't write it right when the dust bowl was so bad in Oklahoma. I never did read it because some people told me some things that was in it that I didn't think were true so I never did see it.

J.G.: You didn't see the movie either on T.V. or anything like that?

Combs: No, I didn't.

J.G.: The movie version was filmed here at the Arvin Labor Camp.

Combs: Yeah, that's what I heard.

J.G.: It didn't peak your curiosity and make you decide that you wanted to [see it]?

Combs: No, I didn't care about it because it's kind of running people down some. In his book he told about a highway patrolman shooting some woman up here with a big revolver and there was nothing like that. Those highway patrolman don't shoot people like that.

J.G.: Did you think it made some people look bad?

Combs: Yeah, that's what I thought. What people told me about it now some of them bragged on the book but I never could get interested in it.

J.G.: Is there anything else that you can think of that I haven't asked about that you would like to mention as a part of your experience as a farmer during that time?

Combs: Farming was hard work. I bought a hay baler and started baling hay for other people and I was running my farm too. I'd go out and work on that hay baler from about midnight until about nine or ten o'clock in the morning. We worked when the dew was on and the
hay baled nicer. Then I came in and had to bother with the farm. I had men working there and I had to go see about them, maybe something was wrong. I'd be working and I'd get to bed about eight o'clock at night and have to get up at midnight. I'd tell people, if you get a hay baler you got to trade the bed for a lantern.

J.G.: It sounds like you also worked very, very hard.

Combs: I have worked awful hard myself, long hours. You don't find people that do that anymore.

J.G.: No, I guess not, specially not working from midnight until eight o'clock and working all day and getting about four hours of sleep at night.

Combs: That's right. We didn't have no coolers [air conditioners] then so we had screened porches. After midnight I would have better sleeping, but we'd have to get up about midnight.

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