CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Oral History Program
Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Edgar Romine Crane
PLACE OF BIRTH: Haskell, Haskell County, Texas
INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon
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Edgar Crane came to California with his family at age 20. He worked mainly as a farm hand on a year-round basis. His statement on page 11 regarding the difficulty in organizing the field workers is interesting and perhaps is an indication of the philosophy of other migrants.

Mr. Crane is very involved in his one man band and shared with the Project a tape of his original "Okie" music.

Judith Gannon
Interviewer
J.G.: This is an interview with Mr. Edgar R. Crane for the California State College, Bakersfield, CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Judith Gannon at 284 East Euclid, Shafter, California on April 7, 1981 at 10:00 a.m.

J.G.: Okay, Mr. Crane, if you would just begin with your earliest memories of what life was like in Haskell, Texas.

Crane: Well, my mother and father and one brother lived in the little town of Haskell, Texas from 1915 until 1931. In fact, we came to Shafter Christmas Eve day 1930. 1931 was my first year of experience in California. Prior to leaving Texas my father owned fourteen acres of dry land farming area and worked on the railroad. I was only 20 when I came to the Shafter cotton area and wanted to get into the ginning business. I didn't succeed in getting into the ginning industry for ten years. I worked on farms around Shafter.

J.G.: Before you continue talking about your experience here in Shafter, let's go back to Haskell. Tell me a little bit about what your farm was like and what it was like to be in Texas.

Crane: Well, my mother and brother and myself farmed the small acreage. One year my dad took off [from] the railroad and we went out and rented a farm, but that's the only year we went into extensive farming. The rest of the time my mother and brother and myself kept a small acreage in cotton and hay and, of course, we raised our own meat. We raised hogs for meat. [We had] chickens and a cow or two. We had enough milk, butter and eggs, all the necessities of life, but my father did have to work out unless he sharecropped and we only did that one year.

J.G.: Had your family always lived in Haskell?

Crane: Yes. I was born in Haskell in 1910. I think my parents arrived in Haskell about 1908. I'm not sure of that date, but I was born in 1910
and my brother was born in 1908. He was also born in Haskell. We moved only once during that twenty years in Texas. We moved from our original home on the fourteen acres when we went to more extensive farming. The rest of the time we farmed that little acreage and maybe rented a little land around us. My dad's wages on the railroad and the acreage was it. He quit the railroad when we came to Shafter.

J.G.: What kind of work did your father do on the railroad?
Crane: He was a section hand, just maintenance, roadbed maintenance.

J.G.: Did you go to school there in Texas?
Crane: Yes. I attended through the third year of high school in Haskell.

J.G.: What was the school like in Haskell?
Crane: Well, the main thing I remember is we walked. We lived a mile east of town and we had an East Ward school, but about the time I got through the fourth grade they consolidated the schools and we all had to go to one. There were no buses at that time so we had to walk to school. I think it was something like two miles that I had to walk to school. Like I said, I went through the third year of high school in Haskell, but I didn't graduate like I should have. I was taking Spanish in high school and I took two years of it and then dropped out. I wish I had finished the Spanish thing because it's pretty necessary now to have it to learn with.

J.G.: Why did you drop out?
Crane: Oh, just hard times. I had to go to work. Naturally, now you look back and see that you should have finished high school. It wasn't as important then as it is now to have more education.

J.G.: When you say hard times, what was happening at that time?
Crane: Well, it got down to where there was no money at all. What hay baling we did, we did on the shares. We traded milk, butter and eggs for necessities like sugar. It just got pretty rough there in 1929 and 1930.

J.G.: What had happened to your father's job?
Crane: Well, he was one-eyed from [age] three or four years old, but in 1930 they passed a rule against a one-eyed person working on the railroad. They couldn't insure him sufficiently so they laid him off and we came to California soon after that.

J.G.: How did your father lose his eye?
Crane: His eye was put out by measles when he was a child, I think three or
four years old. It settled in his eye and he had no eye at all. I mean the ball itself was gone.

In 1929 and 1930 when they couldn't use him on the railroad on account of insurance problems and we couldn't make it farming, we came to California. My brother was already out here. My dad had a brother here and my brother came out in 1929, I guess it was. They were doing all right out here. Wages were still pretty good so here we came.

J.G.: Tell me a little bit about your trip to California. How did you get the money together to make the journey?

Crane: Well, we sold our teams and harness and the old cow and what chickens we had. We practically gave it away to get enough money to come to California. I think we got to Shafter with $18 between the three of us.

J.G.: How did you get out here?

Crane: Well, we bought an old Nash car. I think we paid $75 for that thing. We drove it out and it was a headache, it took us a week to get here because it was a slow, big car and took a lot of gasoline and oil. I do remember gasoline was thirteen cents a gallon. We got to California and had to pay eighteen cents and thought it was terrible.

J.G.: Did you camp out on the way or did you stay in tourist cabins?

Crane: No, we stayed in tourist cabin-type motels. They didn't call them motels then, but they do now. The five nights that we were out it was too cold. On December 23 our old car gasped its last breath and my cousin brought us on to Shafter. He lived in Colton, California. My father's brother had come out in the early 1920s and went to work for the Santa Fe Railroad and they were doing okay. So my cousin brought us on up here to his sister-in-law's house and I met my wife that first night in Shafter at the Christmas Eve party.

J.G.: So you came first to Colton outside of San Bernardino?

Crane: Yes. We arrived in Colton early on December 23 and the old Nash just played out, did its last deed right there. The cousin that brought us on the trip took us back and we worked on the old car and got it going and brought it to Shafter. Of course, we disposed of it right away, sold it to a junk man.

J.G.: So you came here to Shafter and you were living here with your cousin's sister-in-law.

Crane: For a while we lived with my brother. He had a job with a farmer here and the house was furnished. We lived with him a few days and with my dad's brother a few days. At that time there was lots of cotton left in December and January. You had to pick it by hand. We picked cotton for several weeks, I think, through January at least. Then it was
pruning time and we didn't know anything about pruning but got out and tried to learn. Grape pruning was big then. We did get to where we could do a fairly good job of pruning and then potato season started. We worked in the potatoes for several years in season. I finally went to work for a farmer in a year-round job and that solved all of our problems once I got to working by the year.

J.G.: Where were you living when you were working in the potatoes?

Crane: We just rented various houses around Shafter. I don't know how many, probably five or six different houses that we rented. I even tried living in a tent one time. I got tired of paying rent and bought myself a tent. That was in 1934 I guess. We set it up out here at what we called Smith Corner. It was a regular camp of transient labor people. That worked all right until it rained heavily. Then we had to get back into the regular house idea. I didn't buy my own home until 1940. I bought a small lot out on Beech and Burbank and built a shack on it. I kept it until, oh, 1946 I guess. I sold it and bought this.

J.G.: Beech and Burbank in Shafter?

Crane: Yes, it's just out of Shafter about three miles.

J.G.: What were the houses like that you rented? Were conditions pretty good?

Crane: Well, way back in the early 1930s and 1940s most of the ranches had houses for their help. I think in 1937 I moved into a rancher-furnished house and from that point on I began trying to either work for a farmer that furnished housing or buy something of my own. Finally we did buy that place out on Beech and Burbank. I didn't live there very long until I went to the gin company I lived twenty years in one of the gin company houses. I raised all my kids in that one house.

J.G.: What year would it have been when you started working for the year-round farmer?

Crane: I think from 1932 until 1936 I had steady employment. In 1936, I went out with a fellow, another Texan, that had a big ranch out north of Shafter. I worked for him a year. There again he furnished us a place to live about a month. I was working by the month at that time for Curt Robertson. He sold his lease and tractors and everything so I moved back to Shafter. That was the second year-round job that I had that furnished a house.

J.G.: Who did you work for in your first year-round job?

Crane: Schnaidt and Mettler, Calvin Mettler and Dan Schnaidt, brothers-in-law. I worked for them intermittently for three years. I mean, I worked when they had things to do. The Mettlers are big here in Shafter. They have always been big farmers. Mr. Schnaidt was their brother-in-law. They were old settlers from North and South Dakota, German people actually.
J.G.: Go back to those first two years when you came out here that you were working in various crops. What were conditions like for field workers at that time?

Crane: I remember working for fifteen cents an hour on various ranches. In fact, for Schnaidt and Mettler I started for fifteen cents an hour and finally got up to twenty-five [cents]. The year I went out to Kurt Robertson's ranch I went to work by the month for $60 a month with a house, lights and water furnished. That was 1935. In 1936 I went to work for a fellow by the name of John Fox and worked for him until 1940.

J.G.: Go back just a bit. You said that when you worked for Mettler and Schnaitd that you worked part-time when they needed you. How part-time was that?

Crane: They kept me pretty well occupied. They had cotton, potatoes, and hay. There was only a few months in the spring and the fall that I was unemployed. I was still on their ranch, living in the house rent-free. If I could go out somewhere else and pick up another job, it was perfectly all right with them. No problem there.

J.G.: Did you find that you could usually find odd jobs during that time?

Crane: Most of the time we did fairly well on the job. I remember a couple of times that I worked on the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. SRA [State Relief Administration] was the relief idea then and WPA jobs kept us going.

J.G.: Were those WPA projects right here in Shafter?

Crane: Yes. There are signs all along the sidewalk in front of my house that [say] 1941 WPA construction. I think the WPA did a lot of wonderful things like working in the forests and mountains and rivers and parks.

J.G.: Yes, but most of your experience was working on projects in Shafter?

Crane: Actually, I didn't work too much for the WPA. About the time they would decide that I could be on a WPA job, some ranch job would come along and I'd take that rather than WPA because it seemed unnecessary. You know, when the farm work did open we took that rather than the WPA.

J.G.: Unnecessary? Was WPA sort of looked on as taking welfare?

Crane: It was a relief project. Let's see, what all did they have? The WPA was constructing sidewalks and working for Parks and Recreation. They did a lot of different type things for people who were unemployed. I didn't have to ride that too much. I stayed on the farm jobs as much as possible.

J.G.: When you were working these farm jobs in the early 1930s, were your parents living with you on the ranches?
Crane: They went back in 1933. They only stayed three years and went back to Texas in 1933 and remained there. My brother went back in 1936, and he's still there.

J.G.: Why did your parents go back to Texas?

Crane: They had their home there and they didn't like to rent and they didn't like California.

J.G.: Why didn't they like California?

Crane: When we came over the Grapevine on Christmas Eve day in 1930 it was nice and clear in Colton, clear to the top of the mountain. We started down the Grapevine and there was that fog laying in the Valley. My mother formed an instant dislike for Shafter. She wanted to go back to Texas and she never did get that out of her system so they went back in 1933.

J.G.: Why did your brother go back?

Crane: Well, he was kind of the same. He didn't like to work for other people. He liked to work for himself. You do that in Texas, but you couldn't do it here, so he went back. He owned his own home there too. I had a good job so I stayed here. I went to work for the Shafter-Wasco Gin Company in 1947 and stayed with them for twenty years.

J.G.: We skipped a bunch of years here. Let's go back to them for a second. We were up to the second farm job that you took in 1935.

Crane: I think I got to John Fox. I worked for John four years. He was a potato, cotton and hay farmer. He kept me steadily employed until 1940.

J.G.: Were you married in the meantime? You said you met your wife at the New Year's Eve party.

Crane: Yes. We married in October 1931, Halloween night to be exact. Incidentally, this will be our golden wedding anniversary. We're planning for some high jinks with the kids.

Anyway, I had these various farm jobs where they furnished us housing. We tried everything in the way of obtaining property of our own. We finally bought that place on Beech and Burbank. It was just a bare lot, actually. We built a shack on it and kept adding to it until we disposed of it. We bought another place on the same corner in 1935. We bought that place and it already had a house on it. Then we sold that in the 1940s and bought a pretty nice two bedroom [house] on Beech and never did live in it. We always lived in farm-owned housing.

J.G.: You bought property anyhow.

Crane: Oh yes. We wanted something to accumulate, something to build to. Then we disposed of that about 1948 and bought this property here.
J.G.: What kind of work did you do on the various farms?

Crane: Well, I could drive a tractor and irrigate. I was what you could call a general farm hand. I could do just about anything. No problem there.

J.G.: When you were working for other farmers did you have the idea that some day you would like to own your own farm? What was your hope at that point?

Crane: We only tried farming two years in 1942 and 1943. We moved on a farm that my cousin owned and I went in partnership with his father. We farmed 60 acres. My uncle wanted to get out of it so we had a chance to sell the property and tools and everything and wages were beginning to come up. I was paying those people $1 an hour to work for me and I couldn't stand it. I wanted some of that dollar an hour myself so I went back to work for wages in 1943. It was the sort of deal that I couldn't see any future in farming but you know what's happened since. Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

J.G.: Has the small farmer been able to compete? You know, a 60 acre farm versus the big farm?

Crane: There's no way that I can see that you could take 60 acres even if you owned it and make a living on it. But at that time it was possible. You could even make a lot of money in it. Nowadays it's grown so diversified and mechanized that it costs too much to buy the different pieces of equipment to try to farm. I just can't see the small farmer at all anymore. He's helpless. I don't want to get into the small farming thing and I sure don't want to be a big farmer. I've succeeded in maintaining our standard of living over all of these years working for the other fellow. I had a desire to get out on my own, but I just never did do it.

J.G.: After you tried farming for yourself you went to work for the gin company?

Crane: Yes, soon after the farming venture I went to work for Sol Camp Shafter in the cotton gin and, of course, that was just for the season. It played out in March.

J.G.: That would have been about 1943 or 1944?

Crane: 1945 actually. The war was practically over and I went to work for the Shafter-Wasco Ginning Company in 1946 for a season. Then in January of 1947 they let me go to work on their ranch so that I could be steadily employed and when ginning season came around I went back into ginning. My primary objective was to work in the gin.

J.G.: What did you do in the gin?

Crane: I started out as a press man, yard man, whatever. I became the night ginner in 1948. They began to build new gins in 1950 and 1951. We
built one new gin, rebuilt the old one, and acquired a third one out in the country seven miles west. A fellow by the name of Garrison built the gin and they called it Garrison City. The Shafter-Wasco Ginning Company acquired that in 1950 or 1951. We rebuilt it over the years. I left Shafter-Wasco in 1967 and went to work for the San Joaquin Cotton Oil and took over various gins around the country. I've worked for the Co-op in Buttonwillow and finally got back in the Co-op gin. They bought the old Garrison City Gin and I worked there a season. So up until I retired I worked in several different gins in the Valley. The San Joaquin Cotton Oil owns gins all over the Valley and I worked at several different plants all the way from Bakersfield to Stratford would be the farthest north, I guess. That's a little town just north of Wasco there.

J.G.: You lived here in town in Shafter and drove back and forth to work?

Crane: I did for a while. The job was way out where they had no housing at all. It was a new gin and so I drove back and forth 50 miles. Of course, I got to where I would just stay out there for a week at a time and drive in on the weekend. I only did that a couple of seasons. Their seasons are so short now. They used to be four and five months' duration and now they are 60 days and less sometimes.

J.G.: What did you do back then when there was no cotton to be ginned?

Crane: Well, my job with the Shafter-Wasco Ginning was as supervisor. I had to maintain the gin through the summer. Back in those days we had 300 cotton trailers that we had to keep in tires and repaired.

J.G.: You retired in what year?

Crane: I retired actually in 1976. I tried to work part-time and my health got so bad that I had to even quit that and go on complete retirement. When I became 65 it was possible to retire and pursue my hobby of entertaining. I didn't try to make a commercial venture out of it because there was too much competition in that, but I do go around to the fairs and rodeo parades. I've gotten into this convalescent hospital and senior citizen entertaining through friends.

J.G.: You're talking about your "Uncle Ed's One Man Band"?

Crane: Right. I formed that in 1976 for the Bicentennial celebration. I won a trophy or two and that gave me the fever to get into it. I won't say I got into it big but I got into it deep. I made a lot of rodeo parades and the County Fair. I've done the County Fair a couple of times. I go as far as Mojave. There's an old ghost town there at Calico. I worked over there a couple of times. They have an annual jamboree that I used to go to pretty regularly, but it is quite a ways.

J.G.: How did you get started in this one man band?
Crane: Well, I saw a fellow one time with one arm playing two fiddles and a guitar and I said, "If he can do that I can do it all." So I acquired a bass drum and I always did play the harmonica with a wire around my neck. Grandpa Jones does that on T.V. [television]. I finally came up with a piece of flexible microphone stand and fastened it to my guitar so I don't have to hold the harmonica in any peculiar way. It just sticks out from the guitar. That's been my main effort, to play the guitar and the harmonica at the same time. I added the bass drum and the cymbals and that brought the kids on. They liked that, you know, because I'm doing it all. A couple of times I've come up with an electric side man, a rhythm machine that I can play and it sounds better, but the kids don't get a bang out of it like they do seeing me kick that old bass drum.

J.G.: Where did you learn how to play the guitar and the harmonica?

Crane: I picked up the harmonica when I was a kid and my dad had an organ. I think we got our first guitar about the time I was sixteen or seventeen and learned a few cords on it. Our main instrument was the old pedal organ that my father owned. We played the harmonica with the organ. I didn't add the harmonica and guitar until I saw a one man band somewhere. I actually saw a guy playing a harmonica, a guitar, a drum and I got the idea. Over the years I just accumulated what I have now. Rigging the harmonica to the guitar was the best idea I've come up with yet.

J.G.: Did you take lessons to learn to play the guitar?

Crane: No, it's entirely by ear. I guess you would call it playing by ear. I can't even read music. I never made any effort to read music. My grandson is taking music in high school now and he laughs at me because I'm so dumb on the music thing. He's with the local high school band and going right along. One of my kids got to playing the guitar pretty good. My daughter's taken up the guitar now. She's 40 years old and just now taking up guitar.

J.G.: How many children do you have?

Crane: Four. That's my little grandkids up there.

J.G.: Are your children around here still?

Crane: One of my daughters lives in Rialto. The rest of them are fairly close. One son lives in Bakersfield, one in Taft, and one daughter here in Shafter.

J.G.: Do they farm?

Crane: No, the boy here in Shafter, the son-in-law, is working for the Ranchers Cotton Oil Mill just at the edge of Lerdo on the highway over here. My son in Taft is working for an oil company. He's into steaming those old wells and bringing that old hard oil to the top.
My oldest son is working for PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric]. He's been with them since he was eighteen. He's already got his 25 years pin. He's a dispatcher in Bakersfield for the PG&E. My daughter's husband in Rialto has just retired from the Air Force after 22 years.

J.G.: Let's back up a little to the 1930s period. I think you mentioned earlier that you thought that the WPA initiated some good projects. What did you think of President Roosevelt as a President?

Crane: Well, I was for Roosevelt. We had to do something. Hoover just had to go in our opinion. We had the idea that we had to get Hoover out of there. Of course, he [Roosevelt] stayed for about twelve years or so. During that time I could see all kinds of improvement. Naturally it wasn't altogether his doing, but I think he helped. Awhile ago I said that I deliberately stayed off the WPA by taking farm jobs, but the fellows that worked for the WPA got to go to the shipyards and the airplane factories during the war preparation years. They became carpenters, welders, and earned fabulous wages for those days. I still didn't partake of it because I stayed with the steady job idea, that my kids needed a home and I needed to be with them so I stayed with the steady job rather than running around after shipbuilding and airplane factories.

After Roosevelt was elected the real construction fever began. Meadows Field started up. I don't remember what year but I do remember I went down and applied for work as a tractor driver because I could drive anything on wheels or tracks. They said, "Well, you'll have to get a union card." I dug into that a little bit and decided I didn't want any part of the union organization.

J.G.: Why was that?

Crane: Well, at that time, if you were in you were big and if you were out you were not so big. I couldn't see it that way. Everybody looks alike to me. If they can drive a piece of big equipment, they're just as good as a guy with a card to my way of looking at it. But anyway, I dodged the issue and went to work for the Shafter-Wasco Company about that time rather than follow the shipbuilding and airplane fever that was going around.

J.G.: Speaking of unions, during the 1930s there were some attempts to unionize the farm workers. Were you ever involved in that?

Crane: The first unionization that I remember happened in the cotton fields in 1932. The unions wanted to organize the farm laborers but they didn't have very much of an organization. The union struck for higher wages. They were getting 50¢ a hundred for picking and they wanted $1 and they finally got up to 75¢ a hundred for picking cotton. I was working for Mettler and Schnaidt at the time. They paid me 75¢ a hundred already because I took care of all their picking. I didn't have to hire any help. The wife and I picked most of the cotton. I had one cousin that helped
me and we picked that crop practically by ourselves. We didn't partake in the strike. The strike was finally settled at 75¢ in the first place so I gained by not participating in the strike effort. I never was too much on strikes. I don't like the idea and concept of a strike. If I'm working for a person I owe my allegiance to my employer until it becomes patently unfair and then I'll go somewhere else to go to work. That's been my theory of the whole thing. I'm not against organized labor, but they should be organized first, state their demands, and make it work or else. I'm not so great on union organizations. I've seen a lot of misuse of it, if you know what I mean. The thing they have accomplished is the fair labor practices that we have going now. Some of them are fair and some of them are unfair, but it is going. It's working to a certain extent.

**J.G.:** What year was the strike that you were just talking about?

**Crane:** I think that was in 1932 or 1933. It had to be one of those years. I'm not positive of which year it was. The following year they started early and of course the price of cotton had gone up in the meantime and the wages had gone up along with it, so there wasn't such a big flap over it as there was that previous time. They saw they couldn't organize the farm labor. They've always had a problem with organizing stoop labor, the transient field worker type.

**J.G.:** Why do you think there were so many problems with organizing the farm laborers during the 1930s?

**Crane:** Well, just like myself, I came out here with nothing and I had to go to work with whatever I could get which was at that time as low as fifteen cents an hour. Wages began to rise as prices began to go up. I think wages go along with the prosperity. If the farmer is prosperous he will pay you a fair wage, most of them will. I had very little problems with the people I was working for in getting what was appropriate at the time. Looking back now you think, why in the world would a guy work for fifteen cents an hour? You could go to town and buy a carload of groceries for $15. The difference between then and now is very little as far as transient labor is concerned. He's still in trouble if he tries to move along with the crops. Take the average fruit picker. He starts here in Shafter picking potatoes and then he goes north as the season progresses. I suppose they are picking potatoes over in Edison and Arvin now. They should be pretty quick. You come through Shafter and Wasco potatoes a little bit later. Then you go north and you get peaches and plums and pears. You can still work the year round in fruit, but the cost of traveling from this job to that job and maintaining a family is prohibitive. You just can't do it. Still just like it was. I told a fellow the other day that I couldn't see the difference between fifteen cents and fifteen dollars. He said, "What?" I said, "Well, I have worked for as high as $15 an hour on a short job. I can't see any difference if I have to spend my money for housing and traveling from this job to that one, I'm still not making any profit. I would be better sitting somewhere and drawing less wages and maintaining my standard of
living permanent someplace."

J.G.: In other words, what you're saying is that inflation has eaten up so much of the purchasing power that when you were making $15 an hour you were right about the same as when you were making fifteen cents an hour?

Crane: Exactly. You have to go to that $15 an hour job. Your housing costs are prohibitive. Commuting back and forth is out because of the high cost of gasoline.

J.G.: Did you or any of your family members ever consider following the crops like a lot of the migrants?

Crane: I tried that in 1931 about the time the wife and I decided to get married. We went as far as Dinuba and Reedley and up in there following the crops. At that time you had to live out in deplorable living conditions. I just couldn't see that. I wanted a permanent address at least.

J.G.: When you say you had to live in deplorable living conditions, the people who were transient laborers that followed the crops had quite a different living condition than those that worked for the ranchers?

Crane: Yes, when we went to the grapes up there around Dinuba and Reedley we lived right out in the open. Of course, it was summertime. We just pitched a tent out on the river bank there and picked grapes. Had a heck of a time. We had a good time.

J.G.: Why is that?

Crane: Well, we were kids twenty years old and enjoying life. We didn't mind it a bit, but it was primitive. We cooked on a campfire and actually just enjoyed it. But if you start raising a family I can't see that kind of living. You just can't do it with small kids. You have to have a house. Our first son was born in 1932 [and] from that point on we tried to maintain a home and put the kids through school.

J.G.: When you decided to go with the crops that was before you had begun any of the regular, year-round jobs?

Crane: Yes. I would say from 1931 to 1933 I did try to follow the crops along a little bit and did succeed in getting better wages than average, but it cost you too much to move and acquire living quarters so I went to work for this Mettler and Schnaidt in 1933 and stayed with them about four years.

J.G.: When you were following the crops or when you first came to California from Texas what was the attitude toward you by the local people?

Crane: There was some effort at that time to turn back the tide of the people
who were coming from the Dust Bowl. We got in just ahead of that. There was a year or two there that they tried to discourage people from coming out here because there were so many unemployed. You get unemployed at those kind of wages and you're in trouble. There was some effort made at that time to turn the people back at the California [border]. It wasn't enforced or anything, but they tried.

If you remember *The Grapes of Wrath* that all happened along about that time. It was based on true facts and actually happened. We were here and pretty firmly established and weren't connected with that at all but we do remember the conditions that prevailed that caused a lot of that racket that was going on.

**J.G.:** The conditions that prevailed, what do you mean?

**Crane:** Well, from 1932 to 1934 the fruit tramp, the itinerant laborer was in trouble. I mean, he had to run like mad to get there first to get the job or he didn't get it. There were some years there that were really rough you know.

**J.G.:** Tell me about those years that were really rough. What do you remember about that time?

**Crane:** Well, I'm sure there was some big farms that were taking advantage of the itinerant laborer. They misused them. They still do. I mean they still take the influx of the foreign labor and misuse them because they've got a whip hand over them. They tell them, "Hey, if you don't do it, I'll send you back to Mexico." So that thing is still practiced but I don't think it's 100% of the farmers that are involved in that. Most of the farmers that I've worked for are fair minded. They are trying to make an honest, decent profit and give their labor adequate housing and living conditions. It's not true in all cases.

I think that most of the big farmers now have gotten away from trying to maintain the houses out on the ranch and have gone to boarding the laborers in town and using buses to commute them to different jobs. Lots of these farmers have their farms scattered all over the county. One particular fellow here at Shafter has a piece of farming land down in Old River and around Famosa and Pond, Shafter and Wasco. He's involved in all that and he has to transport his labor and his machinery from one ranch to another. He's big in acres but they are not all together, they are scattered all over. He has a different problem. He has to commute with his machinery as well as his labor.

**J.G.:** When do you think the farmers stopped housing workers on their property?

**Crane:** I would say in the 1950s it started and now there's hardly any residences out in the farming communities. They had to dispose of them because of insurance, for one thing. If you maintain a home for a guy to work in, you have to keep it adequately insured and it has to meet all the building codes. The fire hazard got to be a big thing
here, and vandalism got to be a problem. So they just drifted away from furnishing housing for the laborer. It's almost become extinct. I mean, it's practically gone. The main reason is the different regulations that were imposed over the years, particularly insurance and maintenance against vandalism. Vandalism got to be the worst thing here. It's the hardest thing in the world to keep a tractor out in the country. Say on a job you take a hay baler and a tractor out to a man's hayfield and leave it overnight. When you go back the next day the tires and battery and fuel will be all gone. It has become a terrible problem for the farmer.

J.G.: When about did that start to get really bad?

Crane: Oh, I'd say in the last ten years from the 1970s on it has become progressively worse.

J.G.: During the 1930s there were farmers that provided houses and there were private people that had camps that you could live in and there were the government camps. I think Shafter had a government camp at that time. Of the three, which did you prefer to live in or what were the better conditions?

Crane: I never did try to live in the Shafter labor camp. Eleanor Roosevelt came out and dedicated that thing in about 1937. I'm not sure of that year but she came out to the Shafter labor migratory camp and dedicated it to the working class. At that time it consisted of floor and wall and a canvas top and they eventually took the canvas off and put roofs on them. Shafter's labor camp is now closed for the biggest part of the year. It's open during certain seasons when they need migratory help for a few months and then they close it again. It don't know why, but it's done that way. It's part of the itinerant labor problem and they do use it to some extent yet. Wasco's is more or less permanent housing and if you are an agricultural worker, you can rent them the year round. Of course, Shafter has cheap housing projects all over too. I'm not aware of how many but I do know they have subsidized housing.

J.G.: You said that you never tried to live in the labor camp here at Shafter during the 1930s. Was there a particular reason?

Crane: No, just that I had better opportunities. Usually I went to work with the idea of being there a year or more. So we tried to work out the housing problem from the farmer's angle as well as mine. After I began to have a place of my own that I could say, "Well, if you don't furnish me this place, I'll go get my own place and commute back and forth." But I had no problem with that after I acquired my first home. From then on they always furnished me a place until 1967 when I moved back into this one.

J.G.: They would rather have you there on the property?

Crane: Yes, as a maintainer against vandalism. If you lived there on their
ranch they would have less problem with vandalism.

J.G.: Did the houses you lived in that the grower furnished have running water and electricity?

Crane: Yes. I don't ever remember living in a place where the water wasn't at least available. I have lived in places where we had outside washrooms and bathhouses and laundry rooms. In the government camp they had the houses arranged around a center community building where all the plumbing was available.

J.G.: What did you ever hear about the government camps? Were people pretty satisfied with it?

Crane: I think people were happy with it to a certain extent. I mean, they would like to do better, but it was there and available and I think most of the people appreciated the fact that the government was trying to afford them some kind of housing. Because in the early 1930s it was quite a change from that.

J.G.: It was quite a change from the early 1930s?

Crane: From having to live wherever you could find [housing]. From 1931 to 1933, unless you found a job with some farmer that furnished you a house, you were out under the shade tree part of the time. They used to call us fruit tramps.

J.G.: I know. Did they have a lot of problem with that here in Shafter? People living on the canal banks and that kind of thing?

Crane: From 1930 to 1933 there was a tent city in Shafter right where the lumberyard is now and Smith Corner was a migrant labor tent city. The place around Beech and Burbank they called the Cherokee Strip. There's a little strip of land there that Mrs. Rowe subdivided into lots and sold it for very little down and so much a month. That's where I acquired the first lot that I owned. She did it out of generosity, just wanting to do something for the problem we were having here with migratory labor. That started the idea of people forming groups and buying property and getting their start. We had our problems out there with water. We had one fellow that gave us a problem. He wanted to put meters on all the property owners and we were paying him something like $2.50 or $3 a month for water. He put meters on some of us. I was one of the guys that was unlucky enough to acquire a meter and my bill went to over $10. That was back in hard times and $10 seemed like an exhorbitant amount. We fought him on it and went to the Public Utilities Commission. We had a real problem for a while. He finally gave up and returned the property to Mrs. Rowe and she got the thing down to reasonable rates for everybody and took the meters off.
J.G.: You were talking about Cherokee Strip, a development that Mrs. Rowe made. Who was Mrs. Rowe?

Crane: She was a farmer. Actually her husband was a farmer. She was into real estate business in a small way at that time. When she got bigger she moved into Bakersfield with her son-in-law. I don't know whether I can come up with his name or not. They maintained a real estate [office] in Bakersfield since Mr. Rowe died. She was an agent for this property. She told the farmer that owned it, "Why not lay off a strip of it and subdivide and sell it to these poor people that need homes?" Right now I would say it's not fancy homes but comfortable homes out along that whole so-called strip.

J.G.: Was that mostly migrant settlers?

Crane: Originally it was. The people wanted to work year-round for farmers in the area so they bought a lot and built themselves a house on it and kept improving and rebuilding it. It's a fairly well established community now and they are well equipped with gas and lights.

J.G.: Looking back to the 1930s period when you first came to California, what kinds of people did you work with? Were they mostly other people that were migrating to California or were there minorities involved there?

Crane: There were few people outside of Texas and Oklahoma people that were here in 1931. My folks were originally from Missouri, and as soon as we got here we had a picnic up at Mooney's Grove in Visalia. That settlement up there was practically all natives of Missouri that had migrated to California. Shafter happened to be made up mostly of Texas and Oklahoma people. There were very few Mexicans and I would say very few blacks at that time. There are not too many here now. The Mexicans are becoming more and more prevalent because they are the only stoop labor you get anymore. Of course, there are all kinds of nationalities mixed together, but the basis of the work that you have to do by hand is migrant Mexican labor.

J.G.: Were there ever any problems between the groups of Mexicans and other groups?

Crane: Back in 1934 they had a problem with the Hoover Ranch. Hoover had shipped Puerto Ricans in from someplace and was using them on the ranch and that brought on a problem between Hoover and the people that was trying to organize labor here. There was a little fat there in the early 1930s between the so-called Okies and imported labor from the other countries. That did happen but it didn't last very long until they absorbed all the labor. [They] needed all the labor they could get there and still do.

J.G.: The Hoover Ranch, is that a big ranch here in the vicinity?
Crane: It's divided now. The Shafter-Wasco Ginning Company bought some of it and different growers in the area bought various parcels of it. It's no longer Hoover property. It's been sold and resold since then, but at that time it was a big operating ranch with several thousand acres in it. It belonged to the Hoover syndicate or whatever you want to call the family that actually did own it back in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It became subdivided in the early 1940s and was completely dissolved.

J.G.: When you were following the crops during those couple of years before your children were born, were those mostly white laborers?

Crane: Yes. I would say 80% of the labor force was people from Oklahoma and Texas and the people that ordinarily lived here, who were born here.

J.G.: And did you live together in camp towns or were you sort of off by yourself?

Crane: Well, from 1931 to 1933 I would say we pretty well lived in communal camps. I remember living out in the outskirts of Shafter here in a rented house. It was pretty hard to commute from there to various jobs that I had so I moved from that into a Smith Corner communal camp so I would be available to the work. Then the rain came along that we were talking about and drove us out of the tent idea and back into renting in a house. We rented a house in that same area from a lady that had several houses for that purpose. She kept two little cabins for migrant labor and kept them rented out to that type of people. Along about that time I went to work for Mr. Fox and he had a ranch out in Lerdo. That was too far away to commute so we moved out there on his ranch for four years. I was out on Mr. Robertson's place for about a year.

J.G.: Whom did you associate with when you were living in the years of 1930 to 1940? Did you mostly have your recreation and social life with other migrants?

Crane: Well, our social life consisted mostly of weekend parties. For instance, if we wound up a guy's potato crop he would throw us a feed and that would take care of a weekend usually. Even if we did finish in the first part of the week he still had the party on a Saturday or Sunday. We had our country dances. At that time square dances were fairly popular here and we had one of those every couple of weeks.

J.G.: When you talk about the social activities like the square dancing, was that mostly the migrant laborers that were involved in that kind of social activity or was it townspeople and the laboring force?

Crane: Well, I don't know how to say people get together on a deal like that, but you'll form friendships with the owner and his steady workers and it will branch out from family to family. The girl that I mentioned writing to me and telling me about this one man band was of a family that had weekend dances pretty regular. They had an old fellow in
the bunch that called square dances and he knew a fiddle and guitar player and so on. It was just a natural place for us to gravitate to if we wanted a weekend entertainment of some kind.

J.G.: The people who had the dances, were they another migrant [group] that settled here from another place or were they local Shafter people?

Crane: I think they had been here most of their lives. I'm not too sure of their start in life but I think he spent most of his life working for a rancher. He had his house furnished and it was a nice, big place. Most of us didn't have room to have a dance, but he did. The old man's name was Stevenson and I would say for two or three years he was our main opportunity for getting out on the weekend.

J.G.: What about later on?

Crane: After I began to live out on the different ranches, that kind of disappeared out of our lives. We didn't follow it so much any more. In fact, I haven't been turned on to square dancing for a long time, but at that time it was our only form of recreation and relief.

Along about that time the parks started opening up. Kern County Park and Greenhorn Mountain was developed by the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. That all came about along in that time and the kids went through a series of working the parks for CCC. That was another great thing that happened along in those times. Didn't seem so great at the time but you can see now that it was an improvement over what we had.

J.G.: What I am gathering from a lot of conversations I have had with other people is that they felt there was hostility toward them from the local people. I don't get a sense that you saw that.

Crane: I didn't see too much hostility. In fact, the people that I worked for were glad to have me and treated me right. No problems.

J.G.: How about the townspeople when you came into town or that kind of thing?

Crane: So far as I was concerned, I couldn't see any problem. I could see other people having problems, but it seemed to be their own makings. Belligerence caused it. If something started back when we were young we just forgot it and went to something else.

J.G.: Did your children go to school here in Shafter?

Crane: Yes, every one of my kids graduated here in Shafter.

J.G.: Did they ever complain or did they ever have any feeling that they were treated any differently?

Crane: No. I would say Shafter has a very excellent school system and it always
J.G.: Some other places and people I have talked to have mentioned that the children of the migrant and farm laborers were treated differently than the children of local people.

Crane: I don't know how much problems they are having now with the race problem but I don't think it's of any consequence here in Shafter at all.

J.G.: Yes, but I mean back then when your kids were going to school. Did they ever complain?

Crane: No mistreatment. And they got an excellent education. Every one of my kids got a good education. My oldest daughter, Edna, she's not trying to become a teacher exactly, but she's been a teacher's aide. She's seen all this problem that they've had with Mexican kids, for instance. They can't talk English and she can't talk Spanish so they have a real problem that we didn't have being Okies. I mean there was no problem. There is a problem now with language in the schools. These kids coming in here can't talk English at all and you try to teach them and it is a problem. We didn't have that back in the early 1930s and 1940s.

J.G.: How did you get medical care back at that time?

Crane: Well, you paid your own if you could. If you couldn't why you just waited until you could. That was one of our major problems with the kids. We did go to Kern County Hospital for the birth of three children. One was born here at Shafter under Dr. Kay. Of course, it didn't cost like it does now for childbirth but even then it was rough. You know it was an added expense.

J.G.: The one that was born here in Shafter, was he or she born in the hospital?

Crane: No, he was born at our home, a little two room cabin about like this.

J.G.: But you say that the other three were born in Kern County. Did your wife have problems with the delivery?

Crane: Oh no. With the first boy I almost didn't get to the hospital in time. She was only just a few minutes in labor in the hospital.

J.G.: So that was your decision. You felt that rather than having the children born at home you would prefer to go to a hospital?

Crane: Well, it was the only answer then. The reason the boy was born here at home was he just came about so quick that we just couldn't get to the hospital. We had to have the local doctor. He was the second one. From then on we lived over in Saco, it's just between Lerdo and Bakersfield when the third one was born. Again it was a hurry up job.
I mean we had to hurry to get her there on time. At that time the county hospital was kind of a circuitous route. We had to go zigzag through Bakersfield. It wasn't easy to get there in a hurry.

J.G.: You mentioned earlier that The Grapes of Wrath was written right about this time. There has been a lot of controversy about that book. What was your feeling about the accuracy of the way that life was depicted for the migrants?

Crane: Well, as I viewed the whole story from the time they left from wherever it was in Oklahoma and Arkansas, they hit the same problems that I did in coming out here and getting established, but somewhere in there they lost contact. They took it on themselves to try to fight the organized farmer. The farmer was organized to a certain extent and the laborer was terribly disorganized. So I said, "I'm going to go out and work for a guy that wants a year-round steady employee. I am going to go to work for him and I'm going to work for him and when I decide to quit him, I'm going to find a better job and that's it." I did not have trouble with employers. I'm sure that those people did. As I remember it the boy that got into the killing part of it was the fact that he associated with some winos, people that were trying to have a good time at somebody else's expense. So he got in trouble and he had to kill the guy. Well, that part was justifiable, but their whole family problem was something they could have avoided if they'd had luck maybe or whatever. When you go from one place to another seeking employment, there is a lot of luck involved in who you contact and who you don't contact. Maybe you miss a job by a few minutes.

J.G.: One of the things though that has been stated to me a number of times is that there were a lot of people that no matter how hard they were willing to work or how much they wanted to work year-round for a farmer, there were just too many people and too few jobs.

Crane: Yes. I would say from 1931 to 1933 I have actually seen people stand at the end of the field and wait for somebody to knock themselves out working too hard and take his job. I don't think it was quite that bad, but there were circumstances where it was bordering on that type of problem. After 1936 I've never seen the time that a guy couldn't work if he wanted to, if he was physically able and willing to do anything.

J.G.: What to you think happened from the time that there was an oversupply of labor to the time around 1936 when one could work?

Crane: I don't think there was anything except the natural swing from nothing up. You have to go up if you're down on the bottom. I think the natural thing there was for prices to go up. Wages always came up behind prices but it did happen. I think the law of supply and demand is the popular way of putting our problem. If we could get the people that need work to the job, there wouldn't be any unemployment and there wouldn't be any need of hiring. Get people from some other place and ship them in.
If you could just get the migrant to the job, if you could just get the food to the hungry, there would be no problem. But we create the problems ourselves. Big farming operations right here in Shafter have gotten to where you are either a couple of thousand acres or you're not in. I mean it's big farming business and you can't afford it. You can't get away from it.

J.G.: You've used the word Okies a couple times during the course of the interview and I realize that you are not really from Oklahoma, that you are from Texas. When they used the term Okie, Arkie or Texan, do you think those were intended as derogatory terms?

Crane: Not with me. I call my wife [an Okie] because she is from Oklahoma and I want to see the sparks fly. With me it's all in fun and I'm sure the word has been used in a derogatory manner but I'm sure most people don't intend it that way. I mean, there's a lot of words that's unusual in other people's estimation.

J.G.: But you mention that when you use the word Okie with your wife that the sparks fly. What is that about?

Crane: Way back there was the first time I ever let it slip out. I called her an Okie and she drew offense at it and told me off in no uncertain terms, but she learned to accept it.

J.G.: Why do you think she told you off? What was it that she thought that you were saying?

Crane: I would say that The Grapes of Wrath was the whole thing. We saw that way back in a picture show. One of the first talkies I ever saw was The Grapes of Wrath. It hit pretty close to home. We were pretty closely associated with that type of people so we knew where they were coming from because we understood their problems and we didn't know what to tell them. Like I say, we were pretty firmly established by the time the worst crush of that 1931 and 1932 migratory problem came up. It was no problem in those days, believe me. A lot of people were hurt by it and farmers were hurt by it.

J.G.: Hurt how? How were the farmers hurt by it?

Crane: Well, if you're getting nine cents a pound for your cotton which they were getting at that time and you have to pay 75¢ a hundred to get it picked, it cuts down on the profit of your year's labor. If you have to pay 75¢ or $1 to get it picked, why it's going to take all your profit you see. So there's no use in going that way in my opinion. You've got to give the farmer a break too.

J.G.: Yes. One of the things that some people have mentioned to me is that during the 1930s when there was such a vast influx of migrants from those four states the farmers were advertising in the states that jobs were
Crane: I think there was some misuse in their ideas on how to get people to come out. In other words, if you have two or three people standing there wanting one man's job, why you'd naturally force the issue a little bit and it's not exactly the right way to do it. But then again you come to this law of supply and demand. If you've got plenty of labor why you can sort of hold back on your efforts to get them to come and work for you. But I never saw any big problem with that.

If I went to work for a fellow and as long as he treated me right, I tried to treat him right. I don't think I ever lost anything by it. I think I gained by it.

The one time that I did try farming was right at the edge of the time that wages went from 35¢ an hour to 75¢ and 80¢ an hour that year. I had a little crop of potatoes and it was nearing the Fourth of July and the shed wanted to shut down. I had a few potatoes that weren't picked up and I told the people that were running the crew, "If you'll come out and help me tomorrow, I'll pay you $1 an hour." "Oh, yeah, we'll be there." So I made money by it and they made money by it and we got the potatoes to the shed so the man could shut it down. But that's what started me on the idea that if I can make a buck an hour why should I work on the farm and work my brains out here?

J.G.: Let somebody else have the worries.

Crane: At that particular time I had the chance through the government rehabilitation program to buy that 40 acres that was available. I could have bought my uncle's machinery at a very good price. I went to the farm administration loan deal and applied for that type of a 30 year loan. My repayments on that loan would have been less than I was paying cash rent for the place. So I entertained the idea of buying that 40 acres and buying my uncle's little tractor and farm equipment. I had some cows and chickens. I thought, "Well, I'll just try to arrange this government loan." Right now looking back I wish I had, but at the time wages were up around $1 an hour and there I was borrowing money to farm on my own and I couldn't really see it. I would have owed $13,000 for the 40 acres. You know what 40 acres is worth now? I would have had to owe $13,000 for that and I don't remember what my uncle wanted for all his machinery but it was a very moderate price. It was old equipment, but it was serviceable. I went and applied for the loan and got it approved and then back out. Again I wanted some of that $1 an hour and went to work for Shafter-Wasco for 95¢ an hour. The first fall they raised me to $1.05. From that year on I never even asked them for a raise. They came automatically. When wages went up I got my raise. When I left the company I was employed the year round as maintenance ginner. They call you a ginner but actually you're maintaining the machinery. You are keeping it in good condition and painted. There's always something to do with three cotton gins and a couple of thousand acres of land to farm.
J.G.: That pretty much covers the questions that I had. Is there anything that you would like to say?

Crane: No. I think that pretty well covered my life in California. I had no real problems working for other people all my life, and when I did I just solved it by going somewhere else and going to work. So I don't see any reason for suspecting that the farmers are the ogres or any one group. Circumstances alter cases and you can't avoid that.

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Country-Western Music accompanied Okies

When the Okies came to California, one thing they brought with them was their music, what is now called folk music and country-western. Many families had at least one member who played the guitar, and everyone sang. The tunes were those they learned from one another, and their music was usually self-taught.

CARRYING ON THE TRADITION is Shafter's one-man band, Edgar Crane, who lives at 284 East Euclid Avenue. Ed, of "Uncle Ed" as he is sometimes known, came here from Haskell, Texas, on Christmas Eve Day in 1930. Ed got his first guitar, for which he paid about $7.50, when he was 16, and he has been entertaining with it ever since. After his retirement he began playing for senior citizens groups. He is now trying to organize a little band of oldsters who can play with him.

He came to Shafter with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Crane, to the home of his uncle, Jim Crane. Jim was working for Clyde Bell on his ranch north of Shafter. Ed and his father soon got jobs on the next ranch, which belonged to Joe O'Hanneson. They also picked cotton at various places around Shafter and Wasco.

In 1933, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Crane returned to Texas, but by that time Ed had married a girl from Oklahoma, whom he had met at a Christmas Eve party the night he arrived.

Laura Burton had come from Asker, Oklahoma, earlier to visit her uncle, George Molder. She and Ed were married in October, 1931.

Ed worked at farm labor for the Mettlers, John Fox and Kurt Robertson for a number of years. He tried farming for himself for about two years and then went to work in cotton gins. In 1947 he became foreman for the Shafter-Wasco Gin and stayed there until he retired in 1976.

"There have been some changes in ginning in the 47 years since I came here," Crane remarked. "Now they can bale as much in an hour as we did in a day." Crane says there were progressive changes to speed up the ginning and to improve drying techniques, but the most recent changes have increased the production from about 50 or 60 bales a day to 40 bales in one hour.

He is proud of the safety record of the Shafter Wasco Gin during the time that he was foreman. There were no major accidents, although some workers lost a finger or two. He admits he probably began to think about retiring about 3 years ago when he himself got a finger caught by putting it where he shouldn't have.

Music is now his occupation. He plays guitar, harmonica and drums as a one-man band and is a familiar figure at gatherings, especially of seniors. He has entertained groups in Tulare County as well as nearer home. Whenever there is a parade, he mounts his instruments on the back of a station wagon or truck and supplies some patriotic music.

Patriotism is the theme of two songs he has written himself. For the Bicentennial he wrote one about the history of the nation. "That one went over like a lead balloon," Crane says ruefully. "It's yesterday's newspaper. Now I'm writing one by presidents Hoover to Carter-one verse to a president."

Opening verses of the president song are:
I was born in Texas in nineteen hundred ten.
If I ever get money enough, I'm going back again.
California has been good in an awful lot of ways,
But it seems to me like Texas was the good ole days.

I came to California in 1931.
And I worked in the cotton fields from dawn to setting sun.
Fifteen cents an hour was the going wage.
And there are some people who think them was the good ole days.

Now Hoover was the president and that was wrong we felt.
So we all got together and elected Roosevelt.
And his first name was Franklin. His wife was Eleanor.
He said "We don't want no trouble, we don't want no war."
But the Japs hit Pearl Harbor in the cold December haze.
And let me tell you something, there was not the good ole days.

Other verses follow for succeeding presidents.
But not Ed Crane hopes to make the one-man band bigger one. He would like to find other seniors who play instruments to perform with him for oldsters. Younger people are all at work during the day when these programs are given, so he hopes to find others like himself who know the oldtime tunes that his audiences like so well.

Meantime, he has a system of tapes and instruments he uses so that he can play for an hour or more. His wife Laura goes along "So the folks have something good to look at," Ed says. The Okie tradition of entertaining one another with familiar, old-time songs wasn't lost when they came to California.