

Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

Born In Space

From Skinny Little Kid To School Principal, 1931-1979

An interview with Lorenza Hughes

By Gilbert P. Gia

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Gilbert Gia: Today is July 1, 2017. Mrs. Hughes, thank you for agreeing to share your story. It's an important one for children to know.

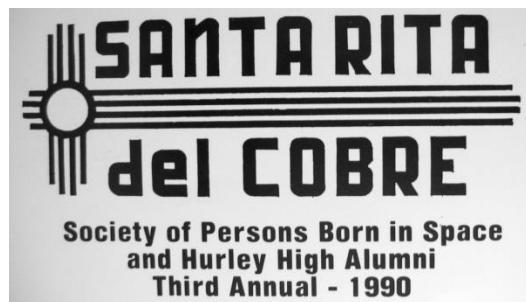
Lorenza Tafoya Hughes: I was surprised you were interested, but if you think it'll help anybody, then sure.

GG: You're a retired principal who I hear makes great New Mexico red chili. Are you from New Mexico?

LH: Yes, I was born in Santa Rita – in 1931 at the company hospital. My town was on rolling hillsides at 6,000 feet. It's in southwestern New Mexico. Santa Rita was a copper-mining town, and everybody there worked for the company, Kennecott Copper. The town isn't there anymore because of open-pit

¹ With the exception of the image attributed to Daniel C. Marrujo.

mining. There's just a big space where it used to be. That's why my childhood friends and I tell people we were born in space.



Cover of reunion pamphlet



Strip mining that erased the town of Santa Rita

GG: What do you recall about Santa Rita?

LH: The soil was very mineral and there were only small, scrub oak trees. When I was six I knew that the nearest large town was Silver City, about ten miles away. Some of the smaller towns around were Bayard, Santa Clara, Hanover, Fiero, and Hurley. A railroad delivered the ore from the mine at Santa Rita to Hurley. The smelter was there and was several miles from us, but sometimes it vented a strong smell. We could see a fog in the air.

GG: You talked about your brothers and sisters. Who was the oldest?

LH: I was the oldest of six, but I always was the skinny little kid. José came after me but died at eighteen months. Then came Esther. She was five years younger than myself. Then Vince and then JoLynn. My brother Dan was born the year I became a teacher. This is me when I was little.



GG: You look scared.

LH: I was! They put me up on top a burro.

GG: [Grimace] Was your family around Santa Rita a long time?

LH: My grandfather built his house there. Actually, the copper mine had been producing for hundreds of years before the company even existed. I have a book about Santa Rita that says the Apaches used to mine the copper and trade it with people in Mexico. My parents' history in New Mexico goes back before it was part of the United States. My mother was born in New Mexico the year it became a state. More than half of Santa Rita was Hispanic and most had been in this area for generations.

GG: What about the company?

LH: It provided the jobs, the two schools, the hospital, and our neighborhood grocery store. There was a candy store nearby,

too. I went there whenever I had a few pennies or maybe a nickel.

GG: How did the store work?

LH: Well, we bought on company credit. I sometimes went to the store by myself, and I remember walking down the hill and then having to walk back up carrying the groceries. It had a meat market, but we didn't buy any fresh food in advance because we didn't have a way to keep it cold. But our house had a box attached outside the window to keep food cool.

GG: With ice?

LH: There wasn't any block ice. My grandmother was one of the first to have an electric refrigerator that made ice. She shared it with the neighbors.

GG: What was the house like?

LH: It was small but had water and electricity. In some of the rooms there was an electric light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. You'd pull a string to turn on the light.

GG: What was Santa Rita like in the winter?

LH: We could see our breath inside the house in the morning. It snowed regularly in the winter, and we had an outhouse.

GG: Where was your bed?

LH: All the houses in Santa Rita had basements. My sister Esther and I slept there. You'd asked me about bugs. Well I don't remember any in the basement, but we did have centipedes and tarantulas in Santa Rita. Oh, another thing about the basement was that my dad made beer there. I was

pretty young that day when somebody came around asking questions about what was in the basement.

GG: Neighbors?

LH: We were surrounded by relatives. Most important was Tia Maria Ontiveros, who was my aunt, and Francisca and Vicente Tafoya who were my grandparents. The Costales and the Uderos were other relatives who lived nearby. The houses there were built by the residents, but the houses that were on the hillside across from us were built by the company. They were regular frame houses with bathrooms. That's where the white people lived.



Santa Rita homes in the mid-1930s (Image from a video)

GG: The houses faced each other.

LH: In those days I never thought we were poor, but looking back I can see we were. One Christmas we had no tree, and on Christmas morning we found that someone had left a box of food and clothes by our front door. I got the plush toy dog in

that box. It was used, but I was delighted with it. But like I said, I didn't feel poor then.

GG: How was school?

LH: My school was Hill School about a quarter-mile from my house. One hundred percent of the students were Hispanic. Now that I think about it, all my teachers were white until I went away to college. Until then I never saw an Hispanic or black teacher.



Hill School in 1949. Photo credit Daniel C. Marrujo

GG: I think you said your school was a company school.

LH: The company built it, but it was public. I said company school because the company was good to us kids. They gave each child a bottle of milk every day, and at Christmas each of us received a bag of fruit and some Christmas candy. I remember a gift I got at school one Christmas. It was a little

set of cards with pictures of birds and the names of the birds. I loved that deck of cards.

GG: How about the teachers?

LH: They were good, but strict. My first teacher was Miss Brooks who shared her snacks with me. She was a young, pretty white woman, and, just like little kids do, I took in every detail about her clothes. I loved her. I had her in Second. My third-grade teacher was Mrs. Roberts. I was a good kid and a hard worker, and I got along well with her. She taught us to write cursive using those old-fashioned dip, ink pens.

GG: What'd your parents say about school?

LH: My mother always preached that we should never miss any days of school, and she encouraged all of us to be educated. She told me that her own father believed in school, too. Mom went through the eighth grade. Dad finished the third grade.

GG: I suspect you did well in school.

LH: When I brought my report card home my father said why did I get a B when I should have got an A. My mother made a big deal over getting A's. She always was interested in how I was doing at school, and she helped me when I needed help with my homework. My mom was so smart, and she had a lot of knowledge. I always wondered how she got it. Mom was my inspiration. I wanted to do well, and I did it for her.

GG: Did Santa Rita have a church?

LH: A Catholic one and a Protestant one. The company didn't build the churches, but I know they gave the land for the Catholic Church.

GG: Do you remember it?

LH: The children sat together at Mass and lay Catholics watched over us. They had long wands to keep the boys and girls quiet.

GG: Where did you take Catechism?

LH: At the church in the summer. The nuns that taught us didn't live in Santa Rita. I never saw them around the neighborhood. They probably came from Silver City. Our priests were Padre Mario and Padre Gerey [geh-RAY]. They wore brown robes. Both were from Spain, and I think Padre Gerey was Basque.

GG: Any special festivals?

LH: We celebrated the Posadas at Christmas time, but we didn't have jamaicas.² We were not that rich, but I do remember musical entertainment from artists who came in from Mexico.

GG: Can you tell me more about your family?

LH: My mom's father was Luciano Garcia. He died in 1931, the year I was born. My mother was born Ramona Garcia in 1912 in Gila, New Mexico. Her grandfather had a farm there. My grandmother – my mother's mother -- was Adelaida Lopez. My mother was orphaned when she was five and was raised by her grandparents and her aunts and uncles. Mom was married when she was seventeen. That's the way it was in those days. I was born when she was nineteen.

We think my grandfather Vicente Tafoya -- my dad's father -- came to Santa Rita from Casas Grande in Mexico, probably to

² fund-raising festival

work in the mine. He was also a part-time blacksmith who shoed horses and fixed things for our neighbors. Luciano was the brother of my grandfather. He also worked in the mine, but on the weekends he taught Spanish from his house. My family was industrious.

GG: He taught Spanish?

LH: I don't think it was for pay. My mother learned to read proper Spanish from him. Mom read the Bible to my grandma when she was dying.

GG: What was your father's name?

LH: My dad was Vidal Tafoya. He was born in 1905 and probably came to Santa Rita when he was young. I know he started working in the mine when he was a teenager. He'd come home dead-tired from the mine. There were no labor unions. You were out if you wanted a labor union.

GG: You talked about a place called Bayard.

LH: That was a nearby town. The house we rented in Santa Rita was owned by the company, and my father thought we were paying too much rent. So he built a house for us in Bayard, but at the same time he worked in the underground mine at Santa Rita. In 1941 when we were getting ready to go to the new house, I said I didn't want to leave my school. And I didn't want to leave my grandma. So I was allowed to stay with her.



Grandma

GG: But you did move to Bayard.

LH: In December 1941 my mother told me I had to go. That house in Bayard had no water or electricity. Dad brought water to the house once a week, and we used coal oil lamps for light at night.

GG: How did you heat the house?

LH: We had an iron stove that burned coal, but to get the coal started you had to have dry wood. If the fire went out in the night, I had to go outside and get kindling wood, and if it wasn't chopped, I had to chop it. Now that was cold.

GG: How was school at Bayard?

LH: In the Fourth Grade I was with Mrs. Dodson. It was the same as at Santa Rita; I loved all of my teachers, and they appreciated me. I just loved the school. Oh, I remember being at home and hearing the radio announce the attack on Pearl Harbor. I don't know why we had a radio. We must've borrowed it or were taking care of it for somebody.

GG: Anything else about the school?

LH: Just like at Santa Rita none of the parents went to visit the teachers or the school, and no one worried about the workings of the school. I don't think it was even thought of. For those families it was more important to just survive. Bayard was my first experience being in school with Anglo kids. I found I could do as well as they did, sometimes better.

GG: You finished eighth grade at Bayard. Where did you go after that?

LH: I took the school bus to the company high school at Hurley. It was about five miles away.

GG: How was that experience?

LH: I liked it. The school was big. I remember we had 60 in my graduating class, and more than half of them had Hispanic names. High school meant freedom to me. It was a nice school with a big library. I would liked to have taken more academic classes, but I knew I needed practical courses if I was going to get a job when I went away to college. I took the business courses including bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing. I took them all. I think I got up to 65 words a minute. In my senior year of high school I was class valedictorian. That was 1950.



GG: What caused you to decide to go to college?

LH: Thanks to the encouragement from my teachers and my principal I decided to attend Western New Mexico College at Silver City. I had good references from them and the principal, so I applied for scholarships while I was in high school. Help from the Lions Club and the Silver City Women's Club paid for my books and tuition my first year. I got other scholarship money while I was in college.

GG: I'm not surprised you chair new teacher grants for the Kern County Retired Teachers' Association.

LH: I do enjoy it. I had help and encouragement when I was coming up, and I like helping the next generation of deserving kids.

GG: I interrupted you. Sorry.

LH: That's okay. [pause] That summer before college I worked in a grocery store. When classes started in September was hired to work in the college's registrar office. I did typing and filing plus on Saturdays I ran the telephone switchboard. I would say, "Western New Mexico College. Who do you want to speak with?" I felt important.



The secretaries taught me to copy transcripts on a huge machine. I'd lay the original transcript on the glass lid, close

the top, turn it on, wait a few minutes, then take the copy into the darkroom – well, not completely dark; it had a small red light. I treated the paper in three chemical baths before I took it out to the drum dryer. Another job was using headphones to transcribe from a Dictaphone with a rotating wax cylinder. I typed all the dean's correspondence. I sure loved the freedom of college.

GG: What was your major?

LH: The college offered two majors, teaching and business, and I took teaching. That first year I got rides back and forth between Bayard and Silver City. Sometimes I took the bus and sometimes I'd catch a ride with a friend or call one of my cousins to come get me. I couldn't call home because we had no telephone.

GG: You mentioned you lived in a dorm.

LH: Before my father left us and moved to California my mother had only worked at home. After that she struggled as a cook in a restaurant and worked part time in a hardware store. At that point I wanted to quit school and go home to help her, but she wouldn't hear of it and told me to stay in college. In my last three years I worked and paid my way to live in the dorm.

GG: What brought you to Bakersfield?

LH: It was pretty well known at the college that there were no openings in teaching in that part of New Mexico. I knew if I wanted to teach I'd have to go elsewhere. In my junior year I contacted the departments of education in California and Arizona to find out what their requirements were for teaching, and I made sure I took the classes I needed.

In early 1954 Mrs. Marguerite Holcombe from Bakersfield City Schools visited the college, and she hired me and my friend Stephanie Peña. We graduated, and in August she and I took a bus to Bakersfield. We had no idea what teaching jobs we would have or what to expect.

A city schools person met us and took us around to find a place to live, and we found an apartment in a court on Niles Street near Williams School. I wanted to teach at Mt. Vernon School, but Mrs. Holcombe assigned me to Williams and Stephie got Horace Mann. Later that year we roomed with two other new teachers in another apartment group.

GG: How was Williams?

LH: The thing is I really didn't start at Williams because it was still damaged by the earthquake. I first taught at River Boulevard School. Today it's called Noble School.

GG: Double sessions?

LH: That's right. From 8 AM to noon the River Boulevard teachers taught their kids, and from noon to 4 PM the Williams teachers taught the Williams School kids. We finally were able to move into Williams School in December of 1954.

GG: Who was the principal?

LH: Sagie Osterdorf. She was a redheaded firebrand, and her hair matched her temper. She was demanding, but I got along with her. A fellow teacher of mine was Miss Frances Frey, and Osterdorf warned me to avoid her.

GG: Why was that?

LH: Frances was very outspoken and had a strong, persistent personality. Osterdorf and the older teachers didn't approve of young teachers having opinions about everything. I don't think the principal knew that Frances was one of my roommates.

GG: What was it like rooming with her?

LH: Fine. All of us girls got along well, and we had a lot of fun together after work. I remember dancing at the Dead Horse Inn off Fairfax across the street from today's White Forest Nursery. Another place was the Lucky Spot on Edison. We generally had a good time.

GG: Wow!

LH: Well, that was mostly on weekends. In 1956 one of my roommates asked me to go with her to a square-dance being held in the basement of the Methodist Church. It sounded boring, but I agreed to go. That's where I met my future husband.

GG: No more bar hopping!

LH: [smile]

GG: You talked about John Compton.

LH: He was superintendent of city schools, and he had been in the job a long time. He'd drop into the teachers' lounge at Williams unannounced, and everyone would welcome him to sit down. He talked to everybody, and he remembered details about all the new teachers. Every time he saw me he would give me news from Silver City, even things about our families! He was awesome.

GG: I suppose that teachers' dress has changed since then.

LH: When I came to city schools the men teachers wore white shirts and ties and jackets, and the women teachers wore dresses. I shopped at Eggers on Chester Avenue, and one of the clerks always set aside some clothes to show us teachers. She'd say, "I have just the thing for you! Look at this."

Shopping for clothes was really wonderful for me. Imagine, having money to spend for a change! When I was at Williams I was the first to wear a pants suit. The teachers stared at me, but pants suits were practical because I had to get down on the floor with the little second graders. Pretty soon pantsuits were all over the school.

GG: In those days did you think about being a principal?

LH: No, I just wanted to do more than stay in the same place and do the same job for the rest of my teaching career. So I started work on my counselling certificate and took classes at Fresno State College, Bakersfield Extension. That's the one that used to be across from Bakersfield College on the hill. I also took classes here at Cal State University after it opened up later. I took classes for an administrative credential. Altogether that was about twelve years of night school.

GG: Where else did you teach?

LH: I was at Nichols from 1960 to 1969. That was before I became a counselor. Leonard Maas was my principal. He was likable, intelligent and flexible. I remember after I read-over the new program for teaching mathematics I went to Mr. Maas and explained that I already knew the right way to teach math and that wanted to teach it my way. He said if I was that convinced, then I should do it the way I wanted.

GG: You worked as a counselor.

LH: Tom Tafoya asked me to go to Mt. Vernon to be the specially-funded counselor. I was hired in 1972, and I had total freedom there for four years.

GG: The counseling positons were eliminated.

LH: They were. I already had my administrative certificate by then, but after they got rid of counselors I taught bilingual classes.

GG: Do you remember when the Federal Government found out that city schools was running a segregated school system?

LH: Yes. The Feds came in, looked around and left. Then they returned, traced-back the racial enrollment figures for five years and said the district had made no progress. So the district decided to establish magnet programs. Dr. Cole sent a few of us to New York -- and other states -- to observe magnet programs. Dr. Cole was an awfully forward-looking administrator.

GG: Those programs are still going.

LH: They started around 1986. Ida Randal and I developed the first magnet programs. Part of the work was doing outreach to convince the community that magnet programs were good for the neighborhood kids.

GG: The neighborhood kids?

LH: Yes, some of them were enrolled in magnet. We took care of them until five pm, and it was very helpful for working parents. The programs were a great success, but the irony is

that whites gradually left city schools and moved to the suburbs.

GG: Would you say Dr. Cole was progressive?

LH: He wanted to promote women and minorities, and he did. He promoted Ruth McBride, Helen Poloynis, Fred Haynes, Herb Neeley, and Paul Cato, and he was waiting for more of the old principals to retire or resign so he could appoint other minorities. Dr. Cole wanted me to go to Harris to replace the principal, Hal Kavern. He was ill, but for me to get that job I had to have junior high experience. So I was sent to Sierra Junior High to get it.

GG: Dr. Cole was watching over you.

LH: I think so. When I told him I was interested in the principal position at Mt. Vernon School he said, "I can't tell you anything yet. Wait." Turns out he was waiting for a principal to resign. About that time a personnel director called me and discouraged me applying for the principal job. He said the work was too hard. I don't know what happened, but right after that conversation -- the next day -- he called me and told me to forget what he said. In 1979 I was assigned to Mt. Vernon as the principal. I was scared and wondered if I could do the job.

GG: That's a big school.

LH: There were 121 employees in those days, teachers and classified staff altogether. My VP was Mario Castro. He went on to become a principal. I was 13 years at Mt. Vernon.

GG: Your story is remarkable.

LH: When I look back I see I've come a long, long way. So here I am now. I can afford about anything I want or need -- food, a house, a car – and I have an amazing, talented family and a wonderful grandson. I was in school a long, long time, and it was good to me. In a way I never left it.

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