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## **Interview no. 1546**

Reynaldo H. Chapa

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## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Reynaldo H. Chapa

Interviewer: Homero S. Vera

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: McAllen, Texas

Date of Interview: May 7, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1546

Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Reynaldo Chapa was born on July 17, 1932, in Edinburg, Texas, but he was raised in Mission, Texas; in 1951, he graduated from high school; after graduating, he enlisted in the service, and he finished his tour of duty in 1955; after leaving the service, he began going to school at the University of Texas-Pan American; that summer he started working at a bracero processing center in Hidalgo, Texas; he continued working summers there until 1957; a year later, in 1958, he graduated from the university. Mr. Chapa remembers getting out of the service in 1955; shortly thereafter, he began going to school at the University of Texas-Pan American; that summer he started working at a bracero processing center in Hidalgo, Texas; he worked in the selection area, which is where the braceros were sent after their medical exams when they were ready to be processed; in addition, he worked with the men that were not chosen, often due to illness, and were sent back to Mexico; his brother also worked with him at the center as a foreign labor escort; as an escort, he would cross the border along with three or four other men to pick up potential braceros in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, and bring them to the center in Hidalgo; upon arriving at the center, the men were searched for drugs and weapons, fingerprinted, and medically examined, which included x-rays and delousing; the braceros were primarily hired to pick cotton in the area, but sometimes they were sent to work as far away as Arkansas or Michigan; in such an event, the farmers were responsible for transporting the braceros by bus; in addition, the farmers were expected to adhere to strict regulations with regard to their treatment of the braceros; there were about 4,000 braceros processed in a day at the center, and when things slowed down, they processed about 2,000 braceros per day.

Length of Interview 34 minutes

Length of Transcript 13 pages

**Name of Interviewee:** Reynaldo Chapa

**Date of Interview:** May 7, 2003

**Name of Interviewer:** Homero Vera

Today is Wednesday, May 7, 2003. We are here at the house of Reynaldo Chapa in McAllen, Texas. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project at the University of Texas at El Paso.

HV: Mr. Chapa will you tell us when and where were you born?

RC: I was born in Edberg, Texas in July 17, 1932.

HV: Did you grow up there? Where did you go to school?

RC: I was born there and then we moved to Mission and I was actually, maybe, three years old. I was raised in Mission, went to the school and graduated in 1951 from Mission High School.

HV: How did you come about to work with the braceros in the program that you worked for? What was it called?

RC: They called it, I was working Hidalgo and they called it the Bracero Center. Of course, the problem with that, I was a student at Pan American. In the summers and I forgot exactly when it was but it was between, I guess, in 1955-1957. I graduated in 1958. We worked the summers there. Most of the kids there were students or all of them anyway.

HV: How many summers did you work there?

RC: At least three because I got out of the service in 1955 so I was there until 1958.

HV: Of course, you do speak Spanish?

RC: Yes. *Bastante*.

HV: What were the requirements for the job at the center?

RC: I'm sure, it was a long time ago, but I'm sure you had to be bilingual. I don't remember if we took a test or anything like that.

HV: What was your job assignment there or title?

RC: I worked in the, what they call the selection area, which if you need to know.

RC: After the braceros came over and they were sent to the medics and all that stuff and after they were, we had a selection area. After the buildings training, some of them didn't make it because they had diseases or whatever or tuberculosis and then when they were ready to be processed, to be selected, I was in that area. I was in charge of bringing them over.

HV: What was your role?

RC: At the selection area the, ah. I don't know how much time you've got on this thing?

HV: Oh, plenty of time.

RC: The braceros were brought across, of course, and inspected. Some of them had knives and they took them away from them. The other people, my brother included, he was working there. They use to call this group foreign labor escorts. My brother was one of them, a whole bunch of them. They would go across the bridge to Reynosa, most of these braceros came by train, and they brought them in like cattle, you could say. We use to process four thousand, more or less, sometimes a little bit more and they would pick them up over there at the....and then just walk them across through town. The escorts, three or four guys, and they would bring them across Hidalgo and then to into the Center. As soon as they came there, first, they were inspected for knives and drugs or marijuana, whatever they could and they would take that away from them. Take them to the medical center, the area there at the center, and they were fumigated because these poor guys have been on the road for weeks and treaded very badly.

RC: We use to talk to them and they would tell us about, in Monterrey especially, what they call "El Corralón." They would put them in there to transport them to Reynosa and they didn't get enough food. They

couldn't shower. They didn't have anything for them and then they would come across and they would tell us about the experiences they had over there in Mexico, in Monterrey, "*El Corralón*" they called it. I just imagined that they brought them like in large groups. They wouldn't feed them right. They couldn't shower and then they would tell us, because I would ask them.

RC: They would tell us that some of these people there in Monterrey would get a mordida from them. What little money they had the ones that "*haber que trae, dinero*" and the ones that have a little bit. They said "Well go first, well send you" and they were, first of all, being taking by whatever little money they had. *Llegaban aquí con mucha hambre los pobres*. Like I said before, they have been on the road, from my stories that I got, three or four weeks. *Se venían*, from way back yonder. Way back. We would get some Indians once in a while. Some of these braceros that come over and some of them couldn't speak Spanish. They were actually Indian. *De allá de Chiapas* or wherever they came from and then we would come across and fumigate them. They give them a shower and the poor guys had to put the same *ropa* back on. That's all they had with them. So, of course, *la ropa* was smelly and all that but they had nothing.

HV: You mentioned fumigating. What kind of chemicals?

RC: They treat them like cattle, something like that. I didn't do it but my brother was the one that brought them in there and I knew the doctor, I forget his name, some of the guys I worked with. I imagine it was some kind of, for *piojos* and stuff like that, that they might have with them. *Los fumigaban*.

RC: Then they would take a shower and I didn't see the process as far as the rooms and stuff like that. My brother, I saw him yesterday, I talked to him a little bit to remember this thing.

RC: They were very, here in the U.S., in Hidalgo, they were treated very well and I know because I was there and I was part of the program and then

they would check them for tuberculosis, venereal diseases. *Les daban* shower and of course they feed them *dedolada* and all that and most of the, through out the medical process some of these braceros that had deceased, venereal diseases or whatever came out, they of course would not be accepted. They were rejected and had to send them back to Mexico and they knew. I had to go look for them sometimes. I would go on the intercom and "*Los siguientes braceros que por favor esperen me*" at this area because I need to talk to you. I had to go look for them because they knew something was wrong. I had to go find them and we had to send them back, *pobrecitos*.

HV: You mentioned earlier about four thousand of them. Is that four thousand in one group or four thousand that came across?

RC: No, Sr. We use to process, when things were going real good, there was a lot of demand for them. We use to process four thousand a day. At the end of the month it started to slow down and then there were two thousand.

HV: That is a lot of people.

RC: Yes, four thousand, and to bring them in and to check them over and all that was big up front. They would take pictures of course for the contractors y firmaban ellos.

HV: So they would bring them in and screen them was that inside the building?

RC: They came of course to the medical center. Here in Hidalgo we had very large building. They were kind of huge barracks.

RC: I don't think they were really army barracks but similar to that. They had the doctor with all the x-rays and all that stuff.

RC: Large buildings, like I said, the medical part and then they would take a picture of you and when they get through with all that and after they get something to eat and all that. Then they were sent to this other large barracks, you could call it, and that was the selection area. They called it

selection area because the farmers would come and say, "I need fifty" thirty or whatever. They would come and start looking and selected them out "you, you and you." They would check them over kind of, maybe, they wanted husky guys or healthy looking, whatever. But, they would select them like that. They would go to the selection area. I would talk to them and let them know what was going on. I had to blow the horn and "You've done this but now you are in the selection area and now we are going out and we are going to give you a contract." Most of the farmers that came by they said "Well I just need fifty." At the time, it was mostly the cotton here in the valley. Some of these braceros where going way up north to do some, whatever they do, strawberries or cherries, all the way to Michigan, I guess, Arkansas, all those places. They would take them in real nice buses, which the state of course has to have a bus all those, you know, real good facilities for them.

HV: What were the qualifications for them?

RC: I really don't know. We just got them. I don't know where, who told them about this program. They just came to Raynosa and we would pick them up and we would process them.

HV: The Mexican government worked with the U.S. government?

RC: Yes, right. They have to have been involved. I never knew the ins and out of the Mexican side over there. They have to be involved in it because the had this Corralón in Monterrey.

HV: Where they criminals?

RC: You know, I thought about that. I don't think so, no that I knew of. I'm sure some of them were bad guys and had records like that. I don't know if they screened them over there.

HV: After they got processed and all that and the farmers would come and choose them for work, what happened to the ones that didn't get picked?

RC: They all went. When I say selection area, they would look at them, these farmers and so forth, most of the time they would want them for the

cotton fields. We would ask them sometimes because the farmers would tell them. *Yo les preguntaba* sometimes, I use to kid around with them, not to make fun of them but I, I've always been, *me gusta mucho sonsear*. I use to ask them "¿Oiga, usted sabe pisca algodón?" "Oh, si patrón, yo soy bueno para el algodón." "¿Usted pisca algodón con las escalera grande o corta?" Dijo "con la que sea, yo pa las dos." So, I know that the guy had never picked any cotton. He wanted the job so badly. They still went we never had left over. We never held people back because they found a job.

HV: What were your hours there?

RC: I think they were regular hours form 9 to 5 at least six, something like that.

HV: Monday thru Friday?

RC: I think so. I think we worked Sundays also. I think it was a seven-day deal.

HV: How many came thru?

RC: Four thousand that came thru inspected and checked for diseases and gave them a shower and then these girls Ida Guytan and a whole bunch of us. We had about, inside of this building, after we got them in we would process them, they would take their fingerprints para el contrato, and then they would come inside the big buildings. We had at least twenty or thirty girls there typing contracts for each individual bracero and once they got that done by then the farmers were ready to bus them and take them.

HV: How long did the process take?

RC: Normally a day. Those who came in, in the morning, and some of those braceros came in at night, whenever the railroad or something. They would pick them up at night and then in the morning they started processing.

HV: Where would they sleep?



RC: There were no sleeping quarters at the center. It was normally a thing that in one day you came in and in the afternoon by 5:00 you were gone. You were in a bus headed for a job.

HV: Did you all feed them there?

RC: Yes.

HV: What would you feed them?

RC: Yes, *muy buenas comidas*, they had some good cooks there. They feed them real good. I feel real bad for these braceros, *pobrecitos*, some of them have been on the road so long that a few of them became psychotic, no that's not the word. What's the word I'm looking for? They were, *medios mure mundos*. All this hardship. All the stress, *veníán ya medios*, what's the word I'm looking for? It was so stressful you could say they were, *no estaban locos pero enfermos*. They were sick, they were nervous and shaking and all that *Del hambre y de toda la cosa*. Some of those guys have been on the road four or five weeks, *pobrecitos*.

HV: Did you do a lot of paper work yourself?

RC: No, my job was when they came in here I would take them out to get them inside the building for the contract and everything. I would talk to them and I tried to make them relaxed and we had to move a lot of people.

HV: So you were the escort?

RC: Yes, and I tried to make it fun because it was hard working all day.

RC: I would talk to them and say "*Ustedes están aquí y ya van a ir a trabajar ustedes.*" "I'm gonna take you outside, para aya, I yo se que usted todos" they have like a National Guard in Mexico. They all go to the march on Sundays or Saturdays or wherever it is. "*Ustedes saben como marchar y yo los voy a marchar, Y no lo ago para reír me, no quiero abusar de usted nomás quiero mover los mas rápido, con bastante orden para que ustedes se van a trabajar.*" "*Si, lo que usted diga.*" Los ponía, I use to give them a little coaching. "We will put you in lines, twenty, and I'll give you the

commands and we will march over here. Then I will come back and get another twenty" I use to move them by myself, it was fun. "*Media vuelta a la derecha, ya, marchen, ya, alto*" I couldn't move. I don't know how many but I just moved them about thirty, forty yards. I had to move a lot of people that way and very orderly and nobody could believe that. The director of this program, the head man there, called Washington and they brought people from Washington with cameras. "You guys gotta come over here and watch this guy Chapa move people." It was real orderly, *si*, and by myself.

HV: Do you know what happened to those photographs?

RC: No. They took cameras and they took them to Washington. I never saw them. They brought people because, of course, they wanted to check the program and all that. But, Mr. Stencil, I think, or something like that, was the head man and then we had Baron second in command and then we had Santos Anaya as number three man. Santos became county commissioner, county judge I think. He was there working and we use to move them real good and they would have a piece of paper with them from the medical thing or something that had the addresses and all that.

RC: Myself and the other guys, we got so good at this thing that we could tell more or less where they were from, what part of Mexico with the hats *que traían*. "*Oh, usted es de Michoacán*" porque se ponían certain hats and I forget the jacket. We could tell where they were from just by the hat and then *como hablaban también*. My mother was from, *murió mi mama ya*. She was from Agualeguas right here in Nuevo Leon and I would go there in the summer so I knew the people there. *Como hablan, tienen* un little colloquialism. I was going by and I just going thru the paper wanting to make sure whatever I was checking. These guys were talking to each other. *Estaban platicando y yo pase así y me regrese le dije "¿Oye,*

ustedes son de Agualeguas?" "¿Si señor, como sabe usted?" "No mas como hablan. ¿No conocen usted a Victoria Maldonado?" They were really surprised just the way they talked I knew they were from Agualeguas. It was very interesting. From the selection area then then they would go inside and that's when they would get the finger prints and they started the contract and I guess the farmers were outside ready to take them. The girls inside would do the typing of the contracts.

HV: When did they go thru the medical office?

RC: The last process for them was contract and then they would go with the farmers.

HV: Where they given any type of shots or anything?

RC: Yes, I think so. I'm not sure what the shots were but I think they received shots.

HV: Did they take showers?

RC: Yes, they took showers. They were required. Like I said before, they had to put the same dirty clothes back on that's all they had with them. I was going to mention one more thing here that is kind of unusual. These farmers got to know me pretty well and they knew that I was in the selection area.

RC: I would get some farmers here and they would say "Hey Chapa" or I remember Farmer Sparks that had a lot of heart. He says "I'm gonna come back here tomorrow. I need five tractor drivers." The guys that know how to drive a tractor. Keep them on the side for me and I'll give you a coke money. "*Una mordida*" and I would do it. I would ask the guys and find out and set them apart and "*Aquí se quedan ustedes asta las quatro de la tarde.*" This guy would come over and get his tractor drivers and he would give me a dollar or something. I thought that was nice for the farmer (he laughs).

HV: On the different meals, did they have them at the mess hall? What time did you guys open?

RC: No, there was a mess hall because we use to eat there also, not with them but right next to them. It was a regular mess hall. They had cooks.

HV: What did they serve?

RC: Well I remember mashed potatoes. *Les daban carne* and I don't think, I don't remember *tortillas*. It 's so much easier and faster to just give them pan, pan *blanco* and they had drinks. I don't know, tea or I don't know exactly that, It's been a while, *ya se me olvida*.

HV: You said the farmers would actually come themselves.

RC: They had buses. I guess they owned those buses. Those buses had certain restrictions that they had to have, they have to stop after so many hours, and the state or the national government had the regulations for them. They have to have water and stuff, of course, feed them on the way over. Some of them went all the way to Arkansas and they couldn't be over crowded, those buses.

HV: After their contract was over, were they required to come back thru here, thru the center?

RC: That's a good question. I don't remember how that worked because they say the went for four months and then that farmer had to bring him back to Hidalgo and then I think after that they were on their own. They had to get their own transportation.

HV: Did they get to return the contractors, the workers?

RC: I don't remember any. From one year to the other, they say "*Hey, usted estaba aquí el año pasado.*" Fíjate, I probable did but I don't [remember].

HV: Do they have to go through the whole process again?

RC: I know that they had to go through the whole deal all over again. The whole process. One of the stories that hurt me later on *que me decían estos braceros* that once they went across. *Abecés los estaban esperando* across the river. *Los volteaban y los robaban* from that money that those braceros have

been working for three months. Sometimes I'm sure, stories *que me decían a mí que abecés los mataban para robarlos, los pobres.*

HV: Do you think that that know *que los iban a robar*? Do you think that had an effect on illegal crossings?

RC: I think so. There have to have been less illegal crossing. And of course a lot of those braceros stayed here. And my father had a business admission and he profited because the braceros on weekends, *mi papa tenían un pool hall y una cantina y tomaban y jugaban.* And the stores *allí vendían muchas camisas. Iban comprando para el trabajo.* It was a very good program for the businesses here and it was a very good program for everybody. I'm sorry that they did away with it. They don't have it anymore? They don't. It was a great program.

HV: What is your personal opinion on the Bracero Program?

RC: I think it should be revived. For me, that program was very organized and it helped a lot of illegals. I think, I'm sure because the braceros *no andaban batallando con la ley.*

RC: And these guys wherever they went, let's say they went to Arkansas, the farmers up there had to have a place to sleep, showers and whole deal. That was part of the great program. It was good for business and to me, I'm sorry that they did away with it.

RC: I think they should bring it back.

HV: Do you recall any legal problems? Let's say that they wanted to organize and they wanted more money?

RC: I never, you get so many braceros coming across, once in a while you get some radicals coming over but you catch them *dedolada, se creían muy fregones.* I remember one guy that came across spoke spok perfect English. *Deseen los braceros, "Oye ondee aprendiste?"* But once in a while you would get one that was *vallan protesté,* But to me, I would say most of them *eran pobrecitos, querían trabajar* and they wouldn't complain. And

they were treaded good and I didn't see, I saw one or two guys that came around trying to, I don't know. They were radicals.

HV: Do you know how they were paid? Were they paid by the hour or by the day?

RC: I think they were paid by the hour, minimum wage. I don't remember exactly by the farmers. But the farmers had to be, he was required to pay so much. I think it was whatever was minimum wage, *les pagaban*. I forget what it was then, three sixty-five or I don't know what it is. It was a very good program. No, you know, we didn't have, that I could remember, fights, protest, things like that. I never saw that. It was well organized. These poor people came across and all they want to do is go work. I have one, I don't know if I should mention this but it was funny at time. We had so many people there and this poor guy from way in Mexico, some of them like I told you before, they didn't know Spanish. They were watching the people in the coke machines.

RC: They get the coke and they wanted to buy a coke but they didn't know how it worked and I don't know if it's a true story or not, *pero*, this guy *los vio que estaban, querían aprender como hacer lo*, and he wanted to joke or whatever. He put the coin in there and then reached in there *como le hablaba a la maquina*. "*Maquinita, maquinita déme una coca y la feria por favor.*" *A eso salía la coke y la feria*. So one goes in there and he starts doing that and talking to the machine. "*Hey, mire el loco.*" Those guys *estaban toriquiando con ellos. Los tenían hablado a la maquina, pobre de ellos*. They'd never seen one of those. I thought that was funny.

HV: It's a totally different environment.

RC: And let me just say one more little thing, maybe I'm talking too much. But from the selection area, *de ay venían y los*, finger printed and then we'd take them in there where the girls were and *yo como me gusta social*, so I'd tell the guys, *estaban las pobres muchas con las typewriters eperaban a los braceros*. Venian los pobres con las camisas, even though they'd shower

an everything, pero, estaba la ropa, bad, strong y no mas de malo. "Okay, aquí van a ir con estas muchas." Y les daba un tentavive time or whatever. "Cuando entren aquí levanten los brazos, agarren el contrato de este lado y de las huellas este lado." Entraban así los guys y las workers se asustaron todas. "No, no,no,no,no bajen los brazos, bajen los brazos!" Dijo, "Ay Chapa." Don't do that Rey. Del southeast venia el breeze, el poquito breeze, y no había air conditioner, no había nada allí. They didn't have that, not in those days. Anyways, I thought the (-). Yo era muy travieso.

HV: Well thank you very much for your time.

RC: Yes sir, anytime.

DRAFT