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Interview no. 1548

Leo Montalvo

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Leo Montalvo

Interviewer: Homero Vera

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: McAllen, Texas

Date of Interview: May 27, 2003

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1548

Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Leo Montalvo was born on June 9, 1943, in Mexico; when he was nine years old, he came to the United States; he also worked in the fields for a time; during his senior year in high school, he worked as an assistant cook at a bracero processing center in Hidalgo, Texas; while there, he worked in the kitchen helping to prepare meals and cleaning; he went to college and eventually graduated from law school; later, he became involved in politics, and he went on to serve two terms as mayor of McAllen, Texas. Mr. Montalvo recalls his senior year in high school when he worked as an assistant cook at a bracero processing center in Hidalgo, Texas; his shift started after school at 3:30 and lasted until 11:30; in addition, he also worked Saturdays and Sundays; he earned a little over \$1.00 an hour; the braceros were given breakfast, lunch, and dinner; the meals consisted of chicken or meat, which was prepared as *carne guisada*, *picadillo*, or *papas con carne picada*, beans, powdered potatoes, bread, milk or an orange drink, and fresh fruit; anywhere between 200 and 300 people would eat at once, depending on the time of day; breakfast was served between 7:00 and 7:30, and dinner was served between 5:30 and 6:00; the braceros were always allowed a second serving if they so desired, and they were never denied more food; the mess hall was comprised of an open area with nothing but tables and up front was the counter; in order to get served a meal, the men would move in a line alongside the counter with their trays; he goes on to recall particular instances with braceros while he was in town; in addition, he comments on how and why he views the use of braceros as exploitative; in his opinion, a legal guest worker program would be beneficial insofar as it would ensure payment for the workers and provide an avenue for complaints.

Length of interview 20 minutes

Length of Transcript 8 pages

Name of Interviewee: Leo Montalvo

Date of interview:

Name of Interviewer: Homero Vera

My name is Homero Vera. This is for the University of Texas at El Paso the Institute of Oral History conducting an interview for the Bracero Oral History Project. Today we are interviewing Leo Montalvo here at the office in McAllen, Texas.

HV: Mr. Montalvo would you give us your full name and when you were born.

LM: Leo Montalvo. I was born June 9, 1943. I will be sixty years old in a couple of weeks.

HV: Congratulations. I just turned fifty myself.

LM: I'm a decade older than old you.

HV: Okay. I understand when we met a couple of weeks ago. You told me that you had worked in the Bracero Program for a brief period. Can you tell me your experience of the Bracero Program and what you did?

LM: Okay, certainly Homero. I was a high school senior back in the early part of 1962. I finished high school in May of 1962. During the first few months 1962, I worked at the bracero center in Hidalgo as a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. The braceros or you know, the workers were obviously housed there for a day or two. They were fed breakfast, lunch and supper. I assisted in the kitchen doing frijoles, potatoes. It was kind of like, not potato salad but rather your *papa de polvo*. You mixed it with water and you had mashed potatoes.

HV: So they had mashed potatoes back then?

LM: No, no. It was *papa de polvo*. Even *blanquillos de polvo*. And of course they were given milk, orange drink, depending what it was.

LM: Milk in the mornings and at noon. In the evening it was kind of an orange drink, half a pint. We use to have the Army steel trays. We cooked *carne guisada* as well, *picadillo*, *papas con carne picada*. I never knew the name of the head cook. His nick name was Chino and so I got hired and certainly because I was still in high school I rode the bus or hitchhiked out to Hidalgo when I left school at about two thirty. And I would start working at about three thirty in the afternoon and sometimes it would last till about eleven, eleven thirty at night. Because once we fed them we also had to clean up and have the kitchen ready for first thing in the morning for who ever was going to be out there. And usually I managed to work also on Saturdays and on Sundays.

HV: You use to leave from McAllen to Hidalgo?

LM: Exactly. There was another high school student, Raul Tarango, that got hired probably a month into my tenure and he had a car. And so we use, you know, obviously when there was work for both of us, he would give me a ride to and from. But sometimes, the last valley transit bus ran at about eleven and so if I didn't make it out there on South Twenty third by eleven I would have to hitchhike. And it was pretty difficult hitchhiking in the middle of the night back then.

HV: What kind of salary did you get? Did you get paid by the hour, by the month?

LM: I got paid by the hour slightly a little over a dollar an hour. And so, back then, a little over a dollar an hour, un limited number of hours, no overtime was pretty good. Because I remember working as a sacker at the Piggly Wiggly and I would get thirty-five cents an hour. We would work forty hours for twelve bucks. As a matter of fact when I finished at Hidalgo I came to work in the cotton gin in McAllen right across the street from where I used to live for a dollar fifteen an hour, eighty four hours a week. I use to work seven in the evening, seven in the morning.

HV: Who would pay you? The federal government, the department of labor?

LM: I don't even recall. I just got a check.

HV: You got a check?

LM: Yeah, it was a check.

HV: About how many people did you all cook for?

LM: Oh, I'm gonna say, it varied because they were shifts and I would say two to four hundred at a time, sometimes even more. It was just an open building, barracks type where we use to have tables that had already the seating along with it. And as soon as one finished there was one guy, the individual would take his tray, take it someone that was working and you would then clean off with a brush, clean all the leftovers and throw the juice cartoons out into garbage containers and then wash everything and get it ready for the next shift.

HV: (unintelligible)

LM: I would say most of them were but obviously it was a new experience, you know. *Papas de polvo y luego huevós también de polvo.* And so it was a little different and of course, but, anybody who wanted seconds, whatever. No body was ever denied more food. If you're hungry, you're hungry because a lot of people left some of it. One because they didn't like it or but, you know, when you are hungry you start developing a taste for food.

HV: Did you all have fresh fruit?

LM: Yes.

HV: What about meat, steaks?

LM: No, no steaks. I'm gonna say that you would get hamburger meat and then once in a while *carne gisada*.

HV: What about chicken?

LM: Chicken, you know, I don't remember but I'm sure that we did have chicken as well, yeah.

HV: Is there in particular instances that stand out in your mind that happened?

- LM: Well, you know, some of those people wound up working here in the Valley and I remember I use to love to play pool and I went against one individual who had served out there playing pool in one of the pool halls here in McAllen. He was a very good player. *Jugaba kino*, on a bigger table with a board obviously with the numbers one thru fifteen, break up, get it out to the board. Who ever makes sixty points or if the ball landed on a star or landed on its own number I would win. This guy was an excellent player and he probably would make more money playing pool on a Friday night, Saturday night than he would probably picking cotton or picking any fruits in the valley because the wages back then were just too low.
- HV: The bracero was doing this on the side?
- LM: Oh, yeah. Entertainment, I mean, he was legally here. There was nothing to prevent him from going out there and having a beer and playing a game of pool.
- HV: He was obviously from a city. The braceros that came here, where did come from?
- LM: I would say different parts of the country. Some of them were from Tamaulipas, Nevó León, Aguas Calientes, Guanajuato, de abajo, from all over Mexico. It's not limited to just a certain area.
- HV: Where they all Spanish speakers?
- LM: Yes.
- HV: (unintelligible)
- LM: I would say there were some but very limited though. Because they needed to at least, you know, write in front of everyone. *Pero*, for the most part they it was just poor people who worked.
- HV: So most of them were illiterate?
- LM: *Un poquito*, not much.
- HV: (unintelligible)

LM: No, but you know, we kind of simply because I spoke Spanish and I'm originally from Mexico. I would carry on conversations with the guys, like, "*¿Como les a ido?*" "How guys are doing?" "How are they treating you?" Sometimes these people wasn't that hot. *Insultos* now and then. But for the most part, at least when they were at the center, the guys who provided the housing, back in the open barracks and the food were pretty nice to them.

HV: Do you recall where they lived?

LM: No. The center there had a number of barracks. But, again, the stay was only one week, two to three days. Get people processed, get them fed and move them out.

HV: This was an on going thing?

LM: Oh, yeah. Every day.

HV: Can you describe the mess hall?

LM: The mess hall, just pretend that you see a long, long barrack for at least a hundred feet, open with nothing but tables. And then up front you would have the counter where we had the goodies, you know. The guy would pick up his tray and one guy would dump the mash potatoes, one would dump *frijoles*, *carne gisada* or whatever. Okay, depending on the meal. And then, obviously, I liked the easy job. Because the easy job was just handing the carton of milk or the carton of orange juice or actually orange drink. It was not really orange juice and, you know, the guys would take the tray and they would pick up their own utensils.

HV: Did they get *tortilla* or *pan*?

LN: Pan, for the most part, *era pan blanco*.

HV: And the kitchen? Was it together with the mess hall?

LN: Yes, it was open.

LN: Like, you know, you had all your kitchen equipment out here, let's say, in an area of say twenty by thirty and then you had the counter where obviously we had all the food, in trays and there would be one guy

serving *frijoles*, nothing but frijoles and the other guy would be serving nothing but mashed potato and the other guy the meat and the other guy would be just putting on the bread, you know. And so it was kind of like mass production in here, come on. "Here's your tray, here's your tray pick it up."

HV: How many meals a day?

LN: Three. It was breakfast, lunch and of course the dinner was usually at five thirty six o'clock. It was not like you wait there till seven, when you're ready, you know.

HV: What was the hour for breakfast?

LN: Breakfast, I'm gonna say seven, seven thirty. And then lunch at noon and then it went five thirty, six o'clock. Because, again, for those of us who worked there, we had to make sure that all your steel trays were cleaned. All your silverware cleaned and washed and so forth. And then, *a poner frijoles para la mañana*.

HV: The trays were taken to you?

LN: Yes.

HV: Do you recall if there were any problems in the commons area?

LN: No, at least not when I was there.

HV: (unintelligible)

LN: Well, having been born in Mexico, it's nothing but exploitation. I, mean, it's just cheap labor. What else can you call it? You bring somebody in, cheap labor, no benefits, no health insurance, no overtime, *ni nada*. It's just like, it kind of reminds me of "Well we don't have slaves anymore, we just rent them." Or "We don't own slaves we just rent them."

LN: You know, that kind of sayings. It was typical back then, I mean, having come to this country at the age of nine, I also worked in the fields, picking cotton, tomatoes, and so forth. And the pay was not that high. I mean

getting paid two dollars and five cents for every hundred ounce of clean cotton we picked.

HV: You think the Bracero Program would work today?

LN: In some areas of the country, I think where farmers are having a hard time, you know, getting labor like you would. But I think that the pay and the conditions need to improve. And you just can't keep ten, twenty people in an open barn for an extent period of time. There's gonna be some privacy issues. Is it limited only now to men that leave their women behind or they bring them with them? If they do, well obviously then you get into private situations where a family can't be out in the open. But, you know, my understanding right now is that there is a guest program between Mexico and Canada and they get up there and they get paid. They do a lot better.

HV: That's an actual guest program?

LN: Yeah, yeah they do. And I understand that primarily they work in areas where they raise beef and chicken, poultry.

HV: My wife just got back from Georgia and they have housing. It's paid for. (unintelligible)

LN: Well that's a lot better. See and of course one of the good things about having a legal guest program is that at least you can provide a mechanism, a process by which people can complain of shenanigans by court, okay, whereas if your working legally, well all I gotta do sometimes is just call the *migra* and your out and you're gone. And as a matter of fact you might even have lost some wages, owed to. That's probably one justification for a legal guest program. That it gives you an avenue, it gives the worker the avenue to at least file a complaint.

LN "Your gonna fire me fine." But pay me what you owe me, okay. That's perhaps one of safe guards. As suppose to being here totally illegally where people really abuse you and then they say. "Well, bye, bye."

HV: Well do have anything else that you want to add that you remember particularly that stands out?

LN: Not, not really it was just, again, one of those things where I got an opportunity to work.

HV: You worked one year?

LN: Yeah, because after that I use to work in the cotton gins in the summer time. And then obviously I went to A&M.

HV: I meant to ask you, Did you get by on yourself?

LN: Well, I was born in Mexico. Came here at the age of nine. I finished High School in 1962 here in McAllen. I was very active in school activities. I was sliding champ for the district. I was senior class president. I went to A&M on a scholarship. I got a degree in mathematics in 1966. I went back got a masters degree in education with an emphasis in school administration. I was a math teacher for a few years and a school principal. I got to be superintendent in schools. I quit in 1979 to go to law school. And I left my wife and four kids behind and I commuted to Austin and came home once a month. I finished in twenty seven months. Got licensed and I have been practicing now for twenty years, twenty one years actually. I got licensed in 1982. May 14, 1982. I've been active politically for a number of years. City council man in McAllen since 1983 up until 1997, when I went for mayor. Now I am serving my second term as mayor right now. Second four-year term.

HV: Thank you Mr. Montalvo for your time. It has been a pleasure to have a recollection of what happened and to have shared your experiences as a cook.

LN: As an assistant cook. (He laughs).

HV: Thank you very much.

LN: Certainly.

DRAFT