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Interview no. 1551

John L. Augustine

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: John L. Augustine

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Las Cruces, New Mexico

Date of Interview: April 28, 2003

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Transcript No: 1551

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

John L. Augustine was born in El Paso, Texas, on August 29, 1914; his father worked in the mines of Lordsburg, New Mexico; he received a degree in agriculture from New Mexico State University and taught for a brief time; from there, he went on to become an assistant agent for Doña Ana County, where he served as a liaison for the Bracero Program. Mr. Augustine's first working experience was teaching vocational agriculture in the Farmington Public School System; from there, he went on to become an assistant agent for Doña Ana County under Mr. Lee Gould; upon Mr. Gould's retirement, Mr. Augustine served as county agent for about ten years; these ten years roughly coincide with the first decade of the Bracero Program; as an acting liaison for the Bracero Program, it was his job to ensure that things ran smoothly; he would report the number of necessary workers the farmers needed to the contracting agency; in addition, he intervened and settled disputes between farmers and braceros, and he also required farmers to provide adequate housing according to the program standards; he also recalls the specific harvest seasons braceros were hired and their corresponding duties; to the best of his recollection, there were never any major problems with the program; the use of the braceros provided a symbiotic relationship in which the needs of both the braceros and the farmers were met.

Name of Interviewee: John L. Augustine

Date of Interview: April 28, 2003

Name of Interviewee: Beth Morgan

BM: When and where were you born, Mr. Augustine?

JA: Where was I born?

BM: Mmm-hmm.

JA: In El Paso, Texas.

BM: And when was that?

JA: In El Paso, Texas in 1914.

BM: When is your birthday?

JA: August 29, 1914.

BM: Did you grow up in El Paso?

JA: Well, my mother and father lived in Lordsburg, New Mexico. He was a mining engineer there and had a little mine out, close to the 85 mine and my mother went to El Paso to have me. Because there were no facilities in Lordsburg at that time.

BM: You grew up then in Lordsburg?

JA: That's right.

BM: Is that where you graduated from high school?

JA: No, I went to high school two years at Lordsburg and then attended the New Mexico Military Institute for four years. Two years of high school and two years of Aunior college. In 1935, I came down to New Mexico State University and took agriculture and attended the university here until I graduated.

BM: And you got a Bachelor's degree...

JA: In agriculture.

BM: I believe you said your first position with the Cooperative Extension Services...

JA: My first position was teaching vocational agriculture in Farmington, New Mexico for a year.

BM: Was that with a public school?

JA: Yes, ma'am. Then I came from there, got employed by the New Mexico Extension Service and became assistant county agent here in Las Cruces under County Agent Lee Drew. And when he retired, I became County Agent.

BM: What year was that?

JA: Well, I've been trying to think, but I think it was sometime in the early 40's.

BM: So that would have been during the time the Bracero project was in effect?

JA: Yes, ma'am.

BM: Can you tell me a little about your training for your position of county agent?

JA: Well you just needed a degree in agriculture and that is what starts you out. The purpose of the extension service is to give information on what is going on in the university in the agriculture department out to the farmers and ranchers. Experiment work, mostly.

BM: How many years did you work for the extension service?

JA: I think it was about ten years.

BM: Okay, and then you went on to something else?

JA: I became the director of the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau. Executive Vice President of the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau.

BM: Okay. Do you speak Spanish?

JA: Only in, just pick-up terms. I took Spanish in high school and then college and I know the basics of it, but I can't speak it.

BM: Okay. Can you describe to me what your role was in the Bracero program as a county agent?

JA: Mostly I would take orders from the farmer's for the number of people they needed to help them and to do farm work on the farm. And by and large, because I remember this, it was mostly to pick cotton at the Bracero program was in effect in Doña Ana County.

BM: And what did you do with those orders?

JA: There was another organization that handled the Braceros. That would go down and recruited them and brought them into the country from Mexico and made them available to go into the farms.

BM: Would that have been the Doña Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau.

JA: I don't remember. I don't think it was the Farm Bureau, but it could have been.

BM: Okay, I think it was at some time. It may not always have been.

JA: Yeah.

BM: You took orders for how many workers the farmers needed?

JA: Yes, ma'am. And if they needed a certain, a certain farmer needed fifteen or twenty or whatever number, or two, why then we would get them, go to the organization that had brought them in and made them available and get them to take them to the farm.

BM: Were there any other responsibilities that you had that related to the Bracero program?

JA: Only to try to make it as available and work as good as possible. They had to be available and bring them over here and put them available to go to the farm.

BM: What years did you work with the Braceros? With that program?

JA: I can't give you the exact years (laughs). As I said, I'm getting pretty old and I can't remember exact dates anymore. But, during the time I was county agent.

BM: Okay, so maybe 1942 to 1952? Something like that?

JA: Yeah, something like that.

BM: And your job assignment then was here in Doña Ana County?

JA: That's right.

BM: Did you ever have to go out into the farms as result of your...

JA: If they came, disagreements or some farmer was accused of not doing the right thing that the man. I would try to settle that and make sure those things didn't happen.

BM: So you would kind of work with the farmers and the Braceros?

JA: That's right. To see that they were treated properly and paid and, you know, that they did their job. If they became...and there is between, between worker and employee sometimes develops, you know, disagreements and things like that. I would try to help straighten those things out.

BM: Do you remember any of those in particular?

JA: No, ma'am, I don't. They would happen in any program and my job was to make this program successful and get our agriculture products picked, like the cotton picked and out of the farm.

BM: Did you ever have any reason to travel down to the recruiting station? I believe it was in Eagle Pass, Texas?

JA: No, ma'am, I never did.

BM: Did you ever have to go anywhere else to do your job as administer of that program?

JA: No, ma'am. Mostly I was right here in the county working, tried to get the Braceros to the farmers and see that they did the job during the agriculture work.

BM: Did you have any responsibilities for checking the qualifications of the Braceros or anything like that?

JA: No, ma'am. That was the people that brought them in.

BM: Okay. Did you ever have any interaction with the Mexican government as a result of your position?

JA: No. All I can say is that these Braceros, most of them were tremendous workers and they're good people. And didn't cause any trouble and wanted to do the job and make the money that came with the job. Because it was good pay for them to come over here and get paid.

BM: Maybe you could talk about why it was necessary to bring people in from Mexico to do that work.

JA: Well, this country, that was the time of labor shortages. I think the war brought it on. There had to be some agriculture work done and there just wasn't any local people available.

BM: Were there any farmers that stood out in terms of the numbers of Braceros that they used or their treatment, whether good or bad, of their laborers?

JA: As any program, there were farmers who didn't do exactly the right thing with these men and we would try to straighten that out too and bring about proper treatment of our Braceros. And there wasn't many cases of that, but there's always something, somebody that does something that isn't just right. And we had some Braceros who were not good workers, too, and we had to straighten that out and send them back or get them to go to work.

BM: On a day to day basis, what exactly were your responsibilities in the program? What would you do that had to do with that program?

JA: Take order from farmers and get them to the people who had the Braceros and then had to get them out on the farm and that was about it.

BM: Would that be kind of a seasonal thing?

JA: A what?

BM: Seasonal?

JA: Yeah, it was in the cotton picking season was when we needed them the most.

BM: So, maybe towards the end of the summer and early fall, you'd have a lot of orders?

JA: Early fall, yeah.

BM: And then, in the wintertime, did you have any orders?

JA: This picking season went on until finally all the cotton was picked.

BM: When was that usually?

JA: Usually around the first of the year.

BM: Okay. During the springtime, was there any demand for Braceros?

JA: Yes, ma'am. They preferred them to land when the crops needed some hand work, or human work, to get things prepared.

BM: Like weeding or something like that.

JA: Yeah.

BM: Was it nearly always hand labor that they were hired for?

JA: That's right.

BM: Okay. Did any of them, to your knowledge, drive tractors and heavy equipment like that?

JA: If the farmer needed somebody to, and they were available, they could do it.

BM: Would you happen to remember how many Braceros would be hired by farmers in the County over the course of the year?

JA: You mean the total number, or for each farm?

BM: Either one, or both.

JA: I don't remember, but there were several thousand Braceros in here at one time.

BM: In the county?

JA: In the county.

BM: And would you say that would be in the peak of the cotton harvest?

JA: Yes, ma'am.

BM: Okay.

JA: And there was other, the growing of vegetables that required a lot of hand labor. Just harvesting it and keeping the land clean and getting the vegetables grown and harvested.

BM: Okay. That was things like onions...

JA: Onions, well onions was our main crop here alright.

BM: At that time for vegetables?

JA: Yeah.

BM: What about chile?

JA: Chile? That required picking like cotton. That required a lot of hand labor. Chile and cotton was the big picking crops.

BM: How about lettuce?

JA: Lettuce had to be harvested by hand, too. So we had all of those things.

BM: What about alfalfa? Did they have any...

JA: Well, the only thing, you can load the hay onto a truck or something like that, they could be used. That didn't require a great number.

BM: So, they may have been employed within the county year round, but for different purposes?

JA: That's right.

BM: Okay. To your knowledge, did the Braceros that work at one farm return to the same place the next year?

JA: If they were satisfied and in most cases, the farmers and the Braceros got along good.

BM: Did you have any responsibility for setting that up?

JA: I would help them to get back to the same farm. And if the farmer wanted the same one, I would help him to get them.

BM: How did you manage that? Did you have to correspond with them in Mexico, or what?

JA: No, they had the people that had them they contacted the other.

BM: So, that would have been with the organization that actually

JA: Yeah, that's right.

BM: Let's see here. Did you require any proof of the Braceros state of health?

JA: As a whole, their health was very good. I mean, they weren't sickly or anything like that as a whole. There's always a few that have something, or some kind of disease or something, but as a whole, we didn't have much of that.

BM: Did you have any responsibility ensuring that they were fit to work? Or was that the other organization?

JA: That was the other organization.

BM: Did you have to keep track of what kind of housing the Braceros were put in?

JA: No. When, when you hired them they had to have adequate clean housing. On the whole, that was developed over at the time. There wasn't high class housing, but it was adequate, clean places to live.

BM: By adequate, would that include running water and...

JA: Running water and something to cook with and that sort of thing. And a place to sleep.

BM: Did that necessarily include indoor toilets or not?

JA: Most cases there were no indoor toilets.

BM: I see. What was the Cooperative Extension Service responsibility for ensuring that that housing was adequate?

JA: Well, if it turned out that it had to be, we would work with the farmer to get him to fix it, to take care of the situation.

BM: So that was mostly a matter of persuading them to do it?

JA: That's right. In the final analysis, it could be brought out and they could lost these Braceros if they didn't do the right thing.

BM: Did they have to do that out of their own expense?

JA: Yes.

BM: Did you handle any of the work contracts for the Braceros?

JA: Only to furnish the forms and that sort of thing.

BM: Did you do most of your work on the phone or did you go to the farms to find out how many Braceros people needed?

JA: Both ways. They would come to me, the farmers would, and request that we get them so many or I was out in the community, too.

BM: Six of one and half a dozen of the other. (Laughs)

JA: Yeah.

BM: Did you have any oversight of the Braceros at the time their contracts were over?

JA: You mean what they would do then?

BM: Right.

JA: They were supposed to be taken back to Mexico.

BM: But that was by the other agency.

JA: Yeah.

BM: Okay, so did the Cooperative Extension Service have any requirement for closing out the books on any particular Bracero, or anything like that?

JA: No, we didn't do much of that.

BM: So, mostly you were like a go-between.

JA: That's right.

BM: In your opinion, what effect did the Bracero program have on undocumented workers coming into the county?

JA: What do you mean by undocumented? I thought they were undocumented?

BM: Well, the Braceros were people who were legally sanctioned by the US government and the Mexican government. I'm talking about the ones...

JA: Who came across the border on their own.

BM: Right.

JA: I think they had some places where they were working and came back. But as a whole, I think the Bracero program was what was relied on during that time.

BM: Okay, so do you think the fact that the Bracero program was in effect reduced the number of illegals crossing?

JA: Oh, yes.

BM: What about relations between Doña Ana County and Mexico? Mexican government? Do you think that was pretty good during that time?

JA: We didn't have any arguments that I remember because the Braceros were needed and the Braceros needed the job. So our job was to get them together, get them in here to work.

BM: Okay, did you have any complaints about discrimination against the Braceros by any of the local farmers?

JA: It wasn't anything big.

BM: If those kind of complaints arose, then did you have some sort of responsibility in working those out, too?

JA: We would try to get them together and get them straightened out.

BM: To your knowledge, did any of the Braceros end up working on any crew with people who had crossed illegally?

JA: No, I didn't think we had a problem with that.

BM: That was not a problem?

JA: No.

BM: Did you ever have to arbitrate with the farmers who had Braceros who were say, having a little too much fun on Saturday night? (laughs)

JA: Yeah. Once again, I would get into those things if I was asked or if I saw that I needed to straighten out something. And we did pretty good at it. Fighting or anything like that, just a matter of getting people to do the right thing and if the Braceros wouldn't do the right thing, they would have to go back.

BM: Do you remember any specific incidents?

JA: No, ma'am, but I know there were some.

BM: I understand that some of the farmers may have received workers that did cross illegally and I want to know if there was any awareness on your part of such farmers and if you have any responsibility for trying to make them legal by bringing them into the Bracero program?

JA: No, ma'am. I didn't get mixed up...

BM: To your knowledge was there any labor unrest among the Braceros in this county?

JA: Well, there are always dissatisfied workers that want more or do less, but it wasn't a big problem. We never had a big problem with that.

BM: How about criminal behavior?

JA: Once in awhile, one of those, too. The sherriff's department took care of most of those.

BM: What effect did the Bracero program have on the productivity of Doña Ana County farms?

JA: If we hadn't have them, there would have been a lot of farms that wouldn't have been able to harvest their crops and that would have been real bad financially for our farm people.

BM: What about the ranchers? Were there any Doña Ana County ranchers who used Braceros?

JA: That was not a problem with us, that I remember.

BM: The ranchers were not requiring Braceros?

JA: Did they, no. The big requirement was with the cotton farmers and the vegetables farmers.

BM: So, could you describe for me your personal opinion of the Bracero program?

JA: I think it was a tremendous program at the time it was in effect and something that we really needed in this county, in this area and it did a great deal of good and kept many of our farmers in the business by harvesting their crops. And by and large, the majority of the Braceros were good workers and good people.

BM: What would you say were the advantages of the program?

JA: Well, they were here to work and, take care, harvesting our crops and the farmers needed them, and if they hadn't of had their, I don't know what we would have done.

BM: What about disadvantages of the program?

JA: I can't think of any. It didn't hurt anybody in this country. The workers who were here, the few that were here. So there was no disadvantages that I know of.

BM: Do you think it would be a good idea to revive the Bracero program?

JA: Only if it didn't displace American workers.

BM: Seems like there's not a lot of Americans that want to do farm labor at this point in time anyway.

JA: No, and if it would help our farmers then carry on and feed the people of the United States, feed and clothe them, then it would be good to have Bracero labor.

BM: Do you think there would be any benefits to the farmers in terms of, well you Just said that, enabling them to stay in business basically.

JA: Well, you have to harvest these crops and today, we have many mechanical ways of harvesting, but we still need hand labor in many cases. So, if there is a need, I

think it would be a good thing to revive it in a way that wouldn't hurt American workers.

BM: Is there anything that stands out in your mind about the time that you were working with the Bracero program that you'd like to talk about?

JA: No, ma'am, it was just something to do. It was a program that was needed and necessary and we did it, and that was just the thing that was done.

BM: Well, as I said this questionnaire was not written specifically for county agents, I think I may have done about what I can do with it.

JA: Yeah, I don't know what else we can talk about much. I'd still like to say that it was good program, well carried out, and it was really a real benefit to the farmers in this county. And it was a benefit to the Braceros because they were able to work, make money, and go back to Mexico and have the resources to buy, to do anything at home.

BM: Do you think it had an effect on immigration?

JA: Well might of been some of them wanted to come over, but as a whole, they were Mexican citizens and were here to do a job.

BM: So the majority of them went home?

JA: Yes, ma'am.

BM: Do you know of any personally who decided to stay?

JA: Uh-uh.

BM: I guess that is all the questions I have for you, sir.

JA: I think that it is nice that you are doing this. And it was a good program and deserves to be part of the good things that's happened in the past.

BM: Thank you so much. I'm gonna turn this off now.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW