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Interview no. 1552

Celia Berton Castro

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Celia Berton Castro

Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: January 22, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1552

Transcriber: Courtney Richards

Celia Berton was born in El Paso, Texas, in December of 1934; upon graduating from Loretto Academy, she took a civil service exam; her qualifications for typing and stenography led to her to work for INS, the Immigration and Naturalization Service; she worked as a bilingual court typist for the Bracero Program at *Rio Vista*, a processing center in Socorro, Texas. During the summer of 1953, while going to school at Texas Western College, she worked as a bilingual court typist for the Bracero Program at *Rio Vista*, a processing center in Socorro, Texas, where she received minimal training; her primary responsibility was to interview braceros in Spanish and fill out their paperwork in English; she explains the procedures the braceros had to go through while there, which included medical exams, a shower, a haircut from the on-site barbershop, photographs, and fingerprints; she worked at *Rio Vista*, for a total of two years and also half a year at the Santa Fe Bridge in El Paso, Texas.

Name of Interviewee: Celia Berton
Date of Interview: January 22, 2003
Name of Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

This is an interview with Celia Berton, on January 22, 2003, in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Fernanda Carrillo. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project.

FC: Good afternoon Mrs. Berton. When and where were you born?

CB: I was born in El Paso, Texas, in December of 1934.

FC: Where did you grow up?

CB: I grew up in central El Paso.

FC: You've been living here all your life?

CB: Yes, relatively. However, I was away from 1956 to 1963 when I went to work with the U.S. Army to Europe, and later I worked in Naples, Italy, also. I worked in Paris and then Naples.

FC: When did you start working for the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service]?

CB: That was my first job in 1953, my first civil service job. It was during the summer of '53 and the summer of '54, while I was going to then Texas Western, here in El Paso.

FC: How did you get this job? Did you read about it in the paper?

CB: The one with the immigration?

FC: Exactly.

CB: No. When we were at Loretto Academy, when we graduated, we could sign up to take the civil service exam. At the time, there was a service that was done for graduates that wanted to pursue careers in business, which was my goal. I took

the exam, and I qualified for the typing and stenography. As a result of that, I was called in to work for the INS. Working for the INS, they were looking for bilingual clerk typists to work on the Bracero Program.

FC: You were required to speak in Spanish?

CB: Yes.

FC: Tell me about your training at the Rio Vista Farm, did you receive training?

CB: We probably received very minimal training. I really cannot remember how long the training was. [The job] was asking [questions] and filling out an application for the braceros, for the workers. We interviewed them in Spanish, and we filled out the application in English. Of course we had to be able to type Spanish because the cities and their names—

FC: You had to be able to spell out these names correctly?

CB: Um-hm.

FC: How many years did you work for the—

CB: I worked two years at Rio Vista, and the following year I worked half a year at the bridge—uh—the Santa Fe Bridge.

FC: Did you work full-time or part-time at that Rio Vista Farm?

CB: It was just part-time. There were temporary appointments for three months during the summer.

FC: The rest of the year, did they hire students as well?

CB: I don't know if they hired students or if they hired other individuals that worked, that could work all year. I really don't know. [I] don't remember too much of that.

FC: Could you please describe your role in the Bracero Program?

CB: My role was to interview the braceros after they had been processed. They had [already] been medically examined. I know that they went through showers and went through the barbershop. They were photographed and fingerprinted, and then they came to us to be interviewed. From there, they went to another holding area where they were [kept]. Sometimes they waited overnight, and sometimes there were big buses, transportation, to take them to the designated areas where they were going to work. I remember hearing Michigan a lot. I guess a lot of them went to Michigan. Others, I don't know where they went.

FC: Those buses picked them up at the Rio Vista Farm?

CB: Yes, yes they did. I don't know how they—I don't know how they got there. I don't recall being involved in seeing them arrive. I know that in the mornings when I arrived, we were ready to start interviewing them.

FC: At the time you arrived to your workplace, were they already in line?

CB: No, no, they were not in line. I think they were still processing them. They must have processed them early in the morning, because when we got there at 7:30 or about that time, it was a little while after that when they would start asking them to come into this large room.

FC: The Rio Vista Farm facilities were open twenty-four hours a day?

CB: I guess they were. I really don't remember. I don't know.

FC: Where was the reception center where you worked?

CB: It was inside Rio Vista. It was in a large room. I know the other rooms were smaller, and they were around the camp. They were around the containment facility.

FC: I have a copy here of the map of the Rio Vista Farm. (showing map) Would you please take a look at it? Do you remember the different buildings and what happened in each one?

CB: Uh, no—but this looks like, it is either this building or this building—

FC: Either twenty-two or—

CB: They were large buildings and—

FC: The one that you worked at—

CB: I think it might have been this one.

FC: [Building] twenty-two.

CB: Um-hm.

FC: The other different rooms, do you remember what—(both talking at once)

CB: Some were the showers, some were, like I said, the barbershop, and others were where they were photographed. I do remember that they were fingerprinted right before they came into our room.

FC: Were the braceros required to bathe, shave, and get haircuts in the—

CB: Yes. Well, it was done for them. I mean, I never went into the showers, but from hearing them talk, it was something that they would joke about, that they had taken showers. I guess it was a communal shower where they were all together, and this was kind of a topic of conversation for them. (both laugh)

FC: It was a great joke. On average, how many days did the braceros stay at the reception center before processing?

CB: I really couldn't give you an accurate answer, because I don't know.

FC: Would you please describe the process the candidates had to go through at the reception center once they got there? What were the different procedures that they had to—

CB: As I mentioned to you, if they stayed there the night before, I really don't know. I know they were put in this large room where the showers were. From there, they went to the barbershop, [had] their picture taken, after that they were fingerprinted, and then they were interviewed. I don't recall—at some point they must have been fed meals, but that must have been in another area.

FC: Do you remember if any medical examination was performed during the process at the Rio Vista Farm?

CB: I do know that there were doctors there or med—maybe not doctors. Maybe there were uh, you know—

FC: Nurses?

CB: I don't know if there were any nurses. There were mostly a lot of men there.

FC: Do you know what constituted the medical examination?

CB: No. No.

FC: Was any disinfectant performed for the braceros?

CB: No, not to my knowledge.

FC: Do you know if the braceros were allowed to keep their personal belongings?

CB: I don't know. But I know that what they did have with them, I would say that the majority, 99 percent of them, had hats. They had their hats, their straw hats.

FC: With them?

CB: When they came to the interview, they did not have anything with them, like a sack or anything like that. They were just there with their hats, because a lot of them used to play with them. (both laugh)

FC: Describe for me please, the mess hall. Do you—

CB: The mess hall, where they ate?

FC: Did you have a chance to sit—

CB: No, that was not where we ate. The fact is we were where we had our lunch breaks. We had to bring our lunch, because there was no place to get food there. We would do it in shifts, and we would eat in a little room. Four or five of us—

FC: You never shared a meal with the braceros?

CB: No, we did not.

FC: How were the work contracts arranged? Do you know?

CB: No.

FC: The people that hired the braceros, did they have to come to the Rio Vista Farm?

CB: I don't know if the person that was taking them back was the contractor or a representative of the contractor. But I do know that most all of the contractor representatives that were there were Anglo.

FC: I have several copies of contracts here. (showing contracts) Do you recognize any of them? (long pause) Are those similar to the kinds of—

CB: Yeah. Yeah. They were (unintelligible) (long pause) this was already typed on here, because we didn't type that. All of this about the hourly wage, we didn't get involved in that.

FC: You typed in the names?

CB: Yeah, and also if they had any, you know, what do you call them? Significant—scars that were visible.

FC: You would have to—

CB: We asked them that. Sometimes they would show us something on their arm or they would—(laughs) it was very funny, because when we used to ask them about significant scars, they would sometimes lift their shirts up to show us tattoos.

FC: Really? They thought of that as scars? A lot of them—(both talking at once)

CB: I would say that over 50 percent would have either tattoos on their arms or on their chest.

FC: Wow, that's very interesting. What kind of information did you type on the forms?

CB: We typed their date of birth. A lot of them did not know their date of birth. They guessed at it. Those that didn't know would say, "Well, it was between this year and that year." We would ask them their wives' name, if they were married, their mothers' name, who they wanted their money to go to, or who the next of kin was. Of course, their height and weight wasn't filled in. I don't remember if that was something that we had to do ourselves. I can't remember that, but I do remember the names and the addresses.

FC: Did they have to provide you any documents to prove that what they were saying was true, like ID's or birth certificates?

CB: No.

FC: So you just take what they say for truth?

CB: Right. The birth certificates or whatever documents they had were not part of that process that we did.

FC: Did they have to sign the application?

CB: Yes. They had to sign, and many of them did not know how to sign their names. They just marked an X. We told them to use an X.

FC: They weren't able to read the application?

CB: No, they never read it in front of us. They just sort of— took our word for it. I think it was just the culture. They were trying to better themselves, and they were really just thinking that this was a way to better themselves. They trusted their faith. The faith I think just brought them over here and—

FC: Was the document written in both English and Spanish?

CB: The documents were only in English.

FC: The application that you filled in was only in English?

CB: Um-hm. This one is in English? Was it in Spanish, too?

FC: It is in English and Spanish.

CB: I don't remember that. I didn't remember if it was in Spanish or not, but—

FC: They never got a copy of the application?

CB: I can't remember if they got a copy of this.

FC: You had to keep the files for them everyday?

CB: Everyday, yes. They were given to someone. I don't know where they went after that. I do remember that there were members of the Mexican consulate there.
(both talking at once)

CB: Yes.

FC: During the entire process—(both talking at once)

CB: Not eight hours a day, but they were walking around the complex.

FC: They were—(both talking at once)

CB: Sort of supervising, being cognizant of what was going on.

FC: Did that happen every day? Were they allowed to be there every day?

CB: Um-hm.

FC: When a bracero completed his work contract and returned to Mexico, was he required to pass back through a center to make his return official?

CB: I don't know any of that.

FC: You only filled out applications for people that entered the United States—

CB: (unintelligible) There might have, of course. But since I did not work there on a full time basis, I don't know if that came about later. I think some of the contracts were for three months, some were for longer, and some were shorter.

FC: It depended—

CB: I think it really depended on where they went [and] what crops they were going to work in.

FC: What happened if during the subsequent years, if they wanted to go back to the United States? Did they have to go all over through the process again?

CB: I don't know.

FC: You never got—

CB: No, I never (both talking at once)

FC: Was his first time—

CB: No, I don't believe that. I think I probably did not know as much as I do now. Maybe I would have asked a lot more questions. (laughs)

FC: Where did you live while you worked at the reception center?

CB: I lived in central El Paso. My mother would drive me every day to Rio Vista. I would get a ride sometimes with some of the other girls that worked there. Then my mother would pick me up some place closer to town.

FC: Were there only women working at the Rio Vista?

CB: There were men too, but the clerk-typists were, I believe, they were all women. I remember the person that fingerprinted them was a young man. I think the one that took their picture was also a man. I believe that all of the typists were women, young girls.

FC: Would you please describe your typical workday there at the reception center?

CB: Well, we would get there and visit with the other typists a little bit. When they had enough braceros to be interviewed we would be told to get ready. It was constant. They would just line them up behind that typewriter all—

FC: They were in lines?

CB: They were in lines, yeah.

FC: Depending on their last name or just—

CB: No, they were just at random, however they came in there.

FC: What were your normal hours?

CB: They were 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, because we only took a half an hour for lunch.

FC: Besides the paperwork you did, what other tasks did you perform at the reception center?

CB: That's all we did. That's all I did.

FC: All day long, you typed the forms?

CB: Um-hm.

FC: Is there any particular incident that stands out in your mind, [something] that you remember, an anecdote or something?

CB: They made us laugh a lot, because they were very humorous, and we were very, I guess, young. We would ask them if they had a wife of course. They would say, “Well, you know, I had one, but now I don’t” or “I’ve had two.” In Spanish it just—things were just—I think that it was their humor. Of course, we would sometimes joke with them. I know that probably was not the right thing to do, but it was just something that lend a little bit of levity to an otherwise very strained situation for them. I’m sure that they were in awe about a lot of things that happened. Sometimes I would ask them if they had any scars that were visible. Some of them were probably joking or maybe it was true. They would say, “Yeah. I got thrown off a horse. *Tengo una patada de caballo*. Do you want to see where?” Of course, it was in a private part. It was just humor. The guy next door laughed, and we would laugh. It was part of human nature.

FC: Do you think most of them had scars or not?

CB: A lot of the men had a very ruddy complexion and a lot of pockmarks. They had had illnesses when they were young, and their faces were scarred up. I think that was the most common. If they were laborers, and they worked their fields in Mexico, the weather doesn’t help anybody with their face. A lot of them had marks, like acne, a lot of acne. Maybe some had been in accidents and might have had a scar. One or two might have had half a finger or something from some accident that they were in. Like I said, 99 percent of them had tattoos, and they were in color.

FC: Oh really? Were most of the braceros that you interviewed young or—

CB: Most of them, I would say, they were probably in their midtwenties. The ones I interviewed were not old men. Of course, they probably looked older than they were because of the fact that they were out in (laughs) the environment is not very good to them. It made the day pass for us. Some of the other ladies that were interviewing there [were] more humorous than I was, I guess. They joked with them about one thing or another.

FC: About how many braceros would you interview a day?

CB: It's hard to say. I think we would spend maybe twenty minutes with each one. You know, it might have been close to a hundred.

FC: Everyday?

CB: Yeah, close to a hundred, more or less.

FC: How many laborers worked in the same room? (both talking at once)

CB: That's almost twenty minutes a person. That was three hours, about three or four an hour. Yeah, almost four or maybe it was less than that. I just couldn't remember.

FC: But it was continuous?

CB: Yeah. We would spend about twenty minutes with each one.

FC: What about at the end of the day? Were there still people in line? You are at your—it's 5:00 PM, I have to leave. What happened there?

CB: You know, I don't remember that.

FC: Would you say they were mostly happy and excited about entering the—(both talking at once)

CB: Yes, they were. They were looking forward to a very happy [experience], and they were looking forward to working. I think a lot of them would come in from the same city, because they would know each other or they were relatives. For example, if you would ask one of them about when he was born, maybe his brother, uncle, cousin or somebody [would be] in another line. They would call to each other, and they would say, "*Oyes, ¿cuándo nació? No me acuerdo.*" "*Pues, yo en este tiempo.*" They would—

FC: They were asking each other?

- CB: Yeah. They were asking each other, because a lot of them were from the same little towns. They were relatives. A lot of them were related.
- FC: Throughout the process, when they were sent out to the work places, were they able to stay together?
- CB: I don't know, because I don't know how that process went, whether they were recruited by towns to go to a different city or state, I don't know what happened then.
- FC: What do you think were the affects of the Bracero Program on the work of the INS?
- CB: I think that this guest worker program, as it's now being called, I didn't know much about the INS in their role, it's changed throughout the years. I think this was sort of a good way for the INS to process these groups, because they were not coming in illegally. They were coming in on a legal basis even though they were not under visas or other documentation. They were being contracted as an agreement between the two countries. The immigration, I mean the INS, probably liked it, because it did not exert a lot of effort on their part to make this happen.
- FC: What is your personal opinion of the Bracero Program?
- CB: Now that so many years have gone by, I think that the Bracero Program was a good program. I think this program should be revisited by our two countries again. Maybe to curb some of the illegal immigrants that we know come here to work, maybe not in the fields, but they come here to do other types of work.
- FC: So you think it should be brought back?
- CB: I think it should be.
- FC: What were the advantages and disadvantages of the program from your personal point of view?

CB: I think some of the disadvantages were, and I think you still hear it today, that they're taking work from Americans. American citizens, however, that could perform this type of work don't want it, because it's menial and subservient to their way of life. However, if our American citizens don't educate themselves and don't make it a point to get skilled in jobs that pay better, then there should be no complaint.

FC: Is there anything else that you would like to add about the time that you worked at the Rio Vista Farm?

CB: I know that I would come home and tell my parents what was going on. My parents, at the time, had just become American citizens, because they were immigrants themselves. I was born here in El Paso. I'm a first generation American. They would (laughs) my father would always say that (laughs) this was good, because they would learn. They could learn to speak English. (laughs) He had such trouble speaking English.

FC: It was a good chance for them. Would you work again for the Bracero Program, at the INS?

CB: Oh, yes. It's strange you should ask, but being that I've gone the full circle, it would be very interesting to go back.

FC: I would like to thank you very much for this interview.

End of interview