

4-2-2003

Interview no. 1553

Elias Bonilla

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Elias Bonilla by Richard Baquera, 2003, "Interview no. 1553," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Elias Bonilla

Interviewer: Richard Baquera

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 2, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1553

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Elias Bonilla was born on April 1, 1934, in Tornillo, Texas; his father was originally from Chihuahua, Mexico, and his mother was originally from Coahuila, Mexico; he was the eldest of five children; his father managed a grocery store in Tornillo and was also involved in the family construction business; for a brief time, his family moved to California but returned to Tornillo; he helped his father at a commissary on Allison Farms, where many of the clients were braceros. Mr. Bonilla recalls his childhood growing up in Tornillo, Texas; he goes into great detail about the construction work his father and grandfather would do with adobe buildings and houses; his family moved to California from 1946 to 1949 then returned to Tornillo; upon returning to Tornillo, he helped his father work at a commissary on Allison Farms; he describes the commissary and the various services they provided for the braceros; in addition, he recalls what kinds of items the braceros would buy, what their favorite things were, and how the kinds of clothes they wore were often very telling of the different cities in Mexico that they came from; in 1952, he left to join the military, and goes on to tell what his experiences were like while in the military and what life was like afterward as well.

Name of Interviewee: Elias Bonilla
Date of Interview: April 2, 2003
Name of Interviewer: Richard Baquera

This is an interview with Mr. Elias Bonilla, taken at his home in El Paso, Texas, on Wednesday morning, April 2, 2003. The interviewer is Richard Baquera, and this is for the Bracero Oral History Project.

RB: If you would please, tell me your name.

EB: Elias Bonilla.

RB: Your birthday?

EB: First of April, 1934.

RB: Yesterday was your birthday.

EB: Sixty-nine years young. (laughs)

RB: Happy one day late birthday. Where were you born?

EB: I was born in Tornillo, Texas, in El Paso County, down in the Lower Valley, about fifty miles from here.

RB: Your parents, how long had they been there?

EB: My father and his family migrated from Chihuahua, in March of 1910. They lived in Fabens and in Tornillo all that time. My dad grew up in the valley, and he became a store manager or storekeeper as he called it. My mother and her folks were originally from Coahuila. They came over much later, and my mother and father met as young people in the little town of Tornillo. They married, and I was the eldest child out of five.

RB: You have four other brothers and sisters?

EB: Yes, two brothers, one deceased, and two sisters.

RB: Your father was always a storekeeper? Do you remember?

EB: My father, as a young man, was the leader. That is to say, he represented the family. He represented my grandfather's construction business. He was the one who dealt with the clients. He was the fellow that they went to for everything that needed to be done. He learned to speak English quite well. They built a store for a fellow named Mark Silverman. He took a liking to my dad, and they worked with him for months while they were constructing the store. He offered him the job of senior clerk, and later dad became manager of the store for the Silverman's.

RB: That was down there—

EB: In Tornillo.

RB: Do you remember how many people were in Tornillo at the time?

EB: It's an unincorporated little village, a hamlet really. It grew up around the water tower, like so many of these little towns in west Texas did alongside the railroad. There must have been about maybe two hundred or two hundred and fifty people, at most.

RB: It's mostly for the farms in the area.

EB: Absolutely. It's a cotton farming community. They also had an oil mill, a cottonseed plant, and of course, the gin. That was the economy of the town.

RB: Especially, I would assume, in the fall when all the cotton was being [harvested]. Was it pretty much just all cotton?

EB: The construction of Elephant Butte Dam was done somewhere in about the early teens, 1912, 1915. The purpose of it was to control the water coming down from the Rio Grande. It would come through in a flood stage in July and August. Generally, [it] just spread throughout the valley changing the course of the river and causing a lot of havoc. In order to become more organized agriculturally, they had to tame the river, both on the Mexican side and on the American side. It was very rich bottomland. Unfortunately, the water didn't come in on schedule. Sometimes it was late. Sometimes it came in early, but it did come in and just

generally flood the fields. Arrangements were made with the government to build Elephant Butte and then turned over to the water improvement district. There were some interesting things that went on. My father along with his other brothers helped my grandfather use a steel—harrow—a *fresno*. He would hire out at ten dollars an acre what they call in Spanish a *desmontar*. This would be to smooth out the hillocks and small mounds of earth with brush, and leave it ready for the final braiding for the cotton farmer. For ten bucks an acre, my grandfather would take two mules, the steel *fresno*, and then the children, including my father. [Together] they would gather up all the mesquite brush, and that would be piled up in one corner of the acreage. At the end of the week, on Friday, my father would take the two mules and the wooden wagon, and he would pile up all of the collected mesquite brush to bring it into El Paso. [It] would have been a minimum of thirty-five miles from Tornillo into Ysleta. At the time, it was called Alameda, which of course was Highway 80, our first interstate. The trees grew up over on both sides of Alameda, which was nothing more than a two lane macadam with a stripe down the center. The cottonwoods were huge, and they met in the center, forming a canopy all the way from Tornillo to Ysleta.

RB: Really, that far?

EB: It was, of course, a messy tree. It litters. By the end of the day, pieces of branches and brush would fall onto the roadway. The electric company would send crews out to clean the roadway all the way down so the people could safely travel on it. People were still using it with a combination of automobiles, some trucks, and then of course, the wagons, like my dad's. Alameda was parallel to the railroad tracks. You had the railroads probably fifty yards away. Then you had the canopies, and you had Alameda itself in the center of the canopies. My dad would take all day. He told me to take his mules with the wagon full of firewood, and take it to his route. He had a regular route in Ysleta. He would take it [firewood], and he would trade it to bakeries. There were a lot of bakeries at the time. He would also trade it to store owners for groceries. By the end of the day on Saturday, my dad would have gotten rid of all the wood, and he had a

wagon full of groceries. He would spend the night there, sleeping in the wagon. In the morning, he would hitch them up and drive back home Sunday. [We] had a week's worth of groceries that he had negotiated, traded, and bartered for the firewood. That was part of the profit the family got in the family business of *desmontar*. Of course, at the time, there wasn't that much land leveled in El Paso County, certainly not in the Lower Valley. The Upper Valley was an entirely different situation. You had stagnant water in the Upper Valley, and that had to be done in another matter. Down in the Lower Valley, it was done by the harrows, steel *fresnos*.

RB: In other words, these were the first people who were basically starting agriculture down there. There hadn't been anything there before?

EB: There had been. What you had at the time was a ready market for alfalfa. Remember that Fort Bliss had a huge cavalry, a remount there. The Mexican cavalry also had a huge amount of horses. Then there were the normal farm animals in the Lower Valley. There was a big market for alfalfa. The average person who lived in the rural area, outside of the little hamlets, would have truck gardens, and they would grow their own vegetables. We can say that there was a certain amount of small agricultural plots there. People came here with the idea from places like Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, and those southern cotton-growing states. They knew that El Paso could grow cotton. It had been established pretty early. That's an interesting story, but we don't have to get into it now. Anyway, the cottonseed was brought in from outside El Paso, planted, and then of course, it was grown. There was a ready market with a good world price of cotton. The farmers were good businessmen to begin with, the ones who were successful. Not all of them were. They grew the cotton, and then they sold it or had it ginned. They started gins again very quickly here to take advantage of it, [like] good American capitalists. There was a ready market for the labor to prepare land and to level it like my dad. There were other people, who did the same thing, but my grandfather was a very enterprising man. He knew how to trade labor for money and how to trade firewood for groceries, that sort of thing.

He also was an *albañil*. That is to say, he was a general contractor, a very small general contractor. He built adobe houses, and he built adobe commercial buildings. My father learned to represent him in the negotiations with the owners of these residences and commercial buildings. He and I got together one time after I had become a contractor. I took a pencil to all he told me, and I found out that they actually had a margin of profit of 20 percent on what they did. At the time, a *maestro*, this would be a real first class adobe placer, a fellow who placed the stuff in the wall, would get about \$1.50 a day. Now the laborers, the ones who made the adobes, let them dry, and used the hoe and water buckets to make the clay adobe plaster, now they only got about 50¢ a day. They made the adobe themselves as well.

RB: They made the adobe themselves, right on site, and let it dry. They weren't baked, kilned dried, or anything. They were just baked in the sun. They had two systems of doing it. If it were a residence, they would lay the adobes the long way for the wall. If it was gonna be a commercial building, which required a higher ceiling and more strength, they would turn it on the long way. That was the way they determined it. (laughs) When they started out a building, my dad showed me, he would take the heel of his right foot, and he would make a mark in the dirt. Then he would, at right angles, make a second mark. He would do it at every corner. That was the signal for the laborers to start digging. They dug down maybe about a foot, and then they started putting in rocks they had collected. The foundation for these adobe buildings consisted of large rocks and layers of lime mortar. After the walls were brought up, they would mix concrete and pour the floor. As it came up, they used the old method that was introduced by the Spanish to the Arabs in Spain, which was to use a rope. The rope was about twenty feet long, and it had knots in it indicating the placement and width of both windows and doors. They would lay it on top of the foundation.

RB: Crosswise or lengthwise?

EB: Lengthwise. That would be your mason's mark, instead of using twine, which they didn't have. They made everything work. They were good at what they did. They were very efficient and very hardworking. Everything was done on a quota system. My grandfather paid the *maestro* a dollar and a half a day. By God, he had to lay two hundred adobes a day. (laughs) Of course, everybody at the end of the day was wiped out.

RB: The lime for the mortar, did they have to buy it?

EB: They had to buy it, but that was really available. It wasn't like this fancy, yellow colored, hydrated stuff we have now, just pure lime. It was also used for food.

RB: For the corn?

EB: For the corn, right. It gave good strong teeth, I guess. Look at mine. (laughs)

RB: Did he ever tell you what was maybe the largest building he constructed? Was it mostly homes and businesses?

EB: He did both. Most of the adobe houses that they built are still standing in the little town of Tornillo. My dad took me around and showed them to me, and I took my kids and showed them. I made them touch the walls and lean into them. Every year, of course, they deteriorate. The largest building in Tornillo was the oil mill. It was a huge place. They tore it down about ten years ago. Everybody and their family got a little piece of it as a souvenir.

RB: They had constructed that?

EB: They had constructed that. He also constructed a number of buildings in Fabens. They had lived in Fabens. They had built their own compound, the three brothers, my grandfather, and his two brothers. They also built some commercial buildings, which are still there. I have no idea how many residences they built in Tornillo, Cuadrilla, San Elizario, Socorro, or any place like that. He was very active in the trade. My grandfather died in 1928. My mother and father married in 1933, soon after that. He continued working there during World War II. We

left my grandfather's house, which my father had inherited in Tornillo, and we went to live at the Allison place. Dad was the storekeeper at the commissary at the L.R. Allison Farms. It was the largest cotton and Cattle Company in the Lower Valley. It had fifteen hundred acres. It spanned from Highway 80 to the Mexican border.

RB: In other words, to the river?

EB: Clear to the river. It was maybe half a mile wide or something like that. At the time, the pecans had not been introduced yet, so they still had a fairly good market for alfalfa even though the cavalry was still here in World War II, [during] the early years. The Mexicans were raising their own alfalfa by then. The cotton was very usable and enjoyed a very good world market price for many years. It was the dominant cotton crop in the world. They made denim from it, and they made a number of other things. They also very ingeniously used the very fine lint that was left on the cottonseed for a number of things. One was to make explosives, and it was also one of the constituent parts of making film.

RB: Oh, really? I didn't realize that.

EB: Right, acetate. Then of course, they crushed the seed, and the oil was used to make a substitute for butter. They used everything including the shell. The shell that was left over after they had thoroughly processed the seed was used as cattle feed. It was very nutritious. They used everything. (laughs)

RB: It sounds like it.

EB: There was always a demand for labor to pick the cotton, irrigate it, hoe it, and so on. Up until World War II, it had not been a problem. You had some people who would come over everyday from little towns on the other side of the border [like] Caseta, Guadalupe, San Ignacio, and all those places. They would come over in the morning, and they would work all day. Then in the evening, they would simply walk back across. That was all pretty well understood. The Border Patrol and Customs people went along with it, because the American farmers needed

that labor. There were a lot of native Mexican Americans who did that, but they were always looking for better work than that. They had to bring in these day laborers, *jornaleros*, from Mexico to take up the slack.

RB: Do you remember how much they were paid?

EB: Not much. I was a child then. I've done some research on it, and I remember the stories that I was told. I don't have a firm grasp on all of the numbers. In World War II, the Americans took prisoners, and they brought them into places like El Paso and many other places I'm sure. They set up camps. There was one in Fabens, in particular. I think they had about fifty people there.

RB: Were they Germans or Italians? Do you remember?

EB: The first ones were Germans. After that, they brought in more Italians. The Italians were very amenable. They could almost speak Spanish. It's a very similar language, as you know, a romance language. Neither the Germans nor the Italians, who I understand were basically rural people and farmers themselves, were used to the heat. They certainly weren't used to stoop labor. Their productivity was pretty low. If they picked one hundred pounds a day, that was a lot. It was mostly like twenty-five to fifty pounds. (laughs) Some did more, and some did about that. The American farmers were pretty unhappy about it. All the available Mexican American labor, including my uncles and even my dad, for a short while, were all drafted. They were gone. They were fighting. That little town produced dozens of soldiers. Most of them went into the Army. There was a vacuum here, and there was no labor. There was a huge demand for the cotton product, as you can imagine, just for uniforms alone, the khaki. I can't pretend to know exactly how it worked out, but the Mexican movers and shakers over in Juarez realized that there was huge market for labor on the American side, and there was a huge surplus of Mexican labor on the other side. There was no way to get them back and forth because of the immigration laws, which were being strictly enforced after all, for security reasons. As I recall, the railroads were staffed by Mexican soldiers with bayonets. (laughs) They patrolled the passenger

cars to prevent escaping prisoners of war from going down into Mexico. There was a lot of that, you could see, I recall. Dad had moved the family to California, East Los Angeles, which is a very interesting story, but we won't go into that. We got back in 1949. Things had changed here in El Paso.

RB: You were at Allison Farms—

EB: Until about 1946.

RB: I see and then you—

EB: We moved to California.

RB: For about three years?

EB: For about three years, then came back. It didn't turn out to as be exciting and wonderful as we were told. We were told that it was Mexican blue heaven, but it really wasn't. (both laugh)

RB: You came back to the same place?

EB: Dad maneuvered a new contract with Mr. Allison. Instead of going to Tornillo and running the commissary there in the little town, we went to the Allison place. We went directly there from California. Dad took up the duties of being—

RB: You would have been ten years old?

EB: I was about fifteen, fourteen or fifteen, somewhere in there. When I got back, I graduated from junior high school in Montebello, California, and I graduated from elementary school here in Tornillo. I started Montebello Senior High School in 1949 and then in the middle of the year, I was uprooted and brought back here. I finished my high school education in Tornillo. I graduated in 1952. I immediately went into the Air Force, because I wanted the GI Bill so I could go to college. When we got back, there had been a change. I don't recall if it was the first year of the Bracero Program or not. I'm sure you'll have more accurate

information than what I'm giving you about that. I recall that dad would ask me if I wanted to help receive the workers as they were coming in from Rio Vista.

RB: Can I ask you a question? The commissary itself, was it a building on the Allison Farm?

EB: Yes, it was.

RB: Could you just kind of describe it? What did you sell? Your father ran it, but was there a certain profit that he made? I'm just curious.

EB: The Allison place was self-sufficient, almost a hacienda. People lived on the place, managers and so on. Most of the senior managers were Anglo. They had their own machine shop and mechanical shop. There was a manager who was the administrator. He did the bookkeeping. Dad ran the store. They had their own blacksmith shop, where they did a great deal of work, in addition to the machine shop. They had their own blacksmith guy there with an anvil and a huge hearth. [It was] bang, bang, bang, all day long. I can still hear it today, a wonderful memory. Then there were the people who handled the livestock. They always had a certain amount of beef cattle on the place. Later, they introduced sheep, but that didn't work out too well. They always had cattle, and of course, they had herds of horses. One summer I worked as a cowboy. I learned to ride and work the cattle and so on. They had a *caballerango*, which is as you know, the root word for the American cowboy word, wrangler. He was the guy who took care of all the horses, all the tack, and kept the herds in good repair. They used them to move the cattle from one pasture to another. When they were through raising a crop of alfalfa, which was harvested up until about maybe the fourth or fifth cutting, they would bring in the cattle to let them graze on it. They had to keep them moving, because alfalfa has the tendency to create gas in the cattle. That's what we did as kids. Anyway, the big product was cotton. Mr. Allison was an investor. He had purchased that land by combining three actual smaller farms. He bought them and combined them all under Allison. The way he worked, he had an interest in a construction company in New Mexico—Allison Haney. They

were the largest road contractors in New Mexico. He was politically very well connected with the senators from New Mexico. Also, he was very well connected with the state representatives and senators from El Paso to Austin. He also invested in oil and gas leases. He was a friend of Conrad Hilton. All of these people were originally from New Mexico, so they all knew each other. He kept a place at the Hilton Hotel in downtown El Paso. He always kept the penthouse rented. That was one of the places where he stayed. He also had an apartment in a New York City hotel. He often went there. He bought the land and built this large hacienda building as a residence. He was there with his daughter, Francis Allison, a wonderful woman, but I'll go into that a little later. He was traveling a lot, so he had professional managers in charge of what he did. Whenever he was in residence, well of course, things revolved around what he needed done. For the most part, he was an absentee owner. He kept track of everything. (laughs) He really did. He was quite a businessman. He also had been involved in the creation of one of the dams in New Mexico, with a partner. He made a ton of money during the war, because if you remember, they needed electricity, so they needed the dams built. The government gave cost-plus contracts. It was a twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week construction job. They poured concrete twenty-four hours a day to build those dams. I forget which dam he was involved with, but he got one. The man was very busy. He also found time to start the Sunland Park Racetrack.

RB: He had horses as well.

EB: He could see the value of having horseracing down here. Since he had the politicians with him, he was able to get that done. In order to do it, he needed water, and he needed wells. Of course, when the people heard about his plans, all hell broke loose in El Paso. All of the Protestant Churches, I don't think the Catholics got too involved in it, but they thought it was just terrible that gambling was being brought in so close to us. They led a drive to stop the drilling of the water wells so there would be no casino, no racetrack, and no gambling. He was

able to prevail and get the wells sunk and run and started. You can see he was very (laughs)—

RB: Sounds like it.

EB: Anyway, he was also involved very much. It was in his interest, as far as the labor was concerned, to have some input into making sure the Bracero Program was a reality. If I'm not mistaken, it was Antonio Bermudez, in Juarez, who came up with the idea of a Bracero Program. *Brazos, pués*, meaning strong arms. Every farmer would contract, it was all worked out legally, at Rio Vista. I'm sure you probably have information on that. That would become the reception center for all of the qualified men from all over Mexico. As each farmer neared his crop need for labor, he would contract for so many, and they would send them out in buses, usually at night, because it was cooler then. There I take up the end of my story. Dad asked me to go help him. We got up and went over there about ten o'clock at night. Dad opened up the warehouse, which was across the street from the commissary. There was a huge open area between the corrals, the dairy cattle, the horse herd, the warehouse, the storage, the buildings, the administrative building with the connected store next to it and warehouse for the commissary, and then a great number of other outbuildings. They had a terrific infrastructure. It was all pretty well planned. They all had aluminum roofs, which were later painted silver. The plaster walls on the adobe buildings were all white, and the trim was painted a royal dark blue. Everything in the place was the same color, except his hacienda. They had housing for all of the managers. It was according to tenure, which house you got. Some were starter houses, some were better, and some were much better. According to your pecking order, you got a house. Dad usually got us an upgrade every year. We finally wound up living right behind the store, a very nice place.

RB: The store then was there basically to provide for the needs of the workers who were there?

EB: For the whole place, yeah.

RB: So that you wouldn't have to go into Tornillo or anywhere else. Whatever you needed, supplies, food, or anything was there.

EB: It was all there, and they would also take charge of ordering custom things, whatever they really needed, since dad had the contacts with all these vendors who would come in. It was three-quarters of a mile from Highway 80 to the front of the store. It was a two-lane gravel road with trees on both sides. They would come in all day long, all the vendors. They would bring in bread, milk, groceries, and all kinds of staples. Anything that was needed from El Paso or elsewhere was ordered through the store, and dad took care of that.

RB: How many workers do you suppose were on the farm?

EB: The men who lived on the place from Mexico were called *peones acasillados*. These were laborers who were given free rent. Then you had *peones de día*, *jornaleros*, who would come in during the day, but they left at night. I would say, year-round, there were probably fifty people, including the families and the managers, and then all of the other people who were in charge of the agricultural group.

RB: It must have been a good size commissary then.

EB: It was, and there was a big turnover of items. Dad had a butcher shop at one end of the store with a walk-in freezer. The rest of it was taken up with canned goods along one side. Across the back were all the dry goods. Then there were other things on the serving counter where you would have candies and things like that. It had a concrete floor. Stacks of soda, for example, were brought in and placed one on top of the other all the way up to the ceiling. It was kind of tight in there. It really was. Dad would hire clerks. Dad would put me to work behind the counter at the age of, I think, it was eight years old. That's when I got my social security card, in 1943, I think. Anyway, dad taught me how to wait on people and all that. He had one little mechanical adding machine. You pushed on it, and you pulled a lever. Dad wouldn't let me use it. He told me not to use it. I said,

“What do you have it here for?” He said, “Look, you learn to do your adding with a pencil. Just learn to do the addition. Now, if you want to check your addition on the bill for accuracy, then you can use the machine.” Well, by the time you got through, you were busy. You didn’t have time to work the little machine. You did it all by pencil. This is the way dad taught me to do it. Today, I find myself taking notes for the things I have to do with a number two pencil and a yellow—(laughs)

RB: Same way.

EB: Yeah. He was right in a way, because I’ve seen places where the electricity goes off, and everybody is used to using adding machines, the lights go off, they’re helpless. They can’t do anything. Anyway, dad would hire clerks and train them, as he needed them. When the braceros came in, there was an explosion of work, of everything. They brought in more tractors, and they repaired them. They had all kinds of equipment to begin with. They even used surplus army equipment. They had a tank that they had remodeled. (laughs) A tank!

RB: What were they going to be using—

EB: They were using it to pull these huge plows. At one time or another, you would have to go deep and turn them over. As you understand, cotton depletes the soil of nitrogen. They used to put in alfalfa for a couple of years to replenish the soil and then go back to the cotton. In order to get all the root system of the alfalfa, which is very extensive and very hard, they had to use very deep plowing. They had to have a Caterpillar for that, but they also had a tank. You couldn’t just get anything you wanted. You usually bought things used, and then you repaired them. You had a good mechanic. They were always cannibalizing parts, creating new ones, and welding new ones. [It was] a busy place. Some of my prettiest memories are of going over in the summers and listening to—talking to the guy at the blacksmith shop while he was doing all the work, sharpening and resharpening the tools for the various machines.

RB: Do you remember his name?

EB: No, I don't. He lived in Caseta, and he had a family. He was an older guy, but he was very stout, a life timer. He came back and forth. When he retired, they brought in new people with automatic machines, so no more handwork. I still remember the day. They would talk to me. I had the run of the place, and everybody knew me. They were real good to me, all those kids. I had to learn to get along with laborers. My mother had taken us, in the summers, down to Mexico, Coahuila, a little town outside of Torreón. My grandfather and grandmother lived there. That's where she had been before. She would take us kids, and we would jump on the train. We would go down as soon as school let out in El Paso County. We would go on about a two-day trip down to Coahuila, through all those towns. It was an exciting adventure for a kid. I'm telling you! Of course, you didn't have first class accommodations, you had second and then you had third. Third was where all the chickens and pigs were. Second at least you had a place to sit. There were no dining facilities so you bought food at every stop, and there were a lot of stops. People would come up and thrust cups of coffee and milk at you, gorditas and tamales, whatever you wanted to eat. Nobody gave any thought to sanitary facilities or food inspectors. You just grabbed what you could, paid for it, and ate. There would be musicians. I remember one guy was blind. He was good on the guitar, and his son would bring him aboard. The guy would sing, and people would take pity and drop—he had a lot of voice, and he always sang these real tearjerkers. (both laugh)

RB: That's what you could call good drinking songs.

EB: Drinking songs, right. There were always people on the way down. There would be the ever-present Mexican soldiers with their guns and all. The Mexican National Railroads bought a lot of used equipment from the Americans. When the Americans came out with the diesel, they got rid of all of their steams. All the steam stuff went down south. Mexico did the same thing. When they got ready to buy other equipment, they would take theirs, and they would sell it to

Guatemala, Honduras, or whatever. Whatever we do to the Mexicans on the border here, they do to somebody else down there.

RB: Lower on the pecking order.

EB: Yes, sir. One of my memories was going down a steep hill into—Gomez, Gomez—Palacio. We were coming down lickety-split, and all of a sudden, I was the only guy awake in that particular train or car. I could see the lights from the other car getting dimmer and dimmer, and I realized we had pulled apart. (laughs) I woke everybody up, and said, “Hey!” Everybody was in an uproar, you know. Well, the engineer, this wasn’t the first time it had happened. He simply slowed down. Eventually we caught up with them, and off we went again. I remember another time. We had to stop, because they had to do some mechanical repair on one of the engines out in the middle of the desert, God knows where. Everybody started getting out and going behind a bush, relieving themselves. Then all of a sudden, toot, toot, and “Let’s go! Let’s get out of here.” You could see people jumping out of the bushes and running toward the train. (both laugh) Anyway, a real adventure for a little kid.

RB: Sounds like it.

EB: Anyway, of course, I went to school in Mexico in the summers. When I got back, I was put back into elementary school. I recall that the very first summer I went down there; I was put in the second grade. They didn’t [know] what to do with me. I didn’t know—my Spanish wasn’t that good. They decided, as a favor to my grandfather, who everybody knew there, [because] he had a little store there, they put me in and my sister and my brother. They put them in the first grade, and they put me in the second grade. I went to the Mexican school, which I found out, was based on the European system. The first six grades you get algebra. Everything to the sixth grade, and that’s it. From there on, either you go to college, a trade school, or you go to work. It was very interesting. I learned to salute the flag and say the national poem. They were very strong on that down there. Also, I learned the culture, how things are done. There would be maybe

two or three grades in the same room. The boys would flirt with the girls, and this was not allowed. The *profesor* and the *profesora*, boy they were the law. They had the right to exercise corporal punishment. If somebody got out of line, they would slap the hell out of them.

RB: Oh, really?

EB: Oh, yeah, both boys and girls. That was it. That was the end of it, nobody complained. There were no letters to the editor. Nobody sued the principal of the school, nothing. (both laugh) The professor was the law. They had a great deal of respect for an educated person. Anyway, [we had] a lot of adventures in those summers that we went down there. I had learned to meet and talk to my grandfather. He was very good about it. He also taught me [to work] behind the counter, to wait on people, but he did it in Spanish. He gave me a great deal of education about people in general. I spent many a happy hour at this elbow, listening to him tell me about people in the little town. I had that advantage. My Spanish increased—my understanding of it. The first summer went that way. Then we came back in the fall. I started in a Tornillo school in the second grade. I sat down, and all of a sudden, I realized I didn't understand. I had forgotten my English during the summer. It was astounding, hair-raising. I didn't understand them. These were my friends. I knew them, and I knew they were trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand them. Do you know what the sound of English sounds like to somebody who doesn't speak English?

RB: No. I never thought of it from that end.

EB: It sounds like the hissing of geese. There are so many sharp s sounds in the English language. You can't believe—how on earth are you going to learn to speak this language with so many s sounds—it's so distracting. Soon, in a couple of weeks, it came back to me. I went on my merry way.

RB: It's amazing that you would forget.

EB: Yes, that's true. It happened.

RB: I guess it reflects more on the total immersion you were put into over there in the Mexican school. How old were you when you first started working at the commissary with your dad, working with the braceros?

EB: Dealing with braceros, I was about fifteen years old, in 1949. They were brought in, as I explained to you. The way it worked, they would bring in a busload. Let's say there were twenty or thirty people. They would all come down off the bus, and the bus would drive off. They were going to go pick up other people, and take them elsewhere. There would be a list of names. The administrator was there with his list. He would talk to dad, and dad would say, "Okay, you guys make a *quadrilla*, the four of you guys are gonna live in one room." So, they would select each other and stand off and be a *quadrilla*. There'd be four of them. Each *quadrilla* then, would receive their allotment. This was all worked out by the Mexican government.

RB: You really didn't have a choice as to what—

EB: No, because the Americans had agreed to furnish them everything, to pay them so much, and also to provide a certain amount of medical attention for them and so on. Remember, they were only going to be there for a certain number of months, it was not a permanent situation. Dad would have a couple of the guys, his clerks, help me. Each *quadrilla* would receive their common utensils. Each room was about ten by fourteen [feet], something like that; it had one door and one window. There they had a *cuadra*, it was a huge rectangle with an open area in the center, it was already built; it was already there. These quarters [were] for the braceros, quarters for semipermanent workers or what have you. They were not houses; the houses were separate. Anyway, there was one light bulb, about a 75-watt bulb, I don't think it was one hundred, more like sixty or seventy-five. And in the middle of the room were one table and four chairs, then there were four army cots with the springs—

RB: The old style?

- EB: The old style. There would be four men to a room, and that's what they would have. Each one received their utensils, but to continue with their common utensils, they would get one very large soup spoon, this was blue and white enameled metal wear, that's what they got, it was new, it had this peculiar polka dot effect, the white coming through the blue, pretty good, there was nothing wrong with it, it was Army issue. Anyway, each man got kind of like a soup platter, which was a large dish, but it was kind of deep, and they could eat soup out of it or whatever they wanted to, each one got that, and each one got a cup. They also got a large bowl so they could wash dishes in it. They also got a two-burner kerosene stove, about this high and this big.
- RB: Is that like two feet by one foot, less, something like that?
- EB: Similar, yes that would be good. Each one of them had about a half gallon capacity, glass fuel tank, that was that. Then, personal utensils furnished, they each got a fork, a knife, and a small spoon that was it, that was issued to them, that was chrome plated metal of some kind.
- RB: Was there any kind of pots, pans, any kind of cooking, anything that they could cook in? Do you remember?
- EB: Yeah, you're right, there was a frying pan, I don't think each one got a frying pan, I think there was a common frying pan, there may have been two. They cooked their own food, except that there would be some of the people who lived on the place, whose wives' and children lived there. They would have what they would call *casas de borde*, this would be a person that you would sign up with, and you would be given hot meals. They would cost so much a day, maybe a dollar, dollar and a half, something in that order. They would make you three meals a day, they would make you morning breakfast, and give you a lunch, so you could take it with you in a paper bag, and then at night they would have the *cena*. They cooked up a storm, and they ladled it out to these guys. A lot of the men just, when they started making money that was a luxury for them, they didn't want to do that (unintelligible).

RB: They'd rather do their own cooking?

EB: They would for a while, but then they got tired. They were used to having their womenfolk do all their cooking, here it was, they had to cook, make a *lonche*, and then at night, they would come home dog-tired—

RB: Cook and then clean the dishes.

EB: Yeah, the whole smear, so, a lot of them just gave up and they said, "Okay, I'll just work harder, pay a dollar, dollar and a half a day." Later on the price went up, of course, prices went up. Then after that, they immediately were given a *ficha*. The *ficha* was a brass disk with a number on it in black enamel that was their open credit, they could buy food at the commissary against future earnings. Whatever they owed, they had a system where they would present them, we didn't keep up with their names, although after a while, we learned their names, and we really got to know them. We would take their order, they would give the *ficha*, we would take the number down, that's what was all-important, the number, give them back their *ficha*, and then they would tell us, "*Quiero una caja de pan*. I want a loaf of white bread." They had never seen white bread until they got here, but boy, did they learn to like it. (laughs)

RB: They did?

EB: Yeah, (laughs) they learned to like it. It was white, enriched flour bread, worst thing you can eat, but there it was. Back then, we didn't have all this knowledge, (laughs) what was good and what wasn't. And we would tie a knot on it so the air wouldn't get in there, and it would last for a while. Some of them would buy together, "*Sí, bueno, tú compre esto y yo compro el otro*." They quickly found out how to buy. Then they would buy cans of food. They liked to buy the prepared beans, they liked to, because they really didn't know how to cook beans properly, it took forever, and they didn't want to be stirring. I guess there is a cultural bias against men cooking in Mexico, some have to, of course, but most of

the time, this is *trabajo de mujeres*. They never really learn, they certainly don't appreciate it, so this is where the commissary came in.

RB: Did they get, like, I'm sure they did, but you didn't mention it, like a blanket, a pillow, anything like that?

EB: I'm sorry. They got a pillow, and they also got a bedroll, then they each got an army blanket, olive. That pretty much completes the issue, what each man got.

RB: How about any, like, food just to get them started, no?

EB: Dad simply opened up the commissary. They had been fed at Rio Vista, they had evening supper, so the only thing they had to prepare for was the next morning, because they went to work right away, then they would have to make breakfast, and they would have to make a *lonche*. The first few days was hectic for them, because it was all new to them, they had never done it before, and they would forget, they'd forget that they had to buy this and buy that. There was no refrigeration so the food spoiled, you ate it, I mean, you cooked it, and you ate it, because it would spoil. There were two water taps in the center of the open area that worked as everything, that's where they ditched water and everything else. They also got the water for drinking, water for cooking, and for bathing, they would take the water inside. They would buy a bucket from the store, that's what they would take a bath. They used the usual system that rural people have used forever; they'd bathe on Saturday night, that's it. Then during the week, they couldn't afford to buy razor blades, they were too expensive, *la hoja*, they would shave once a week, and then they would be ready for Sunday. There was no church facilities, nowhere to go, but still, this was a custom, *costumbre*. They would put on their nice clothes, and they would spend all day Sunday in the *cuadra*. They would play card games, and they would play baseball, they would just sit and talk and visit, write letters, and all that, they would [take] long walks to the river and back. They knew they couldn't get out of there, because that would void their contract, they would send them right back. This was good work, good money, all they had to do was focus and concentrate on producing, and they

could make money. Excuse me. (pause) As time went on, I recall at the peak of the cotton-picking season, they would be a total of some six hundred at the Allison place.

RB: Really? That's a lot.

EB: A lot of them, since there was no more housing available, the *cuadra* was completely full up, they would come in, by that time, a lot of them were quartered in Caseta. They would have a car, somehow or another, and they would drive over in the morning, these were the guys who were there as *jornaleros*, all legal, they all had their papers. They were checked at the Fabens Bridge, for example, they would come across, present their cards, the guys knew where they were going. They were looking for them at night, "You come back tonight." It worked out pretty well, smooth, but there would be that many. Remember the picking was over thirty to sixty days, I mean, boom, boom, done. They had a train of these cotton wagons where they would pull the cotton. They would have a whole system of people who weighed the cotton for them, gave them a slip for the amount of cotton the machines said they had picked up, the scales. They were paid so much; I think it was a penny and a half or something like that, for a pound. At the end of the week, they would tally up everything that they had picked, and then they would calculate, somebody in the office—

RB: Eleanor Martin.

EB: Before that, the guy she worked for was a Cyber, he was the administrator, they would calculate it. Each man got a little brown envelope with his number on it and his name, in it, they would put in copies of his receipts that were kept showing what he had bought, that was stuffed in there. They would take the money that he owed to the store, turn it over to the administrator's fund, then what was left over, his net, they would stuff it into it, and that was his money, clear and all.

RB: That was cash, right?

EB: The whole cash. They had to go to Fabens to pick up the money and bring it in, I suppose thousands of dollars, I never knew. Anyway, on payday, they had a little window, and everybody would come right on up. They would give the *ficha*—each of them, show it, and they would be given their [checks], then they would look at it, then go and tell dad, “*Oiga, usted me cobró tanto.*” Dad would make an adjustment or tell them, “Get out of here.” (both laugh) “Don’t try to con me.” They would buy things for themselves once they started getting money in, like pocketknives, and they all liked to carry these pocketwatches, you know, pocket watches? They would buy themselves straw hats for Sunday wear. They would buy cowboy clothes, *norteño* they call it. The guys from the northern states, from Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, places like that, they would dress *norteño*, we could tell by the dress where they were from. After you get to know them. The *sureños*, the guys who were from the south, who were always *muy indios*, they were very dark, very Indian features, they always dressed in white, white shirt, white pants. The other men called them *guardapedos*, because they wore narrow legs trousers. They would also wear *huaraches*; they didn’t wear shoes.

RB: All the time?

EB: All the time, that was it, they worked and dressed in the same *huaraches*. They would wash out their white clothes, because that’s what they wore in the southern part of Mexico, it was very humid, but the guys who were from the more urban areas, they dressed differently. All the guys along the border, from Chihuahua and all that, they always wore these fancy *norteño* clothes, they wore these fancy belts. The ones that could afford it would buy boots, most of them didn’t, but they would buy boots. They would wear dark Levi’s and cowboy shirts, the louder the better (laughs) and a nice hat.

RB: It’s interesting, at first, they wouldn’t pay for somebody to cook for them, but then later they’re buying these, what you would consider maybe expensive clothes, you would think they would want to save the money to take home.

EB: Richard, it evolved, what they did, their customs evolved. Also, accordingly, they were making more money, they were sending money home, don't get me wrong, they did it, that was the purpose for being there, but they also—do you want to stop?

RB: No, that's okay; I'm almost at the end of this tape.

EB: How long is that?

RB: I think it's seventy-four, we're at seventy-two. I can go ahead and stop it if you want.

EB: No, no. Anyway, remember that this went on for years. So what happened was that you had certain men, a lot of them became almost permanent braceros at the places where they had started, they really did. A lot of them simply transferred their place of residence from down in the interior to these towns over here, Zaragoza, San Ignacio, and so on, what they would do, they would become the daily *jornaleros*, even if they didn't, they would go home on the weekends, but they were making money. They had learned how to work the system and work hard, and so they had money left over to buy that, now they would also buy for their children, and dad always had clothing, American underwear for the women, brassieres and panties and all that, also cotton underwear for the men, khaki shirts, khaki pants, and the *sombreros*. The guys from the interior would wear straw hats all right, but they had a peculiar cultural habit, they would have a little string in the back with a little flower or a little feather hanging from the back of the hat, that way you could tell where he was from, "*Este camarada viene de Zacatecas, mira.*" You could tell by their walk, their confidence, you could tell by their clothing mostly, and you could tell by their accent where they were from. We learned a lot, I did learn a lot from them. I grew to like them very much. I respected the—there was a nobility about their work, they were proud of what they did, very masculine, they were not at all what you would think. At least we got the clean-cut group up here, they weren't drunks, they weren't any of that or fighters or anything like that, they were pretty clean cut, mature, family men, who

knew they couldn't make a good living for their families over there, but they could over here, so you had that. Also, you had some of them who applied for and became permanent visa, green card residents. Now that's an interesting story. A number of them brought their families over or brought their young wives over, and they had children over there as American citizens. The kids went through school in Tornillo and all, graduated from high school, several of them went to college, women, the girls, and the men, and became very productive citizens and had good professional jobs. You'd find that, up and down, the family took root.

RB: Right. It sounds like, from what you're describing, is that you believe that it was very much a success overall, because the farmers here needed the workers, the workers came over, and by and large, it seems like they succeeded, maybe more than they ever hoped they would, since some were able to stay here—

EB: Yes, you're right, however, what really happened, the other side of the story is, as soon as they could, they got out of here, this was a springboard to the interior. They knew they could go to Kansas City, Chicago, Denver, they could work in the mines in Arizona, they could work, for example, meat cutting places in Iowa.

RB: Was this as braceros or as illegals?

EB: Legal, green card workers. Yeah, they would come in, and they would pay their dues, it took a while to get that green card, it wasn't done in a day, but then they took the kids and they were gone. The kids who stayed there went to school, but as soon as they could, they got out of here, they went to college elsewhere. They quickly went to work in Dallas, Houston, Austin, and places like that, then they would send for their mother and father. Over there, they all live together following the old tradition. They would have a car, or two cars, or three cars, and buy a house, buy furniture, and by God, they would start all over again. But, you know, it's like the old story, it takes three generations to make an American citizen, the third one, the grandchild, doesn't speak Spanish or Polish or anything else, she's an American, the middle people, what you would call the immigrant

generation, they're in between, and, of course, the original group that came over, you know.

RB: Let me start. This is the end of the first part. This is the second part of the interview with Mr. Elias Bonilla. I wanted to go back. There's a couple of questions. How long was their workday?

EB: It was certainly longer than forty hours. Remember they were being paid as contract labor, no salaries involved. The only salaried people were people like my dad and other managers, but that was different, they were there all year-round. The laborers worked six days a week, Monday through Saturday; they were off Sunday. The time was when they started in the morning, maybe say—early, because in the summer, when it was very hot, they would start early, when you could barely see daylight, say they would start around five o'clock in the morning. Then they would work until it became unbearably hot, or they reached the end of the *surcos*, or reached another field. They could stop pretty much when they wanted to, but they had to walk all the way back, there would be no transportation. They were very, very serious and industrious, while there was daylight, and there was work to be done, they did it, because this is what they were here for, to make money, there was never any questions about their motivations. They very quietly planned what they were going to do for themselves, what they would do in accumulating money. Some of them, for example, accumulated enough money, I remember a couple of guys in particular, they brought their families into Caseta, and they then opened a little store.

RB: Oh, they learned from your father.

EB: Yes, that's right. There was one guy, Francisco something or another, we called him *Pancho Pistolas*. He was a real character, hard worker. He had his family over here, brought them up from, I think, somewhere in the interior. They set up a little store. He would buy things from dad and take them across and resell them over there, cause not everybody would come across. Remember, those gates had slammed shut in World War II and afterwards, so you didn't have that much free

flow, the only people who would come over were the people who had a visa or who had a one day shopping permit, but not everybody had a car. People on the other side were limited in their ability to come over and buy things. They were kind of prey for people who brought the stuff over there and sold it to them on credit, credit, remember that. Anyway, I admired them and saw that they were people who wanted to better themselves and were very crafty, very patient, who saw opportunities for themselves, and who were quite willing to sacrifice years of hard work in order to achieve certain goals for themselves and their families, to better *la familia*. They not only took advantage of American educational opportunities for their children, but they also took advantage of, as I mentioned earlier, once they got that green card, that was a ticket to anywhere they wanted to go in the United States. There was absolutely no problem in going to work anywhere else in the United States. Here in this part of the country, people tend to follow the 106th meridian, they go straight up, and then from there they go to Iowa or whatever.

RB: Like Denver.

EB: Denver, straight up, they take the railroad or they take the Greyhound bus. In California, that was an entirely different matter. People from Arizona, they have their own states that they follow; they also do a lot of work in the mines over there, which is not necessarily true over here. Here, these people are agricultural workers, the best in the world, very, very good. Then on the East Coast, I mean the West Coast, you have very hardworking people, people, for example, from the state of Jalisco. Actually, one of the hardest workers I've ever seen in my life [was from there], they make the guys from Chihuahua look like pantywaists. So all that I learned from living in Mexico as a child and working with my dad behind the counter with the braceros, I put to use later on in my career, because I was able to function very well with these Mexican workers.

RB: I do want to ask you about afterwards. I was just wondering, did you ever see any kind of abuse of the braceros? You know, I don't know—they weren't paid what they were supposed to? I don't know mistreatment in any way?

EB: I never heard of any. You had occasionally people who tried to cheat the system. They would put rocks in their *costal*, but they were quick to catch on to that, they would feel them, find a rock, and take it out. A guy like that would be fired, it kind of worked the other way around. People were always testing the system to see if they could find a soft spot or they would steal things in the store. Oh, yeah, but I never saw anybody who was abused, I never heard of any. Everybody wanted them to succeed in production, because everybody's job depended on it. Dad couldn't sell groceries if nobody was there to pay for them, and so on. I never heard or saw anything. We heard of stuff like that, for example, you would hear stories about people from Pecos who were supposed to have a bad reputation over there. I personally have talked to people who told me they had been shoved around in the sidewalk over there, with these toughies, but, for the most part, no. There was more shenanigans going on in California, which I found out later among the agricultural workers. I found out that most of those were not against braceros, but against Mexican Americans themselves, who frankly didn't have a work ethic from the guys in Mexico. They were just trying to get by without working too hard; they certainly did not produce what these guys did down here. The guys that were able to learn American technology did very well, they were able to join their work ethic by mastering American technology, and became highly productive and well sought after, and well paid. I knew more than one who became a master craftsman. You know you have to graft a type of pecan tree onto the original pecan tree.

RB: Sure, it's very small—

EB: The original pecan tree gives very small nuts, but if you introduce, through grafting, another tree in there, then you get the large nut, you get the variety, the paper shell, and so on. That takes some doing. I knew one fella who became

very, very good at it, he did it all for the Allison place. When they introduced that as a cash crop, he became a consultant. [He] went to live on his own and went to go graft for whoever hired him. Boy, his kids did well, oh, my God; all went to college in Dallas.

RB: The most interesting occupation.

EB: Very interesting. We had a lot of fellas who became masters at tractor, *tractoristas*, they were very, very good at it. They could go to work almost anywhere there was harvesting machines, then they also became good mechanics and could move on. There was always the master carpenters, who were always in demand, one or two were always needed. Then there were the guys who learned to do the welding, who were already welders; they brought with them a lot of skills that they put to good use, anything to try and reach that magic status of being a resident alien, the green card.

RB: It almost seems like there was nothing to stop you, if you had the willingness to learn to do something.

EB: That's true. It's always good to remember that in these kinds of migrations, the fellas who finally made it over here and became braceros went through a great deal of grief and sacrifice in doing without. It wasn't easy to get in line and get assigned and go through the process.

RB: They would be X-rayed and checked—

EB: Oh, yeah, checked, selected, and they had to prove themselves every step of the way. The guys we had were survivors, genetically, their kids were survivors, too. They had a work ethic that was incredible. I'm sure you have the information about what went on at Rio Vista. Later on, I became friends with a fella who was a civilian employee of the United States Department of Health, as opposed to a commissioned officer. This fella was a civilian, and he had a Ph.D. of entomology or etymology, expert in lice. Anyway, his job was to inspect them at Rio Vista, the new guys who came in. He would inspect them for lice and take

down the data. He told me that there are three kinds of lice that inhabit the human body. The first one inhabits the region from your toes up to the groin; that's their turf, they don't go any further. Then you have a second one that inhabits the human body from the groin up to the eyebrows and doesn't go any further, that's their turf. Then you have the head lice, these are the little insects that live in the scalp and do not come south. So, yeah, that's how they work. Anyway, he would take down notes and all that, he would test them. He would try to find if there were different species. (laughs) Anyway, interesting enough.

RB: Do you remember his name?

EB: No, we called him Doc, but I don't remember his name. When I met him, he was about my age at the time, maybe twenty-nine, thirty, something like that. He was a graduate of Rutgers, back east, he completed his Ph.D., and gone to work for the U.S. government. Anyway, he told me, he had been invited to go and present a paper at an annual meeting that they had regarding the Braceros Program, I think they met either in Laredo, across the river, or in Monterrey, somewhere in that area. All of the American agencies that were involved in the Bracero Program, on this side, all had representatives down there, this would have been the Border Patrol, Customs, certainly the United States Health Service, there were all the guys who did the x-raying and the doctors who did their examining and all of that. They had to be free of any disease. This is where they eliminated so many people, they had TB, they had jaundice, they had, God, you name it, they didn't want them over here, because—what would happen was that the Americans had to pay for health insurance. The health insurance close to us was in Fabens, they had a doctor there, Dr. Treece, T-R-E-E-C-E, who had a little hospital there, and he also had a private practice and a partner. They would handle what really would amount to workers' comp cases. Somebody on the farm got hurt, hit his eye, or stuck something through his hand. They would immediately run him over; they would stop what they were doing, put him in a pickup truck, head over there, and they would be treated. If he needed to be admitted to the hospital, they would admit him, if not, they brought him back home and gave him stuff to take care of

themselves, and they were put on light duty, just like workman's comp. I imagine it was very similar to that. But, you understand, every time the guy shows up and knocks on the emergency room for the doctor there, it's gonna cost money, it's all going to accumulate, and next year the premiums go up. They were very careful, because the farmer's had a very strong lobby. They were smart, they knew what to look out for, and they were veterans. They had everything happen to them working with Mexican workers that you can think of (laughs), they knew all the tricks. Anyway, they get down to this meeting, and it drones on and on. The Mexican counterparts were there; every Mexican state had a delegation there. These were the guys who came prepared, saying, "We have a letter from so and so, who went over there to such and such a place, and this is what they did to him, and he claims (unintelligible)." All these things were ironed out, it was the purpose of the thing, then based on what when on, the Mexican consulate and the Mexican ambassadors would work up next year's requirements, "My, God, this year you're gonna do this and that and the other." Every year, it got more expensive for the American farmers. They were over here frantically trying to get people in California, like at UC-Davis, to come up with square tomatoes that could be picked up with special equipment; they were working on the machines. They were working on them, because the cost of labor, which had been terrific in the early years of the Bracero Program, now was climbing up, because of the requirements from the Mexican government who was hell bent on having to protect their people. Incidentally, I never heard anything, none of us ever heard anything, about a fund. (both laugh)

RB: I was going to ask you about that. That was a question.

EB: This was a surprise to me years later when I read about it in the paper, because I know I never heard about it, and I would have heard about it.

RB: I asked Eleanor Martin about it when she was paying them did they ever take it, she said, "No, we always pay them to the penny what they were supposed to be paid."

EB: She would have known, because they would have been required to withhold the money and send it in with an accountant. My answer to your question, and I'm sure hers is too, is that we never heard of such a fund, never heard of it. That it was proposed, probably, who knows? Anyway, to go on with the story, my friend—it becomes his turn, he stands up and brings out all his papers and goes to the podium and starts talking about his job. This is what he does, he starts reading off the data, he says that in his inspections, he found out that the workers from, say, Michoacán have the highest number of lice, they were the lousiest. (unintelligible) Oh, my God, the delegation from Michoacán jumped up straight in the air, saying babble, babble, about what the hell he was doing insulting them, and they stormed out of the room. It took a while to calm them all down and get them back. Someone told my friend, "Don't do that anymore." (laughs) "Don't do that. Watch what you're saying, because these people are extremely sensitive about all that, especially since you're talking about their state, this is their people." So he said, "Well, of course, I was never invited back."

RB: Obviously he wasn't a diplomat.

EB: No he wasn't, he was a good bugman, though. (coughs) But, looking back over the experience down there—I tell you, the people who stayed on and who became, even if not citizens, accredited resident aliens, had great success with their children. It's due to that work ethic, but again, the children's children, the third generation, they're Americans, they don't have that work ethic anymore.

RB: They don't see the struggles.

EB: No, they never know the struggles, so why should they—

RB: Right. So, you started—you were with your dad I guess as a teenager. How many years did you work with him there at the commissary?

EB: I worked in the commissary, off and on, from 1949 to 1952, when I left to go in the service, but I was asked to do other work. My sister and a whole bunch of cousins from Tornillo were brought in at different times. Dad always had a bunch

of people from Tornillo, high school students and so on, working. Sometimes there would be as many as nine in that small store. That was to handle that huge crowd, because remember, they had to buy for three meals a day, no refrigeration. In the morning they would come in and buy tortillas. They began to like the flour tortillas, *harina*, which are unknown in the rest of Mexico; they all came over here with corn. These were much more flavorful, much larger, and they grew to like them, of course, they were full of hog lard.

RB: Did your father have somebody to make them for him? Do you remember?

EB: No, they were made here in El Paso. When they came in to unload the tortillas and bread, the trucks would come in unbelievable quantities. Just Coca-Cola alone was an enormous business for us. I'll tell you a story about that. (laughs) They liked the convenience of prepackaged food. They liked the taste of flour-based products. They liked the convenience of canned goods, they learned to like even canned fruit, and so fresh fruit was something dad just didn't bother with anymore. He didn't have a whole lot of meat to sell, because they didn't buy meat, they just—it was too expensive.

RB: Probably spoiled easily, wouldn't it? Unless you cooked it right away?

EB: Exactly. What they would do, as you know, they would take these beautiful steaks and cut them into little pieces, make stew out of them. It drives the Americans crazy.

RB: My mother still does that.

EB: Yeah, I love it myself. Anyway, he always had meat for the managers and their families, because they bought there too, until they started driving to Fabens and all that for better shopping variety and better prices. Dad didn't like that either, it was a problem. Anyway, you could see when they came in, dressed in their working clothes, and then when they left months later, they had new clothes, they were heavier. We could see them coming back year after year. They were sturdy, they had put on weight, better color, just, my God, they looked better.

RB: I was talking to a doctor who said that he also saw a whole [different] demeanor, they were less, how would you say, maybe less humble, more confident, more self-confidence, he could see as well.

EB: Yes, I can testify to the same thing. They were great people. I really enjoyed knowing them. I grew to learn and to appreciate their work ethic, which I keep mentioning, but it's very important, you can see the difference between peoples. They also would start bringing in their wives and become permanent *acasillados*. They would take over certain areas of the *cuadra*. I think the largest number they ever had was the season there, I guess it would have been about 1950, '51. After that, it started going downhill, because by that time, they were bringing in machines, so you needed less labor, it would be less people, but it still went on, till I don't know how long the program went on. I left here and never came back, till I came back to live in El Paso proper. I went off to the service; I went for four years and wound up in Germany and so on. Anyway, they also had done away with acres of alfalfa; it was no longer a cash crop of any real importance. They were not having to turn over, rejuvenate the soil for cotton, because there was less cotton being grown. According to some farmers—the State Department, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Commerce, they had just screwed up the American cotton market, people got tired of it—elsewhere, they started growing their own cotton, Egyptian cotton became very, very good, South American cotton, Mexican cotton, everywhere that there was a cotton growing climate. They started growing their own in Africa, too, so the American cotton was not in such high demand. They also grew, what they called the very fine cotton, which is used to make very fine—

RB: I'm just going to ask you if you want to, really just a quick little recap. So you left to go to the military in '52, I guess during the Korean—

EB: Yes, absolutely.

RB: You spent some time in Germany?

EB: Yes.

RB: You were away from here for how many years?

EB: I was away from here for four years; I left in '52 and came back in '56. I started college at UTEP, well, it was Texas Western College. I worked part-time downtown. I went to work for the paint business. I eventually wound up in my own construction company and did that for ten years. I was recruited to go to California (unintelligible) had got hold of me. By that time, I had developed good experience in large roofing projects, high-rise roofing. I was bilingual and bicultural. They needed somebody in northern California with those qualifications, I couldn't believe it, "What do you mean in California?" Well, they paid our way; Jenna and I went out there. We found out there just weren't any guys who had big roofing experience, were not bilingual, and had no knowledge of how to work with these Mexican groups. What had happened was there had been an evolution. The American unions had been in great strength in all of California. Roofing was one of the specialty trades, kind of like being a plumber, you're really at the top of the heap, but their productivity was not very good, they had been replaced with ethnic groups. They brought in Hawaiians in northern California; their productivity was a little better, let's say that the union guys would produce twenty-five squares a day of roofing, that's two thousand, five hundred; the Hawaiians may do thirty, thirty-two. Then all African, black groups, also were there, roofers, and they had a little better, more or less. They brought in other groups, ethnic groups, but still in all, it was like the same thing that had happened down here with the cotton farmers. The productivity was not helping the contractors to meet the demand and be competitive; they weren't producing, so they decided to try Mexicans. Mexicans had not been recruited for roofing work, they just simply weren't. They had a few of them up there who really were illegal aliens, they were good workers, but you didn't have crews of them, you had individuals. Anyway, they decided to try them. All of a sudden, the Mexican crews, the whole crew together, either five or seven to a crew, that's what makes up a crew, they would come in and double the production in one day

and more. They also would work overtime, everyday, ten to twelve hours a day. They would work Saturdays if they wanted them, no problem. They were doing, oh, (unintelligible), fifty, sixty-five squares a day. The contractors were overjoyed. The only problem was there was no communication. The Anglo and even the Mexican American supervisors couldn't communicate with the Mexicans, they didn't speak Spanish, they were not bicultural, they didn't understand them. The Mexicans, very, very few of them even spoke a little English. So, you see what was happening? They needed somebody in this particular company to make a bridge, that's where I came in, and that's why it wasn't happening over there, which I couldn't believe. Anyway, we got over there, and I was supposed to stay for five years, but I only wound up staying for two, but we stayed on for another three years doing other things.

RB: Do you remember what years this was?

EB: It was in 1990, we came back in 1994. Anyway, we had a total of one hundred workers from Mexico. It was a pool of workers that were brought in from one little town in Jalisco, who were going back and forth. Actually, they would land in Guadalajara and bus over, but anyway, they were there overnight. We needed somebody, the word would go out, and boom here comes the guy, all set with his papers. I was wise to all this paperwork stuff down here, even if those people up there weren't. The whole thing was that they just took over more and more of the work, the Mexican groups. Our particular company was the largest roofing company in California, as a matter of fact, it was the largest roofing company in North America, and it did \$140 million of work in one year. They had a union group and a non-union group; I was in the non-union group. These union people were hysterical they just didn't want anything to do with them, they didn't want the company to hire them, and there was a lot of infighting, but production is production. I had to modernize their thinking; I had to teach them about safety and all that, that's what I did. My boss was originally from South Bend, Indiana, a big German guy from a roofing business, actually, he was from England, and he had a green card, too. He never learned Spanish and had no intention of learning;

he wanted everyone to speak English to him, which they couldn't, so there was a lot of hard feelings going on at all time. I had to bridge over a lot of that. These guys were terrific, but I knew how to talk to them, I knew how they thought, I knew what they would do, what they were capable of doing, so we got along great. I was able to smooth over a lot of things. When I got over there, there were four outstanding lawsuits against the company. These were work comp cases where the guys had burned themselves, and they hadn't been taken care of them very well, then they had fired them. They had just messed it up. They also had, what I called, discrimination kickers tied into them. You've got twenty-five thousand lawyers in San Francisco, they would send runners out to these guys collecting unemployment and approach them and say, "You had an accident." "Yeah." "Well, you're entitled to a lot more money." "Oh yeah?" "Yeah, you go see my boss's lawyer, and he'll tell you all about it." He goes over there and talks to him. (laughs) They'll fix you right up. It took me a year to help settle those five, four cases. What they had done, when a guy got burned, they would say, "Okay, here go the clinic, he'll take care of you." The guy didn't speak English, he didn't know where the hell he was, he didn't know how to take the bus to get over there. They just threw him out in the street, literally. Well, you can see what would happen. Then, nobody ever bothered to check up on the guy, see how he was doing, in general, behave in a civilized manner towards the guy, following the rules, they didn't do it, they weren't going to do it. When I got over there, I had to stop all that. If anybody got hurt, I put them in my truck, I took them to the doctor, and I sat there and went through the whole thing with them, including skin grafts and everything else. That's a mean hurt. You got a bunch of tar on you, it'll burn you right down to the bone. I also would follow up on them and make sure that they were, because you know, a bad burn will last a year before it really—they would go back to work before then. I knew what they really needed was simply people to explain to them what was going to happen, that they didn't have to worry, that there would be money coming in for them, then when they were through, they could go back to work, they had a job. That's all that was needed. I was able to work all of that out and settle those court cases, minimum,

one of them was for \$22,000, and the rest of them were a lot more. They had some real problems there through lack of communication. Well, we got a hold of some Mexican Americans, one or two of them did speak Spanish, but they had no cultural knowledge of how to talk to these men, they spoke American Spanish, kitchen Spanish.

RB: I know what you mean.

EB: They couldn't get along with those men, because they really didn't understand each other, they sure weren't empathetic, they weren't used to it, they didn't know how to talk to them, they didn't know where these guys were coming from or anything. That led to some problems, but eventually, there was so much inefficiency going on that it went bankrupt. The largest building high-rise roofing in the United States went bankrupt. They had merged with another company out of Arizona, the number three company, it was then really huge, but they all had the same problem. They weren't even computerized properly. They had no training and no regard for the workers, even though more and more of them were using Mexican workers, they never learned how to get along with them or what to do with them. So all of that, I was able to use what I had learned down here. It worked out rather well for me. So there is something to be said on both sides. It was a game.

RB: Let me just ask you one last question. I was going to ask you if you thought the program succeeded, but I think we pretty well established that you think it did.

EB: I think it eventually died of its own accord, through a combination of things. One was a change in the crop, the other was that the industry became mechanized; second of all, the cost of importing Mexican labor in the bracero basis became as expensive as hiring Americans, even though you had higher productivity, the costs no longer was cost efficient. It lasted for a good while, I don't know, ten, twelve years, I suppose, it worked and people benefited by it. That was, by the way, the basis for the *maquiladora* industry, right? I'm sure you're going to cover that in your research. That did come from that. I saw it from its very

beginning; I didn't realize I was doing it. I remember being in a school trip at about 1949 or '50 in Chihuahua City; we had gone down there, the whole school. We stayed in a hotel there. In the evening we went to eat out in the patio. It was surrounded by a wrought iron fence, and there were hundreds of men pressed up against the fence, they were looking for food, drink, whatever. Some of the older guys went over and took him some food, beer, whatever. We talked to them. They told us they were there because Chihuahua was a gathering place for the state, for people who wanted to become braceros. They were in there from all over the place, on their own, they had to do the best they could. If they didn't have any money, boy, they were up against it, but you can see what they went through to finally get here, so the guys who got here were the survivors. That's why I say it really worked, but you have to give them credit for just refusing to give up until they got here and got what they wanted, an opportunity to make some money.

RB: Anything else you want to add?

EB: No, I think that's pretty much it. I probably talked your ear off. (laughs)

RB: Okay, this is the end of the interview.

End of interview