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Interview no. 1557

Lily Gutierrez Reveles

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Lily Gutierrez Reveles

Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 7, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1557

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Lily Gutierrez was born in El Paso, Texas, on October 5, 1935; her father was a professional butcher who owned several grocery stores, and her mother was a homemaker; she had four brothers and two sisters; after getting married, she moved to Pecos, Texas, where she began working for the Trans Pecos Cotton Association as a clerk and typist from 1955 to 1957. Ms. Gutierrez recalls that she met her husband while in college; after getting married, in 1955, they moved to Pecos, Texas, where she began working for the Trans Pecos Cotton Association as a clerk and typist; she compares the association to Rio Vista, a processing center for braceros in Socorro, Texas; it was her job to fill out the necessary paperwork and contracts for the braceros; the association was responsible for Reeves and Pecos County; inspectors from the Department of Labor would often check to verify that adequate housing was provided for the braceros; they even had representatives from the Mexican consulate periodically arriving to handle any complaints or concerns on behalf of the braceros; she provides a general description of the facilities as well as the various procedures the workers went through; in addition, she comments that on the weekends it was common to see braceros in town buying groceries or going to church; braceros and Mexican-Americans were often discriminated against by the people in town.

Name of Interviewee: Lily Gutierrez
Date of Interview: April 7, 2003
Date of Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

This is an interview with Mrs. Lily Gutierrez on April 7, 2003 in El Paso, Texas.
The interviewer is Fernanda Carrillo. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project. Good morning, ma'am.

LG: Good morning.

FC: What is your full name, please?

LG: My name is Lily Gutierrez.

FC: When and where were you born, ma'am?

LG: I was born in El Paso.

FC: The date, ma'am, please?

LG: Um, 10-5-35.

FC: And did you grow up here?

LG: Yes, I went to school here. I went to Ascarate School, Ysleta High School, and I went to Texas Western for a couple of years. And went on to the University of Houston and then I went back to UTEP.

FC: To finish your Bachelor's degree? And, um, is your family from El Paso, ma'am?

LG: Yes, in fact my great grandfather was one of the first, I would venture to say, farmworkers because he owned the land here and what was Mexico, El Paso was Mexico at that time. He had a land grant from Mexico.

FC: So you've been in the area for a long, long time?

LG: Yes, for a long time.

FC: Do you have brothers and sisters?

LG: Yes, I have four brothers and two sisters.

FC: None of them worked for the Bracero project or anything or in any way?

LG: No.

FC: What about your parents? What did, where they're...?

LG: My father was a butcher by profession and a, uh, businessman. He owned grocery stores.

FC: What about your mother?

LG: My mother was a homemaker.

FC: When did you start working at the Bracero program?

LG: When I married, I met him at Texas Western. He was from Pecos and he chose to go back to Pecos for a little while and, of course, I had to go with him. By the time I got to Pecos, he had very nicely acquired me a job at the Trans Pecos Cotton Association which was, I presume, had a government entity, a connection with the government because we had government guidelines to follow and it had to be adhered to.

FC: So this association was, uh...

LG: It was like Rio Vista, it was basically the same thing. We had an inspector from the Department of Labor come and check the housing and to make sure...

FC: So you actually had housing, too, for the um...?

LG: Oh, yes, all the farmers were required to provide housing for the Braceros. And they had to be, you know, there were requirements. I mean, it had to have a roof and four door, believe or not, some people didn't, don't ever provide that kind of housing. It had to have a floor, doors and windows. And I'm sure other things, I can't remember. So we had the inspector from the Department of Labor come often. We also had a counsel from the Mexican consulate out of El Paso.

FC: Was he present at all time, ma'am?

LG: No, he came periodically to visit and any Bracero who had a complaint, a request, or a desire to speak to him for whatever private reason they might have were told of his coming and they would line up at the fence of the Pecos Cotton Association and he would visit with them.

FC: How old were you, ma'am, when you started working for the TransPecos Cotton Association?

LG: I was, uh, 21.

FC: What years did you work at Pecos?

LG: My recollection it's been a long time, but I think I worked since I got there in 1955 to 1957, or '58 I'm not sure.

FC: Would you please describe your role there at the TransPecos...?

LG: My job was to, along with my co-worker, Lois Vasquez who was my supervisor, she, I was to help in the processing of very farmworker that came into Pecos. This, the TransPecos Cotton Association, covered two counties. Reeves and Pecos County. So, we, I was speaking to my colleague the other day and she and I ventured that there were at least 25,000 Braceros came through.

FC: Through the Pecos?

LG: Yes, it's a guess, but I think it's a pretty fair guess because there were hundreds and hundreds. The farmers came from Pecos County and Reeves County. Canosa an Pecos and all those other small towns.

FC: It covered a pretty large area.

LG: Area, yes.

FC: Do you know when the TransPecos Cotton Association started?

LG: No, it was there before I got there. But I do know someone that you could speak to.

FC: Oh, okay, perfect, thank you. What about the purpose of the TransPecos Cotton Association? I don't understand. Was it, it was something like the Rio Vista center?

LG: Yes, the whole idea was that the government allowed so many farmworkers to come to an area to help the farmers do the harvesting of well, in Pecos and Reeves County it was cotton. Ok? And it was a contract that they had, they contracted with farmworkers and each farmworker would say, "I'll take 200 workers. I'll provide housing and so many other benefits." Then at the end of their term of working, at the end of the contract that the Bracero had, he would have an immigrant visa to come and work, a working visa. A specific working visa. I don't know, I think they were called H-(Unintelligible)-2.

FC: H-(Unintelligible)-2. So, after let's say a Bracero came and they worked on a farm for a certain period of time...?

LG: Right, from September to November.

FC: From September to November.

LG: Right. Then they were, of course, they had to go back.

FC: Oh, okay, to Mexico?

LG: To Mexico. It was only a...

FC: Seasonal.

LG: Right, so many months visa. And the farmers were responsible for the workers. They were placed in their care, you know, as I said they had to provide food, not food, but the Braceros cooked their own food. They went and bought their own food, from my recollection.

FC: Oh, so they were able to leave the ranch to and go out.

LG: Pecos was a small town, or is a small town. It's even smaller now. But back then it was a town of like 15,000 people. And it's a agricultural based town. The Braceros, on the weekend, would flood downtown because they had a weekend off. And so, everywhere you went, the grocery stores, the post office, they were there buying at JC Penny's or Woolworth's or whatever. They were there.

FC: Oh, and you actually saw them in your days during the week?

LG: Oh, yeah. And my co-worker, Lois and I were the only Spanish-speaking staff there. So we were the lucky ones, we got to talk to them.

FC: Were you required to speak Spanish to work there?

LG: No, no. I mean I don't remember anybody asking me, "Do you speak Spanish?" No, no. I think it, they liked the idea that they could get people that could speak Spanish. Lois and I were the ones that had all these great conversations with the workers who came in and we did the actual processing and they would tell us where they were from. We had some very interesting conversations.

FC: So let me see if I understand? The workers were, they come from Mexico?

LG: From all over Mexico.

FC: From all over Mexico. (Unintelligible) into the recruiting center in Chihuahua, let's just say. How did they got to Pecos?

LG: Buses.

FC: Buses.

LG: Yeah, they came to El Paso. I believe they came through El Paso. They might have come through Rio Grande, what was the one?

FC: The Rio Vista?

LG: No, no back here, another small town. Um, where they could cross as well. But my recollection is that they came from El Paso in buses. And we had a fellow, I remember his name, Oscar Hawkins, not Oscar, Orson Hawkins, who spoke Spanish fluently, I mean. He was the one that would bring them. He would bring them and then when their time was up, he would take them back.

FC: Take them back.

LG: Back to the, to the border.

FC: Mr. Hawkins picked them up at the border? And he take them...?

LG: I don't really know exactly...

FC: Exactly how...

LG: How that happened. I do know that they had to come across the border and show their immigrant visa, so I presume that he picked them up at the border or he might have picked them at the, I don't think at the detention center was. No, I don't think so. It must have been, maybe it was Rio Vista. Maybe he picked them up from Rio Vista.

FC: They were, the Braceros had to go through the process in Rio Vista first in order to go to Pecos?

LG: I couldn't say for sure. But I can tell you who would know.

FC: Oh, okay. I have another question. At the time that they arrived at the Pecos, at the TransPecos Cotton Association, they already have forms, like ID forms or visas or something they had to show you?

LG: They did. They had the (Unintelligible) and it was our job to do what we call it, a number card. Every immigrant has a name number that's either on their immigrant visa or their file at INS, so we would do a card on them and the assignment of the, to the farmer. You know, like, Mr. Holsher needed 200 workers, so it was our job to assign 'em to.

FC: They got there in groups and then you supplied them to...

LG: Right, depending on (Unintelligible).

FC: You gave them...

LG: And then we did the processing.

FC: And then you did the processing. And after that they left?

LG: The farmworker came to pick them up.

FC: To pick them up.

LG: I think he came to pick them up. Either he came to pick 'em, I remember cotton people coming in trucks. They would climb in the back and (Unintelligible) my recollections.

FC: What about when the Braceros came, you did like a contract or something, but the contractor wasn't there to pick them up that very same day. Do you have...?

LG: Well, I think they had a really good system where a farmer knew when a crew was coming for him to pick up. Because you know they were all very anxious. There's only a certain amount of harvesting time for cotton and so forth. So.

FC: Was this processing done inside a building?

LG: Yes, I was inside that building, we had a building, a fairly large building.

FC: Would you describe the facilities?

LG: I don't remember too well. I just remember a big building. Very nice, actually a nice building. I don't mean a fancy building. Let's say it was more utilitarian than it was attractive. That's all I can remember. Frankly...

FC: Was it located in downtown Pecos?

LG: No, it was more or less off of one of the highways where the farming areas were. It was not in the middle, it wasn't downtown at all.

FC: You said, well, your're offices, where you would do the clerical work. You also had a kitchen or something like that?

LG: Oh, yes, we had a kitchen.

FC: What other offices were right there?

LG: We had a director whose name I remember is Bob Cherrill.

FC: Bob?

LG: Cherrill. C-H-E-double R-R-I-L-L. Very nice man. Then we had other staff people. There were at least 3 or 4 other women.

FC: Doing the same kind of job you...?

LG: Yes, or doing maybe some of the more other than processing because I tell you Lois and I basically did the processing because we were the ones that spoke Spanish.

FC: Okay, so you would talk to the Braceros and fill out a form or something?

LG: Right.

FC: The contract (Unintelligible)?

LG: It was, no, we called an 8 card? The 8 number.

FC: Okay, what was the information in this card? What did you have to ask?

LG: Well, it was, their names, date of births, place of birth. And I can't remember what else.

FC: Did you ask them to give you any proof of identification?

LG: Oh, they all had their forms of (Unintelligible). They had all been, they were there because they had gone through INS already.

FC: Oh, okay, so they already had all their...

LG: Our job was not to do the reviewing of immigration documents. Other than only to put them into our database. We didn't have computers back then.

FC: No, just typewriters. Did they, did the TransPecos Cotton Association work year round? Was it open all year?

LG: Yeah, I know that we worked, I worked there for two years, so I must have...

FC: It wasn't a seasonal job, you worked there...?

LG: Oh, yeah, I worked there all the time.

FC: Was it a part-time job or a full-time job?

LG: No, it was a full-time job.

FC: It was a full-time job. But you mentioned that September and November was....

LG: That was the season and when the cotton was harvested, but then there's other thing to do besides the harvesting.

FC: The other ones there. How many applicants were you say there were on a given day? Like how many you...

LG: I have no idea.

FC: You say you draw forms for all of them, right? You and your co, Lois? So, how many would you say you had?

LG: Well, I don't know. They would bring them on busloads, so that would be, you know I haven't thought about all these things, so I haven't given it much thought as to the numbers. I would say that we'd have two or three busloads a day.

FC: Oh, okay.

LG: I'm sure there were other crops that they might have picked. Like there were onions and (Unintelligible) is also a farming area that farms a lot of, harvests a lot of onions. So I'm not sure what other. I'm trying to, my recollection tells me basically it was cotton.

FC: Okay, maybe it was cotton. Maybe there will be (Unintelligible). You mentioned that besides the staff from the TransPecos Cotton Association, you have inspectors from the Department of Labor as well as the Mexican consulate. Which wasn't, you said, he wasn't present all the time?

LG: No, he came from El Paso.

FC: He came from El Paso. How often would you say that he um...?

LG: I think he was there pretty often. You know, I, we'd get to know them very well.

FC: He was able to be present at the offices you were asking the Braceros?

LG: Yeah, and many asked to speak to him. Directly. As I said, either they had a complaint or they had, they wanted him to do some connection with his family and their family in Mexico or they just wanted to speak to him for whatever personal reasons they might have. Which he did, he was very good at...

FC: Oh, so he was very good with listening and...after you filled out the form, well, first the (Unintelligible), then you fill out the form for them the other card, then the farmers would pick them up and take them to each farm? (Unintelligible). And when they finish the contract, let's say, it was from September to November or any given time, did they have to go back to your offices like to sign a paper saying they finished the contract or...?

LG: You know, they might have. I don't remember. But they might have.

FC: But you didn't uh...

LG: I don't remember doing that, but we had other staff people who did that.

FC: Okay, perfect.

LG: You must know that some had, there were accidents, some died, and some either maybe got run over by a car or some fell off the truck.

FC: Oh, some of the Braceros?

LG: Yeah, they had some accidents, not, you know, like anything else. We had a doctor on staff. I remember his name was Dr. del Campo.

FC: Dr. del Campo. So he was there permanently?

LG: Yes. Anybody that became ill, we took them to the Pecos clinic. Pecos Valley Clinic. Dr. Schmidt was the doctor there.

FC: Pecos...so any farm they got injured or any place they would go to this clinic?

LG: They'd go to the clinic or sometimes the doctor would see them. But, basically, if anything happened to them.

FC: Do you remember some accidents that might have happened?

LG: I remember a fella falling off the truck.

FC: The ones that were supposed to take them...

LG: Yeah, he somehow or another, I don't know how it happened, that he fell off the truck and he became, he was injured. But you know, they sometimes cut themselves or something happened to them and um...

FC: Were there, besides the medical attention that the association provided? Were they insured? Did they have any health insurance?

LG: I don't think so. I think that the, and you know, this is just my recollection, okay, I cannot really tell you for sure that this is the way it happened, but I'm thinking that that was part of the government contract that we had that we were to provide medical help for them if they so needed it.

FC: What was, no go ahead.

LG: I was saying I don't think they were there long term. I don't know how long they were there, you know, but I don't think that I don't remember anybody required being in the hospital for a long length of time, at least while I was there.

FC: Great. You say also that some inspectors from the Department of Labor go to the association. What was their job?

LG: Their job was to see that the farmers were complying with the requirements that had been set forth in the contract.

FC: What were those requirements?

LG: Like I told you before, housing, proper housing, at least proper according to what had been agreed.

FC: Which mainly was to have...?

LG: A decent place to live.

FC: Were the farmers required to provide the meals during the day?

LG: I don't think so. I think that they had, they could get their own food, they could bring their own food. Because like I told you, I saw them at Safeway buying huge, huge sacks of flour and beans and stuff like that. So I'm assuming they could cook their own food.

FC: So you mentioned during the weekends when they had their days off, (Unintelligible) to saw them in town?

LG: In town. It was very common. Everybody knew, in fact a lot of the local people would do their shopping during the week because they knew it would be very crowded in the Safeway or at JC Penny. Wherever it is they were buying. They bought Levi's, they bought, you know...actually they were very, they were a boom to the El Pa, to the Pecos community. They sent money home, but they also spent money. They would buy things for their wives. Like tablecloths, things that, dishtowels.

FC: So they actually did spend their money there?

LG: Oh, yeah. Some money.

FC: What about the entertainment centers, like restaurants and bars and movie?

LG: (Unintelligible) we had a lot of them. I mean, Pecos was very small.

FC: Was very small?

LG: They might have been, they had a few bars, they might have gone to the bars. So, I couldn't tell you, I didn't frequent those.

FC: (Laughs)

LG: But I know they were in town all the time. Movies, we had movies in, you have to know, Pecos was a little bit of a, of a, not a little bit, quite a bit, very discriminatory. So, I don't think they had access to go everywhere. Like the theater. Mexican Americans weren't even, before I got there, weren't even allowed to sit on the first floor of the theater.

FC: Not even the Mexican Americans?

LG: Not even the Mexican Americans who lived there.

FC: Okay, so you were saying Pecos was very discriminatory.

LG: Back then. Yeah, and so I'm sure there were places they weren't allowed to go. But, it's not like it had a whole bunch of places you'd want to go to. They didn't have a whole bunch of restaurants. They had one theater and I think they had Spanish-speaking theater. I think they probably would have been allowed to go to that.

FC: Okay, what about the post office, was it?

LG: The post office, I mean, anybody, it's a federal building, so everybody. They went to the post office a lot sometimes.

FC: Well, yeah, because they send their...

LG: They send their mail, they send their money orders.

FC: Their money orders. What about church? Do you remember were they allowed...?

LG: Yes, we had Santa Rosa which was where most Mexican Americans. The priest there were always very helpful. They opened the doors to them.

FC: Oh, okay, so they were able to...where did you live while you were working at the TransPecos...?

LG: Where did I live? I lived on...

FC: Was it close to you workplace?

LG: Well, it was not a very big town. It took like about 10 minutes to get to work.

FC: Did you drive?

LG: Yes, I drove.

FC: What were your normal hours?

LG: I think they were like from 8:30 to 5.

FC: To 5. Your weekly schedule, was it Monday through Friday?

LG: Uh-hmm.

FC: Would you please describe a typical workday? At the TransPecos...

LG: I don't remember a typical workday. I wish I could be more helpful to you, but I just remember going to work there.

FC: But you had to, like first you'd get there and you did the same things all day long?

LG: No, we had different assignments. I remember if there were farmers, if the Braceros were there, we're, of course, our job was the process them. But we had other work to do. That's what I can't remember what it was.

FC: Mostly clerical, filing?

LG: Yes.

FC: Do you remember any particular incident while working at, you know, or conversations with the Braceros workday?

LG: Well, they would ask us things like they want to buy something like a dress for their wives. Where could they buy it. One thing that impressed me most was one time seeing a Bracero walk downtown with a sewing machine, one of those old pedal ones. Like, made out of iron. He was carrying it on his back, he was determined to get it home.

FC: He was going to take it back?

LG: He bought it to take it home to his wife. It obviously they were people who had families and this was a good opportunity for them to come and make a little money. It was certainly more than what they had at home. It allowed them to better their lives a little bit. It was a good idea, the Bracero program because the farmers benefit tremendously from having them, workers there. Workers who were, who wanted to work. So they benefit tremendously. The Bracero benefit because he had work and he got paid for it.

FC: Do you remember like the minimum wage that they established in the contracts back then?

LG: No, I don't.

FC: Did they have like a minimum wage?

LG: No, I think they had a set amount of money that was paid to them. Either day. Obviously they were paid either weekly or every other week because they were in town all the time so they had money. The city of Pecos also benefited from it because it helped with the economy. So you see, to me it was an excellent program. I always thought that that's the way they should do it. The USA is always looking for farmworkers and the people in the United States don't want to work in the farms.

FC: True.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE ONE

FC: Who was mostly when they got there, the Braceros and everything, were they, what was their attitude to work, come to work?

LG: Oh, they were happy. They were happy for the opportunity. They said, they often talked about their families and how they would help them. How they would send the money home.

FC: At the beginning, like the first time they were there, how were they dressed? Like...

LG: They, well, they were just dressed, I mean they didn't have the best clothes, they were wearing whatever they had. That's why I told you they were buying Levi's and shirts...

FC: Once they were there.

LG: Once they were there. And shoes, good shoes they could wear out in the field.

FC: Were there allowed to go back to the association in case they had any, while working there in Pecos, any complaints or questions or (Unintelligible)/

LG: Yeah, because like I told you, they could make, they could ask to come in and talk to the consule.

FC: So they had to go to the association in order to do that?

LG: Well, actually, they would tell the farmer and the farmer would just let them come in. Bring them in. You know, I don't remember hearing that they were ever mistreated. I'm not saying that there weren't any mistreatments. I think the farmers there were just glad to have workers. Help them with their harvesting. But there might have been, I don't know.

FC: Now that you know that the Department of Labor, you know the ones that were, did you ever hear about their farm contractors not complying to the requirements?

LG: Yeah, well, they did and there were some I'm sure that they did and then they were told they couldn't have anymore workers if they...

FC: Oh, if they didn't. Did they give them a chance to correct (Unintelligible) of the problems?

LG: I'm sure if it was something minor, that they could give them the opportunity, but I think the Department of Labor was very strict about this is the contract we have with Mexico and the United States and we want it to work. If you're not interested in doing the right thing, then it would have been a big loss to the farmer because there were no workers. So most of them I know tried very hard to comply. Yeah, when they didn't, they were told what they had to do.

FC: What about the Braceros? Were they out to come back the next season? Did they?

LG: I'm trying to remember if they were allowed to do that. They, um, I think they were because I remember some of them, some of the farmworkers saying, "Well, we'd like to have these guys back."

FC: Oh, okay, so they were able to say... What about the Braceros, they could say, "I want to go back to this farm that I work."

LG: Yeah, they did, they did do that. I don't know what the process was, what they applied at INS again. But, I'm telling you, I know someone that could answer all these questions for you.

FC: Great. When you were there, do you remember any incidents, good or bad, from people from Pecos saying about the Braceros, about having all these people here working for them?

LG: Well, the businesspeople liked it because it was good for them. But, I think sometimes the people of Pecos would get frustrated because they were everywhere. Especially on the weekend they...but, it's a farming community, so they recognize farmers, farmworkers as farmworkers. They knew they were from Mexico and actually I even think some of them, when they finally were able to immigrate, wanted to go live in Pecos.

FC: Oh, okay, stay there?

LG: Yeah. A lot of the people that lived in Pecos were from some part of Mexico. They were immigrants themselves.

FC: Themselves. What is your personal opinion about the Bracero program?

- LG: I think its an excellent program. Like I was telling you before that it helps everyone involved. It makes for good relationships between Mexico and the United States. It makes for, it helps the farmer harvest his crops. It helps the Bracero earn some capital so that he can take it home to his family. It helps the economy of the town or the city wherever this Bracero program is taking place. I think it would be a very great program to have today.
- FC: (Unintelligible) to revive it?
- LG: Yeah, I think it is. From my experience working with immigrants, I think that most immigrants only want to come to the United States because they can make a better living than they do at home. Not because they think the United States is the most wonderful place to live, but because that's the place to make a living.
- FC: So they can send the money...
- LG: Send it back home. So, this would, I think, stop some of the illegal immigration to a certain extent because it would allow people to come in and work on contracts. At the end of the term, they could go back home and we're all better off. They take their money home, we've got our work done.
- FC: After working for the TransPecos Association, would you say it might be '57, '58 when you stopped working there?
- LG: Uh-huh.
- FC: Did you have any contact later on with the Braceros?
- LG: It was really strange because that was actually the beginning of my work in dealing with immigration, with immigrants and refugees. When I left Pecos and I came back to work here...
- FC: Oh, you came back to El Paso?
- LG: Yes, I came to work for the migrant, there was a migrant program that was funded by the government. That was to get migrants out of the migrant way of living in the (Unintelligible). Try to find them a job here so they wouldn't have to leave their home and go out and to other towns and cities and pick apples or whatever vegetables or whatever. I trained people to provide some kind of training for these migrants. Then from there I went to work in helping immigrants and refugees.
- FC: So you worked with immigrants mostly all your life?

LG: All my life.

FC: Is there any comment...?

LG: I represented immigrants in immigration court.

FC: Immigration court?

LG: I worked for INS, yes.

FC: You said you worked here for how long?

LG: Thirty years for that particular program.

FC: Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the time you worked with the Bracero program that you got involved?

LG: I hold that program in my mind, it's a good memory because the people that came from Mexico to work were very decent people. I think they were happy to be here once.

FC: I would like to thank you very much for the interview, for the opportunity of sharing your memories with us. And...

END OF SIDE B, TAPE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW