

4-21-2003

Interview no. 1558

Richard Hancock

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Richard Hancock by Kristine Navarro, 2003, "Interview no. 1558," 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: Richard Hancock

Interviewer: Kristine Navarro

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 21, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1558

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Richard Hancock was born in Alpine, Texas, on January 19, 1926, but he grew up in New Mexico; he worked with the Foot and Mouth Commission in Jalisco, Mexico; later, he was employed by Doña Ana County as a labor director for the Farm Bureau and as an executive secretary; in both positions with Doña Ana County, he worked directly with the Bracero Program; he eventually went on to receive his doctoral degree and wrote his dissertation on the cultural and economic dynamics of the Bracero Program in Chihuahua, Mexico. Mr. Hancock began working as a labor director for the Farm Bureau in Doña Ana County in May of 1951; because of his ability to speak both Spanish and English, he would communicate with the farmers, braceros, and processing centers; he would determine how many braceros were needed, then contact Rio Vista, a processing center in Socorro, Texas, to schedule the needed number of workers; according to his estimates, there were 600 farmers and 10,000 braceros; he continued working at Rio Vista until 1955, at which point he left to go to Stanford University and complete his doctoral degree; his dissertation dealt with the cultural and economic dynamics of the Bracero Program in Chihuahua, Mexico; in 1959, he graduated and then returned to work as an executive secretary for Doña Ana County, where he again worked with the Bracero Program; he estimates that he worked for a total of about eight years with the program.

Name of interviewee: Richard Hancock
Date of Interview: April 21, 2003
Name of interviewer: Kristine Navarro

Today is April 21, 2003. This is Kristine Navarro interviewing Dr. Richard H. Hancock in El Paso, Texas.

KN: Good afternoon, sir. How are you?

RH: I'm fine.

KN: Tell me a little bit about when and where you were born.

RH: I was born in Alpine, Texas, on January 19, 1926.

KN: Where did you grow up?

RH: I grew up in Corona, New Mexico.

KN: When did you start working for the Doña Ana Farm Bureau?

RH: I started, I think in May of 1951.

KN: Did you have any training? What brought you to this?

RH: I had some training in an informal sense. I graduated from New Mexico State University in 1950, and I went to work with the Foot and Mouth Commission in Jalisco, Mexico. I grew up speaking Spanish, but a year in Mexico helped my Spanish a great deal and my cultural sensitivity [too]. My father was a rancher in Corona, New Mexico. While I was at the Foot and Mouth [Commission], he sold his ranch in Corona. He was getting old by then, and he bought a farm near Mesilla, New Mexico. I decided rather than stay on with the Foot and Mouth [Commission], that I would come home and help him farm. I had barely been home when I went to the local farm bureau where my parents belonged. We met the executive secretary there. I told him what I had been doing, and he said, "How would you like a job? We've got these braceros coming in, and we need a labor director who can speak Spanish and English." I said, "Sure why not?" I

worked there until the spring of 1955. I went to Stanford University and completed my doctoral program there in 1959. At that time, I learned that the executive secretary's position was open at Doña Ana County, so I took it. I worked there from 1959 through a large part of '61. Basically, I worked about five, seven, or eight years with the bracero program.

KN: What made you decide to leave the program and go to Stanford to earn your—

RH: I got interested in Spanish, and I think I was kind of burned out on the job. I found myself more interested in the braceros and talking to them than I was in doing my job. I would sign up, and during that time that I worked at New Mexico State [University] or Doña Ana County. I got a master's degree from New Mexico State in Spanish. I finished my degree there, and I liked studying. I decided I would go off to Stanford, and I did. I met my wife there, so that was not bad. (laughs)

KN: Your dissertation, can you tell me the title?

RH: I hope I remember it. It was, "The bracero program in the Economic and Cultural Dynamics of Mexico: The Case of Chihuahua." I hope I have that right. It was a case study of Chihuahua, and the history of where they went, what they did, the type of work they did, and what impact this had on different communities. In other words, I chose four different communities in Chihuahua, *municipios* to study. One was down in the irrigated district, on the Conchos River. Another was in the desert area, which is near Chihuahua City, Aldama. Another was in the mountain area, Guerrero, and another was Janos, Chihuahua, where they didn't provide any braceros. I used those as a kind of a check on the rest of them. These other three were heavy providers of braceros. I went down there and talked to them, you know, the *presidentes*, priests, businessmen, and returned braceros. I got their ideas on what was good and what was the impact of the bracero program. I concluded that it was a valuable impact.

KN: Tell me why.

RH: I was talking to a man, I can't remember where, and I told him that I was doing a study on the bracero program. He said to me, "You know, my uncle runs the post office in Gómez Farías, Chihuahua." At that time, Chihuahua was not well communicated. You could go down the Pan-American Highway, and there was one or two fairly decent roads going off laterally. The rest of it was just terrible. We had a 1956 Chevrolet, and we would do things like drive to a place ninety miles away. It would take us eight hours to get there, just about. We tried to get into the mountains in Sierra Madre, but we never could, because there were no roads. We were going to ride the train one day. We drove up, and that train was a real trolley in those days. We drove up as far as we could go in our car. The train was in the station, so we got on and bought our ticket. It stood in the station for four hours, and they finally said, "The train has broken down, and we sent for another one. It'll be here tomorrow." We went back to Chihuahua City. When we finally finished, we rented an airplane to fly over the mountains so we could see them. The mountain areas of Chihuahua, and many other areas were totally inaccessible. Janos was one of those places. We went to Janos, and it was just totally inaccessible. To get to your question about why, I had this man in the mountain area of Gómez Farías. It has a road to it now, not too inaccessible, but then it was very inaccessible. He said, "My uncle tells me that there's a lot of communist propaganda coming through his post office in Gómez Farías. The Russians are sending their magazine, *América*, and it's a beautiful magazine. People come in, and they haven't got anything to do. They want to know where their copy of *América* is. It would have a tremendous propaganda effect on our town except that nearly everybody has been to the United States." (laughs) "They just read it, because it's a nice, pretty, and colorful magazine. They have all been to the United States, so they know pretty much what it is." These people made some money coming. Really, it goes for the wetback system, too. It's a big safety valve for Mexico. It was then, and it is now. Some people want to keep the Mexicans in Mexico. We can't, because we don't want a revolution down there, and we don't want unrest. We should have a legal program to allow Mexicans to work in the United States and have the safeguards of a minimum

wage, at least, insurance, and period of contract guaranteed work. The bracero program had all of those things. I just can't [understand], particularly religious people that oppose the bracero program. I don't see how they feel like the wetback program is better. It was not a program. I think it [bracero program] was very necessary to Mexico, because people had a way out. If they were hard up, broke, and hungry, they could come to the United States to get a fairly decent job. [They could] send some money home and keep the country from blowing up. They also learned new technologies. Obviously, braceros were kind of misused in a way. That was one reason they opposed it. The farmer would get a bracero that was reliable, and most of them in comparison to the local people, were extremely good workers. They could stay eighteen months, but then they would get recontracted and stay another eighteen months. Pretty soon, they were driving tractors and bulldozers. They were doing various skilled things and were probably being underpaid for that. To them, it was a good job, so they didn't complain. They learned how to farm in a modern, high tech fashion, and they brought some money home. I knew of hundreds of cases where they went home, and they would take toms, used clothing, and all this kind of stuff with them. They benefited from it and kept returning year after year. Some of the force became legalized. Even though they became legalized, some of them went back, because they had made a way for themselves. They had a little capital. I don't see anything bad about it. My father ran his farm, and he had a man by the name of Manuel. I don't remember his last name. I wish I did. He came in, and he ran this farm. I was working for the farm bureau, and he [my father] said, "I want to legalize Manuel." I said, "Dad, why are you doing this? You don't need any workers. You're running your farm." "No," he said, "Manuel wants me to legalize him, so I'm going to do it." I said, "Well, okay." We got him legalized, and my father died. (gets choked up) Manuel and his family were very good to my mother. [My brothers and I] worked all over the United States, but we came during my father's illness. I was working in Oklahoma. One brother was working in California, and the other brother in New York. Manuel [and his family] filled in for us. They would come by and mow my mother's yard every

week. They would invite her out to go to some gathering in Juárez. They were a great help to her. I figured that was cash bred upon the border. Those were awfully good people, those Mexicans. I remember we had a big farmer there, Stahmanns Farms. I used to go with him to give programs to farm bureau locals. He had one hundred and fifty braceros, and he legalized them all. He told me, “I don’t understand it. The parents, those women and men, were the best people in the world when I legalized them. Their children aren’t worth a damn. Why is that? I blame the schools.” I personally think that you came into a different world. The kids went to school, and they came home and said, “Dad, you know, this and that happened.” The dad gave them answers like, “Pray to the Blessed Virgin,” or something, particularly the mothers. This wasn’t relevant to them. They took their advice from their peers, and that’s the worst advice they could get. (laughs)

KN: For the record, can I ask you both your parents’ full names please?

RH: My father was Henry Lee Hancock. My mother was Mary Gillette Hancock. She was born in Marfa, Texas, and he was born in Alpine, Texas. They spoke Spanish, being down there on the border. In Corona, New Mexico, most of our workers were Mexicans. We had a family, a man and wife. The wife worked in the house, and the man on the farm, or on the ranch. Our language, both out on the job and in the house, was pretty much Spanish. That’s where I got my Spanish. It’s been a real blessing to me. [It] wouldn’t have happened if it hadn’t been an accident of birth. I wouldn’t be in Chihuahua doing these things for the governor if I couldn’t speak Spanish.

KN: Definitely. Can you describe your role as the labor director and also as the executive secretary for the—

RH: As the labor director, I [communicated] with the farmers, [as far as how many workers they wanted]. I would schedule, with Rio Vista, the appropriate numbers that we were going to get. We would bring them in. We had kind of a bullpen there at the Doña Ana County Farm Bureau.

KN: Where was that located?

RH: That was located on the railroad there. I can't remember the address, but it was located in a commercial area in Las Cruces. [It was] kind of the warehouse area, along the farm bureau. You all interviewed Bobby Jack Porter, and he can tell you exactly where that was. I don't know if that's there anymore, but—

KN: Okay, and as executive secretary—

RH: I would take the orders from the farmers and dish out the braceros to the farmers. We were not a big farm operation. I suppose the average farmer in Doña Ana County probably didn't have over two workers during the year. [They] maybe had ten or twelve [during] harvest time. There was quite a personal relationship with the workers, because they weren't big farmers. [It] irritated me that anti-bracero people said that this program was to help corporate farmers. We didn't have any corporate farmers. I suspect that there were not a lot anywhere in the United States. I still don't think there are a lot, because they're big family farms. We would get them [braceros] and dish them out to the farmers. For the most part, we didn't have a lot of trouble. The most [we had was] say six hundred farmers and ten thousand workers. Another fellow and I worked this job. His name was Epefino Apodaca, but he's dead now. He would go out north, and I would go out south. Vice versa, we would settle strikes. We would call into the office, and they would say, "Go down to Chamberino. They got another one there." I would go down there, talk, and find out what the problem was.

KN: What was the main problem for the cause of the strikes?

RH: Disagreements, mostly during the picking season and [about] the farm. The first picking, I think our wage was \$2.05. Then the second picking, the picking was usual poorer, so you pay them less or you pay them more. Usually, the bracero would say, "This picking has gotten bad." The farmer would say, "That's good cotton." They would come to an agreement. The farmer didn't want to lose his men, and the braceros didn't want to lose their job. We had to guarantee, I'm not

sure how many hours, but [something] like, every two weeks, which is a normal workweek, eighty hours. You had to guarantee sixty hours in a two-week period, and if you fell below that, you had to pay the Mexicans a dollar and a half a day, what they call subsistence. That was a major complaint. The farmer would never bring these complaints until they brought them [braceros] in at the end of the year. You would ask them, you were required to do that. You had to ask every man, “Do you have any complaints? We want to hear it.” They would say, “*Yo tuve muchos días deoquis.*” [They] didn’t have any work. So, you would say, “How many?” “Twenty.” That meant the farmers had to pay them \$30.00, which was more than it is now. That’s unpleasant to the farmer, but we did that kind of thing and all kinds of things. We had a farmer, I won’t mention his name, but his foreman struck a worker. We went out there to see what that problem was. The Labor Department came down, the guys from Denver, and they had a pretty good session with the farmer. They were all love and kisses. The local Labor Department man kept whispering to me, “Get them to settle.” They just seemed so much in accord, I thought, but he kept saying to me, “Get them to settle.” I didn’t, and I learned a lesson there. The farmer left, and the Labor Department man said, “Mr. So and So seems like a nice fellow. If he would just pay this bracero one hundred dollars, well, we would just call it even.” I thought, Well, what’s wrong with that? This man is wealthy. What’s one hundred dollars to him? So, I said, “Okay.” The guy [bracero] was going home, and the farm bureau paid him one hundred dollars. We billed the farmer, and he just raised holy hell. You had to be on the mortar there, and he left us and went to the Southwest Cotton Growers. He just told everybody. [It was] like he hired a loudspeaker and told everybody what a bunch of bastards we were. I haven’t forgiven him yet, because we thought we were working in his best interest. The big farmers had these coffee meetings, and he just told them, “The farm bureau will sell you out at the first chance. They’re not supporting the farmers. They’re in league with these government bureaucrats.” That’s just one of those irritating things that happened. You go out there, and you try to find out what’s happening. A farmer called me. He was a nice fellow, and he said, “My workers want to go

home, and I don't know why. I can't believe they want to go home." I went out there, and I said to them, "What's this? You fellows want to go home?" They said, "We got to get our corn in." I think they were from Durango, maybe from the Laguna down there. Those were the big good cotton pickers. They said, "We've got to go home." I smoked cigars in those days, and I pulled out my cigar, put it in my mouth, and began to feel for matches. There was a hard looking old boy, and he said, "Light the *señor*." Like that, you know, a sharp command. I told the farmer, "I think I figured out your problem. Send that guy off to do something." He sent him off to the other side of the field to get a tractor or something. I said, "Boys, that man is your problem, isn't he?" They said, "Oh, yes. He comes in drunk at two o'clock in the morning. He makes us get up and cook eggs for him." He was a real bully. The Mexicans at that time couldn't move as a group to take care of a guy like that. The farmer said, "When he comes back, let's just jump him. We'll beat the hell out of him." The Mexicans said, "That's all right for you, but we live in his town. He's killed six men. It's just better for us to go home. You know, we have to do it. You're a *patrón*, but it's just too risky for us. We just have to." The guy comes back, and I said, "Hey, get your stuff." He said, "What's the matter, *patrón*?" I said, "Hell, I don't give you answers. Come with me. I'm changing you." I put him with one Mexican farmer, far north. One farmer, he had the bully there, but he could get along one on one. The other [farmer], his men stayed the whole period and picked his cotton. Everybody went home happy. There was no way—he was a killer, and we had some of those guys. I like northern Mexicans, because the southern Mexicans were very herd minded. [It was] difficult for them to perform as individuals. Anthropologists will say, "That's what we like about southern Mexicans. They have community spirit." I'm sure that's true. (laughs) You get some of those southern Mexicans, and they would come in a group of say, thirty or forty. We didn't get very many of them, because we liked to have Chihuahuans, which are basically quite a lot like Americans. If they got one man to do something, they all do it. They don't have to have some companions go with them. For many of the southern Mexicans, one young radical kind of guy

would do all the talking. You would have guys [that were] fifty years old, and you would ask them, "What is your complaint?" They said, "*Lo que dice mi compañero.*" With those guys, you're always dealing with the leader. With the northern Mexicans, you were dealing with individuals. Some people would say, "Sure, you like people who don't organize so you can exploit them better." I remember one time that we went to a farm way up north. (coughs) There was a farmer who had two Mexicans there. One of them was from the south, and one of them was from Durango or Chihuahua. We had a complaint. This guy came to the office and said, "He employed me, and he hasn't given me any work." This was [during] the wintertime. These guys, a lot of the time, begged the farmers to renew their contract. The farmer said, "We don't have any work in the winter. If you really want to, I guess I can employ you and give you whatever work I can." He [bracero] had this subsistence payment. If you had a guy for a month or two, I think in his case six months, then you probably had not given him six weeks of work in that time. You had to pay him \$1.50 a day for all the days he was assured [work]. This guy came in and told us about that. We went up there. He was a Hispanic farmer. We told him, "These guys from the south, they can live on about \$12.00 per week. The northern Mexicans, probably twenty or twenty-five dollars." We went up there and told this guy, "You owe this guy some subsistence." He said, "Yes. He asked me to contract him, but I guess I'll just have to pay him." He paid him, and I asked the other bracero, "Do you have any complaints?" He said, "No, and if I had any, I wouldn't have to go to your office to settle." (both laugh)

KN: That's the difference.

RH: We went down, and we had this southern boy with us. We said, "Your friend, has he been getting more work than you?" He said, "No." I said, "He seems to be doing all right." He said, "He's a guy that's killed some people in our country. The farmer is afraid to mistreat him." (laughs)

KN: That'll do it. Were the workers or the farmers afraid to come to you or ask for your assistance?

RH: No. I don't think so, because we tried to be honest about this. Our farm bureau board wanted us to abide by the contract. They would be tougher on violators than we would. We had to work with these people. If the board had to deal with them, they would just be tougher on them, because they were basically men of rules. They thought, this guy is not obeying the rules, and to heck with him. I had another incident that I got a good deal of satisfaction out of. I had a farmer, and I didn't know anything about his personal business. He had a Mexican foreman who was an ex-army sergeant, and he was a real tough guy. He was a tough nut. If the workers complained or anything, he would invite them to settle it with their fists. He was tough. He always was. He had a pretty good bunch of workers. We would give him workers, and some of them would come in and want to be transferred. They were contracted to the farm bureau not to the individual. We could transfer them, but we didn't. We didn't really want to encourage that very much. This guy, his name was Jim, he was always getting on us, "You can't transfer my men. You're just making it easy for these people to give us trouble. They'll be transferring all over the valley. You guys got to stand up for us." I went out and got some of his men that came in wanting to transfer. I went out to Jim's farm, and there he was. There was an older man with him. He had a very southern accent, like a Kentucky colonel. I said, "Jim, we got the same problem as we've had. Some of your men want to transfer." Jim didn't say anything, and this Kentucky colonel said, "Why, these boys don't want to work for us? Of course we'll transfer them." That was the end of the trouble. That man was his financier. (laughs) We never have had any more trouble with him. That was kind of gratifying.

KN: Did you handle only in the Doña Ana area? How many farms would you estimate?

RH: I think we had about six hundred farms. We were very preferred. We would go to Rio Vista, and we would say we wanted three hundred men. We would get one thousand in one go. They much preferred us to go into Texas.

KN: Why?

RH: I hate to say this, but I think Texans were more racist then. New Mexico was half Hispanic, and half our farmers were Hispanic. The Texas farms were bigger, and they didn't like to go to big farms. They had to wait in line to weigh their cotton and wait in line to eat. There were loud noises, and some people were gambling and fighting. They just preferred to have a smaller [farm]. Our area was an area of small farms.

KN: You said one thousand men would want to go. How would you determine who would go and who would stay?

RH: They all had cards from the farm bureau. Our farmers would tell us, "Look out for so and so." The guys showed us the card. "He worked last year for John Doe in Doña Ana County." They only gave these cards to those that completed their contract. You really didn't interview them much. They would approach you, and say, "I want to go and work for John Doe." Then you would get them. Even if John Doe couldn't take them, you figured they were pretty good workers. By and large, we didn't have very much trouble. They wanted to work, and the farmers needed the work. We got along pretty well. We even got along pretty well with the Mexican consul. We would occasionally be called on the carpet by the Mexican consul. They had a guy there, an old revolutionary man by the name of Colonel Michelle. They said he could speak English better than we could, but he always spoke Spanish. It gave him some advantage, I think. We got along very well with him, and he had younger men working for him. We really became good friends with them. We had the Labor Department men there, too. We, by and large, got along well with them, too. We all wanted to see the program work, and it did.

KN: Can you tell me, on average, how many braceros you think you processed on a daily basis?

RH: We tried to keep it down. Sometimes though, when the cotton is ready to pick, farmers want it yesterday. They want the workers yesterday. We would sometimes run five or six hundred a day. We tried two to three hundred in there. I'll tell you another story that's kind of interesting. We had a bunkhouse, because sometimes we had leftovers. They would get in about eleven o'clock at night. You don't want to work all night, so we had a fellow that would bring them sandwiches on request. We called this guy, and he would bring them some sandwiches for supper. We would put them in the bunkhouse. As I recall, we had seven beds. One night, we had seven braceros, and I told them, "We're all done for the day. You guys go in the bunkhouse, find your beds, and go to bed. We'll get farmers for you tomorrow." I was doing some paperwork, and it was about 11:30 PM. I was closing up and I thought, "Maybe I'll just go out to see if the braceros got accommodated all right." I went out there and turned on the light. It was cold, because it was getting along in the fall. There was frost every night. We didn't have any heat in that room, but we had GI comforters for everybody. That's pretty good cover. Much to my surprise, I found some of the more aggressive men had two GI comforters, and some of the old, passive types were sleeping under newspapers and cardboard boxes. I got them all sorted out again. I thought it was interesting that those people were unknown to each other. When they are a community, they will [get to know each other], but nobody came from the same village. There seemed to be no thought given to [the fact that] we've got seven comforters, and each one always gets one. The big husky ones got two comforters, and the others didn't have any. (laughs)

KN: Can you describe the process of how the farmer would call you? Can you describe how that would happen? How would you transport them [braceros] up to the areas?

RH: We transported them from Rio Vista to our center there at the farm bureau. The farmers would come in and get them. You had the bracero, and he had a card. He wanted to go and work with his old *patrón*. You would call, and the old *patrón* would say, "I've already got my men. He's a good man, but I can't take him." Then the bracero would be very crestfallen. You would tell him, "We've got another job," but [he was] still [disappointed]. The Mexican worker, then and now, really values the personal relationship. Other times, we would call at ten o'clock at night, and we would say, "We've got a man by the name of Juan González here, and he's coming from seventy miles away." "Oh," he [would say], "Juan is back. Yeah, I'll be there." He comes with the whole family, his wife and kids. It's a real reunion. The kids jump on Juan and, that was one of the most gratifying things about the job. That was a close relationship with these people. These were usually small farmers, and they didn't have a foreman. They valued these people. I always remember the Hispanic farmers got along better with their workers than the Americans did. I've had Americans saying, "I don't know how Joe Apodaca gets along so well with his people. Why can't I do that?" I said, "You don't speak Spanish, and you don't understand them like he does." I've seen Joe Apodaca bring in thirty men to go home. They would get on the bus, and he would embrace each one. You can't beat that. He was the *patrón* that those men expected. He valued them. He was the *patrón*. If they had a sickness or some kind of problem, he would do something for them. Other Anglo farmers, some of them were good too, but they didn't embrace their workers when they left. They just kind of [said], "See you, Joe." To me, the bracero program was a friendship program as well as an economic program. I didn't ever feel guilty about working with the bracero program.

KN: What cultural reason could you give for the bond of a bracero that would come over and be loyal to a certain *patrón*, or vice versa?

RH: I was a Peace Corp director in El Salvador for two years, so I'm not limited to Mexico. We had maids in El Salvador, and they would talk about how they worked for someone. They said, "You know, that woman wouldn't say good

morning to us.” The woman probably had no bad intention. She was a foreign woman, and she just didn’t know or didn’t worry about it too much. Those people want to be spoken to and valued as human beings. You say a lot of things about Mexico, but Mexico is a humane society. In a way, we think dollars are the way that people like us, but Mexicans are humane. [They] don’t ever lose [their] humanity. You may be a prisoner in the jail, but they, the Mexicans, still treat you as a human being. I never quite understood why. [At the] University of Oklahoma, we had a center down in Colima, Mexico. They had a prison there. We took people down there, and in the summer we had students studying Spanish. We used to play basketball against the prison team. Of course, they used to beat us, because they had nothing else to do but practice. One time, I took a major from the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. He was helping them with police work. We visited the prison, and there was a young social worker, about your age, that accompanied us. We walked right out in the yard with all the prisoners and didn’t feel any insecurity. This man commented, “You wouldn’t dare take a young woman into the McAlester [State] Prison in Oklahoma. They would just hoot and holler, insult her, and make sexual remarks. You couldn’t do that.” I said, “Why do you think that is?” Angel, our boss down there on the hacienda, said, “Prisoners don’t get sore like they do in the United States. They treat them humanely.” It’s not a matter of having good plumbing and all that. It’s [about] treating them like they’re people. They have a thing that we wouldn’t ever do. They allow wives and girlfriends to spend the night with prisoners. They have a special section there that they set aside for that. The average American would say, “Oh, this is horrible. It’s very primitive.” They just do things in a [different way]. When we were walking in there with the warden, no guards were with him. He just walked in there. We were going to walk somewhere, and prisoners were constantly talking to him. He was a young man. He walked a few steps, and another prisoner would grab him and say, “I’ve got this and that.” The Oklahoma State Highway Patrol major said, “This man has good communication with his prisoners.” It’s interesting. Today, people that are trustees in the jail, people that they know won’t escape, they’ll let them sit in the park. That’s a very small

prison. The highway patrolman said, "That's another thing. The stateside prisons are very big. They have two to three thousand inmates." That's a tough deal.

KN: When the bracero completed his contract with the farmer, you said they were contracted to the farm bureau, not the individual farmer.

RH: That's right.

KN: Tell me about the return process. Did they have to go through your center?

RH: The return process, well, we would just take them when the farmer was done. He would bring his people in, and we would make sure that everything was settled out according to the contract. We would take them back to Rio Vista. I think they took them back to Chihuahua. I think they had three centers in the [Mexican] states, most of the time. One of them was in Monterrey, [another] in Chihuahua, and one in Hermosillo, Sonora. They had one in Irapuato, [too]. We took a bunch of old men down there to get renewed, and that was quite an experience.

KN: Tell me about it.

RH: Texans are always ahead of the rest of us. (laughs) They had made a deal, and I don't know what they paid. I suspect they paid to get some of their old men renewed. These people [worked for] eighteen months. They called them keymen, and they said, "We need to have a way where we can keep these men." This guy from Texas, [from the] El Paso Cotton Growers I believe it was, said, "We made a deal to renew our men in Irapuato. Do you want to go in with us?" I said, "We got about two hundred. We would like to do that." We went down there to Irapuato. In the first place, that's a much lower standard of living than in northern Mexico. All of our workers were well dressed. [They] had good Stetson cowboy boots. We were not appreciated there. They looked at us [like] we were stealing places that ought to be given to them. In the papers, they were talking about how tough the managers at the center were. It was not a real good environment. In order to become a bracero, you had to have a military card. In other words, you

had to have a draft card. We got down there with our two hundred men, and I suppose twenty of them didn't have draft cards. I was talking to the lieutenant there, in the Army. They were the ones that saw to all that. I said, "What's to be done here? I've sent these men. They say they served their military service, which may or may not be true." He said, "They have to go back to their respective *municipios* and get a draft card." I told these men. I even telegraphed their *presidencias*, because they were from everywhere. I asked them to please expedite these people and get their draft cards. We got what we could. We left those that didn't have their draft cards. We had two young guys from Jalisco. There are a lot of blonde people in Jalisco, and they were readily recognizable. We went by bus. [When] we got to Juárez, we were crossing the border, getting to the immigration, and these two young guys showed up. I went to see the general about getting those *cartillas militares*, and the general made quite a speech. He said, "You have to be responsible." [Then] he said to me, "I bet you got your draft card in your pocket. Is that correct?" I said, "Yeah, that's correct." He said, "All we're asking is that these men be responsible." Then he said to our braceros [that] were all gathered there, "You men, remember what you've got in your pockets, and money is what you're worth. Take advantage of your stay in the United States." He made quite an eloquent speech, I thought. You can't fight that. He's got the right idea. These two guys came up, and they had their military [cards]. They were all fixed up with their Army. I said, "How did you get to Jalisco so quick and get back?" He said, "You know that lieutenant that you were talking to?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I had a blank one of those *micas*, [that] the card fits in. I put one hundred pesos in it. I went to him and said, '*Mi teniente, tenemos nuestra carta military*,' and handed it to him. He looked at it and said, '*Oh, muy bien*'". (laughs) That was kind of funny.

KN: That's where he got it. Did you have any problems with braceros disappearing from the farms or leaving?

RH: Yeah, they called them abscondees(?). We had some, but it wasn't a huge problem. Usually, as an accommodation to our membership, when that happened,

we would replace them. We would mark them, you see. They paid for, let's say, three months of insurance. We would just mark that off and apply that to another man. We wouldn't charge them another fee for it. It wasn't a huge problem. To the immigration and the Labor Department, I'm sure it was probably something that they worried about a little, but we didn't worry about it too much.

KN: We're just doing some final reflections now. What is your personal opinion of the bracero program?

RH: As I said, I thought it was a program in human relations. I thought, by and large, at least in New Mexico, we had gratification on both sides. It was also a successful economic program. [It was] certainly a lot better than the wetback program. I can tell you a story about wetbacks in Norman, Oklahoma. This has been oh, fifteen years ago. They had been having a problem. For some reason, the Norman police had gotten into capturing wetbacks. I never did understand why they did that, because most police didn't want to get involved in that. We had some wealthy people that played polo. [They] needed one thing that Mexico has, [which is] a great number of people that know how to work with horses. They had this one fellow. He had four or five workers for his polo [fields], and he played polo. He was a wealthy man. He owned the Cadillac agency in Norman. A reporter came to me and said, "I want to talk to these wetbacks. I would like you to interpret." We got down there and [started] talking nice to them, [asking them] how they did and everything. They didn't have any complaints, except [that] they didn't want to go home. The reporter said, "Do you have any complaints?" They said, "No. The only thing that's worrying us now is that they owe us seven hundred dollars. We called in the foreman, and he was a Mexican. He said he wouldn't answer our call. We are worried we're going to lose our money if we get sent home." I asked the jailor, "Immigration will collect their money won't they?" I think there were three of them. He said, "Oh, no, they'll just send a driver with a van. They'll pick these guys up and take them home. They aren't going to do anything." We walked out of the jail, and the sheriff was there. He had nothing do with the Norman police. He was the sheriff of the

county. I knew the sheriff, and I said, "Sheriff, we need to collect the money of these boys." Here he was. Was he going to go up against a powerful, rich man and collect money? He just reared back in his chair. He talked like a real redneck, and he said to one of his deputies, "J.T., you doing anything?" The deputy said, "No, sheriff." He said, "Take Hancock out there and collect these boys' money." I went out with the big deputy. I wasn't going out to a farmer on my own initiative to tell him that he had to pay his people. I went out there with the deputy, and we came to the farm. The man's wife was there. She said to the bracero with us, "Oh, hello Shorty." She said to me, "Why are they taking these men? We need these men. There ought to be a way we could keep them." I said, "He says you all owe him some money." She said, "I don't know anything about that, but I'll call my husband." She called him, and he was up there at his Cadillac agency. Then she said, "They say that we owe Shorty and whoever seven hundred dollars." The guy said, "Pay him seven hundred dollars and add fifty dollars to it." That Mexican foreman would have kept their money if the sheriff hadn't [helped]. I always esteemed that sheriff.

KN: What do you think ended the program?

RH: I think if you look at this program, *The Harvest of Shame*, it's on video somewhere, CBS [has it], then you know that there were people that were opposed to it. I can never figure out why the Catholic Church was opposed to it. The archbishop of San Antonio was one of the big guys that talked against it. I figured the braceros were Catholics. Why you should be opposed to it, I can't understand. My wife has a brother. He's been a career ranch administrator in southern Arizona. They have a ranch twenty-five miles from the Mexican border. He says that they're just inundated with wetbacks. It used to be one or two of them would come through, and they knew where they were going. Their *patrón* was expecting them. He said, "I even get sixty. All those people are carrying pistols down there. They all have side arms. They don't leave the house without them." It's one thing to talk to one or two guys, but it's another thing to talk to fifty. They're all kind of in a state of war down there. Immigration controlled

wetbacks. I forget when it was. It might have been in the late 1950s or early 1960s, but they totally controlled the wetbacks. They had a legal alternative. I realize it's more complicated now, because it's a bigger body of people. I think at the maximum the wetback program was close to five hundred thousand. Now what do they say? We've got eight million. The year the bracero program was working well, they controlled the wetbacks. It was primarily farmers that were using wetbacks, but now everybody's using them. They told the farmer, "You can get legal workers at your local farm association. If you don't do that, we'll put you out of business." They meant it. They controlled it. There was a year or two, right toward the end of the bracero program, where they didn't have very many wetbacks. Certainly farmers didn't use them because, if you said, "Heck, I'm not going to go along without that," they would station an immigration officer on your farm. You couldn't get anybody to work. If they caught you with wetbacks, they didn't blacklist you. They would just say, "You've got to go to the farm bureau and get workers." I still say, if you have a legal program, the workers and the employers would rather have [that]. Why we [continue to] go on with this wetback program is more than I can fathom. I really can't understand it. I thought Bush was going to do something about it, but then 9/11 came along (unintelligible). [This guy] drove us to this hotel, and we asked him, "How is it to go to Juarez now? Is it tough?" He said, "During this Iraq thing, it'll take you two or three hours to get down there [Juarez]." (laughs) If I was king of the world, I would get immigration to advertise throughout the land, "Come to the immigration office on such and such street. Register your workers, and there will be a legal contract. Wages will be specified." In other words, start a hiring hall for legal workers. The State Department and Department of Labor would run it. It would be a pretty big job. [Some] people say, "We don't want to give those people green cards or citizenship." You don't have to. Give them a contract and make it tough on the employers that don't go along with it. I think it could still be done, but I'm not sure it will be done. [Vicente] Fox is working toward that. He's giving the guys credentials. I say, let's give them credentials or contracts. If they're supposed to get a certain wage and be insured, then there will be labor

guarantees. [We should] reinstate the old bracero program, for everybody, not just for farmers. Restaurants could get them, too. In Oklahoma City, they told me, “If we were to pick up all the wetbacks, we would close all the restaurants in Oklahoma City.” I’m sure that’s true everywhere.

KN: Thank you very much, Dr. Hancock.

RH: You bet.

End of interview

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