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Interview no. 1560

Consuelo Lerma

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Consuelo Lerma

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Las Cruces, New Mexico

Date of Interview: March 7, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1560

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Consuelo Lerma was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, on December 1, 1917; in 1949, she began working for the Singer Sewing Center in Las Cruces; after receiving training, she began teaching sewing classes for the wives of braceros and other low-income farm women. Ms. Lerma recalls that in 1949, she began working for the Singer Sewing Center in her hometown of Las Cruces, New Mexico; she went to El Paso, Texas, and Albuquerque, New Mexico, to receive training on how to use the machines and their various attachments and how to teach others to sew; shortly thereafter, she then began teaching a sewing class for the wives of braceros and other low-income farm women; the classes were offered through the Home Education Livelihood Program and jointly sponsored by the government and area churches; the government provided the fabric and necessary materials, and the Singer Company supplied the machines; the classes were given in Vado, New Mexico, in the morning, afternoon, and evening once a week; the women taking her class spoke only Spanish, and she taught them what little English she could; they were from the San Miguel, La Mesa, and Vado area; the women focused primarily on making dresses. [Interviewer's Note: Ms. Lerma was uncertain of the exact years she taught the classes, but she was adamant about these women being the wives of braceros.]

Name of Interviewee: Consuelo Lerma

Date of Interview: March 7, 2003

Name of Interviewer: Beth Morgan

This is Beth Morgan, and it is March 7, 2003. I'm visiting with Consuelo Lerma at her home at Las Cruces, New Mexico. This interview is for the Bracero Oral History Project.

BM: Okay, if I could just ask you when and where you were born.

CL: I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, here, in the 535 South Church Street in my grandparents' house.

BM: Okay, and when was that?

CL: December 1, 1917.

BM: Okay, and did you grow up in this area as well?

CL: Yes, certainly.

BM: So, that was kind of close to this area, isn't it?

CL: It was right by the city hall, St. Genevieve's Church that was torn down.

BM: And so that is still kind of in the neighborhood, right, to where you live now?

CL: Yes.

BM: When did you start working for the Singer Company?

CL: I started working when my daughter graduated from the Holy Cross. I started in 1949.

BM: And what kind of training did you receive to do that work?

CL: They sent me to school to learn how to use, how to operate the machines, and then I took schooling to teach sewing classes.

BM: Where did they send you to school?

CL: Well, I went to El Paso. They had all the teachers from the area attend a whole week, and they would pay me the wages, plus the hotel, and the food, so I was gone for one week.

BM: Okay, and that was just to learn how to use the machines?

CL: And also to learn the attachments, to teach the people about, you know, the button holders and all this.

BM: Right, okay, and then you said that they also gave you some training in how to teach sewing?

CL: Yes. I had a very nice teacher from Denver, and she was, what was her name? I can't even remember her name it's been so many years. Anyway, she was the one that would come and get all the teachers in El Paso or in Santa Fe or in Albuquerque. I went to training in El Paso, because it was closer to my house, and I went to Albuquerque. I met a lot of teachers. I also have pictures from that group of ladies that took sewing classes.

BM: Okay, and you were saying right before we got started recording, who provided the funding for this operation?

CL: Well, the government would furnish the material for the dresses, thread, and patterns, and the Singer Company would loan them eight machines. My check would come from Livelihood—let's see—I forgot now—just hang onto that, and let me think of it.

BM: Okay, we'll get back to that. But that was some kind of a government—

CL: Well, uh-huh, it was churches, from the churches, Livelihood, yeah, it's called HELP, Home Education Livelihood Program was the name of it, and they used to call it HELP, H-E-L-P, just the initials. It's been so long I couldn't even remember.

BM: That was through the churches?

CL: The churches would fund some of it, and the government would fund the patterns, and the fabric, and the teacher. First, I volunteered, for about a week, and I had to drive fourteen miles to Vado, New Mexico. Do you know where that is?

BM: Yes.

CL: And they have an old schoolhouse there, which the machines were there, and then there was a little shuttle bus that helped, it would pay to get the driver to pick up the ladies from the different farms.

BM: Now, do you know, was the program already in effect before you started working there at Singer's or was that a new program?

CL: I don't remember, but see I was working for Singer, and on my day off, I decided to go teach this group, migrant ladies that were working. Then I decided it was

too far to drive every, you know on my day off. And my husband was a little bit, he would say, “Why do you have to work over there when you work over here on your day off.” But my girls were already going to high school, and one was in high school, and the other had just graduated from the eighth grade in the Catholic schools, so I thought, well the girls help me with everything, and we did, we got along real good, we managed. But, I wanted these ladies to learn, I really [did], because they had worked in the farms, they would chop cotton, they would pick cotton, vegetables, everything. Now the group that I had, that I liked, that were very very good at learning, were the ones that lived in Stahmann Farms. They had free rent, and they had water, and light, and the houses. Their husbands worked for Stahmann, and they were entitled to go to this program.

BM: Okay, so most of the ladies that you worked with, they were Spanish-speaking?

CL: All of them were from Mexico. They couldn’t speak English, but they were trying to learn. And I had a tape recorder, and I taught them how to at least say pattern, thread, scissors, you know, the basic things for sewing, for when they go to the store, they would ask for scissors, if they wanted to buy a pair of scissors or things like that. That was the basic language that I taught them.

BM: You spoke Spanish yourself though?

CL: Definitely.

BM: Okay, so you were able to communicate very well. Did you receive any training in speaking Spanish or was that just part of your—

CL: Well, that was part of my heritage. I went through the eighth grade with only Anglo people, so I would speak English with them, but at home we spoke Spanish all the time.

BM: And how many years did you work with the braceros’ wives?

CL: With the braceros, about two years. And that schoolhouse is probably still standing in Vado. They had, like, a home ec department, and they had a stove, and they had sinks. It was an old schoolhouse, a redbrick schoolhouse.

BM: I think—

CL: It’s still standing there.

BM: I know what kind of building you are talking about.

- CL: Now, these ladies did not know how to stuff a turkey. So, I asked, let's see the name of the gentlemen that was in charge of that was from Santa Fe, and what was it? Larry, I can't even remember his last name. Anyway, I asked him if it was okay if he would buy turkeys, so that I could teach the ladies how to stuff a turkey for Thanksgiving. He was very generous and let us have two turkeys.
- BM: That's nice. Okay, so you also taught cooking?
- CL: Yeah, it was just around Christmas. I taught them how to make lemon pie, pecan pie, and dressing. Then they, in turn, taught me how to make tamales. They made sweet tamales, which I had never eaten, and they used sugar, and raisins, and pineapple, a can of pineapple. They were delicious for breakfast, for coffee. I had to buy the *masa* already ready. They were really good. They stayed there, well, I had a group in the mornings from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM, and then another group from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM. They would come in; they would bring them in little shuttles. The morning group didn't want to leave, they want to stay there, and I had an awful time trying to figure out who's gonna use the machines, we only had eight machines, and there were sixteen ladies at the end of the day.
- BM: So each class then, was eight ladies?
- CL: Eight ladies, uh-huh. And let me tell you, they had children, and they had a student teacher, now, I remember that girl, Polanco was her last name, but anyway, they would have her at the other end of the school, in a room, to teach those kids how to speak English. They would donate cookies and juice, and they would feed, give them that for refreshments. They would put them to sleep there in the afternoon, to take their naps. They were all children between one year through six or something like that.
- BM: How did the ladies find out about the program?
- CL: I went knocking on doors. My supervisor was, she already died, Ms. Bradford, she was a colored lady, and she told me about all these farms where they worked. So, she would go, we drove in her car to knock on the doors and get them enrolled. Now, some of the husbands were not happy to let them go, I'm certain they didn't, but after they found out the neighbors were doing it, they let their wives go.

BM: Why do you think that was?

CL: Because they hadn't heard about the program. There was one particular family that I drove my little station wagon to knock at the door, and the girls were in there, and they were so scared to open the door. They would open the little curtain, and I said, "I won't hurt you. I'm Mrs. Lerma," you know, I told them, "I'm Mrs. Lerma, and I want to enroll you for a sewing class." The gentleman was in a tractor, and he came all the way, and he said, "No trespassing," in Spanish, "you have no business in this place." (laughs) I said, "Let me talk to you." Finally, he didn't want to hear anything, he just wanted me out of there. So, I had to drive off, but later on, they found out about it, I came back, and one of the girls was enrolled.

BM: What do you think they were afraid of?

CL: Well, the man was very strict; this was the owner of the ranch. They were, they came from Mexico, but it's right there in Vado, not far from the schoolhouse, and it says right there, Private Property. I drove in, because I saw the house and the girls. They were young women, so they were kind of scared to open the door, and they would talk to me through the little curtain. (laughs)

BM: So, that was like their husbands' boss.

CL: Yes.

BM: Did any of the husbands give you trouble?

CL: Two of them did. The one was working in the fields. I came over, and he had no idea who was inside the house talking to the lady. He saw the station wagon out there, he breaks in there, really mad, called her, I can't even remember her name, "Chole! What is this lady, what is that car doing out there?" And I said, "It's my car," and then I start talking to him, and he calmed down.

BM: (laughs) Did he think she had a boyfriend?

CL: Well, I guess so. When I would go and knock on doors in the morning, they would, the braceros, some of them, would come home for lunch, and I could smell the girls making these homemade tortillas, corn tortillas, and everybody was fixing lunch. If I'd go knocking doors between 10:00 AM and 11:30 AM, I could smell their *sopa de arroz* cooking and their food. And in the summer, they used

to have corn. In the summer, my supervisor came over looking for me, and I was in Stahmann Farms. These young girls, they were young and all clean, they were boiling corn on the cob. They invited me, so when my supervisor walked in, I'm sitting, eating corn on the cob. (laughs) Then she says, "Now, Mrs. Lerma, it's not, this is not the policy." I said, "Well, it smelled so good, and they invited me, they're so nice." She said, "But it's not the policy, you don't eat any of their food, because you could get sick." I said, "Sick? Those are boiling." I started talking back to her, and she started laughing, "I know this taste good, but it's the policy, you don't eat food in their house."

BM: Oh, well, that's kind of disappointing—

CL: But all of them were fixing, you know, the smell of the chile, roasted chile, they were roasting the chile, they were fixing tortillas, and they were fixing *sopa de arroz*, rice. They used to use a lot of meat, like pork, they ate a lot of pork meat, pork chops, chile with pork in it, they eat a lot of pork, and I love pork chops, myself.

BM: So, they cooked, and you would take them up on their goodies, whatever they offered, huh?

CL: Well, I did it twice, but then when I found out what the policy was, I didn't even—

BM: So, that would have been when you recruited people for the classes?

CL: I was recruiting people, and then I had some that already knew, and knocked at the door, and she would talk to her neighbor, and she would invite me in, because she knew me, that's how come we got so many. Sometimes, I tell you, they were all looking for a ride to get over there, not only the braceros' wives, I had some from La Mesa, from San Miguel, and from Berino.

BM: Now did they have to be—

CL: They had to qualify, their husbands were braceros. Now, I had, let me see, Ms. Celesco(??), a young girl, her parents had more money or they had better jobs or something, she only went to two classes, because she wasn't qualified. You had to be a bracero's wife or live on a farm to get to those classes. The HELP wouldn't pay for them.

BM: So, it could have been a farmer's wife, also?

CL: It had to be a farmer's wife, and that they were low income, but that lived on farms. And they were also happy, I have never seen people so, I used to feel ashamed at myself sometimes, you know, I have running water, I have two bathrooms now, things like that, and those girls would be cutting onions, and their hands were cut. They would go at night, I taught in the morning and in the afternoon, and when they couldn't come, I'd go from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM. They would come, and they had been working at the field all day, about four of them did that or chopping cotton. They looked so happy, though, they were so happy to come to the classes. They used to get along real good with me, and I got along with all of them. I still meet them all over. They've done great. They stayed here in Las Cruces, most of them that worked for Stahmann.

BM: Why don't you tell me a little more about the class itself? How did you start teaching them to sew and how did that go?

CL: Okay, we had the sewing machines there. Some of those women had never used an electric machine, and these were all electric machines. I start teaching them how to wind a bobbin. I had to be real extra careful they didn't disappear with the bobbin cases, because then we couldn't use the machine the next time. They were real good about keeping them, not stealing them, because they didn't have machines at home, but then I sold the machines on payments. The Singer Company would open an account for them, and they all had machines. I sold them not the highest, but the real good straight stitching machines.

BM: The Singer Company was working in partnership with the HELP Program?

CL: No, HELP would pay to use those machines, Singer had nothing to do with it, nothing, although, I worked for Singer, and everybody would come looking for me. You have no idea. I worked for wages, but I made more money selling machines, not only to the braceros but to everybody. I go to eat now at the restaurants and, "You're the Singer lady." In fact, Wednesday I went to eat at the fish, at the Long John Silver's, and I was sitting there, and Dr. Basille(??), she kept waving at me. I said, "That's Dr. Basille(??)." She's a woman, and I sold

her a machine, and [she] says, “You know when you sold my machine? Forty-six years ago.” (laughs)

BM: And she still has it?

CL: Yes. She has a girl taking care of her, because she’s real old, she’s a lot older than I am, and she recognized me. When my granddaughters come to visit, they take me to eat at *Si Señor* or *La Posta* or something. There’s always two or three people that know who I am, they know where I worked, well, after I put in all my life there. The worst that when the Singer Company went broke, and I don’t get the pension I should get.

BM: Well, that’s too bad.

CL: It is too bad.

BM: Talking about the classes, you said you taught them how to wind the bobbin.

CL: How to thread the machines, and how to use them, because they had never used electric machines, and to go slowly. That was the main thing, to teach them how to use the machines, so that they wouldn’t get their fingers caught, so they wouldn’t get it all messed up. They learned real good.

BM: They had to learn about the thread tension and—

CL: Very much. I’d tell them, “Don’t touch the tension after I have it adjusted. Stay on number three.” They knew, and everybody would turn it to the three to be sure, they were very careful. I really enjoyed teaching all those people. They were so willing to learn.

BM: What did you have them make to start out with?

CL: Dresses. First of all, I gave them a little, they had a little pad, Singer used to give them a little, it was a piece of jersey, a piece of leather, a piece of denim, and we sew on that, so they could know how to sew on all of those. Then I taught them how to use the size of needle, a heavy needle for denim, and a heavy needle for the *pantalones*. Then we had what they called, they had just come out with a knit fabric. I had to show them to buy the regular knit needles. We would give them money, no? We’d put them on the machines. Of course, we give them cotton ones most of the time, cotton fabric. We give them enough for the pattern and the size of women they were, because some were small, and they didn’t need two

yards, others needed three and a half or four, depending. They were getting the money from the HELP. I'm sure HELP is a government thing, isn't it?

BM: It sounds like it. I can probably do a little research on it.

CL: Yeah, they're still going. In the summer, I see them picking up people here, because it says HELP on the little truck.

BM: I think it's a government program.

CL: I'm sure it is, because I know the churches pay for the teacher, and that's where I got my check, from the churches, a bunch of churches from Albuquerque.

BM: So, they made dresses. Did you have a certain number of weeks that you worked with each group of women?

CL: I went all day Wednesday, one day of the week, and one evening. In fact, one evening all the lights went, they had a blackout. My husband didn't want me to go back. (laughs) Guess who brought me the candles? A colored fellow who lived next door to the school.

BM: Well, bless his heart.

CL: Uh-huh, and then he brought his truck and turned on the lights, so that people would, you know, they were getting ready to get into the shuttle.

BM: That was nice.

CL: It was very nice. Some of the husbands would drive with them at night, with the ladies, too.

BM: Now, when you say they had a blackout, did the electricity go off?

CL: The electricity went out in all of El Paso and Las Cruces that one time.

BM: Do you remember what year that was?

CL: Oh, God—I know my husband—I can't remember, but it was several years ago. I can't think right now, but it was a real black out for a couple of hours or more. I had to drive home, and everybody went too, we finally got everybody, so they could get home, too. That's why my husband didn't want me to go, especially to work at night over there.

BM: So, did they have like a semester type situation or—

- CL: No. I enrolled them, and they would finish their dress, because then some of them have to move on, like they went to California, they went to Hereford(??), Texas, I got cards, that's how come I know where they were.
- BM: So, whenever they would finish their projects, then they were sort of—
- CL: Well, if they were going to stay, the [ones from] Stahmann Farms stayed there, but, I mean, the other farms that hired the braceros, they would move them or they would go to different places. They had their own cars, and they would go to different areas, [like] Hatch, they'd go, and they wouldn't come, but what they did when they were there, they wanted to finish their project, their dress or their blouses or whatever they were doing.
- BM: You said a lot of the women lived at Stahmann Farms—
- CL: Several of them.
- BM: Can you tell me some of the other farms where some of them worked?
- CL: Oh, let's see—I went to so many places (laughs)—let's see—well, I can mention Ranchos Snow?? Rancho Plaza, Rancho—I can't even remember the names of those, these were the Stahmann Farms, each one had their own name, and they're all different, Rancho Plaza—if I can find those pictures, I can find more information for you.
- BM: So, does that mean there were several different places where Stahmann housed their—
- CL: Yes, there were different areas where they had their braceros working, picking the pecans. They also had, you know what else they had? They were raising geese; instead of ducks there were geese. Some of them worked where they were using the eggs. Some of these ladies worked in the pecan factory there that they had, making candy or whatever. This was after, the one's that lived in the Stahmann did that, the others that came and the other farmers didn't work at Stahmann. Stahmann was real good, because he would give them bonus [for] Easter and Christmas.
- BM: The women that you worked with, would you say they were mostly—
- CL: Mexican.
- BM: Yeah, but I mean were they working or living at farms?

CL: They were living on farms in La Mesa. I can't remember the names, they all had different names for their farms, and I can't think of them right now.

BM: But they would have been between Las Cruces and El Paso.

CL: Well, I didn't go further than La Mesa and San Miguel. They were all in this area; I didn't go to El Paso. They also had what they called the HELP Program, [they] had a man training them how to service their automobiles, and that man came from El Paso, but I don't know, they were paying him as a mechanic.

BM: That would have been the men he was teaching?

CL: He was teaching the men at night, and that was there at that school in another room. I can't even remember that man's name, and I knew everybody's name. It's been several years, and I can't place them. I went through so many people on my job that you have no idea.

BM: So, you drove yourself when you went down there to teach, right?

CL: Yes, I had a station wagon.

BM: The ladies used the little shuttle bus?

CL: Yes, because I didn't dare pick any of them up, because I didn't want to be late, because sometimes they weren't ready. The shuttle would pick them up and bring them to me. Sometimes, the shuttle was there just as I drove up. They were all anxious to get started, you know. I enjoyed them very much. I really enjoyed my job, that's why, I really didn't have to work, I had a husband that supported me, and I had the Singer Company check also, but I still wanted to teach them, because I felt like I was doing a great thing for them, because they didn't know how.

BM: Did you have to do any paperwork in relationship to your job?

CL: Yes, a lot of paperwork.

BM: What did that consist of?

CL: It consisted of, I had to roll call, and find out how many classes were there, and all that, so I could get my check. It went all the way to Santa Fe. I may have the check stubs still. That's my storeroom right now, and I'm telling you, it's a mess, and I gotta look for that. I have all kinds of boxes of checks that I got from Singer. My daughter is going to come and help me discard everything that I don't

need, because it's just keeping space, like, those boxes, I have full of stuff I gotta get rid of.

BM: I know, I'm doing the same thing.

CL: I already got a lot of, Tuesday I go to get my income tax finished, I haven't done it, I always leave it to the last minute, I don't know why.

BM: So, you had to take roll in the classes?

CL: Oh, definitely. If they didn't come, I wanted to find out why they didn't come.

BM: That was part of your responsibility, also?

CL: That's right, and the hours they were there. Some would come in the morning and didn't want to leave in the afternoon, so they stayed the eight hours, because they wanted to finish their dresses so fast. Some were very smart, and some were very dumb. (laughs) We had all kinds of people.

BM: I guess that's true of all us.

CL: Oh, yeah, well, I don't claim myself smart, but at least I was glad that I had some smart ladies there that, you know, could help the others whenever, because teaching eight people at the same time is not easy.

BM: That's true, because they are all at different—

CL: Especially when you're going to start, see my fingers? I can't even cut anymore. I have arthritis in this hand, and they're really bad, but I manage, and then I broke the wrist that's got it even worse, you know, when I fell. But, anyway, I want to stay here, you say I have a pretty house, it's not as pretty, but it's my home. And I was the architect, this is how I wanted a living room this size, and a dinette sitting there, and I wanted two bedrooms and a bath, and another bedroom and another bath here. My husband built it. We built it, that's why I went to work on so many jobs, to help him pay for the loan that we got. He was, my husband was part German, he was a very smart man. He died real young, but he was very clean, everything he wanted, he wanted it done right or else start from scratch again. My daughters were real good at, one of them took sewing, the other one didn't did not like sewing. The one that didn't like sewing got a real good job. They went to the University, she went to the University and got married. She got from Arizona, she graduated over there. She worked with Digital Company, she's

- the one who hires and fires the people. What do they call that? She was an administrator—
- BM: Personnel Director.
- CL: Yeah she's a director. She's retired and her husband retired not long ago. He retired from TRW, he's an engineer. Both of my girls married all nice boys. One has been married forty one years and the other has been married thirty nine, the same husbands.
- BM: That's fortunate for you.
- CL: That's fortunate, the oldest the one, the one that's been married thirty one, she got married and had one daughter and got married by the Church and everything. She met him, he was an MP at White Sand's, from Illinois. Then they moved to California, he running around with another police woman over there, so she left him. Came home and went back to school and said goodbye. Then she met this accountant, he's a real nice fellow, Anderson. I like my son in laws. They are real good boys. Good providers. If they can put up with my daughter's, they're doing ok. (laughs)
- BM: Well, back to the sewing class for a little bit. Did you have a lot of turnover in the class? Were you constantly getting new students?
- CL: I'll tell you, no. Most of the Stahmann Farms girls didn't move. I had turnover when they moved a bunch for the onion sheds to different places. I didn't stay but just in the summer, the Stahmann group stayed there until they finished two dresses, 'cause they kept coming and coming.
- BM: That was the Stahmann Farms ladies?
- CL: Uh-huh. The girls that lived in La Mesa, not in front, but there in La Mesa, the Celesca(??) girl, and the Avalos girl, and who else was theirs? The bosses, like, there was the Ricos, they didn't qualify, because their husbands were the managers of the farms, and they made more money than the braceros.
- BM: So they had to be low income. How many summers did you teach the class?
- CL: Let's see, two summers, two years.
- BM: Did they have more going on at the farms at that time? Is that why you taught the classes in the summer?

CL: They replaced me, because I didn't want to go back, they replaced me with another lady, but the classes kept on going. I think she recruited more, not only from Stahmann, from all the farms.

BM: But that was still just in the summertime?

CL: The same.

BM: Is that because there were more farmworkers here then?

CL: Well, I don't know, I guess so. They had a lot of people working. I had never been to the farms until I started teaching, and I saw that there were so many people from all over. Now, let's see, the other lady, I think she had some that were working for the dairies, also, somewhere over there. I didn't have any from the dairies.

BM: I think we were talking about this earlier, one of the times we were talking about it, was when we had lunch that day. You were telling me a story about one of the ladies, you taught her how to write her name.

CL: Yes, she didn't know how, and her husband was already running her down, he says, "She didn't even know her name in Spanish. *Ésa no sabe nada*," real sarcastic. I told her, "I'm going to teach you." She would come, and I'd help her with the dress, so she would finish it, so he wouldn't say she wasn't doing the sewing. (laughs) I got a tablet with high lines. I first started her printing A-B-C, then I start her with my hand holding her hand to write, and she learned. He was, (laughs) his eyes popped open when she found out that she could write her name. I said, "We've got a surprise for you!" (laughs) And he came in with boots, and a cowboy hat, and very sarcastic. I didn't like that man. I can't even remember his first name. He worked in the farms.

BM: I wonder why he had such a strange opinion of his wife.

CL: I don't know. He married her, and he just thought she didn't know anything. She was from Mexico, because she couldn't speak nothing in English at all. She never went to school, she told me she lived on a farm in Mexico. I think she just married to get away from there, because she wanted to come to the United States, I think, I don't know. She was a very slender little lady, very nice, she was attractive, but she couldn't dress up or anything, she couldn't use any makeup or

nothing, because he wouldn't let her. Now, I had another lady, she was a young girl, I can't remember what her name was, she was the one who didn't let her husband tell her what to do, she was gonna do what she wanted. There was all kinds. There were some that had finished the high school over there, there were two of the ones that were the managers from Stahmann, there was three of them that could read and write, and they were real smart. They went to the classes, but shortly after, they couldn't qualify, 'cause their husbands were managers. They had to be the ones that earned less money. I can't even remember the average, what it was, but we had to go and enroll them. I had a real nice time with all those ladies.

BM: So, do you think most of the women who took your class, did they then continue sewing? Did they use those clothes for their families?

CL: Yes, they did, 'cause they would tell me they were making shorts for their little boys. They understood the patterns, because they were in Spanish and in English. You would get a pattern, we used to get McCall's and Simplicity Patterns, and they were in English and in Spanish, so they didn't have any problems reading them, they kept on.

BM: Did any of them use their new skills to help earn a living for their family?

CL: I don't think so, they were just helping their husbands earn, with the economy at home.

BM: The cost of clothing for the family and all that.

CL: Uh-huh. And you know, it used to be, my girls, never bought any dresses, because I made them all, and even formal [ones]. It's funny, but now I don't even want to sew anymore. Everything is so expensive; the thread is so expensive, everything. It's cheaper to go get it on sale, at 75 percent off at Dillard's right now, you can get nice little sweaters and blouses for that.

BM: That's true.

CL: You don't have to borrow money to pay for it.

BM: I think there is so many of us who are working full-time now—

CL: That you don't have time to sew.

BM: Exactly.

CL: I also went to school to learn how to use a Serger Sewing [Machine]. They taught me how to use a Serger, and while I was working with Singer, they also introduced me to learn to use hemstitching. Now, these ladies that I taught, they were all real good at crocheting. They all crocheted, even the little girls that would come, they would start them with some little needle, and they would always crochet. You know, that's one thing, my mother was a good crotcheter and knitter, and I never learned. My grandmother was a good seamstress, and I really learned on a pedal machine myself. I have an electronic machine right there in the front, and I have another one my husband bought me for our twelfth anniversary, sitting there. I use this one; I use that one. The electronic is very nice, but you don't do as much, like I used to. I used to make those kind of laces and things and finish the edges and all that. It's too much trouble now. (laughs)

BM: It is.

CL: I already have the machines in my will, and who's gonna get them, my granddaughters. The one that sews more is going to get the Serger, 'cause they're expensive machines. I have it in the closet; it's a portable. I already wrote my will, because I know that one of these days, I'll go to sleep (laughs), and like that, they won't be fighting. They'll know exactly what goes to everybody.

BM: Exactly. Did you ever have any trouble with any of the women who took your class?

CL: No. They were all very very, they were so happy to learn to sew. They were neighbors, mostly. Then the others that would come new, I introduce them all. They were a good, nice group of ladies. I don't see how they put up with a few of their husbands that I didn't like, but they had to do it, poor girls. In fact, some ladies told me, when you're gonna go teach those ladies from Mexico, they're going to be fighting, and listen, they were not, they were real nice in fact, the groups that I got. I don't know later on, what happened.

BM: What would you estimate was the impact of your being able to teach these ladies to sew? Do you have any idea of what that did to their families, economically?

CL: Yeah, they sewed. In fact, if they were going to go baptize a baby, they would make the baptismal, the little Christening set. They went all out.

BM: So, you think the classes were very helpful?

CL: Oh, I really [do], not because I taught them, it's because the ladies were willing to learn.

BM: And you did still keep in touch with some of these ladies?

CL: Well, I meet them every now and then, when I'm grocery shopping or something. In fact, sometimes, I have to decide what's the name of this one until she tells me. Yeah, I meet several of them.

BM: So, a lot of them stayed in the area?

CL: Oh, they stayed in Stahmann Farms, and their husbands are retired. They have bought homes, and they went to work for construction companies, and they're doing fine. And you know, their kids have all been educated, too. They all went to Gadsden High School. In fact, that's where one family came to—what was their name? He was a pilot at the Connecticut, the Air Force Academy, and he graduated there, and he's a pilot now.

BM: So, a lot of them—

CL: They all graduated from Gadsden High School, because their parents would always tell them, "You're gonna keep going to school and be something yourself."

BM: Do you think most of the people you worked with eventually become citizens then, of the U.S.?

CL: I think so, most of them.

BM: Why do you think that was?

CL: They didn't want to go back. They wanted to educate their kids, and make their home here, but they still want Mexico. I used to tell them, "Why did you have to leave Mexico?" And they said, "For economical reasons," because they had to find a job. Their husbands, the ones that would come to Stahmann, would get a job, work it, and they were hardworking laborers. They would go bring their brothers, and the uncles, they were all related, and that's one thing about them—

BM: They were very family oriented.

CL: All, then they bring their mother, their father, they worked in order to bring them across. I don't know how many are citizens, but I'm sure some of those are

citizens. In fact, this fellow that I worked [with] for fifteen years for the Singer Company was also from San Luis Potosí, México. Of course, he was a Mormon and went to Anglo schools in Mexico. He was very well educated, and he was the manager for Singer.

BM: What was his name?

CL: Samuel Flores. He's a Mormon. When he came over here, and he got a job with Singer, he was a manager there. I worked with him, and they didn't smoke, they didn't drink coffee. I would have him over, and I had to have to have juice or something, 'cause they wouldn't eat, my husband—we went to Las Vegas on a trip, my husband and I, and we went all together. And, Ernie said: "Well, I'm gonna have a drink, I'm gonna have a margarita." (laughs) They were real friendly, real friends with us. She passed away last Christmas and he still calls me. Every now and then I'll fix some Mexican food for him and he comes over. He's a lot younger than I am and so was she. They had two daughters and a son and they were real friends of my daughters.

BM: And I gather that your family was Catholic, was that right?

CL: Oh, yes. They were real friendly. In fact, their son wanted to go out with my youngest granddaughter. My granddaughter said: "I don't want to be a Mormon and have all those kids." (Laughs) He was real nice. He married a Mormon girl, and my granddaughter is still single, she was going to marry a Jewish boy. Isn't that funny how the world turns?

BM: It is.

CL: You don't know where you're going to end. My husband came from San Antonio, Texas from a CC camp.

BM: Civilian Conservation Corps?

CL: And there was about, he played baseball, there was about eight boys who stayed here, they all married girls from here. We all get together every now and then. Our kids didn't get married with their kids or anything, but when they were little we used to have picnics and get together.

BM: How did your husband?

CL: How did we meet? My brother in law was a local employed man in the Corps, over here when they opened that camp. He was driving a truck. Ernest, his mama was German, and he didn't look Mexican at all, he looked more German. My brother in law picked him to teach him how to use the truck. They had, what they called, *matanza de marrano*, where they killed, my brother in law and my sister raised hog and then around November they butchered the hog and then we made tamales and fix dinners. I don't know if you've been to any *marranadas* (Laughs) in. I also have pictures of the ____ (?), that also (Laughs). I've gotta find them for you. But anyway, what they did, I went to visit my sister, well we would go to help because they had a lot of people coming over. The men would all sit at the table after they had butchered the hog and they were making a *chicarrones*. Do you know what *chicarrones* are? It was a lot of work. The ladies would fix all the food in the kitchen. They had this *macizo* dining room table, bigger than this because they would be sitting around it and we would have to feed the men. My brother in law, introduced me to Ernest. He had two other Anglo boys and they were all there. So, I had to pump water with those old-fashioned pumps. Pretty soon I had two, three guys helping me pump water (Laughs). They would heat the water real hot and then they'd pour it over the pig and then they would shave the pig. It was a lot of work. Anyway, by five o'clock, it was a big dinner, everything was ready, all the men were there. My husband was sitting right here, my daddy was sitting on that end, and I would go serve the coffee to all these people. I couldn't say anything or wink back because my dad was there (Laughs). And one of the Anglo boys would also wink at me, and I will never forget, I was young, I was 17 and I had made a peasant blouse, I'll never forget, it was kind of low cut, oh, you didn't wear those low cut blouses then. He would look at me and wink and wink and then he would manage to, I was doing dishes and he managed to go drink water in the kitchen and he said: "Can I see you tomorrow?" It was a Saturday. "Can I see you Sunday?" I said: "Well, you can see me in church." So then, he saw me after mass and he wasn't even Catholic, he wasn't even Catholic. He went over there, he didn't know how to kneel like the Catholics. Anyway, he became Catholic to marry me because my father wouldn't let me

marry him unless he became a Catholic. And he was such a good Catholic, he was more Catholic than I am, the priest really liked him. The priest's sister taught him the Catechism. She was an old maid. She was a very pretty lady, blue eyes, real nice looking legs. I used to tell him: "Did you like to go to learn the rosary and Catechism, let me show it to you." "No, I have to go there." She played at our wedding, she was real nice. So, I tell you, things change in this world, everything changes.

BM: I guess we got a little bit off the track there, but I wanted to hear about that. Is there anything we haven't talked about regarding your classes with the bracero ladies?

CL: Well, the only thing is that you had trouble to start with, to enroll them, because they weren't sure what was going to happen. The supervisor was colored, and she could speak Spanish fluently. So, Meredith and I would go from one farm to this other farm, we knocked on all the doors.

BM: Were they afraid of being turned into the immigration services?

CL: I don't know. I tell you, some wouldn't even want to open the door. I would tell them, "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just enrolling you to go teach at that school," I would point to them. And finally, I had to talk to their husbands, of course, first. And then, once it start rolling, it start rolling so much that they wouldn't want to leave, they would stay there for the second class. I didn't want to turn them down, 'cause that was the only thing they had for entertainment or to get away from the house, I think. Because they didn't go to anything, just the grocery stores, I guess. But they were also clean and nice people. I really liked them. Their husbands had jobs, and then they started buying cars when they got their bonuses. They bought their little cars, and they're doing great. I guess, I don't know what bank would finance them for them, because they were paying on them.

BM: They probably had some special arrangement.

CL: Their little houses that Stahmann let them rent, they were nice little houses. They had electricity, they had water, running water, they had their toilets, so that wasn't bad. Now the others, on the other farms, they were really poor. I went to enroll a

- girl, there was a turn, I don't know if you've been to La Mesa, *Los Chopes*, have you?
- BM: Yes.
- CL: Well, when you come this way from *Chopes*, there's a little curl like that, and there was a girl expecting her baby. Her husband was doing a job, and he didn't want to take her to the hospital until he got through with his labor, and she was almost having the baby there. She was a niece to one of the students I had. She was so mad, because he took her, just barely walked in the hospital to have the baby.
- BM: Oh, my goodness.
- CL: Yeah.
- BM: So, I think I forgot to ask you what years it was that you were teaching the bracero wives.
- CL: It was in the sixties. Let me find out the dates on the stubs, my, I have a more firm date.
- BM: Okay, well, I think that maybe we should turn off the tape recorder here.

End of interview