

3-3-2003

Interview no. 1564

Socorro Perez

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Socorro Perez by Richard Baquera, 2003, "Interview no. 1564," 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: Socorro Perez

Interviewer: Richard Baquera

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: March 3, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1564

Transcriber: Vanessa Macias

Socorro Perez was born and raised in El Paso, Texas; in 1954, she began working as a clerk and typist at *Rio Vista*, a bracero processing center in Socorro, Texas; she continued working there until 1957, and she later went on to become a teacher in the Ysleta and Socorro Independent School Districts. Ms. Perez recalls how she spent her childhood and adolescence moving around in El Paso; after graduating from high school, her uncle, who worked for the employment commission, informed her that there were job openings at the local immigration offices; she applied and went through the hiring process; upon being hired in 1954, she began working as a clerk and typist at *Rio Vista*, a bracero processing center in Socorro, Texas; she describes what her duties consisted of while working there and the kinds of questions she asked the braceros; her observations of the braceros led her to conclude that they were humble people, and that more often than not, they were taken advantage of; she goes on to describe why she stopped working there in 1957; later, in 1972, she went back to working for immigration, but only part-time; she ends with general comments and observations about the braceros.

Name of Interviewee: Socorro Perez
Date of Interview: March 3, 2003
Name of Interviewer: Richard Baquera

This is a recording of an interview with Mrs. Socorro Perez. She lives at 7911 Monterrey, in El Paso, Texas. The date is Monday, March 3, 2003. The interviewer is Richard Baquera, and this interview is for the Bracero Oral History Project.

RB: Let's just begin with, would you please tell me your name and birthday?

SP: I was born here in El Paso, at Thomason Hospital, about sixty-one, some years [ago].

RB: Your maiden name?

SP: My maiden name is Socorro Christina Ortiz Perez. I started school—

RB: What part of town were you born in?

SP: I was born at Thomason. My mother and my grandmother used to live in the second ward.

RB: Do you remember the address?

SP: It was Park Street, in front of the little park that was on *presidio* there. Right now, it's renovated; it's got government projects. Then when I was about five, we moved up to North El Paso [Street], so we started school at Morehead.

RB: Do you remember the address there?

SP: North El Paso Street, it was a hill, homes were there just across from Providence [Hospital], more or less, a little bit over here on the mountains, where there was a mountain, and it was North El Paso Street at the time. Now, it's changed, I think the name has changed. Anyway, I started Morehead, first grade, second grade, that was at my grandmother's house. Then we moved back to second ward, with just the five of us and my mother. My mother was a widow.

RB: How many brothers and sisters?

SP: I've got three brothers, and my sister, and I.

RB: And you are oldest? Youngest?

SP: I'm the second oldest, just a year apart. My brother and I are three years apart. My sister and I are one year apart. Then my brothers, five years apart from us, then two, one year apart also.

RB: Do you remember their names?

SP: Sure, of course, I see them all the time. There's Manuel, there's me, then Maria Elena, and Chuy, and Richard, he's the youngest, same name as you.

RB: So you moved back to—

SP: We moved back to the San Jacinto area, so I started school at Alamo, second grade, my sister was in first grade at Alamo. Then we went up to fifth, and then we moved to San Jacinto, and then we started at San Jacinto, fifth and sixth.

RB: San Jacinto school?

SP: San Jacinto Elementary School, where the adult's center is now.

RB: Do you remember the street you lived on?

SP: When I was growing up? Olive Street.

RB: So, you moved around a little bit?

SP: Of course, at the time, nobody owned a home. Then I started Bowie for half a semester, and then we moved back again up to Wyoming, no, yeah, Wyoming, and then I started El Paso High. Since I had to work, and I couldn't have as a freshman, I couldn't have. What was it at the time? On the job training, where you get out and go part-time to school. So, I changed schools, I went to El Paso Tech. Then I used to go part-time in school, and then go work at Woolworth in the afternoon.

RB: What did you do at Woolworth's?

SP: Salesperson, I was selling trinkets and all that kinda stuff.

RB: That would be downtown, right?

SP: Downtown. I would run from El Paso Tech to Woolworth.

RB: Really? You didn't take a bus or anything?

SP: No, we used to walk for everything, good legs.

RB: I guess so. (laughs)

SP: Then I graduated from El Paso Tech, and I started working at Lone Star. My uncle, who used to work for the employment commission, told me there's a lot of openings at immigration for the braceros.

RB: The Lone Star was—

SP: Lone Star Motor Company, on Texas and Cotton.

RB: My father used to buy his cars there.

SP: Yeah, a Cadillac and a Chevrolet.

RB: Exactly, that's the one.

SP: Yeah, that's my one. Anyway, it was 1955 when I started working at immigration. I left the Lone Star job, because it was a better paying job. Of course, at the time, the minimum wage was \$1.25, and so over here, I was going to earn, what was it? I think it was \$7.00.

RB: Really? An hour?

SP: An hour, yeah.

RB: That is a lot.

SP: Good checks, yeah, for the time.

RB: Was it a difference just because it was a federal job?

SP: Mine was \$7.00 an hour. Yeah, it was the federal government; we had to go through all the process.

RB: It was your uncle that told you, right?

SP: My uncle that told me.

RB: Where did you apply?

SP: I applied over at the federal courthouse. I took a test at the Working Commission. I took the application to the federal building. I was sworn in and all this kind of stuff.

RB: Were you just looking for any kind of job? You weren't into anything particular?

SP: No, it was a typist; you had to be a typist.

RB: But not with any particular agency? Just wherever they needed you?

SP: Yeah, they were there; it was for the immigration job that I was looking at. I started over there, I typed passports, it was by hand. We used to take the fingerprints of the braceros.

RB: So you started at the, where was it that you—

SP: At the Rio Vista, typing passports.

RB: Do you remember exactly when it was that you started there?

SP: It was harvest time, it had to be, so I started, I think it was, the summer, it was summertime, about July. It was a seasonal job, we worked through July, August,

September, October, November, and then that was it. The next year, I went back to work, I don't know where I went back to work, I can't remember that part. It was seasonal, because I wanted to go back to the immigration.

RB: How did you get to [there] from where you lived?

SP: We took the bus.

RB: Which bus? Do you remember?

SP: It was the valley bus.

RB: Little blue ones?

SP: Yeah.

RB: The Villalobos?

SP: Yeah, the Villalobos, that was—

RB: How much did it cost you?

SP: It was maybe a quarter.

RB: I don't remember. I used to ride them myself. Where would they drop you?

SP: They would drop me at the Highway 80, then we walked over to...there were many of us. We knew each other.

RB: So, you walked together, back and forth?

SP: We walked back and forth.

RB: How long was your day?

SP: I know it was early in the morning; we had to be there 7:30 AM, I think it was 7:00 AM to 2:00 PM or something like that, yeah, we would be home early.

RB: But you'd have to leave your home early?

SP: Yeah.

RB: What time did you have to leave downtown?

SP: No, I used to live out here in the valley, by that time, yeah, on Montecito Street, that's where my mother lived. We started at six o'clock in the morning. Sometimes, my brothers would drop me off, he would drop me off, but I had to pay him for weekly gas. Then we have the government bus that would pick us up also.

RB: Oh really? There was a—

SP: Yeah, government bus, we had a bus that would pick us up on North Loop, we had to be there waiting for them.

RB: So you would have to walk. Montecito is—

SP: Montecito is an area up here, it's one of the first urban that they built. We used to walk to North Loop and catch the bus right there.

RB: Would it also bring you back?

SP: Yeah.

RB: Did they charge you anything?

SP: No, that was free.

RB: So, you had three ways then, the city bus, or one of your brothers, or—

SP: Yeah, the valley bus. We would ride in packs or they would pick us up, and we would pay the gas if somebody had a car. Nobody had a car, only the males used to have a car. I used to earn more than my brothers, but he was the one with the car, not me, we were not supposed to. So the experiences was that some of these men would come in for the adventure. We could tell, they told us in the beginning, "Be sure to check their hands when you take their fingerprints, be sure to check their hands to see if there..." (pause) We would check their fingerprints. If their hands were very smooth, that meant that they were not workers, they were just out here for the adventure or to stay here.

RB: I understand that they would be fingerprinted ahead of time, right?

SP: Ahead of time, right. We make the passports, and then in the passports their fingerprints were there on the finger—

RB: So, they had an actual, like, a passport?

SP: They had a card, we would make a card and the passports, the fingerprints would be on the passport.

RB: So, basically, [you] would then check the name with the person.

SP: Yeah, the person and the date of birth. Some of them didn't know when they were born, they knew that they had been baptized, but they didn't know where, they didn't have any papers, they just had, you know, just the Mexican passport.

RB: What would you do in that case?

SP: We would just put 'no certificate,' not any kind.

- RB: Do you think you got the job, because you knew Spanish? Was it a requirement, pretty much that you know Spanish?
- SP: I think it was, because we knew typing at the time, and because we would speak to the braceros.
- RB: Being bilingual was an asset then.
- SP: It was an asset, it's always been. Something else, the social skills were there also. We were not supposed to be shy, because we would ask some personal questions. At the time, I was so young and naïve, like when they said, "*Soy hijo natural*," I didn't know what they meant. I came home and asked my grandmother *le dije*, "*Mamá, cuando dicen hijo natural, ¿qué quiere decir?*" "*Pues, nomás fue de la madre.*" "*Y, ¿no tuvieron padre? Pues, ¿cómo puede ser eso?*" "*Pues, fue una aventura que tuvieron, pero no fueron legítimos de papá y mamá.*" Very naïve at the time, at the time, girls were, we were.
- RB: So, you would show up in the morning, about 7:30. Everybody had their own desk?
- SP: We had a desk. It was a big room, like, a warehouse. We would sit, everybody in a certain corner. We would have them line up. Since we were the only ones there, plus our supervisor, we could do whatever we wanted to. So I'd call out, and I'd say, in the morning, if I came in with the high spirits, I would say, "*Todos que tenga veinte-cinco para abajo para este maquina por favor.*" So, I was surrounded by young people, a lot of young people. They had just gotten off the train. I started to type, then the smell, I couldn't breath, only the smell, pow, I fainted. I fainted because of the smell. They had not taken a bath or anything. Yeah, some of the men *no se lavaban las manos*. "*¿Por qué no se ha lavado las manos?*". Dice, "*Traigo un resfrío, señorita, y no me quiero lavar ni las manos.*"
- RB: Do you remember how they brought them over on a train to—
- SP: They would unload them.
- RB: From there, how would they get to Rio Vista?
- SP: They took them by buses from the train. The train was nearby, it was, in fact, the warehouse was like this, and the railroad was very close. They would walk to the big warehouse on Rio Vista. Some of the men were not being able to put their

fingerprints, their hands were so, had been so wasted from work, they didn't have any fingerprints anymore.

RB: So, what did you do in that case?

SP: We would put them anyway we could, we would try all the fingers, it wouldn't come out, we would just put down, you know, unable to print the fingerprint.

RB: So, basically, you had all these men would come in, and everybody could just do whoever you wanted?

SP: No, no, *donde quiera*. Sometimes, we used to take all the Chihuahua states, you know, *de Chihuahua, diferentes*. That's what we used to do most of the time, but we did it, they didn't tell us. We just tell them, "Get in line," and everybody would get in line.

RB: If you can remember, say if I was one of these men, what would you ask them?

SP: Okay, "*¿Cómo se llama? ¿Cuál es su apellido de su padre?*". "*No tengo, señorita, soy hijo natural.*" I understood, *nomás un nombre nomás*. "*Su edad, el día de nacimiento y dónde nació*". *¿Qué más le preguntaba?* "*Cuánto ha trabajado de ranchero, de agrícola ?¿ Cuántos años tiene trabajando en esto?*" Y, put down how many years they've been a farmer or agricultural worker. *Muchos de ellos no sabían donde habían nacido. Muchos de ellos no sabían si tenían padres. Toda la vida fueron criados por padrinos o—*

RB: *Abuelos.*

SP: *Abuelos o este, o vecinos que lo habían dejado. Parte de la cultura, ¿verdá?, mexicana, que los niños los cría alguien más. Muchos de ellos decían, venía decían: "Pues mire señorita, no sé cuándo nací, pero me decían mis abuelos que yo había nacido cuando la cosecha de calabazas había sido muy grande. ¿Usted no sabe?" No, ¿dónde? "No", le decía yo, "Bueno, más o menos tiene como cuarenta y cinco años." "No, señorita, tengo treinta." They'd look forty-five, and they were thirty, about thirty years old, más o menos. Les decía yo, los veía muy gastados ya por el sol y por el este. A lot of experiences como cuando venían unos güeros güeros, güeros güeros, de ojos azules y todo. Y le digo: "¿Sus padres son menonitas?" "No, no señorita, nomás así eran mis padres, así güeros de ojos azules". Venían a trabajar, sí, mucha gente, mucho, muchos güeros.*

RB: *Y, ¿de cuáles estados? Which states did they come from, do you remember?*

SP: *De, ¿los güeros? De Chihuahua.*

RB: *Pos todos.*

SP: *De Zacatecas, sí, de donde quiera, de Zacatecas. Y luego los que venían de Veracruz, estaban morenos.*

RB: *Sí, más morenos.*

SP: *Más morenos porque allá entraron allá los Africanos allá por Veracruz. Y todo eso, toda la historia tienes que saber parte de la historia y por qué vienen así. Todos los de Chihuahua estan mixiados con los Alemanes que cayeron allí por las minas. Pos, you read about all this things, we're avid readers here, so we know about this, yeah, todo eso—*

RB: *Vinieron de Chihuahua, de Zacatecas.*

SP: *De Chihuahua, Zacatecas, de Veracruz, de Michoacán, de Matamoros, de Tamaulipas. ¿Dónde esta Tamaulipas?*

RB: *Es cerca de Nueva León.*

SP: *Nueva León. De todas las partes.*

RB: *Y les hacía las preguntas y luego, you would fingerprint them?*

SP: *We would fingerprint them.*

RB: *Okay, and that would—*

SP: *Sometimes, my job was just typing. Cuanda acabamos, ya con todos los pasaportes, y luego ya los mandabamos para las huellas. Y luego les decíamos: “Ora sí, vénganse para este línea.”*

RB: *That would be in another building?*

SP: *No, the same building. Nomás que un poquito más para allí donde teníamos todas las mesas de fingerprinting.*

RB: *I've been to, well, I've driven by Rio Vista, I live by there.*

SP: *And you've never been inside?*

RB: *No, not yet. Four or five buildings large, do you remember which one you were in?*

SP: *The biggest one, the main building, it was the main building. Todos estaban iguales, pero este estaba más grande. Este estaba más grande con una bodega*

- acá y luego se partía la bodega y para allá hacíamos los estos. Estábamos todos en el mismo edificio.*
- RB: Then they would go to fingerprinting?
- SP: *Sí, las demás. Y luego fingerprinting in the same building y luego ya, les daban su cot para cuando les estaban llamando de los ranchos, los mandaban a ver cuántos les necesitaban. Pero tenían su cot ahí en los otros building. Eran su dormitorio.*
- RB: They would sleep there until—
- SP: Yeah, they would sleep, and the other one was a cafeteria, stuff like that.
- RB: They would be fed as well?
- SP: Yeah, they were fed, and they had their cot to sleep in.
- RB: Do you remember, did they have clothes? What did they bring with them?
- SP: They brought, like, their jackets, whatever they had as jackets, some of them didn't have anything. *Todo el tiempo andaban—*
- RB: What they were wearing?
- SP: Long sleeve shirts, and all of them had their, that union—
- RB: Undergarment?
- SP: Yeah, the undergarment, if they were from Chihuahua, because Chihuahua was very cold, cold state, very much like this, but it's colder, because the mountains are there.
- RB: Did you ever have a, let's say you saw somebody, the hands were very smooth, he's obviously not a... what would you tell him? Would you send him back?
- SP: We would tell him, "*Estas seguro que quiere ir a trabajar a un rancho? Que quiere, de, de (Unintelligible) de ir a levantarla (Unintelligible)? Piscar fruta, piscar (Unintelligible)?*" "*Sí, señorita, estoy listo. Yo fui...*" *Y ya lo decían que iban a colegio pero estaban (Unintelligible) a vivir a conocer y que era una ensenasa para ellos.*
- RB: So, once they were processed, that's basically the end of your—
- SP: Yeah, that was it, we never saw them again, but there was a lot of people, a lot of professors that came by to work in the farms, *que quedadon por aca.*
- RB: Oh, okay, so a lot of them would stay?

SP: Yeah.

RB: Did you see any come, like, would they come two or three seasons in a row?

SP: Yes.

RB: You would see some a few times?

SP: I left after about three seasons so, yes, I did see some that came back.

RB: So this would be, I believe you said you started in about '55?

SP: Yep, about '54, '55, more or less, about three seasons. Then I started working at Georgia's Thompson, and I stayed there.

RB: Where?

SP: Georgia's Thompson, it was industrial. I stayed there until I got married, then I worked for a year, then I stayed home.

RB: So, was there always work? Was there anytime when you came and showed up for work, and they would tell you, "Well, we don't have any," or "they haven't come in?"

SP: No, they would tell us a week in advance. We were working until this date, from then on we'll call you, until that time, this will be your last paycheck, we will call you for the next season.

RB: Oh, they would call you for the when—

SP: Yeah, they would call us for the next season or they would tell us, "Socorro, you're up for August," you know, "come back on this date to work again." They would tell us—

RB: That's usually when you would start back, August, maybe July?

SP: July. Sometimes, it was very hot in there, yeah, that's why you would lose your balance out there because of the smell, uh-huh. Some of them, mostly they did want to take a bath, *pero los señores grandes son que los no se bañaron. No quierian bañarse.*

RB: I thought that they would, well, when they were being processed, I don't know if you ever, um, that they wouldn't make them take a bath or they would—

SP: It was up to them.

RB: Oh, really./?

SP: You're thinking of the camps up in Germany, where they fumigated them for *piojos*. No, they didn't do that, no.

RB: They didn't do that? That's what I heard they would do that to them for, you know, bugs and whatever, *piojos*, or you know.

SP: I didn't see that, I never saw that. *Nunca lo andaban rascando yo...* Expect *brinca*. No, no, I didn't, I never saw any fumigating of men, no, I don't think so. The fumigation was there on the farms?/.

RB: Maybe on the farms.

SP: Yeah, on the farms.

RB: Okay, but not—

SP: The crops, but not them.

RB: Do you remember what kind...you mentioned picking cotton?

SP: Picking cotton, they would go all the way to strawberry season. Where is strawberry, Minnesota?

RB: That was the other thing I was going to ask you. So, around here it was mostly cotton and maybe—

SP: Cotton and um...melons and cantaloupes and all that kinds of stuff. To the north, it was, I think, it was Minnesota, it was cattlemen. They would go all the way to Wyoming and all those places

RB: So from here they could also go—

SP: Yeah, to Wyoming, because if they had skills in cattle, yeah.

RB: How would they get them there? Someone, I would assume, they would drive./—

SP: They would come for them. They would be taken by buses, Greyhound, yeah, by buses or sometimes, by their own cars, the farmer's cars, if they were taking about five, four, whatever, they would pick them up here.

RB: I see. So, up in Minnesota, strawberries./?

SP: Strawberries and I think it was, they said that it was um...what other thing? Other fruits, it was fruits and vegetables, all kinds of vegetables.

RB: A lot of people, I guess, they kind of assumed most of them would stay here, but they went to various different, like maybe the Northwest? Washington? Oregon? Do you remember?

SP: I remember that they used to go to California, also.

RB: From here?

SP: From here, uh-huh, but they wouldn't stay here in Texas, no, they would be out in different places, 'cause this is the only place that we had braceros. Did they have braceros up in San Diego and—

RB: Yes, from my understanding./—

SP: They also had braceros?

RB: There was processing centers in a couple of other places maybe. They might have sent them, but it's interesting that from El Paso, here, they would send them.

SP: Yeah.

RB: Do you remember about how many, at some point, how many would you have there in a typical day, waiting to be picked up?

SP: We would sometimes have so many, five hundred in a day, they would come in droves.

RB: Then what do you think most of those would be gone? What was the turnover? How long would, say those five hundred, how long would they stay there? A day or two and then they would be gone? And then another crew? So, rarely lasted more than maybe a day, two, or three?

SP: No more than...three days, three days only, yeah, then they would be shipped out. So they had the demand, and then they would bring, what is it called? Demand and—

RB: Supply and demand?

SP: Supply and demand, yeah, so that was...there were nice stories, too, it wasn't all dreary. It was a lot of fun, because they were, these people that you're talking about are people with so many manners and so submissive, that they would tell us their stories, you know, they would tell us their stories as why... 'cause drought in their area.

RB: That's a question I was going to ask you. Did they ever tell you why they had come?

SP: Yeah, many of them, because the drought was terrible up there in their places where they came from. The farmers out there were not hiring anybody 'cause

they could hardly make it themselves. Some of them lost their farms **cause** of their playing cards or whatever, some of them, yeah, some of them lost it to their women, to other women, instead of their wives?. *Pa que trabajan.*

RB: Very different reasons, huh?

SP: Different reasons. Some of them just came, because it was very needed to come and work, '**cause** there was nothing out there.

RB: Would some of them say, "Well I just came, I just wanted to travel, I just wanted to **...**"

SP: Yeah, yeah.

RB: But most of them, it was a need?

SP: Most of them, it was a need, but some, maybe two, three out of a hundred people would come, you would see their hands, we were supposed to check their hands to see if they knew how to work as a laborer.

RB: Were there any, like, age limits?

SP: No age limits, no, nothing like that.

RB: Like, if someone came in, looked like fourteen, fifteen? Some was too young?

SP: Some of them did, maybe they lied, but they had their papers, they looked sixteen, but they were actually twenty. Yeah, a lot of them like that, malnutrition, I think it was.

RB: Most of them must just looked older than they were, so—

SP: Some looked older than they were, most of them, I would say, the ones that had had family already. A lot of single men would come looking for wives, American citizen wives, that's why I had so many boyfriends.

RB: I was going to ask you about your side. I would assume they would give you time for lunch or would you just work through until you were done for the day?

SP: Yeah, we used to take our lunch, we would take our lunch at 12:00 PM, we would all stop and take our lunch.

RB: I guess they would have lunch as well?

SP: Yeah, and then we would mingle with our co-workers for a while, and then come back again, oh, yeah, we used to, it was nice.

RB: Did you ever, like, you were going to mention something about socially. Were you prohibited from, like, you know they would tell you, “Well, don’t get too friendly with any of these.”/?

SP: Oh, no, they didn’t tell us anything, ‘cause we come, the old-timers, we didn’t do that. Also, we did tell them, you know, “*Señorita, no me das su numero para escribirle?*” So, I would put a wrong name, and they would write to me. Those are the letters I wanted to show you, but I can’t find them, might have thrown them away, so many years.

RB: Sure, you never think that they are going to be—

SP: Yeah, that they’re going to be important, right? So, yeah, I had this guy that wrote to me from...where did he write to me from? Somewhere up in Taylor, Texas, or...what was it...something like that, a rural town. He wrote to me, and I couldn’t write back. That was the only time, because he didn’t tell me anything. He wrote a lot of poetry. “*Tu cara esta con un espejo. Que la aqua refleja el que, como las estrellas, que eras la unica que me has gustado y que... No mas, como un cancion.*” So, I didn’t write back.

RB: This is sort of like very old style.

SP: Very old style of writing.

RB: Think he wrote it or think he—

SP: He asked somebody, none of them could write, you know, they were farmers, and there was very few that could write, and when they wrote, they wrote just bad Spanish.

RB: What about some of your other co-workers? Did they have some of the same experiences?

SP: Yeah, they did.

RB: Did any of them ever get any friendlier with them, let’s say, to where maybe they started seeing them or something?

SP: Okay, let me tell you about this one. This is an older woman, and she was unmarried, I think she got friendly, more than friendly with, and I think he came back, and he stayed here in El Paso, but that was only a temporary thing. But I think, yeah, more than friendly.

RB: But, as soon as the season was out, they would...? The papers they had, the passport, did it say there's a certain deadline or, you know, *vence a cierto*?

SP: Yes, *no mas por el* season, just the season. (coughs) Ah, I'm sorry.

RB: No, that's okay. It's that time of the year for—

SP: Yeah, it was only seasonal. Yeah, the passport said from this date to this date. They would come back. The ranchers knew when to send them back or if they wanted to keep 'em, they would tell, you know, the year-round.

RB: Oh, they would? If they were...because if they were going to be sent back, would they ever come back through there again?

SP: No, not there, no.

RB: This is just where they came in, right?

SP: Where they came in.

RB: They were processed there. To leave—

SP: Coming back, no, we never saw them again. You know what? (coughs) Sometimes, what I saw was that those people that had the contract would come back before the contract, because they didn't like it, they would come and apply for another farm. The same process, but it was on their own. That's what I saw.

RB: I was going to ask you if you ever had problems between some of the braceros and some of the ranchers?/.

SP: Yeah, they did, they did. Some of them didn't like, some of them would say that it was so cold, and they didn't have a house, they would sleep up in the barn, but the barn was so old. (coughs) They didn't have any covering.

RB: So sometimes, they would complain, because where they stayed there was no—

SP: Yeah, it was, the working arrangements were just, or they were treated, you know, like an animal, they would say, "*Nos trataban como animales tambien.*"

RB: Do you know how much they got paid? Were there complaints about, "*No me pagan bastante?*"

SP: Wasn't it a...? *Que les daban? Tres dolares por el dia, o algo asi?*

RB: I don't know. I think that the ones that picked cotton would be paid according to how much—

SP: According to the pounds they picked, but the other ones, it was for the day, for an eight-hour day or twelve hour day, sometimes.

RB: So, if they came back and said they wanted to go somewhere else, what would their—

SP: Yeah, or the owners would send them back.

RB: Okay, so you would just?/—

SP: Process them again and send them to another place.

RB: Was that an easy thing for them to do? I mean—

SP: It wasn't easy for them.

RB: I'm thinking that it must, as you were telling me, they were very kind of submissive and very *humildes*—

SP: *Muy humildes.*

RB: It must have been very difficult. There must have many of them who didn't like it, but who didn't say anything. So, this must have been very difficult for them to be brave enough to come and say, "I'm not happy," or whatever.

SP: "*No estoy, no estoy agusto aqui.*"

RB: That wasn't very many or was it?

SP: Yes, a lot of them, a lot of complaints. *Muchos rancheros son racist*, well, it's always been.

RB: Do you remember any particular ranches? Any particular *rancheros*?

SP: *Los rancheros que trabajaren en, los trabajadores que trabajen en King Ranch.*

RB: Oh, okay, down in south Texas.

SP: *Con la vacas, yeah, el cattle.*

RB: Were there any local ranchers here?

SP: Here? Ivey.

RB: Really? Oh, yeah, a lot of complaints about him?/. That's interesting, because my father worked—

SP: Worked for Ivey?

RB: He was not a bracero, but he worked for Ivey for many years.

SP: Well, not that I know of. What do you know about the Ivey's?

RB: Well, I know that—

SP: They were, you know, farmers, but they weren't that nice.

RB: They were farmers. I know they were very Catholic, and so I assumed that they would be—

SP: But treated the people *asi*. Lately, I've heard that they change, but maybe the grandfather wasn't like that.

RB: Maybe so. That's interesting. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry there.

SP: Oh, no.

RB: I was wondering if you remembered any names in particular./?

SP: Some others? Who were the others? Farmers here?

RB: Did you ever send any to Pecos?

SP: Oh, yeah.

RB: Any complaints about Pecos?

SP: Yes, a lot of complaints from Pecos, "*No, señorita, estos, esta gente nos dicen cada cosa, cada cosa.*"

RB: You see, I've heard of problems in the Pecos, that at some point, they wouldn't even send [them]. Do you know if you got too many complaints, would you stop sending braceros to a particular place?

SP: *Nombre, puro gringos estaban alla. Nombre*, they would side with the farmers, they wouldn't side with the braceros. *No, no, todo el tiempo hacido así. Nunca va cambiar. Hasta que se ten murieron estos. Estos viejos. Que cambian a la nueva ola.* What else can I tell you about them? They was so humble, the humility.

RB: Was there ever any trouble between them? Would there be fighting? Any kind of violence between them or were they pretty much?/—

SP: There were some sometimes, sometimes they were. They used to gamble between them, maybe that was—

RB: Some of them had a little money, this was when they were there, maybe they had a little money with them.

SP: Yeah, they had a little money. But mostly, they would send them back if there were some troublemakers, they would send them back to Mexico. No, they wouldn't put up with them.

RB: So, they should know that that was the price they would pay?

SP: Yeah, uh-huh, but mostly, no, it was, you're talking about really, the humble people that came.

RB: The neediest people.

SP: Most of them.

RB: It sounds like you feel like the whole bracero thing was good for them. Overall do you think?

SP: Oh, yes, 'cause most of them do want to go back to their country, they don't want to stay here, put up with all this nonsense.

RB: So, basically earn an honest wage and—

SP: Go back and make a living out there. Most of them, you know, what they had in mind was that they would come in, and save their money, and build a business up in Mexico, some kind of business.

RB: They didn't want to go back to farming, ranching, no?

SP: Yeah, they did, but they wanted to build their own, you know, even buy acres of whatever, but they didn't, most of them didn't want to stay here. They wanted to go back. They say, you know, this is a beautiful country, but ours is more beautiful than here, more beautiful, and it is, it's true, it's true. *Esa tierra de la Virgen, verdad? La de Mexico?* What else can I tell you? Some of them stayed, they married Anglo women, as you can see, all of these people that stayed, yeah, a lot of them stayed. They got married out here with Anglo women, hillbillies, yeah, like my son.

RB: So, how was it then that you worked there three seasons? And you left because—

SP: Permanent job.

RB: By that time you wanted something more permanent?

SP: Yeah, and I started at Georgia's Thompson, and I stayed there until I got married, then I worked a year after that, and then I stayed home with my children. I got married in '58.

RB: And George Thompson does?/—

SP: Georgia's Thompson, they sell industrial supplies, tubing, electrical, wiring, all that industrial things for Phelps Dodge, Standard Oil, all those.

RB: Was your wage about the same?

SP: Oh, no, George's Thompson, I got \$1.25, I started with \$1.25.

RB: Really? Wow!

SP: Then I was the main secretary, and they upped my salary to \$2.00, big deal.

RB: A whole \$2.00, huh? Where was this? Where was the Thompson?

SP: Campbell and Montana?/. Was it Montana? Yeah, it was Montana, Campbell and Montana, more or less, that block. It's gone; it doesn't exist anymore. Georgia's Thompson is now up here, up on Guardian Angel, near the freeway, Guardian Angel Church.

RB: Yeah, I think I know where that is, Frutas and—

SP: Somewhere, Frutas, yeah, that's where Georgia's Thompson is now.

RB: Do you ever hear from some of your co-workers who were there?

SP: Oh, yeah, I knew a lot. *Los Gomez*, the three of them worked, the guy, Guillermo Gomez, Teresa Gomez, *y la hermana*, what was her name? *La grande*, I think it was Paula Gomez.

RB: So, you all stayed in touch, those of you that used to work?/—

SP: Yeah, we've known each other, I went to school with Teresa, and we knew each other. Another one was, *um*, *este* Guevara, Robert Guevara.

RB: For some reason, I had a feeling that you all were mostly women, but you weren't, there was men.

SP: There was some guys, yeah, some guys with the fingerprinting, and typists also.

RB: About how many in all do you remember? The typists and the *fingerprinters*?

SP: *Cuantos eramos*? A bunch of us, about a dozen females. We were all young, right out of high school; we were all out of high school. The supervisor was the oldest of all. The supervisor was one of the immigration officers. Mostly, it was, we were all very young. I can't remember any other people that I used to hang out [with].

RB: Did your friends envy you that you were making so much more money?

SP: No, there wasn't, no, nothing like that. Then I got married, and I had children, and my children started to go to college, and then I started college also, when my youngest was in first grade.

RB: Oh, really?

SP: I finished, and then I went to teach.

RB: You were teaching for where?

SP: I was teaching, I started in Ysleta grade, then I went to Socorro, then I worked up to Waco, I was up there for five years, then one summer I was invited to work part-time over here at the adult center.

RB: Where is that? You mentioned it.

SP: The Ysleta Community Living Center, on Alameda and Padres. Where you're going to the freeway, the border freeway.

RB: Oh, yes, I know where it is. I was confusing it with another place.

SP: Yeah, that's Ysleta, but then I stayed there for fifteen years.

RB: When you were teaching, what grade did you teach? Any particular?/—

SP: Usually second grade.

RB: Oh, okay, the young ones.

SP: The young ones. Then I started teaching the adults, the GED over here, and I liked it, no discipline problems. I got less money, but who cares? I was very happy there. I just retired last year.

RB: Wow! So, now you get to enjoy your—

SP: What I'm doing. I'm volunteering, I'm teaching ESL here at church. I've got a dozen students, *las señoras*, some young and some—

RB: The church is where? Santa Lucia?

SP: Santa Lucia, I teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I volunteer on my own. Then I got a lot of friends that are principals, and they told me, "You can have all the materials. You just ask, ma'am." So, I go for the materials over here at (unintelligible) and then Dolores del Avila, she's the principal over at Ysleta Elementary, she also gives me supplies, no problem.

RB: You were at the old Ysleta grade, I went there for, I think, a year to Ysleta grade.

SP: You did? When I was teaching out there, yeah?

RB: I don't know. I must have been there, it was, like, second grade would be, maybe early 50s, no, late 50s. I remember a Mrs. Roberts.

SP: Another name, tell me another name.

RB: That's all I remember, Mrs. Roberts. Mr. Binian(?) was the principal, and there was Mr., the one that lives there on North Loop, *aquí*, Macindorfe(?), something like that?/.

SP: I didn't get to know him.

RB: I remember that there was this couple who used to be on TV, and country western, and they came to sing for us once, Red Brown and Annie Lee. This was, like, a long time ago, second grade, third grade, I don't think so, because then my parents moved us over to Mount Carmel, and we went to the parochial schools and high schools and all that.

SP: Oh, really? Did you like that parochial school?

RB: Yeah. My mother went to Ysleta grade school. You know, people talk about they have problems with the nuns who would hit them with the ruler or whatever, I never really had.

SP: What about the schooling? Was it up to the standards of the Texas schools?

RB: I didn't think about it then. All I knew then was it was a poor school. We would get our textbooks and things we were using, they looked old.

SP: Saved from the regular schools, yeah?

RB: But, you know, you learn the basics, and so I think in that sense, but that's where our parents wanted to send us, so—

SP: Yeah, well, I always went to public schools, I started at St. Ignatius, but it was expensive for just a single parent.

RB: Yeah, and with four or five?

SP: Yeah, there were five of us, uh-huh. So, we started working very early in life. Then in '72, I went back to work for immigration.

RB: You did? Really?

SP: Yes, I went back, but this was riding around, remember that the agents were abusing women they picked up, so there had to be a woman then on, that's when I started, in '72.

RB: Really? Did they contact you? How did that happen?

SP: I went because my brother used to work for immigration, and he said, "You know what? They're hiring now, part-time. It'll be good for you. You can be with the

children and still work part-time.” Then when I went, they told me, “Okay, this job doesn’t pay too much, because you had never been in the service. If you had been in the service, you would be a G8.” What is it?

RB: The levels.

SP: Yeah, the levels, so I started at **Level 1**. The pay wasn’t good, but it was adventuresome, because we used to pick up the barmaids that were coming over, the homosexuals that dressed in drag—

RB: Transvestites?

SP: Uh-huh, transvestites. We would pick up all kinds of people.

RB: And you were there basically just what? To basically be a witness that nothing—

SP: I was an agent, I was a patrol officer.

RB: Oh really? Did you wear a uniform and everything?

SP: No, I had a badge, only the badge, I would wear the badge. I didn’t have a gun, the other guy, the guard, would have the gun. We would take the barmaids and go to the Paso del Norte Bridge, and take them just to the bridge, and then come back. We would pass them to the immigration out there and just come back again, and, of course, they would come back again, they would come up with a different wig.

RB: (laughs) Really? So, you said people were complaining about some abuse by the agents. So, your job—

SP: Sexual abuse, yeah

RB: Your job was basically so they couldn’t claim later to have been—

SP: Yeah. All the agents, all the, what do you call it? The detectives in immigration, they all had their *queridas*, from the hookers and the **(?)**.

RB: Really?

SP: Yes, they all had their *queridas*.

RB: So, then why did people complain they’d been abuse if they had their own little favorites?

SP: Apparently, these were good women, these were good women they were complaining they had been sexually abuse.

RB: You never hear about that. (laughs)

SP: Oh, we would hear about it.

RB: How long did that last?

SP: It lasted only a year. When I went in to resign, I told the secretary over at the federal building, at the time it was Mrs. Castillo, she said, “But Mrs. Perez, this wasn’t a job for monetary compensation. It was a job for people who like to write stories.” “I really don’t have time with all my children.” I love to write, and I’ve written some of the ones I’m going through when I went for one year at immigration. The officers would come for me, pick me up, and we would pick up barmaids. One time, we went up to Canutillo, and we picked up all the maids in the bar, the bartenders and everybody, even the *marichai’s* were all without papers. So, they padlocked the bar, because everybody didn’t have papers, the barmaids, the bartenders, the musicians, all of them, *los echamos en la troka*.

RB: Wow! I’m curious. They said you hadn’t worked. You didn’t get any credit for the three years, the three seasons with the Braceros Program?

SP: No, I didn’t get any credit, no. Yeah, it’s a white’s man world, still is, Richard, you’ve gone through this, you know it still is. Well, it’s getting, if we don’t speak up, you know, it’s going to keep on doing like that. So—

RB: But other than that, do you think your experience, do you look back on it fondly?

SP: I dwell on the fact that I didn’t earn any money, but the experience was tremendous, to be working for immigration. You get the frustration in people when you get ‘em. I had to sometimes, I had to check the women, and they would tell me, you would have to give me gloves and check them all over. I said, “I’m not going to do that.” I didn’t do it, I just said that I did, but I didn’t do it, I was not gonna do it, people are trying to survive, I wasn’t gonna do it.

RB: Sounds very invasive, invading their privacy.

SP: I know, that was so humiliating. I did it once only. *Y lo la otra señora vino, dice, “Porque de su madre, mire.” “Ahora, no señora, yo no voy a chequear. Yo lo creo a usted. Pasale.”*

RB: What about working with the bracero at Rio Vista? Do you have happy memories working there, overall?

SP: Very happy memories, yeah, very happy memories. (unintelligible) I think about how I think my thinking has grown. I think that they should be, you know, given a passport and come to live, given the wages, good housing, you know, like they should, and pay their meals. The meals should be included so that money can be, you know, even if they took away so many wages from them, they never got them back, they're not gonna get them back. They shouldn't take away social security and all that kind of stuff. Why? Why?

RB: I know that now they are demonstrating in Mexico—/.

SP: Yeah, some of them are getting their—

RB: Did that really happen? Did you ever see where they would take out so much of their wages?

SP: Yeah, they would be paid in cash, in little envelopes, yeah, they would take out their, you know, they would pay the what would they call it? The supervisor. See they were all Mexicans, but their supervisors was Mexican also or maybe he had been at that ranch for a lot longer than these people, that person would take away that money for having a job there.

RB: So, he helped himself to part of their, and the rancher knew this, of course?

SP: *Pues*, of course.

RB: He probably got some of it as well?

SP: *Pos*, could be, you know, or he didn't pay the guy. It's up to you to make your own money.

RB: Maybe so. I've been hearing about it, I just didn't know, because you talk to other people, and they said, "Oh, no, they always got paid what they were supposed to."

SP: Nah, who knows? No *estaban allí*. Yeah, we were there to see what they went through. We heard so many things about that, but I think they were worked, and they were not paid adequately, whereas they should of. They shouldn't have taken any money out for government, because now what the braceros are saying, if they worked, they should be getting a social security check now that they're retired. And some of them are getting it; they're getting the minimum, but—

RB: So overall, you think that the program, the Bracero Program—

SP: It worked. I think it did. The farmers did—

RB: They were taken advantage of?

SP: Oh, yeah. The farmers are not, what? What is the word that I'm trying to say?

RB: Accepting their responsibilities, maybe?

SP: Well, the farmers that hired the braceros are not, *deben de estar agradecidos de tenerlos*, they should be grateful that they had 'em, no, they're not. They think that they were supporting them. I don't think so.

RB: Well, it seems like that was the whole idea, wasn't it? That they needed workers here?

SP: They needed workers; nobody else wanted that job, so, yeah.

RB: What do you think about these days? Do you think something like that would work? A new kind of Bracero Program? It's a hard question, sorry.

SP: You know, unemployment is so low right now, and there's so many college students, and there's no jobs for them. But still, farmer's job, you know, most of the farmers are selling their farms for the technology, to go into the technology. So, what's happening is that I think we need to revive the farms again, but the United States will not do it. Somebody else is gonna do it. The produce is coming from South America, Mexico—

RB: Because it's cheaper.

SP: Yeah, it's cheaper. There's no farms out there anymore.

RB: But you know what they say here is that, "Well, there are workers here, but they don't want to do this kind of work."

SP: No, they don't want to do this kind of job, so I don't know. I'm thinking now that so many of those farmers that stayed out here went also into the service, remember?

RB: In the war?

SP: Yeah, they were of age, and they went in to serve the United States.

RB: That reminds me. I don't know, maybe you don't remember, during World War II, there were some prisoners of war here?

SP: I read about 'em. There's some—

RB: But you don't remember? Germans—

SP: Well, we were very young then, but we do remember that there were Germans out here, and they had them over at Rio Vista.

RB: Right, that's why I was asking, but you don't remember seeing?

SP: No, I never saw them. I was very young, but I remember, you know, conversation at home that they had. They used to work out in the roads—

RB: In the roads and the fields.

SP: Yeah, they would have them, you know, the German./—

RB: Do you remember where they would keep them? Besides Rio Vista?

SP: Beto, do you remember where they kept the German prisoners of war [during] World War II?

2nd: When they brought them, they had them up in that area.

SP: In Rio Vista, that's what I'm saying. Where else, Beto?

2nd: The prisoners, they got here, were here in Fort Bliss at the prison stockade, but there was a couple of, about just like—

SP: Remember that *mi tía* would say that a lot of Germans were here, at Fort Bliss, and at Rio Vista *tambien*, yeah.

2nd: And then Japanese, they take off when the war started, and Dr. Fumigochi(??) was right there, Dr. Fumigochi(?) was picked up, Fumigochi, at the time, he was very popular with Second Ward people.

RB: Oh, he's a doctor./?

2nd: Fumigochi got a dermatologist degree, like, a specialty in (unintelligible). That's the one, he came back, (unintelligible) he kept practicing until he went to Japan, and died at about ninety some odd years. A little article came out. Everybody was looking for him; they didn't know where he was. (laughs) When you find out, let us know. Years later a little article came out, he had died in Japan.

RB: Just curious.

SP: There was a farm, Hernandez family, their grandfather was Japanese, and he had changed his name to Hernandez a little before World War II. That's what we heard, they all look very Japanese, but he changed his name so he wouldn't be stockade all the family into prison.

RB: The internment.

SP: Yeah.

RB: So, you lived here in the valley for many years. How do you think it's changed?

SP: The valley?

RB: For the better or for the worse? The valley, the Lower Valley.

SP: It's okay; I still like it.

RB: If you had the chance to move to another part of town, would you do it?

SP: (pause) No.

RB: See, because I've grown up in Ysleta, born and raised, now I live out there by Socorro, and people ask me the same thing, and I said, "No, I don't think I would leave." Maybe to different part of the valley, but I don't...you move to the northeast or the Westside or something, and it's not the same thing.

SP: The northeast has a lot of Blacks and a lot of Anglos.

RB: In the military, yeah.

SP: The northeast, *como si fuera otro*—

RB: Another city, exactly, that's how—

SP: You go to the Westside, and it's okay, because there's a lot of Mexicans from Mexico *que tienen dinerito o dinerito malo*.

RB: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that unusual question, but I was just wondering.

SP: No. I read so much, I know so many things, I know so many things 'cause when we used to work in immigration, my brother would come over, and we used to share stories.

RB: Just one other question, anything else you wanted to add? Just, any last comments?

SP: The last comment that I could say is that um...you grow up to have empathy for those people, and that they're coming only for the survival, it's the survival of the fittest, and that's where the concern is. We should all, you know, if we're not educated, we should all get educated, so that we have our minds can be open wide, and not be so close-minded and narrow-minded. These people, you know, are coming to take away our jobs, they're not doing that, it's up to you. So, when you talk about saying that these people take away your jobs, well, get an

education. There's so many things, now you can get an education here in the United States. If you don't take advantage, they will, 'cause they're after that.

RB: Let me ask you. Across the street from the Rio Vista, there was this large building that is now a part of the sheriff's, do you remember? Do you know what I'm talking about?

SP: It was an immigration, was it a sheriff's?

RB: I also heard that it was the county poorhouse, but the buildings that we think of Rio Vista today, on the other side, you know where I'm talking about?

SP: Yeah, uh-huh.

RB: Do you know? Did they build, were those buildings built specifically for the braceros or were they already there before?

SP: I think they were built for the braceros.

RB: Were they pretty new when you all were there? Did they look new?

SP: Yeah, yeah, they looked, they were very rustic, but they were relatively new, I thought.

RB: Because somebody was asking me. Have you ever gone back there, just to visit?

SP: Never gone back. It's a hospital now, the Rio Vista?

RB: They have a—

SP: A convalescent home or something?

RB: No, you're thinking of something else. There's like a little community center in part of it. The other buildings are almost falling apart. They're trying to save them, to renovate them. There's a little historical marker there now, too.

SP: So, what about you, Richard? Are you against the braceros coming over?

RB: No, I think, I agree with you. I think it was something that benefited both sides. Unfortunately, from what I'm learning, the braceros were taken advantage of.

SP: Oh, yes, yes.

RB: They were taken advantage of, but it was a situation at the time. There was the demand for workers, there was a supply over there, they weren't here, so it was something that would benefit both sides, but unfortunately, as it happens, a lot, as you know, when you have a situation where, like this, sometimes one side or another will take advantage.

- SP: You kinda think, so, the engineers were the Anglos, but who paved the streets?
- RB: Oh, sure. This is the second part of the interview with Mrs. Socorro Perez. We're just going to finish up. The interview is Monday, March 3, 2003. Well, we're almost finished. I forget what you were telling me.
- SP: I was telling you that the braceros were so happy to have a job, that they were happy bunch, they were not dreary. Some of them were scared, like anybody else, but, mostly, they were very happy to have a job. Now, they knew that their children would be okay, their families would be okay, because they would send the money, most of the money over there. Some of them did things they weren't supposed to, they would go out to the bars where Anglos were, and they would have very unhappy situations happen to them, experiences out there that that—
- RB: Did most of them save their money and take it all home at one time?
- SP: No, they would try to find ways to...to go up to the post office and send the money, make a postal check, a money order and send the money. Some of them would save 'em, but it wasn't a good idea, everybody was told about that. It wasn't a good idea, because they would be robbed if they did that with their money, so, no, yeah, they would send the money back home.
- RB: Which would be a lot, because the *peso* at the time, do you remember? Was it eight to one?
- SP: Oh, twelve to one, twelve-fifty to one, at the time.
- RB: Right. Well, anything else that you want to—
- SP: If you see a lot of handsome people, it's because a lot of handsome braceros came by, just like the Spaniards that came. *Creedon la Mexico tambien aqui. Vinieron los Mexicanos*. That's why you see the golden color, some of them married an Anglo, and the children became a golden color.
- RB: Like the *gueros, ojos azules*.
- SP: *Ojos azules*, yeah. If they came and stayed, yeah, they would look for the *rancheritas*.
- RB: That doesn't say much for the people, the *Mexicanos* that were here, though. If you're saying the nicer looking ones, the handsome ones are because of the braceros. (laughs)

SP: Well, they were handsome people, too.

RB: Well, thank you very much.

SP: Remember that they weren't up in Louisiana, and now they are, Louisiana, Georgia, there's a lot of Mexicans, you know, up there. These are people that stayed from the Bracero Programs. They stayed, they saw, they liked, and they stayed, they conquered. There was an article in the U.S. News about the economy of Mexicans in this Louisiana town. There was no jobs, no nothing, so all the people almost left the town, and the Mexicans came in, and they started to build this little town with stores and what have you, stores and restaurants and...and bakeries and all kinds of stuff. So, people are coming in just to have a celebration, which is, you know, tidbit.

RB: An interesting story, yes, definitely. Okay, well, thank you very much, Socorro.

SP: You're welcome.

End of interview

DRAFT