

3-6-2003

Interview no. 1565

Bob Porter

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Bob Porter by Beth Morgan, 2003, "Interview no. 1565," 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: Bob Porter

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: Las Cruces, New Mexico

Date of Interview: March 6, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1565

Transcriber: Courtney Richards

Bob Porter was born in Roscoe, Texas, in 1929; a year later, his family moved to the Las Cruces, New Mexico area, and later they moved again to Hatch, New Mexico, which is where he grew up; in 1954, upon finishing a tour of duty in the military, he began working for the Doña Ana County Farm Bureau; while there, he administered the Bracero Program for two years; he later took a position with the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, spending his last fifteen years there as director and CEO. Mr. Porter briefly recalls his childhood; in 1954, he began working for the Doña Ana County Farm Bureau as an assistant director, and he then moved up to director; while there, he administered the Bracero Program for two years; the Doña Ana program was the largest one with 6,000 braceros during the cotton season; at that time, about 500 braceros were transported daily between *Rio Vista*, a processing center in Socorro, Texas, and Las Cruces, New Mexico; while at the reception center, the braceros were medically examined and given time to clean up and rest from their trips; the centers operated year round with some of the braceros working on ranches and in vegetable production; he recalls a trip he took to México, for a special crossing of braceros, in which a few hundred workers were requested by local farmers, but thousands showed up waiting to be hired; there were meetings and negotiations between the Department of Labor and area farmers; he also mentions labor strikes in the area, and he recalls one instance in which Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta came through town; in his opinion, the Department of Labor's stringent and increasing demands led farmers to pursue mechanization, which ultimately ended the Bracero Program.

Name of Interviewee: Bob Porter
Date of Interview: March 6, 2003
Name of Interviewer: Beth Morgan

This is March the 6th, 2003. Uh, my name is Beth Morgan. I'm visiting with Bob Porter at his home in Las Cruces, New Mexico. And this is for the Bracero Oral History Project. Can I ask you uh Mr. Porter when and where you were born?

BP: I was born in uh, in Texas, and my family moved here in 1929. My family moved here in 1930s so, I've lived in the valley all my life.

BM: Whereabouts in Texas were you born?

BP: A place called Roscoe, it's near uh Sweetwater...

BM: I have relatives from near that area myself. Um so you grew up then here, in the Las Cruces area?

BP: Well, I grew up in the Hatch area. My family, my dad moved here as a cotton picker in 1930 and, and we uh- He worked around at various farms for a few years, and then we moved to Tunuco, which is up near Hatch, where he still works for a, a farmer. And then we moved to Salem, which is just five miles out of Hatch. And uh, and he uh bought, bought farms and farmed in that area all his life...

BM: Um-hm. Okay. And uh when did you begin working for the- Is it the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, is that the formal name?

BP: That's the formal name. The, the entity that ran the Bracero Program was the Dona Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau...

BM: Okay. I see...

BP: ...which is an affiliate of the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau.

BM: Okay and you worked for...

BP: Dona... At that time, in the Bracero Program I worked for the Dona Ana Farm Bureau for a couple of years, and then I later went to work for the New Mexico Farm Bureau.

BM: So did you begin then with the Dona Ana County?

BP: I began with the Dona Ana Farm Bureau in the Bracero Program, that was my first job. I had just uh gotten out of the service, and I, I went to work for the Dona Ana Farm Bureau in that program.

BM: And that was as the Labor Director?

BP: I was assistant initially and then, then I, I became the director. So I stayed there I guess a year and a half, two years, and uh then I went to work for the New Mexico Farm Bureau.

BM: And so what year would you have begun your work with the Dona Ana County?

BP: Uh, 1954, 1955 were the years I believe I was with the Dona Ana Farm Bureau in the Bracero Program, Labor Program.

BM: Okay and can you tell me about your training for the position?

BP: Well, I, it was on job training actually. You know it was a fairly new program, and there weren't a lot of people involved. But the uh, the Farm Bureaus mostly and, and the counties throughout New Mexico, and that was in the southern part of the state, uh they ran the programs. So, there was a program in Deming and Roswell and Lovington and uh and of course here in Las Cruces were the big programs. And it was, they were run, they were all run by the uh county Farm Bureaus.

BM: Um, so you think the volume of Braceros was higher in this area than maybe in some of the areas of New Mexico?

BP: This, this uh was the largest uh program in the state. Uh at, at one time I recall we had something like six thousand workers came in in the fall to pick cotton because at that time, uh it was a hundred percent hand-picked. And local people were not either available or willing to, to pick cotton by hand. So it was uh, it was a tremendous program from that aspect.

BM: Okay. Uh how many years did you work for the Farm Bureau total?

BP: I worked forty years for the program, uh for Farm Bureaus. But only two years with the county Farm Bureau and then I, I moved over and worked for the state Farm Bureau. And about my last fifteen years I guess I was the CEO, Executive Vice President, of the New Mexico Farm Bureau.

BM: Okay. Um, do you speak Spanish?

BP: I'm not fluent, but I, I'm passable. I, I was able to uh function alright in the program. I have a pretty good understanding of Spanish, and I, I do have trouble sometimes communicating and speaking Spanish but I, I can get by.

BM: So, at that time did they provide any, any training in Spanish for you or anything like that?

BP: No. There was no training and, and, I mean it was just on the job training and, and a lot of the programs were new so you, you learned [th]em as, as time went on. But it was, it was a fairly simple, straightforward program and uh, highly regulated and um, uh fairly easy to administer.

BM: Okay. Um describe what your, your position was like. What was your role in the Bracero Program per se?

BP: Well, as you probably know, uh the Bracero, it was a public law that created the program uh passed by US Congress. And the workers were brought in to Rio Vista down below Ysleta, Texas, down below El Paso, they were brought in to, to a center down there where they were processed, and uh and from there we, we recruited them out of that center, Rio Vista, and then brought [th]em up to Las Cruces by bus and then uh assigned them out to various farmers for, for work.

BM: Okay.

BP: And farmers would make application for the numbers they thought they needed to harvest their cotton.

BM: And those applications were to the Dona Ana County Farm...

BP: Yes, they were.

BM: Okay. Um so you said earlier the years that you worked with the Braceros, that was [19]54?

BP: [19]54 and [19]55 were, I believe were the years that I worked in that program.

BM: Okay and... So you worked out of Las Cruces here, right?

BP: Yes, I worked out of the Dona Ana County Farm Bureau Office, which at that time was on Compress Road by the railroad track. And so we brought these workers in over there, and uh farmers would come in. We usually got [th]em in the late afternoon or evening and the farmers would pick [th]em up and, and uh take [th]em back out to the farms. Of course, they, you know there was an additional part of the program, it wasn't all just cotton picking. There were, there were workers that came in during the summer that would do uh tractor driving and irrigation and hoeing and, and all the various uh, jobs that are associated with agriculture, but that was a much smaller number than the, the six thousand that we brought in for cotton picking in the fall...

BM: (Unintelligible)

BP: ...The numbers were greatly reduced for, for the summer time.

BM: Okay.

BP: ...for production.

BM: Hm. Well I guess that makes sense because harvest is usually later in the year, huh?

BP: Right.

BM: What other crops were they involved in working with?

BP: They were involved in every crop that was grown in the county. Uh they did work at uh cotton and alfalfa, of course in those days were the two big crops. But there were also vegetables and uh lettuce and onions and, and pecans and things of that nature and so they did whatever job there was to do and whatever crops were grown in the county. And they also worked on ranches, out uh on livestock ranches, uh as, as cowpunchers and, and doing work out on ranches, to a limited degree. That was a small number of them but they, but there, they did that.

BM: And were there any who worked on rancher, ranches in this area?

BP: Sure.

BM: Who were some of the ranchers that they worked for?

BP: Well there was Johnson Ranch and uh, uh Cox and uh, oh uh Pat Clever Ranch in the, in the immediate area used maybe a limited number of workers.

BM: Okay, well I, I was aware that, that there were some that had worked on the ranches, but I didn't know if they were actually men working on ranches...in this area.

BP: Many of [th]em were, were not trying to work on ranches. So (coughs) – excuse me – they had to, they had to learn the job but, but they were ready, willing, and able most of [th]em to, to learn anything that, that they could and get whatever job they could. And they were certainly a big help to the farmers and ranchers that used them.

BM: Um, did you... Okay, you mentioned that there was a center in Rio Vista, was that?

BP: That's correct. Rio Vista. It's down below Ysleta, Texas - down below El Paso.

BM: Now is Rio Vista in Texas or in...

BP: It's in Texas.

BM: Okay.

BP: There was a, it was a reception center where those, those workers were brought across from Mexico and, and went into the reception center where they had a doctor on hand and, and he checked [th]em out. Of course remembering that when they arrived, a large part of [th]em back in those days, they were destitute because they'd used whatever little savings they had to get up there. And not only

were they destitute, but they were hungry. And so they came into that center and, and the center provided uh, uh basic food, some big pots of beans and tortillas and what have you, and those people came in there destitute and hungry and it wasn't unusual for [th]em to to get sick after, after having plenty to eat for a day or two. So they were kept there until their health improved. Uh and many of these people did not know how to use a, a bathroom. They didn't know how to use a commode or a urinal. Uh they didn't know how to use showers. Uh they had not been exposed to those types of things so they were very primitive, a lot of [th]em. And so it was a rude awakening for them, and it was a difficult adjustment, I'm sure. Tremendously difficult for them to come. And they would arrive here of course with, with on their feet usually huaraches, those are shoes made out of tires, you know...

BM: Um-hm.

BP: ...with straps on [th]em. And just the clothes are the only possessions were what they had on their back usually. So uh it was uh, it was a primitive situation in which they arrived.

BM: Do you happen to know where in Mexico the uh workers came from who were processed at that particular center?

BP: No. They came from all over Mexico. Uh the people, those Braceros that lived near the border uh seemed to be the best fitted for uh for jobs that, that come off of farms in the areas near to, near the border. But they also come from deep into Mexico. And many of [th]em had not, did not know how to pick cotton - didn't

know much about farm work. But they ready, willing and able to, to learn and most of [th]em were able to, to learn farm work fairly rapid.

BM: Do you know what the uh, what the screening process consisted of when they arrived there at the reception center?

BP: I'm not sure of the, the, the details of exactly what they did, but of course, course it was a program that the Mexican Consul supervised out of Juarez. And uh, and I don't know how they made their selections in Mexico as to who would or would not come across, but once those selections were made, then they came into the center. And they had housing for [th]em and, and a kitchen and dining room and, and medic, you know medical examinations and those types of things. Uh for a few days before they were, they were taken out. And then the, and usually the uh employer or the, the organization that was, was running the program in the county would make arrangements to send buses down to pick [th]em up and bring [th]em up to. But as far as details of, of exactly what went on at Rio Vista, I, I never saw that, all of it. You know I saw it from time to time, as I was there picking up workers, but I, I never was familiar with exactly what they went through. Although I saw the lines of people being examined by doctors and that type of thing...

BM: I see. And would that have taken place indoors all about.

BP: Yes, um-hm. Pretty much.

BM: Um-hm. Um to your knowledge, did, did these reception centers operate year-round?

BP: Yes they did. Of course, you know, the big push was in like September and October when they first started picking cotton because this was before they invented mechanical harvesters so everything was picked by hand. And, and so there was a tremendous demand for workers uh as the cotton was opening and it would vary each year as to when, when the workers were needed. But usually starting in September we'd start getting a few, and then it would peak out in, in probably November and uh, uh that's when the big influx. And then during the summer the numbers would cut back dramatically.

BM: On say an average day, uh how many workers might you have processed during the busiest times?

BP: Oh I think we'd, I think, I can't remember exactly, but I think we would bring up four or five hundred uh workers on, on a given day during the peak.

BM: Um-hm. So that's, that's a lot of buses, huh?

BP: A lot of buses and uh, it took a lot of coordinating of efforts of getting, getting the farmers in when the workers arrived so that they didn't have to wait a long, around a long time. And then of course once the farmer got them, uh they had to get [th]em out and, and get [th]em in the housing and you know show [th]em where they're gonna live and, and what they had available to help [th]em and bedding and cooking and eating utensils and cooking utensils and all of those type things.

BM: So the buses, did they transport the Braceros directly to the farms?

BP: No, they brought [th]em from Rio Vista to the Farm Bureau Headquarters, in our case, and from there, we uh we assigned [th]em out to farmers who came in with vehicles to pick [th]em up.

BM: And that had to be like a same day turn around type situation?

BP: Right. We, we had no facilities for keeping them overnight, so we, they had to be signed out the same day they arrived.

BM: I see. Okay. Um what were the qualifications that were required to be a Bracero?

BP: Well, I think they had to be ready, willing and able. And uh and, you know whether, whether, uh I don't know too much about what they did on the Mexican end, how they resolved who was selected, but I do understand they had the "Mordida" system in Mexico where they paid off a, often times to get jobs. And whether they did that or not or how much of that was going on, I have no knowledge of that. But uh, but these folks, and of course you know through the years we had a situation where usually they would come over for say three months, sometimes those, those contracts were extended for additional weeks or months. But often, but a lot of times uh workers would come back uh, they would go home, and then they would come back again, and on occasions there were special crossings where workers who had previously worked for farmers were allowed to come back by name, designate a name, and they would show up on the Mexican side. And, and if they had a letter from a farmer showing that he wanted him, they, they were allowed to re-enter and work for the same farmer.

BM: I see.

BP: So it wasn't unusual for, for those workers to, to uh work several different times for the same employer.

BM: Would it have been common for workers who had been working for say one farmer to then go to another farm to work?

BP: Well it wasn't uncommon, but uh we had, we had situations where (laughs) and I found it amusing because I remember on one occasion the workers came in and I was going to assign [th]em to, to a farmer, and they said, No, we're going with farmer Callaway. They said. His name- They called him Callaway. And I said, "Well, we don't have a farmer named Callaway." And, and uh- And so I tried to assign [th]em, and they just refused. They were not going to go with anyone but Callaway. And, and uh so it, it was like ten o'clock at night and they were still there and I said, "Well, I don't know where you're going and, and I don't know anybody named Callaway." So we fina- we finally just had to leave the office, and they were still there - maybe eight or ten of [th]em. And then the next morning, they came in and this- There was- They were with this guy named Callaway Grooms – Callaway was his first name and his last name was Grooms. I didn't know his first name was Callaway...

BM: (Laughs).

BP: ...But they, he, he brought [th]em in. They'd walked about ten miles out to his farm during the night, and he brought [th]em in the next morning for processing...

BM: Oh (??)

BP: ...So they were- There was great loyalty between uh the Braceros and the farmer and vice versa in many situations.

BM: That's amazing. Um Did you have to perform any kind of background check on the Braceros?

BP: We did not. Uh you know in those days, we did not. I, I- You know today that would- That program on that basis, if it were operated then, would not work. One of the things that we did, and that was on a voluntary basis, and, and we assisted – we who were employees assisted with it. They did blood testing for venereal disease uh and TB, I believe. And uh the Health Department - the local Health Department – that was doing it because of the disease situation I guess on a volunteer basis. And because they would have such limited people, well we would often help [th]em. And uh then, then if they did find TB or venereal disease, then they would- We had records so we could track down the individuals as to where they were so they could be treated.

BM: Okay. And who was it that was required to provide that treatment?

BP: Well, part of the program was that they had medical insurance...

BM: Uh-huh.

BP: And so uh they would- They could go to a doctor of their choice or their employer's doctor or whoever they wanted to for, for treatment, and it was covered by insurance. And the premium was paid by the, by the grower (??) for that insurance firm. That was part of the cost.

BM: When you went to the um reception center in Rio Vista, were there Mexican Officials who also worked there...

BP: Yes.

BM: ...at the center?

BP: Yes there were. Mexican Consul uh monitored the program pretty closely. And uh of course most of the people that uh were working there were Hispanic and bilingual and could communicate with the workers. So uh, I think that gave [th]em a comfort level for these people that were in a new world. Uh that was a real benefit to them when they were being processed. And of course when they came in, they had no idea where they were going from there other than they were going to be working on, on a farm somewhere in the southern part of the state usually.

BM: Do you happen to know how long um, how long the laborers may have had to wait at the reception center before they were uh contracted or was there like a, a quarantine period or anything like that?

BP: Well I'm not sure if there was a quarantine period, but usually they held [th]em for two or three days because, as I mentioned, uh they came in there and they were hungry and they were in, they were not in real good shape a lot of [th]em, and so when they did get a lot of food, often times, it wasn't unusual for [th]em to get sick. So they held [th]em around [un]til they were well or, or, or [un]til, for a few days until they kinda got adjusted. And I'm not sure what that time frame was or if they had a specific time frame, but the workers were very anxious to, to get to work because most of [th]em had absolutely no, no money, and uh and they couldn't communicate, so they, they couldn't go to a store or, or any place to, to buy anything because they were restricted to, to the center there until such time as they were processed.

BM: Where did the buses come from that the Farmer's Bureau used to get them to the farmers?

- BP: We'd made an arrangement with the a guy named Percy Sanderson in El Paso who had a little private bus company, and uh we, we contracted with him to transport our, our workers.
- BM: Okay. And can you estimate how many buses it would take to transport five or six hundred Braceros?
- BP: Now these were um- These were school buses, uh for the most part, and, and they probably held thirty passengers, something like that. So uh there were at times during the peak when it was a little bit of a problem to get enough buses to, to transport these workers. (Unintelligible) It wasn't unusual to make round-trip - several round-trips - picking up workers...
- BM: Well maybe fifteen or twenty buses or fifteen or twenty trips a day?
- BP: Yeah, (Unintelligible) day. And, and I'm sure Mr. Sanderson probably made arrangements with other bus companies to borrow or lease buses whenever, during the peak season.
- BM: I can imagine he would have had to. Did you ever have to go into Mexico to do any recruiting yourself?
- BP: I personally didn't - well, I take it back. I did on one occasion. Uh I went over to uh across the border uh across from Rio Vista into to Mexico there. And it was for a special crossing. And these were workers who had been contacted by farmers by name and identified, and they were told to report to the border for processing to cross on a certain day. And I remember on this particular occasion, when I was over there, there was supposed to be maybe a few hundred workers. And literally thousands showed up because a lot of [th]em uh thought even though they weren't called by name that they could somehow or another get across and work. And so uh this huge massive humanity and, and without money

and food and so forth showed up over on the Mexican side. And uh it was- I remember it was kinda a scary situation with this mass of humanity trying to get across and becoming more and more unruly. And I didn't know what was gonna happen because we were, we were trying to find these people who had been identified by name, and all these other people yelling and trying to get across. Well, to make a long story short, uh pretty soon a three or four truckloads of Mexican soldiers arrived. And uh they got out of the trucks, and they were giving orders to line up and uh fix bayonets. And they got that crowd under control – this massive crowd under control in about five or ten minutes, you know. It, it was sad because all these people wanted to come across and they're just- There wasn't any opportunity for [th]em.

BM: So, you would say they were pretty much just desperate for the work?

BP: Oh, absolutely. Uh but the desperation was both sides. The farmers needed them as badly as they needed the work. So it was uh, it was uh- It was a mutually beneficial program, in my opinion.

BM: Do you happen to remember when this incident occurred?

BP: Well, it would have been some time in either in [19]54 or [19]55. Uh and I imagine there were lots of incidents like that. Now some of the people that worked in the program here for the County Farm Bureau did go into Mexico and, and recruit - I never did. I- It happened before, I believe, before I went to work for the program or after - maybe both. But I never did go into interior Mexico to recruit.

BM: Can you describe for me a typical work day for you during say the peak season?

BP: Well a typical work day would be that uh we, we would get order from farmers. They would call in and, and ask for X number of workers on a given day, if

possible. And we would have to find out if we were bringing workers up on that day and coordinate that type of activity. Also, uh one of our jobs- The Department of Labor had the responsibility for administering the program. And they had field representatives here in Las Cruces who, who checked out complaints and, and abuses and alleged abuses and, and, and that type of thing. So, so we would have occasions when, when- It wasn't unusual to have a case of incompatibility between a farmer and a worker and a worker or workers. So maybe a farmer would get fifty workers and maybe he'd have one or two that he just couldn't get along with. They, they would be at crossed purposes, and, and there was hostility. And the worker might walk in or come in and the farmer might bring him in, uh but there were disputes. There were disputes over, over various and sundry things. So part of the work day was trying to help resolve that. We worked with the Department of Labor in trying to resolve as many of those disputes as, as we could without uh you know- Just because a farmer didn't like a worker, we didn't feel it was an excuse for reassigning a worker...

BM: Right.

BP: ...But if there was a case of incompatibility and, and the worker wanted to remain but not with a particular farmer, then we would try to reassign him. And uh usually reassignment worked out. And occasions there were some workers that just simply couldn't get along with, with any employer, and there were employers that had a hard time getting along with workers. And of course communication was, was one of the things. A lot of the farmers spoke very little OR rural (??) English, and the workers spoke no- Uh the farmers spoke very little Spanish and the workers spoke no English. So sometimes communication was, was a little bit of a problem. Uh, by and large it was, it worked well and we had uh a minimum of this type of thing but, but there were those, those situations. And of course we had uh workers that needed to go see the doctor or dentist or whatever. And then a worker sometimes would come up and maybe spend a week and go home.

BM: Got too homesick?

BP: Well, just various and sundry reasons. Homesick, uh disillusion I guess or I, you know I think there were a lot of reasons. We, uh- And toward the end, you know, when, when the cotton sort of played out and they were pickin' the remnants and so forth and it was, it was hard to make the money they made wh- during the peak of the season. Some of [th]em would just go home.

BM: Um-hm.

BP: Uh, but, but these folks were very diligent in saving their money. They were very good at that. They came up, and, and they bought new clothes and new suitcases, and all the old treble (Spelling??) sewing machines and, and battery radios. And uh they bought a tremendous amount of stuff from the local merchants. It was a real, a real help to merchants – especially out in these rural areas where there was a little country store. They, they really liked this program because farmers would bring [th]em in and they'd buy all their groceries and, and a lot of dry goods - you know clothing and that sort of stuff. These folks would send uh, send uh as much money as they possibly could back to their families...

BM: Mmm.

BP: ...They saved their money. And uh so it was a great economic thing for Mexico, and it was a, a good thing for, for our farmers. And it was good for the local economy. They caused– These folks caused very little trouble as far as uh law was concerned. They, they rarely ran afoul of the law...

BM: Um-hm.

BP: ...As far as, you know, uh drunk, drunks and fighting and that type of thing there was, there was not, not, not an awful lot of that.

BM: Okay. Um I was going to ask when there were grievances, was there any particular issue that was more common than others to be...

BP: Well, of course they...

BM: _____ (??)

BP: ...They were- They earned their minimum wage, you know, but they had- They had to make a wage established by the Department of Labor. And uh the uh the regional director was a guy named John Gross(??) out of Denver, and uh he would come down and, and explain the rules to farmers and ranchers. Those were- Those were meetings of hostility. (Laughs) I'm here to tell you. Uh he would- He would explain that, that this was the way it was going to be as far as the Department of Labor was concerned. And in those days there were a lot of pretty raunchy farmers and they'd take him on and these, these mass meetings with him sometimes got very testy. And uh but, but the Department of Labor would establish a wage that had to be paid to these workers, and they had to make this, this minimum wage uh either on an hourly basis or piece-base (??) basis. In other words, if they didn't pick enough cotton to reach the minimum wage that was established, they had to be paid that wage anyway. So, uh most of [th]em made well over that minimum so that, that didn't become an issue but occasionally they would complain that uh- Workers would say that they were not being paid the minimum wage or they were not given all the hours that they worked - those types of things. But it wasn't a big- Those weren't big issues but they were occasionally a few. So these were the types of things we dealt with, and we tried to cooperate with the Department of Labor so that we minimized those types of things because we didn't want it to become a big international case where we went back to the Mexican Consul in Juarez and, and had a[n] international situation. So we tried to resolve these. And usually the farmer and the worker were willing to, to compromise and work out those, those issues. But

the Department of Labor people did a lot of uh checking to make sure that the workers were receiving those minimum guarantees.

BM: So was the Farm Bureau involved at all in determining what the wages would be?

BP: No. They were not. Uh we, we uh- This was one of the sore spots with the program. The Department of Labor made the determination of what that minimum wage was, and we had no involvement. Uh one of the things that would happen uh see was uh the Bracero received minimum wage but in addition to that, he received housing, utilities, uh cooking utensils, eating utensils, uh bedding, uh there was a requirement on light and screen doors and, and all of these different- There were all of these requirements that uh had to be fulfilled in order to house these workers. So they got those types of things free. Now the, the issue there was that the local people were living at home, and so most farmers felt that well we gotta pay the local guys a little bit more because we're furnishing the Bracero with all these prerequisites...

BM: Um-hm.

BP: ...housing, bedding, uh utilities, so on and so forth. And so the local guys should get more to offset that. Well the Department of Labor said, "Okay, we will, we will allow that, but you've got to document it on a daily basis and show exactly how much, where and how many." And these farmers were trying to make a living. We're not bookkeepers and- So they just had- They just couldn't, didn't have the time or the _____ (??) all to keep all these records to justify the extra wage. So when the Department of Labor would make a, a survey to determine the prevailing wage that should be paid the Braceros, well it would come up that the local people were making a little bit more. So this uh set off an increase for the Braceros and it was just uh thing that kept cycling up and up and up and uh...

BM: A point of contention...

BP: Right. It was uh- It was a uh- It was uh- And you probably remember uh there was a documentary or a movie called uh *Harvest (??) of Shame*...

BM: Hm.

BP: And this, this- I don't know if it was movie or a documentary but it was nationally aired. And it depicted the farmer as a monster that was abusing and taking advantage of, of these workers. And to the extent that the local people didn't have jobs and, and slave labor and the local people were left without jobs. And the fact was the local people simply would no longer be willing or able or in numbers to, to do the harvest. And so, so they, they were not taking the jobs of local people. In fact most of the farmers would rather had a local guy because he was there all the time, and he could communicate with him and they were more skilled, but they just simply were not available.

BM: Um-hm. Okay. So way back then when we were talking about (??) what your typical day was like (laughs)...

BP: Oh yeah.

BM: ...I was going to ask you how many hours you normally worked in the day.

BP: Oh, gosh. I never kept track, but uh they used to be very long because we would uh- We would go to Rio Vista, say to pick up workers, and uh they may not have been processed and we might have buses there ready for [th]em - that we were paying for - but we, we didn't have workers that were not assigned to us. So, uh it wasn't unusual- And then a lot of times we wouldn't get those workers in [un]til dark. And, and the farmer may have been there and left to do something else and we might have had to call him again. And it wasn't unusual to be in the office during - especially during the fall there - when we had the big numbers. We'd be there at midnight uh trying to get all the workers processed and signed out to, to various farms. Though the days could be very long, uh at certain times. And then of course if we had a little problem out somewhere uh that could take a long time because we were, we were up there near out of Las Cruces (??) but we went all the way to the Texas line and, and we also had Sierra County up uh all the way up to Caballo dam...

BM: Um-hm.

BP: So uh we would- Limit County (??) had their own program over in Deming, but we had uh Sierra and Dona Ana County for the most part.

BM: Hm.

BP: So we uh we put in a lot of hours of work uh in those days.

BM: Now would you say that you had a pretty normal work week? I mean did you get weekends off? Did you often end up working weekends also or...

BP: We, wetly had weekends off, but uh it wasn't unusual to get a call from some farmer on Saturday or Sunday saying, Oh I got this problem. These guys won't work, and I'm bringing [th]em in. Or you know or- They want to come in. Or what do I do? (Correct Punctuation??) So we, we were available all the time. Uh So it was uh a different job and it was enjoyable and I had an opportunity after a couple of years so I, I moved on.

BM: So you're kinda like on-call during the peak season?

BP: You bet. Um-hm. You have to be available. And that's okay. We, we had no problem with that because we knew all the farmers personally. We tried to accommodate [th]em the best we could. And uh you know ninety percent - probably ninety, ninety-five percent - of [th]em there was never any problem but that five percent uh farmers and ranchers would have a horrible time with workers for whatever reason.

BM: Um, did they have any problem with um prejudice in this area that you're aware of?

BP: Uh I'm not aware of any problem with prejudice although uh my recollection was that the workers probably preferred for the most part -now this is a strange statement to make - that they would rather work for Anglo farmers than Hispanic farmers.

BM: And why might that be?

BP: Uh well I think uh- I think the Hispanic farmers probably were a little more demanding because they spoke the language and probably more instructions and directions and, and, and- I don't know. You know I just can't answer that question...

BM: Hm. (??)

BP: ...But it seemed like that in processing these workers and signing [th]em out that their preference was to Anglo farmers – usually - although not, not in every case certainly.

BM: That's interesting. Maybe a certain amount of mystery is a good thing, huh?

BP: (Laughs) Yeah.

BM: (Laughs). Um, let's see. What kind of uh paperwork did you have to uh use to do job...

BP: Well, see these workers when they were processed through Rio Vista, they were given uh a mica (??), or a card, you know with their picture and date of birth and, and vital statistics; something like a driver's license. And uh we would uh we would collect those and record the information and then uh record who, what farmer they had been assigned to so we knew who, at least where they went out to. Uh they, the workers, were supposed to come back through our office to go home and then we would provide transportation back to the border for them but uh a lot of [th]em just went home on their own. Never, never came back through...

BM: I see.

BP: So- And some of [th]em did. I remember uh- (laughs) On one occasion- And these guys brought everything imaginable back to, back to Mexico. But they- When this one guy came in with a windmill, (laughs) in pieces, and, and, and I

told him I said, “There’s no way you can take that this windmill to Mexico. There’s no way we can take it.” Well he wasn’t satisfied with that answer. The next thing I knew - and I was busy doing some other things - he had that (??), bunch of guys helping him, and he had that windmill in parts tied up on top of the bus and they took it back to (laughs) to the border. (Laughs).

BM: Amazing.

BP: (Laughs)

BM: That’s one thing that’s always impressed me about the Mexican people, is that they are very um...

BP: Innovative. They...

BM: ...Innovative...

BP: ...Determined and, and uh...

BM: They have a lot of initiative.

BP: They do. They were very hard workers, very conscientious and, and uh it was just uh just a very good program while it lasted. And of course one of the things that ultimately killed the program uh as far as big numbers was uh mechanization. We went from all hand-picking to almost total mechanization by uh cotton pickers in a period of just two or three years after they came on the market. So...

BM: And when did this become _____ (??) ?

BP: Mechanical cotton pickers? I’d say uh probably in the late fifties. I’m not sure exactly when.

BM: Hm.

BP: Somewhere in the mid to late fifties. Maybe [19]57, [19]58, somewhere in there.

BM: Okay. Well back to the reception center for a minute.

BP: Hm.(??)

BM: Uh, did you deal exclusively with the Rio Vista reception center or did you have to go to any others?

BP: No, we,we- They were the- I believe they were the reception center probably for all of West Texas and New Mexico. I'm not sure how large the area that they covered was, but uh they did all the processing - except on the, on some of those special crossings you know where individuals were identified. Uh they were, they were- They came through sometimes without going through the uh reception center at Rio Vista.

BM: Now what would a special crossing be for? Can you give me an example?

BP: Well, uh here's a guy that uh- Here's a guy or a group of people that came over and, and worked during the summer as tractor drivers or, or irrigators or whatever - usually tractor drivers. And they were quite skilled. And uh they were on a limited permit to stay here when they were processed, so they might have to go home, and the farmer still needed [th]em and wanted [th]em and they wanted to stay. And so uh Department of Labor was convinced that there was a necessity for [th]em, and so uh they would have these special crossings where you could contact - the farmer could contact or we could - this association contact those workers and, and ask them to show up on a given day that was agreed on by the Department of Labor and by the Mexican Consul to cross and, and come back for a period, another period of time.

BM: Would that normally have been done by mail or...

BP: They were contacted by mail, um-hm.

BM: Okay.

BP: A lot of those workers sometimes would write their old Patron (Something in Spanish??) or maybe even some them telephoned. You know if they wanted to come back. And they'd make sure they had their address and how to get a hold of them. And so a date would be specified and they would, they would cross. (Unintelligible. Interrupted)

BM: When you tell me about the Patron(??) you mean like a farmer in Mexico that they worked for?

BP: No, here.

BM: Here.

BP: Here. They called their bosses Patron.

BM: I see.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

(The tape is only halfway through, but there doesn't seem to be any more recording)

BP: One of the things in the program that happened on the weighed scale (??) was that in order to get these braceros, you had to prove – we had to prove – that local workers were not available so that they were not replacing any local workers. And so we were required to do a lot of things. We had to go through the local employment offices to determine if there were people that said they wanted farm work and try to hire those people if we could and send them out to these various farms. At one time, the Department of Labor – and I was involved in that – they made us go to Missouri. And I went down to Missouri and rec- Kind of hilly country where people seemed to be kinda poverty stricken and I recruited probably - through the employment office down there - probably recruited 150

workers and rented buses – greyhound buses or some major bus company – dropped those workers here and we signed them out to farmers. And I don't think there was a single one left uh two weeks later. They all went back. A lot of them went back the same day, or it was in two or three days.

BM: To Missouri?

BP: Um-hm. Ah, well I guess. That's what they said they were going to do, and I'm sure that's where they went back. It was such a cultural shock, they couldn't handle it. So really we were required to do a lot of things to justify the bracero program and to prove that there were not local people available to fill those jobs.

BM: Well Missouri is not exactly local. (Laughs).

BP: No, but they made us go to that extent on one occasion. Then on several occasions we tried to use Native Americans from other, up in northern New Mexico, and they did not work out either. They were not happy down here picking cotton because they had not done that.

BM: Okay. Well back to some of the health issues for just a minute. At the reception center, do you happen to know if the braceros were required to take showers, shave, get haircuts, any of that sort of thing?

BP: I don't think they were required to get haircuts, but they were required to shower and shave and cleanup before I guess before their physical – limited physical examination. I remember for example in the bathroom they had to take the controls off of the showers and just run them because they didn't know how to use showers or commodes or lavatories or that type of thing. And so they had to keep that to the bare minimum so that they wouldn't wreck everything. And you know after they were here first time and then they had use- Some people had hot water and bathtubs and - but not everyone of course. Because you see one of the things the farmers had to furnish the housing but here- And they had to spend

quite a bit of money putting on screen doors and windows and heating and so forth and so on. But and workers not knowing how to use those things often times tore the screen doors off and this, that and the other. But it was an education for them. I remember a worker not even knowing how to use a stove because they had cooked outside with a little circle of rocks where they lived. So they were really primitive. So it wasn't- It was a big cultural change.

BM: You mention earlier that when they arrived at the reception center most of them didn't have anything but the clothes on their back. If they had any personal belongings were they allowed to keep those?

BP: Yes they were. A few of them would have a little mini-sack bag (??), and they'd have a few things in there. But most of them didn't have things like toothbrushes and combs and you know shaving lotion, razors and things. They didn't have that with them.

BM: Okay. What about holidays? Were the farmers required to allow the braceros to say take certain holidays or to go to church or anything like that?

BP: Well I think most of the farmers encouraged them to go to church because they wanted them to be as happy and as comfortable as they could, but as far as requirements of holidays and that type of thing, I don't recall any requirement in that regard. Some of the workers would go home for the sixteenth of September and some other holidays. And just usually when they'd go home, they'd stay. They wouldn't come back. So, you know, every situation was a little different.

BM: So then the uh farmers had to apply for workers through the Farm Bureau.

BP: I think there were situations where it was not Farm Bureau. But mostly it was the county Farm Bureaus that were running the programs.

BM: And what would a typical contract be like?

BP: We just signed the agreement with the Department of Labor that we would act as the contractor and the processor to do that. And they went through an approval process, as I recall, and then we were allowed to do that on behalf of the farmers.

BM: So the farmers applied to the Farm Bureau and the Farm Bureau had to pass that paperwork on...

BP: Yeah, we had to deal with the Department of Labor directly and with the Mexican Consul because it was an international program with the Mexican Consul having responsibility for the Mexican side. But we had rare occasions when we would meet with the Mexican Consul. There was a fella named Rusak (??) in El Paso, Mexican Consul, and we dealt with him quite a bit, and we had very little conflict with the Mexican Consul.

BM: Okay. It seems like uh- You were saying earlier that the cotton harvest was kinda like the big deal...

BP: Right.

BM: ...during the time that you were working in the Bracero Program. Um did they have a difficult timeframe for how long they would hire a worker?

BP: Well, my recollection was – and of course you remember this has been a long time - but my recollection was that most of the contracts for the workers were three months in length. And some of them on occasion would allow that period to be extended for periods of time.

BM: If it was extended, what would be a typical extension?

BP: Well, probably a month or probably a month or sixty days.

BM: Um-hm. Okay.

BP: And we would have to anticipate additional need and apply for that and get an approval.

BM: Okay. Um did any of the farmers ever actually accompany you to the reception center to pick up the workers?

BP: Uh, I think on rare occasions maybe one or two went over there with me, but it wasn't a usual thing.

BM: Okay. So they didn't have a particular need to choose the workers themselves?

BP: Well, they might have liked to, but (Laughs) they weren't allowed to so...
(Background Noise – Papers Ruffling)

BM: I see.

BP: Other than just to see what was going on at the reception center, there was no benefit in them going.

BM: Okay. So you had said earlier that when the braceros were finished with their contracts, you liked for them to come back to the Farm Bureau in order to make arrangements to go home.

BP: Well, for that too and because we had a responsibility of knowing where they were and who they were assigned to and if they just left on their own, we didn't have a real good system and the farmers weren't real good about recording workers that were gone. So we really liked for them to come back through the center so we could account for them and provide them that transportation.

BM: So they're kind of needing to determine...

BP: Accountability

BM: ... (Talking at the same time)(??) here or in Mexico...

BP: Right. Accountability

BM: Okay.

BP: And of course you know there was a lot of immigration around here even back in those days, so the use of the illegals has always been very limited in this area and still is, but there were very few wetbacks, if you want to call them, or illegals working. Immigration would periodically check and make sure they had their identification cards or trajetas (Spanish??) as they called them.

BM: Okay. If a bracero had worked for a particular farmer in earlier years, did he have to come back through the reception center every time?

BP: Except for those special crossings, which on some occasions they'd let them cross, but for the most part they did. And that they seemed to be fairly accommodating at the reception center to send them back to an area where they were happy and with a group they had been pleased with. So I think they tried to accommodate the grower's interest as well as the worker's interest particularly...
(Phone Rings)

BM: Shall I stop this?

BP: Well, let me answer. Okay we'll keep it... (PAUSE)

BM: Okay, um I was going to ask if in your experience the braceros were always housed on the farm and/or ranch premises?

BP: That was one of the requirements. You had to have housing. And that was another thing that was kind of a problem because these houses that were used were only occupied for a maybe a period of six weeks or at the most three months a year. So during that other period of time, these facilities were vacant. No one was living in them for the most part. So they were open to all kinds of vandalism and this, that and the other during that off period. And it was a little bit of a strain often times for the farmer to have to bring these facilities up to acceptable levels established by the Department of Labor for occupancy when these facilities were

vacant all this time. So every year before they brought in the workers, they was a considerable expense of updating and bringing facilities up to standards.

BM: I can imagine that would be kind of difficult.

BP: Most of those facilities have been torn down now because they weren't the best of facilities, but on the other hand the farmer simply couldn't afford to invest huge amounts of money for such a short period of time.

BM: Right. So they were required to furnish like an actual structure?

BP: Correct.

BM: Either had to be like a frame house or an adobe or...

BP: A lot of them were adobe. And yeah some of them were frame and they were mostly homes or something that had been occupied by families previously - a lot of them. And some of those facilities were built specifically for this program. Some of the larger farmers were able to build structures that would house workers, single workers.

BM: Now were they required to bear the expense of that themselves or was there some kind of...

BP: No, it was...

BM: ...subsidy

BP: There was no subsidy. Farmers were required to do that at their own expense. And as I say furnish cooking utensils and bedding and it wasn't unusual for the workers to take the cooking utensils and the bedding with them when they left. But, you know, most of the farmers just figured that was the cost of them doing business.

BM: Sort of like the typical hotel visitor?

BP: Yeah, I think so. (Laughs)

BM: (Laughs)

BP: The towel thing and the soap and so forth (Laughs)

BM: Yes. Okay. Uh, did you have other responsibilities at the Farm Bureau during the time that you were acting as Labor Director?

BP: I had some. We had local chapters of the Farm Bureau. At that time we had a chapter in Hatch. We had one here at Fair Acres (??), uh one over in Mesilla Park (??), and one at Anthony. And so we had these community Farm Bureaus that met monthly for potluck suppers usually.

BM: Um-hm.

BP: And we had the responsibility a lot of times of developing programs or finding programs for those meetings or giving them an update on the Bracero Program or whatever.

BM: Um-hm.

BP: Well, I did some of that. But that wasn't my main responsibility.

BM: That was kind of like a PR and...

BP: Yeah

BM: ...(Talking at the same time??) informational type...

BP: Right

BM: ...type of stuff. Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the effect the Bracero Program had during your tenure there on the legal border crossings?

BP: Yeah, you know I think I mentioned earlier the border areas have always been heavily staffed by Border Patrol and Immigration. And there were very few

illegals that were used by farmers and ranchers. They much preferred to have the braceros or local people than to try to use illegals because that was so uncertain. Might use a worker for a day and then he'd be gone. So using illegals just was not a major option in those days.

BM: I see. So do you think that may have slowed down a number of people crossing the border illegally?

BP: Oh, no doubt about it because most of the workers pretty soon realized that if they were going to be over here illegally, they had to move away from the border here.

BM: Um-hm.

BP: And of course it wasn't unusual to find them in Chicago and Atlanta and Seattle and San Francisco and L.A. and wherever.

BM: Did you have any responsibility for verifying that the workers on the farms have their cards or that would have been done at the reception center?

BP: Yes, they issued those cards at the reception center. Took their picture and issued their _____ (Spanish??) they called them, and with their identification. So they kept that with them and they were instructed to always keep it just like you would a driver's license because this was their permit that allowed them to stay here if they were questioned by immigration or whoever.

BM: So they were issued there at the reception center?

BP: Yes, they were.

BM: And the reception centers, were those U.S. facilities?

BP: Yes, they were. Um-hm.

BM: Were they Department of Labor facilities?

- BP: I don't know who paid the bill, but they were operated by the Department of Labor.
- BM: Okay. Was it common or uncommon to find both braceros and undocumented workers working on the same farm?
- BP: Well, I'm sure there were some of that, but I don't think it was a real common practice. I'm sure that the bracero would be interested in helping his fellow citizen if he could, but simply the immigration was too diligent in their responsibilities to allow much of that. So it was a very limited practice.
- BM: In this area are you aware of any farmers or ranchers who hired undocumented workers and then sought to have them become official participants in the Bracero Program?
- BP: That was a hard thing to do. And no, I'm not aware of any of that. I'm sure there was some of it, but it was very limited because they had to be processed through on the Mexican side and that would not have worked with illegals already here.
- BM: Alright. You said earlier that there was not much trouble with the braceros in terms of crime and that sort of thing.
- BP: They were a good bunch of people as far as the problems they would cause on weekends, you know. Most of them had the weekends off to go to town or go buy their groceries or shop or whatever they wanted to do. And there was a minimum of trouble as far as police involvement.
- BM: What about oh, labor protest-type (??) situations? Were there any incidents of that sort you recall?
- BP: Yes, uh on occasions there would be huelga or strikes. I think most of those would occur at the tail-end of the cotton harvest. This is an example: maybe the cotton had been picked and the production had been pretty good, but still there was enough left out there to pick a second time. And maybe it was pretty bad, and it might have created a situation where it was hard for the workers to continue

to make the type of money that they had been making so we did on occasions have strikes where the workers would refuse to work without an increase in the wage per pound for cotton harvest.

BM: Now what was the word you used again for strikes?

BP: Huelga

BM: Huelga.

BP: Um-hm.

BM: Okay, would that be h-...

BP: H-u-e-l-g-a. This was about the time that Caesar Chavez was making his move, too. And there were groups that would try to incite the braceros and would go to camps and try to, you know, go out on the farms, and try to get the workers to be discontent.

BM: In this area?

BP: Um-hm. There was a little bit of that.

BM: Did they have like an organization or anything that they belonged to?

BP: I don't think so, but people like Caesar Chavez and Delores Huerta and some of those people on occasions would come by and then there were groups in El Paso that would try to cause problems with the workers.

BM: So Caesar Chavez and Delores...

BP: Huerta. She was in his United Farm Workers Group.

BM: Okay. So they actually did some activism in this area?

BP: Uh, yeah. They would come here once in a great while, not real often. They mainly were working California where there was of course a lot more agriculture.

BM: Do you remember any specific occasions when they were here and where did they go?

BP: I don't remember. I know that they had a red flag with a black eagle. I don't remember. They would have some marches and protests. I think probably more in El Paso than up here, but they did a little bit of that, trying to incite the workers and unionize – not the braceros – but unionize the other workers.

BM: More like the undocumented ones?

BP: No, more like the local people.

BM: I see. Okay. You said that often the Dona Ana County Farm Bureau was responsible for getting workers for this county and also Sierra County.

BP: Yes. There's agriculture up to the Caballo dam, which is in the Sierra County. So they just had a small area from the county line up to the Caballo dam. So they didn't have a lot of farms or farmers and so they were allowed to participate through us. And we were happy to provide them with that service.

BM: Does that include Garfield, Derry areas (??)...

BP: Garfield was in this county. Derry is in Sierra County. So it would be Derry and Array (??) and those communities.

BM: Okay. Do you remember specifically the farmers that were in the program in Sierra County?

BP: Well, Price Black Farms was one of them. They were a dairy farm at that time. Uh, Millard was one, John Bradley (??), uh, the Gillespies (??), uh, there were some Riggs (??), uh, Luccini (??) – I know those people I remember. (unintelligible) There's others that if you're interested I'll try to remember names.

BM: Okay, what about in Dona Ana County?

BP: Well practically everybody in this county. Practically all the farmers were growing cotton at that time and so almost every farmer in this valley used the program.

BM: Um-hm. Can you recall some of the names of those farmers?

BP: Sure. There was the uh the Bickleys (??). The other guy that worked with us is deceased, so uh there were three of us that had worked in the program. I guess that's all the people that worked in that program.

BM: You mean...

BP: As directors of

BM: I see. So we were talking about farmers and Dona Ana County who were...

BP: Oh yeah.

BM: ...participants in the program.

BP: Well, practically every farmer starting way down there would be the Bickleys and Wayne Huber (??), and the Provencios (??), and uh Donaldson (??) - Tom Donaldson (??) ;uh, Ikard -Bill Ikard - uh...

BM: How do you spell that?

BP: I-k-a-r-d. He lives at Santa Teresa now. Uh, Stallin(??) Farms used a few, but not big numbers. Uh, oh, uh, Singh – S-i-n-g-h – Sammy Singh; uh, Woodwards (??) – several families of Woodwards (??); uh, Chester Randall (??), S. Lingers (??)...

BM: I've heard that name. Where are they?

BP: They're at La Mesa. Uh, Archer – Ellie Archer (??); uh, let's see, Apodoca (??) – several Apodocas (??); Enriquez(??) is another user; um all of the Solopecs (??)

BM: Um-hm.

BP: Um, Richardson (Paper ripping in the background)

BM: Richardson.

BP: Jess (??) Richardson

BM: Jess?

BP: Jess

BM: Um-hm.

BP: Uh, Jim Cole (??); Oh gosh, everybody that farmed had them. Then when you get up here you would have _____ (??) and uh Tomlin (??); Carl _____ (??); Tharps – T-h-a-r-p – several families of those; uh Simpson (??) - right over here a big farmer; Kuykendall – K-u-y-k-e-n-d-a-l-l; J.B. Harris (??); the Lujans (??) - of course you mentioned earlier; and uh up at Hatch was Hackey (??) ; my family used them up there – Porter...

BM: What was your family like (Background noise; unintelligible) _____ (??) at that time?

BP: Yeah, some (Background noise; unintelligible) _____ (??) We used to use them extensively. (Pause) Hayner – H-a-y-n-e-r; Smith – Jim Smith;

BM: And those are also in the Hatch area?

BP: Um-hm. Holguin – H-o-l-g-u-i-n; Lack – L-a-c-k; And those are just a few, but...

BM: Okay. Well, that's a bit of a start. I want to ask you about some of _____ (??) a little bit later when we finish this up.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

BM: So in your opinion as a former Labor Director of the bracero program what were the effects of the program on the productivity of the farms and ranches in this area?

BP: Well I don't really know how farmers would have harvested their crops in those days had it not been for the program. There's some similar type program. It was a tremendous help to farmers and it was a tremendous economic help to Mexico. It was a mutually beneficial program that worked well for the workers and the farmers with what I believe was the minimum of problems and difficulties. And so I think it was a great program. It served a real purpose. And I think as the program got more and more difficult for the farmers to comply with, that did a lot to bring on the mechanical harvester because the program got to where it was very difficult toward the end. Farmers felt that the Department of Labor became too difficult to deal with, so they were looking for an alternative. And I think that _____ (??) the advent of the mechanical harvester.

BM: What would you say the advantages of the program were?

BP: The advantages were that it brought in a supply of workers that were not available in this country. Workers who were hard, hard workers willing to do stoop labor, if you will, and realized that they could improve their economic plot tremendously by making money up here and sending it home and make enough money in a few months to live well the rest of the year. So it was a economic thing from workers plus gave them employment that they did not have, and it gave the farmers the source of labor that wasn't, not available here.

BM: Well at the time you were working with the program, that would have been after the war had been over for several years.

BP: Well this was just after the Korean...

BM: After the Korean?

BP: ...Conflict.

BM: Okay. So...

BP: But I was there. I had gone in the Service during that Korean part of time, and I had just gotten out of the Service when I went to work for the program.

BM: So there was still a need because people had gone into that war?

BP: Well true, but mainly it was that local people were just no longer willing to do that type of labor. They were no longer willing to go out and hoe and to pick cotton and do those hard farm labor work because if they could do anything else, they did that rather than farm labor.

BM: Okay.

BP: And of course the farmer was in a unique position. The farmer was not in the position - and never has been in a position - to pass along his costs to the consumer. Every other business in the country is able to add on labor costs into whatever product they ultimately are marketing, but farmers were not able to pass- They would have liked to have paid more for wages and to the workers, but economically they simply couldn't do it. Based on the prices they were getting for their products.

BM: So they were kind of controlled by what they could get for their crops?

BP: Yeah. It had a lot to do with the price they were getting for their commodities.

BM: This is kind of jumping around a little bit, but I wanted to ask how it was determined how many braceros a particular farmer would get?

BP: We took orders from the individual farmers, and they would make an estimate of the number of workers they would need and the dates on which they would need them. So we tried to coordinate that into a, uh, association-wide numbers, and it worked out pretty well. It wasn't like the farmers were in a position where they would have to wait a month to get workers that they wanted today, so it worked (??) pretty well. Sometimes we had a little trouble getting approval from the Department of Labor, and it might have been that they were having the same type of trouble getting Mexican government to agree since it was an international program. We were never aware whatever problems they might have had on those types of negotiations.

BM: Okay. Would you see any benefit to a revival of the Bracero Program?

BP: Well I think under the right circumstances it would be a good program. I think we still got a lot of work that local people are not willing to do. The program would have to be a program that was mutually beneficial to the worker and the grower. And that might be under today's circumstances very difficult to negotiate.

BM: What types of farm tasks are not possible to animate still? I guess you have to have people drive the tractors, right?

BP: Well, you still got to have tractor drivers and those people, you know, usually they're given a lot of prerequisites. A lot of the tractor drivers have housing on the farm and they're furnished a lot of times with utilities and gasoline and so on and so forth. So you've got to have tractor drivers. You've got to have people that- A lot of the work now is done by crews, and a lot the crews that work here in Las Cruces quite of a few of them- It's not unusual for them to come out of El Paso on a day-haul, on a bus with a crew leader to do thinning and hoeing and those types of things. Large groups- And onion topping and work like that. So a lot of that's done by crew, organized by crew leaders that bring groups of workers up. So a Bracero Program might help fill in the gap there and that although in recent years it seems like there's been quite a few workers available. There are quite a few women that work in farm labor doing things like onion harvest and hoeing and thinning and that type of thing. And some of the kids work, you know, there's a law that limits age-wise and that type of thing for children, but some of the younger people work in the fields with their parents and that type of thing.

BM: So would that be the local people or people coming across from Mexico?

BP: It's both. The crews that come out of El Paso up here, some of them are legal people that live in Juarez and they cross over on a daily basis and come up and work. They usually come up very early and quit in early afternoon and go home.

BM: So they would be people that have Green Cards?

BP: Um-hm.

BM: Okay.

BP: People that have the legal documentation. They can come over on a day-haul, and because I guess of the economics of it or preference, too, some of them live in Juarez.

BM: Okay. Is there anything that we have not covered that you would like to share with me about your time with the Bracero Program?

BP: Well I can't think of anything. It was an interesting experiment for me, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working with the braceros. I enjoyed working with the farmers and ranchers. So it was a good experience, and I think I learned a lot. I don't know what benefit that education ever will do me, but I enjoyed it.

BM: Well I thank you for your time. And since I forgot to put an introduction on this tape, I'm going to say here again that this is Beth Morgan. It's March the sixth 2003, and this interview has been with Bob Porter, a former Labor Director for the Dona Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau. And this is for the UTEP Bracero Oral History Project. So, I'm going to stop this now.