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## **Interview no. 1566**

Herminia Reza Contreras

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## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Herminia Reza Contreras

Interviewer: Fernanda Carrillo

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: March 18, 2003

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Transcript No.: 1566

Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Herminina Reza Contreras was born on May 5, 1920, in Douglas, Arizona; she had eight brothers and sisters; because her father worked for the railroads, her family moved to El Paso, Texas, when she was thirteen years old; in 1951, she began working with immigration services; later, in 1953, she went to work for the Department of Labor, and stayed there until 1963; both jobs entailed working closely with the Bracero Program. Ms. Reza briefly recounts her childhood; when she was thirteen years old, she moved with her family from Douglas, Arizona to El Paso, Texas; in 1951, she began working with immigration services, where she was in constant contact with braceros; her boss recommended that she look for work with the Department of Labor, and later, in 1953, she did; while there, she worked for the administrative offices of *Rio Vista*, a processing center for braceros in Socorro, Texas; she provides a detailed description of the buildings and offices and of the processing procedures; her primary responsibility was to oversee the contracting aspect of the program; she was in charge of making sure the appropriate permits were in place in order for farmers and ranchers to hire braceros and that the proper amount of money for the contracts was received as well; the contractors were primarily from Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming; in addition, she mentions the names of several employees she worked with, including Mr. Carlos Corella; she continued to work for the Department of Labor until 1963.

Length of Interview 31 minutes

Length of Transcript 16 pages

**Name of Interview:** Herminia Reza Contreras

**Date of Interview:** March 18, 2003

**Name of Interview:** Fernanda Carrillo

I am with Herminia Contreras on March 18, 2003 in El Paso, Texas. The interviewer is Fernanda Carrillo. This interview is part of the Bracero Oral History Project.

FC: Good morning Mrs. Contreras.

HC: Good morning.

FC: What is your full name please?

HC: Herminia Reza Contreras.

FC: And when and where were you born Ma'am?

HC: I was born in Arizona, Douglas.

FC: What date, I'm sorry?

HC: May 5, 1920.

FC: Where did you grow up in Arizona or here in El Paso?

HC: Both, both, the first, I guess about thirteen years of my life I was in Arizona and then we moved to El Paso.

FC: Because of your dad's work or?

HC: Yeah, he worked for the railroad.

FC: Oh, he worked for the railroad and what did your mom do?

HC: She stayed home. She was a housekeeper, a home keeper whatever.

FC: And how many brothers and sister do you have?

HC: There was eight of us.

FC: Eight, and the eight of you came to El Paso?

HC: Yes, we were children.

FC: Okay, great, and so did you attend school here in El Paso?

HC: A hum.

FC: Where did you go to?

HC: Well I went to grade school here at Sanchez Central. I understand they demolished that school, I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I went to Grade School there then I went to Bowie and to College of Minds.

FC: Oh, you went to the College of Minds?

HC: For a while because I ended College and took up College again many years later in New Mexico.

FC: How many years did you attend the College of Minds?

HC: Well I have credit for a two year College.

FC: For two years and when did you start working for the Department of Labor?

HC: When I first started when the Bracero Program it was, Immigration had it....I'm sorry, I came to work with Immigration, with a portion that they had with the Bracero Program. Then in 1950, ah, that was 1951 in 1953 I started with the Department of Labor and I stayed with it until it closed.

FC: Which was what date Ma'am?

HC: What was it? In 1963, was it?

FC: How did you have this job? How did you know about it? Did you apply for the....

HC: The Department of Labor?

FC: A hum.

HC: When I was with Immigration my boss recommended me to move over to Immigration, to the Department of Labor, cause I had better promotional potential, opportunities there.

FC: So you worked with them for about thirteen years?

HC: I guess, about that.

FC: Do you speak Spanish Ma'am?

HC: Yes, a hum.

FC: Were you required to speak Spanish for that job?

HC: No.

FC: No.

HC: It helped.

FC: It helped a lot.

HC: It helped because of the people. I didn't have any, well, when I was with Immigration, it helped, it was almost a requirement cause I did contact, I had contact with the Braceros but later on I was in Administrative office so it didn't, it still helped.

FC: Would you please describe your role in the Bracero Program Ma'am?

HC: Well I, the last two years I was in the main office, in Administrative office. I kept control of the contracts, of the money that was deposited for the contracts; except they couldn't contract they couldn't take out any men unless they paid for the contracts.

FC: Oh, so they had to pay first in order to take the Braceros?

HC: That's right, a hum.

FC: Where were those main offices located Ma'am?

HC: At the main office right there in, where you were at the Rio Vista, right across from the County Head Quarters that they have there. It's an old, old home. It's a lovely home but we made it up into offices.

FC: And the whole time when the Rio Vista Center was open, those were the main offices?

HC: Yes.

FC: Okay, perfect. What was your job assignment? What did you do exactly in the Department of Labor at the main offices?

HC: That was it. I mean I was responsible for the....to see that the contractors, the potential employers had the proper permission, authority, permits from their, from wherever they came from, wherever the men were going to.

HC: They had state permits in writing for so many workers, for such a period of time and I had a control of that plus they, I controlled, I had to control the money facet of it. I didn't have the money per say.

FC: Okay.

HC: I just saw that they had the money on record.

FC: Okay, perfect, but you never actually had the money?

HC: I accepted the check and passed it on, but that's all.

FC: And mainly the contractors were from what regions Ma'am? From what cities?

HC: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming.

FC: Mostly they hired by service to what kind of....

HC: Agriculture.

FC: Agriculture.

HC: In all facets.

FC: Okay.

HC: There was food contract, you know, some of them had food around here. It was mostly cotton, chili, ah, that type of agriculture.

FC: Okay and the contracts were how long?

HC: Well they varied depending where they went to cause some, ah, types of work that they went to do wouldn't last more than three months so it was controlled by that and others they just kept extending them till they almost worked year long.

FC: When they extended a contract had the Bracero have to come back to the Rio Vista Center?

HC: No, no, no.

FC: No, it wasn't necessary?

HC: No, it was extended out in the field.

FC: Okay, and when the Bracero finished his contract did he have to go back to Rio Vista on his way back to Mexico.

HC: He could but it wasn't necessary.

FC: Oh, it wasn't necessary, okay and did your offices operate year round?

HC: Yearlong.

FC: And usually when were the business times?

HC: In spring and all summer well actually through the fall.

HC: I think the only, they would only let up a little bit the couple of months in the winter and we still had a lot of work there, you know. Not contracting workers but there was a lot of office work.

FC: And the did Rio Vista Center was also operation all year round as well as your offices?

HC: That was my office. That was my whole project.

FC: Your whole project, the whole Rio Vista, okay.

HC: Yeah, yeah.

FC: And how many applicants were there in a given day? Usually how many Braceros were arriving to the Rio Vista Center?

HC: You want max?

FC: Yes.

HC: Ah, (A short period of silence). Lets see I can hear about three-thousand.

FC: Three-thousand in a day?

HC: But they were moving out.

FC: Okay.

HC: See we didn't have the facilities to house them. To house that many anyway, so they would start arriving early and it was a continuous thing. They'd come up here from Chihuahua.

FC: Okay.

HC: And they, as soon as they'd get here we tried to process them and get them out of there.

FC: Okay. How many people were you able to house and the Rio Vista Center?

HC: I don't remember.

FC: Okay, but it wasn't for two-thousand?

HC: No, no, that's what I mean. I'm giving you a round figure there. That round figure would arrive in one day but, now, Carlos Carella well he worked in transportation.

HC: He would have been able to answer that process.

FC: Okay. Would you describe the screening process for me once the Braceros get there from Chihuahua? How did they get to the Rio Vista Center?

HC: Well we had a Center, a Bracero Center, a recruiting Center in Chihuahua. They recruited the Braceros there; we had people, Department of Labor people in Chihuahua. We would keep in touch with them. We'd place our order for the workers with them and then they would tell us if there was a shortage of workers applying. Well they would tell us, you know, they wouldn't be able to have them but usually they did very well, ah, but we'd place an order. They'd control the number of workers. They would put them in busses in Chihuahua and they'd come up here in that fashion.

FC: So you, ah, so you usually tell them how many people you need?

HC: That's right.

FC: Once you had the contracts....

HC: Once they were cleared, everything was cleared and we had guaranteed for say one-thousand workers. Everything was cleared and everything was taken care of and the employers or contractors would be there and they could select their workers.

FC: They had a chance to do that?

HC: They had to cause we weren't going to select their workers for them.

FC: Okay. So once the Braceros arrived from the recruiting center from Chihuahua in busses what was, you know, the process they had to follow in order....

HC: They came in, they arrived at the Center, ah, and they were processed first through Public Health Service. They were checked to see that they were well, they needed any shots, whatever it is that they needed, ah, if some of them were ill when they got here so Public Health Service, there was a doctor on hand at all times. The doctor is still here. Dr. Ortega.

FC: Doctor, what's his first name Ma'am?

HC: What is his first name? He is a cutie pie. Ortega, he has the Ortega clinic in Ysleta.



FC: Clinic in Ysleta, so he is still working, we might be able to contact him.

HC: Yeah, sure.

FC: So he was the one who worked there at Public Health?

HC: He was in charge of the Public Health Service.

FC: For a long time Ma'am, was he in charge?

HC: Quite some time, yeah, I can't, I don't remember exactly how long but he was the last doctor that was there.

FC: Okay and were the Braceros required to bathe or shave?

HC: Yea, a hum. They weren't required to shave but they could if they wanted to.

FC: Oh, they could if they wanted.

HC: But yeah they were required to bathe and there were showers.

FC: Was there any disinfecting performed for the Braceros?

HC: I don't know. I wasn't there that's Public Health portion but they were given, ah, the medication and shots that they needed.

FC: Okay and at this part of the process could any of the Braceros be rejected for health reasons? Let's say they have an illness or something?

HC: Yeah, a hum. They were returned to Chihuahua.

FC: They were returned to Chihuahua at, ah, the Rio Vista Center expense?

HC: A hum.

FC: I mean they return on the busses?

HC: A hum.

FC: Were the Braceros allowed to keep their personal belongings while they were....

HC: Yes, a hum.

FC: Okay.

HC: Sometimes their personal belongings were disinfected.

FC: Oh, sometimes....

HC: Some of them had little bugs in them.

FC: Oh, okay, so they checked the luggage?

HC: Yeah, you had to check everything. You didn't want to send a sick person or one with bugs and all that out inside. If the person had bugs or something like that, they would give him the proper treatment.

FC: And after the Public Health Division what was the next exam for them?

HC: Then the Public Health Service after they cleared that, well of course there was meals in between, you know. Mealtime was necessary. There was breakfast and lunch and we didn't have dinner but it was, the Braceros there in the evening they'd had already packed lunches for them, you know.

FC: Oh, okay, okay. Those were provided by?

HC: After Public Health, then contracting would be the next entity that would take charge. They would see to it, they were placed; they would go through Immigration also. Let's see, Immigration and contracting would kind of work together cause I used to help Immigration in the screening of some of the Braceros and finger printing them, when I was working with Immigration. After I went to the Department of Labor I didn't but they would do that together with contracting and then they would place the Braceros say that El Paso Valley Cotton Association had an order for five-hundred workers they would already have the representative there.

FC: There, waiting for the Braceros to arrive?

HC: Yeah and then they would place them, group them in one area and they'd let you pick your five-hundred workers.

FC: And do you remember a time when some of the employers placed an order for let's say a given number and they didn't appear that day and you had to house the Braceros for a little while. Was it common for you to keep Braceros?

HC: I wouldn't say that it was common but it happened.

FC: It happened and while they went to the Immigration-Contracting they finger printed them, they got all that kind of information and after that what happened?

HC: They filled out the contract. Then when they, by that time they already knew who was, who they were being contracted to. From there they would line them up and go....

FC: Transportation?

HC: That would be their last exit.

FC: What were the normal requirements to be a Bracero? What did they....

HC: I don't know, I don't know that's Chihuahuas, that was their thing.

FC: And at the time they arrive here did they have to show some kind of ID's or proof of identity like birth certificate or?

HC: Well, Immigration could ask them anything they wanted to or any official with the Department of Labor could but I don't know that it was a requirement of each and every one of them.

FC: Would you describe your typical workday at the Rio Vista Center? What were your normal hours?

HC: It was an eight to five job.

FC: An eight to five, all week?

HC: Yeah.

FC: You had to be there all week?

HC: Monday through Friday.

FC: Was the Rio Vista Center open during the weekends?

HC: At the peak of contracting season, yeah.

FC: Is there any particular incident with the Braceros that stands out in your mind?

HC: Oh, no I don't think so. It was rather a pleasant job, um, by both the contractors and the Braceros. It was a pleasant job.

HC: I don't know of any one incident. One Bracero brought, he went to Mexico, he brought me back a shawl, and I still have it.

FC: Oh, you still have it? So he did return to Rio Vista?

HC: Yeah, they would go home for vacations.

FC: And so they had to go back to the Rio Vista Center and do the whole process again in order to go back to the United States?

HC: No, no, no, no. If they, if he goes up to stop by and bring me that but it was on their own. They would go home and whatever transportation they decided to come back, they would go directly to their employer.

FC: Okay.

HC: Sometimes they would stop here and call their employers by phone, you know, and then the employer would come in and pick them up.

FC: But going back to Mexico was at their own expense and with their own means, perfect, and how would you describe the Braceros in general? Were they young or old persons, were they open?

HC: Were they what, open?

FC: You know like very talkative or....

HC: Let's face it some of them were. Most of them liked schooling so, ah, some of them didn't even know how to read or write but, ah, like I said before, all in all they were very nice people.

FC: Were they....

HC: I never did get out to be sociable with them. There was not time.

FC: Did the employees of the Rio Vista in general did they socialize with the Braceros at some point?

HC: Oh yes, a hum, yes. It came very....some of them almost members of their family really.

FC: Really?

HC: A hum.

FC: And what about during lunchtime, where did you eat, right there at the Rio Vista Center?

HC: I used to go to Ysleta to eat.

FC: To Ysleta, okay.

HC: Or take lunches.

FC: Or take lunches. Will you describe the buildings, the Rio Vista Center, how was it distributed in general, please?

HC: Well, distribution as far as function?

FC: Yes Ma'am, please, like the buildings. What was going on in each building?

HC: You said you went through the Rio Vista Center?

FC: Yes, we did.

HC: Did you see where, ah, Public Health Service is, was?

FC: Was it to your right once you entered the Center?

HC: Extreme right, that's your first building and you keep on going and then there's a long building at the end.

FC: Yes.

HC: Okay that would be Immigration and, ah, let's see they would still kind of screen them through there and contracting.

FC: Okay.

HC: Then keep on coming and the very next building to your left is contracting. It's contracting and Immigration.

HC: You keep on coming and then you would find two buildings of cart typist, writing up all the contracts and the very last building to your extreme left is transportation.

FC: Which was the last step for the Braceros right?

HC: Right that was one they would be boarding busses to go to their respected places they were going to work.

FC: From what I understand, where is the meal center where they ate?

HC: The what?

FC: The meal where they ate, meal where given?

HC: In between the first building that was Public Health Service and, ah, transportation which is over here, there's a long building right here in the center, that was the kitchen.

FC: That was the kitchen and there were some buildings in the middle of the Rio Vista Center, ah, right between the two main....

HC: Oh there might have been for other purposes.

FC: Okay.

HC: I really didn't get out there to check on everything.

FC: Was it a very crowded place most of the time?

HC: During all the contracting season, yeah, very busy.

FC: Where did you live while you worked at this, at the Rio Vista Center?

HC: Here.

FC: Here in El Paso? In your house, right?

HC: What, what?

FC: In your own house?

HC: In this one right here.

FC: In this house. What expect do you think that the Bracero Program had on illegal cousins?

HC: That was the most wonderful that ever happened. You didn't have a lot of problems that exist now because the workers, the men, the people that wanted to come over could be processed through legal action and they would come in they would work and, ah, then they'd go home. They already earned their money and they'd go home and they had enough, at least for a while, support their families and then the following season they would come back again and the same, almost the same Braceros would come and then some of the younger ones would follow. That was the greatest thing that happened to the, ah, agricultural end of this side and the home life in Mexico cause people had jobs.

FC: Do you remember by any change how much did they, where paid?

HC: No, I don't remember how much they made, no, well I don't remember, no. There was a minimum set up by the State.

FC: Which was?

HC: I don't remember.

FC: But there was a minimum that they had at least?

HC: Yeah some of their salaries were controlled, yes, but they made a lot more.

FC: As part of your job did you check the documentation of workers or of the ranchers?

HC: Did I check the what?

FC: The documentation, did the contractors have to bring you some papers or, you know, information about them when they had to hire a certain number of Braceros?

HC: Oh, their application?

FC: A ha.

HC: Their application would go through their employment office.

FC: Okay.

HC: The nearest employment, state employment office, so wherever they were located, I would get that in the mail and that would tell me that, ah, Mr. X had already applied and been approved for whatever number of workers they needed for that certain period of time.

FC: Do you think the Braceros caused any problems while they where working in the United States?

HC: Like what?

FC: I don't know, like....

HC: Yeah nobody is perfect.

FC: Yeah, like criminal behavior that kind of stuff?

HC: If it happened, it was very, very rare. I didn't hear about it so it must not have happened, I mean, if it happened it wasn't that much.

FC: What do you think are the effects of the Bracero Program?

HC: What do you mean?

FC: Was it positive or negative during that time?

HC: During the period of....Positive effect on what?

FC: On the life in general on the countries there?

HC: Their life?

FC: Both of their life and our countries life, was it good to have that program? Did it help us, or not at all?

HC: I don't know socially over here. I don't know because we weren't aware of what their social life was but even in the communities where they went to it was very positive.

FC: And for them, what will you say, it was good for them to come? It was a good opportunity to be here?

HC: I think it was but that's just my thinking. I don't have anything in writing on that.

FC: So what is your personal opinion about the Bracero Program?

HC: I told you, I thought it was wonderful.

FC: What will you think about the Bracero Program being revived during this time, like, if they apply it again?

HC: I think it would be just really nice if, however, the way of life has changed quite a bit since then and there are so many drugs now a day that it would turn out to be a way of trafficking drugs. I don't know that it would but you hear so much about that. It's in the media in the press and everything but I don't know. Do you anything about what the drug situation is?

FC: Well you keep hearing what they tell you and you know....

HC: Well that's what I say.

FC: The television, it's, you don't really know.

HC: Then sometimes their exaggerating.

FC: But you never know, could be.

HC: Is there anything else that you would like to add about the time you worked for the Bracero Program any general impression that you had or any....?

FC: I met some wonderful people during all time and I worked with wonderful people. I'll never forget them. But when it closed I think every



body, well no, Carlos didn't stay he went with the IRS, is that where he went to? He went to some federal thing and he moved to Albuquerque, some place in New Mexico. I saw him in Albuquerque later. When we were closing up the place, everybody had already gotten a job but I hadn't.

FC: Oh, you hadn't?

HC: (She laughs) no, so I had been inquiring about jobs through the young ladies and all and I didn't find, I mean, I didn't even look for one for many.... and I was in the process of going out looking but this man approached me and asked me if I wanted to go to work for the Forest Service so I said "Sure why not, I don't have a job." So I packed up and went to Albuquerque and I started a life with the Forest Service.

FC: How long did you work for the Forest Service?

HC: Until I retired in 1980.

FC: So you never worked for the Department of Labor again neither the Immigration offices?

HC: No, no. It's not a good idea to go back.

FC: It's not?

HC: No. (They both laugh)

FC: And most of the people there what kind of jobs did they get in? Mostly related with what they did at the Rio Vista or very different?

HC: I don't know, I don't know.

FC: You never saw them?

HC: I didn't keep in touch with them.

FC: You didn't keep in touch with any of them.

HC: Well I would like to thank you very much for the interview.

FC: Your very welcome.

DRAFT