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## **Interview no. 1574**

Raymundo Villa

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**Name of Interviewee:** Raymundo Villa  
**Date of Interview:** April 21, 2003  
**Name of Interviewer:** Richard Baquera

This is an interview with Raymundo Villa. It's taken at his home in Ysleta. Today is Monday, April 21, 2003. The interviewer is Richard Baquera, and this is for the Bracero Oral History project.

RB: First of all, your name?

RV: Raymundo Villa.

RB: And your birthday?

RV: December 24, 1939.

RB: And you were born, where?

RV: Ysleta.

RB: Do you remember exactly where? Was it here in Ysleta or was it—

RV: I was born in Ysleta, Texas—at the time, *ahora* El Paso.

RB: Was it a doctor's clinic or a—I am just curious about exactly where.

RV: I don't recall.

RB: But it was here?

RV: It was here, yes.

RB: And how many in your family?

RV: Eight.

RB: Brothers and sisters and your mom and dad, *verdad*?

RV: No.

RB: No? That includes your mom and dad?

RV: No—there would be—ah, Manuela, Cuca, Glori, Angelina, Inez, Eduardo, *yo*, Maria. It would be ten, mom and dad.

RB: Where were you raised?

RV: I was born and raised in Ysleta on a farm on North Loop road.

RB: Which would be where Del Valle High School is today, right?

RV: Del Valle High School is.

RB: Do you remember who use to run the farm?

RV: George Wilmer Spades.

RB: And was he there all the time? Was there somebody before him?

RV: Before him was a gentlemen called—Rosenbloom.

RB: Do you remember his first name?

RV: No, I don't recall his first name.

RB: And why was it that you were raised on that farm?

RV: My dad was in charge of the farm.

RB: Okay. So you said you were born in 1939. Do you remember anything about like, say, World War II?

RV: I remember when it was over.

RB: What do you remember about?

RV: I remember a young man, no it wasn't World War II, it was Korea, I am sorry.

RB: Oh, okay. So you don't remember anything about, say, prisoners of war from World War II? Italians or Germans?

RV: I remember, oh yeah, that's right, it was World War II. World War II ended, I think, in 1945. I was six years old. Yeah, and I remember the Germans picking cotton or working in the cotton fields.

RB: In Spence's Farm?

RV: On Spence's Farm. This was after Rosenbloom.

RB: Lots of them?

RV: Unh-uh, there wasn't that many. I would say twenty to twenty-five.

RB: Do you remember ever talking to them?

RV: Just greeting words, no conversation, "How you doing? Bye," that sort of thing. We weren't allowed to talk to them.

RB: Why was that? Just your parents or was it—

RV: No one was allowed near them.

RB: They had guards?

RV: They had guards.

RB: Okay. What about your school? Where did you go to school?

RV: I went to school in Ysleta.

RB: How did you get to the school, because it's kind of—it's a few miles, no?

RV: It's a few miles. We use to ride the school bus to school, to and from.

RB: It would pick you up on North Loop?

RV: On North Loop and Ivey Lane. Would bring us to school, and it would drop us off there in the evening.

RB: Did you finish grade school? How much education do you have?

RV: I have eighth grade, no—ninth grade education.

RB: So you started high school?

RV: I started high school.

RB: Where?

RV: Ysleta.

RB: Why didn't you finish the high school?

RV: I was forced to go work.

RB: On the farm, with your dad?

RV: On the farm, with my dad.

RB: What kind of work did you do?

RV: Farm work, regular farm work. Whatever was in season at that time, whatever the crop required at that time. We use to irrigate, we use to plant.

RB: So it wasn't necessarily, like, the picking of the cotton?

RV: No, no. We picked cotton, yes, *pero*, that wasn't entirely it. Although they used to pull us from school to pick cotton—in the wintertime.

RB: How much did you get paid?

RV: Oh, I believe at the time it was 5¢ a pound, was the going rate.

RB: Where did most of the workers come from, before the braceros?

RV: Before the braceros, it was usually the people from town, from Ysleta, who would come down and pick cotton. It was mostly the Tigua Indians.

RB: Oh, *si*? Do you remember any names of the—

RV: Of the Tigua Indians? Yes, I remember—el Granillos, I remember—Lupe, I forget his last name, I remember *los hijos de Don Luciano*, the Reyes', there were about three or four of them, and I remember—

RB: How come it was the Tiguas? Was it just that particular group? *Porque ellos y—*

RV: The Tiguas used to go there, because the man that use to work there, Pedro Carazco, was married to a Tigua woman, and her relatives would come and pick cotton.

RB: I see. Did they ever hire like *mojados* or illegals from—

RV: There were some illegals. At the time, the Border Patrol would not bother them as long as they were already working on the farm. If they were caught in transit, say from the border to the farm, they would get picked up and returned back to Mexico. But as long as they were on the farm and already working they would not be bothered.

RB: Did you always have enough workers or was there always like a need for them?

RV: Only during harvests there was a need for extra help.

RB: Which would be what, the—

RV: Cotton, it would be the cotton pickers.

RB: Is that mostly what you had on the Spence Farm?

RV: Mostly cotton, some alfalfa, mostly cotton.

RB: And it was still all done by hand, pretty much?

RV: Everything was harvested by hand. The cotton all was harvested by hand, by cotton pickers.

RB: I remember at some point, they brought some geese or ducks in. Was it geese?

RV: Geese. The idea of the geese was to control the weeds.

RB: The geese were supposed to eat the weeds?

RV: The geese would eat the weeds, but they would leave the cotton alone.

RB: Do you remember how many of them. Were there a lot of them?

RV: There was quite a few, there was about three hundred—right at three hundred geese on the Spence Farm. I use to tend them.

RB: Oh, *si*? (both laugh) Were they a lot of trouble to—

RV: I use to tend them in the summer time, you know, when we were not in school.

RB: Who came up with that idea? Do you remember?

RV: It came up in the Stahmann Farm, somewhere down the valley. They came up with that—I think they came up with the idea in the pecan orchards.

RB: Oh, and they just thought it would be cheaper than bringing people into—

RV: It would be a lot more economical than bringing people to hoe the weeds.

RB: Do you remember what year it was?

RV: I don't recall the year.

RB: I don't either, I just remember we were really young, I was. And I remember some geese, and then they didn't work out right?

RV: They used them a couple of years or maybe one or two years is all. It didn't work out.

RB: Because, do you remember why?

RV: Because the geese would not cooperate, I mean, they would only go to one area, they wouldn't go all over the place. They liked to stick around the water.

RB: Oh, okay. I remember they used to leave a lot of their droppings everywhere.

RV: They made a mess, everywhere they went, there was a mess.

RB: Yeah, so they just got rid of them, and that was it?

RV: Well, what they did is they got them as goslings in the early season, and then when they grew up through the summer, and there was no longer a need for them to be working in the fields, the cotton had grown, and there was no more weeds coming up, they would sell them. They would go to market, but where, I don't know.

RB: But did they really eat the weeds and not hurt the cotton? Was that working out like that or no?

RV: Like I said, it worked in areas, but not everywhere, not in the whole field. You couldn't control them to go from one end of the field to the other. They liked to hang around in the shade and in the water. The ditches were full of water. They liked to hang around the water when it was real hot.

RB: So, there usually was enough workers, as many as you needed.

RV: There was hardly any shortage of workers.

RB: What's the first thing you remember about the Bracero Program?

RV: I don't recall exactly what year it was that the braceros started coming, but I remember dealing with them. I had to talk to them, because the farm owner, which would be Spence, didn't understand Spanish, and I had to interpret for them, of course, they didn't know English. I had to take their grocery list to the grocery store, and take them to the stores when they needed something, take them to the doctor when they were sick. They didn't understand the American currency or the dollar rather, and I had to explain to help them with their purchases.

RB: You don't remember, more or less, how old you were?

RV: I was in the neighborhood of—ten, twelve years old.

RB: Okay, so that was the basic reason how you got involved, because you were bilingual, you could understand both?

RV: Yes, I was still in grade school.

RB: What did they do if the bracero wanted to buy something? Couldn't they go themselves to the store?

RV: No, they didn't know their way around. They would give me, for example, their grocery list, and I would take it to the store. The store would fill out the order and deliver it. They would deliver it to the farm with the name of the person and the contents, separate contents for different—

RB: For each one?

RV: Yes.

RB: Do you remember what store it was?

RV: It was the P&N store. It was right there on Alameda, where the post office was at one time, between Harris Street and, ah, I believe it's the corner of—the street over from Harris.

RB: I don't know what's there now.

RV: It's a dead end street now, right there, *donde se acaba el service de la—el garaje de Olivas*, the little street there, Stevens, I think, is the name of it, I'm not sure.

RB: Cause, I remember the post office as being in two or three spots.

RV: The post office was there at one time and that's where the P&N was at, so he's been around a long time.

RB: Oh, yeah.

RV: Sure. It's not the Big 8?

RV: It wasn't a Big 8, there was P&N.

RB: It was, yeah, cause now it's the Big 8.

RV: Now it's a Big 8 store, yes.

RB: Maybe we should start with where they lived on the Spence Farm.

RV: The braceros?

RB: Um-hm.

RV: They were housed on the second floor of the farm equipment barn.

RB: It was a pretty big barn wasn't it? I remember it was large.

RV: It was pretty good size barn; it was about—eighty feet wide by about a hundred and twenty feet long. They were bunked at what they would call the hayloft.

RB: Which had already been there before?

RV: It was already before, and it was converted to living quarters for the braceros.

RB: What did each one of them get when they came in as a bracero, like to sleep in or anything?

RV: They got an army cot or an army stretcher, the thing that the Red Cross used, stretchers, where they carried off the wounded. They were about five inches off the ground.

RB: A real stretcher?

RV: Yes, a real stretcher, and the cot was a regular sleeping cot, pretty much the same as what they use now, only they were wood instead of aluminum.

RB: Okay. Would they get a mattress? Did they get a blanket?

RV: No, they didn't get a mattress; they got blankets, no mattresses. They slept on Army surplus blankets.

RB: It seems that the cots and the stretchers are surplus too.

RV: Yeah, the cots and the stretchers were surplus.

RB: Did they cook in their own—

RV: They had their own little stoves. They had a stove for about every five or six guys.

RB: Was it like a little butane or what was it?

RV: No, it was a kerosene stove that they used.

RB: There was never any concern about a fire? That they might cause a fire up there at all?

RV: *Nada*, I don't recall ever. They had fire extinguishers up there, *pero* we I never recall any fire of any kind.

RB: So actually, they could cook for themselves if they wanted to?

RV: Yeah, they cooked for themselves some, and some mom feed for a fee.



RB: Was it all three meals or just a meal or two, do you remember? Did she fix breakfast, lunch, and dinner for them?

RV: I think it was dinner, *nomás*.

RB: So your mom would have to cook for, do you remember how many?

RV: Oh, it was about—not all of them, she cooked for maybe about ten or twelve of them.

RB: How much did she charge them, do you know?

RV: I think it was \$2.50 a week or something like that.

RB: I see, and that would just be taken off their paychecks?

RV: They would pay her when they got their money on Fridays; they used to get paid Saturdays at noon.

RB: So they worked six and a half day weeks?

RV: Six and a half day weeks. Some of them would work longer, but it was voluntary, you know, they didn't have to.

RB: Sunday was their day off?

RV: Sunday was the day off; they didn't have to work on Sundays.

RB: So, the ones that cooked then, I guess, that's why they would give you the list of what they wanted from the store?

RV: From the store, but then most of them had to take their own lunch. Like I said, mom would only cook dinner for them, they had to cook their own breakfast and their lunch.

RB: So they probably would have to get up early to prepare the food that they were going to take with them to the field.

RV: In the wintertime, the frost was real bad, some days were more than others, and they didn't start early. They didn't start to pick early in the morning, they started to pick around 8:30 AM or 9:00 AM, after the frost was gone. The owner, which would be Spence, did not want them picking wet cotton.

RB: Oh, because it make it heavier.

RV: It makes it heavier, and if it's not taken care of and dried up, it would mildew. It's not good for the cotton, for the grade.

RB: So when did they usually start picking the cotton? Was it in September, October?

RV: It was around the fifteenth, sixteenth of September, usually mid-September.

RB: Through?

RV: Through the beginning of January.

RB: That far?

RV: Yeah, but they would be gone by the end of December, and only a few people would stay to pick the rest, there was not much left.

RB: They get paid by the pound right? Do you know how much?

RV: Five cents a pound. That's the last that I remember. There were two grades. There was what they called the short staple cotton, that one was at five cents a pound, and then they had the pima cotton, or the long staple, they used to get ten to twelve cents on that.

RB: What was the difference?

RV: That would be the cotton ball itself. The pima was much smaller.

RB: Oh, so harder to pick?

RV: You had to pick a lot more of it to make weight.

RB: Somebody told me that they would get the first picking or the second pickings, since there was more of it, it was easier, so maybe they get paid so much. Then, as it got harder and more difficult, they would get paid a little more. Do you remember of anything like that? Was it always pretty much the same whether it's the first picking or the last picking?

RV: The first picking, I think, was a little more. The second picking was a little less, and I remember the second picking being 5¢ a pound, because there was a lot more cotton. They use to pick three times. The third time was as much as the first, but I don't remember the amount that they use to get.

RB: We were talking yesterday about how they had different sizes of sacks.

RV: Yes.

RB: What did you say eight, nine?

RV: Eight, ten, and twelve.

RB: And that's the length right?

RV: That's the length in feet. It was eight footers, ten footers, and twelve footers.

RB: And that's basically how far they have to drag, once they're filling their sack with the cotton, right as they're picking?

RV: Yes.

RB: So, who would take, like, the twelve foot one?

RV: The bigger guys, cause they could pack it, and they could go almost to the end of the road before they had to go away. They didn't want to walk to the scales and weigh the cotton and unload their sack and then come back, [it would] take them too long. So then they figured the more they stayed picking, the more weight they'd make.

RB: Do you remember, more or less, how much they could put on a twelve footer?

RV: On a twelve footer, they could put a hundred and fifty pounds.

RB: Really? At 5¢, that's \$7.50.

RV: They would take them somewhere between—two, two and a half hours to fill up a twelve foot sack, about a hundred and fifty pounds. Some guys could pick five hundred to five twenty.

RB: In one day?

RV: In one day, yeah, they were good pickers, some of them; some of them were not so good pickers.

RB: There was a person who would weigh it, right? Did you ever do something like that, weigh the—

RV: No, I never—they had a person that came from town to do the weighing, that's all he did was just weigh.

RB: Do you remember how did he kept track of—because I interviewed somebody that said each bracero had like a little *ficha* with a number on it, and that's how they would record how much that person had picked, and that's how they would get paid. Do you remember how?

RV: In some farms they had a tag number, and every time you would weigh in they would issue you a tag, and they would credit that number with the weight.

RB: So you didn't necessarily know them by name, huh? I mean they wouldn't record the weight by name?

RV: By name, no. In some areas, although at the farm where I lived, we never had that tag system, because there weren't that many. We all knew them by name, personally, we knew who they were, although they did have a payroll number. They got paid by that payroll number, but it was mostly by name and *un* ledger telling names, everybody had a page. At the end of the day they would tally it.

RB: Who did that, do you know?

RV: The weigh master.

RB: The one that came in from town?

RV: The one that came in from town.

RB: Do you remember that person?

RV: I remember his name, Luciano Reyes; he used to live right up the road here.

RB: What street would this be?

RV: On Candelaria, Candelaria and Leonardo.

RB: What did you call him?

RV: The weigh master.

RB: Was there any question about somebody being—that they picked more, that they were cheated on how much weight they had picked, or anything?

RV: I don't recall him ever having any disputes over that. Everybody got paid his due. That old man kept pretty good records. He kept the record of what was on the trailer and how many pounds he had to have on that trailer to determine how many bales. You have to have so much weight on that trailer for so many bales, you couldn't have a half of bales, he wanted full bales. So the weigh master had to take care of that, although I don't recall how many pounds in a bale, *no me acuerdo*.

RB: So they worked until Saturday noon. What about on Sunday? Would they all stay there on the farm or would they—

RV: No, some of them would go to town, usually the movies, or they'd send off to get beer or whatever, but they usually hang around and do their laundry.

RB: Where would they do the laundry? Did they have tubs or anything?

RV: No, they did it on the cattle trough. They had a big cement trough, and they used to do their laundry there, by hand, then hang it on the wire on the fences or wherever.

RB: The barbed wire?

RV: The barbed wire fence or wherever they could find a sunny spot to hang their clothes, but that was usually a Sunday task.

RB: Do you remember what states in Mexico they were from?

RV: Oh, they were from all over Mexico. The ones I talk to the most were from Chihuahua and Juárez. The cotton pickers here were mostly from Chihuahua, Juárez, and around the Torreón area, because around the Torreón area, they grow a lot of cotton there, and they were very familiar with cotton picking. Those were the good pickers. The ones that didn't pick so good were city folks that worked in restaurants and that sort of thing.

RB: And then they came to do farm labor here?

RV: And then they came to do farm labor, and it was really hard on them, especially the ones that come from the subtropical like Mazatlán and all that, where they don't get much winter there, and it don't get too cold. They struggled with the weather here; it got a little too cold for them. If you remember, back in the days, we used to get some snow and stuff.

RB: Yeah. What about the clothing, do you remember?

RV: The clothing was the typical of Mexican clothing of time. It was kind of like baggy pants, *como*, like the Arabs use now.

RB: Okay, so, like, the *peones* white?

RV: It was usually white, and it was a real fine canvas-like material, like a flower shop material.

RB: But can you tell where some of them were from by how they were dressed, maybe or the shoes?

RV: Yes, you could tell the ones from the interior of Mexico, they wore *huaraches*, baggy pants, and those big blue shirts. The ones from close to the border here, they wore more like jeans, khaki pants, shoes and boots.

RB: What about once they started to make money? Say, the one with *huaraches*, did they change? Did they buy shoes and more comfortable clothes or no?

RV: Not so much clothes, they bought big thick socks, because they couldn't wear shoes.

RB: Because they were use to *huaraches*?

RV: They were use to *huaraches*, and it was too hard for them. The shoes and boots were too hard on their feet, they would blister pretty bad, their feet were all sprawled out, you know, they're not used to being contained in the shoes, and their toes, *estaban asi*—

RB: Real spread out?

RV: Yeah, they were real spread out, and they had trouble wearing shoes, they would buy those big thick socks.

RB: Did they ever buy anything to take back with them?

RV: Yes they did. They use to buy stuff to take back with them. They couldn't take very much, but they did buy stuff for their wives, mostly clothes, for their wife and their kids. They bought clothes and maybe a little thing or two of perfume for their wives.

RB: Did they ever tell you why they were here?

RV: Well, they were here for economic reasons, most of them, if not all of them. They were here to make a little bit of money to go back to their country. Some of them didn't want to go back, some of them would rather stay, but they weren't allowed to stay. Some of them would go, and they would come back illegal, the ones that lived closer to the border, they use to come back illegal. If somebody would provide work for them; they would cross the border and come to work. I know of two of them.

RB: Wouldn't that be harder for them? Wouldn't the idea of having a contract and being a sort of legal bracero that would be much better than being illegal, because you could be picked up and sent back?

RV: The Border Patrol was very conscious of that. I remember when they were being picked up and sent back, they would go to the boss's house and collect their

paycheck before they deported them, some of them, not all of them. Some of them would write and give an address where we can mail their money.

RB: You couldn't or you could?

RV: Yeah, we could mail their money. Some of them would leave a name and an address, and we would collect the money and mail it to them.

RB: That would be who? Spence would do that?

RV: Spence would give us the money, and we would send it to them.

RB: In a money order or something?

RV: Usually it was a money order, but very rarely did we do that, I remember maybe once or twice on two different occasions, but they were good at paying them before they took them back.

RB: Now, lately there has been this talk about how supposedly some part of their paycheck was kept, and then it was supposed to be put in a fund. There's braceros now in Mexico who—I guess, they're trying to bring a lawsuit, or have brought a lawsuit, to get that money back, but I've talked to people who say that as far as they know, everything that they were due was paid, that there was never any annuity money taken out. Do you know anything about that?

RV: I don't know exactly how that worked, but I know about my experiences, counting their money. They got paid their due, whatever money was owed them for the week's work or their wages; they were paid in full.

RB: To the penny?

RV: To the penny, yeah. There was no money retained for no annuity or any other purpose.

RB: Except for what they had spent, say on groceries—

RV: Except for groceries, medicine, or whatever, and I don't think even the medicine. If they had to go to the doctor, I think it was not money out of their pocket.

RB: I see, the farm owner would—

RV: The farm owner would take care of the doctor bill, I'm pretty sure that's the way it was, but as far as wages, I don't recall ever seeing any money deducted from the wages, not even social security, not even income tax.

RB: Nothing at all?

RV: They got paid whatever it was owed them.

RB: Do you remember if they got sick what doctor would they go to? Was there a doctor here in town or would he go to the farm?

RV: Sometimes, the doctor would go to the farm if there was one or two, three guys sick, the doctor would make a call. More often than not, just take them to Doctor Delgado, *aquí* in Ysleta Hospital. That's usually where they ended up, but they didn't get sick very often other than a cold or a runny nose and stuff.

RB: But nothing serious?

RV: Nothing serious, I never recall anyone ever getting seriously sick. That was here in El Paso.

RB: Did you ever have to go to the Rio Vista?

RV: I never went to Rio Vista.

RB: So how did the braceros get to the Spence Farm, do you remember?

RV: I remember the times that I dealt with the braceros, I was a very young man at the time. We had to go to the C.C. Camp [Civilian Conservation Camp], it's called a C.C. Camp on Zaragoza road.

RB: Where is that today, near the freeway?

RV: It's right in front of Shawver Park, across Zaragoza. The braceros would be there, and they were already under contract. They would bring them from the Rio Vista Farm and bus them here, and there they would be picked up. They would only be there for two or three days. If they weren't picked up, they would be returned to the pool.

RB: Back to Rio Vista?

RV: Back to Rio Vista to be picked up by someone else.

RB: That's different, cause all I've ever heard was they were always at Rio Vista, and then from there they would be taken to—I never heard that they would sometimes be brought over to the C.C.C. camp.

RV: The C.C.C. camp, what was later the Rough Riders.

RB: Right.

RV: At that C.C.C. camp was where the prisoners of war were, the Germans.



RB: During World War II?

RV: Before the Bracero Program, they were housed there.

RB: Okay, but if they were there at that old C.C.C. camp it wasn't for very long. Why would they bring them here? Is it for the farmers that lived a little bit closer into town?

RV: No, they were contracted in a different manner then. These people knew where they were going; they weren't in a pool. The farmer would come and say, "I need ten", and he'd take ten out of the pool, no, these people were already contracted.

RB: Maybe they had been here before?

RV: They had been here before. I don't know exactly how it worked, but the farmer would request so and so—by name. They would be pulled over here, and they would be picked up over here, because they were under a different status, I think, than the rest of the braceros.

RB: The ones at the Rio Vista?

RV: Um-hm.

RB: Oh, that's unusual.

RV: It only happened twice, that I remember, but then we left the farm, so I don't know what happened.

RB: Would they be brought by truck? By bus?

RV: From the C.C.C. camp we would pick them up in a two-ton truck, they would be brought in. There weren't that many, maybe there was about twelve, fifteen, twenty at the most, *no eran muchos*, Richard.

RB: How big was the Spence Farm?

RV: It was a hundred and eighty-five acres, I believe, somewhere around that. I remember hauling cotton sometimes. We had three pickings, and it took a while to pick all that cotton.

RB: You said you left the farm. Do you remember what year it was?

RV: I left the Spence Farm in 1955, I believe, or '56.

RB: So when you were about sixteen, seventeen. Why did you all leave the farm?

RV: We moved to Oregon. We were what you call—what do you call it?

RB: Sort of migrate?

RV: Migrant workers.

RB: Except that you just went there and back, right?

RV: Yes.

RB: Migrant workers usually go most of the year to work from one place to another.

RV: No, we went there to that particular place and back home.

RB: And you would go up there, what time of the year?

RV: Around early March, first and second week of March.

RB: And you would come back?

RV: Come back in—September.

RB: Why did you go up there? I mean you were doing farm work too, right?

RV: Yeah, we were doing farm work, but we were working in the beet fields, carrot fields, bean fields, and stuff like that.

RB: That's kind of far to go. Why was it? What was the difference?

RV: The pay!

RB: Oh, how much would get paid here?

RV: I think it was 50¢ an hour.

RB: And up there?

RV: A dollar fifty or two dollars an hour.

RB: Really, that much more, three, four times more?

RV: Uh-huh. We did contract work.

RB: How much different is that?

RV: Well, contract work we did it by the acre. When the tilling and the hoeing came together and we would do it, I think it was forty dollars or fifty dollars an acre.

RB: It would be the beets?

RV: It would be the beets.

RB: There were several of you together, and it would be the family?

RV: It would be the family all together. We'd do it together, and then the rest we did by the hour, the weeding of the beets and the carrots, and that sort of thing, but the beets were the only ones that were contracted.

RB: Now, one year you went up to—this was, what part of Oregon or Washington?

RV: This was Milton Freewater, Oregon.

RB: Okay. I know one year or two you went up to Chelan, Washington?

RV: Lake Chelan.

RB: How come you ended up there?

RV: We went up there to pick apples.

RB: Did you hear from somebody about this or what?

RV: Yeah, my brother-in-law, Juan Peña, he used to go over there and pick apples. He carted us up there one year. I think it was only two years that we picked apples. In the first year I was there, I dealt with the braceros up there also.

RB: So there were braceros there too?

RV: Yes, I dealt with the braceros up there also.

RB: How had they gotten in? Did they come in through California, through—

RV: I don't know where they came from or how they got contacted or how they ended up over there. I know that a bunch of apple growers got together, and they would contract some pickers. They would go from orchard to orchard, with different types of growers. They kind of like got together, because one of them, they couldn't do it with one or two pickers, I'd take him forever to pick them, so they got together, and they would bring in a few, I'd say twenty-five of them, and they'd go from orchard to orchard or they split them up, and they can get their apples harvested quicker.

RB: Where did they live when they were there?

RV: They lived in kinda like a labor camp area.

RB: Did you ever go there?

RV: Yes.

RB: How was it?

RV: It was two room sheds, a little house, and they had a communal bathroom or showers, and what have you, and a laundry mat. They would do their laundry and stuff there.

RB: So how many per room? How many braceros would live in one—

RV: About three guys in each little shed.

RB: And would they be given like the same things, a little cot, a little—

RV: They would be given a cot, and a place to sleep, and a little kitchen where they could cook. Like I said, the bathroom was not there, it was in the center of the compound, sort of.

RB: Did you think it was, I mean, was it clean? Was it taken care of? Because sometimes, people say that some of these labor camps were dirty, that the owners didn't really, you know, have good sanitation or health or anything. Did you see any of that? Was it pretty well—was it clean?

RV: The one that I saw in Chelan was pretty clean; it was well kept. They had a person that would do the cleaning.

PB: Oh, okay, paid by the braceros?

RV: Oh, no, no, paid by the farmers, the food farmers.

RB: Oh, okay, do you remember, more or less, how many braceros were in that camp?

RV: Quite a few, I would mention to say in the neighborhood of fifty to seventy-five.

RB: I never went, but there must have been many acres of apples?

RV: Oh, there were acres and acres and acres of apples, but the braceros were not the only ones picking.

RB: Right. You all were picking too?

RV: We were there picking also, and there was people from all over picking apples.

RB: All the migrant workers.

RV: They were migrant workers, like us.

RB: So, I wonder why they would bring braceros in. Because they just needed more?

RV: They needed more help, that's why there weren't that many, they just brought a few in to kinda—

RB: And were the braceros paid the same as you all were paid?

RV: Everybody got paid the same amount.

RB: Which is, per box?

RV: Per box.

RB: Which was, do you remember how much?

RV: I don't remember an exact amount, we got paid different, that's how come I don't remember. One type of apple was one price, and another type of apple was another price, and the other type of apple was another price. The apple that paid

the most was the Golden Delicious apple, but you had to be very careful with it, because it bruised easy, and you had to be more gentle with them, and therefore they expected you to go slower and take care of them.

RB: So they paid you more money?

RV: So they paid you more money so you'd be more careful.

RB: These are large trees, aren't they?

RV: Huge trees, you could pick fifty, sixty boxes off a tree, apple crates.

RB: So how did you get involved with the braceros who were there?

RV: Because I was bilingual, and it's for the same reason that I got involved here.

RB: So what? You were picking one day, and then the farmer couldn't communicate?

RV: He couldn't communicate. I was talking to the braceros, and they knew that I understood English, sometimes they would come to me when they needed to explain something to the boss. And then pretty soon the boss found out that I could communicate with them, and he would come to me and ask me to tell them things.

RB: Like what? Where to go or—

RV: Like to be careful with the trees, not to lean the ladders on the limbs, to be careful with the ladder, you know, when they climb, not to climb to the very top of the ladder, not to climb the tree itself to pick the apple, and how to pick the apple to keep from pulling the stem. An apple that has no stem is no good. The water gets in the hole where the stem was and it rots, so it had to have a stem on it. And not to pull the little twigs off the tree, because that was gonna be next years crop. They didn't want all that stuff off the tree; they had to be careful, then I had to explain that to them. And, pretty much the same as, you know, communicating with them telling them, "If you need to go to the store, write a list of stuff that you need so I could take it to the boss man," or whoever he was that was in charge of them, and he was see to it that they got it. If not, at times, they had a bus, and we would bus them into town to buy their stuff, their needs, their toiletries or their soap, food.

RB: And you would go with them?

RV: I would go with them, because like I said before, they didn't understand the money, they didn't know the American dollar.

RB: Did they ever pay you for this or was this all just—

RV: No, I got paid full.

RB: Were you like an interpreter?

RV: An interpreter and helping them with their needs, and the ranchers would give me a little something for my troubles. I made a little bit of money, but I never charged the braceros. I charged the rancher, the apple farmer, but no, I never charged the braceros any money, because I did it to help them.

RB: Did they ever tell you about, like, any problems that they were having with the farmers, any complaints?

RV: I got a complaint once, but it wasn't with the farmer, it was with one of the other pickers, that he went and dumped a couple of apple boxes. I don't recall if it was the field man, the field inspector, or just another picker. The gentlemen came to me, and I had to go tell the boss what was happening, but other than that I don't remember ever.

RB: So they usually got along pretty well?

RV: They got along well. Those people came here to work, and that was it. They didn't complain much, they weren't whiners or anything like that; they came here to work and make money and go back to their homes. They were hard workers, most of them.

RB: Now the apple-picking season is also in the fall isn't?

RV: Late fall.

RB: So it would get cold up there wouldn't it?

RV: It was cold. One year, it snowed on us before we finished picking.

RB: And these are Mexican braceros who maybe aren't use to the cold. Were they ready for—

RV: No, they weren't dressed for it. I had to take them to town for them to get coats. What they did mostly was go the surplus store and get those ugly blankets and cut holes in them where they could stick their head through it, like a poncho. They liked to have [that] more than jackets; they would rather have a poncho like thing.

RB: Yeah. Was that enough though, for them to keep warm?

RV: Well, some of them bought long johns, but they didn't like to wear jackets and stuff, they would rather wear the poncho and big heavy socks and stuff.

RB: Maybe because the poncho was looser? Is that—

RV: They claimed that the poncho was warmer than the jacket, because they could sit and kinda like [make] a little tent to stay warm, yeah, so the wind wouldn't get to them.

RB: Now, there was something I meant to ask you. Back here on the Spence Farm, you were mentioning to me about how you used to get cold up on the hayloft. So there was problems with the braceros who would get cold. Why was that, do you remember?

RV: Well, the boards of the floor, which was the floor of the loft, were not tight up against each other, they had maybe about a half-inch or three-quarter inch gap between boards. Naturally, you get a natural draft up through the boards, and at night, it got cold, it got miserable cold, until some of them got the idea of putting cardboards down, whatever they could find—or pack the cracks. Then Spence got them a big Kolo heater, and that's how they kept warm. They took turns dumping the oil into the heater, and they would stay warm that way, but at first, it was real cold for them. I told Spence that they were cold, that they were complaining that it was too cold, and he went and got them a big huge heater. It had a little blower on it. It wasn't warm, warm, you know, like you could wear a tee shirt, but it was comfortable warm. Better than nothing at all, a lot better.

RB: Well, back to the apples in Washington. So these men could presumably make a lot of money, assuming that they didn't have very many expenses other than just whatever they spent. So, what I'm thinking is, they could have made a lot of money, if they saved most of it.

RV: They did, some of them made a bunch of money. Some of them would go into town and splurge, some of them would drink, some of them would smoke. Others, they stayed around the camp and made money, I mean, they didn't go out to town and spend their money.

RB: How would they send it back? Would they send it back or would they keep it in cash?

RV: Some of them would keep it. Some of them would even ask the boss to hold it for them until they left.

RB: They trusted him?

RV: They trusted him enough where he could hold the money for them, not all of it, you know. He'd give them some and put some away, and I guess, they got their money at the end of the season and they'd take off. Some of them would write money orders at the post office, I would take them to the post office, and they would write money orders and send the money home. Some of them didn't, and some of them spent most of it. Some of them didn't have much when they left.

RB: You were mentioning how some apples you have to be careful and not to bruise any; you have to pick them a certain way. The apple growers, they brought in people basically who, I would assume, they had never picked an apple before, and they had to be taught. So the apple growers, that didn't concern them that these people had to be—

RV: Oh, yeah, it concerned them a lot. They were always after them, you know, that's where I came in. I had to remind them and remind them that these apples couldn't be bruised; otherwise they were of no value to the grower. They had to be careful, and all of them were pretty conscious.

RB: They never, like, fired anybody, and said, you know, "That's it, we've warned you enough times."?

RV: No, not that I recall. There wasn't that kind of a discipline; they didn't need that kind of discipline, we were very conscientious workers.

RB: It just seems like a long way to go, and it would be harder, you'd have to like put up with more, because it would be harder if you wanted to fire somebody and send them home.

RV: Some were sent home as far as I know, but not in the group that I dealt with. There were some growers that complained about having to send some of them back.

RB: And how would they be sent back?



RV: They would be taken to the compound were they were contracted out, and from there they would be shipped out, how, I don't know.

RB: They never told you how they got there in the first place?

RV: I never knew how they got there, and I never knew how they left.

RB: So when you all left then, after that harvest, you came back the next year, and I think, you said they weren't there anymore. Is that right?

RV: Yes, that's correct, but I don't recall the year. One year they were there, and the next year, they weren't. No more braceros.

RB: You never found out why?

RV: No, I never knew why. I think the Bracero Program was over. No more braceros. I believe it was at that time, but what year it was, I don't recall.

RB: So overall, what do you think about the braceros and their experiences? Do you think it was good for them? Not so good?

RV: I think, all in all, it was good for everybody concerned. It was good for the bracero, because he made some money, and it was good for the rancher or the farmer, because he got his crops in to market. Although some of them were very inexperienced; they were totally out of their environment.

RB: Some of the braceros?

RV: Some of the braceros.

RB: Really? Because I've been told that, you know, they would be processed through Chihuahua, and then they would come here to the border, and that when they were processed, people would check their hands to make sure that they had calluses, "Are you really a worker?" So I am a little surprised that some of them got through and still had some problems in doing farm work.

RV: They usually tried to contract farm workers, but you know, people wanted to come to work. They maybe lied but, very few were far between. Some of them you could tell that they were way out of their environment, way out.

RB: Do you remember what the ages were of most of these men?

RV: Most of these men were in their midtwenties to midthirties; they were all pretty much the same age.

RB: Did they look their age?

RV: They looked older; some of them looked a lot older than what they were. They were kinda like, I would say, weather beaten, for years, it's not been the years—life has not been kind to them, you could tell.

RB: Did you have any that would come back, just to where you got to know them well? They would be back maybe two or three years?

RV: I got to know a few that would come back. Not in Morgan but here.

RB: Here in Spence?

RV: Here in Spence, one of them came back two or three years. Some of them, they were here a couple of years.

RB: You don't remember any names?

RV: Miguel was one of them, but I can't recall his last name, we called him *Miguelon*. He came back about three years, but he never left Juárez.

RB: Oh, he was from Juárez?

RV: No. He was from the interior of Mexico, but he brought his family to Juárez, so next year he could contract out, and he could go to Juárez on weekends and be with the family, cause they could walk out. They could come and go anytime they want to, as long as they showed their, I guess, status, their card. They could go and come, I think, it was only on weekends, but during the week they should be working.

RB: Right, you would assume they'd be too tired, and they would work.

RV: Some of them, like I said, they brought their families close to the border, and they stayed here. Every year they would come back. Those are the ones you would pick up at the C.C.C. camp, the ones that were already contracted and have been here before. We had about three or four of them. I don't remember their names. One of them was Miguel, the other one was Don Ramon. Leonardo Maldonado, he lived in Zaragoza, and the other one was—I don't recall.

RB: Any of them that eventually stayed and settled here, here in Ysleta, here in El Paso?

RV: Um-hm. Leonardo, he came back, and he lives out in Socorro now.

RB: Do you know his last name?

RV: Maldonado. And then, there was another guy, what the heck was his name? Claudio, but he died in an accident or something, *pero*, he was here, he came back.

RB: One other thing that I'm asking people this. You mentioned about the weather, since you grew up here, how has it changed, of course, the population is a lot more, but how else has this area changed?

RV: The weather?

RB: The weather and just the people. Well, let me ask you this, the Spence Farm, it's sort up against the hills, what kind of wild animals did you have back in those days that you probably wouldn't see today?

RV: Oh, we had pheasant, we had raccoons, and we had coyotes, I think there were coyotes, they were few far between. We had bobcats. You would see a fox and a badger every now and then.

RB: A badger?

RV: You would see badgers every now and then, jack rabbits and cotton tail—

RB: Roadrunners?

RV: Roadrunners, and lizards, and those chameleons, horny toads.

RB: Oh, really those too?

RV: Oh, yeah you could find them there, *en el rancho*, the horny toads, but you probably couldn't find them now. You could see a lot of ducks, geese, the geese would land, *alli*, they would land right there on the drainage ditch, wild geese, Canadian Geese, honkers, whatever you call them, a lot of ducks. We could fish right there at the drainage ditch.

RB: Really and you could eat the fish?

RV: Oh yeah, you could eat the fish.

RB: What kind of fish was it?

RV: They were black bass, there were some perch, and there were carp and catfish.

RB: That's the drainage ditch that right along side North Loop now or close by North Loop?

RV: Yeah, the one between North Loop and the Hills, the one right along side Del Valle High School now, right there, *donde vivía usted en el Ivey Farm*, that one.

RB: There was just runoff water from the irrigations, maybe that's where they came from?

RV: Not all of it was runoff water; some of it was table water. Some of it would come out of the ground because the ditch was so deep, it would rise out of the ground, start running.

RB: Did it seem to you like it rained more? Does it use to be colder than it is now?

RV: It was definitely colder than what it is now. It used to rain more. And it used to snow, we use to get two, three snows a year, and it snowed quite a bit, five, six inches every time. I know, because when it snowed a lot, we didn't go to school, we stayed home that day, I remember. I still have pictures, *aquí mi vieja tiene* pictures *aquí, mire*, when it snowed.

RB: Right in front.

RV: Uh-hmm, '56, '55, '54. Well the people are different now, you could trust people back then, you can't trust anybody now. You could leave the car open, *aya*, leave the keys in it nobody bothered it, and *ahora* no. We didn't have all this graffiti and stuff like that.

RB: Right, it has changed a lot. There's one other thing, well it's tied to the braceros. You mentioned that some of the braceros would talk about how there was maybe a ghost or something in the hayloft where they would sleep. Something would pull their blankets off?

RV: No, it was in the tech room downstairs. They said that they could feel somebody sitting on the edge of their cot.

RB: And there was nobody there?

RV: They could hear people talking, but there was no one there, they couldn't make out what they were saying, because it was more like a murmur. They could hear a horse running down the road at night, there ain't no horses, there wasn't even any horse tracks.

RB: Now what did they use to call that ranch?

RV: *El Rancho del Diablo*.

RB: Because?

RV: Because, people back then said that they saw the devil there one time, I don't know.

RB: I heard that somebody saw somebody hanging from a tree there in the yard. Is that true?

RV: In the courtyard, they saw someone hanging from a tree, but I don't know.

RB: So was this an old farm?

RV: It was an old farm, an old place, but they had new buildings, the buildings weren't that old, *pero*, it was an old place.

RB: So as far as the buildings, there was the home where you and your dad and your mom and your brothers and sisters [lived], then there was the courtyard, and then there was the big barn, where the hayloft was where the braceros slept.

RV: Way on top. Then there was a tool shed, it had three walls only, it was open in the front, and it had the corral where the cows were. Then further down, about three or four bays, we used to put the farm equipment in there. At the end was the scales, along side the roadway. At the very end, on the southeast end, was another house with four rooms. It's what you call now a duplex, there were two houses in one, but it was one house with two rooms in each house.

RB: Who lived in that house?

RV: One of the workers.

RB: Was he like a caretaker or something? Why was it way over there on the end?

RV: No, he was just another farmhand.

RB: And then on the opposite end, which would be like behind your house—

RV: It would be behind our house, it would be on the northwest area, would be another long building; I would venture to say about thirty foot wide and about a hundred feet long. On the very north end, they had a garage type opening with sliding doors, and then there was a little room in there. That building itself was about sixty feet long, maybe a little more, and there was a little tack room and a side door. Then towards the end of the building, there were three big rooms, where people lived there.

RB: Workers?

RV: Farm workers. Then there was a space between it and our house. Right there on the corner of the house was the water well shed.

RB: Oh, so the ranch had a—

RV: The ranch had its own water.

RB: Did it ever run out?

RV: Oh no, we never ran out of water. It had an electric motor, an electric pump. It had a big huge reservoir. It had about a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty, two hundred gallon reservoir. It had quite a bit of pressure. It was good water too.

RB: Well, anything else that you remember that maybe I have forgotten to ask?

RV: No. Just that the braceros, I found it odd that these people would come without any warm clothes or shoes. I found out that some of them weren't wearing shoes. It was just the *huaraches*. Some of them wouldn't shower, some of them wouldn't clean up, some of them wouldn't even shave.

RB: Why do you think, because they were just lazy?

RV: No.

RB: Or was just their way?

RV: I think it was just their way. They came from way up in the mountains somewhere, I don't where they came from, they just didn't believe in cleaning up.

RB: There is one other question that reminds me of something else. How would they change? Like if you saw one just over, and then after a few months and maybe the second year, were they dressed differently? Did they act differently? Were they a little more confident? You know what I'm saying?

RV: Yeah, I understand. The first year that they came, they were kind of a little bit raw, they didn't know exactly what they were up against, but then the second time, I'd see them, they'd be a little more prepared. They knew what they were up against, and they kind of prepared a little better for what they were going to encounter here. Some of them started to understand the dollar, the currency a little better. Then some of them start picking up some of the customs of the locals, they kinda adjusted, some of them.

- RB: Some people have suggested that they're very submissive, *humildes*, and then you could see where they got a little bit more assertive and more confident. Did you see some of that? Maybe you could see it on how they dressed and how they—
- RV: You could tell that they were getting a little more confident. At first, they were kinda like scared, very humiliated, they were scared to say anything, but second, third year, you could tell that they were more assertive. They could talk to you. At first, they wouldn't even talk to you. They wouldn't trust you at all.
- RB: Would they even look you in the eye?
- RV: They wouldn't even look you in the eye, "*Sí patronsito*," but then towards the end, they got a little more confident. Then they got to where they trusted you, at first, they didn't trust you at all, you had to earn their trust. There were very few of them that would trust you, but then you started talking to them and joking with them and all that stuff. Then you would help them with mailing their letters home. Some of them couldn't read or write, some of them we had to write letters for them and read their mail.
- RB: What would they say in their letters home?
- RV: They'd send money. When they send them money, they'd say what it was for and how to spend it, "Put it away or save it for me. I'll be there a certain date, more or less. I'll be there in two or three weeks. I'll be there in a month or so." You know, that sort of thing. It was kinda very private, but you had to know what they wanted to say, so you had to write it. Some of them would say, don't answer my letter, some of them would receive mail. The ones that were closer would receive letters and stuff. I would give them the letter. Some of them would ask another bracero, because not all of them didn't know how to read and write. Most of them were pretty sharp with numbers, you couldn't fool them with numbers, *pero*, they would ask one of their peers to read the letter for them and stuff. All in all, I think it was a good program. Some of this farm equipment wouldn't be what it is now, if they had kept hand picking everything. We wouldn't have the modern equipment that we have now.
- RB: Are you saying that's worse or it's better? Would you rather have the hand—

RV: The hand picked stuff was a lot better grade than the machine picked. The machine tears up stuff, and it wastes a lot, but one thing covers the other, because they could get it picked and to market a lot quicker, and they didn't have the hassle dealing with all these people. The machine doesn't complain.

RB: Exactly. Okay, well that's it; this is the end of the interview.

**End of interview**

DRAFT





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

Interviewee: Raymundo Villa

Interviewer: Richard Baquera

Project: Bracero Oral History Project

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 21, 2003

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1574

Transcriber: Myrna Avalos

Raymundo Villa was born in Ysleta, Texas, on December 24, 1939; he had eight brothers and sisters; his father was the foreman on a farm near Ysleta; he initially became involved with the Bracero Program as an interpreter and aide because he could communicate with the braceros; because he often had to help his father work on the farm, he was unable to finish high school; later in 1955, he and his family started working in Washington and Oregon, where he again served as an interpreter. Mr. Villa recalls his childhood growing up on a farm near Ysleta, Texas; he remembers that before the braceros were hired as workers, German POWs and the Tigua Indians would often pick cotton on the farm where he lived; when the braceros were contracted, he acted as an interpreter and aide because his boss could not speak Spanish and they could not speak English; oftentimes he had to help his father work on the farm, and he was unable to finish high school; he recalls picking cotton, the size of the sacks they would use, and how much they were paid; later in the mid 1950s, he and his family left the farm to work in Washington and Oregon during the spring and summer; he picked apples in Chelan, Washington, where braceros were also contracted; eventually, he served as an interpreter and aide there as well; he goes on to describe what life in the labor camps was like for the braceros; in addition, he gives his overall impressions of the Bracero Program.